COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:
Claybrooke family

Inclusive Dates:
1802-1959, bulk, 1831-1864

Scope & Content:
Addition to the first Claybrooke and Overton Papers (1747-1894) consists of around 60 original items, including correspondence, accounts, receipts, obituaries, family histories, family trees, biographical sketches, land records, surveyor’s notes, legal documents, poems, memorials, instructions for tax collectors, photographs, newspaper clippings, a historical sketch, an Edinburgh newspaper, an indenture, and directions for building a new cotton cultivator. Most items relate to the Claybrooke family of Williamson County, Tennessee, and Louisa County, Virginia. Quotes below are unedited.

The Claybrooke-Overton Papers, Addition, is valuable for its regional social, religious, political, agricultural, and familial content. It enhances and challenges widely held interpretations of antebellum thought and culture.

Correspondence comprises the majority of the addition. John Samuel Claybrooke wrote or received most of the letters (1833-1859). Researchers can find talk of childbirth and childrearing, religion, classical education, death and grief, disease and medicine, cooking, and slavery. The family reveals its character through judgments, opinions, and reflections on gender roles, religion, and marriage.

Of historical interest to African American and medical historians is Claybrooke’s October 22, 1836, letter to “Dear Sisters” regarding smallpox immunization for Negroes. Writing from Buckingham County, Virginia, he prescribed a method for
inoculating slaves. Mary Perkins in Williamson County wrote to daughter Mary Ann Claybrooke in August 1846 about a sickness afflicting slaves and whites. To prevent the spread of disease, the Perkinses confined slaves to a camp away from their houses. Of interest to those researching slavery or genealogy is Mrs. Perkins’ list of the dead.

In a lighter vein, he wrote to Jane Claybrooke on October 27, 1833, saying that he would give their sister $40.00 more than any other man “if she will teach one of her negroes the art of cookery.” A letter to Elizabeth P. Claybrooke, dated only February 9, casually tells the story of a Mr. Redd’s 13-year-old “boy” who ran away to sea and returned to the U.S. with the ship’s captain.

News of sickness and death was common. In Clarksville, Mary W. Humphreys wrote to an unidentified Claybrooke in 1873 that she had just lost her child. “We laid away our precious little baby in the cold ground–just the hour when you were giving up your dear child.” Correspondents expressed sadness and heartache throughout the letters. Elizabeth P. Claybrooke received a letter, dated only February 9, informing her that a local girl had burnt to death while taking a teakettle from the fire. (The writer speculated that flaming dress hoops were the culprit.) In 1842, John’s brother Thomas was grieved to hear about the deaths of “[John’s] little children.”

An earlier letter (December 12, 1833) to John S. Claybrooke is “piggybacked” as three letters in one: from sisters Elizabeth Pomphelet Claybrooke, Mary Ann Hart, and Jane Rebecca Claybrooke. Elizabeth wrote of the great sickness in the neighborhood of Pottiesville, Virginia, and how the family was nursing the ill at home and in the community. She cautioned that so many deaths should be sufficient to turn their thoughts to another world. “[We] can’t tel how soon we may be called to appear at that last tribunal from which there is no appeal.” Mary Ann reported on the sickness and said Andrew Hart had “become deranged” from it.

Jane’s portion of the December 12 letters is one of the most historically important. After describing her toothache, she told John that troops from Fort Comfort [Florida] were ordered to Alabama “for what purpose it has not yet been ascertained, some of the prints say to protect the Indians and others say on account of this Nullification business….” (The 1832-1833 Nullification Crisis foreshadowed events that begot the Civil War. When South Carolina threatened to secede after Congress passed tariffs favorable to Northern interests, Congress authorized military action against the state.)

Traditional gender roles sometimes shifted with childbirth. On October 18/22, 1837, Thomas and John Claybrooke sent piggybacked letters to their brother James and an unnamed sister in which they discussed Mary Perkins Claybrooke’s delivery of “a fine son.” Following the birth, John became both plantation owner with all its responsibilities and new father whose wife was confined with the
She was so weak she scarcely was able to suckle. John not only oversaw the plantation business, he took over Mary’s household duties. He waited on her and nursed the infant, “both of which are novel employments to me.” John humorously described “my mode for making our fine little boy hush crying is to make a similar noise and he ceases forthwith…. Children cry half of their time for the musick they make.”

