

Guide to the Webster Family Papers

MS 527



compiled by Janet Elaine Gertz and staff of Manuscripts and Archives

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Manuscripts and Archives
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CALL NUMBER: MS 527

CREATOR: Webster family

TITLE: Webster family papers

DATES: Circa 1764-1909

BULK DATES: 1831-1873

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 4.46 linear feet (8 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: Principal figures in these papers are Noah Webster, the lexicographer, and his son William Greenleaf Webster. Also included are papers pertaining to the G. C. Merriam Company and the publication of Noah Webster's dictionaries and grammars. Family correspondence includes twenty-two letters written by Noah Webster to his son between 1835 and 1843 while the latter was in Cincinnati, Ohio, and La Fayette, Indiana, selling his father's books. The papers of William Greenleaf Webster make up two-thirds of the papers and include extensive correspondence during the Civil War on the death of his sons and his subsequent divorce. The letters of both these sons to their father before the war describes their beginning careers: Eugene as a civil engineer in Maryland and Stuart attempting land speculation and other occupations in Minneapolis. Both sons were killed while serving in the Civil War, Eugene fighting for the Confederacy and Stuart for the Union. The sixty-five letters of William Greenleaf Webster's second wife, Sara Appleton Webster to Judge Bristol, who was the executor of William G. Webster's estate, describe her attempts to earn a living by copying paintings in Germany (1870-1873). Also in the papers are financial documents, estate papers, a memoir of Noah Webster by Chauncey Allen Goodrich, an essay by William Eugene Webster, and newspaper clippings.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.0527>

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.0527>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please go to 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

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Acquired by purchase from William Todd, 1945; gift of June Hotchkiss, 2001; gift of Michael Magruder, 2007; and gifts of Michael Magruder, Robert S. Magruder, and Calvert Magruder, 2007-2009, 2011-2012.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

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.

Preferred Citation

Webster Family Papers (MS 527). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Processing Information

Gift of June Hotchkiss, 2001 (Accession 2001-M-061). Materials from this accession are in boxes 6-7.

Gift of Michael Magruder, 2007 (Accession 2007-M-053), and Michael Magruder, Robert S. Magruder, and Calvert Magruder, 2007 (Accession 2007-M-054), 2008 (Accession 2007-M-063), 2009 (Accessions 2009-M-058 and 2009-M-088), and 2011 (Accession 2011-M-049). Materials from these accessions are in boxes 3-5. (Accession 2012-M-046).

Existence and Location of Copies

Additional information not yet available in the online version of the finding aid exists in the repository. Contact Manuscripts and Archives for assistance.

Biographical / Historical

Noah Webster: lexicographer; published *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, 1806; published *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828.

William Greenleaf Webster: engaged with his father, Noah Webster, in getting out the second edition of the Dictionary, 1840-1841; assisted Chauncey A. Goodrich in getting out another edition in 1847; publisher of dictionary in 1856.

Scope and Contents

Personal and business papers of Noah Webster, his son William Greenleaf Webster, and their families make up the bulk of this collection, along with papers pertaining to the G. & C. Merriam Company and the publication of Noah Webster's dictionaries and grammars. The Webster Family Papers are thus of interest both for the history of American publishing and lexicography and for family and social history.

Only a small number of the papers are those of Noah Webster. These include twenty-two letters written to William G. Webster while the latter was living in Cincinnati, Ohio, and La Fayette, Indiana, selling his father's books. The letters are concerned with problems of publication, pirated editions, and competing lexicographers, and with financial difficulties caused by the financial crisis of the 1830s. Noah Webster several times states his belief that nationwide use of a standard grammar and dictionary would promote national unity and counteract regionalism (1835 Oct 27, 1836 Oct 18). He also comments on family news and on events in New Haven, including an arson epidemic in September 1837.

In addition to Noah Webster's letters to his son, there are five letters from other family members to Noah Webster, and a few letters exchanged with friends and business acquaintances. These deal in the main with the writing and publication of his books. There is also an 1807 prospectus for the dictionary and an assortment of legal and financial papers pertaining to Webster's publications, his will, and his estate. A collection of signed cancelled checks is also included, as is a biographical sketch of Webster written by his associate and son-in-law, Chauncey Allen Goodrich.

