DONNELL, JAMES WEBB SMITH
(1820-1877)
PAPERS
1820-1932

(THS Collection)

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INTRODUCTION

This collection is centered around two families: the James Webb Smith Donnell family and the John Nelson Spottswood Jones family. Both families were prominent in Alabama and to a lesser extent in Tennessee. They were large land owners and prosperous planters who lost most of their fortunes and land due to the Civil War. The Donnell family had many prominent ministers, the most important being Robert Donnell, a founder of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The Jones family included prominent individuals in the fields of law and politics. The James Webb Smith Donnell Papers were deposited with the Tennessee Historical Society in 1932 by Mrs. Octavia Donnell Carney, Belle Mina, Alabama, daughter of the owner.

The materials in this finding aid measure 1.26 linear feet. There are no restrictions on the materials. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the James Webb Smith Donnell Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.
SCOPE AND CONTENT

The James Webb Smith Donnell Papers, containing 612 items and 2 volumes, cover the years 1820-1932. The collection is composed of correspondence, accounts, legal papers (affidavits, agreements and contracts, court records, a decree of bankruptcy, and land agreements), biographical data, a memorandum book, and other miscellaneous material.

The largest amount of correspondence in the collection was written by James Webb Smith Donnell. He wrote to his wife, Maria, about family and farm news, the military (1860s) around Montgomery, Alabama, and contracts with freedmen; to his daughter, Nannie, directing her to be observant and learn all she could about the North during her vacation to the northeast; and to his son, Robert, admonishing him to follow instructions and send money to the family. He wrote to various individuals concerning business or legal affairs, and to his overseer or partner, William Weems, he wrote concerning farm business, supplying wood for crossties for the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and the possible selling of his plantation, “Seclusion,” near Jonesboro, Alabama.

Other people wrote to James Webb Smith Donnell concerning farm business, selling cotton, payment for accounts, wood supplied for crossties and later the trains on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, an endowment fund for Cumberland University, legal affairs, painting portraits, and some views on politics.

The family correspondence, besides that written by Donnell, makes up the remainder of the correspondence. Family connections, including the Donnell, Dearing, Jones, Lindley, Ridley, Smith, and Peete families, corresponded with one another. One of the most interesting letters was one written by the Reverend Jacob Lindley to Robert Donnell (1854) telling him of his life. Other topics of conversation between the families included illness and death, courtship, business dealings, schooling at local institutions and at Cumberland University and Georgetown College, vacation, some politics, the cotton crop, and a description of the Washington Territory.

The accounts are divided into those belonging to James Webb Smith Donnell, Maria Donnell, Robert Donnell, John Nelson Spottswood Jones, and miscellaneous accounts of other individuals. James Webb Smith Donnell carried accounts with members of his family, his plantation, the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company and the J.T. and W.P. Tanner and Company. He also accumulated receipts for such items as express and freight tickets, taxes, and school tuition. Maria Donnell’s accounts are receipts for taxes, court costs, and cotton. Robert Donnell’s accounts included receipts for shares in the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company, an endowment fund at Cumberland University, and an itemized bill with J.P. Coman for medical expenses. John Nelson Spottswood Jones carried accounts with various individuals besides keeping receipts for recording deeds, paying rent, school tuition, the purchase of Negroes, and paying taxes.

Some of the most interesting contracts are those between James Webb Smith Donnell and freedmen after the Civil War. The freedmen are listed by name and sometimes by age. Another interesting contract is that of a marriage contract (1848) between Thomas P. Hawkins of Weakley County, Tennessee, and Frances Ray of Davidson County,
Tennessee, in which Miss Ray would be able to retain in her name such property and slaves as she owned.

James Webb Smith Donnell was an officer in the firm W.P. Tanner and Company. This firm suffered a great loss due to the Civil War and was never able to recover. In 1869, Donnell filed for bankruptcy. Earlier, in 1861, William P. Tanner wrote to Donnell suggesting that the partnership be dissolved, but apparently this was never done. Donnell lost a great deal in the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company, as he held several shares of stock in the company. Also, his land was confiscated in the War and, finally, when it was recovered, he was unable to pay the taxes or retain the land. His daughter, Octavia Donnell Carney, stated that James Webb Smith Donnell died bankrupt.

Within the collection there is biographical material on John Nelson Spottswood Jones and Haywood Jones, as well as a biographical sketch of Robert Donnell by his son, James Webb Smith Donnell, in the Memorandum Book.

Robert Donnell’s Memorandum Book lists the marriages which he performed in Alabama and Tennessee for the years 1813-1826. He also lists some baptisms, gives notes on his children, four of whom died in childhood, and gives the names and ages of Negroes.

There are also other miscellaneous items, such as newspaper clippings giving some genealogical data, some certificates and other documents, a map of a township, checks, and promissory notes.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

James Webb Smith Donnell

1820 July 13 – Born in Limestone County, Alabama, the first and only child of the Reverend Robert Donnell and Ann E. (Smith) Donnell to live to manhood

1828 November 3 – His mother, Ann E. (Smith) Donnell died.

1831 the Reverend Robert Donnell was appointed as a missionary to Western Pennsylvania

1832 June 21 – the Reverend Donnell married Clara W. Lindley, daughter of the Revered Jacob Lindley, president of Ohio University

1839 Married Maria Louise Jones

Prosperous landowner and farmer

Lived in Courtland Valley, Alabama

1863 Member of Alabama House of Representatives from Limestone County, Alabama

Lost property and fortune due to Civil War

1877 Died
John Nelson Spottswood Jones

1792  Born in Louisa County, Virginia, son of Llewellyn Jones

1802  Moved with family to Rutherford County, Tennessee
      Received early education from the Reverend Gideon Blackburn at Murfreesboro, Tennessee

1810  Family moved to Madison County, Alabama

1814  Went to Yale College
      Studied under Dr. Timothy D. Wright

1818  Graduated
      Read law with Judge John Haywood

1821  May 3 – Married Eliza Haywood, youngest daughter of Judge Haywood

1822  December – Moved to Limestone County, Alabama

1829  Justice of the Peace in Limestone County, Alabama
      Prosperous planter and landowner

1854  November 17 - Died
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18. Correspondence – Adair - Wheatcroft
19. Genealogical Data – Carney family
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The Arthur D. Clark Co., to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1927, re: appraisal of old books and papers
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