



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 1873

Joseph Watson (1784-1841)
Papers

1823-1828

1 box, 0.4 lin. feet

Contact: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania
1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107
Phone: (215) 732-6200 FAX: (215) 732-2680
<http://www.hsp.org>

Processed by: Leslie Hunt

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Abstract

Joseph Watson, born in 1784, was the son of Isaac Watson and Ann Jenks. Originally a Philadelphia lumber merchant, Watson was appointed an alderman in 1822. In 1824 he was chosen to succeed Robert Wharton as mayor of Philadelphia. After leaving the mayor's office in 1828, Watson went on to serve as the president of Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, a position he held until his death in 1841. He had married Harriet Snowden in about 1815; they had no children.

Watson's papers, which date from his tenure as mayor, are primarily comprised of incoming correspondence, much of which is from office seekers. Also included are pleas from prisoners seeking clemency, letters from victims and alleged criminals concerning larceny and other crimes, and letters and papers from various agents and law enforcement officials in southern towns concerning the kidnapping of Philadelphia free blacks who were then sold into slavery. A few bonds, receipts, and copies of legal documents supplement the correspondence.

Background note

Joseph Watson was born in 1784, the youngest son of Isaac Watson and Ann Jenks. Isaac, a Quaker carpenter, was born in Bucks County, the son of English immigrant Mark Watson and his wife Ann Sotcher. In addition to his work as a tanner, Mark also served as a provincial officer in the Pennsylvania Assembly and as a justice of the peace.

Joseph Watson's career combined aspects of his father's trade and his grandfather's public service. Originally a lumber merchant in Philadelphia, he was elected an alderman, or city councilman, in 1822. Just two years later, his fellow city councilmen selected him to succeed Robert Wharton as mayor, an office to which he was reappointed for the three following years. During this period, mayoral duties were somewhat limited; the city's executive duties were shared by the Select Council.

After leaving the mayor's office in 1828, Watson became the president of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, then in its fledgling years. He served in that capacity

until his death in 1841. Watson had married Harriet Snowden, probably sometime around 1815, and the couple had no children.

Scope & content

This collection is primarily comprised of approximately four hundred letters received by Joseph Watson during his tenure as mayor of Philadelphia from 1824 to 1828. Also included are a handful of bonds, affidavits, and other materials related to the correspondence. Letters, a few of which are written in French and German, were organized by Watson's office in a rough alphabetical arrangement (by correspondent), then numbered. However, when letters arrived pertaining to others that had already been filed, the related letters were often placed with the filed letters, even if they were from different people. There are two groups of letters: one primarily concerns Watson's first two years as mayor, the other his final two years. The numerical order has been retained, making it possible to follow a particular person or subject through several months or years. Significant gaps in the numbering indicate the absence of many letters.

Much of the correspondence received by Watson was from individuals who were seeking appointments to city offices. Many of the individuals who requested positions did so out of desperation; they had been unable to find employment elsewhere and appealed to Watson as a last resort. In addition to those who sought any available appointment, men also applied for positions that they knew to be vacant and for which they felt they were qualified. One of these positions was that of high constable, which was left vacant in 1824 by William Hines. Hines subsequently wrote to Watson repenting his past behavior, admitting he had “disgraced your confidence in one point that of Drinking too much accursed liquor.” Hines claimed to be an “alterd man” and begged Watson to “try me once more in any situation.” Watson received a similar letter from another man who had fallen from his favor. Like Hines, this man promised temperance, too: “I will not Drink one Drop of any kind of Liquor for five years I Do Sollmonley Declair this Befor god and my wife.”

Some correspondents were looking for less formal appointments. In December 1824 Watson received a letter from Charles Williams: “My situation as an agent for Steam Boats & Stages for the last 7 years has made me acquainted with a host of villains comprised of Counterfeiters, Gamblers, thieves &c &c &c &c &c.” Williams requested that Watson make him a “special constable, or some such thing, in order that I may bring these villains to Justice. I ask no payI only wish to be instrumental in clearing this city of some of the confirmed scoundrels who now infest it.” Another man offered his services to Watson in June 1826, stating that he could help bring some criminals to justice. Unlike Charles Williams, this man desired to be compensated “handsomely” for his work.

Office seekers were not the only men who tried to win Watson's favor – he also received many letters from convicts, some of them proclaiming their innocence and begging for pardons, others acknowledging their guilt but asking for leniency. Prisoner Charles Mitchell asked that Watson use his influence over the governor to request a pardon, claiming that he was a changed man. Mitchell professed to have prevented a prison

escape and cited other good behavior as reasons for clemency. Mitchell wrote Watson several letters concerning his plight.

Also included in Watson's correspondence are numerous letters regarding free blacks who were kidnapped from Philadelphia and then sold into slavery. A September 1824 letter describes the sad condition of Isaiah Sadler, age seventeen, "Negro boy, who...has been kidnapped from your city, and if so the perpetrator or perpetrators ought to be brought to punishment." The letter was written in Delaware, where Sadler was sold into slavery by a Philadelphia neighbor who accompanied him there. Sadler was placed in irons after his sale, but picked the lock using the splintered handle of a wooden spoon. He subsequently escaped, and was described as being "in a very crippled condition" due to the irons and his long walk to safety. Sadler's deposition regarding his background and ordeal is also included. Several other letters tell similar stories of Philadelphia blacks who were sold into slavery, some of them to locations in the Deep South. In at least one case, retrieving the kidnapped individual required a great deal of investigation and supporting correspondence. These letters were often filed under the name of the person who first reported the kidnapping, with other related letters following.

