



Smithsonian

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Historical Records of the DeWolf Family

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of African American History and Culture
Title:	Historical Records of the DeWolf Family
Date:	1757-1947
Identifier:	NMAAHC.A2018.17.2
Creator:	DeWolf, James, 1764-1837
Extent:	1.8 Cubic feet
Language:	English , Dutch; Flemish .

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Acquired through a purchase by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Processing Information

Collection processed, arranged, and described by Alana Donocoff and Ayla Amon in 2021.

Preferred Citation

Historical Records of the DeWolf Family, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

Portions of this collection are restricted from use as means to further preserve the collection. Digital surrogates are available for portions of this collection.

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Biographical / Historical

Rhode Island dominated the North American transatlantic slave trade, led by the DeWolf family of Bristol. They financed their wealthy lifestyle by engaging in each part of the triangular trade, which involved the shipping of natural resources from the Caribbean to America and Europe for manufacturing, then using them to fund the purchase of enslaved persons. The DeWolf family owned numerous sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba. Sugar from the Cuba plantations was made into molasses, transported to Rhode Island in DeWolf vessels, and transformed into rum in DeWolf-owned distilleries. The rum was then taken to Africa and used as payment for enslaved captives, who were eventually sold in Cuba and other southern ports for tremendous profit. Between 1769 and 1820, it is believed the DeWolf-owned vessels carried more than 12,000 enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage. The profit generated from these trade endeavors allowed the family to start a bank and insurance company.

The first patriarch of the DeWolf family was Mark Anthony DeWolf (1726-1792). Mark emigrated from Guadeloupe Island in the West Indies after serving as a deckhand on a slave trading ship owned by privateer Simeon Potter. Mark married Potter's sister Abigail and they had 15 children. Their son James DeWolf, born on March 18, 1764 in Bristol, was most apt to take over the family business. James, like his father, worked as a slave trader, privateer, and a politician, including time as an U. S. Senator for Rhode Island. During the Revolutionary War, DeWolf served as a sailor on a private armed vessel that was twice captured by the British. By his early twenties, his past experiences saw him promoted to the rank of captain of a ship. James married Nancy Ann Bradford, daughter of the Massachusetts governor William Bradford, in 1790. Together they had 11 children.

In 1791, DeWolf was indicted for murdering an enslaved woman on his ship. The enslaved woman may have had smallpox and DeWolf claimed that she threatened the lives of all the enslaved persons and crew members on board. DeWolf and two crew members agreed to throw the woman overboard to her death. Judge John Jay discovered the story and reported it to President George Washington who gave orders for DeWolf's immediate arrest, citing violation of the Federal Slave Trade Law of 1790. DeWolf fled to the West Indies and by 1795 the charges were dropped. The judge declared that "this act of James De Wolfe was morally evil, but at the same time physically good and beneficial to a number of beings." Further, it was the "least" of the "two evils," and the accusations against DeWolf were "groundless."

Buoyed by the acquittal, DeWolf's family continued their criminal activity within the slave trading business. In 1794, Congress outlawed Americans carrying slaves between foreign countries or into countries that had statutes against the trade. In order to circumvent these laws, DeWolf called in a favor with Thomas Jefferson to appoint his brother-in-law, Charles Collins, a customs inspector. Collins ignored many of the slave ships moving in and out of the harbor that in turn allowed the DeWolf family to continue profiting from human suffering. DeWolf funneled his slave trading efforts through Cuba, the only open Caribbean trade port with American access. DeWolf continually shipped men, women, and children from American soil to Cuba.

In 1808, Congress banned the importation of enslaved into the United States and DeWolf turned to new ventures to keep his wealth, including privateering. During the War of 1812, his ship *Yankee* was the most successful privateer of the war, capturing prizes worth over three million dollars. In order to continue to profit off slavery, DeWolf founded the Arkwright Mill in Coventry, Rhode Island, which became a pioneer in the processing and manufacturing of cotton harvested by enslaved people. The family also maintained plantations in Cuba, and James' nephew, George DeWolf, continued trading enslaved persons at least until 1820 when it became punishable by death. From 1817-1821, DeWolf served as a member of the Rhode Island State House of Representatives; he was promoted to Speaker of the House from 1819-1821. In 1821, he was elected a U.S Senator for Rhode Island and served five years of his six-year term. He resigned and returned to the State House of Representatives from 1829 until his death in 1837. James DeWolf died in New York City on December 21, 1837. It was reported at his death that he was the second wealthiest man in America.

