

JAMES ALTON JAMES (1864-1962) PAPERS, 1888-1965

Series 11/3/16/4

Boxes 1-5

Biography

James Alton James was born in Jefferson, southwestern Wisconsin (two miles north of Hazel Green), on September 17, 1864.

He was the son and second child of John R. and Mary (Alton) James, the first being Alice and the third and last child John Maurice. John was a miner and smelter but neither this occupation nor that of farming appealed to young James who entered the State Normal School at Platteville in 1884. After two years at Platteville James spent the next two years teaching at the high school in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, to earn sufficient money to attend the University of Wisconsin. He was chosen valedictorian and received the Bachelor of Letters degree in 1888. During the next two years he served as superintendent of schools at Darlington, Wisconsin. In 1890, at the suggestion of Frederick Jackson Turner (Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin), James registered as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins with a major in history and a minor in economics. With the aid of two fellowships James obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1893.

From 1893 to 1897 James taught history at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. In 1894 he turned down the offer of the presidency of the new state normal school at Stevens Point, Wisconsin. In later years he twice turned down the presidency of Cornell College.

In 1897 James accepted the invitation of President Henry Wade Rogers to come to Northwestern as Professor of History, a position he held until 1923 when he was appointed the first William Smith Mason Professor of History. In 1935 he was accorded emeritus status. James also served as Chairman of the Department of History for over two decades.

James was a firm believer in the importance of graduate programs in a university. He played a major role in initiating such programs at Northwestern and became the first Dean of the Graduate School, serving in this position from 1917 to 1931. His work with graduate studies was instrumental in Northwestern's admission to the Association of American Universities in 1917.

In addition to his teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels James engaged in historical investigation and writing, particularly about the revolutionary period and the Midwest. He edited two volumes of the George Rogers Clark papers (1912 and 1926) and wrote *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (University of Chicago, 1928), which received high praise from scholars throughout the world. In 1937 Appleton-Century published James' *Oliver Pollock, Life and Times of an Unknown Patriot*. James had become interested in the Alaskan work of Robert Kennicott and Henry M. Bannister, the first and second curators of Northwestern's Museum of Natural History. Diaries, letters, and related material edited by James were published in 1942. Typical of James' desire to encourage historical interest was his writing of the text for *Chicago: A History in Blockprint* published in 1934. Clara MacGowan, Assistant Professor of Art at Northwestern, had compiled a number of blockprints made by her advanced class in design. James wrote many articles for historical and educational publications.

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James participated in the University's committees and alumni activities. Among these were the Library Committee, on which he served from 1917 to 1935 (Chairman from 1928 to 1935), and the Committee on Archives and History of which he was Chairman from 1935 to 1946. After his retirement in 1935 James collected a considerable amount of archival material, and could be called the founder of the University Archives. For the next dozen years he worked on a history of Northwestern and left 21 chapters (some 750 pages of typescript) covering the period up to 1939, the end of Dr. Scott's presidency. In 1951 James was Consultant to the Editorial Board of the Pictorial History of Northwestern University. He conceived the idea of the Half Century Club for alumni, which was founded in 1942.

Secondary and elementary education took much of James' time and effort, especially during the early years of his career. He was co-author with Albert H. Sanford of two texts in American history (which went through several editions) and editor of a collection of readings that was also well received.

James was active in many historical and educational societies. He served on several important committees of the American Historical Association; was an early member and President (1913-14) of the Mississippi Valley Historical Society; was for 27 years on the Board of Trustees of the Chicago Historical Society (five years as Vice-President); and he served five years as President and another 34 years as a Trustee of the Illinois Historical Society.

Illinois and Evanston drew upon James' expertise in his role as citizen. He was Chairman of the first Illinois Park Commission, established by Governor Charles Deneen. During his eight years on the Commission (1909-17) he was instrumental in the acquisition of Starved Rock and Fort Chartres, the beginning of the State's park system. The Century of Progress in Chicago (1933) drew on James' historical knowledge for several of their exhibits. In 1934 James played an active part in the work of the Home Protective League, which led to a decisive victory for the anti-alcohol forces in Evanston's referendum. The following year he was General Campaign Chairman for Evanston's Community Chest Drive. James' position as an acknowledged historical scholar led in 1927 to his testifying for 3 days in Washington before Charles Evans Hughes in the suit brought by Wisconsin, Michigan, and other states against the Chicago Drainage Canal Board. He was also appointed Chairman of the Board of Graduate Studies on November 14, 1913 by action of the Board of Trustees.