Of particular interest are a number of papers concerning Jesse Sharpless, whose 1815 obscenity trial is considered the first in the United States. Sharpless, a merchant, pled guilty to exhibiting and charging admission to view a painting that was considered lewd. By the mid 1820s Sharpless's dry goods store on Market Street had become known as the Washington Museum. In an anonymous letter (number 408) to Joseph Watson written in April 1824, the author condemned Sharpless's museum as a "place of temptation, a place exhibiting objects that enflame passions, passions that in all conscience are firey enough in young & oldish folks, without help from this hoary headed prostitute fanning the flames by his indelicate exhibition." This letter, written in an erratic, unsteady hand, goes on to graphically describe the offensive objects Sharpless displayed, calling the objects by their "vulgar names – for sure it cannot be so naughtyey to do this in an anonymous letter." Also included is a copy of the 1824 recognizance of Jesse Sharpless and his sons, in which it was agreed that the Sharplesses would not exhibit "any improper or indecent painting, print, statue nor casting of any description whatever calculated to corrupt the morals or tastes" of the public. Apparently the 1815 conviction had done little to stymie Sharpless.

Other mail addressed to Watson concerned crimes or harassment. Reparations and the return of stolen property were frequent requests. A number of letters refer to the poor conduct of city watchmen, the excessive noise caused by neighbors, the rudeness of local drunks, and the antics of teenage boys. Victims of crime and complainants were not the only people who requested information of the mayor. One man wrote about a particular case in which "a certain young man was arrested in your city for opening several trunks and taking from them silk dresses shawls &c and leaving his trunk in which was found brick bats and portmantoes which contained old sail cloth." The man feared that the accused was his brother, Bernard Wells, and wished that Mayor Watson might confirm it.

Although many letters concern burglary and robbery, counterfeiting was also a common crime. A good forger could easily demand payments on false bank notes and drafts. Watson received many letters regarding forgers, some of which were accompanied by newspaper clippings concerning the crimes. In October 1824, an indignant former convict named Thomas Mott wrote to Watson regarding his alleged involvement in the production of counterfeit bank notes: "Believe me sir I am not that pitiful scoundrel you have taken me for to belong a gang of Robbers and be a greater villain than the rest by turning states evidence."

Not all letters were addressed directly to Watson; some appear to have been forwarded to him, perhaps as evidence for trials or investigations. Among these is a letter (number 365) addressed to Freeman Rickshaw in which the author, Joseph M., wrote, "My Dear Freeman as ther is no evidence against you but the 10 dollar bill wich they say you gave to that girl, I do wish you would not plead guilty as there is every hope of your getting clear, Remember hold your Toung."

Interestingly, although this group of letters covers a number of topics that pertained to Joseph Watson's work, they seem to offer only a glimpse of what his mayoral responsibilities would have entailed. Discussions of politics, city infrastructure, city council duties, and mentions of the more mundane, yet essential, aspects of managing the city are strikingly absent from this group of letters.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania:
Mayor's Court Records, Am .30927 and Am .30353

At other institutions:

Joseph Watson Correspondence (Mss. 1872), Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge,
La.

Bibliography

Burgett, Bruce. "Obscene Publics: Jesse Sharpless and Harriet Jacobs." *Genders OnLine Journal*, www.genders.org/g27/g27_obscene.html

Roth, Anthony A *Mayors of Philadelphia, 1691-1972: Some Genealogical Notes*, vol. 9.
Philadelphia: The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, 1978.

Subjects

City council members – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Clemency – 19th century

Counterfeits and counterfeiting – 19th century

Crime – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Criminals – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Criminal law – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Free blacks – 19th century

Hooligans – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Job hunting – 19th century

Kidnapping – 19th century

Larceny – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Mayors – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Obscenity (Law) – 19th century

Philadelphia (Pa.) – Politics and government – 19th century

Politicians – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Pornography – 19th century

Prisoners – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Robbery – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Sharples, Jesse, 1759-1832

Watson, Joseph, 1784-1784

Administrative Information

Restrictions

This collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Purchased, 1962.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

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Processing note

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Gaps in Watson's correspondence, made evident by breaks in the numbering system, were probably caused when the collection was disassembled for sale.

Many items have been cleaned for mold.

Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Correspondence 3-94 (A-B) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	1
Correspondence 109-144 (D-G) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1823-1826	1	2
Correspondence 146-196 (G-H) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	3
Correspondence 205-260 (J-M) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	4
Correspondence 273-296 (M-N) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	5
Correspondence 300-398 (O-S) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	6
Correspondence 400-435 (S) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	7
Correspondence 436-476 (S-W) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	8
Correspondence 481-499 (T-W) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1823-1826	1	9
Correspondence 500-553 (W) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1824-1826	1	10
Correspondence 6-67 (A-B) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	11
Correspondence 71-99 (B-C) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	12
Correspondence 102-143 (C-E) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	13
Correspondence 146-175 (G) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	14
Correspondence 176-226 (G-H) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	15
Correspondence 262-272 (H) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	16
Correspondence 274-299 (H-K) [items have been cleaned for mold]	1827-1828	1	17
Correspondence 300-392 (K-P)	1827-1828	1	18
Correspondence 405-500 (Q-W)	1825-1828	1	19