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McBlair Papers, 1797-1849, MS 1355

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Maryland Historical Society

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Maryland Historical Society

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Descriptive Summary

Register of the McBlair Papers, 1797-1849 MS 1355

Maryland Historical Society Baltimore MD 21201-4674

by William G. LeFurgy

Scope and Content

The McBlair Papers

There are about 3,000 items, more rather than less. About 2,000 bear dates or I have been able to date them from contents. Most of the remainder could probably be dated by more careful study. The earliest dated item is of 1797 and the latest 1849.

All papers appear to be from the files of Michael McBlair who came to this country from Belfast in 1789 (letter from Wm. Algeo?, 9 nov. 1825). He became an active merchant in Baltimore, manager of Hollins and McBlair (offices foot of Gay Street near Customs House) which owned some famous ships and traded all over the world. In the course of his rise to this position, he appears to

have made voyages to many distant ports. However, items belonging to the years before 1820 are relatively few and do not afford any consecutive picture of McB.'s activities.

The papers may be said to consist of (1) family letters, (2) business letters, (3) memoranda of cash expenditures, notes given and received, and other financial transactions.

In 1802, McB. was married by the Presbyterian minister in Baltimore, to Pleasance, daughter the Revolutionary patriot Dr. Lyde Goodwin (d. 1800). There are numerous letters from all of the four daughters and five sons of this marriage (perhaps other children who died in infancy). The family tie was strong and appears to have held all members closely bound to the group to the end of the period.

Hollins and McBlair went bankrupt in 1822. McB. then went into cotton manufacturing. He briefly managed a factory on the Patapsco for the Savage Co. in which his wife and children owned stock, but he soon resigned, sold the stock and promoted the formation of the Maryland Manufacturing Co. Most of the capital was supplied by his wife's brothers, Lyde Goodwin of Balto., and Charles Goodwin Ridgely of the US Navy (eventually commodore, see art. on him in DAB), but they entrusted McB. with complete control of the enterprise. He superintended the building of the factory on the Little Gunpowder near Kingsville, and moved his family there in 1825 from the house on Franklin Street near St. Paul where they had lived many years.

As the collection does not include the books of Hollins and McBlair or the Maryland Manufacturing Co., it does not afford material for a consecutive history of either of these enterprises. McB., however, was a careful and exact accountant. His memoranda of receipts and expenses extend to the minutest items. For some years, they are almost complete, and throw much light on prices, wages and the cost of living.

In 1818-1819, a series of letters to McB. from John Moses, an active merchant in Philadelphia, are essentially market reports, giving fluctuations of prices of many important commodities, US bank stock, etc.

In 1819-1820, correspondence between McB. and Andrew Thompson of Frederick, throws some light on trade between Frederick and Balto.

In 1799-1800, numerous papers relating to the voyage of the Samuel Smith from Batavia via Lisbon to London give much information on business relations between a Balto. merchant and his London factors, and show that Hollins and McBlair then had an important interest in numerous trading voyages to all parts of the world.

Also of possible interest are complex borrowings by which McB. succeeded in raising funds with which to build the factory on the little Gunpowder and keep it in operation under adverse circumstances. His relations with his employees (who were also tenants of the Company and customers of its store) appear to have been usually strained and often tempestuous.[UNK].

The Papers might interest the historian of Scotch-Irish migration to America because of a number of letters from McB's relatives and friends in Ireland, because of his success in establishing himself as a member of the ruling class over here, and because his three brothers who also came over achieved no success whatever in spite of assistance from him.

At the time McB. married Pleasance Goodwin, her mother (nee Abby or Abigail Levy) was according to the Balto. Directory for 1803, taking boarders at her house at 244 Baltimore Street. Yet the marriage allied McB. with a group of families well established in Maryland, and with good connections elsewhere. Mrs. McB.'s uncle, Nathan Lovy, merchant, and aunt, Philadelphia Lovy, spinster, are both mentioned in the 1826-1828 journal of her brother, Lyde Goodwin the Younger, in the Lloyd Papers in this Society. Uncle Nat apparently declined to become involved in the Maryland Mfg. Co. but references to him in these letters give the impression of an interesting personality.

