



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 1575

**William Rudolf O'Donovan
Papers**

**1846-1920 (bulk 1871-1879)
1 box (11 folders), 5 photographs, 0.4 lin. feet**

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Restrictions: None
Related Collections at Fayette County (Pa) Collection,
HSP: (Collection 837)

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Abstract

William Rudolf O'Donovan was a self-taught sculptor with a studio in New York City. This collection contains approximately ninety letters written by O'Donovan to his mother, sisters, and brother. O'Donovan's letters to his family describe his experiences in New York and include descriptions of his works in progress, opinions on current events and politics, accounts of cultural activities, and ideas about marriage and religion. Also included in the collection are five photographs and several miscellaneous items.

Background note

William Rudolf O'Donovan was a self-taught sculptor born in Preston County, Virginia in 1844. In 1861 O'Donovan joined the Confederate Army and served, probably in the Staunton Artillery, until the end of the Civil War. By 1871 he had moved to New York City where he worked as a sculptor and earned the respect of his colleagues. His works include a sculpture of Thomas Eakins located at the National Academy, busts of Walt Whitman and General Joseph Wheeler, and equestrian statues of Lincoln and Grant for Soldiers' and Sailors' Arch in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. O'Donovan was a founding member of the Title Club, a member of the Hudson-Fulton Commission, the Society of American Sculptors, and the Architectural League. He died in 1920.

Scope & content

This small collection primarily contains correspondence written by O'Donovan to his mother, sisters, and brother between the years of 1860 and 1920, with most letters written in the 1870s. Many of O'Donovan's 1871 letters to his family briefly summarize his activities since his departure from home in 1860, including his service in the Confederate Army. Although O'Donovan fought for the Confederacy for almost the entire war, his comments regarding his experiences are chiefly limited to a single letter written shortly after Lee's surrender and passing references to his service in his 1871 letters. His May 2, 1865 letter notes, "Their [sic] is no business of any kind going on here now, but this is on account of the currency. We have no currency, at present

except species which is tolerably scare here now, but thinks will improve in a short time I hope."

O'Donovan's later correspondence focuses on detailed descriptions of his impressions of New York City. One letter recounts a trip to the opera while another notes that "Certainly there is no place so utterly solitary as a great city when the whole circle of ones associates is broken and scattered" [September 19, 1878]. O'Donovan's ideas about religion and family run through the letters which also relate news of his work as an artist. Of particular note are several early letters detailing his work on a bust of Daniel O'Connell, which are accompanied by three photographs of the work (now located in the miscellaneous series of this collection). In addition, the collection contains two other photographs, one of Linda Detes and the other of Carmichaels from Town's Hill, as well as an obituary, a penmanship book, and an 1846 letter from Jeremiah O'Donovan to William's father, James.

Overview of arrangement

Series I	Correspondence, 1860-1920	91 items
Series II	Miscellaneous, 1846 and n.d.	11 items

Related materials

Virtually all of O'Donovan's correspondence is reproduced in the Fayette County (Pa.) Collection (#837), although several letters are incompletely transcribed.

References

Dictionary of American Biography. Vol. XIII, p 627.

Opitz, Glenn B., Ed. *Mantle Fielding's Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors and Engravers.*
New York: Apollo Press, 1986.

Subjects

Art, Modern—19th century--New York (State)--New York—Study and teaching

New York (N.Y.)—Social Life and Customs

Sculptors—New York (State)—New York

United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865

O'Donovan, William Rudolf, 1844-1920

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Mrs. Evelyn Benson and Miss Pierie Abraham.

Alternative format

The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute has a microfilm copy of the collection.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], William Rudolf O'Donovan Papers (Collection 1575), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

The correspondence in the collection is arranged chronologically. Several letters in poor condition have been photocopied and the originals, which are not to be handled, are in a sealed envelope at the end of the collection. The photocopies have been placed in the appropriate places within the run of correspondence.

Box and folder listing

Series 1. Correspondence

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Correspondence	1860, 1865	2 items	1	1
Correspondence	Jan.-June 1871	19 items	1	2
Correspondence	July-Dec. 1871	12 items	1	3
Correspondence	Jan.-June 1872	19 items	1	4
Correspondence	July-Dec. 1872	8 items	1	5
Correspondence	1873	12 items	1	6
Correspondence	1874-1876	7 items	1	7
Correspondence	1877-1920	12 items	1	8

Series 2. Miscellaneous

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Photographs	n.d.	5 items	1	9
Miscellaneous	1846 and n.d.	3 items	1	10
Originals not to be handled	1871	3 items	1	11