Historical Timeline

1726	Mark Anthony DeWolf was born
1764	James DeWolf was born in Bristol, Rhode Island, son of Mark Anthony and Abigail DeWolf
1775-83	James DeWolf served as a sailor in the Revolutionary War
1790	James DeWolf married Nancy Bradford, daughter of Massachusetts Governor William Bradford
1791	James DeWolf was indicted for murdering an enslaved woman on his slaving ship
1792	Mark Anthony DeWolf died leaving the business to his son, James
1795	All charges against James in the death of an enslaved woman on-board his ship in 1791 were dismissed
1808	Congress abolishes the African slave trade

1812	James DeWolf built the Arkwright Mills in Coventry, Rhode Island. He also served a privateer in the War of 1812
1817	James DeWolf began serving as a representative in the Rhode Island House of Representatives
1819	DeWolf began serving as the Speaker of the House in Rhode Island State General Assembly
1821-25	James DeWolf served as U.S. Senator for Rhode Island
1829	James DeWolf returned as a member of the State House of Representatives
1837	James DeWolf died in New York City, New York

Scope and Contents

The Papers of the DeWolf Family shed light on one of the wealthiest New England families in the 18th-19th centuries who made their fortune by engaging in each part of the transatlantic slave trade. This collection is comprised of photographs, correspondence, publications, and business records including daily logs and ship manifests. Included in the collection are ship business records and documents from multiple countries including Cuba, the Netherlands, China, and India.

Arrangement

The materials in this collection have been kept at the folder level and separated into five series. The materials have been ordered and organized based on the content.

Bibliography

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Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Coffee
- Domestic Slave Trade
- Middle Passage
- Photography
- Rum
- Shipping
- Slavery
- Sugar
- Transatlantic Slave Trade
- United States -- History -- 1783-1815
- United States -- History -- 1815-1861
- United States -- History -- 1865-1921
- United States -- History -- Colonial period -- Societies
- United States -- History -- Revolution, 1775-1783

Types of Materials:

- Correspondence

Names:

- Bellin, J.H.
- DeWolf, George
- Elfelt, Peter
- Oliver, Louis

Places:

Caribbean
Cuba
Rhode Island
West Indies

Container Listing

Series 1: Photographs, 1890-1911; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials include photographs of men, women, and children from the DeWolf family. The series is separated into 3 subseries, Studio Portraits and Photographs in Havana, Cuba. Subseries 2 are miscellaneous photographs of the DeWolf family outdoors, unknown buildings, and special events. Most of the photographs are not labeled, and the subjects are unknown.

1.1: Studio Portraits, c. 1890-1931; undated

Box 1, Folder 1	Unidentified woman 57 years old, 1869
Box 1, Folder 1	Hilda en Henny Hilsen [illegible] [photographer] Peter Elfelt, Copenhagen, c. 1890-1931
Box 1, Folder 1	Grandma Mrs. Susan C. Howland [photographer] Shepard Company Providence, R.I., 1901
Box 1, Folder 1	Mille X Intermediate grades Shirley School [photographer] Bailey Studio Leominster, Mass., 1903
Box 1, Folder 1	Gia lin [illegible] [photographer] Swan at Dimonds Studio Providence, R.I., 1911
Box 1, Folder 2	Mémère [Grandmother] and Mrs. Elise Vallee, undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Alice Pearl Summerscales [photographer] Sharknberg and Robinson Pawtucket, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Studio portrait of an unidentified young woman [photographer] Narragansett Studio, Pawt. R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman and baby [photographer] G.F. Douglas, undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Studio portrait of unidentified woman [photographer] Louis Oliver, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Studio portrait of unidentified girl [photographer] A. Cobden, Troy N.Y., undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Studio portrait of unidentified girl [photographer] Goodwin's Studio, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Studio portrait of an unidentified man [photographer] Louis Oliver, Providence R.I., undated

Box 1, Folder 3	Studio Portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Marshall, Cambridge, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Studio Portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Goodwin's Studio, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Studio portrait of unidentified man and woman [photographer] Wm Mills & Son, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Studio Portrait of unidentified man in a suit and wearing glasses [photographer] [illegible], undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Studio portrait of unidentified child [photographer] Chas. E. Smith, Evanston, Ills., undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] L. H Bellin, undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Studio Portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Louis Oliver, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Oliver, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Louis Oliver, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Studio portrait of an unidentified man [photographer] J H Bellin, undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Studio portrait of unidentified girl [photographer] Albert Sachs Bradford, England, undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Studio portrait of an unidentified baby [photographer] Rose Studio, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Arthur Russell, Ellard, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman [photographer] Louis Olivier, Providence, R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Studio portrait of an unidentified baby [photographer] Oliver, Providence R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Studio portrait of an unidentified man [photographer] Louis Oliver, Providence R.I., undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Studio portrait of unidentified woman seated [photographer] [illegible], undated

