



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the John Frazee
Papers, 1819-1966, bulk 1819-1893,
in the Archives of American Art

Jayna Hanson

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection
was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art

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Archives of American Art
750 9th Street, NW
Victor Building, Suite 2200
Washington, D.C. 20001
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	John Frazee papers
Identifier:	AAA.frazejoh
Date:	1819-1966 (bulk 1819-1893)
Extent:	0.6 Linear feet
Creator:	Frazee, John, 1790-1852
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of sculptor and architect John Frazee measure 0.6 linear feet, and date from 1819-1966, with the bulk of the materials dating from 1819-1893. These scattered papers contain documentation of Frazee's early career as a gravestone carver, his commission to design the New York Customs House, and his busts of John Jay, the Marquis De Lafayette, and other famous figures. There is also correspondence with family members, genealogical materials, sketches of Frazee monuments and stone engravings, poems and notes by Frazee, printed materials, a few financial documents, photographs of works of art, and a plaster cast of a medal.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The John Frazee papers were donated by the sculptor's great granddaughter Marguerite Heath and grand niece Theresa Eliot in several increments between 1973-1978.

Separated Material

A few exhibition catalogs and printed materials microfilmed on reel 1103 were later transferred to The Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery Library.

Location of Originals

Some correspondence included in this collection are photocopies of originals that remained with the donors.

Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **John Frazee** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2010, and total 264 images.

Processing Information

Upon receipt, the papers were microfilmed on reels 1103 and 2804. All accessions were merged and processed by Jayna Hanson in 2008 and scanned in 2010 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

John Frazee papers, 1819-1966, bulk 1819-1966. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

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Biographical Note

John Stark Frazee (1790-1854) worked as a sculptor and architect primarily in New York City. He is best known for his design of the New York Customs House and his busts of notable American public figures, including John Wells, John Jay, John Marshall, and Daniel Webster.

Born in Rahway, New Jersey in 1790, Frazee began his career as a bricklayer. He lost a young son in 1815 and carved a memorial sculpture to commemorate his son's life. In 1818 he started a marble workshop in New York City specializing in memorials and grave markers. Sadly, many of Frazee's monuments were completed for deceased family members including his first wife Jane and several children. His reputation grew and he was well known for tasteful, simple, and well-executed memorials. Frazee began to receive private commissions for monuments and cenotaphs throughout New York. Frazee did not have formal training and developed a realistic style of carving that was heavily influenced by the neoclassical style.

By the mid 1820s, Frazee began to receive public commissions to carve busts of famous Americans. His bust of John Wells is considered to be the first carved marble bust made by an American born sculptor. In 1831, he received a Congressional commission to sculpt a bust of John Jay. Later, Frazee sculpted busts of Chief Justice John Marshall, Daniel Webster and others for the Boston Athenaeum.

After achieving considerable recognition for his sculpting abilities, President John Tyler appointed Frazee as the designer of the New York Customs House. He oversaw construction from 1834-1840. It is likely that Frazee created many of the decorative sculptural elements within the building as well. John Frazee died in 1854 in Rhode Island.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of sculptor and architect John Frazee measure 0.6 linear feet, and date from 1819-1966, with the bulk of the materials dating from 1819-1893. These scattered papers contain documentation of Frazee's early career as a gravestone carver, his commission to design the New York Customs House, and his busts of John Jay, the Marquis De Lafayette, and other famous figures. There is also correspondence with family members, genealogical materials, sketches of Frazee monuments and stone engravings, poems and notes by Frazee, printed materials, a few financial documents, photographs of works of art, and a plaster cast of a medal.

Biographical information consists primarily of family history and genealogical materials.

Correspondence is mostly with family members, although there are a few letters from others regarding his work. The majority of letters written by John Frazee are to his first and second wives, Jane and Lydia respectively. Other letters are addressed to his brother Noah and reflect his sorrow at the premature deaths of his first wife and some of his young children. In these letters, he talks about the grave markers he designed for his family members, and includes sketches of the markers and lettering. In another illustrated letter written to Lydia Frazee, John describes and sketches his experience on a railroad train in 1834. General correspondence includes letters of praise by the sons of John Jay and the Marquis de Lafayette for Frazee's busts of their fathers. There is also one letter from John J. Audubon. The majority of letters concerning busts for the Boston Athenaeum are photocopies.

There is one file documenting John Frazee's congressional commission as the designer of the New York Customs House. The file contains a draft of the petition by Frazee for the position, the subsequent grant of the petition by President Tyler, and a detailed report written by Frazee to Congress of the work completed on the building.

Artwork consists of scattered unsigned sketches of grave markers designed by Frazee. It is not clear whether Frazee completed the sketches, or if they were done at a later date by someone else.

Writings and notes include poems written by Frazee and scattered notes referencing Frazee's works. There is also one small ledger of Frazee's purchases and scattered receipts. Printed materials consist of a clipping and two catalogs. One catalog is about Frazee's design of the Washington Monument in the New York Customs House, and the other is of the New York Historical Society's art collection, which includes pieces by Frazee.

