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Guide to the William Mason Papers

NMAH.AC.0045

Barbara Kemp and Robert S. Harding

1983

Archives Center, National Museum of American History
P.O. Box 37012
Suite 1100, MRC 601
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012
Business Number: Phone: 202-633-3270
Fax Number: Fax: 202-786-2453
archivescenter@si.edu
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	William Mason Papers
Date:	1839-1857
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0045
Creator:	Mason, William, 1808-1883 (manufacturer) (Creator)
Extent:	0.6 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Papers of William Mason of Taunton, Massachusetts--engine builder, machinist, and manufacturer of locomotives and cotton machinery. The papers consist of bills, receipts, and correspondence concerning the operation of his household, the construction of his residence, and several incidental papers dealing with his business affairs.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The collection was transferred from the Division of Transportation (now the Division of Work and Industry) on May 2, 1983.

Processing Information

Processed by Robert S. Harding, archvisit and Barbara Kemp, 1983.

Preferred Citation

William Mason Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

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Biographical / Historical

William Mason was born in 1808 in Mystic, Connecticut. His father was a blacksmith. As a boy, Mason spent time in his father's shops. He left home at the age of twelve and worked as an operator in the spinning room of a small cotton factory. He was a born mechanical genius and could repair the most complicated machine in the mill. At the

age of fifteen he went to East Haddam, where a mill for the manufacture of thread was being established, to start the machines. At seventeen he worked at the machine shop connected with the mill, where he stayed for three years. It was here he set up the first power loom in the country for the manufacture of diaper linen. He also constructed an ingenious loom for the weaving of damask table cloths.

In 1833, Mason joined Asell Lamphaer at Killingly, Connecticut to make the ring frame for spinning. He remodeled and perfected the "ring" which had been a failure, overcame the prejudice attached to it because of its failure, and caused the device to acquire the reputation it still retains today.

In 1835, Mason moved to Taunton, Massachusetts to join Crocker and Richmond, manufacturers of cotton machinery. He worked almost entirely on ring frames. The firm failed in 1837 during the financial crisis. The business was taken over by Messrs Leach and Keith. Mason was employed as foreman. On October 8, 1840 his greatest invention, the "self acting mule" was patented. Competition required improvements and on October 3, 1846 he received a patent for "Mason's Self acting Mule."

Leach and Keith suffered a failure in the winter of 1842 owing Mason a large amount of money. James K. Mills & Co. of Boston, a leading commission firm, came to his rescue and helped him to buy out the former partners. In 1845, new buildings were erected and the plant became the largest one devoted to the manufacture of machinery in the country. It made cotton machinery, woolen machinery, machinists' tools, blowers, cupola furnaces, gearing, shafting, car wheels made with spokes, and after 1852, locomotives.

Mason wanted to improve the symmetry of the American locomotive. A first engine was turned out in 1853. In 1857 his firm failed but he managed to reopen the plant soon afterwards. The textile business recovered rapidly but the locomotive business was less prosperous. By 1860, he had produced a total of only 100 engines. The figure was doubled by 1865 due to the wartime demand and the pace continued for the next several years. Also during the Civil War, 600 Springfield rifles were turned out weekly.

Mason's locomotives were genuinely handsome without ornaments. His influence was exerted over all locomotive builders at the time and later. In 1856 he built two locomotives for the Cairo and Alexandria R.R. (Egypt) in which a commentator said that the engines' excellence was due to the accuracy of execution attained by an admirable set of tools and a skillful set of workmen. Opinion by Master Mechanics was that they were the easiest engines to keep in repair. The business was organized as the Mason Machine Works in 1873 with a capital of \$800,000.

Mason died in 1883 of pneumonia. The 700th engine was being completed. Only 54 more engines were completed by 1889 and delivered in 1890. The company continued to build cotton machinery.

William Mason was a painter and a good violinist. He established a bank in Taunton for his employees and made gifts to charity. He is remembered as a pioneer in the building of locomotives which ranked foremost in the country.

Scope and Contents

The papers of William Mason (1808-1883), of Taunton, Massachusetts, document an engine builder, machinist, and manufacturer of locomotives and cotton machinery. The papers consist of bills, invoices, receipts, and correspondence concerning the operation of his household, the construction of his residence, and several incidental papers dealing with his business affairs.

