

C Carvill, George W., Letters, 1834-1868
2697 8 folders

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INTRODUCTION

Letters written by Carvill, his wife Kate and daughter Eliza, living in the United States and Canada, to his sister Eliza and, later, brother-in-law William Boyle in England. The letters discuss family and political matters and economic problems.

DONOR INFORMATION

The letters were purchased by the State Historical Society of Missouri as part of the J. Christian Bay collection (Accession No. 737). The letters had been preserved in Liverpool, England, before they were purchased by Bay.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George W. Carvill was born c. 1810 and came to the United States from London, England, in about 1829. He was apparently in business with his paternal uncles in New York City. Part of the business involved mines in Kentucky, which Carvill managed. When his business dealings failed he became involved with cotton farming in Alabama.

He married Mary Caroline Bennett, called Kate, in 1835. They had nine children: William Charles (b. 1837), Eliza Claudia (b. 1839), John Bennett (born c. 1841), George Arthur (b. 1843), Mary (1845-1846), Mary Caroline (b. 1847), Edward (b. 1849), Herman (born c. 1852), and Anna.

As his children grew older Carvill became concerned about the moral effects of slavery on them as well as the lack of good schools. He also disliked the "tropical climate." In 1846 the family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where Carvill was the bookkeeper and manager of a mill. The family moved again in 1852 to Caseyville, Kentucky, where he ran a saw mill and flour mill. He later took over a coal mine from a friend and owned steamboats to take the coal to Louisville.

The Civil War caused many hardships for the family. Carvill's business concerns and farm were at the mercy of both federal troops and Confederate guerillas. In 1864 the family left for London, Canada, leaving under cover of darkness and rafting to Evansville, Indiana, where they took trains to Canada. Carvill had been unable to sell his businesses so he returned to Kentucky where he and his oldest son Will continued to run them. His son George ran the family farm. After the war Carvill tried to get restitution from the U.S. government for his war losses. He and his son also speculated in oil and petroleum by leasing land around their coal mine.

Carvill's family remained in Canada until he had his business affairs in order. When the letters stop in 1868 they are still there while Carville and his sons Will and George are in Kentucky. No other information could be found on the family after 1868.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The George W. Carvill Letters consist of sixty-four letters and, except for two written by his daughter Eliza and two written by his wife Kate, all were written by George to his sister Eliza and later to his brother-in-law William Boyle. There is no incoming correspondence from the recipients of the letters. They are arranged chronologically and were written months and sometimes as long as a year apart.

It is obvious from the very first letter that Carvill saw himself as a visitor to the U.S. He viewed every political and diplomatic event through the eyes of an Englishman. He disliked U.S. style democracy, feeling it was mob rule. He especially could not understand how a country that considered itself a democracy could condone slavery. His move from Alabama to Kentucky was to remove his children from the influence of a slave owning society, although Carvill apparently owned at least two slaves in Kentucky.

Carvill's letters are a mixture of observations about current events, local customs, and personal affairs. In early letters he mentions visits to New York City, a Seminole uprising, steamboat accidents, lynch law, prayer meetings, and slavery. Until he met and married Mary Caroline Bennett in 1835 he had planned to return to England. Because his wife was southern he settled in Alabama and tried his hand at cotton farming. With the birth of two children in the 1830s Carvill began to doubt that he would ever return to home.

The letters from the early 1840s comment on increasing tension between Mexico and the U.S. in Texas, presidential elections, and Carvill's continued dislike of the republican form of government in the U.S. The announcement of the births of two more children and reflections on the death of Carvill's father are also part of his letters home.

In the late 1840s Carvill writes about the Oregon boundary dispute, the Mexican War, the Irish famine, and the gold rush. On a personal note he announces the births of three more children and moving to Louisville, Kentucky. The move was the result of Carvill's continued abhorrence of slavery and his concerns about the effects of a slave society, lack of education, and tropical climate on his family.

Letters from the period when the family lived in Louisville describe coping with the heat of the summers, which was nearly as bad as that in Alabama. Carvill remarks on efforts to curb cholera outbreaks in the city by killing stray dogs, which the mayor felt spread the disease. Unfortunately the bodies of the dogs were left where they were shot. He also comments on the practice in Louisville of storing bodies in a building for a month before burial so that area medical students wouldn't have "fresh" bodies to dig up for anatomy classes.

After a trip east during this period he notes the increased building in New York and Philadelphia, cities that he had lived in previously. He mentions the separation of religion and education, to the detriment of education in his opinion, and a local murder trial and the justice system.

Carvill recounts his family's move to Caseyville by steamboat in the winter. The very cold weather caused the river to freeze and strand the boat. When the captain decided to abandon the ship he left the passengers behind. The Carvills stayed on the boat for a couple of weeks and then took shelter with a family on shore. Carvill notes that the trip was especially difficult for his wife and children.

Once in Caseyville Carvill's letters decry the lack of education in the backwoods and note the international events of the time. Mention is made of leasing land for oil and petroleum exploration. Talk of war appears in the letters and, during the Civil War, Carvill shows a lack of sympathy for either side especially since his business is vulnerable to attack from both.

A letter from 1864 describes the family's escape to Canada along with one of their slaves. After his return to Kentucky Carvill's letters describe his efforts to get restitution for war losses. Letters from the late 1860s state that the family was still in Canada while Carvill was still in Kentucky trying to settle his business affairs. The letters end at this point.