Photographs are of Frazee's busts including Chief Justice John Marshall, Daniel Webster and Nathaniel Bowditch as well as an image of a bust of John Frazee by another sculptor. There is one plaster cast of a medal commemorating Napoleon Bonaparte.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 9 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Information, circa 1825-1966 (Box 1-2; 4 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1819 - circa 1880s, circa 1960s (Box 1; 6 folders)
- Series 3: New York Customs House Commission File, circa 1837-1841 (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 4: Artwork, 1830 - circa 1840s (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 5: Writings and Notes, 1824 - circa 1890s (Box 1; 4 folders)
- Series 6: Financial Materials, 1838-1853 (Box 1; 2 folders)
- Series 7: Printed Material, 1848-1889, 1942 (Box 1; 4 folders)

- Series 8: Photographs, circa 1910s, circa 1930s (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 9: Plaster Cast, circa 1800s (Box 1; 1 folder)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Architects -- New York (State) -- New York
Sculptors -- New York (State) -- New York
Sculpture, American

Types of Materials:

Illustrated letters
Notes
Photographs
Poems
Sketches

Names:

Alexander Hamilton United States Custom House (New York, N.Y.)
Audubon, John James, 1785-1851
Frazee, Noah

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Information, circa 1825-1966

(Box 1-2; 4 folders)

Biographical materials include miscellaneous documents relating to Frazee and family history and genealogy. There are written narratives of the Frazee family history, family trees, correspondence between Frazee's descendents and the Boston Athenaeum, his daughter Athenia's bible, and a sketch of Frazee's funerary monument.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. Only the cover of the family bible and pages with notations have been scanned.

Box 1, Folder 1	John Frazee, circa 1847 - 1930 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 2	John Frazee (Created Posthumously), 1908-1966 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 3	Frazee Family, 1837-1893, 1905, 1939 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 4	Athenia Frazee Neubauer's Bible, 1887 <i>(Oversized materials housed in Box 2; partially scanned)</i> Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 1	Oversized Athenia Frazee Neubauer's Bible, 1887 <i>(Scanned with Box 1, F4)</i>

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1819 - circa 1880s, circa 1960s

(Box 1; 6 folders)

Correspondence is mostly with family members. The majority of letters written by John Frazee are to his first and second wives, Jane and Lydia respectively. Other letters are addressed to his brother Noah and reflect his sorrow at the premature deaths of his first wife and some of his young children. In these letters, he talks about the grave markers he designed for his family members, and includes sketches of the markers and lettering. In another illustrated letter written to Lydia, he describes and sketches his experience on a railroad train in 1834. General correspondence includes letters of praise by the sons of John Jay and the Marquis de Lafayette for Frazee's busts of their fathers. There are also letters from John J. Audubon and art associations. The majority of letters concerning busts for the Boston Athenaeum are photocopies. Also found are notes concerning the correspondence which were presumably written by the donors.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 5	John Frazee Letters to Family, 1819-1836 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 6	General Letters, 1824-1844 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 7	Letters to John Frazee and Family, 1847-1852 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 8	Letters to John Frazee and Family, circa 1830s - circa 1880s Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 9	Letters from Art Associations, 1831-1840 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 10	Notes Concerning Correspondence, circa 1960s Image(s)

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Series 3: New York Customs House File, circa 1837-1841

(Box 1; 1 folder)

This file contains documents relating to John Frazee's congressional commission to design the New York Customs House. Included is a grant by President John Tyler, a petition of the commission by Frazee to President Tyler, a statement for the cost of materials by Frazee, and a description of all work completed by Frazee to the United States Congress.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 11

New York Customs House, 1837 - circa 1840s

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 4: Artwork, 1830 - circa 1840s

(Box 1; 1 folder)

Artwork consists of sketches of John Frazee-designed gravestone markers, including the markers of his wife Jane Frazee and Colonel Joseph Blackshear. Also found is a design for a memorial marker to George Washington. It is not entirely clear if Frazee created these sketches or if they were done by someone else at a later date.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 12

Sketches of Frazee Memorials, 1830 - circa 1840s

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 5: Writings and Notes, 1824-1890s

(Box 1; 4 folders)

There are poems written by John Frazee and others and notes, some of which discuss Frazee's artwork.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 13	Poems by Frazee, 1824, 1830 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 14	Poems by Others, circa 1840s Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 15	Notes Concerning Frazee's Artwork, 1885 - circa 1890s Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 16	Notes, circa 1880s Image(s)

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Series 6: Financial Materials, 1838-1857

(Box 1; 2 folders)

A small ledger contains information on day-to-day transactions. Receipts include a certificate for a land purchase and other items.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 17	Ledger, 1838-1840 Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 18	Receipts, 1838-1857 Image(s)

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Series 7: Printed Material, 1848-1887, 1942

(Box 1; 4 folders)

This series consists of one clipping concerning John Frazee from 1942, a catalog with information about Frazee's design for the 'Washington Monument' in the New York Customs House, a catalog for the New York Historical Society's art collection listing Frazee's artworks, and a copy of *My Old Kentucky Home*.

This series has been partially scanned. Only pages concerning John Frazee have been scanned from the New York Historical Society's art collection catalog. The published book has not been scanned.

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|------------------|---|
| Box 1, Folder 19 | "Description of John Frazee's Design for the Washington Monument," 1848
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 20 | <i>My Old Kentucky Home</i> by Stephen Collins Foster, 1889 |
| Box 1, Folder 21 | <i>Catalog of the Museum and Gallery of Art of the New York Historical Society</i> , 1868
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 22 | Clipping, 1942
Image(s) |

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Series 8: Photographs, circa 1910s, circa 1930s

(Box 1; 1 folder)

Photographs depict Frazee's busts of Daniel Webster, Joseph Story, and Nathaniel Bowditch displayed in the Boston Athenaeum. Also found is a stereograph card showing a Frazee bust of Chief Justice Marshall as well as a bust of John Frazee by another sculptor. There is also a photograph of a self-portrait by Noah Frazee, John's half-brother.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 23

Photographs of Frazee's Busts and Artwork by Others, circa 1910s, circa 1930s

[Image\(s\)](#)

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Series 9: Plaster Cast, circa 1800s

(Box 1; 1 folder)

There is one plaster cast of a medal commemorating Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

This series has not been scanned.

Box 1, Folder 24

Napoleon Medal, circa 1900s

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