The collection is arranged by type of material and then chronologically. Some materials relate to personal matters such as clothing, furniture, and food purchases. Others relate to William Mason's business affairs. The collection provides an understanding of the time, labor, tools, machinery, and supplies necessary to build the home of a successful businessman between 1848 and 1850 in Taunton, Massachusetts.

A partial description of William Mason, (little is known of his personal life), and of his times can be made through a study of his expenditures. The wages of both skilled and unskilled workers can be studied from payroll receipts. The cost of supplies, tools and equipment can be examined. The quantity and variety of products necessary to construct a home can be gauged to an extent.

Of note are the type and variety of products that each store stocked. Most were specialty stores with limited purpose. Mr. Mason generally paid his payroll bills when delivered. However, there are many bills with receipt of payment given as much as a year later. Some bills had statements asking early payment, others included interest, and some reminders of non-payment.

Arrangement

The collection is divided into two series.

Series 1: Business Records, 1839-1857

Series 2: Correspondence, 1845-1857

Bibliography

Lozier, John "Taunton and Mason: Cotton Machinery and Locomotive Manufacturing in Taunton, Massachusetts 1811 1861." Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1978.

The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. Bulletin #15. Boston: Baker Library, Harvard Business School, 1927. (pp. 20 33).

White, John H. "Mason Machine Works," A Short History of American Locomotive Builders in the Steam Era. (pp. 15; 63 65.)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Housing
- Locomotive builders
- Manufacturers
- Railroads

Types of Materials:

- Family papers

Container Listing

Series 1: Business Records, 1839-1857

Scope and
Contents:

One large purchase in 1849 of furnishings included:

- Mahogany bedstead
- 2 hair mattresses
- 2 bolsters and 4 pillows
- Walnut bedstead
- Walnut washstand
- Walnut bureau
- Walnut night table
- 4 cane seat chairs
- 6 mahogany chairs
- rosewood centre table
- 4 rosewood chairs
- 2 rosewood sofas
- 1 rosewood armchair
- 1 rosewood console table
- 1 rosewood morocco arm chair
- 1 rosewood oval dinning table with 4 leaves
- 2 Mahogany burears
- 8 Mahogany chairs
- 4 Mahogany towel stand
- 1 Mahogany arm chair
- 2 Mahogany tete a tetes
- 1 Walnut towel stand
- 1 oak wardrobe
- 2 oak hall chairs
- 1 Mahogany ladies secretary
- 1 Mahogany night table
- 1 rosewood bedstead
- 1 rosewood washstand
- 1 rosewood night table
- 4 rosewood chairs
- 1 rosewood oval centre table
- 1 rosewood library table and desk
- 2 rosewood low arm chairs
- 2 rosewood high arm chairs
- 2 rosewood book cases
- 1 rosewood ladies chair
- 1 rosewood toilet table
- 1 rosewood glass wardrobe
- 2 circular window cornices with green and gold brocade curtains
- Brown linen covers for sofas, chairs, arm chair
- 1 rosewood card table
- 1 rosewood folio stand
- 1 large circular cornice with silk and lace curtains

- 1 rosewood moroccan chair
- Painting of Caesar & Cleopatra

Box 1, Folder 1	Business Records, 1839
Box 1, Folder 2	Business Records, 1840
Box 1, Folder 3	Business Records, 1841
Box 1, Folder 4	Business Records, 1842
Box 1, Folder 5	Business Records, 1843
Box 1, Folder 6	Business Records, 1844
Box 1, Folder 7	Business Records, 1845
Box 1, Folder 8	Business Records, 1846
Box 1, Folder 9	Business Records, 1847
Box 1, Folder 10-11	Business Records, 1848
Box 1, Folder 12-13	Business Records, 1849
Box 1, Folder 14	Business Records, 1850
Box 2, Folder 15	Business Records, 1851
Box 2, Folder 16	Business Records, 1851
Box 2, Folder 17	Business Records, 1853
Box 2, Folder 18	Business Records, 1854
Box 2, Folder 19	Business Records, 1857
Box 2, Folder 20	Business Records, undated

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1845 - 1857

Scope and Contents: Frost & Wallace of New York provided Mr. Mason with many of his clothes. He seems to have placed a large order every year for coats, pants, and vests:

1845

Seems to have sent "Cards" produced by poor workmanship to Andrew Robson & Son of Fall River. Didn't notice until second set sent. Said the 12 were replaced. Evidently had received a nasty letter about this previously.