FOLDER LIST

- f. 1 1834-1839
- f. 2 1840-1844
- f. 3 1845-1849
- f. 4 1850-1854
- f. 5 1855-1859
- f. 6 1860-1863
- f. 7 1864-1866
- f. 8 1867-1868

INDEX TERMS

| Subject | Folders |
|--|---------|
| Alabama, 1835 | 1 |
| American Party | 6 |
| Arthur, George | 1 |
| Baldwin, Edmund | 2 |
| Beauregard, (Pierre Gustave Toutant) (1818-1893) | 6 |
| Bell, Ab | 5 |
| Bell, John | 6 |
| Bennett, Mary Caroline | 1 |
| Benton, Thomas Hart (1782-1858) | 3 |
| Bissell, Claudia | 1 |
| Bissell, Titus L. | 6 |
| Blacks | 8 |
| Blanchard, George | 3,4 |
| Blanchard, Sarah | 3 |
| Boyle, William A. | 1 |
| Boyle, William A., Mrs. | 1 |
| Buchanan, Robert | 5 |
| Burritt, Elihu | 4 |
| Butler, Billy | 4 |
| Butler, William | 3 |
| Carvill, Anna | 7 |
| Carvill, Caroline | 1 |
| Carvill, Charles | 2 |
| Carvill, Claudia Eliza | 2 |
| Carvill, Elizabeth | 3 |
| Carvill, Emma | 4 |
| Carvill, George W. | 1 |
| Carvill, Herman | 8 |

| Subject | Folders |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Carvill, Jane | 3 |
| Carvill, John Bennet | 2 |
| Carvill, Mary | 3 |
| Carvill, William | 2 |
| Carvill, William Charles | 1 |
| Chevalier, Michael | 8 |
| Cholera, 1849 | 3 |
| Cholera, Alabama, 1840 | 2 |
| Civil War--Black soldiers | 7 |
| Civil War--Correspondence | 6,7 |
| Civil War--Guerillas | 7 |
| Civil War--Kentucky | 6 |
| Civil War--Mississippi | 6 |
| Civil War--Tennessee | 6 |
| Clay, Cassius Marcellus (1810-1903) | 3 |
| Colberne, John | 1 |
| Cotworthy, John | 3 |
| Crimean War, 1853-1856 | 5 |
| Cuba | 3 |
| Dillon, Gregory | 4 |
| Don, William | 4 |
| Donelson, (General) | 6 |
| Douglas, Stephen | 6 |
| Education--Kentucky, 1846 | 3 |
| Emancipation of slaves | 1 |
| Emigrant Aid Society | 4 |
| Famines--Ireland, 1840s | 3 |
| Floods, 1867 | 8 |
| Forsyth, John | 1 |
| France--History--1815-1914 | 3 |
| Franklin, John | 3 |
| Goldschmitt, Otto | 4 |
| Graffe, Fanny | 4 |
| Grant, Ulysses Simpson (1822-1885) | 6 |
| Hanack (General) | 7 |
| Harrison, William Henry (1773-1841) | 2 |
| Harvey, John | 1 |
| Hulme, Charlotte | 3 |

| Subject | Folders |
|--|---------|
| Hulme, Peter | 3 |
| Hulme, Thomas | 3 |
| Indians, Seminole | 1 |
| Ireland, 1848 | 3 |
| Jackson, Francis | 1 |
| Johnson, Andrew (1808-1875) | 6 |
| Johnson, Andrew (1808-1875), Impeachment | 8 |
| Kentucky, Louisville | 3 |
| Kimble, Fanny | 4 |
| Knight, Charles | 2 |
| Lincoln, Abraham (1809-1865) | 6 |
| Lind, Jenny (1821-1887) | 4 |
| Locofocos | 3 |
| Louisiana, New Orleans, 1835 | 1 |
| Lynching--Law and legislation | 1 |
| Maine. Boundaries | 1 |
| Maitlande, Robert S. | 6 |
| Merimac | 6 |
| Mexican War | 3 |
| Meyer, Lee | 3 |
| Mitchell, John | 5 |
| Monitor (Ironclad) | 1 |
| Mooney, Thomas | 3 |
| Mormons, Illinois | 3 |
| Motley, Lowthrop | 6 |
| Napolean, Louis | 4 |
| Nelson, Robert | 1 |
| New Brunswick | 1 |
| New York, NY, 1834 | 1 |
| Nicaragua | 3 |
| Nicholas I, Czar of Russia | 5 |
| Ohio River, Commerce | 3 |
| Oregon Territory, Boundary dispute | 3 |
| Pacific Railroad | 4 |
| Parker, John W. | 2 |
| Pierce, Franklin (1804-1869) | 4 |
| Pillow, Gideon J. (1806-1878) | 6 |
| Prayer | 1 |

| Subject | Folders |
|--|----------------|
| Protests, demonstrations, etc., Canada, 1838 | 1 |
| Rogers, Robert | 3 |
| Rosencrans, William S. | 7 |
| Russell, John | 4 |
| Santa Anna, Antonio Lopez de (1795-1876) | 3 |
| Scott, Winfield (1786-1866) | 3 |
| Secession | 6 |
| Sheridan, Philip H. (1831-1888) | 7 |
| Sherman, William Tecumseh (1820-1891) | 6 |
| Slidell, John | 3 |
| Soule, Pierre | 4 |
| Steamboats, Accidents | 1 |
| Taylor, Zachary (1784-1850) | 3 |
| Telegraph, 1849 | 3 |
| Texas | 1 |
| Texas, Annexation of | 3 |
| Victoria (1819-1901) | 6 |
| Walker, William | 6 |
| Ward, Matt | 5 |
| Ward, William | 5 |
| Yellow Fever, 1855 | 5 |
| Young, Brigham (1801-1877) | 5 |