

Guide to the Joseph Smith Harris Papers

WA MSS S-1293



by Susie R. Bock

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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CALL NUMBER: WA MSS S-1293

CREATOR: Harris, Joseph S. (Joseph Smith), 1836-1910

TITLE: Joseph Smith Harris papers

DATES: 1848-1903

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 5.5 linear feet (11 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers, which document Harris's work on the United States surveys of the Mississippi Sound and the northwest boundary, contain correspondence, reports of the Northwest Boundary Survey, photographs of the survey, and a genealogical record of the Harris family up to 1903.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.harris>

Requesting Instructions

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Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

The Harris Papers, purchased in 1958 from Peter Decker, were a gift from E. J. & F. W. Beinecke.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

The Joseph Smith Harris Papers are the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Joseph Smith Harris Papers. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

JOSEPH SMITH HARRIS (1836-1910)

Joseph Smith Harris was a surveyor and civil engineer. During the 1850s-60s he worked on several projects for the federal government including the Northwest Boundary Survey of 1857-61.

Harris was born and raised in Pennsylvania and he attended Philadelphia's Central High school. In 1853 he was appointed a topographer by the North Pennsylvania Rail Road Company. Harris left the private sector in 1854 to become an astronomer for the U.S. government's survey of the Mississippi Sound, and two years later filled a similar position on the Kentucky Geological Survey. He resigned after one month in July 1856 and returned to the Gulf of Mexico to complete his earlier work. The following March, Harris was hired as an astronomer for the Northwest Boundary Survey.

In 1846, Britain and the United States agreed by treaty to draw the western Canadian-American border along the 49th parallel and a joint American-British commission began survey work in 1857. Archibald Campbell served as the American commissioner and Lt. John G. Parke was appointed chief astronomer. Harris and G. Clinton Gardner were assistant astronomers.

When the commission completed its work in 1861, Harris became an officer on the U.S.S. *Sachem* and served in the Farragut Mississippi Squadron during the Civil War. He went back to railroad work in 1864, joining his older brother Stephen in the Schuylkill Company of Pottsville, Pennsylvania. Harris worked with his brother doing survey work for the Lehigh Valley Rail Road and the Pennsylvania Rail Road Company. During the 1880s he became general manager for the Central Railroad of New Jersey and later served as president of various railroad and mining companies.

In 1865 Harris married Delia Silliman Brodhead and the couple had five children. After the death of his first wife, Harris married Emily Eliza Potts in 1882, and in 1896 married Emily's sister, Anna Zelia Potts. He died at home in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1910.

For additional biographical information, see the Harris family genealogy, prepared by Joseph Harris.

Scope and Contents

The Joseph Smith Harris Papers document his work on the United States surveys of the Mississippi Sound and the Northwest Boundary. The collection spans the years 1848-1903, with the majority of the material dating from 1854-61.

The papers contain correspondence, reports of the Northwest Boundary Survey, photographs of the survey, and genealogical material.

[The correspondence](#) is arranged chronologically and consists primarily of letters by Harris to his family. These letters contain a great deal of information on the survey projects. There are also letters from survey colleagues and business correspondence regarding Harris's railroad work. The correspondence covers Harris's life from his last years in school and his first job (1848-54) through his work on the Mississippi and Kentucky surveys (1854-57) and on the Northwest Boundary Survey (1857-61) ending with letters from his time as a railroad engineer (1866-74).

Harris's letters for 1848-53, written to his mother and siblings, mention visits to relatives and journeys to and from school. The letters do not give much detail about his work for the North Pennsylvania Rail Road Company, but document his search for another job. In 1854, J. E. Hilgard offered Harris work with the Mississippi Sound Survey. Harris's letters from Mississippi discuss his fellow survey workers, troubles with provisions and the weather, and the astronomical and magnetic observations for which he was responsible.

Many of his letters, particularly those sent to his astronomer brother Stephen, contain a great deal of technical information. Occasionally Harris sent hand-drawn maps showing the field of action. At the end of correspondence for October 1855 is a map of the Gulf of Mexico showing all the cities and topographical features that Harris mentions in his letters.

Harris joined the Mississippi Survey in the fall of 1854, but an attack of cholera and typhoid fever kept him from working until February 1855. During these first months he worried about adequately carrying out his duties and meeting Hilgard's deadlines. In May Stephen joined him. There are a few letters from Stephen and some between the two brothers, but the majority of the letters were written by Harris to his family in Pennsylvania. They contain descriptions of the area and discuss local events, such as the yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans in October 1855.

Harris left the Mississippi Survey in June 1856 to accept a position with the Kentucky Geological Survey, but he resigned after a month because he did not have the necessary geological skills. His letters from Kentucky discuss the finances of the survey and give his criticisms of the project.

