



The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania

**Collection 3090**

**Wilson Family  
Papers**

**1852-1939**

**2 boxes (35 folders), 1 flat file, 0.6 lin. feet**

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**Restrictions:** None

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**Abstract**

Phillip and Francis (Fanny) M. Wilson lived with their four children in Carbondale, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. Their oldest son, Robert Bruce, born in 1830, traveled the country as a gymnast in the Robinson Circus to finance medical school and eventually became a doctor in New York City. Henry, born five years later, was an attorney for several years before becoming a political journalist and publishing *The Honesdale Citizen*. Their third son, Jerome, lived in Edmeston, Ostego, New York for several years until leaving to find odd jobs around the country to pay off debt accrued throughout the years. Phillip and Fanny's only daughter, Theresa, born in 1836, remained in Carbondale following her marriage to Major Lewis Berkley.

The collection contains correspondence between members of the Wilson family from 1852 to 1933. The majority of the letters detail the personal and professional lives of Phillip and Fanny M. Wilson's four children and their spouses. Though this collection is small, it provides an intimate look into the domestic life of a nineteenth century family, covering topics ranging from spousal abandonment and financial distress to the upbringing of grandchildren.

**Background note**

Phillip and Fanny M. Wilson lived in Carbondale, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania with their four children, Robert Bruce, Henry, Jerome, and Theresa. Little is known regarding the lives of Phillip and Fanny, outside their dedication to their children. Following the death of her husband, Fanny lived alone for several years until eventually moving in with her daughter, Theresa, and Theresa's husband, Lewis Berkley. Fanny died in 1882.

Phillip and Fanny's oldest and most industrious son, Robert Bruce, was born in 1830 in Carbondale. In order to finance medical school, Robert Bruce, who was frequently referred to as Bruce, took up a variety of odd jobs across the country. In 1867 he performed as a gymnast for the Robinson Circus for 25 dollars a week. Following this stint, Bruce entered medical school. In 1869 he married a woman named Henrietta from New York. The following year he graduated from medical school and began a lucrative career as a New York City doctor. Bruce also owned and ran two drugstores.

Henry Wilson, Fanny and Phillip's second son, was born in 1835 in Carbondale. Though Henry attended law school and eventually became a practicing attorney, much of his financial success came later. Leaving his law practice, Henry became a political journalist and, after spending only a relatively short time writing for various papers, became publisher of *The Honesdale Citizen*. Yet Henry and his wife Sarah, ten years his junior, were not without personal loss. On January 24, 1870, Sarah gave birth to the couple's third child and their first son, who died less than a month later after suffering violent spasms. Shortly thereafter, their second child, Gerti, fell ill and died, leaving them with only their eldest daughter, Clarabel.

Theresa Wilson Berkley, born in 1836, was Phillip and Fanny's third child and their only daughter. In 1867, Theresa met Major Lewis Berkley, who at the time was boarding with her brother, Henry. Major Berkley was from Missouri and had just served four years in the Confederate army. After securing Fanny Wilson's permission, Major Berkley and Theresa began their courtship. They were married in 1869 and shortly thereafter invited both Theresa's mother, Fanny, and her niece, Fannie, to live with them.

Phillip and Fanny's youngest and most unpredictable son was Jerome. Jerome married Annie A. in 1861 in Edmeston, Ostego County, New York, although his parents could not attend the wedding. In 1864, Annie gave birth to their only child, Frances (Fannie) E. Wilson. Shortly after her birth, Jerome left New York in search of a better paying job to curtail his growing debt. Though he promised to write home frequently and return soon, these promises were soon broken. With no word from Jerome for years, Annie and the rest of his family assumed he had died. However in 1881, Jerome returned home to Carbondale with a rather large fortune.

During Jerome's absence, Fannie was under the care of her mother and her father's family. Fannie spent a great deal of time in Carbondale visiting her grandmother and Aunt Theresa, and eventually moved in with Lewis and Theresa Berkley. In 1886, Fannie married Charles J. Watson.

## Scope & content

The Wilson Family Papers consist entirely of personal correspondence, with letters to and from family members and friends from 1852 through 1933. The 35 folders and one flat file which make up the collection are arranged by author and recipient and the letters are ordered chronologically within each folder when possible.

Written over a period of 80 years, the letters capture almost a century of Wilson family history. However, because they begin two decades after Fanny and Phillip's first child was born, the letters offer little description of the four children when they were young, highlighting instead their married adult lives.

Letters between Fanny and Phillip and their children and spouses document the comings and goings of family members, guests, and friends. On January 13, 1861, Jerome wrote to his parents that he was getting married and asked them to come to the wedding. He

explained that he and Annie “intend to be married as soon as we receive an answer to this letter, or as soon as you can visit here to witness the ceremony matrimonial.” His mother replied only five days later. She was excited to hearing from her son, with whom contact had been lost, but declined the invitation.

Such letters allowed Fanny and others to express their emotions. In a letter to Jerome on August 25, 1855, Fanny wrote, “It is very hard to have my children away from me, yet I know I cannot always have them with me: reason teaches me that, and I should that a little experience had taught me that by this time I know that they must go out from us to act for themselves, in the great drama of life...” Fanny added, however, that Jerome should, “write to us as often as you can consistently. If you are at any time sick, or in need of any thing do not fail to let us know it if it is within the reach of possibility.” Though it seems he was going abroad, Fanny still wanted to provide and care for him as best she could.

