

Charles Wilkes Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the
Library of Congress

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Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

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Collection Summary

Title: Charles Wilkes Papers

Span Dates: 1607-1959

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1841-1865)

ID No.: MSS45716

Creator: Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877

Size: 6,500 items; 45 containers plus 2 oversize plus 1 vault; 18 linear feet; 26 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Naval officer and explorer. Official and family correspondence, journals and diaries, legal and financial papers, autobiography and other writings, and scientific notebooks relating to Wilkes's command of an expedition (1838-1842) to the Antarctic, Hawaii and various other Pacific islands, and the northwest coast of the United States; his capture of J. M. Mason and John Slidell in the *Trent* affair (1861); and his command of the James River Flotilla and West India Squadron during the Civil War. Includes legal and business papers of the Wilkes family in England.

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.

People

Agassiz, Louis, 1807-1873--Correspondence.

Bolton, William Compton, d. 1849--Correspondence.

Dana, James Dwight, 1813-1895--Correspondence.

Drayton, Joseph--Correspondence.

Gray, Asa, 1810-1888--Correspondence.

Mason, J. M. (James Murray), 1798-1871.

McClellan, George Brinton, 1826-1885--Correspondence.

Slidell, John, 1793-1871.

Stuart, Fred D.--Correspondence.

Welles, Gideon, 1802-1878--Correspondence.

Wilkes family.

Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877.

Wilkes, Eliza--Correspondence.

Wilkes, Jane Renwick, d. 1843--Correspondence.

Wilkes, Jane--Correspondence.

Wilkes, John, 1827-1908--Correspondence.

Wilkes, Mary Lynch Bolton--Correspondence.

Organizations

United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)

United States. Navy. James River Flotilla.

United States. Navy. Potomac River Flotilla.

United States. Navy. West India Squadron.

Subjects

Astronomy.

Maps.

Meteorology--Observations.

Scientific expeditions--Antarctica.

Scientific expeditions--Hawaii.

Scientific expeditions--Oceania.

Tides.
Trent Affair, 1861.

Places
Antarctica--Discovery and exploration.
Hawaii--Discovery and exploration.
Oceania--Discovery and exploration.
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Naval operations.

Occupations
Explorers.
Naval officers.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Charles Wilkes, naval officer and explorer, were chiefly the gift of Rosalee Lockwood-Jones, Mrs. M. L. Hull, and C. Denby Wilkes, 1921-1964. An addition was given by Gilbert Wilkes in 2002. A second addition was donated by the Wilkes family from the estate of Gilbert Wilkes.

Processing History

The papers of Charles Wilkes were processed in 1975. The register was revised in 1999 and 2003. Material received in 2002 was added to the collection in 2003. A second addition was processed in 2010.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Charles Wilkes is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Charles Wilkes are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Microfilm

A microfilm edition of part of these papers is available on twenty-six reels. Consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan. To promote preservation of the originals, researchers are required to consult the microfilm edition as available.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, Charles Wilkes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1798, Apr. 3	Born, New York, N.Y.
1815	Entered the merchant marine
1818	Appointed midshipman

- 1826 Married Jane Jeffrey Renwick (died 1843)
Promoted to lieutenant
- 1833 Headed the Depot of Charts and Instruments, Washington, D.C., which later
became the Naval Observatory
- 1838-1842 Commanded an expedition to the Antarctic, islands of the Pacific Ocean, and
the American northwest coast
- 1843-1863 On special duty, chiefly in Washington, D.C., preparing for publication of
information gathered from the expedition
- 1845 Published *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*. Philadelphia:
Lea and Blanchard. 5 vols.
- 1849 Published *Western America*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard
- 1851 Published *Meteorology*. Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman
- 1854 Married Mary H. Lynch Bolton
- 1857 Published *Theory of Zodiacal Light*. Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Son, Printers
- 1858 Published *Hydrography*. Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman
- 1859 Published *On the Circulation of the Oceans*. Philadelphia
Published *Report on the Examination of the Deep River District, North
Carolina*. [Washington, D.C.]
- 1861 While in command of the *San Jacinto*, halted the British mail steamer *Trent* and
forcibly removed Confederate commissioners J. M. Mason and John Slidell
- 1862 Placed in command of the James River Flotilla; transferred to the command of
the Potomac River Flotilla; later commanded the West India Squadron
- 1863 Recalled to Washington, D.C.
- 1864 Court-martialed
- 1866 Commissioned rear admiral on the retired list
- 1877, Feb. 8 Died, Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Charles Wilkes (1798-1877) span the years 1807-1877, with the bulk of the material dated between 1841 and 1865. The collection contains [family](#), [official](#), and [general correspondence](#) of Charles Wilkes, letterbooks of Wilkes and another United States naval officer, [journals and diaries](#), a draft [autobiography](#), scientific tracts and notes detailing weather and tidal observations, genealogical charts, newspaper clippings, Confederate currency, and printed matter. There are also marriage and building contracts, leases, inventories, promissory

notes, trust agreements, and debt records dating from the seventeenth century that relate to the [Wilkes family](#) in England and America.