Harris's correspondence reveals that he was interested in the Northwest Survey project as early as 1854. A joint commission to establish the Canadian-American border had been appointed by the United States and England. In September of that year, he was in contact with a Professor Bache and there is a hint of employment by the commission. Again in February 1855, Harris mentions the boundary work. He was finally offered a position on March 10, 1857 by a telegram from J. E. Hilgard. A month later he wrote home describing the terms of his employment.* The spelling of place and personal names in this finding aid is consistent with Marcus Baker's "Survey of the Northwestern Boundary of the United States 1857-1861," *Bulletin of the United States Geological Survey* 174(1900).

From 1857 to 1861, Harris's correspondence documents the field work of the [Northwest Boundary Survey](#). Along with letters from Harris to his family, there is correspondence between Harris and his colleagues including letters from Lt. John G. Parke to Harris, a few from William J. Warren and three from Archibald Campbell (June 8, 1859, January 15, 1860, November 1, 1861). Parke's letters provide information about daily survey operations. Harris's letters home describe the survey personnel, relations with the British team, his duties, and the Indians. His letters sometimes include maps which show the area or layout of the camps.

Harris's letters are a good source of information on the members of the American team. Two long letters, dated April 25, 1857, and January 31, 1859, discuss the survey personnel. Archibald Campbell served as commissioner, Lt John G. Parke as chief astronomer, C. B. R. Kennerly as doctor, Francis Herbst and Henry Custer as topographers, William J. Warren as secretary, and John J. Major as clerk. Letters in June and July 1857 introduce G. Clinton Gardner as assistant astronomer and surveyor, and give details on his employment by the commission. In 1859 Harris described George Gibbs as their geologist and interpreter and R. V. Peabody as guide. There is a good deal of information on the topographers in 1859, when Harris was in charge of one of the field teams.

Although Harris mentions some of the British team as early as 1857, the majority of his comments are made from the summer of 1858 to 1861, when the two teams worked together. By January 8, 1859 Harris felt that the British were becoming a "millstone about our necks." Harris went on to write about a squabble over Point Roberts in April, and in August an argument over San Juan Island, which, with the water boundary, was not settled for many years. Harris expressed the American opinion that British Commissioner Col. J. S. Hawkins traveled to England in the fall of 1859 to seek increased financial support for the British team and thus give it an edge over the Americans in the upcoming season. For another view of these same events see the Samuel Anderson Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana. Anderson was an astronomer with the British team.

Throughout his letters, Harris discusses his own duties and responsibilities. His letters for July 1857 describe the work on longitude for which he and Gardner were responsible. In January 1859 Parke

appointed Harris head of a field team in charge of cutting down trees to establish a physical boundary and Harris describes the team's progress. Harris's letter to J. E. Hilgard in December 1859, regarding the state of the magnetic equipment, documents his responsibility for magnetic observations. Harris often described the overall progress and future work of the commission. On May 9, 1859 he wrote the "most difficult portion of our whole work lies right before us" and went on to discuss the terrain between the Skagit and Similkameen Rivers. A good overview of Harris's daily work can be found in his reports (Box 3, folders 60-62).

Indians were another common topic of Harris's letters. He specifically mentions the Chinnock (Chinook) and the Kootenay Flatheads (Salish). Hired by the Americans to act as messengers and what Harris called "pack animals" (February 20, 1860), the Indians did not always live up to their employer's standards. In April 1858 Parke commiserated with Harris when the hired workers deserted, and the previous month Harris describes trouble between an Indian and the cook. Harris, however, also took time to observe and describe the Indians. He wrote about Mormon missionaries, Chief Joseph of the Flathead Indians, and the Chinook jargon they used for communication. By spring 1859 the survey team encountered increasing hostility from local Indians. There are letters by Harris to the local military commander requesting an escort and Indian affairs dominate correspondence among the survey members.

Harris's correspondence also contains personal information. Harris wrote personal resolutions and discusses the literature he read and the periodicals he received. In the spring of 1859, his younger brother Frazer died and Harris expressed his grief in his letters home in June.

The last boundary survey letters were written from Washington, D. C., in 1861, where Harris and others had settled to write the final reports.

The correspondence for 1866-74 covers Harris's life as a railroad engineer. Letters for 1866-68 are a mixture of Harris's letters to his wife and letters to Harris from the Lehigh Valley Rail Road Company. In 1874 Harris was working for the Pennsylvania Rail Road Company, and he corresponded with his old friend G. Clinton Gardner.