McB.'s greatest prosperity probably was in the period of the War of 1812, for which there are few letters in this collection. From other sources, we know that he owned or had a controlling

share in many famous vessels, including privateers, and that profits were often enormous. In addition to the Franklin St. house and lots, McB. had a place in the country, numerous servants, carriage and horses, etc. The curious thing is that the bankruptcy seems to have made little change in the family's style of living and none at all in its social position. The Franklin Street property and the country place seem to have been sold, but at the Factory there was an almost ceaseless flow of house guests. In spite of abject poverty, many servants and a carriage and horses were maintained. The older boys were sent to St. Mary's College, and for the younger ones tutors were imported from New England. There is no indication of spending for display. The McB.s gave no balls or parties; they kept careful track of expenses, bought in the cheapest market; mended their old clothing and made it last as long as possible. But certain things they regarded as indispensable, and these included food and drink, doctors and medicines, education for the children, and maintaining contact with good society. Mrs. McB. appears in her letters a devout Christian (though there is little mention of church going), a devoted and watchful mother, and wife, and a capable housekeeper.

Before the family moved to the Factory, the McB.'s eldest daughter, Alicia, was married (1824) to Edward Lloyd VI of Wye House was then [UNK]. Senator and had been governor of Maryland. From then on all the McBlairs paid frequent visits to Wye and their letters give a great deal of information about the Lloyds, their neighbors, and life in that section of the Eastern Shore.

Mrs. McB. was the eldest of a numerous family most of whom seem to have died rather early in life. Others figure prominently in these letters, especially her brothers Lyde, who lived in Balto, and Charles, who was in the Navy, and her sisters Eliza (Mrs. Stevenson) and Maria (Mrs. Greenwood). Charles changed his name from Goodwyn to Ridgely. His influence obtained commissions as midshipmen for the McBlair boys, Charles in March, 1823, and William in November, 1825. Both remained in the Navy attained the rank of captain and in 1861 resigned to serve the Confederacy. Their letters and letters to them from other naval officers make the McB. Papers a valuable source for the history of the Navy, 1823 - 1849.

Goodwin (Lyde Goodwin McB.) [UNK] eldest son, early caused his parents distress by his dissipation. After graduating from St John's College, he read law for a time and then became manager of the cotton factory. He was so much more successful than his father at getting on with the hands that his Uncle Lyde wanted him to remain permanently on the job, but Goodwin was eager to get away. In 1826 he went (as supercargo?) to Callao. His letters thence describe conditions following the abdication of San Matin. In 1837-1839, Goodwin went on the USS Independence, as secretary to Commodore Jno. B. Nicholson, first to London, then to Rio de Janeiro and Monte Video. His letters are the best written in the collection.

There are, any letters from Goodwin's wife. According to a note I find in the Papers, they were married 23 Jan., 1834. She was Matilda Chase Lockerman, granddaughter of Samuel Chase from whom her mother inherited the Harwood house in Annapolis. Matilda generally lived thereafter with the McBlairs, but paid visits to her mother in Annapolis. Later they lived in Annapolis, Goodwin having obtained employment by the State.

Hollins (John Hollins McB.) McB's fourth son, was employed by his father at \$30 a month in 1832 to act as his agent in Baltimore. He soon went to Washington and obtained a temporary government job that seems to have become permanent in 1833.

In 1835 ([UNK] 30 - Aug. 30) for the health of Chas. McB. and Alicia Lloyd, their mother, PMcB., went with them on an extended tour of the Virginia Spings. Her numerous letters give some idea of life at these resorts.

In 1835 (Oct.) Hollins married Augusta Gadsby whose father I think kept a hotel in Washington. Gadsbys seem to have been old friends of the McB.s. and were probably from Baltimore. In the spring of 1836, Hollins went West to Mississippi, met Col. Vick of Vicksburg and decided Miss. was land of opportunity. On his return to the East, he and Parkin (Thomas Parkin McB., youngest of the sons) decided to open a store in Miss., probably in Canton. Later letters from Hollins and Parkin tell the exciting story of the rise and fall of the town of Sharon, still unbuilt when they chose it for the site of their store, and soon overtaken by the panic of 1837. At the same time, Alicia's husband, Edward Lloyd, to buy land in Miss. to employ some of his surplus Negroes. A letter from him describes part of his journey across the Appalachians.

