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R.C. Donaldson papers

Title: R.C. Donaldson papers
Collection No: MSS.121
Creator: Robert C. Donaldson (1877-1961)
Extent: 5 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1824-1960 (Bulk dates: 1930-1960)

Abstract: The collection contains correspondence and personal papers, clippings, diaries and scrapbooks documenting the life and interests of lawyer, banker and local historian, Robert C. Donaldson (1877-1961) of Tiptonville, Lake County, Tennessee.

Donor: West Tennessee Historical Society.
Processed by: Robert D. Bohanan, January 1978; Gerald Chaudron, April 2014.
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: R.C. Donaldson papers, Preservation and Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: April 2014

Biographical information

Robert Cleveland Donaldson—banker, lawyer, and collector—was born on January 2, 1877, in Tiptonville, Lake County, Tennessee, one of six children of Lauchlan (1844-1924) and Mary Ann Nall Donaldson (1847-1889). Robert's grandfather, Lauchlan, came from Scotland and was a ship owner and merchant in New Brunswick, Canada, and served as mayor of St. Johns from 1829 to 1832 and from 1843 to 1847. His son, Wellington (1812-1862), moved first to Fulton County, Kentucky, and then Obion County, Tennessee. He married Elizabeth Ann Meriwether (1814-1889), daughter of the first settlers of Madrid Bend in western Obion County, as the area which became Lake County in 1870 was called. Wellington died during the Civil War defending nearby Island No. 10 in the Mississippi River from Union forces. Robert's father was a farmer, lawyer, banker and real estate developer, and served as the first mayor of Tiptonville.

Robert graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1897 and then went on to complete law school there in 1899. He started working in the Lake County Bank and then began practicing law in Tiptonville and formed the law firm of Burnett and Donaldson with J.T. Burnett. The partnership ended with Burnett's death in 1948. Donaldson later succeeded Burnett as president of the First State Bank and Trust Company of Tiptonville. He also served as school superintendent (1896-1915), and mayor of Tiptonville from 1907 to 1910 and from 1917 to 1918. His first assignment as a lawyer was to draw up a charter for the town in 1900. Donaldson retired from the law in 1958 but continued with the bank until his death on March 25, 1961. He married Dona Wynn Chitwood (1883-1974) of Union City in 1903. They had two children: Robert Cleveland, Jr., (1906-1987) and Frances Hazel (1904-1962).

Unlike most collectors, Donaldson did not confine his interest to one field. In addition to more than 2,000 Indian artifacts, some of which predate the Chickasaws by more than 500 years, he had a collection of 1,173 seashells and 1,177 rock samples. He was an authority on the Civil War and early Lake County history. His collection of Civil War relics, books and papers was extensive, and was deposited in the R.C. Donaldson Memorial Museum on Reelfoot Lake near Tiptonville.

Scope and contents

The collection contains correspondence and personal papers, clippings, diaries and scrapbooks. Box 1 holds correspondence and personal papers, and materials dealing with Donaldson's historical research. Folder 4 contains typescript copies of correspondence and news reports concerning the career of Sam Houston. Folder 16 has copies of reports in the *War of the Rebellion* records concerning operations in West Tennessee and along the Mississippi River. The land grants in Folders 10 and 11 are originals and refer to areas in West Tennessee. The archeology file (Folder 6) includes correspondence with University of Tennessee anthropologists, reports on Indian mounds in West Tennessee, and a report on excavations at the T.O. Fuller site in Shelby County.

Box 2 contains clippings regarding the history of West Tennessee and the lower Mississippi valley from Lake County and other newspapers. Boxes 3-5 hold Donaldson's diaries for the years 1934, 1938-1960. The diaries contain references to his professional life and interests and give a good picture of small town life in West Tennessee in these years.

Boxes 6 and 6A contain nine scrapbooks, primarily of clippings concerning West Tennessee history. Scrapbook 1 includes Donaldson's column "Lake County Bygones", which ran in the *Lake County Banner*. Scrapbook 2 contains a typescript copy of the diary of C.M. Peacock of Tiptonville for 1856 and Scrapbook 8 contains the clippings of the published diary from 1956. Scrapbook 3 has extensive clippings on the 1937 Mississippi River flood. Scrapbook 4 contains copies of the 1858 diary and letters of Margaret Q.C. Griffis and clippings from 1958 concerning Donaldson's discovery of the diary.

Provenance

The collection is part of the archives and collected papers of the West Tennessee Historical Society (WTHS) housed in the Preservation and Special Collections Department. Funds for processing the holdings of the WTHS came in part from a grant from the National Publications and Records Commission, which were matched by the WTHS.

There are no records regarding the acquisition of the collection by the WTHS.

Subject terms

Donaldson, Robert C., 1877-1961.
Lake County (Tenn.)--History.
Scrapbooks--Tennessee.
Tiptonville (Tenn.)--History.

Inventory

Folder

Box 1

- 1 Register.
- 2 Correspondence, 1939-1955. Re: James R. Slack, 47th Indiana Regiment, U.S.S. Lake County.
- 3 University of Tennessee class reunion, 1947.
- 4 Miscellaneous writings, undated.

- 5 Typewritten information on Sam Houston.
- 6 Archeological materials, 1946-1951 and undated. Includes correspondence, clippings, pamphlets, newsletters.
- 7 Key to plat of Tiptonville.
- 8 Surveys and plats, 1875 and undated.
- 9 Land grant: Wheaton and Tisdale, 1824.
- 10 Land grant: Pleasant Sarimore, 1843.
- 11 Land grant: R.C. Nall, 1873.
- 12 Receipt for land sale: F.C. Powell, 1876.
- 13 Deposition: R.I. Chester et al, vs. J.H. Hillsman et al, 1889.
- 14 Letter: R.A. Hatcher, Jackson, to Mrs. E.H. Bancroft, 1860 June 5. Re: Sunday school history.
- 15 Letters (copies): Benjamin Tippett, Great Mills, Md., to Sarah, 1866-1867.
- 16 Miscellaneous Civil War material. Includes typescript copies of reports in the *War of the Rebellion* records; Donaldson column for *Lake County Banner*.

Box 2

- Newspaper clippings, mainly from Lake County:
 - 1 1898-1958 and undated.
 - 2 1928-1955 and undated.
 - 3 1916-1954 and undated.
 - 4 1925-1955 and undated.
 - 5 Miscellany, 1941-1955 and undated.

Box 3

- Donaldson journals:
 - Unfolded 1934, 1938-1948.

Box 4

- Unfolded 1949-1954.

Box 5

- Unfolded 1955-1960.

Box 7

- 1934-1943 (copies).

Box 8

- 1944-1951 (copies).

Box 9

- 1952-1960 (copies).

Box 6A

- Scrapbooks:
 - Unfolded 1, Civil War. Includes Donaldson's "Lake County Bygones" column.
 - 2, Civil War.

Box 6

- Unfolded
 - 3, 1877-1937.
 - 4, 1929-1954.
 - 5, Archeology, 1952-1959.
 - 6, 1946-1955.

7, 1926-1954. Includes columns by Alfred M. Franko.
8, 1956-1960.
9, 1917-1957.

Separated materials

The following material has been separated from the collection and disposed of as follows:

“The Confederacy: A Cantata Based on Music of the South during the Years 1861-65” by
Richard Bales, Columbia, S.C., 1954 January 20.

Separated to WTHS Vertical File “Confederacy”.

Memphis Press-Scimitar, 75th anniversary edition, 1955 October 12.

Separated to Special Collections newspaper collection.