The papers of William G. Webster constitute two-thirds of this collection, and include family and general correspondence and legal and financial papers. The last ten years of Webster's life are the most heavily documented, especially the Civil War years, a period of personal tragedy for William G. Webster and his family. Webster and his wife of thirty years, Rosalie Stuart of Alexandria, Virginia, endured steadily worsening relations. A kinswoman of the Lee family, she was a strong Southern sympathizer; as Webster complained in a letter of September 24, 1864 (Box 2, folder 44): "with every breath she prayed that Virginia might secede --denouncing Congress and the Executive and the North, and expressing the warmest sympathy for and justifying the outrages of her Southern 'countrymen'." He, on the other hand, was an ardent supporter of the Union. With the outbreak of the war, life together became intolerable. Webster left his wife and she joined her sisters and son Eugene in Cumberland, Maryland. Eugene was later killed in battle outside of Richmond, fighting for the Confederate side. His brother Stuart, who had joined the Union Army, died within two months of him as a result of a fever contracted during the same campaign. Embittered by these losses, and blaming his wife for Eugene's death, Webster in 1864 obtained a divorce from his "unamiable and rebellious wife" (letter of 1868 Jan 8, Box 1, folder 28). The legal and financial ramifications of the divorce, and the reactions of friends and family, form a recurring theme in both the family and general correspondence. There is little about Webster's marriage in 1866 to Sara Appleton.

William G. Webster's family correspondence is divided into letters exchanged with his wife and sons and letters exchanged with other family members. There are no letters exchanged between Webster and Sara Appleton. There are thirteen letters from Rosalie Webster, part written in 1858-1859 from Minneapolis where she was keeping house for her son Stuart; these discuss family matters, possible property purchases, and the dictionary. Her other letters date from 1864 and are written from Cumberland, Maryland. In these she is concerned over financial troubles stemming from the war (she mentions rising food prices and the difficulty of finding safe housing) and with the effects of the war on her marriage and the country as a whole. Further information about her life during the Civil War is contained in Stuart's letters to his father, 1861-1862.

The twenty-nine letters from William Eugene Webster, 1858-1859, describe his life as a civil engineer in Baltimore and Cumberland, his search for better employment (he considers applying for work on the New Haven water works), his decision "to commit matrimony," and the subsequent birth of his first daughter. Interested in politics and current events, he comments on the elections of 1859 in Baltimore and on the

incidents at Harper's Ferry. Unfortunately, there are no Civil War letters from Eugene which might explain his decision to side with the Confederacy despite his New England upbringing. The only information about him during that period is contained in Stuart's letters to his father. An essay by Eugene entitled "Longing for Immortality" is also included in the collection (Box 3, folder 71). An additional accession of Eugene's letters (Box 4, folder 8), primarily to his wife, and hers to him provide details of life in a family deeply affected by the war.

The approximately one hundred letters from Calvert Stuart Webster to his father cover the years 1859, 1861-1862, ceasing shortly before his death. In 1859 he was in Minneapolis, attempting to support himself through a combination of book selling, land speculation, and insurance work. He suffered from financial difficulties and unfortunate dealings with unscrupulous agents. His letters resume in 1861 after he had joined the Army of the Potomac as a lieutenant of pontoniers in the engineer corps. He describes his training, camp life, and duties as acting commander of his company due to the court martial of the captain. His eagerness for battle and desire to clear the Webster name of the taint of treason emerge clearly, as does his enthusiasm on being ordered into active duty with McClellan's army in March 1862. He was throughout a staunch supporter of McClellan, attributing his failure to adverse conditions and political enemies. Stuart participated in the siege of Yorktown in April 1862 and reports on the work of the engineers, adding a lively account of his own experiences clearing out land mines. Active in McClellan's June campaign to take Richmond, Stuart vividly recounts the physical and emotional hardships suffered by the engineers in the campaign, during which they often slept only three or four hours per night and spent long days laboring knee-deep and even waist-deep in mud and water building roads and bridges, often under fire from the enemy. "I could not free my mind from the thought ... that I was set up as a target for rebel rifles, -- that each single shot had been aimed at my life, ... and the hissing snake-like sound of the balls, produces a cold, creeping sensation that is inexpressible" (1862 Jun 16). The letters conclude with Stuart's furlough to New York and his fatal illness. There are, in addition, legal and financial papers pertaining to his business activities, to his will, and to a dispute over payment for supplies ordered by Stuart as quartermaster and outstanding at his death. These issues are also referred to in William G. Webster's family and general correspondence.

