



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3107

Joseph Smith Harris
Correspondence

1853-1907, 2007, n.d. (bulk 1856-1863)
1 box, 0.4 lin. feet

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Restrictions: None

Related Collections at The Joel Robert Poinsett papers (Collection

HSP: 512) contain some materials on the Northwest
boundary controversy.

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Abstract

Joseph Smith Harris (1836-1910) of Chester County and Philadelphia was a civil engineer, surveyor, and railroad administrator. In 1853, after attending Philadelphia's Central High School, he took a job as a topographer with the Easton and Water Gap Railroad (later the North Pennsylvania Railroad). He then worked for the U.S. Coast Survey from the late 1850s to the early 1860s. In this capacity he worked on the Northwest Boundary Survey, which established the U.S.-Canadian border along the 49th Parallel, and participated in combat operations in Louisiana in 1862. Starting in 1864, he held positions with various railroad companies, rising to become president of the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company. He also became president, in 1893, of the bankrupt Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and led the company's successful reorganization into the new Reading Company.

The collection consists of about one hundred and fifty letters to and from Harris, and includes both professional and personal correspondence. Many of the letters have accompanying transcriptions, and there are also biographical excerpts and a few scans of photographs and maps.

Background note

According to his obituary, Joseph Smith Harris "was one of the best known figures in the railroad and financial circles of the East."¹ He was born on 29 April 1836 in East Whiteland Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania, to Stephen Harris (1798-1851), a physician, and Marianne Smith (1805-1890). Joseph had an older brother, also named Stephen, and five younger siblings. He attended Central High School in Philadelphia, but left his studies in 1853 to take a job as a rodman with the Easton and Water Gap Railroad (later the North Pennsylvania Railroad) in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. He eventually became one of the company's topographers. In 1854, United States Coast Survey Superintendent Alexander Dallas Bache offered Harris a topographical job with the survey in Mississippi. (Harris's older brother Stephen had joined the U. S. Coast Survey a few years earlier.) Harris spent two years on the project and took a few months leave in 1856 to join the Kentucky Geological Survey.

¹ This quote is from a clipping from an unidentified newspaper dated 3 June 1910, which is pasted in the front pages of *The Collateral Ancestry of Stephen Harris and Marianne Smith* (1908) [call # Fa 929.2 H313h 1908].

In 1857, Harris was appointed an astronomer of the Northwest Boundary Survey Commission. This project originated from the 1846 Oregon Treaty in which the United States and Britain named the 49th parallel as a boundary between the upper northwest American and British (now Canadian) lands. Ten years later, a joint American-British commission was formed to survey the area. At its head were Commissioner Archibald Campbell and Chief Astronomer and Lieutenant John G. Parke. Harris spent five years surveying territory that now encompasses the states of Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia, Canada.

Near the end of his tenure with the Boundary Commission, Harris spent a little time in Washington, D.C., analyzing the work he had done for the U. S. Coast Survey, to which he was still attached. When his brother, Stephen, was called to join the Navy under the command of Flag Officer (or Admiral) David G. Farragut, Harris asked to go in his place, arguing that Stephen had to care for his family. In response, Campbell released Harris from his Boundary Commission duties and Bache placed him under the command of Coast Survey Assistant F. H. Gerdes. Harris spent almost three years working on Coast Survey vessels under the auspices of the Navy and Flag Officer Farragut. He was first deployed to New Orleans and traveled by boat from New York to the coast of Louisiana. During the voyage he and his crew witnessed the battle between the *USS Monitor* and *CSS Virginia* (also known as the Battle of Hampton Roads). Harris served on several different steamer ships during his time under Farragut, including the *Uncas*, *Sachem*, and *Ovasco*.

Harris left the service in 1864 and moved to Pottsville, Pennsylvania, to officially join his brother Stephen's civil and mining engineering business. (Harris had partnered with Stephen to help form this business several years earlier). A year later, he married his first wife, Delia Silliman Brodhead (1842-1880), the second daughter of George Hamilton Brodhead, secretary of the New York Stock Exchange, and Julia Ann Phelps. Joseph and Delia Harris had five surviving children: Marian (1866-1960), George (1868-1962), Frances (1870-1925), Clinton (1872-1910), and Madeline (1873-1966).

