

# Guide to the Joe Vincent Meigs Papers

MS 334



compiled by Diane E. Kaplan, Joseph Papagoda and Staff of Manuscripts and Archives

September 1987

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Manuscripts and Archives  
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**CALL NUMBER:** MS 334

**CREATOR:** Meigs, Joe V. (Joe Vincent), 1840-

**TITLE:** Joe Vincent Meigs papers

**DATES:** 1858-1915

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 11 linear feet

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The papers consist of correspondence, pamphlets, scrapbooks, genealogical materials and papers related to the Meigs Transit System in Boston and the American Civil War, including the formation of a black light artillery battalion. Meigs' Civil War service in the Tennessee army is documented in correspondence, a memoir, and a scrapbook. Meigs designed and installed his elevated rail system in 1885 and over 400 drawings as well as other materials connected with the enterprise are included in the papers. The correspondence contains an extended series of letters from his father, Return Jonathan Meigs, written between 1858 and 1888, as well as substantial genealogical correspondence.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.0334>

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## Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Manuscripts and Archives reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.0334>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please go to [http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/ifr\\_copy\\_order.html](http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/ifr_copy_order.html). The information you will need to submit an order includes: the collection call number, collection title, series or accession number, box number, and folder number or name.

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

b.      box  
f.      folder

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## Administrative Information

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### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Purchased in 1959 or 1961 from Ed Morrill. Gift of Liz Courtney, 1985. Gift of Charles M. Sullivan, 2006. For information prior to the purchase of the Meigs material, see the dealers records at BRBL, Morrill file, 1958-1959.

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### Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

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### Conditions Governing Use

Unpublished materials authored or otherwise produced by the creator(s) of this collection are in the public domain. There are no restrictions on use. Copyright status for other collection materials is unknown. Transmission or reproduction of materials protected by U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.) beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written permission of the copyright owners. Works not in the public domain cannot be commercially exploited without permission of the copyright owners. Responsibility for any use rests exclusively with the user.

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### Preferred Citation

Joe Vincent Meigs Papers (MS 334). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

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### Existence and Location of Copies

Scrapbook of materials related to Meigs elevated railway is available on microfilm from Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, at cost. Order no. HM202. 1987. 507 frames on 1 reel, 35mm.

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## Biographical / Historical

Josiah (Joe) Vincent Meigs was born on June 7, 1840, one of five sons of Return Jonathan and Eugenia (Love) Meigs. Joe Meigs spent his childhood in Nashville, Tennessee, where his father was a prominent jurist.

In 1858 R. J. Meigs apprenticed Joe to his brother James, an engineer for the Memphis and Charlestown railroad. When war broke out, Joe left Memphis and returned to Nashville. His father's strong unionist feelings forced the family to flee Tennessee in 1861. After a few years in New York, Joe Meigs went to Washington, D.C., where his father was clerk for the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, and got a position as clerk in the office of the Secretary of War. After a year in this post, Meigs joined the Union forces, and with the help of influential connections made through his father, he was able to raise the first black light artillery battalion. Despite his success with the battalion, he was forced to resign his commission due to injuries.

A job in the court of claims in Washington provided minimal financial support for Meigs while he worked at his true vocation: invention. General Benjamin Butler became interested in Meigs' talents as an inventor, especially in gun and cartridge design. In 1866 the Meigs family moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, under Butler's patronage, and Meigs became manager of the U.S. Cartridge Co.

Meigs' interest in traction problems, first contemplated when he was a boy and fine tuned while at work as a young man on the Memphis and Charlestown Railroad, led to the development of a monorail

railway system which Meigs felt would revolutionize rapid transit. With General Butler's financial backing, Meigs and others began in 1881 the difficult task of seeking permission to build an elevated railway in Boston. Opposition by street car lobbyists kept a charter from being granted until 1884. In order to encourage capital investment and to fulfill one of the terms of the 1884 charter, the Meigs Elevated Railway Construction Company was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By 1885-1886, one-third mile of track had been laid and an engine, tender, and car were operational.

By 1887 the elevated railway was both an engineering and a popular success. Lack of financial support, however, and continued opposition from street railways interests plagued Meigs and his enterprise.

Years of legal battles resulted in approval for the Meigs-Subway bill in 1894. Unfortunately Meigs' refusal to accept electricity as the chief source of motive power for the railway lost him financial support. By 1896 Meigs sold his charter rights to the elevated railway line.

In the last years of his life, Meigs immersed himself in gathering genealogical information on the Meigs family. In failing health from his Civil War injuries, Meigs died from a stroke on November 14, 1907, in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

[Biographical information extracted from a prospectus by Tawny Ryan Nelb.]

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## Scope and Contents

The Joe Vincent Meigs (1840-) Papers contain material relating primarily to three different areas: the Meigs Rapid Transit System, the U.S. Civil War, and family genealogies. Meigs designed an "extraordinary" type of elevated railway—described best in his pamphlet in the folder "Misc. re Meigs Rapid Transit,1," in Box 7—which was installed in Boston on a limited scale in 1884. (The line failed quickly, but not because of engineering difficulties; rather because funds were lacking.)

