

Johnson, Martha L. Family Papers

Martha L. Johnson Family Papers

1821-1882



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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

Ms.2001.065

Unit Date

1821-1882

Language

The materials in the collection are in English.

Creator

Martha L. Johnson family

Extent

0.5 Cubic Feet 1 box

Repository

Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

Collection is open to research.

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Source of Acquisition

The Martha L. Johnson Family Papers were donated to the Special Collections in 2001.

Processing Information

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Biographical Note

Martha L. "Patsy" Robinson Johnson was born in Frederick County, Virginia on February 19, 1803. Evidence suggests that she was the daughter of William and Martha Robinson of Orange County, Virginia. Martha married Robert C. Johnson (ca.1798-1863), the son of Valentine and Ann Johnson of Orange County, probably in the late 1820s. The Johnsons moved several times during the following two decades. In 1833, they lived at Amherst Court House and at Lynchburg, where Robert was a merchant. The next year, they were living in Patrick County, Virginia, where Robert was keeper of a public house and served as master commissioner of the Patrick County superior court. The family was still in Patrick County as late as 1839, though Robert was operating the Red Sulphur Springs tavern that year. In 1840/41, Robert was keeping tavern in Danville, Virginia, while Martha and his daughters lived in Stanardsville (Greene County).

The Johnsons seem to have settled by 1843 in Carroll County, Virginia, where Robert kept a tavern. Evidence in the collection suggests that he also operated a store and served as Hillsville postmaster and commissioner of the revenue. The couple had three daughters: Ann, Martha and Alverda.

The Carroll County census for 1860 lists Robert Johnson as "insane." He was hospitalized in the Eastern Lunatic Asylum (Williamsburg, Virginia) later that year and died there around October 23, 1860. By 1880, Martha Johnson was living with her son-in-law, John Early, and his children in Carroll County. She died April 15, 1886.

Ann Johnson (1828-1879), oldest daughter of Robert and Martha Robinson Johnson, was born in Orange County, Virginia. She married John Early (born c.1821), and the couple had several children, including Peter S., Robert J., James L., and William H., and Martha (c.1851-1864).

Alverda "Buddie" Johnson (1830-1917) married twice, first to James H. Hounshell in 1849. The couple had one daughter, Martha (1852-1865). After Hounshell's death, Alverda married Robert Toncrey (born ca.1815), a local dentist, in 1863. The couple's children included Mary E., Laura E. and Alverda J.

Martha Loury Johnson (1832-1916) married William Craig Thornton (1825-1913) in 1848. William worked at times as a tailor, a dry goods merchant, and operator of Hillsville's Thornton Hotel. He also served as justice of the peace. The couple raised a large family, including Alverda R., Emma R. ("Sissie"), Ann Eliza, Margaret B., Martha Elizabeth, Ida May, Agnes W., Jesse Maud, Dora N., Robert Cave Johnson, and William Hiram.

William Lithgow Robinson, Martha Johnson's nephew, was born around 1837. He enlisted in the Danville Blues on April 23, 1861; prior to enlistment, he had worked as a clerk. In October 1861, Robinson was hospitalized at Orange Court House, Virginia with periostitis; he returned to duty on November 18. He was again admitted to the hospital on March 11 for contusion of the leg and was discharged April 5, 1862. Robinson's own letters indicate that he was infected with typhoid in 1861, probably resulting from the contaminated water at Manassas, where, he wrote, "All the streams and springs were contaminated with putrefying bodies of men and horses." He also mentions being wounded in the leg during hand-to-hand combat in October 1861. By 1863, Robinson was working as deputy clerk of Hastings Court House and as chief of police in Danville, Virginia. He died March 1, 1914 and is buried in Danville's Green Hill Cemetery.

Creating a sketch of this family proved difficult. Martha Robinson Johnson seems to have been known as "mother" by both her children and her grandchildren; likewise, Ann Johnson Early was referred to as "Sister Ann" by all family members. The prevalent use of nicknames within the correspondence compounds the difficulty in identifying individuals, as does the large number of extended family of both Johnsons and Robinsons. (Among Martha's siblings mentioned in this collection are Thomas A., William R., Norborne and Richard Robinson; named within the collection as siblings of Robert are Belfield C., Benjamin V., George W., and William B. Johnson, Mildred C. Collins, Lucy Leggett, and Sallie Ann Dickerson.) The sketch above is based on interpretation of the documents and surviving public (especially census) records, and therefore likely contains errors.

Scope and Contents

This collection contains the papers of the family of Martha L. Robinson Johnson, nineteenth-century matriarch of a Carroll County, Virginia family. The collection consists largely of correspondence to Johnson from various family members and friends, providing a chronicle of the life of a Southwest Virginia family during the mid-nineteenth century, mostly from a feminine perspective. The letters focus on childbirth, death, illness, folk medicine, fashion, sewing, knitting, quilting, gardening, food, spirituality and the Civil War. The letters were mailed from various locales--mostly in Virginia--including Hillsville, Copper Mines, Orange Court House, Lynchburg, Texas House, Chatham Hill, Coal Hill, Warm Springs, Red Sulphur Springs, Spring Valley, Grayson County, Cove and Hickory Grove. Though the majority of the correspondence is addressed to Martha Johnson, the collection also contains correspondence to and from her husband, Robert C. Johnson, a Carroll County tavern keeper, postmaster and commissioner of revenue.

Significant among the letters from extended family are those of William Lithgow Robinson, nephew of Martha Johnson and a soldier in Company A, 18th Virginia Infantry ("Danville Blues"). Robinson's letters, which focus on accounts of camp life and battles, include references to Harpers Ferry, Vienna, Fairfax Court House, Germantown, Manassas, Richmond, Centreville, Leesburg, Gordonsville, General Johnson, food, sickness (typhoid fever) and clothing. Robinson describes battle scenes in which he saw dead Yankees "piled up 15-20 to a grave." He reports the Danville Blues fought at Bull Run and lost 41 men. Robinson also mentions alcohol use among his fellow soldiers. On December 3, 1861, Robinson wrote a moving letter to Martha Johnson describing how he witnessed the execution of two men for attempting to kill an officer.