In the winter of 1835-1836, Elizabeth, McB.s 2nd daughter, spent two months in Washington with Hollins and Augusta. According to Hollins, she was the belle of the season. She received a proposal of marriage from the lord of Monticello (the justly famous Capt. Uriah Levy of the Navy), a proposal that the McB.s regarded with scorn and amusement. Question whether Mrs. Mc [UNK] mother was not a cousin of Capt. Uriah?

In Nov., 1836, Elizabeth married J.M. Lloyd, younger brother of Alicia's husband, and went to live on the Eastern Shore, first at Woodville, then at Presque Isle, both Lloyd plantations. From then till 1848, numerous letters from her give a fairly complete history of events in the McBlair and Lloyd families.

Mrs. McB. died apparently about end of September, 1836, and Alicia in the following July. Alicia's children continued to visit their Grandfather at frequent intervals, and McB. occasionally visited Wye.

Commodore C. G. Ridgely appears to have had an illegitimate son known variously as Charles Smith, Charles Ridgely Smith. In 1827, when about 7 yrs. old, this child was informally adopted by the McBlairs and remained a member of the household until 1834 when his father obtained for him a commission as midshipman. His letters indicate that his education was very inferior to that of

the McBlair children. According to Hamersley's Register, he got to the rank of passed midshipman but was eventually dismissed. He should not be confused with Charles Smith Ridgely, also a naval officer, from whom there is at least one letter to MMcB in this collection.

In his merchant days, McB. had dealings with a wealthy Cuban named Ximenes who sent his son, Antonio, to St John's College with the McBlair boys. McB. acted as his guardian and kept account of his expenses for which he at times advanced funds. The correspondence throws light on the life and studies of a foreign student at college in the US in the 1820s.

Mrs. McB.'s youngest brother, Robert Goodwin, eventually married Elizabeth Ann Taylor of Savannah and settled there. Her father seems to have had large interests in Cuba. Letters from him and from William and Elizabeth McBlair who visited his family in Savannah, describe events and conditions in that city.

There are a few letters from an older brother, Thomas Goodwyn, a merchant in New York, in the year 1815. The firm was Stevenson and Goodwin, probably George Stevenson who married Eliza Goodwin.

The McB.s patronized the Baltimore Library and there is mention of many books that they borrowed.

The letters mention many physicians in Baltimore, Kingsville and Talbot County. A set of prescriptions by one of these doctors is the 1824 folder. Alicia and her mother went to Philadelphia to get advice from Dr. Physick. Hayden, the family dentist in Baltimore, is frequently mentioned. Charles McB. wrote for advice to a doctor he had served with in the Navy.

Thomas Parkin McB. became a purser in the Navy and some of his records as purser are among the papers.

There are several letters from Samuel Francis Du Pont, later admiral, and other naval officers who were friends of either Charles or William McB.

Introduction

The McBlair Papers primarily relate to Michael McBlair (1775-1861), Baltimore merchant and customs official. Dates covered in the collection range from 1797 to 1849 with the bulk of the material falling between 1820 to 1848. Approximately 3,000 items in seven boxes are contained in the collection.

How the Maryland Historical Society acquired the papers is uncertain. It would appear likely that they came as at least two separate groups as a description of MS 1355 in December 1966 cites just 150 items--far fewer than make up the collection today.

Series Description

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; 1797-1849

Arranged chronologically by year; 4 $\frac{1}{2}$; boxes

Letters addressed to Michael McBlair. Up to 1827 items relate mostly to his business concerns, Afterwards most items were sent by his nine children: Charles, Thomas Parkin, Hollins, William, Lyde Goodwin, Elizabeth, Maria, Alicia and Matilda, in that order. Correspondents frequently appearing are: Edward Lloyd, Thomas P. Goodwin, Andrew Thopson, John Moses, Charles G. Ridgely, R.S.L. McCaulley and Robert Lemmon.

