

Guide to the Alexander Bryan Johnson Papers

MS 741



compiled by Diane E. Kaplan

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Manuscripts and Archives
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CALL NUMBER: MS 741

CREATOR: Johnson, A. B. (Alexander Bryan), 1786-1867

TITLE: Alexander Bryan Johnson papers

DATES: 1823-1861

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 2 linear feet (4 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers consist almost entirely of letters between Alexander Johnson and members of his family, with a small number relating to his business affairs and publications. Also included is a genealogical chart showing the ancestry of his first wife, Abigail Louisa Adams.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.0741>

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.0741>.

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

Purchased from the Alta California Bookstore in Albany, California, in 1974.

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Unpublished materials authored or otherwise produced by the creator(s) of this collection are in the public domain.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

Alexander Bryan Johnson Papers (MS 741). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Related Materials

The Beinecke Library has in its possession six of Johnson's books as well as several pamphlets.

Biographical / Historical

Alexander Bryan Johnson was the son of Leah Simpson and Bryan Johnson, a descendant of Dutch and German-Jewish ancestors. He was born in Gosport, England, on May 29, 1786 and lived in England until he was nearly fifteen. In 1801 Alexander and his mother moved to Utica, New York (then Old Fort Schuyler), to join his father who had emigrated to the United States in 1797 and was becoming a respected merchant. In 1810 Alexander took over the management of his father's business and also established a glass factory in Ontario county. In 1811 Johnson went to New York to invest in bank stocks and learn more about finances. It was here in 1812 that he published his first book, *An Inquiry into the Nature of Value and of Capital*.

Returning to Utica Johnson met and married Abigail Louisa Adams, the daughter of Charles Adams and granddaughter of President John Adams. He was appointed one of the state directors of the Bank of Utica and soon proposed a bank of his own. Through a charter granted him for an insurance company Johnson was able to engage in banking activities, but the company was forced to dissolve itself in July 1819. Johnson, in the meantime, had been appointed a director of the Ontario Branch Bank and in September 1819 was elevated to its presidency. He remained with the bank until its charter expired in 1855.

Freed from financial worries, Johnson was able to find time for many other interests. He studied law in the office of his old friend, Nathan Williams, and was eventually admitted to the bar though he never practiced law. Between 1828 and 1841 he published many pamphlets and four more books, including his important *Treatise on Language*. The Utica Lyceum and other groups frequently called on Johnson as a lecturer. His family prospered; he and Abigail had ten children and all the boys, when old enough, were sent away to preparatory school and then to college. The girls, too, were sent away to be educated. Johnson's oldest son, Alexander Smith Johnson, attended Yale and became a lawyer. He later served on the New York Court of Appeals, including two years as chief justice, and was a commissioner for the settlement of claims of the Hudson's Bay and Puget Sound Agricultural Companies. (Some of A. S. Johnson's papers are in the Bancroft Library in California.)

In 1836 Johnson's wife died. Two years later he married Eliza Lydia Masters; they had four children. Eliza died in 1852 and Johnson became so despondent that his children encouraged him to take a trip to Europe. On his return, and probably at the urging of his children, he married for a third time. He lived with his third wife, Mary Livingston, until his death in 1867.

These last years were not unproductive in terms of literary accomplishment. Johnson produced another five books, including *The Meaning of Words* and *A Guide to the Right Understanding of Our American Constitution*, which contains his reflections on American government and politics including the slavery question. Unfortunately, Johnson did not keep a close enough watch on his banking interests and the new Ontario Bank which he helped organize in 1855 was declared insolvent in 1856: the bank cashier had fraudulently appropriated half of the bank's capital for speculation. Johnson was able, eventually, to pay off all billholders and creditors and return a small amount to the stockholders. He then retired from business to spend the remaining ten years of his life studying and writing. His last book, *Deep Sea Soundings*, appeared in 1861.

Additional biographical material on Alexander Bryan Johnson may be found in Moses M. Bagg's *The Pioneers of Utica*. Johnson wrote an autobiography which was never published. Hamilton College has photocopies made from a typescript of this work, which is still in the hands of the family. In September 1967 Hamilton College held a Centennial Conference on Johnson's life and works. A more detailed appraisal of Johnson's career and a complete bibliography of his works may be found in the proceedings of this conference, published as *Language and Value*, edited by Charles L. Todd and Russell T. Blackwood (Greenwood Publishing Company, New York, 1969).

Scope and Contents

The Alexander Bryan Johnson Papers consist almost entirely of correspondence, mainly between Johnson and members of his family. In addition, there are a few letters pertaining to the schooling of the children, the publication of books, and bank matters. The earliest letters date from 1823 and the latest from 1861.

The letters originally came in seven albums which were arranged by Johnson or some other family member. Five of these albums remain in original order; the other two albums were taken apart to prevent the glue and the album paper from destroying the letters. These loose letters are arranged in folders at the end of the collection. Although these letters bear page numbers from their order in the albums, it was more useful to arrange the letters chronologically.

The collection is arranged as follows:

Volume 1, letterbook labeled "Domestic Relics," 642 manuscript-numbered pages. This volume begins with notes on family history, including Johnson's account of an autopsy performed on his first wife. The earliest letters date from 1823. There are a few letters from Abigail Louisa Adams Johnson to her husband while she was visiting her family in Quincy, Massachusetts, as well as letters from other members of her family. Most of the letters in this volume, however, are from two sons, Alexander Smith Johnson and Bryan Johnson, while they were away at school. Alexander Smith Johnson attended Yale, graduating in 1835, and his letters reflect the quality of student life at the time. They include descriptions of his room and board arrangements and his studies, along with comments on the Yale celebration of the centennial of George Washington's birth, a visit of President Andrew Jackson, and plans for the visit of Harriet Martineau at commencement. There are discussions with his father about abolition and colonization societies. In 1834, there are some remarks in his letters concerning Jackson's removal of government deposits from the Bank of the United States and the impact on the financial establishment of the country. The last letters in the book date from 1835, including some from John Adams Johnson, who attended Yale for a short time. The letters in the volume are arranged chronologically, but occasional mistakes will be found, e.g. a letter dated 1845. The volume ends with an index to the correspondents.

Volume 2, letterbook labeled "Domestic Relics," 727 manuscript-numbered pages. Letters in this volume date from 1836 - 1839. The letters are arranged chronologically, but the volume is confusing because several undated letters were bound into the middle of it. (Many of these letters refer to children from Johnson's second marriage and therefore date from the 1840's.) There is an index to correspondents at the end of the volume.

Johnson's son Bryan learned the business trade in New York while working as a clerk. His letters discuss land speculation and several mention the panic of 1837 and list the businesses that failed. Johnson's other sons continued to write letters about their school lives. William Clarkson Johnson was at boarding school

in Elizabethtown, New Jersey; John Adams Johnson attended Geneva College (now called Hobart); and Alexander Smith Johnson studied law in New Haven. There are also occasional letters from daughters Sarah, Louisa, and Fanny.

Three family tragedies occurred during this period: the death of Johnson's first wife in 1836; and the death of two sons, Bryan in 1837 and John in 1839. Surprisingly, the letters do not mention these events at all. There are discussions of "mother's illness," but after her death there are no letters from the grieving family.

Volume 3, letterbook labeled "Domestic Relics," 418 manuscript-numbered pages. The letters are from family members to Alexander Bryan Johnson and date from 1846 to 1848. Apparently, numerous items have been removed from the volume. The letters are arranged chronologically, but in reverse order, beginning each year with December and running to January. There is an index to correspondents at the end of the volume.

Included in the volume are several letters from son Charles Adams Johnson who served in the army and was stationed in Mexico during the Mexican War. Another son, William Clarkson Johnson, was married in 1847 and took a honeymoon trip to Europe. It is unfortunate that there are no letters from William about his trip, for he would have been a witness to revolution in Europe in the spring of 1848. Other relatives in their letters to A. B. Johnson speculate on what William might be witnessing. A letter from Louisa Catherine Adams, the recently widowed Mrs. John Quincy Adams, is also included in this volume.

Volume 4, letterbook labeled "Ancestral Letters" and composed of Alexander Bryan Johnson's letters to his children. The majority of these letters are addressed to Alexander Smith Johnson, though there are some to Bryan, John Adams, Charles Adams, and Sarah. The letters date from 1826 to 1845. Alexander Bryan Johnson had the letters bound to make a gift for his son Alexander. In his inscription he wrote that the letters contain "much detail of my domestic life and though totally uninteresting to strangers, such incidents will possess an interest to my children and their posterity."

Actually Johnson's description of the contents of his letters is far from accurate. There is little detail about family matters or Utica gossip. Rather, Johnson wrote to his children a course of letters to assist them in forming their character. He knew they would be of interest to others since he printed several of these letters in his book *An Encyclopedia of Instruction; or, Apologues and Breviats on Man and Manners*. He covered such topics as the vices of liquor and deceit, the necessities of experiencing pain and disappointment, the art of writing good letters, and the advantages of being an orator. He was frank with his sons on the need to control their desires in order to avoid promiscuous behavior and he devoted an entire letter to venereal disease. Other letters, containing discussions of a wide range of subjects, show Johnson to be a man of broad learning. Atoms, cholera, capital punishment, democracy, railroad stocks, canal building, and religious meetings were all subjects of letters, and Johnson would often use quotes from classical sources. Occasionally he would discuss his own writings and responses to them. He recounted (1835 Jun 19) a visit from a Quaker named Mott and a discussion with his "highly intelligent" wife who had read some of his works. His letter to his daughter Sarah (1841-1842), who was attending a New York boarding school, are of a different nature: he wrote children's stories to cheer up the homesick young girl. Two letters at the end of the volume give family history, especially details of Johnson's Jewish grandfather.

Volume 5. Letters in this volume had been rebound in a modern binder before arriving at Yale. The letters date from 1856 January - March, and there are approximately 60 numbered pages in the volume. There are letters from the following Johnson children: Bryan at school; a married daughter Louise; Alexander living in Albany; and William, who was negotiating for land in Iowa and traveled between Iowa and Washington. There are also a few letters from non-family members about Alexander Bryan Johnson's business dealings.