William G. Webster's correspondence with all other family members is arranged in a single chronological sequence. Included are letters from his sisters Julia (Webster) Goodrich and Louisa Webster in New Haven, his brothers-in-law William W. Ellsworth of Hartford, Chauncey Allen Goodrich, Henry Jones, and many of Webster's nieces and nephews, as well as from members of the family of his second wife, Sara Appleton of Roxbury, Massachusetts, and from William W. Custis of La Fayette, Indiana, apparently a connection of Rosalie (Stuart) Webster. Many of the letters deal with legal and financial questions and disputes over land ownership, Noah Webster's estate, and the continuing publication of his books, from which most branches of the family derived some income. Chauncey Allen Goodrich and his son Chauncey in particular were active in editing and reissuing the dictionaries. The financial difficulties of publishing, deepened by national economical crises, worsened when William G. Webster's nephew William W. Fowler was discovered to be a swindler (see the letter of 1866 Feb 5). Other letters, especially those of Webster's female relatives, are devoted to family and social events in New Haven and a variety of other New England towns; thus Emily (Jones) Day writes of Litchfield, Connecticut, and of her sister Julia, wife of Thomas Kinnicut Beecher (1867 Aug 10, Sep 5), others write of personal and civic reactions to the death of Lincoln (1865 Apr 18, 20, 22), and William W. Custis describes the establishment of a spa in La Fayette, Indiana, in the 1850s, and the local response to the events at Harper's Ferry (1859 Dec 8). More personal matters, for instance the illnesses and resulting deaths of William W. Ellsworth (letters of 1868 Jan 5-20) and William W. Custis (1865 Nov 18), also figure in the correspondence.

William G. Webster's general correspondence includes letters exchanged with friends and business acquaintances. The business matters discussed concern land holdings in Minnesota, Indiana, and Illinois, Eugene and Stuart's financial activities, and, of course, the publication of Noah Webster's works. There is a steady exchange of letters with the G. & C. Merriam Company as well as correspondence with the Lippincott Company and the Appleton Publishing Company, and with contributors to revised versions of the dictionaries. Among the correspondents are Noah Porter (1864 Feb 27, Mar 7) and Increase Tarbox (1864 Dec 5). Letters from friends relate social events and discuss politics, religion, art and music, and the relative merits of life in New England and Minnesota. Friend and financial adviser Judge William Bristol of New Haven, for instance, expresses his concern over the proximity of Indians, preferring civilization to

the state of nature (1858 Sep 25). There are also two letters from Edward Dickinson (1865 Oct 11) inquiring after a mutual acquaintance. The remainder of William G. Webster's papers consist of legal and financial papers, an account book, bills and receipts, and Webster's will and estate papers.

The next portion of the Webster Family Papers pertains to members of William G. Webster's family. There is one folder each of letters from family members to his two wives, concerning family matters, and a longer sequence of general correspondence belonging to Sara (Appleton) Webster, 1866-1873. The major correspondent is Judge Bristol, who appears to have been William G. Webster's executor, and who was responsible for forwarding Sara Webster's small allowance from the estate and advising her on financial and legal matters stemming from her husband's death. In the approximately sixty-five letters from Sara Webster to Bristol, she discusses not only financial matters and disputes over the distribution of Webster's property to other heirs, but also her art lessons and hopes of supporting herself through her art work. Having moved to Europe in the summer of 1870 with her sister Kate, she writes from a small village outside Dresden where she was copying paintings to pay her way. Despite her grave financial straits, she describes a quiet and pleasant life, commenting on local customs, social mores, and the economy, and on visits to Berlin and Potsdam. Then as her monetary troubles increased through lack of payment for her work and the failure of her bank, she speaks of painting ten or eleven hours a day to the detriment of her health, while keeping house for boarders. After a brief visit to Italy and Switzerland in 1873, she and her sister living in one room and subsisting on milk and bread, they moved to Munich. With her plans to return to America and teach art for a living, the letters break off.

The remaining correspondence in the collection, that of other members of the Greenleaf, Webster, and Appleton families, falls into three main groups. Letters from the 1780s to 1830 are those of the Greenleaf family (the family of Noah Webster's wife), dealing with financial matters for the most part, and particularly with the bankruptcy of James Greenleaf in the 1790s. The correspondence of the 1850s through the 1870s is largely that of the Websters and Appletons, concerning the dictionaries and related financial matters. Between 1869 and 1873 most of the correspondence involves Judge Bristol's executorship of William G. Webster's estate and disputes arising therefrom. The letters of the 1880s are again those of the Greenleafs, concerning genealogy and other matters. Finally, the last materials in the collection are legal papers pertaining to Noah Webster's publications, 1848-1862, and miscellaneous legal papers, 1835-1871; assorted bills and receipts; 1784-1873, and newspaper clippings.

