James H. Wilbur papers, 1846-1887

Overview of the Collection

Creator
Title: James H. Wilbur papers

Dates
1846-1887 (inclusive)
1846 1887
1880-1887 (bulk)
1880 1887

Quantity
1.5 linear feet, (3 boxes)

Collection Number
WUA030

Summary
The James H. Wilbur papers consist of his travel journal, correspondence, and legal and accounting papers dating from 1846 to 1887. The bulk of the material is from the 1880s and pertains to his career as Indian Agent for the Yakama Reservation at Fort Simcoe in the Washington Territory.

Repository
Willamette University Archives and Special Collections
Archives and Special Collections
Mark O. Hatfield Library
900 State Street
Salem, OR
97301
Telephone: 503-370-6866
Fax: 503-370-6141
archives@willamette.edu

Access Restrictions
This collection is open to researchers.

Languages
English

Historical Note

James Harvey Wilbur was born in Lowville, New York on September 11, 1811. He married Lucretia Anne Stevens on March 9, 1831, and soon after they converted to Methodism at a camp revival meeting. Wilbur was admitted on trial to the Black River Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church the following year and served as a circuit-riding missionary in upstate New York until he received a letter on September 26, 1846 calling him to the Oregon Mission. A month later Wilbur and his family sailed on the ship Whiton to the Oregon Territories. Wilbur documented this trip in his journal. A published version of the journal is titled "Travels of J. H. Wilbur: Journal written from September 27, 1846 to January 25, 1848 from New York around Cape Horn to the Oregon Institute and the onset of his Methodist mission work in Oregon Territory."

Upon arriving in Oregon, Wilbur traveled to the Willamette Valley where he became principal of the Oregon Institute, predecessor of Willamette University, in 1848. For the next two years, Wilbur; his wife; and daughter, Ann, taught at the school.

After his term at the Oregon Institute ended in 1850, Wilbur was assigned to the Oregon City and Columbia district, centered in Portland, where he worked making real estate investments for himself and the Methodist conference. In 1851 and 1852, Wilbur helped to purchase land, raise funds, and
build the first Methodist church in the city, Taylor Street Methodist Church, as well as the Portland Academy and Female Institute, a secondary school similar to the Oregon Institute. In 1853 Wilbur was assigned to the Umpqua River Valley district in southern Oregon where he founded the secondary school, Umpqua Academy (later known as Wilbur Academy). Wilbur served in this district until 1857.

After two years, 1857 to 1859, as a substitute teacher at Willamette University, Wilbur was reassigned to the Columbia River district, encompassing Portland, The Dalles, and Walla Walla in the Washington Territory. During a tour of his new circuit-riding territory in the summer of 1859, Wilbur visited Fort Simcoe and the Yakama Indian Agency for the first time. Following a series of discussions about the potential for education on the reservation, Wilbur accepted the new position of Superintendent of Instruction, and he and Lucretia moved to the Yakama Indian Agency in the fall of 1860. Wilbur improved the educational program at the fort but difficulties with staff and fellow agents in the area, including Agent A. A. Bancroft, led to Wilbur's dismissal by Superintendent B. F. Kendall in late 1861. He was reinstated, but problems at the agency sent Wilbur to Washington, D.C. to speak with President Lincoln about the situation. In June, 1864 President Lincoln appointed Wilbur to the position of Yakama Indian Agent.

The agency school operated at capacity level during Wilbur's time there. To give the Yakamas practical experience, an emphasis was placed on trade skills as well as the "four R's" (reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion). Wilbur followed a policy of distributing government annuity goods to those Yakamas who worked on the reservation (unless physically incapable of doing so), concentrating efforts on the farming of grain and care for the agency's huge herd of cattle. Some Yakama tribes rebuked Wilbur's attempts to "civilize" their people, but the Yakama Reservation became a thriving Indian agency during this time.

Despite the Yakama Agency's prosperity, there were difficulties during Wilbur's tenure as Indian Agent there. In 1869 Wilbur was dismissed as agent due to a change in policy that called for all agents to be military men. He was replaced by Lieutenant James Smith. The next year, when Congress passed legislation forbidding active military men to serve in a civilian capacity, the Wilburs returned to Fort Simcoe and resumed their duties.

Wilbur's last years as an Indian Agent covered a difficult period. War with the Nez Perce broke out in 1877. The following summer, the deaths of two white settlers resulted in the wrongful arrest of Chief Moses, chief of the Sinkiuse-Columbia tribe, whom Wilbur bailed out of jail and kept at Fort Simcoe for his own protection. In the winter of 1879, as a result of the Bannock War in which Paiutes had participated, the United States army was ordered to remove members of the Paiute tribes to the Yakama Indian Reservation. Wilbur later remarked that the newly arrived Paiute were "utterly destitute" and that he was given no notice of their coming "and of course no arrangements for giving them rations." Wilbur made emergency preparations for food, shelter, and clothing for approximately 500 people including Sarah Winnemucca, the English-educated daughter and granddaughter of Paiute chiefs.