James was above all a teacher, but he also devoted much of his life to religious endeavors, particularly to those of the Methodist Church. His outstanding achievement was his major role in bringing the Second World Council of Churches to Evanston in 1954. He was a lay leader for three decades in the First Methodist Church of Evanston, and for many years served the World Service Commission, Commission for Organic Church Union, and other groups within the national and international frameworks of the Methodist Church. From 1909 to 1961 James was Secretary of the Commission of the John Richard Lindgren Foundation for the Promotion of International Peace and Christian Unity. He was intensely interested in the movements for international peace, scholarships, and Christian education in foreign lands. James was a vigorous

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promoter of the International Christian University in Japan, and when this was established in 1951 he donated 400 volumes on American history from his personal library.

During the First World War James was on leave for a semester during which time he visited 21 army camps to lecture on the application of the rating scale for the promotion of officers. After the war he was invited to give 10 lectures on American democracy at the Charles University in Prague. James also traveled to England, Germany, and France to do research in various archival collections. His work with the Church led to trips to Edinburgh and Lausanne.

James received many honors. Johns Hopkins University awarded him the Shaw Lectureship in 1904 and James presented eight lectures on French-American diplomacy during the presidential administrations of Washington and John Adams. Cornell College gave him the Doctor of Laws degree in 1917 as did Northwestern in 1937. Upon his retirement in 1935 Northwestern's Board of Trustees presented him with an engrossed Appreciation, and a bound volume of letters from colleagues and former students was also given to him. In 1953 the chapel in Northwestern's John Evans Religious Center was named for James. In 1961 the Wisconsin State College and Institute of Technology, Platteville, honored James with their Distinguished Alumnus Award, which Hubert accepted on his father's behalf.

On September 14, 1892, James married Jane Thomas who had been a classmate at Platteville. They had two sons: Maurice Alton (Jan. 9, 1894) and Hubert Edgar (Nov. 29, 1895). Two grandchildren and four great grandchildren were born before James' death in Evanston on February 12, 1962. Jane Thomas James had died on October 10, 1952. In 1953 James had donated his home at 2127 Orrington to Northwestern, and in his will he provided funds for an annual James Alton James Lecture on "The Ecumenical Ideal."

James Alton James combined the attributes of teacher, man of religion, and scholar. His lectures and seminars inspired many students with an interest in their country and in the field of history. Letters from his former students credit James with thoughtful and practical advice on college and career problems. He was a doer as well as a motivator. The teaching of history at all levels benefited from his efforts. His work for national and international religious groups led to improvements in church activities and programs. James developed both the Department of History and the Graduate School at Northwestern. His scholarly investigations and writings increased the knowledge and raised the level of historical understanding of the revolutionary period and of the Midwest.

Description of the Series

The James Alton James Papers are arranged in six main categories: biographical material; correspondence; addresses and activities; publications; material relating to James' religious interests and activities; and miscellany.

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The biographical material includes the original 197-page typescript and an annotated carbon copy of James' unpublished "Memoirs," which takes him up through 1954; a substantial number of newspaper clippings (many with pictures of James, 1894-1961); alumni information sheets filled out by James; correspondence relating to major steps in his career; and several biographical sketches.

The general correspondence is arranged chronologically by date, 1888-1961. This covers a variety of subjects, writers, and recipients. Included are letters from Gov. Philip F. LaFollette of Wisconsin, President Woodrow Wilson (acknowledging James' letter of condolence upon Mrs. Wilson's death), and President Glenn Frank, University of Wisconsin, giving a brief account of some of his administrative problems. There are six folders of special correspondence which include letters to James upon his retirement from Northwestern (1935), from his former students (1917-1960), on his 85th birthday (1949), and letters to and from James concerning his work on the Committee on Archives and History (1942-47), Illinois Park Commission (primarily 1909-12), and his work on methods for selecting and promoting officers during World War I (1916-18). Much of James' substantive academic and personal correspondence is not here.

Included in the "addresses and activities" category are typescripts for speeches given by James on a wide variety of subjects including George Washington, Frances Willard, and the Northwestern University Guild; material pertaining to his visit to Czechoslovakia in 1921; and to his work with the Century of Progress (1930-34).