The collection also includes the Johnsons' legal and financial papers. Significant among the legal papers is the 1848 will of Valentine Johnson, of Orange County. The financial records include mostly personal receipts, account statements, and promissory notes but also include several items which appear to be subscription fee bills to local residents from the Hillsville post office. Also among the financial records are several of the Johnsons' account books, including two that were apparently kept by Robert Johnson acting in the capacity of commissioner of revenue. The books list, among other things, resident names and numbers of white tithes, slaves between 12 and 16, slaves over the age of 16, watches, clocks, 2- and 4-wheel carriages, etc.

Among other miscellaneous materials in the collection are a subscription/promotional booklet for Fitch W. Taylor's *Voyage Round the World and Visits to Various Foreign Countries of the United States Squadron*, a handwritten cure for dysentery, a petition-letter of recommendation for Robert C. Johnson, an obituary for Martha Ann Hounshell, and a canvas pocket document organizer used by Robert Johnson.

Keywords

Civil War
Folk, historical, and patent medicine
Local/Regional History and Appalachian South
Traditional medicine
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
Women -- History

Rights Statement for Archival Description

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Arrangement

The collection is arranged by document type. Correspondence--arranged alphabetically by surname, then chronologically--is followed by legal, financial, and miscellaneous materials.

Description of Subordinate Components

A-C correspondence

Unit Date 1866-1881, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 1 (folder)

General Physical Description note [17 items]

Brown, Jane

Byrd, E. R.

Campbell, Kate R.

Chaffin, Sarah A.

Crawford, E. R.

D-I correspondence

Unit Date 1849-1881, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 2 (folder)

General Physical Description note [13 items]

Dickenson, Sallie Ann

Early, Ann E.

Early, John

Galt, John M. (Eastern Lunatic Asylum)

Garland, A. B.

Hale, A. S.

Hounshell, Martha Ann

Johnson, Ann correspondence

Unit Date 1831

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 3 (folder)

General Physical Description note [1 item]

Johnson, Martha correspondence

Unit Date 1840-1866

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 4 (folder)

General Physical Description note [3 items]

Johnson, N. correspondence**Unit Date** 1824**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 5 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [1 item]**Johnson, Robert C. correspondence****Unit Date** 1827-1848**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 6 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [14 items]**K-Q correspondence****Unit Date** 1835, n.d.**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 7 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [2 items]**Lee, C. C.****Livingston, A. B.****Richards, C. R. (Mrs.) correspondence****Unit Date** 1849**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 8 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [1 item]**Robinson, Ann correspondence****Unit Date** 1831-1841**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 9 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [6 items]**Robinson, Annie correspondence****Unit Date** 1871-1882**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 10 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [4 items]**Robinson, Eva A. correspondence****Unit Date** 1880**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 11 (folder)**General Physical Description note** [1 item]**Robinson, Mary B. correspondence****Unit Date** 1852-1863**box-folder** 1 (box)**Container** 12 (folder)

General Physical Description note [9 items]

Robinson, Thomas A. correspondence

Unit Date 1846-1861

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 13 (folder)

General Physical Description note [3 items]

Robinson, William Lithgow correspondence

Unit Date 1841-1843

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 14 (folder)

General Physical Description note [21 items]

Robinson, William R. correspondence

Unit Date 1841-1843

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 15 (folder)

General Physical Description note [4 items]

S correspondence, 1838-1852

Unit Date 1838-1852

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 16 (folder)

General Physical Description note [2 items]

Staples, A.

Stuart, Arch

Talbot, Mary correspondence

Unit Date 1879

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 17 (folder)

General Physical Description note [1 item]

Thornton, Emma R. "Sissie" correspondence

Unit Date 1868-1879, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 18 (folder)

General Physical Description note [28 items]

Thornton, Ida correspondence

Unit Date n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 19 (folder)

General Physical Description note [3 items]

Thornton, Lily correspondence

Unit Date 1868-1871

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 20 (folder)

General Physical Description note [7 items]

Thornton, Martha L. correspondence

Unit Date 1862, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 21 (folder)

General Physical Description note [3 items]

Thornton, Robert "Bobby" correspondence

Unit Date 1877, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 22 (folder)

General Physical Description note [4 items]

Thornton, William C. correspondence

Unit Date 1876-1879, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 23 (folder)

General Physical Description note [7 items]

Toncrey, Alverda correspondence

Unit Date 1862-1876, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 24 (folder)

General Physical Description note [16 items]

U-Z correspondence

Unit Date 1880

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 25 (folder)

General Physical Description note [2 items]

Young, Sarah

Unidentified or first-name-only correspondence

Unit Date 1853-1854, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 26 (folder)

General Physical Description note [4 items]

Legal documents

Unit Date 1823-1871

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 27 (folder)

General Physical Description note [11 items]

Financial records

Unit Date 1821-1846

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 28 (folder)

General Physical Description note [68 items]

Financial records

Unit Date 1847-1866, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 29 (folder)

General Physical Description note [63 items]

Account books

Unit Date 1846-1856

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 30 (folder)

General Physical Description note [4 items]

Commissioner of revenue account books

Unit Date 1850

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 31 (folder)

General Physical Description note [2 items]

Miscellaneous

Unit Date 1838, n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 32 (folder)

General Physical Description note [10 items]

Canvas document organizer

Unit Date n.d.

box-folder 1 (box)

Container 33 (folder)