The papers illustrate much of Wilkes's career, including his command of an [expedition](#) of 1838-1842, which engaged in surveys and exploration of the Antarctic, islands in the Pacific Ocean, and the northwest coast of the United States. The collection also covers Wilkes's seizure of Confederate commissioners J. M. Mason and John Slidell aboard the British mail steamer *Trent* in 1861. Notebooks, observation records, and correspondence relate to the expedition, but most of the material relates to his special duty in Washington, D.C., in the period 1843-1861, when Wilkes consolidated the scientific data gathered on the mission and prepared his narrative of the voyage together with other scientific volumes for publication. With these publications came a measure of fame and recognition, not only as an explorer but also as a nautical scientist.

Wilkes's capture of the *Trent* is chiefly reflected in his correspondence for the period 1861-1862, which contains letters from committees honoring him and letters indicating favorable public reaction. More vividly portrayed are Wilkes's commands in 1862 of the James and Potomac River flotillas and of the West India Squadron operating near the Bahamas against Confederate commerce destroyers. The [General Correspondence](#) and [Letterbooks](#) series contain an exchange of letters between Gideon Welles, George Brinton McClellan, and Wilkes touching upon the military operations of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. Scattered references throughout the papers relate to Wilkes's [business](#) interests in the South, especially in North Carolina.

Correspondence in the papers also pertains to the Wilkes family. Included in the [Family Correspondence](#) series are letters of Charles Wilkes, his son John, daughters Jane and Eliza, his wives, Jane Renwick and Mary Lynch Bolton, and cousins and other family members. Their letters chronicle the family's celebrations and tragedies as well as their activities and interests prior to the Civil War.

Wilkes's daily records in the [Journals and Diaries](#) series record events of special interest and supplement those periods lacking in correspondence. His autobiography provides information relating to his career and personal life.

The [Miscellany](#) series includes three official letterbooks of William Compton Bolton, a United States naval officer and the first husband of Wilkes's second wife, Mary Lynch Bolton. Prior to his death in 1848, Bolton and his wife were close companions of the Wilkeses in Washington society. Originally named William Compton Bolton Finch, his name was changed in 1833. The name Finch appears on the first two volumes.

Frequent correspondents in the papers include Louis Agassiz, James Dana, Joseph Drayton, Asa Gray, George Brinton McClellan, Fred D. Stuart, and Gideon Welles.

Two [additions](#) consist primarily of letters written by Wilkes to his wife, Mary, in 1863 while he was in command of the West India Squadron. The letters were sent from Cuba, the Bahamas, and Haiti. Wilkes described life at sea and efforts to capture Confederate destroyers and protect United States commerce during the Civil War and expressed his dissatisfaction with the leadership of the country. Letters from other family members relate personal news including an outbreak of cholera in Germany in 1873.

Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in thirteen series:

- [Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875](#)
- [Letterbooks, 1841-1863](#)
- [Family Correspondence, 1836-1915](#)
- [General Correspondence, 1835-1876](#)
- [Official Correspondence, 1862-1863](#)

- Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940
- Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877
- Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876
- Miscellany, 1817-1921
- Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959
- Additions, 1861-1873
- Oversize, 1861
- Vault, 1864

Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	<u>Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875</u> Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 2-5 REEL 5-9	<u>Letterbooks, 1841-1863</u> Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 6-12 REEL 9-14	<u>Family Correspondence, 1836-1915</u> Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 13-16 REEL 14-17	<u>General Correspondence, 1835-1876</u> Letters received and sent. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 17-19 REEL 17-18	<u>Official Correspondence, 1862-1863</u> Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 20-21 REEL 18-19	<u>Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940</u> Correspondence, drafts of a narrative of the expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 22-25 REEL 20-24	<u>Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877</u> Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 26-27 REEL 24	<u>Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876</u> Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights. Arranged by type of material.

BOX 28-30
REEL 25-26

Miscellany, 1817-1921

A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks belonging to William Compton Bolton.
Arranged by subject or by type of material.

BOX 31-45
REEL 26

Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959

Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature including apprenticeship papers, bonds, deeds, marriage contracts, and mortgages relating to the Wilkes family in England and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an onomastic index to many of the family records in the papers.
Indexed family papers are arranged chronologically.
Containers 32-45 not filmed

BOX 45
not filmed

Additions, 1861-1873

Correspondence and writings.
Arranged in order of processing date and therein by type of material.