Among James' published and unpublished works included in the collection are two folders of reprints of articles written by him (a list of his publications has been placed in the inventory folder), the 750-page typescript for his unpublished "History of Northwestern University, 1850-1939"; and his unpublished accounts of the Development of Graduate Study and the Graduate School at Northwestern, 1856-1931; and the Development of the N.U. Department of History, 1897-1935. Unfortunately, no manuscripts for his published books and only a few for his published articles are included in this collection. A number of books written or edited by James are shelved with the Faculty Collection in the Archives reading room.

Grouped under the rubric "religion" is a small amount of correspondence together with related material pertaining to James' activities in connection with the World Council of Churches, the Methodist Church, and the Japan International Christian University.

The most important item in the miscellaneous category is a bound volume of letters of appreciation from friends, former students, and colleagues presented to James upon his retirement in 1935.

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Cross References

[Northwestern University Centennial Celebration \(Series 0/12/1, Box 2, Folder 4\)](#)

[World Council of Churches \(35/5\)](#)

[College of Arts and Sciences, Dept. of History \(11/3\)](#)

[Graduate School Records \(10/?\)](#)

Provenance: Unknown.

Restrictions: Unknown.

Separations: Unknown.

Processor: William K. Beatty; 1977.

Scanned and Reformatted by: Rachel C. Teuer; August 31, 2004.

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Description of Addition to the Series

This addition, which fills three folders in Box 5, is comprised of photocopied correspondence of James Alton James. The first folder contains correspondence between James and J. Franklin Jameson during the period 1905 to 1916. The second folder contains for the most part correspondence between James and Frederick Jackson Turner during the period 1906 to 1928. Correspondence between Merrill Crissey and James is also included in Folder 2. Folder 3 contains correspondence between James and Clarence Sibley Paine, Secretary/Treasurer of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, during the period 1909 to 1928.

Provenance: These materials, which were photocopied from originals in the possession of the Library of Congress, the Huntington Library, and the Nebraska State Historical Society, were donated to the Northwestern University Archives by Professor Richard W. Leopold in three separate accessions: # 86-44 on March 27, 1986; # 86-174 on August 15, 1986; and # 87-261 on November 6, 1987.

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Separations: None.

Processor: Hal Taylor; March 1, 1988.

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Container List

Box Folder Title

BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

1	1	Biographical Material
	2	Memoirs (original)
	3	Memoirs (copy)
	4	Clippings, 1893-1964
	5	Family

CORRESPONDENCE

	6	Retirement, 1935-1936
	7	Former students, 1917-1960
	8	85th birthday
	9	Committee on Archives and History, 1942-47
	10	Illinois Park Commission, 1909-1956
	11	World War I, 1916-1918
2	1	General, 1888-1898
	2	General, 1908-1920
	3	General, 1922-1936
	4	General, 1937-1940
	5	General, 1941-1961

ADDRESSES AND ACTIVITIES

	6	Addresses and Activities - Addresses on George Washington
	7	Addresses, 1917-1947
	8	Czechoslovakia, 1920-1948
	9	Century of Progress, 1930-1934
	10	Programs, 1901-1946

PUBLICATIONS

	11	Elementary and high school
	12	George Rogers Clark
	13	Oliver Pollock
3	1	Alaskan Volume
	2	History of Northwestern University - Chapters 1-8
	3	History of Northwestern University - Chapters 9-14
	4	History of Northwestern University - Chapters 15-18 (1)
	5	History of Northwestern University - Chapters 18 (2)-21
	6	Correspondence, 1945-1965

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<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Title</u>
3	7	Graduate Study and Development of the Graduate School 1856-1931
	8	Development of the Department of History 1897-1935
	9	Physics Department (summary by Henry Crew)
	10	Physics Department (summary by Henry Crew)
	11	Pictorial History of Northwestern Univ.
4	1	Reprints, 1892-1911
	2	Reprints, 1912-1945
RELIGION		
	3	Religion - World Peace, 1925-1952
	4	World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Movement, 1937-1955
	5	Methodist Church, 1918, 1938-1957
	6	Crusade Scholarships, 1944-1961
	7	Ecumenical Institute, 1957-1959
	8	Japan International Christian University, 1947-61
	9	Miscellaneous Notes and Reprints
5	-	Bound volume of letters to James upon his retirement, 1935
	-	Engrossed appreciation, June 15, 1935
	1	Correspondence with J. Franklin Jameson
	2	Correspondence with Frederick Jackson Turner and Merrill Crissey
	3	Correspondence with Clarence S. Paine