

Connecticut Historical Society
museum & library

Gideon Welles Papers

A Guide to the Gideon Welles Papers at the Connecticut
Historical Society

Collection Overview

Repository :	Connecticut Historical Society
Creator :	Gideon Welles
Title :	Gideon Welles Papers
Dates :	1758 - 1814
Extent :	5 linear feet (10 boxes)
Abstract :	Collection consists of mixed personal and official correspondence, diaries, accounts with the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, Naval Commissions, Ephemera and Printed Political Material.
Location:	Ms Wellg1878
Language:	English

Biographical Sketch

Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1869, was born in Glastonbury, CT, on July 1, 1802. Educated at the Episcopal Academy in Cheshire, CT, and at the American Literary, Scientific and Military Academy in Norwich, VT (now Norwich University, Northfield, VT), Welles later read law in Hartford under William W. Ellsworth. However, preferring political and literary pursuits, he never practiced.

In 1826 Welles was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly from Glastonbury, serving from 1827 to 1835. As a legislator he worked to outlaw imprisonment for debt and to abolish property and religious qualifications for those serving as witnesses in court.

In 1826 Welles also became part-owner and editor of the *Hartford Times*, a leading Jacksonian organ in the state. A skilled political organizer and journalist, he used his editorial and legislative positions to promote the initially unpopular Jacksonian Democracy in Connecticut. Welles was also instrumental in carrying the state for Jackson in the presidential contest of 1832, and for Van Buren four years later. He was rewarded with the

postmastership of Hartford, a powerful patronage position, which he held from 1836 to 1841.

Through the influence of his associate on the *Times*, U. S. Senator John M. Niles, Welles was appointed chief of the Bureau of Provisions and Clothing during the Polk administration. He was the only civilian to head a bureau in the U. S. Navy Department. Serving throughout the Mexican War, Welles brought an unwonted efficiency to the Bureau's administration and eliminated much of the graft which had previously characterized its operations.

While not an ardent abolitionist, Welles was personally opposed to slavery and to its extension into the territories. In the presidential contest of 1848, he gave quiet encouragement to the Free Soil candidacy of his old associate, Martin Van Buren. By 1854 Welles had broken both with the Democratic administration and the pro-Administration *Hartford Times* over the Kansas Nebraska Act, joining with other free soil Democrats in opposition to the extension of slavery into Kansas.

A founder of the Republican Party in Connecticut (1855-6), Welles was its first candidate for governor. While he failed to win election, partly from his refusal to court support from the Know-Nothing Party, his strong showing won him a place on the Republican National Committee (1856-1864). In that role he exercised a strong influence on the drafting of the national Republican platforms of 1856 and 1860. He was also instrumental in founding the *Hartford Evening Press* to promote the interests of the new party. Welles wrote many of its editorials and political articles.

Appointed Secretary of the Navy in 1861, Welles proved to be a firm, efficient and energetic administrator. Under his direction, the department was singularly free from corruption and political favoritism. Versed in international law, Welles, with Charles Sumner, also provided a useful counterweight in the Cabinet to the sometimes ill-conceived policies of Secretary of State William H. Seward. With Montgomery Blair and Edward Bates, Welles represented the conservative position in Lincoln's Cabinet on matters of constitutional law.

Welles was an early and enthusiastic advocate of an ironclad navy. His energetic promotion of the plans of John Erickson led to the construction of the Monitor and ultimately to a highly effective ironclad steam navy. Welles was also an early advocate of giving protection and employment in the navy yards and aboard ship to runaway slaves, with pay equivalent to their white counterparts, and he supported the President's emancipation measures.

Welles also backed the President's moderate reconstruction policies, agreeing with Lincoln that the Union was indissoluble and that the states, as such, had never left the Union. Under Johnson he continued to oppose Congressional reconstruction on constitutional grounds, while deploring the President's often tactless and inept attempts to carry out Lincoln's policies. By 1868 he had returned to the Democratic fold. In 1872 he was acting with

the Liberal Democrats, though he had little enthusiasm for their presidential candidate, Horace Greeley.