The family makes periodic references to pets. John wrote on October 22, 1837, that old age had claimed one of the household dogs. He noted that his brother Thomas was away at the time and what “distressed him, was, I suppose, he was not there to have [the dog] buried and preach his funeral.” In an unsigned letter (February 9) to Elizabeth P. Claybrooke, the writer twice inquired about Cousin Sallie’s cats.

Children frequently figure in the letters. In January 1842, John’s sister Elizabeth advised him not be so strict with the children, and she hoped he would instill in them a respect for religion. Later that year, John’s nephew James M. Hart told him that he was studying “Lattin” and Greek, and that he was very fond of tools--just like his uncle. A number of children, including two girls, were listed on the 1832 tuition account for the Harpeth Male Academy. A grandson of future governor Newton Cannon appears on the roll.

William Thomas filled his July 20, 1859, letter to John Claybrooke with news of historical interest--particularly about a ferry enterprise at Hopefield [Arkansas], opposite Memphis. “I am very, very solicitous to see her on the trot, to hear people once more talk of it as a bright promising place that has dollars in it…. Thomas also commented on railroads and negroes, the slaves bunched with his livestock.

John Claybrooke admired Dr. Ferdinando Stith as one of the “greatest men in Tennessee.” In a crosshatch letter of October 27, 1833, Claybrooke boasted of Stith’s frontier heroics. Stith, who had regaled John with a history of his adventures with the Indians, settled in Franklin, and specialized in the theory and treatment of fevers. That letter may be of interest to those researching foodways because it includes a bill of fare: myriad meats from beef to venison, a variety of “fouls,” vegetables, bread, pies, and cakes. John gave a similarly detailed description of a hunting party.

Civil War researchers may find interest in the Claybrooke letters. In an undated [1863] letter, Major William Clare (a Braxton Bragg staff officer) informed John S. Claybrooke of the imminent death of his son Frederick. Clare offered sympathy for the anticipated loss, and he wrote of Fred’s gallantry and his baptism as an Episcopalian. Clare conveyed Fred’s last words and gave particulars of the body’s return.
An undated manuscript extract provides details about the 20th Tennessee Infantry Regiment flag. It relates that “Mrs. Gen. Breckinridge” often accompanied her husband, John C. Breckinridge, on his war campaigns. Witnesses claim that Mary Burch Breckinridge made a striking flag from her wedding dress and instructed the general to “present it to the bravest regiment of the Orphan Brigade.” It was the 20th Tennessee. Awarded in Tullahoma, the flag that came to have a “bloody, glorious” history was carried into battle at Hoover’s Gap, Chickamauga, Jonesboro, and Franklin.

Of importance to social historians may be the deathbed letter of Charlotte A. Harris dated January 28, 1840. The reader can sense Charlotte’s bereavement over the death of her fiancé in 1838-- just a month before their wedding. She was bedridden for weeks. “At times I have been brought almost to phrensy; and Oh! what heart-rending appeals I have made to Him who reigneth on high!” Visitors, both black and white, paid respects.

The collection contains three oversize plat maps. The oldest is important to Memphis history: a plat of John Rice’s five thousand acres contemporary to the time the city was founded (1819). A simple, crude layout of Memphis set off in squares can be seen on the riverbank at left. Another plat with survey (1844) shows the Hills subdivision drawn out of James Winchester’s portion of the John Ramsey tract. Researchers interested in land use may want to look at Claybrooke’s 1834 proposal for a 1,000-acre plantation in Haywood County. He drew this plat on the backside of a letter to his father. He intended the spread for the elder John Claybrooke, and sought his father’s approval. The letter gives details of land and lumber quality.

The earliest document (1802) is a folio of instructions for Virginia’s direct tax collectors. Other items include an 1840 deed from A. G. Hill to R. P. Curran; an undated clipping on character building; two biographical sketches of John Samuel Claybrooke; a memorial containing biographical material on Samuel Perkins Claybrooke; obituaries of Annie Wingfield Claybrooke (1922) and John S. Claybrooke; three original poems; and Lieutenant S. S. Hughes’s memoir of his Confederate comrade Samuel P. Claybrooke.