In the 1880s and 1890s, Harris returned to a career with the railroads. Among the positions he held were general manager of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, president of the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company, and managing receiver and president of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company and the Philadelphia & Reading Coal and Iron Company. Notably, he helped stabilize and reorganize the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company, which had gone bankrupt at the outset of an economic downturn in the early 1890s. He retired in 1901.

Harris's wife, Delia, died in 1880, and he married twice more before his death in 1910: first to Emily Eliza Potts in 1892, then to her sister, Anna Zelia Potts, in 1896. He had no children from these later marriages. He held memberships in the American Philosophical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and in 1889 became a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania. Joseph Smith Harris died at the age of seventy-four in his home in Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Scope & content

The Joseph Smith Harris correspondence spans from the 1850s to the early 1900s, and contains about one hundred and fifty business and personal letters. Almost all the letters have been transcribed, and the transcriptions are housed adjacent to the appropriate letters. There are also two recent essays on Harris's history, scans of several photographs, and a compact disc containing copies of the transcriptions.

The letters and transcriptions had been separated into two binders, one containing letters pertaining to Harris's survey jobs and naval service and family letters dating up to about 1855; the other containing family letters dating from about 1856 to 1907. Although the letters have been re-housed, they remain in the order in which they were found.

In the first few folders are letters and other documents concerning Harris's work with the U.S. Coast Survey, Kentucky Geological Survey, and Northwest Boundary Commission. There are four letters pertaining to the geological survey, which include details about his appointment to the survey, travel to Louisville, and information on the areas to be surveyed. The Northwest Boundary Commission letters consist of two leave of absence notes: one from Alexander Bache of the U. S. Coast Survey permitting Harris to join the Northwest Boundary Commission; the other from Archibald Campbell of the Boundary Commission permitting Harris to join the military. There is also Harris's oath of service that he pledged as an assistant in the Northwest Boundary Commission on 17 October 1861. It is unclear to whom he pledged this oath, but he may have taken it in preparation for his Coast Survey service under the Navy.

Following these items are two folders of letters concerning Harris's Coast Survey service and deployment to New Orleans under Flag Officer David G. Farragut. The letters, which date from February to July 1862, range from the routine to the meticulous. The routine correspondence concerns requests for and locations of provisions; the more detailed letters include observations on events, notes on the problems with the ships, and operational reports. In March 1862, Harris's ship, the *Uncas*, experienced severe equipment problems, so much so that the crew made at least two requests that the ship be examined by "an experienced naval engineer . . . to decide if [the *Uncas* could] at once be made seaworthy" (March 12, 1862). By April of that year, Harris had transferred to the *Sachem*, and he began to see more action. In an operational report dated April 13, 1862, Harris is reported as having helped place mortar vessels near their appropriate targets, relaying commands between officers, and even helping wounded soldiers. In some of the letters, Harris is candidly complimented: "Troubles appear to follow you," wrote Alexander Bache to Harris in April 19, 1862, "but you just surmount them all." He was also formally commended by Commander Archibald Campbell who wrote in a May 14, 1862 letter:

The services rendered by Mr. Harris, and the admirable spirit in which they have been performed [are] in accordance with the established reputation on the Boundary Survey, for ability, spirit, determination, and every high moral and manly quality.

In June 1862, Harris was placed in charge of the *Sachem*, and among the material from June and July are two of his operational reports, as well as a report, presumably from Alexander Bache, entitled “Coast Survey Operation between Mobile Bay and the Mississippi River.”

The family letters in the collection begin in 1853, the same year in which Joseph left Central High School in Philadelphia to take a job with the Easton and Water Gap Railroad in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The bulk of the letters dated 1853 to 1855 are written to Joseph from his mother. She goes into considerable detail about family events, and constantly expresses concern for Joseph’s health, appearance, and work situations:

Your letter dated the 9th of Aug[ust] I read two weeks ago and was very much interested indeed in its details. I fear sometimes you darling master & mate are not the best seamen in the world, which makes it desirable that you and Stephen should be so much the more cautious. [17 September 1855]