Box 1, Folder 7	Studio portrait of an unidentified man in a suit with arms crossed, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Studio portrait of an unidentified man wearing glasses and a suit and tie, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Portrait of a Wedding and Bridal Party, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Studio portrait of unidentified woman wearing lace dress and a pearl necklace, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Studio portrait of unidentified man wearing a suit and tie, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Oval studio portrait of a family with one daughter and two sons, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Studio portrait of an unidentified boy wearing a sailor outfit and playing with toys, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Studio portrait of unidentified man wearing a suit and tie, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Studio portrait of an unidentified man wearing glasses, a suit and tie, and hat, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Studio portrait of an unidentified woman wearing a dress with a lace collar, undated

1.2: Miscellaneous Photographs of Families, Buildings, and Special Occassions, undated

Box 1, Folder 9	Bobby, undated
Box 1, Folder 9	Unidentified woman standing in the street "taken by Julian", undated
Box 1, Folder 9	Unidentified child with note, "Betty how are these for Grandbabies", undated
Box 1, Folder 9	Unidentified woman wearing dress and hat standing in front of two buildings, undated
Box 1, Folder 9	Two unidentified men, two woman, and child posed in front of a house, undated
Box 1, Folder 10	Wedding and Bridal Party Portrait standing on steps in front of house, undated
Box 1, Folder 10	Unidentified woman wearing a dress with an unidentified man in naval uniform on a ship, undated
Box 1, Folder 10	Unidentified woman wearing a dress talking to an unidentified man in naval uniform on a ship, undated

Box 1, Folder 10	Group of unidentified men and women wearing swimsuits in front of a wagon and tents, undated
Box 1, Folder 10	Unidentified man seated in a rocking chair inside a sunroom, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Living room with piano and fireplace, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Two-family connected home from a street view, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Children playing in a large yard in front of white home, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Ship on the ocean, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Two unidentified men at a tent with a deer carcass hanging behind[photographer] J. W. Bockes, undated

1.3: Photographs of Havana, Cuba; undated

Box 1, Folder 12	Havana Defenses, Block House, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Headquarters Department of Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Unknown room decorated with wicker furniture and large chandelier in Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Unidentified man sitting in unknown wallpapered room in Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Street view of restaurants Chocolate Matias Lopez and Bizacocho Sistema Italiano in Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Entrance to Cabana, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Entrance to Palace, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Street view of Church in Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Unidentified woman seated with another woman with a camera seated in front of belltower in Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Cathedral, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Cathedral, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Roof and Tower, Old Custom House, Havana, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Firemen's Monument, Cementeri de Colon, Havana

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1832-1947; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials include letters from the DeWolf family, business correspondence, and life event announcements.

Box 2, Folder 1	Letter to Mep. Wm Applebaum from [illegible], 1832
Box 2, Folder 1	Letter to Capt. Daniel F. Lothrop from Edwin Howland, 1834
Box 2, Folder 1	Letter to Honorable Thomas DeWolf to Crawford Allen, 1835
Box 2, Folder 1	Letter to Cadet Edwin W. Morgan from James L. Mason, 1836
Box 2, Folder 1	Letter to Thos [Thomas] Lawyer [illegible] Lawyersville, NY from unknown in Schoharie County, NY, 1840
Box 2, Folder 2	Letter to Honorable Isiah Fisk from his son Elbridge, 1844
Box 2, Folder 2	Letter and envelope on Department of State letterhead to Mr. [illegible] from William Langerman, member of the House of Representatives, 1853
Box 2, Folder 2	Letter to unknown from Wm. H. Johnston, 1865
Box 2, Folder 2	Death notice letter to [illegible] from Lieut. C. W. Pease, 1866
Box 2, Folder 2	Wedding announcement for Madeline Howard to Mr. Edgar Montague Amphlett, 1916
Box 2, Folder 3	Postcard to Miss Lena Vedder from her sister, 1919
Box 2, Folder 3	Letter to Major Richard from Judith Wintittanim II, 1930
Box 2, Folder 3	Letter to Clara from L. Frances Herreschoff, 1947
Box 2, Folder 3	Letter to unknown from R.H. Cunningham, Lt. U.S. Navy, undated
Box 2, Folder 3	Envelope: Letter from Vicar YS Ship of nabea re: scandal in the navy - retreat of court martial, etc., undated
Box 2, Folder 3	Envelope: ALS James L. Mason later Lt. Col [illegible], undated
Box 2, Folder 3	Letter to Avis Robinson from Duncan van Reyswoud, undated
Box 2, Folder 3	Christmas card with drawing by Clarence DeW. Herreschoff, undated

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Series 3: Businesss Records, 1757-1899; undated

Scope and Contents: Materials in this series are separated into two subseries. Subseries 1, Ship Manifests, logbooks, and Journals. This includes accounts of ship captain's journeys and manifests of ship stops, trade goods, and locations. Subseries 2, Receipts and Business Documents include trade receipts and invoices for goods delivered, discharge and health records.