Other letters are far less benign, criticizing or circulating rumors about family members and friends. Most of these letters were written by women about other women. In a letter to her Aunt Theresa, Fannie wrote, “I really look forward to a happy winter, all the unpleasant members of our family have been settled for all time, there is no danger of my so-called relatives bursting in with some wild tale of abuse and suffering...” Another letter speculated that a Wilson brother’s fiancé was doubling as a prostitute. The authors of such letters often asked the recipients not to share the correspondence with others.

Beyond the family’s personal history, the letters touch on many aspects of nineteenth-century culture, as when Jerome wrote to his father during the 1860s asking for a wolf or buffalo skin robe, or when Annie related a doctor’s recommendation to treat a cough with hard cider. Some letters also reflect accepted prejudices and discrimination. In a letter to his parents, Bruce referred to the distinguished actress Sarah Bernhardt as “that cunning Jew of Paris, Sarah Bernhardt,” and claimed she was “coining money off the poor idiots who I blush to say are Americans that have some money and little brains.”

Although many of the letters were written during the Civil War, there are few references to the war, perhaps because no one in the immediate Wilson family was sent to fight. When references were made, the authors seemed both uninformed and content to remain distant. Jerome wrote to his parents from Harpersville, “There is nothing of importance to communicate with the exception that we learned yesterday that Richmond was taken but I doubt the truth of the report.” It is this nonchalance that is so striking.

## Separation report

None.

## Related materials

None.

## Subjects

Carbondale (Pa.) – History  
Honesdale (Pa.) – History  
Luzerne County (Pa.) – History  
John Robinson Circus

Berkley, Major Lewis  
Watson, Charles J.  
Wilson, Clarabel  
Wilson, Fannie (Frances) E. (b.1864)  
Wilson, Fanny (Francis) M., 1810-1882  
Wilson, Gerti  
Wilson, Henry (b. 1835)  
Wilson, Jerome  
Wilson, Phillip  
Wilson, Robert Bruce (b.1830)  
Wilson, Sarah (b.1845)  
Wilson, Theresa (b.1836)

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

None.

### **Acquisition information**

Purchased, 2005.

Accession number 2005.086.

### **Alternative format**

None.

### **Preferred citation**

Cite as: [Indicate cited items or series here], Wilson Family papers (Collection 3090), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

### **Processing note**

Processed by Tory Kline, 2006, and completed by Rachel Moskowitz, 2007.

## Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
To Fanny M. and Phillip Wilson from Annie, Robert Bruce, and Jerome Wilson	1861-1881	17 items	1	1
To Sons from Phillip and Fanny Wilson	1855-1861	4 items	1	2
To FM Wilson from Annie A. Wilson	1862-1875, n.d.	20 items	1	3
To Fanny M. from Henrietta Wilson	1879-1881	5 items	1	4
To Fanny M. Wilson from Claribel Wilson	1874, n.d.	2 items	1	5
To Roxanna Lines from Fanny M. Wilson	1869-1872	2 items	1	6
To Robert Bruce Wilson from Theresa Berkley	1856-1894	12 items	1	7
To Robert Bruce Wilson from Annie Wilson	1865-1876	2 items	1	8
To Robert Bruce Wilson from Fanny M. Wilson	1867-1880	3 items	1	9
To Robert Bruce Wilson from Henry Wilson	1894, n.d.	2 items	1	10
To Sister from Robert Bruce Wilson	1856-1895	29 items	1	11
To Family from Robert Bruce Wilson	1881-1895	9 items	1	12
To Sister from Henry Wilson	1893-1895	8 items	1	13
To Sister from Henrietta and Henry Wilson	April 27 and 28, 1896	3 items	1	14
To Henrietta Wilson from Unknown	1899-1901	6 items	1	15
To Sister from Henrietta Wilson	1878	2 items	1	16
To Theresa Berkley from Friends	1852-1910	26 items	1	17
To Theresa Wilson Berkley from Cousins	1869-1901	6 items	1	18
To Theresa Berkley from Nieces	1871-1905	11 items	1	19
To Theresa Berkley from Sarah Wilson	1878-1910	8 items	1	20
To Theresa Berkley from Cousins	1887-1900	5 items	1	21
To Anne A. Wilson from Fanny M. Wilson	1861-1872	9 items	1	22

To Fannie E. Wilson from Friends	1866-1912, n.d.	21 items	1	23
To Fannie E. Wilson from Annie A. Wilson	1873-1888	24 items	1	24
To Fannie E. Wilson from Cousins	1877-1885	7 items	1	25
To Fannie E. Wilson from Theresa Berkley and Aunt Maria	1885-1909	5 items	1	26
To Aunts from Fannie E. Wilson	1896-1905	10 items	1	27
To Mr. and Mrs. Charles Watson from Variety	1915-1933, n.d.	4 items	1	28
To Charles Watson from Nieces and Nephews	1933, n.d.	2 items	2	1
To Cousins ? from Cousins	1859-1898	8 items	2	2
To Various family members from Various family members	1864-1904, n.d.	23 items	2	3
Partial Letters	n.d.	12 items	2	4
Miscellaneous Letters	1852-1938, n.d.	22 items	2	5
Receipts	1868-1893	21 items	2	6
Miscellaneous Documents and Photos	1874-1939, n.d.	33 items	2	7
Flemington High School: Class of 1931 photograph	ca. 1931	1 item	n/a	FF 1