BOX OV 1

Oversize, 1861

Proclamation and genealogical charts.
Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.

BOX VA 1

Vault, 1864

Confederate currency and bond.
Arranged and described according to the series, folder, and container from which the items were removed.

Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875 Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	1841-1875 (24 vols.)
BOX 2-5 REEL 5-9	Letterbooks, 1841-1863 Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 2 REEL 5-6	1841, May 17-1847, Dec. 30 1848, Nov. 22-1850, Feb. 16 1850, Feb. 16-1851, Jan. 17
BOX 3 REEL 6-7	1851, Jan. 18-1854, Dec. 9 1857, Jan. 16-Oct. 25 1857, Nov. 5-1859, Feb. 13
BOX 4 REEL 7-8	1859, Feb. 17-1861, Apr. 22 1862 May 12-22 July 18- Aug. 10 Aug. 10- Sept. 2 Sept. 6-22
BOX 5 REEL 8-9	Sept. 30- Nov. 30 1862, Nov. 11-1863, Jan. 2 1863 Jan. 3-Feb. 2 Feb. 2-26 Mar. 4-Apr. 4 Apr. 4-May 12 May 12-27 May 21- June 18

Letterbooks, 1841-1863

Container

Contents

June 18

BOX 6-12
REEL 9-14

Family Correspondence, 1836-1915

Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family.
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 6
REEL 9-10

1836, Oct.-1850, July

(13 folders)

BOX 7
REEL 10-11

Aug. 1850-May 1853

(10 folders)

BOX 8
REEL 11

1853, June-1855, Dec.

(10 folders)

BOX 9
REEL 12

1856, Jan.-1858, Aug.

(12 folders)

BOX 10
REEL 12-13

1858, Sept.-1862, Oct.

(14 folders)

BOX 11
REEL 13

1863, Jan.-1867, Oct.; 1887, May

(12 folders)

BOX 12
REEL 14

1895, July-1915, Oct.

(7 folders)

Undated

(3 folders)

BOX 13-16
REEL 14-17

General Correspondence, 1835-1876

Letters received and sent.
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 13
REEL 14-15

1835-1856

(22 folders)

BOX 14
REEL 15-16

1857-1862

(22 folders)

BOX 15
REEL 16

1863-1870

(10 folders)

BOX 16
REEL 17

1871-1876, undated

(6 folders)

General Correspondence, 1835-1876

Container

Contents

	Fragments, undated
BOX 17-19 REEL 17-18	Official Correspondence, 1862-1863 Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 17	1862, July 6-Dec. 18 (8 folders)
BOX 18 REEL 17-18	1862, Dec. 19-1863, May 11 (7 folders)
BOX 19 REEL 18	1863, May 12-July 30, undated (4 folders)
BOX 20-21 REEL 18-19	Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940 Correspondence, drafts of a narrative of the expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 20 REEL 18-19	Correspondence, 1940 Maps, Antarctica and Hawaii Narrative, 1838 Bound volume Shortened copy Notebooks Use of astronomical instruments, [1828?] "Instructions to New Officers on Methods of Surveying Used in the Expedition," 1858 Observations Weather and tidal observations, 1839
BOX 21 REEL 19	Journal of tides, air, and water observations, 1839-1840 General, 1841 Columbia River, undated Pendulum on Mauna Loa, computations, 1841 Publications Correspondence on publications concerning the expedition, 1842-1862 <i>Zoology</i> , by Titian Ramsay Peale, introduction to, 1846-1848 Reports American Philosophical Society and the United States Naval Lyceum, 1836 Joint Committee on the Library, United States Congress, 1858-1859 Soo Loo agreement, 1842 Surveys, original list of islands discovered and surveyed for the first time, undated

Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940

Container

Contents

	Naval hearings, charges and defense of Wilkes, 1842, 1847 Miscellany, 1861-1863, undated
BOX 22-25 REEL 20-24	Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877 Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 22 REEL 20-21	Autobiography Draft Vols. 1-8 (4 folders)
BOX 23 REEL 22-23	Vols. 9-10 Typescript pp. 1-300 (3 folders)
BOX 24 REEL 23	pp. 301-882 (6 folders) Essays and sketches Report on the examination of the Deep River District, North Carolina, 1858 (2 folders) "Theory of the Winds," 1855 (2 folders)
BOX 25 REEL 24	"On the Circulation of the Oceans," 1859 "Visit to Tunis" and "The Housewife," 1859 "The Student's Lamp," "In Turn," and "Christmas Story," 1859 "On Postal Arrangements," "How I Was Cured of Going to Fires," and "Sketches of Biography," 1859 "Some Days in the Session," 1877 "Reasons for Taking the <i>Vanderbilt</i> Under Command," 1863 "A Diary From the South Sea Islands," undated Description of a trip through the Midwest, undated
BOX 26-27 REEL 24	Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876 Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 26 REEL 24	Maps and papers relating to the Dauphine and Susquehanna Coal Co., undated Drawings of blast furnaces, scales, and coal kilns, undated Map indicating Wilkes property in Washington, D.C., undated Report on the High Shoals property in Gaston County, N.C., undated Account book, 1870

Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876

Container

Contents

	Bills, checks, and receipts, 1850-1873 (1 folder)
BOX 27	(3 folders)
REEL 24	
	Copyrights, deeds, and property rights, 1833-1876, undated
BOX 28-30	Miscellany, 1817-1921
REEL 25-26	
	A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks belonging to William Compton Bolton. Arranged by subject or by type of material.
BOX 28	Bills, letters, and notes relating to the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1867-1869
REEL 25	Navy registers, 1828-1831, 1845 Coast Survey, 1855 Court-martial defense of Wilkes, 1864 <i>United States v. S.S. Peterhoff</i> , 1864 Maps and papers relating to Deep River District of North Carolina, 1851-1857, undated Biographical sketches of Wilkes, 1912, undated <i>Trent</i> affair, monographs, 1861-1865, undated <i>See also Oversize</i> Winds and Currents of the Sea, by Matthew Fontaine Maury, 1851
BOX 29	Confederate money and bond, 1864 <i>See Vault</i>
REEL 25-26	
	Photographs, 1900, undated Scrapbook, 1856-1913, undated General, 1846-1921, undated Newspaper clippings (3 folders)
BOX 30	Letterbooks of William Compton Bolton (formerly William Compton Bolton Finch)
REEL 26	1817, Dec. 11-1818, Dec. 9 1823, Nov. 4-1824, May 11 1839, June 13-1841, Mar. 9
not filmed	Interest statements, lists, and receipts, 1870-1873, undated
BOX 31-45	Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959
REEL 26	
	Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature including apprenticeship papers, bonds, deeds, marriage contracts, and mortgages relating to the Wilkes family in England and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an onomastic index to many of the family records in the papers. Indexed family papers are arranged chronologically. Containers 32-45 not filmed

Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 31 REEL 26	Agreements, appraisals, building estimates, debt records, letters, receipts, inventories, termination of trusts, 1669-1814 Onomastic index, a partial index of the Wilkes family parchments and other family records contained in the papers, undated Wilkes chronology, 1959 Genealogical notes pertaining to the Wilkes family, typewritten copies, 1728-1869
BOX 32 not filmed	Indexed documents Index, 1951 Nos. 1-11, 1607-1616, 1635, 1644 (12 folders)
BOX 33	Nos. 12-25, 1646-1647, 1655-1667, 1679-1684 (14 folders)
BOX 34	Nos. 26-36, 1685, 1693-1698 (11 folders)
BOX 35	Nos. 37-46, 1701-1705 (10 folders)
BOX 36	Nos. 47-57, 1706-1710 (11 folders)
BOX 37	Nos. 58-64, 1714-1718 (7 folders)
BOX 38	Nos. 65-72, 1720-1727 (8 folders)
BOX 39	Nos. 73-79, 1728-1735 (7 folders)
BOX 40	Nos. 80-87, 1738-1745 (9 folders)
BOX 41	Nos. 88-94, 1746-1747 (7 folders)
BOX 42	Nos. 88-94, 1746-1747 (7 folders)
BOX 43	Nos. 101-105, 1757-1760 (5 folders)
BOX 44	Nos. 106-115, 1761-1771, 1784 (10 folders)
BOX 45	Nos. 116-117, 1791-1792 (3 folders) Genealogical charts, undated <i><u>See also Oversize</u></i> Miscellaneous documents, 1683-1684, 1712-1747, 1761, 1790, undated (4 folders)
BOX 45 not filmed	Additions, 1861-1873 Correspondence and writings. Arranged in order of processing date and therein by type of material.
BOX 45	2003 addition Correspondence, 1861-1863, undated

Additions, 1861-1873

Container

Contents

	Writings on High Shoals, N.C., undated 2010 addition Correspondence, 1861-1863, 1873
BOX OV 1	Oversize, 1861 Proclamation and genealogical charts. Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.
BOX OV 1	Miscellany
	<i>Trent</i> affair, proclamation, 1861 (Container 28)
BOX OV 2	Family Papers and Genealogy Genealogical charts, undated (Container 45)
BOX VA 1	Vault, 1864 Confederate currency and bond. Arranged and described according to the series, folder, and container from which the items were removed.
BOX VA 1	Miscellany Confederate money and bond, 1864 (Container 29; Reel 25)