3.1: Ship Manifests, Logbooks, Journals, 1810-1880

Box Box 2, Folder 4	Sugar Manifest for ship from Havana, Cuba to Philadelphia, PA, 1800
Box 4	Journal and manifest of Benjamin. S. Olney on board Ship I.s.I.s., c. 1810
Box 3, Folder 1	Ship South Boston manifest from Liverpool to Savannah, 1825
Box Box 2, Folder 4	Manifest of Cargo on board Ship Houqua written by Captain William Phanchard, 1830
Box 4	Copy of the log books of the Ship Noble Ermice Arm by Benjamin P. Robinson, 1842-1853
Box 3, Folder 2	Daily Log and expenses written General Average Brig. Wm Pitt, 1846
Box 4	A Journal of the voyage On board Ship Ann Maria...Kept by Edward Graves, 1850
Box 3, Folder 3	Comparison of Gangway Lines of the Downer Plat with Present line of occupation of the Gangways written by Wm S. Hames, 1870
Box Box 2, Folder 4	Typed Transcript copy of "Journal of Journey from New Haven Connecticut to Boston, 17th September 1771", (bulk c. 1880s)

3.2: Receipts and Business Documents, 1757-1899; undated

Box Box 2, Folder 5	Receipt from Mr. Phillipe Freeman to Dr. Abiah Holbrook, 1757-1758
Box 3, Folder 4	Information on renting dock space at the seaport marina [Written in Dutch], 1796
Box 3, Folder 5	Ship route of the Brigantine Fanny bound from the Port of Providence, Rhode Island for Surinam, back again to Providence, 1798
Box Box 2, Folder 5	Receipt: Goods were Shipped...by Dutton and Ferriday of Liverpool in ship The William + Jane...bound for Boston, 1799
Box 3, Folder 6	Invoice of spice and merchandise shipped by Taylor and Taylor on board of the Brig Dolphin bound for Calcutta, 1809

Box 3, Folder 7	Health assessment in the Port of Savannah of the captain, officers, seamen, and passengers of Ship Patterson are health and free of disease and plague to continue travel to Tonniger, 1810
Box 3, Folder 8	Payment receipt from O.C. Blunt for work done by Asa Lewis on Ship Brig. Suttana, 1820
Box Box 2, Folder 5	Receipt: Mr. H. Lingley To Government Customs...in Providence, 1821
Box Box 2, Folder 5	Receipt: Mr. H. Lingley To Government Customs...in Providence, 1821
Box Box 2, Folder 5	Receipt: Mr. H. Lingley To Government Customs...in Providence, 1821
Box 3, Folder 9	Receipt: Ship Anne in Bristol R.I. written by Wm. H. D'Wolf Agent, 1833
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Letter to Mark Healy Esq from Andrew Hall of receipt for "Order from A. J. Hall" [Annotated note "Copy"], 1834
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Letter to Mark Healey "Order for China to be executed in care of the non-arrival of the responses at Canton" from Hastings Potter [Annotated note "Duplicate"], 1834
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Account of goods in the Ship Farquin traveling from Canton to Boston by George E. Foster, 1835
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Discharge record for Alfred S. Pratt from the service of seaman from the master W. Anderson, 1899
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Receipts to Thomas Vernon from W. Greene Governor of the Colony of Rhode Island, undated
Box 3, Folder 10	List of goods William French bought from William P. Hinkley, undated
Box Box 2, Folder 6	Payment receipt for work done by Lewis Henchman from the owners of Ship Suttan, undated

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Series 4: Publications, 1829-1860

Scope and Contents: Materials include a booklet on Robert the Hermit, The Singapore Daily Times Newspaper, and booklets on trade in foreign countries.

Box 4	Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts Who has lived 16 Years in a Cave, secluded from society, 1829
Box 3, Folder 11	The Singapore Daily Times Vol. III No. 725, 1860
Box 3, Folder 12	The Daily Press Ships, Commerce, and Colonies in Hong Kong, 1860
Box 2, Folder 7	United States Centennial Commission. Official list of Foreign Commissions, Accredited to the International Exhibition of 1876, Philadelphia, United States, 1876

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Series 5: Certificates, 1816-1898

Scope and Contents: Materials include a certificate of graduation from Massachusetts Nautical Training School and a Certificate of American citizenship.

Box 3, Folder 13 [Certification of American citizenship for Andrew Vandel, an American seamen in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1816](#)

Box 4 [Massachusetts Nautical Training School certificate for graduation of Alfred Stearns Pratt for Seamanship and Navigation, 1898](#)

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