Two accounts provide valuable textile and education information from the early 19th century. The first one is Alexander McIntosh’s early receipt for various fabrics: calico, Irish linen, and several bolts of silk. The account shows that McIntosh also purchased kid shoes, corsets, a silk handkerchief, a hat, and a willow basket. The second is an 1832 account of tuition fees for the Harpeth Male Academy. The list of students includes Newton Cannon, John S. Russwurm, and several members of the Scales family. Surprisingly, two girls enrolled.

The addition contains two photographs. According to descendants, the tinted one is a portrait of Samuel Perkins Claybrooke wearing a Confederate uniform. The smaller photograph shows a stable groom holding a white horse.
One of the three poems, an elegy called “The Veterans’ Parade,” has five verses, one for each year of the Civil War. Written in the voice of a soldier to his wife, it tells the story of the regimental boys. It ends:

Cheer up, Mary! Sakes alive!
I’m just goin’ out paradin’
With the Boys of ’65.

Two folders hold genealogical information concerning the descendants of Philip DeLancey Meroney (1734-1830). That family is unrelated to the Claybrookes or Overtons.

**Physical Description/Extent:**
.5 cubic feet

**Accession/Record Group Number:**
THS 949; THS 1004, Mf. 2069

**Permanent Location:**
THS I-B-6, top; Mf. 269 (Also available on microfilm)

**Repository:**
Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee, 37243-0312

**Administrative/Biographical History**

John Samuel Claybrooke (1807-1892), born in Hanover County, Virginia, was a teacher, planter, and railroad executive. His parents, John Claybrooke and Sarah Overton Claybrooke, ensured him the best education of the day, and he used it wisely. Around 1820 he traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, and for a while made his home with his uncle, Judge John Overton. The young man so impressed Overton that he made Claybrooke executor of his vast estate.

Overton died in 1833, and Claybrooke married Mary Ann Perkins the following year. They lived in Hardeman’s X Roads (Williamson County) and had a large family.

Always public-spirited, Claybrooke opened Harpeth Male Academy in Williamson County around 1829. It was said that Claybrooke’s “pupils were trained and prepared for the performance of duties, which, some time or other fall to the lot of every true American citizen.”
By 1836, Claybrooke had settled in Williamson County and owned expansive lands in Haywood County and elsewhere in West Tennessee. In 1853, he was named president of the Tennessee & Alabama Railroad and served there until 1868. He died at his home “Brookland” in 1892. Most of the Claybrooks are buried at Mount Hope Cemetery, Williamson County. For more detailed notes on the Claybrooke family, see the finding aid for the original Claybrooke and Overton Papers (Ac. No. THS 14) or the biographical sketches in this addition.

**Organization/Arrangement of Materials**

Alphabetical by document type

**Conditions of Access and Use**

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*Restrictions on Use and Reproduction:*
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**Index Terms**

**Personal Names:**
- Breckinridge, Mary Burch, 1826-1907
- Cahal, Terry
- Claybrooke, Annie Wingfield, -1922
- Claybrooke, Elizabeth P.
- Claybrooke, Frederick, 1837-1863
- Claybrooke, James
- Claybrooke, Jane R.
- Claybrooke, John Samuel, 1807-1892
- Claybrooke, Samuel Perkins, 1846-1910
- Claybrooke, Sarah W.
- Claybrooke, Thomas W.
- Crittenden, John J. (John Jordan), 1787-1863
- Hart, James M.
- Hart, Sally O.
- Humphreys, Mary W.
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Harpeth Male Academy
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Document Types:
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Biographical sketches
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Correspondence
Envelopes
Indentures
Instructions
Legal documents
Memoirs
Memorandums
Newspapers
Obituaries
Photographs
Plats (maps)
Poems
Receipts

Acquisition and Appraisal

Provenance and Acquisition:

The papers were given to the Tennessee State Library and Archives by The Honorable George Paine and Ophelia Paine.

Processing and Administrative Information

Preferred Citation:

Claybrooke and Overton Papers, Addition, 1802-1959, Tennessee State Library and Archives

Processing Information:

The papers were processed by Susan Gordon, April 2017
Related Archival Materials:

Claybrooke and Overton Papers, 1747-1894, Tennessee State Library and Archives

Overton Family Papers, 1727-1961, Swem Library, College of William and Mary

Overton Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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