The letters arranged in folders at the end of the collection date from February 1856 to 1861. There is a slight overlapping of dates with items in Volume 5. Many letters from the married children are included in these folders. Most interesting are the letters relating to land development in Iowa from William, who by this time was president of the Des Moines Navigation and Railroad Company. Included in these folders are two broadsides advertising land for sale in Iowa. Louise's letters deal with the day-to-day problems of a well-to-do family. Her letters exhibit a certain boredom; she is surrounded by servants about whom she complains, and she spends a great deal of time doting on her children. There is some discussion in her letters of the

financial distress in New York businesses in 1857. At the end of the collection are a few letters from Charles, a major in the 17th New York Regiment commanding troops stationed in Virginia after the rout of Union troops at Bull Run. There are several letters from Johnson's cousin Rachel in London, who wrote to remind him of his Jewish ancestors and engaged in interesting religious polemics. One item by Johnson (1856 May 30) is included in these folders: a copy of a letter sent to Preston S. Brooks giving approval for his action of physically chastising Charles Sumner on the floor of Congress.

The folders also contain several interesting letters from non-family members. There is a letter from Johnson's physician giving the nineteenth century prescription for relieving prostate troubles, as well as letters from the printers of Johnson's books. In 1856 reviews of Johnson's *The Physiology of the Senses* provoked letters from the general public. There are also letters from Johnson's friend S. DeWitt Bloodford on this book and a few letters from Roger B. Taney on Johnson's writings. When in 1857 Johnson's bank was forced to declare insolvency, several depositors wrote Johnson to seek relief from their financial losses.

Collection Contents

b. 1, f. 1-2	Letterbooks labeled "Domestic Relics" A copy of this material is available in digital form from Manuscripts and Archives. Contact Manuscripts and Archives at beinecke.library@yale.edu to request access to the digital copy.	1823-1839
b. 2, f. 3	Letterbook labeled "Domestic Relics"	1846-1848 December
b. 2, f. 4	Letterbook labeled "Ancestrel (sic) Letters"	1826-1845
b. 3, f. 5	Letterbook of letters to Alexander Bryan Johnson	1856 January- March
b. 3, f. 6-19	1856 February-December A copy of this material is available in digital form from Manuscripts and Archives. Contact Manuscripts and Archives at beinecke.library@yale.edu to request access to the digital copy.	1856 February- December
b. 3, f. 20	1856, undated Includes index.	1856, undated
b. 4, f. 21	1857 Jan (1 of 2)	
b. 4, f. 22	1857 Jan (2 of 2)	
b. 4, f. 23	1857 Feb	
b. 4, f. 24	1857 Mar	
b. 4, f. 25	1857 Apr	1857 Apr
b. 4, f. 26	1857 May	1857 May
b. 4, f. 27	1857 June	1857 June
b. 4, f. 28	1857 July	1857 July
b. 4, f. 29	1857 Aug	1857 Aug
b. 4, f. 30	1857 Sept	1857 Sept
b. 4, f. 31	1857 Oct	1857 Oct
b. 4, f. 32	1857 Nov	1857 Nov
b. 4, f. 33	1857 Dec	1857 Dec
b. 4, f. 34	1858-1859	1858-1859
b. 4, f. 35	1861	1861
b. 4, f. 36	Genealogical Chart of John Adams and Abigail Smith	

Appendix: List of Names

Children of Alexander Bryan Johnson

* Children of Alexander Bryan Johnson and Abigail Louisa Adams:

John Adams Johnson (1815 - 1820) Alexander Smith Johnson (1817 - 1878) Bryan Johnson (1819 - 1837)
John Adams Johnson (1821 - 1839) William Clarkson Johnson (b. 1823) Charles Adams Johnson (b. 1826)
Sarah Adams Johnson (b. 1828) - married James S. Lynch Arthur Breese Johnson (b. 1830) Louisa Ann Smith
Johnson (b. 1832) - married George Ally Francis Elizabeth Johnson (b. 1835) - married Charles P. Williams

Children of Alexander Bryan Johnson and Eliza Lydia Masters:

Bryan Johnson (b. 1840) John Adams Johnson (b. 1842) Mary Stebbins Johnson (b. 1844) - married
McDonnell Grieg Johnson (b. 1850)

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

Armed Forces
Business
Jews
Medicine -- United States

Geographic Names

Iowa -- History
New York (State) -- Politics and government
Utica (N.Y.)

Occupations

Authors
Bankers

Names

Adams, Louisa Catherine, 1775-1852
Ally, Louisa Ann Smith Johnson, b. 1832
Johnson, A. B. (Alexander Bryan), 1786-1867
Johnson, Abigail Louisa Adams, d. 1836
Johnson, Alexander Smith, 1817-1878
Johnson, Bryan, 1819-1837
Johnson, Charles Adams
Johnson, John Adams, 1821-1839
Johnson, William Clarkson, b. 1823
Lynch, Sarah Adams Johnson, b. 1828
Taney, Roger Brooke, 1777-1864

Families

Adams family

Corporate Body

Yale University -- Students