

**Jonathan Williams Papers**  
**1763-1802**  
**Mss.B.W6765**

American Philosophical Society  
5/2000  
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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	American Philosophical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Williams, Jonathan.
<b>Title</b>	Jonathan Williams Papers
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1763-1802
<b>Call number</b>	Mss.B.W6765
<b>Extent</b>	0.25 Linear feet 46 items
<b>Location</b>	LH-MV-B-3
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>Born May 26, 1750, to the niece of Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Williams was a prominent merchant, scientist and soldier. Elected to the APS in 1787 as a result of his observations on temperature and barometrical readings, as well as work on sugar production, Williams had a distinguished military career highlighted by his appointment as first superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point.</p> <p>The Jonathan Williams Papers consists of 46 letters and documents, written by or to Jonathan Williams Sr. and Jr., dealing primarily with financial and legal matters. The collection includes five letters written by Benjamin Franklin and many of the others are signed by Williams' father-in-law and brother-in-law, William and Robert Alexander.</p>
<b>Preferred Citation</b>	Cite as: Jonathan Williams Papers, American Philosophical Society.

## Background note

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Jonathan Williams was born May 26, 1750 in Boston to Jonathan Williams, a patriot of the revolution and a prosperous merchant, and Grace (Harris) Williams, daughter of Benjamin Franklin's sister Anne. Williams traveled to England in 1770 and 1773 to continue his education and to make contacts through his granduncle. By the time he left England in 1776, he had established prosperous business connections in London, but left them to travel to France with Franklin. While in France, Williams worked as a US commercial agent and also studied military science, particularly fortifications. Williams remained in Europe pursuing various business interests until he returned with Franklin to America in 1785. He had married Marianne Alexander, daughter of William Alexander of Edinburgh, Scotland, on October 12, 1779. They eventually moved to Philadelphia, where Williams became an associate judge in the court of common pleas in 1796.

While in Philadelphia, Williams worked with Franklin on his later experiments and gained a reputation as a scientist in his own right. Williams was elected to the APS in 1787 and published results of his observations on temperature and barometrical readings, as well as a paper on sugar production, in the *APS Transactions*. In 1799 he published a treatise entitled *Thermometrical Navigation*. His scientific interests brought him to the attention of Thomas Jefferson, who became impressed with Williams' knowledge of fortifications. He was appointed major of the 2nd regiment of artillerists and engineers in the regular army in 1801; later that year he was made inspector of fortifications and commander of the post at West Point.

When the U.S. Military Academy was established in 1802, Williams became its first superintendent, but he resigned in 1803 following a dispute over rank and authority. Jefferson arranged for Williams to return to this post in 1805, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel and chief of engineers and with complete authority over the cadets. He planned and built most of the inner forts in New York harbor, including Fort Columbus, Fort Clinton, and Castle Williams. At the outbreak of the War of 1812, he asked for but was denied the command of Castle Williams, probably due to political differences with the secretary of war, William Eustis. He resigned his post and became brevet brigadier-general of the New York militia. Returning to Philadelphia, he served on a committee to ensure the defense of the Delaware. In his later years, he served as vice-president and corresponding secretary of the APS. He was elected to Congress in 1814, but died before he could take his seat.

## Scope & content

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The Jonathan Williams Papers consists of 46 letters and documents, written by or two Jonathan Williams Sr. and Jr., dealing primarily with financial and legal matters. The collection includes five letters written by Benjamin Franklin and many of the others are signed by Williams' father-in-law and brother-in-law, William and Robert Alexander.

In spite of the emphasis on business, glimpses of everyday life can occasionally be seen, including Franklin's life, and a real sense of affection can often be felt in William Alexander's letters to his son-in-law. Items of particular note include the April 13, 1801 letter in which William Alexander expresses his reaction to the news of his brother's death; the May 3, 1802 legal document in which Robert Alexander grants Jonathan Williams power of attorney and which bears the wax seal of the state of Kentucky; and the Dec. 29, 1802 letter in which William Alexander describes his attempts to cultivate grapes and his desire to produce wine, and mentions his relationship to his servants.

## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 5/2000

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

The Williams materials were donated in 1985 by Frederick Roy Sellers of Valley Forge, Penn. The original of the Robert Alexander to Jonathan Williams letter of Dec. 28, 1802 was removed by Mr. Sellers on Aug. 2, 1985.