In the fall of 1880, Wilbur took a leave of absence from his duties at the agency in order to travel to the East coast with his wife. The Wilburs planned to visit family and friends in New York and stop in Washington, D.C. to accelerate the process of auditing, balancing, and closing lapsed government bonds (the source of the agency's finances). Lucretia became dangerously ill, however, and a 60-day leave stretched into several additional months. While they were away, Indian Inspector William J. Pollock arrived to examine Fort Simcoe and spent the better part of three months there reordering the management of the fort.

After their return to Fort Simcoe, Wilbur attempted to return the fort to the management style he had set up before leaving in 1880. After assisting the Paiutes in moving their possessions from the
defunct Malheur Agency to Fort Simcoe during the summer of 1881, he tendered his resignation to the
Commissioner of Indian Affairs in June 1882.

The Wilburs spent their post-retirement years in Walla Walla, where Wilbur continued missionary work
and real estate investments. When both he and Lucretia passed away in October of 1887, the Wilbur
estate was donated to charitable causes, including a bequest to Willamette University’s endowment
fund.

Content Description

The James H. Wilbur papers consist of his travel journal, correspondence, and legal and financial
papers dating from 1850 to 1887. The bulk of the material is from the 1880s and pertains to his career
as Indian Agent for the Yakama Reservation at Fort Simcoe in the Washington Territory. The collection
includes: correspondence relating to the day-to-day business of running the agency; accounting
ledgers, vouchers, reports, and correspondence relating to the government grants that funded the
agency; correspondence and testimony relating to the Agency; court papers relating to land disputes;
deeds and other papers pertaining to real estate ventures; and personal papers regarding Wilbur’s
involvement in the administration of the estates of Calvin Reed and Susan Waters.

Material of note includes: correspondence with Father Louis Napoleon St. Onge in the late 1860s;
Wilbur’s temporary displacement as agent by Lieutenant James Smith in 1869-1870; the arrival and
maintenance of the Paiutes, and the agency inspection of William Pollock.

Use of the Collection

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Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], James H. Wilbur papers, Archives and Special Collections, Mark O. Hatfield
Library, Willamette University.

Administrative Information

Arrangement
These materials are arranged in subject and/or chronological order.

**Location of Collection**
Mark O. Hatfield Library

**Detailed Description of the Collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container(s)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1</td>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>1863-1869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>1870-1879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>1879-1883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 4</td>
<td>Department of Treasury correspondence</td>
<td>1871-1884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 5</td>
<td>Statements and Affidavits This file contains statements and depositions taken at hearings regarding Wilbur's temporary displacement as agent by Lieutenant James Smith in 1869-1870 and the agency inspection of William Pollock, among other issues.</td>
<td>1870-1882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 6</td>
<td>Ledger pages Contains accounting paperwork generated in the course of Wilbur's duties as Indian agent, including ledger pages.</td>
<td>1864-1884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 7</td>
<td>Receipts Contains accounting paperwork generated in the course of Wilbur's duties as Indian agent, including receipts and vouchers for purchases and payments.</td>
<td>1857-1884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 8</td>
<td>Reports Contains paperwork generated in the course of Wilbur's duties as Indian agent, including official communications between the Agent and the Department of the Treasury regarding the disposal of government bonds.</td>
<td>1864-1883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 9</td>
<td>Deeds and Land grants Contains official and unofficial documents pertaining to Wilbur's personal real estate holdings and those he oversaw on behalf of the Office of Indian Affairs and the Methodist Episcopal Conference.</td>
<td>1856-1886</td>
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http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv66799
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Insurance policies</td>
<td>1884-1886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1           | Lawsuits, related correspondence  
Includes legal papers and correspondence relating to court disputes over real estate properties. | 1851-1873     |
| 1           | Documents related to Methodist church business | 1851-1887     |
| 1           | Calvin C. Reed estate  
Contains receipts, vouchers, and correspondence pertaining to Wilbur's administration of the estate of Calvin C. Reed. | 1854-1857     |
| 1           | Susan M. Waters estate  
Contains receipts, vouchers, and correspondence pertaining to Wilbur's administration of the estate of Susan M. Waters. Included is the will of Susan Waters, written in letter format some six months before her death in 1869. | 1866-1871     |
| 2           | Travel Journal  
Wilbur's journal, written from September 27, 1846 to January 25, 1848, tells of his family's journey from New York around Cape Horn to the Oregon Institute and the onset of his Methodist mission work in Oregon Territory. | 1846-1848     |
| 3           | Appointment certificates  
Certificates appointing Wilbur as Indian Agent at Yakama Agency in the Washington Territory. The certificates are signed by Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, and James Garfield. There are five certificates. | 1864-1881     |

Names and Subjects

**Subject Terms:**  
Bannock Indians--Wars, 1878  
Northern Paiute Indians  
Washington

**Personal Names:**  
Garfield, James A. (James Abram), 1831-1881  
Grant, Ulysses S. (Ulysses Simpson), 1822-1885  
Hopkins, Sarah Winnemucca, 1844?-1891  
Johnson, Andrew, 1808-1875  
Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865  
Moses, Chief, approximately 1829-1899
St. Onge, L. N. (Louis Napoléon), 1842-1901

Corporate Names:
Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation
Sinkiuse-Columbia Tribe

Geographical Names:
Fort Simcoe (Wash.)
Oregon

Finding aid processed by Julie Sparks.
2012