As mentioned before, Harris's written reports to G. Clinton Gardner (Box 3, folders 60-62) give full details on his work for the Northwest Survey. A report for December 10, 1858 focuses on his observations to determine magnetic declination and explore small rivers. It may have been used by Lt. Parke to produce his progress report in 1859 (See Senate Ex. Doc. No. 16, 36th Cong., 1st sess., p. 2-7). Harris's final report is present as a draft and in a fair manuscript copy: the draft contains a table of magnetic readings, which Harris passed on to the Coast Survey project and was printed in Marcus Baker's history of the survey.* Baker, p. 40-41.

[The Northwest Boundary Survey Photographs](#) contain sixty-six photoprints taken by one or more of the photographers known to have accompanied the British survey team between 1857-61 (See the correspondence file for 1860 in the Samuel Anderson Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana for a reference to one of the photographers). The photographs include camp scenes, the boundary cuts and monuments, British survey personnel, landscapes, Native Americans, and one of the earliest views of Victoria, British Columbia.

Previous owners marked the prints in a variety of ways. Thirty-eight were numbered on the back of the print, the front of the mount, or the back of the mount. Twenty seven others, lacking numbers, feature brief captions on the back of the mount. One print has neither a number nor a caption on its back. In addition to the markings described above, many of the prints have captions written on the front of their mounts in a hand different from that which made the inscriptions on the back. It has not been possible to determine the significance of the marking schemes, but the prints have been organized to reflect them. Prints with previously supplied numbers have been arranged sequentially, followed by the prints with captions on the back of the mount, and finally by the one print lacking either number or verso inscription. An archival control number which reflects this order has been marked in brackets on the back of the mount.

This collection concludes with a family history, which was compiled by Harris and published in Philadelphia in 1903.

For related material see the [Samuel Anderson Papers](#), Yale Collection of Western Americana. Anderson was an astronomer with the British North American Survey team.

Collection Contents

Correspondence, 1848

b. 1, f. 1	Correspondence	1848
b. 1, f. 2	Correspondence	1849
b. 1, f. 3	Correspondence	1852
b. 1, f. 4-5	Correspondence	1853
b. 1, f. 6-7	Correspondence	1854
b. 1, f. 8-14	Correspondence	1855
b. 1, f. 15-19	Correspondence	1856
b. 1, f. 20-28	Correspondence	1857
b. 2, f. 29-37	Correspondence	1858
b. 2, f. 38-46	Correspondence	1859
b. 2, f. 47-52	Correspondence	1860
b. 3, f. 53-54	Correspondence	1861
b. 3, f. 55-56	Correspondence	1866
b. 3, f. 57	Correspondence	1867-68
b. 3, f. 58	Correspondence	1874
b. 3, f. 59	Correspondence	n.d.

Northwest Boundary Survey Reports, 1858 Dec 10

b. 3, f. 60	Report to Gardner, work Aug - Dec	1858 Dec 10
b. 3, f. 61	Report to Asst. Astronomer [draft]	[1861]
b. 3, f. 62	[Report to Asst. Astronomer]	1864 nov 22

Northwest Boundary Survey Photographs

Control numbers, appearing in brackets, have been assigned to each photoprint. The series are divided into *Numbered Sequence*, organized by original numbers found on the back of the print or mount, and *Captioned Sequence* has been arranged to reflect relationships between the photoprints based on the captions appearing on the back of the mount. The last photoprint does not fit into either of these sequences and is housed at the end.

NUMBERED SEQUENCE

For each photoprint the following information is listed: control number in brackets, original number, caption appearing on the front, if there is none, one has been supplied and appears in brackets.

b. 4, f. 63	[1] 1. Victoria Vancouvers Island
b. 4, f. 63	[2] 2. Hudson Bay Companys Fort Vancouver
b. 4, f. 63	[3] 3. [Camp site on waterfront]
b. 4, f. 63	[4] 4. [Waterfront scene, mountains in background, right half of panorama with [5]
b. 4, f. 63	[5] 5. [Waterfront scene, mountains in background, left half of panorama with [4]
b. 4, f. 63	[6] 6. [Waterfront scene, mountain in background]
b. 4, f. 63	[7] 7. Block House--Fort Dalles--
b. 4, f. 63	[8] 8. [Waterfront scene]
b. 4, f. 63	[9] 9. [Waterfront scene, bluffs in background]
b. 4, f. 63	[10] 10. Skin Lodges
b. 5, f. 64	[11] 11. [Fort Colville from a distance ?]
b. 5, f. 64	[12] 13. Old Hudson Bay Cos Buildings Fort Colville
b. 5, f. 64	[13] 15. [Cabin in field--near Fort Colville ?]
b. 5, f. 64	[14] 16. Columbia River at Mouth of Clarks Fork
b. 5, f. 64	[15] 17. [View of boundary line cut through forest]
b. 5, f. 64	[16] 18. Mining town on Nehoralpilkun River
b. 5, f. 64	[17] 19. Gold mining--Water Wheel & flume Tributary of Nehoralpilkun River
b. 5, f. 64	[18] 20. [Campsite on waterfront]
b. 5, f. 64	[19] 21. [Campsite through fir groove]
b. 5, f. 64	[20] 22. [Campsite in forest]
b. 6, f. 65	[21] 23. [Campsite in clearing at edge of forest]
b. 6, f. 65	[22] 23a. Lake Osoyoos