During the Civil War, Captain Meigs served in the loyal Tennessee army. His war service, including his formation and leadership of what he believed to be the first black light artillery battalion and his invention of a cartridge is documented in his pamphlet, "Some Events of His Life;" correspondence; and a scrapbook. The Civil War scrapbook (in the 1986 addition to the papers) is a particularly rich source and primarily documents the administration, composition, disciplinary matters and complaints about some soldiers. Additional topics include Lincoln's assassination and Butler's death. The scrapbook includes correspondence, official documents, memorabilia, notes, and photographs. Of particular note are the letters from Meigs to his father; letters from Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, G. W. Mercer, and R. D. Mussey; muster rolls; "Colored Recruits Wanted! For the Light Artillery Service," a recruitment poster; a few photographs; equipment lists, and ordinance stores.

Meigs' genealogical interests ran wide and deep. In this collection are many letters relating directly to genealogies, along with genealogical charts and books. Among the families covered are: Benton, Bishop, Clendinen, Love, McCulloch, McSpalden, Meggs, Meigs, Pope, and van Bibber. Meigs published books on his genealogical findings, three of his books being in the Yale University Library.

## Collection Contents

### Original accession

Correspondence		
b. 1, f. 1-7	R. J. Meigs to J. V. Meigs	1858-1870
b. 2, f. 1-5	R. J. Meigs to J. V. Meigs	1871-1888
b. 2, f. 6	Mrs. Mary Langley	1905-1907 October
b. 2, f. 7	Mrs. Sarah N. Love	Circa 1907
b. 3, f. 1	Capt. John A. McNeil	1906-1907
Meigs H. Whaples		
b. 3, f. 2	1903-1905	1903-1905
b. 3, f. 3	Re: genealogies	1905-1907
b. 3, f. 4	Re: Meigs' cartridge	Circa 1865
b. 3, f. 5	Re: pension Includes correspondence with Mr. Baldwin, Mr. Thompson and Congressmen Powers and Weeks.	1864-1907
b. 3, f. 6	<i>The Hildreth Homestead</i> (poem)	1899
b. 3, f. 7	"Certain Events of His Life" English	Circa 1864
b. 4	Genealogical material	
b. 5-6	Material re Meigs Rapid Transit	
b. 7	Material re Meigs Rapid Transit and misc	
b. 8	Genealogical correspondence	
b. 9	Correspondence, mostly genealogical	
b. 10	One book of correspondence	
b. 11	One book of correspondence	
b. 12	Photograph of "Reception to the Philadelphia City Council of the Meigs Elevated R.R. Construction Co. East Cambridge, Mass. 1887 May 27," with negative [Folio]	
b. 13	Miscellaneous blank office forms of the Memphis and Charleston Rail Road [Folio]	
b. 13	Hand lettered signs on the "Meigs System"	
b. 13	Miscellaneous printed matter on railroad	
b. 13	Ms list of various railroad section, 1 leaf	

b. 14, 21, 20, 23, Blueprints and mechanical drawings [Folios]  
22, 16-19, 15

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reel 1 Scrapbook of materials related to the Meigs elevated railway [ca. 1875-1890s].  
[Original scrapbook pages were discarded after filming in 1987. See Film HM 202]

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**Accession 1986-M-115: Additional Material, 1863-1904**

b. 1, f. 1a-1h	Civil War scrapbook	1863-1865
b. 1, f. 2	<a href="#">"Meigs Elevated Railway"</a> English An album of mounted photographs by Henry B. Harrington.	Circa 1896
b. 1, f. 3	"The Meigs Elevated Railway System," by Joe V. Meigs English	1887
b. 1, f. 4	Articles of Agreement and letter	1889
b. 1, f. 5	<i>Henry Dobbs, et als v. Francis H. Peabody, et als</i> English Transcript of cross examination of Henry Dobbins.	1900 December 3-4
b. 1, f. 6	Letter of appointment for Joseph V. Meigs, Jr. (son) as associate medical examiner of Middlesex County, Massachusetts	1905 October 4
b. 1, f. 7	"Fifty Years of Unified Transportation in Metropolitan Boston" English	1938



**Accession 2006-M-112: Additional Material, 1880, 1885, 1911-1915**

Meigs, Eugenia		
b. 1, f. 1 - 6	Correspondence, incoming	1911-1915, n.y., undated
b. 1, f. 7	Diary [includes loose photograph]	1911
b. 4, 3, 2	Drawings of various components of the Meigs railway system	1880, 1885

## **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**

Business  
Local transit  
Monorail railroads  
Railroads, Elevated

### **Geographic Names**

Boston (Mass.)  
Lowell (Mass.)  
New England  
Tennessee -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865  
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

### **Occupations**

Inventors  
Soldiers

### **Names**

Meigs, Joe V. (Joe Vincent), 1840-  
Meigs, Return J. (Return Jonathan), 1801-1891

### **Families**

Meigs family