Other correspondents include: Joseph Smith, R.G. Henderson, Mary Thomson (Aunt), John Gooding, Samuel Glendy, Robert White, John White, Robert Thompson, John Powers, Amos A. Williams, T. Morris, Alice Roney (sister), Samuel Southard, George Monk, Charles F. Mayer, Jane McBlair (sister), William Streat, Arthur McBlair (brother), John Hollins, Merryman L. Gittings,

M.B. Purviance, J. Purviance, Nathaniel Tyson, A.J. Elder, Daniel Polin, James Moser, James Johnson, Joseph Townsend, Michael Ranken, and E.C. Lloyd.

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From Pleasance G. McBlair; 1825-1837

Arranged chronologically by year; 12; box

Letters sent to Michael McBlair from his wife Pleasance Goodwin McBlair. Items refer to family and household news.

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From; 1800-1847

Arranged chronologically by year; 2 folders

All items are presumably copies of correspondence sent by McBlair. The great majority deal with business activity and McBlair's role as a Baltimore customs official. Correspondents include: Capt. George Stiles, Capt. Christopher Deshon, Messers. Jos. Mackenzie and A. Glennie, Messers. Thomas McEuen and Co., David Watt, Capt. Charles G. Ridgely, Lyde Goodwin, C.K. Gardiner, Samuel Moale, A.C. Magruder, Messers. R. Lemmon and Co., N. Brewer, John White and Augustus A. Gould.

Pleasance Goodwin McBlair, Correspondence To; 1800-1837

Arranged chronologically by year; 1 folder

Letters from immediate relatives. Matters discussed involve family and household news. Correspondents include: Lyde Goodwin (brother), Charles Goodwin (brother), Augusta Goodwin (sister-in-law), Elizabeth Goodwin (sister), Michael McBlair (husband) as well as children Charles, Parkin, William, Maria, Alicia and Elizabeth.

Pleasance Goodwin McBlair, Correspondence From; 1826-1837; No Date

Arranged chronologically by year; 2 folders

Items written by Pleasance G. McBlair to her children Maria, Charles, Elizabeth and William. Family news is discussed.

McBlair Papers - General Correspondence; 1811-1846; No Date

Arranged chronologically by year; ¼ box

Correspondence neither sent nor received by Michael McBlair or Pleasance G. McBlair. This series contains a diversity of material such as miscellaneous business letters as well as correspondence to and between various McBlair offspring. Names appearing include: Lyde Goodwin, Lyde Goodwin McBlair, Charles McBlair, William McBlair, Maria McBlair, Thomas Farry, Dr. Jorge Stevenson, F.S. Skinner, Charles Champion, John Travers, J.W. Collins, Andrew Fitzhugh, John Cowper, J.W.P. Greenwood, U.S. Heath, Augustus A. Gould, Levi Woodbury and Levi Griffith.

Container List

Box 1

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; 1797-1829

Box 2

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; 1830-1839

Box 3

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; 1840-1844

Box 4

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; 1845-1849; No Date

Box 5

Michael McBlair, Correspondence To; No Date

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From Pleasance G. McBlair; 1825-1834

Box 6

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From Pleasance G. McBlair; 1835-1837; N.D.

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From George Clark; 1841-1848

Michael McBlair, Correspondence From 1826-1837; No Date

Hollins and McBlair, Correspondence To; 1822-1824

Pleasance G. McBlair, Correspondence To; 1800-1837

Pleasance G. McBlair, Correspondence From; 1826-1837; No Date

Pleasance G. McBlair, Miscellaneous Items; No Date

Box 7

McBlair Papers-General Correspondence; 1811-1846; No Date

McBlair Papers-Copies of Correspondence; ca. 1950's

McBlair Accounts, Bills and Receipts; ca. 1799-1847; No Date

McBlair Papers-Miscellaneous Items; ca. 1800-1849