The miscellaneous Benjamin Franklin-Jonathan Williams Collection (formerly call number B F85.b) was merged into this collection in January 2004. The former call number has been retained in the record below as an indication of provenance.

### Processing Information

Catalogued by Alison M. Lewis, May, 2000, addition January 2004 (accn. no. 85-737ms).

## Related Materials

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### Related Material

Selected papers of Jonathan Williams, 1771-1813. Film. 1 reel. Film 455. From Indiana University Library. The papers selected for inclusion on this microfilm are those relating to Benjamin Franklin and the APS; they include correspondence among Franklin, William Franklin, Jonathan Williams, Sr., and Jonathan Williams, Jr. (the present figure); also Williams's journal of a trip through England with Benjamin Franklin, Jan Ingenhousz, and John Canton, 1771; also some memoranda and essays by Williams on trade, meteorology, and sugar refining; as well as notes and drawings. A 5-page table of contents is available. The Indiana University Jonathan Williams Papers, held at Lilly Library, contains 7,203 items, from which the above microfilmed items are selected. A five page description of their collection is appended. A considerable number of additional items relating to Williams is located in the APS Archives (including information relating to his research in electricity, meteorology, and sugar) and in the various Franklin collections. Consult the card catalog for a complete listing.

## Indexing Terms

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### Genre(s)

- Family Correspondence
- Legal Records
- Political Correspondence

### Personal Name(s)

- Alexander, Robert
- Alexander, William
- Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790
- Franklin, William, 1731-1813
- Williams, Jonathan Sr

### Subject(s)

- Engineering
- Law
- Military History
- Wine and wine making

## Other Descriptive Information

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The Jonathan Williams Papers contain Williams' correspondence, often of a personal nature, from the 1788-1803. This collection adds primary source materials to the H.J. Williams collection, which consists of genealogical material on the Williams family. Jonathan Williams was one of Benjamin Franklin's nephews. He attained high positions in the United States military and helped found West Point. The bulk of Jonathan Williams's papers contain letters from William Alexander to Jonathan Williams. Alexander was his father-in-law. Topics discussed include business, legal, and of course family affairs.

## Bibliography

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Ambrose, Stephen E., *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore, 1966).

Zuersher, Dorothy, Benjamin Franklin, *Jonathan Williams and the United States Military Academy* (UNC Greensboro, Ed.D.dissertation, 1974).



## Collection Inventory

Jonathan Williams Papers	1763-1802	0.25 lin. feet	Box 1
<b>Franklin, William, 1731-1813</b> Letter to Jonathan Williams, Sr.  "Acknowledges receipt of letter of congratulation (Gov. of N.J.); uncertain as to whether he shall 'fix' at Burlington or Amboy." Manuscript, ALS,	1763 April 7	1p.	F85.b
<b>Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790</b> Letter to Jonathan Williams, Sr.  "Sending box on board the Sloop William, Capt. Ephraim Jones, containing portmantle and mail-pillon belonging to Mr. Bernard, son of governor of Mass.; parcel for sister Mecom, books on inoculation. Just before leaving London sat for portrait (Mason Chamberlin?), is sending dozen prints of it to be distributed among friends in Boston. Wants 10 vols. of Boyle's dictionary sent to him. Lists persons to whom prints are to be given." Manuscript - ALS,	1764 Feb. 24	2p.	
<b>Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790</b> Letter to Jonathan Williams, sr.  In receipt of kind favors, but found it impossible to do as he (J.W.) wishes because of no vacancy. Congratulates him on repeal of Stamp act; time taken up with general affairs of America and particular one of province. Has not forgotten armonica for Cousin Josiah; unable to procure one but hopes waiting will prove no disadvantage. Sister Mecom speaks of kindness in late troubles. Recommends bearer. Mr. Sears, to his acquaintance..." <b>Bibliography</b>	1766 April 28	2p.	
<b>Bedford, Gunning S. Bedford,</b> <b>Mary Odell, Jonathan Shippen, John,</b> <b>1771-1805 Wharton, Joseph</b>	1766-1769.	DsS. 5 items	

## Jonathan Williams Papers

Bills of exchange drawn to Benjamin  
Franklin

The last was drawn to William Franklin

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<b>Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790</b>	1770 June 6	ALS, 2p.
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Letter to Jonathan Williams, Sr.

"So much engaged during sitting of Parliament could not correspond regularly with all his friends. Inquired after fate of tickets (lottery), found whole cost not lost; ventured to take two more for him (J.W.), if not wanted send to Messrs. Smith, Wright, Grey. Inquires after father-in-law. Would have given intimation of intention of government with regards America if possible, but affairs very uncertain due to constant changes. Some for severe and others for lenient measures; impossible yet to say which opinion will prevail; knows dispute is thought dangerous. Thanks him (J.W.) and cousin Hubbard for kindness to friend Hughes."

**Bibliography**

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<b>Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790</b>	1771 March 5	1p. ALS.
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Letter to Jonathan Williams, Sr.

"Two new lottery tickets had same success as before. Josiah under tuition of Mr. Stanley; his (Josiah's) thirst for music being satiated by going to concerts, etc. Jonathan has turn for business and accounts; puts Franklin's in order; has proposal from uncle to go to East India; had ordered cargo of books for cousin Wood's shop with expectation of paying ready money; bill protested, necessity of asking credit. Franklin willing to lend and glad to accommodate provided money is replaced in 6 months. Hopes J.W. has been able to rent house at former rent; continue to advance sister same amount."

**Bibliography**

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<b>Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790</b>	1773 July 7	LS, 1p.
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Letter to Jonathan Williams, jr.

"Rejoices that business is going so prosperously and that J.W., jr. keeps in touch with Mrs. Warren. Henry (Walker) unfit for him; hopes he (Henry) will do better in other business; would be glad to help Jonathan's father in commission way; delivered letter to Miss Barnwell; thinks it unlikely that East India ships come to America. Remembrances from Mrs. Stevenson, Mr. and Mrs. Hewson, Miss Dolly Blount. Enquire after McCowan."

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## Jonathan Williams Papers

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?	1788 Nov. 5	1 p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams (includes 1788 Nov. 6)		
<b>M[arianne] Williams</b>	1788 Nov. 6	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams (included in 1788 Nov.6).		
<b>William. Alexander</b>	1792 July 25	1p. ALCy
to Fenwick and Mason (included in 1801 Dec. 23).		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1793 July 14	1p. ALCy
to Fenwick and Mason (included in 1801 Dec. 23).		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1797-98	1p. AMsS
to Jonathan Williams, statement of account.		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1800 July 2	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams.		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1800 July 11	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams.		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1800 July 29	1 p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1800 Oct. 11	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams		
<b>Robert Alexander</b>	1800 Nov. 2	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams.		
<b>William Alexander</b>	1800 Dec. 1	1p. ALS
to Jonathan Williams.		

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## Jonathan Williams Papers

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<b>Robert Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams	1801 Jan. 11(?)	2p. Letterpress ALCy
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 Jan. 27	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 Apr. 13	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 Apr. 27	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 May 28	1p. ALS
<b>Robert Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams	1801 Dec. 2	Photocopy of ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 Dec. 8	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1801 Dec. 18	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams (includes 1792 July 25 and 1793 July 14)	1801 Dec. 23	2p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Col. W. Burrows.	1801 Dec. 24	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1802 Jan. 21	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1802 Mar. 16	1p. ALS
<b>William Alexander</b>	1802 Mar. 25	1p. ALS

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## Jonathan Williams Papers

to Jonathan Williams.

<b>Jonathan Williams</b> to William Alexander	1802 Apr. 5	7p. Letterpress ALCy
copy of first page+ of above.	1802 Apr. 5	1p. ALCy
<b>Robert Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1802 May 3	1p. ALS
<b>State of Kentucky</b> legal document re Robert Alexander (related to above item).	1802 May 3	1p. AMsS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams	1802 July 7	2p. ALS
<b>Robert Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams	1802 Dec. 28	Photocopy of ALS
<b>William Alexander</b> to Jonathan Williams.	1802 Dec. 29	1p. ALS
<b>Jonathan Williams</b> to William Alexander, with note from Marianne Williams.	1803 Jan. 2	1p. ALCy
<b>[Jonathan Williams]</b> to Robert Alexander.	1803 Jan. 14	1p. ALCy
Incomplete.	n.d.	1p. Letterpress ALCy
Printed legal document, partially filled with Jonathan Williams' name.	n.d.	1p.