Further correspondence and other materials related to this collection can be found in the Goodrich Family Papers (Manuscript Group Number 242) in Manuscripts and Archives, and in the Records of the G. & C. Merriam Company and the Noah Webster Papers in the Beinecke Rare Book Library.

Arrangement

Arranged by name of family member or by accession number.

Collection Contents

Original accession

Noah Webster		
b. 1, f. 1-3	Letters to William Greenleaf Webster	1835-1843
b. 1, f. 4	Letters from family members	1789-1825
b. 4, f. 4	Letters to family and friends	1790-1839
b. 1, f. 5	General correspondence	1803-1835, undated
b. 1, f. 6	Prospectus for Dictionary of the English Language	1807 August
b. 4, f. 3	Fragments of early dictionary	Circa 1820
b. 5, f. 1	Oversize fragments	Circa 1820
b. 1, f. 7	Legal and financial papers	1786, 1831-1836
b. 5, f. 1	Indenture (manuscript copy) with William Greenleaf and Rosalie Stuart Webster	1835
b. 4, f. 5	Manuscript notebook of definitions and quotations	Circa 1800
b. 1, f. 8	Cancelled checks	1840-1843
b. 1, f. 9	Estate papers	1843-1853
b. 1, f. 10	"Memoir of Noah Webster," by Chauncey Allen Goodrich English	undated
b. 4, f. 13	"Noah Webster's Place Among English Lexicographers," by F. Sturges Allen English	1909
William Greenleaf Webster		
Family correspondence		
b. 1, f. 11	Rosalie E. (Stuart) Webster	1858-1886
b. 1, f. 12-13	William Eugene Webster	1858-1859
b. 1, f. 14-17	Calvert Stuart Webster	1859, 1861-1862
b. 1, f. 18-29	Other family members	1838-1868, undated
b. 2, f. 30-57	General correspondence	1836-1868, undated
b. 2, f. 58	Legal papers	1858-1868, undated
b. 3, f. 59	Account book	1865

William Greenleaf Webster (continued)

b. 3, f. 60-61	Bills and receipts	1855-1869
b. 3, f. 62	Estate papers	1869-1870, undated
b. 3, f. 63	Miscellaneous	1840-1844, undated
Fanny Lynn Webster		
b. 4, f. 2	Letters to her husband William Eugene Webster	1858-1859
Rebecca Greenleaf Webster		
b. 4, f. 6	Letter to her daughter Eliza	Circa 1820-1847
Rosalie E. (Stuart) Webster		
b. 3, f. 64	Letters from Julia (Webster) Goodrich, William Eugene Webster, and others	Circa 1857-1886
b. 4, f. 7	Letters, primarily to her children	Circa 1850-1865, 1883
Sara (Appleton) Webster		
b. 3, f. 65	Family correspondence	1866-1869
b. 3, f. 66-70	General correspondence	1866-1873, undated
William Eugene Webster		
b. 4, f. 8	Letters, primarily to his wife Fanny Webster	1857-1862
b. 3, f. 71	"Longing after Immortality" English	1851 March 8
b. 5, f. 2	Certificate of resignation from West Point	1854
b. 5, f. 2	<i>New Haven Morning Journal and Courier</i> issue containing obituary of William Eugene Webster	1862 July 19
Calvert Stuart Webster		
b. 4, f. 1	Letters to his mother, Rosalie Stuart Webster, and brother, William Eugene Webster	1858-1862
b. 3, f. 72-73	Legal and financial papers	1858-1869
b. 4, f. 12	Eliza Steele Webster Jones, memorial booklet	Circa 1888
b. 3, f. 74-79	Correspondence of other family members	1786-1899, undated
Unidentified writers		
b. 5, f. 4	Letter written to William Benjamin Prescott, New Haven, Connecticut	1815
b. 5, f. 4	Journal fragments	Circa 1815-1817