NUMBERED SEQUENCE (continued)

b. 6, f. 65	[23] 23b. Lake Osoyoos
b. 6, f. 65	[24] 24. On the Boundary near Camp Nehoralpilkun
	[25] 25. Prairie on the Nehoralpilkun River [right half of panorama with [26]]
	[26] 26. [Prairie on the Nehoralpilkun River, left half of panorama with [25]]
	[27] 27. Prairie on the Nehoralpilkun River
	[28] 28. On the divide between Lake Osoyoos and Nehoralpilkun River
	[29] 29. [Hillside with fir trees]
	[30] 30. [Portrait of Seven Men including] Col Hawkins RE Commr Lieut Darrah R.E. Capt Haig RA Astronomer
b. 7, f. 66	[31] 31. Lt. Wilson RE.
	[32] 32. [John Keast] Lord--Quartermaster
	[33] 34. [Indian Group Portrait]
	[34] 36. [Three Indian men sitting at doorstep]
	[35] 37. [Indian man and woman]
	[36] 38. [Indian woman and child]
	[37] 39. Salmon
	[38] 41. Kootenay Mission Kootenay River

CAPTIONED SEQUENCE

For each photoprint the following information is listed: control number in brackets, caption appearing on the back separated by a "/" from caption appearing on the front (if there is one).

[39] Boundary Monument Point Roberts / Initial Monument

[40] Boundary Monument Point Roberts

b. 8, f. 67	[41] Boundary Monument Point Roberts
	[42] Boundary Monument Point Roberts
	[43] Youngest Child of A. Macdonald HBC.
	[44] Panorama No. 1 Columbia falls Ft Colville
	[45] Panorama No 2. / Kettle ^o/-S/^o/-a/^o/-l/^o/-m/^o/-o/^o/-n/ Falls-- Columbia River
	[46] Columbia R. Fort Colville
	[47] Mule & Load B.B.C. Barracks Colville / British Quarters at Colville
	[48] Panorama No. 1 B.B.C. Barracks Colville / British Quaters Fort Colville
	[49] Panorama No. 2 / British Head Quarters--Fort Colville--

CAPTIONED SEQUENCE (continued)

	[50] On the Boundary Mooyie / Boundary Line near Camp Mooyie	
b. 9, f. 68	[51] Capt. Bannacks Observatory Yahk Station / Lieut. Darrah--Observatory for Latitude	
	[52] Boundary Line Yahk Station	
	[53] Boundary [Line ?] East Kootenay / Monument--Boundary at "Kootenay West"--Kootenay River	
	[54] [?] looking West	
	[55] East Kootenay H.B.C. House on Talos no Plains / Kootenay Mission	
	[56] Kootenay Indians	
	[57] Kootenay Indians	
	[58] Kootenay Indians	
	[59] Indian Lodge / Fish trap--Skin lodges	
b. 10, f. 69	[60] Panorama No. 1 View up Boundary Pass Rocky Mountains	
	[61] Panorama No. 2	
	[62] Panorama No. 3	
	[63] Akamino Boundary Monument Snow drains into Saskatchewan / Rocky Mountains--Boundary Monument with British Flag flying	
	[64] Boundary Monument Akamino Snow drains into Saskatchewan / Rocky Mountains	
	[65] View from [Summach ?] of Rocky Mountains (Akamino) / In the Rocky Mountains near the Boundary	
	[66] / Camp Similkameen	
b. 11, f. 70	<i>Record of the Harris Family descended from John Harris born 1680 in Wiltshire, England</i> by Joseph S. Harris	1903

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Chinook Indians
Indians of North America -- Northwest, Pacific
Salish Indians
Soldiers -- United States

Geographic Names

Canada -- Boundaries -- United States
Mississippi Sound -- Surveys
Northwest, Pacific -- Description and travel
Northwest, Pacific -- Photographs
Northwest, Pacific -- Surveys
Northwest boundary of the United States
United States -- Boundaries -- Canada

Genres / Formats

Photoprints -- United States

Occupations

Surveyors -- United States

Names

Campbell, Archibald, 1813-1887
Gardner, G. Clinton (George Clinton), 1834-1904
Harris, Joseph S. (Joseph Smith), 1836-1910
Harris, Stephen, 1834-1874
Parke, John G., 1827-1900

Families

Harris family

Corporate Body

Northwest Boundary Commission, 1857-1869