From 1869 until his death in 1878 Welles wrote numerous political and historical articles, including a series of wartime recollections which appeared in *The Atlantic* and *Galaxy*. The latter, gathered into a volume entitled *Lincoln and Seward*, exploded the growing myth that Seward and not the President was the directing force in the Lincoln administration. Welles' extensive Civil War diaries are also an important historical source. They must be read, though, with caution. Welles revised the manuscript extensively, and neither of the published versions (1911 and 1960) are entirely accurate, nor do they adequately reflect the original and subsequent revisions.

No orator, Welles tended to avoid the limelight. But like his rival and sometimes uneasy ally, Thurlow Weed, Welles exerted tremendous influence on the political world through his incisive editorial writing and his able and untiring "behind the scenes" political activity. A man of single-minded integrity, and of unwavering loyalty to both his principles and the administrations under which he served, Welles exercised an incalculable influence on the political life of mid-nineteenth century America.

Scope and Content

Collection consists largely of correspondence, drafts of letters and supporting material written in both personal and official roles. Such correspondence is arranged chronologically. Of note are three letter books kept while Welles was Secretary of the Navy. Other naval material consists of commissions to sailors from presidents Madison to Van Buren.

Two slim diaries or commonplace books written by Welles in his youth and a collection of menus, invitations and other societal notices (Series VI: Ephemera) constitute the rest of Welles' personal material in this collection.

Arrangement

Materials are organized into eight series based largely on form.

Series I: Correspondence consists of letters to and from Gideon Welles, written and received in many of his professional roles. Correspondence is arranged chronologically following previous arrangement and contains mixed personal and business matter. Three letter books compiled in 1861 when Welles was Secretary of the Navy are included in this series.

Series II: Printed Political Material consists of notices, adjudications, pamphlets, resolutions, and similar items.

Series III: Ephemera consists of printed and handwritten invitations, obituaries, and other societal notices.

Series IV: Insurance Records consists of policies, receipts for payment, accounts and summaries of account information of Welles' dealings with the Hartford Fire insurance Co.

Series V: Drafts of Letters consists of drafts of letters and documents used in the compilation of those drafts. Drafts are undated but were predominantly written in the 1850s.

Series VI: Naval Commissions consists of Commissions to the Navy issued by Presidents Madison through Van Buren. Commissions are arranged chronologically under issuing president, rather than by name of sailor.

Series VII: Diaries consists of two volumes containing journal entries, jottings and quotations.

Series VIII: Transcriptions comprises transcriptions of the letter books and correspondence in Series I.

Collection is arranged chronologically within in each series.

Restrictions

Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions on access to the collection.

Use Restrictions

Use of the material requires compliance with the Connecticut Historical Society's Research Center regulations.

Subject Headings

Personal Names

Blair, Francis Preston,
Blair, Montgomery,
Buckingham, William Alfred,
Wright, Silas,

Geographic Names

United States History Civil War, 1861-1865 Naval operations.

Genre Forms

Holographs; holographs, signed; typescripts; printed forms completed in manuscript; printed material.

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Item, Collection Title, Collection number (Box #, Folder #). Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

Processing Details

Original EAD instance compiled in April 1999. Updated to EAD 2002 in December 2010.

Accruals

The collection is open, but additional material is not expected.

Related Material

An index of catalog cards is available to aid access to this collection and material in other collections. Access is through writer, recipient and date. The card catalog is located in the Research Center reading room.

Microfilm copy available.

Contents:

I. Correspondence

Transcriptions of the Letter books may be found in Box 8. Other transcriptions of Correspondence in this series are located in Boxes 9 and 10.