1845 April

Appears to be in partnership with J.K. Mills, who is pleased with Mason's "talent and good management." Offered to (s) finish up present contract in "present shops," or (b) have Mason build new shops and machinery and form new partnership of 7 years receiving \$6 10 thousand per year for next two arrangements seemingly favorable in the end for Mason as well.

1845 May

In May ordered to quit premises where machine manufacturing was done because it was part of the Mill Estate.

1845
August

Made a contract in August 1845 (unsigned in file) with the Nauvoo Steam Cotton Company of Salem, Massachusetts, to build 40 self acting mules. Each was to contain 672 spindles. The mules were to be suitable for spinning #20 yarn.

In addition, Mason was to build 576 looms 300 to 35" cloth, and 276 to weave 39" cloth.

Payment was \$2.75 per spindle and \$75 per loom.

1845
September

Agreement made with Dean and Morse on September 1845, to turn over furnace, machine shops and buildings situated on the Brick Mill premises including the property belonging to Charles Richmond, within a specified period of time.

Agreement made with Dean and Morse on September 1845, to permit them to use his patented mule, "Improved Self Actor," for a period of 5 years. In return, payment terms given.

1846

Continues to dress well thanks to Frost and Wallace.

1846 July

Mason formed "Town Hill Mining Company" with others including Mr. Mills.

1846
September

In September, was asked by one stockholder if the mine had opened.

In September Seems to have another contract with Mills.

1846
November

Keller & Greenough of Washington, D.C., represent Mason in his getting a patent for a "self acting mule" for \$250.

1847
1847 March

No mention of clothes this year.

Mason was a stockholder of Parker Mills which now increase its capital stock.

Mason owned guns which came from Barclay Street, New York.

1847
September

Bought from Porter and Lowell 3030' of No. 2 plank for \$99.99. Evidently quality of 2" plank not as good as this was a good load, seasoned more than a year.

1847
November

Received a request for payment to the Great Falls Co., of \$10 due since February 1842. The Company served as trustees when some self acting mules were attached and Mason sued.

Mr. Keller gave it as his opinion that Mason's patent rotary blower did not infringe on that awarded in 1842 to Frederick P. Drinpfel.

1848

Paid \$1,015 for mantels furnished and set up.

1846 November, Many receipts in this folder dealing in goods and services such as:

- sleighs
- fruits, vegetables, meat, crackers, sherry, brandy
- furniture, china, rugs, kitchen equipment
- house trimmings, window sill, hinges
- men's clothing
- rental and boardin payments paid \$65.50/3 months
- dentist and medical bills
- building a well
- payroll and expense accounts for several employees
- sperm oil
- stencil lettering ink
- cement, pig iron, planks, doors, coal, tiles, rope, cast steel

Box 2, Folder 2	Correspondence, 1845
Box 2, Folder 3	Correspondence, 1846
Box 2, Folder 4	Correspondence, 1847
Box 2, Folder 5	Correspondence, 1848
Box 2, Folder 6	Correspondence, 1849
Box 2, Folder 7	Correspondence, 1850
Box 2, Folder 8	Correspondence, 1851

Box 2, Folder 9	Correspondence, 1852
Box 2, Folder 10	Correspondence, 1853
Box 2, Folder 11	Correspondence, 1854
Box 2, Folder 12	Correspondence, 1857
Box 2, Folder 13	Correspondence, undated

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[Seated portrait of William Mason], undated
1 Item (Silver gelatin on paper.; 5.1" x 4.0".)
Creator: Mason, William, 1808-1883 (manufacturer)
Language: English.
Notes: AC0045-0000001.tif (AC Scan No.)
Unrestricted research use on site by appointment. Photographs must be handled with cotton gloves unless protected by sleeves.
Topic: Machinery
Manufacturers