Letters dated 1856 to 1907 are a mixture of Joseph’s outgoing letters and incoming letters from various family members, including his mother, his sister Martha, and his brother John (“Cam”) Campbell. In writing to him, Joseph’s mother and siblings regularly regaled him with stories about friends and family. Joseph’s correspondence is somewhat more revealing. For instance, his letters of mid-1856 show how his unique skills helped him become involved with the Kentucky Geological Survey. “It was desirable that Kentuckians should be employed on this work,” wrote Joseph to his sister on May 1856, “but there seems no one capable of undertaking the astronomical and magnetic work.” His following letters are postmarked from various spots in Kentucky, including Louisville, Hopkins County, and Greenville. By late 1856, Joseph was back working with the Coast Survey in Mississippi and hinted at the possibility of joining the Northwest Boundary Commission. He revealed to his family, in a letter dated 23 March 1857, that he had been given orders to report to Washington (state) to join the Commission. He also noted that he was not sure he would accept the position, despite the good salary (\$1,750).

There are scarcely any letters from Joseph after 1857; most of the correspondence is from family members who continued to keep Joseph informed of various events concerning friends and family. An exception is a folder of correspondence between Joseph and Delia Brodhead from shortly before and after their wedding. There are several love letters between Joseph and Delia, only a few of which are transcribed, as well as a letter dated 15 April 1865, in which Joseph describes to Delia his thoughts on President Abraham Lincoln the day after he was shot.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

At HSP:

The Joel Robert Poinsett papers (Collection 512) contain some materials on the Northwest boundary controversy.

At other institutions:

Joseph Smith Harris papers (WA MSS S-1293), Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book And Manuscript Library, Yale Collection Of Western Americana, New Haven, Connecticut.

Description from their website: "The Joseph Smith Harris Papers document his work on the United States surveys of the Mississippi Sound and the Northwest Boundary. The collection spans the years 1848-1903, with the majority of the material dating from 1854-61. The papers contain correspondence, reports of the Northwest Boundary Survey, photographs of the survey, and genealogical material."

Bibliography

Collateral Ancestry of Stephan Harris and Marianne Smith. Philadelphia: George F. Lasher, 1908. [Fa 929.2 H313h 1908]

Notes on the Ancestry of the Children of Joseph Smith Harris and Delia Silliman Brodhead. Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, 1898. [Fa 929.2 H313h 1898]

Record of the Harris Family descended from John Harris in Wiltshire, England. Philadelphia: George F. Lasher, 1903. [Fa 929.2 H313h 1903]

Subjects

Family life – Pennsylvania – 19th century
Siblings – Correspondence – 19th century
Spouses – Correspondence – 19th century
Surveying – United States – Job descriptions
Surveying – Northwest, Pacific – History
United States – History – Civil War, 1861-1865 – Naval operations – Union

Kentucky Geological Survey
Northwest Boundary Commission, 1857-1869.
Sachem (Ship)
Uncas (Ship)
United States Coast Survey

Bache, A. D. (Alexander Dallas), 1806-1867
Campbell, Archibald, 1813-1887

Harris, Delia Silliman Brodhead
Harris family
Harris, Joseph S. (Joseph Smith), 1836-1910

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Nonya Stevens Wright and Minturn Wright.

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Processing note

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Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Background, images, index – compiled by Anne Streeter	2007	9 pages	1	1
Kentucky Geological Survey	May-Aug. 1856	8 items	1	2
Northwest Boundary Commission	Apr. 1857, Oct. 1861, July 1863	4 items	1	3
Fort Jackson – background, images, and index of correspondents	ca. 2007	8 pages	1	4
Navy Department/Coast Survey (Fort Jackson letters)	Feb.-Mar. 1862	39 items	1	5
Navy Department/Coast Survey (Fort Jackson letters)	Apr.-May 1862	20 items	1	6
Navy Department/Coast Survey (Fort Jackson letters)	June-July 1862	17 items	1	7
Incoming family letters	1853-1855 (bulk 1855)	28 items	1	8
Incoming and outgoing family letters	1856	48 items	1	9
Incoming and outgoing family letters	1857-1860 (bulk 1859- 1860)	42 items	1	10
Incoming and outgoing family letters	1861-1907, n.d. (bulk 1861-1863)	34 items	1	11
Letters between Joseph S. Harris and Delia Harris (née Brodhead)	1865-1866	18 items	1	12
Digital copy (compact disc) of transcriptions	May 2007	1 item	1	13