

GUIDE TO BIRKS FAMILY PAPERS

Scope and Content Note

The Birks Family Papers were received as gifts to the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association from Miss Florence E. Birks and her niece Miss Gladys Mansir in 1970, with further genealogical information supplied by the latter in 1981. They consist of approximately 200 items [exclusive of photographs and printed material], dated between 1802 and 1977. They are comprised of papers of William Birks [1805-1863], a Unitarian minister of Derbyshire, England; his youngest son, Richard E. Birks, also a Unitarian minister in England and later in Massachusetts; and four of the latter's children. Also included are a few sermons by an ancestor, Richard Elliott, English pharmacist and Unitarian lay preacher.

William Birks was born in Ashover, Derbyshire, England, in 1805. While teaching school at Stony Middleton in Derbyshire, he tutored the head gardener, Joseph Caxton, at Chatsworth House. Caxton built a glass conservatory at Chatsworth, and later built the Crystal Palace in London, for which he was knighted by Queen Victoria. William Birks first became a Methodist minister, later a Unitarian minister, and had three sons – John, William, and Richard Elliott – all of whom followed this calling. He died in 1863.

His papers consist of about twenty sermons.

Richard Elliott Birks, youngest son of William Birks, was born in Stony Middleton, Derbyshire, England, in 1846. He became a Unitarian preacher, although without formal training. In the early 1860s he came to the United States where he entered the decorating trade in Boston. In 1867, he married Margaret White Lang of Boston. He and his wife spent the years from 1871 to 1892 in England, where he preached in Unitarian churches; several of their children were born during these years. On their return to Massachusetts, he served as minister in Bernardston, Mass., in Deerfield (1901-13), and in Montague, Mass. (1913-1916). He retired to Bernardston in 1916 and died there in 1925; his widow in 1928. The couple had seven children, four of whom are named below.

His papers include a copy of the marriage certificate of Richard and Margaret, and a large body of congratulatory letters the couple received on the 50th wedding anniversary; correspondence, sermons and articles, his service book, his gift to Jennie Arms Sheldon of a sermon and letter regarding Rev. Timothy Rogers, once minister at Bernardston, and a copy of Birks' *Story of My Life*, printed [c. 1920] for private distribution.

Margaret White (Lang) Birks, the daughter of Andrew and Christiana (Sinclair) Lang, was born in Boston in 1849. In 1867 she and Richard Elliott Birks were married there. Five of their seven children survived both parents. Margaret died in Bernardston in 1928.

Her papers consist almost entirely of letters she received from her husband during his trip to England in 1910. Included is the marriage certificate of her parents, dated 25 May, 1845.

Matilda (Birks) Mansir, daughter of Richard Elliott and Margaret (Lang) Birks, was born in Topsham, Devon, England, in 1872. She married John L. Mansir, D.D.S., in 1899; the couple had two daughters, Gladys and Gertrude. Matilda died in 1941; her husband in 1933.

She is represented by a letter from her father in 1910. Filed with this is a letter to her daughter, **Gladys Mansir**, from her uncle Alfred in 1918.

Alfred W. Birks, son of Richard Elliott and Margaret (Lang) Birks, was born in Northampton, England, in 1876. He served with the YMCA during World War I and received citations from both the French and American governments. He died in 1954 and is buried in the National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

His papers consist of a letter from his father in 1901, and one from the American Unitarian Association in 1920.

Ellen Sinclair Birks, daughter of Richard Elliott and Margaret (Lang) Birks, was born in 1881 in Tamworth, Warwick County, England. She died in Bernardston, Mass., in 1951.

Her papers consist of letters she received from her father, her brother Alfred, her sister Florence, and Jennie Arms Sheldon between 1912 and 1930. Included also is her birth certificate (20 May, 1881) and a document expressing appreciation for her help from the choir, the young people's religious union, and the Sunday school of Deerfield, apparently when she was leaving Deerfield to move with her parents to Montague in 1913.

Florence Elliott Birks, daughter of Richard Elliott and Margaret (Lang) Birks, was born in Chichester, Sussex, England, in 1883. She was secretary for a number of years to Olivia E. Phelps Stokes. Later she became head librarian of the Forest Park Branch Library in Springfield, Massachusetts. She died in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1978 and is buried in Bernardston, Mass.

Her papers consist of correspondence encompassing the period 1919-1977. The earliest letter is from John Sheldon, welcoming her as a life member of the P.V.M.A. There is correspondence with the American Colonization Society regarding the flag of Liberia (the first flag was made in the home of the Stokes family), with the Phelps-Stokes Fund in regard to the wishes of Misses Caroline and Olivia Phelps Stokes in directions the fund should take, and with Archibald MacLeish, Frank L. Boyden, and Frederick F. van de Water as speakers at a coming meeting in Deerfield of the Western Massachusetts Library Club (of which Florence was president) on May 2, 1941. Later letters include one from Richard M. Nixon, one, with a photograph, from Gerald R. Ford, and one from her nephew, J.W. Bickerstaff, of Bidford-on-Avon, England. Included also are her undated writings, "Memories of Frances and Mary Allen," and "The Birks Family." Filed with the genealogical material is biographical information regarding her grandfather, her father, and her brother, Alfred.

Richard Elliott, an ancestor of William Birks, was a pharmacist and later a Unitarian lay preacher in England.

He is represented by sermons, dated 1802 and 1803, and undated.

Container List

Box 1

- Folder 1: Papers of William Birks [1805-1863]. Sermons (c. 20 items)
Folder 2: Papers of Richard Elliott Birks, marriage certificate and correspondence, 1891-1925. (50 items)
Folder 3: Papers of Richard Elliott Birks, letters received by Richard and Margaret (Lang) Birks regarding their 50th wedding anniversary, July-October 1917, and undated. (61 items)
Folder 4: Sermons and articles (12 items)
Folder 5: Same, case containing sermon of Rev. Timothy Rogers and a letter of Mr. Birks to Jennie Arms Sheldon, Sept. 24, 1918; Mr. Birks' service book; and copy of *Story of My Life*. (3 items)
Folder 6: Papers of Margaret (Lang) Birks, 1875-1925. (10 items)

Box 2

- Folder 1: Papers of Matilda (Birks) Mansir and her daughter, Gladys E. Mansir, 1910, 1918. (2 items)
Folder 2: Papers of Alfred W. Birks, 1901, 1920. (2 items)
Folder 3: Papers of Ellen Sinclair Birks, 1881, 1912-1930. (12 items)
Folder 4: Papers of Florence E. Birks, 1919, 1933-1977. (38 items)
Folder 5: Papers of Richard Elliott, sermons. 1802, 1803. (Two gatherings and 2 unbound items)
Folder 6: Genealogical material.
Folder 7: Clippings (many relating to the Birks' 50th wedding anniversary)
Folder 8: Photographs and printed material.