Volume

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Letter book, compiled when Secretary of the Navy. March 8, 1861 |
|---|---|

- July 22, 1861

Volume

2 Letter book, compiled when Secretary of the Navy. July 22, 1861
- February 19, 1862

Volume

3 Letter book, compiled when Secretary of the Navy. February 20,
1862 - June 21, 1862

Box	Folder	
1	1	Correspondence and supporting documents: 1768-1819. Includes diploma of Yale Medical College 1768 - 1819
1	2	Correspondence and supporting documents; principally relating to roles in the Connecticut Assembly and the House of Representatives. 1820 - 1827
1	3	Correspondence and supporting documents: includes some transcriptions. 1827 - 1829
1	4	Correspondence. 1830 - 1832
1	5	Correspondence; largely of a personal nature. 1833 - 1834
1	6	Correspondence; largely of a personal nature. 1835
1	7	Correspondence. 1836
1	8	Correspondence. 1837 - 1839
1	9	Correspondence. 1840 - 1842
1	10	Correspondence. 1843 - 1845

Box	Folder	
2	1	Correspondence and drafts of letters out. 1846 - 1847
2	2	Correspondence and drafts of letters out; includes an "ode to Christmas" and drafts to Martin Van Burren. 1848 - 1849
2	3	Correspondence and drafts of letters out. 1850 - 1851
2	4	Correspondence and drafts of letters out. 1852 - 1853
2	5	Correspondence and drafts of letters out. 1854 - 1855
2	6	Correspondence. 1856
2	7	Correspondence. 1857
2	8	Correspondence. 1858
2	9	Correspondence; including published material of the Republican National Committee. 1859 - 1860
2	10	Correspondence. January - April, 1861

Box	Folder	
3	1	Correspondence. May - December, 1861
3	2	Correspondence. 1862
3	3	Correspondence. 1863
3	4	Correspondence. 1864
3	5	Correspondence. 1865
3	6	Correspondence. 1866 - 1867

3	7	Correspondence. 1868 - 1869
3	8	Correspondence. 1870 - 1872
3	9	Correspondence. 1873 - 1878
3	10	Letters to Gideon Welles; undated, ordered by surname of sender. [18--?]
3	11	Correspondence on the candidature of Judge Welles. [18--?]

II. Printed Political Material

Box Folder

4	1	Printed political material. [183-? - 186?]
4	2	Printed political material. [183-? - 186?]
4	3	Printed political material. [183-? - 186?]
4	4	Printed political material; includes a number of railroad maps. [186-?]
4	5	(empty)
4	6	Draft of an article on Connecticut politics
4	7	Draft of an article on Connecticut politics
4	8	Draft of an article on Connecticut politics

III. Ephemera

Box Folder

4	9	Ephemera: Invitations and notices. [186-?]
4	10	Ephemera: Invitations; including National Inauguration Ball. [183-? - 186?]
4	11	Ephemera: Invitations, notices and obituaries. [186-?]

Box Folder

5	1	Ephemera: Invitations and notices. [186-?]
5	2	Ephemera: Menus. [186-?]

IV. Insurance Records

Box Folder

5	3	Insurance records. 1834 - 1877
---	---	--------------------------------

V. Drafts of Letters

Box Folder

5	4	Drafts of letters and supporting material. [18-]
5	5	Drafts of letters and supporting material. [18-]; predominant [185-]
5	6	Drafts of letters and supporting material. [18-]; predominant [185-]
5	7	Drafts of letters and supporting material. [18-]

5	8	Drafts of letters and supporting material. [18-]; predominant [185-]
5	9	Drafts of letters [18-]; predominant [185-]
5	10	Drafts of letters [185-?]
5	11	Drafts of letters [185-?]
Box Folder		
6	1	Drafts of letters [18-]
6	2	Document (letter) fragments [18-]

VI. Naval Commissions

Box Folder

6	3	James Madison 1809 - 1817
6	4	James Monroe 1817 - 1823
6	5	James Monroe 1817 - 1823
6	6	John Quincy Adams 1823 - 1827
6	7	Andrew Jackson 1829
6	8	Martin Van Buren 1838
6	9	Register of Conveyances for the State of South Carolina. Includes a grant of Alderano Cybo Malaspina to Valleriano Panizza. 1803

VII. Diaries

Box

7	Diary 1822
7	Commonplace book 1823

VIII. Transcriptions

Box

8	Letter books
---	--------------

Box

9-10	Correspondence
------	----------------