b. 3, f. 80-81	Legal papers pertaining to Noah Webster's publications	1848-1862
b. 3, f. 82	Miscellaneous legal papers	1835-1871
b. 3, f. 83	Bills and receipts	1784-1873
b. 3, f. 84	Newspaper clippings	1872, undated
b. 5, f. 3	Newspaper clippings relating to the Noah Webster house in West Hartford, Connecticut, and the murder-suicide of Noah Webster's great-grandsons Paul Leicester Ford and Malcolm W. Ford	1902
b. 4, f. 9	Printed Webster genealogy compiled by Noah Webster and account of a family meeting	Circa 1835-1843
b. 5, f. 3	Webster genealogy compiled by Noah Webster (New Haven, 1836) with notes and corrections by his great-grandson Paul Leicester Ford, privately printed in Brooklyn, N.Y.	1876
b. 4, f. 10	Letters addressed to various family members	Circa 1854-1881
b. 4, f. 11	Letters and documents mainly relating to the death of William Eugene Webster at the Battle of Richmond	1857-1862
b. 4, f. 14	Recipe booklet, handwritten	Undated
Books		
b. 6, f. 1	<i>The Holy Bible, containing the old and new testaments, in the common version. With amendmets of the language by Noah Webster, LL.D.</i> (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1833)	1833
b. 6, f. 2	<i>The Holy Bible, containing the old and new testaments, in the common version. With amendmets of the language by Noah Webster, LL.D.</i> (New Haven: N. Webster, 1841)	1841
b. 6, f. 3	<i>The works of Alexander Pope, Esq. Volume VI. Being the second of his letters.</i> (Edinburgh: printed for J. Balfour, 1764)	1764
b. 7, f. 1	Lee, James. <i>An introduction to botany. Containing an explanation of the theory of that science, extracted from the works of Linnaeus; with an appendix and glossary. The sixth edition, much improved and enlarged.</i> (Edinburgh: printed for James Symington, 1796)	1796
b. 7, f. 2	<i>The Franklin primar, or lessons in spelling and reading.</i> (Greenfield, Mass.: A. Phelps, 1829)	1829
b. 7, f. 3	Webster, Noah, <i>The elementary spelling book; being an improvement on the American spelling book.</i> (Concord, N.H.: Atwood and Brown, 1836)	1836
b. 7, f. 4	Webster, Noah, <i>The elementary spelling book; being an improvement on the American spelling book.</i> (Middletown, Conn.: William H. Niles, 1836)	1836

Accession 2012-M-046: Additional Material, 1831, 1835-1842, 1862, 1864

Correspondence

b. 1, f. 1	Jones, Eliza to Emily Machen Handwritten copy of an account of the fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration in honor of Noah and Rebecca Webster. A typed transcription is included.	1842 May 4
b. 1, f. 2	Rhodes, Brigadier General, to Fanny Webster regarding the death of Eugene Webster	1862 July 4
b. 1, f. 3	Webster, Noah to Obed Waite Obed Waite was a lawyer and onetime mayor of Winchester, Virginia. He married Sarah (Sally) Stuart, the sister of William's wife, Rosalie.	1836 June 11, 1839 June 24, July 10, 22
b. 1, f. 4	Webster, Rosalie to Obed Waite (brother)	1839 January 16
b. 1, f. 5	Webster, William G. to Fanny Webster (daughter-in-law)	1864 October 29
b. 1, f. 6	Webster, William G. to Obed Waite	1835 October 31, December 31, 1837 February 16, 1842 July 20

Topical files

b. 1, f. 7	Marriage contract between William G. Webster and Rosalie Stuart	1831 May 4
b. 1, f. 8	Mortgage note given by William G. Webster to Noah Webster relating to land belonging to David Stuart	1835 June 3
b. 1, f. 9	"Webster's Counting-House Dictionary," article from a Minneapolis newspaper	Undated

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

Americans -- Germany
Death
Divorce
Encyclopedias and dictionaries -- United States
English language -- Lexicography
Families
Husband and wife
Literature -- History and criticism
Women artists

Geographic Names

Minneapolis (Minn.) -- History
Richmond (Va.) -- Siege, 1862
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

Genres / Formats

Biographies
Wills

Occupations

Lexicographers

Names

Goodrich, Chauncey A. (Chauncey Allen),
1790-1860
Goodrich, Julia Webster, 1793-1869
Webster, Calvert Stuart -- 1832-1862
Webster, Noah, 1758-1843
Webster, Rosalie Eugenia Stuart, d. 1886
Webster, Sara Appleton
Webster, William Eugene, 1831-1862
Webster, William G. (William Greenleaf),
1805-1869

Families

Webster family