Finding aid of the The Williams Family Papers

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Finding aid of the The Williams Family Papers

Collection number: 90.253.4122

Autry Library
Autry National Center of the American West
Los Angeles, California

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Descriptive Summary
Title: The Williams Family Papers
Dates: 1837-1916
Bulk Dates: 1850-1890
Collection number: 90.253.4122
Creator: Williams Family
Creator: Williams, Alfred Leonzo, b. 1808.
Collection Size: 8.25 linear feet
Repository: Autry National Center. Institute for the Study of the American West
Los Angeles, CA 90027

Abstract: The documents that make up The Williams Family Papers pertain, for the most part, to the life and business dealings of Alfred Leonzo ("A.L.") Williams, although other Williams family members are also prominently represented in the collection.

Physical location: Autry Library, Autry National Center
Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English

Access
Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment please visit http://www.autrynationalcenter.org/research_application.php or contact library staff at (323) 667-2000.

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Preferred Citation
[Item identification] The Williams Family Papers, 90.253.4122. Autry Library, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, CA

Acquisition Information
Rosenstock Collection.

Biography / Administrative History
The documents that make up The Williams Family Papers pertain, for the most part, to the life and business dealings of Alfred Leonzo ("A.L.") Williams, although other Williams family members are also prominently represented in the collection.

A.L. Williams was born on July 18, 1808 in Concord, Massachusetts. By the early 1830s, he had moved to Michigan. He and his brother Benjamin O. ("B.O.") Williams set up a fur trading post (called "The Shiawassee Exchange") in the Indian village of Ketsheauaoudaungin in Shiawassee County, Michigan in 1831. The trading post was used as housing and as a place to store furs that A.L. and B.O. acquired from neighboring Indian communities. They first worked for the American Fur Company from 1832-1836, but began trading independently in 1837. Late in 1837, they founded Owosso, Michigan.
By the early 1850s, the Williams brothers (now including Alpheus Fuller ("A.F.") and James Monroe ("J.M.")) had begun mining operations in northern California. A.L. was also deeply invested in the railroad industry in Michigan. He, and several partners, owned and operated the Amboy, Lansing and Traverse Bay railroad; he also owned stock in numerous other railroad companies in Ohio, Michigan and Virginia. He trained as a lawyer, and eventually served as a judge.

A.L. was married to Sarah Ann Birdsley in 1835. They had two children, Amos Lee (birthdate unclear) and Sarah (August 1839). Sarah Birdsley died in 1839 (perhaps in childbirth). A.L. married his second wife, Harriet Newell Mattoon, in 1841. They had eight more children together, some which eventually became involved in their father's business ventures.

A.L. Williams sailed from New York in February 1850, arrived in Panama in April that year, and landed in San Francisco on April 30, 1850. He was in mining camps near Nevada City, Nevada County, until January 1851 including Deer Creek and Pontiac Hill. From February to October 1851 he was in Rough and Ready, Nevada County. On November 14, 1851, he sailed to New York from San Francisco.

In 1852, A.L. again sailed for California going across Panama in May 1852 and settling in Pine Grove, Sierra County, in August of that year. By April 1853, he was involved in a venture called the Sears' Union Water Company located at the Sears' Diggings, Pine Grove Creek. He returned to Michigan in 1854.

The first appearance of J.M. Williams is in a letter to his brother A.L. dated August 29, 1853 from Sucker Flat, Yuba County. A.F. Williams wrote letters to his brothers, A.L. and B.O. beginning on October 13, 1854 from Sucker Flat, Sierra County. A.L.'s brothers continued to run the mining operations in California until at least the late 1880s.

**Scope and Content of Collection**

The Williams Family Papers are divided into three series: Diaries and Ledgers, Business Correspondence and Papers, and Personal Correspondence and Papers. The Business Correspondence and Papers are further divided into five subseries: the Williams Brothers' Correspondence, the Chronological Correspondence Subseries, the Alphabetical Correspondence Subseries, the Williams Copybooks Subseries, and the Business Papers Subseries.

The Williams Brothers' Correspondence contains much discussion of business interests in California, as well as other ventures that the brothers were involved in. There is also commentary on events impacting the Williams family members, although the correspondence is largely about business topics. The Alphabetical Correspondence Subseries contains strictly business correspondence to A.L. from partners in his mining and railroad ventures with whom he had extended relationships over many years. The Chronological Correspondence Subseries is the most varied of all the subseries in terms of content because it contains letters to A.L. Williams from business associates and contacts between 1851 and 1884. The A.L. Williams Copybooks Subseries contain six ledgers, some as long as 700 pages, of copies of letters that A.L. Williams wrote to business associates between the years 1862 and 1884. These letters were created by imprinting the original letter onto thin paper before the ink dried. The Business Paper Subseries contains A.L. Williams' legal documentation associated with mining and railroad (such as deeds, powers of attorney, stock certificates and the like). The Diaries and Ledgers Series contain A.L.'s notations about his business dealings over the years.

The Personal Correspondence and Papers are also divided into three subseries: the A.L. Williams to Harriet Williams, 1848-1883 Subseries (containing letters that A.L. Williams wrote to his wife Harriet on his business travels), the Williams Family Letters, 1853-1888 Subseries (containing letters that the Williams family wrote to each other during these years), and the Personal Papers Subseries (containing various writings by A.L. Williams and other ephemera). The letters that A.L. wrote to his wife Harriet are largely personal in nature, though they do contain commentary on business ventures in which he was involved.

Information on A.L. Williams' years in California is most centrally located in the Williams Brothers' Correspondence Subseries. While A.L. was only in California from 1850-1854, and again in 1872 and 1876, his brothers continued to run mining operations there through the 1880s. Thus, all of the files in this subseries are comprised of letters that the brothers wrote to each other concerning the California mining operations from 1853 onwards. A.L.'s experiences in California from 1850-1854 are also documented in his letters to his wife Harriet (A. L. Williams to Harriet Williams, 1848-1883 Subseries). Scattered documentation about California is located in other subseries within the collection; if there is any California documentation in a file, it is indicated in parentheses after file title name.

**Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

**Subjects**

- Williams, Alfred Leonzo, b. 1808.
- Williams, Benjamin Oliver, b.1810.
- Williams, Alpheus Fuller, b.1812.
- Williams, James Monroe, b.1817.

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**Finding aid of the The Williams Family Papers**

90.253.4122
Williams, Gardner D. b. 1804.
Williams, Harriet Newell Mattoon, b. 1822.
Bond, Thomas.
Deardorff, J.R.
Amboy, Lansing and Traverse Bay Railroad Company.
Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw Railroad Company.
Sears Union Water Company.
Pacific Mining Company.
Railroads--Michigan--Finance.
Railroads--Michigan--19th century.
Mineral industries--California--Finance.
Frontier and pioneer life--California.
Gold mines and mining--California--19th century.
Mining camps--California--19th century.
Voyages to the Pacific coast.
Panama--Description and travel.
California--Gold discoveries.
Rough and Ready (Calif.)--19th century.
Owosso (Mich.)--19th century.

**Genres and Forms of Material**

Photographs.
Letters.
Diaries.
Legal documents.
Financial records.
Certificates.
Tintype.
Visiting cards.
Clippings.
Newspapers.
Daguerreotype.

**Related Material**

See the Gould Family Papers (90.253.4123) at the Autry National Center for related materials. Amos Gould was a business associate of A.L. Williams; there are numerous files of correspondence between Gould and Williams, as well as other business documents, in the Gould Family Papers.

Other Williams’ family collections exist at the Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections and the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan.