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126 Ned R. McWhorter Library
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Phone: (901) 678 - 2210
E-mail: lib_sc@memphis.edu

Pitser Miller papers

Title: Pitser Miller papers
Collection No: MSS.176
Creator: Pitser Miller (1801-1881)
Extent: 0.25 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1837 and undated

Abstract: The collection consists of a note book containing an autobiography of Pitser Miller (1801-1881) of Bolivar, Tennessee, covering the period 1801-1842, and transcribed letters from a trip to Europe in 1856. The book was also used as a scrapbook for recipes and other domestic information. Also included is an original bill of sale transferring three slaves from S.C. French to Harry Hodge in 1837 witnessed by Pitser and Austin Miller.

Donor: Dr. Charles Lea Neely, Memphis, Tennessee, June 1986.
Processed by: Darrell B. Uselton, 1994; Gerald Chaudron, 2014.
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: Pitser Miller papers, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: April 2014

Biographical information

Pitser Miller was born in Hawkins County, Tennessee, on February 2, 1801, the oldest of nine children of Jacob Miller (1776-1843), a miller, and Susannah G. Carmack (1779-1864). Pitser started working as a miller about 1810 and six years later went to work for a merchant, William Lyons. Pitser moved to Bolivar, Hardeman County, Tennessee, in 1826 and started a mercantile business there. He married Sarah Lyons (d. 1831) and had a daughter, Sarah Catherine (b.1831). She married Thomas R. Smith (circa 1831-1872), a lawyer, and Pitser later opened a dry goods store with him in Memphis. Pitser then married Sarah Ann Stephens (1809-1848) and had a son, William Pitser (1843-1857) and daughter Mary Margaret (1837-1922), who married Leonidas I. Bills (1828-1881). Around 1853, Pitser married his third wife, Mary R. Talbot (1819-1911). Pitser reportedly had a hand in saving the Hardeman County Courthouse records from being burned by the Union Army when a fellow Freemason, who was a Union officer, sent word ahead to him about the impending destruction of the courthouse. Pitser became an influential businessman and merchant in Bolivar and owned one of the first steam-powered sawmills in the South. He died in Bolivar on July 30, 1881.

Scope and contents

The Pitser Miller papers consist of a note book containing an autobiography written by Pitser Miller which is sketchy at best and covers the portion of his life 1801-1842. The account ends abruptly and remained unfinished. The majority of the book describes his journey to Europe in 1856. The account of Miller's trip to England is in greater detail but it too ends abruptly in Paris and consists of five transcribed letters to the editor of the Bolivar Democrat newspaper in Bolivar, Tennessee. At some point, the book was used to hold recipes for the preparation of various foods, some of which were hand written and some clippings from newspapers, as well as other domestic information.

Also included in the collection is an original bill of sale transferring three slaves from S.C. French to Harry Hodge in 1837 witnessed by Pitser and Austin Miller.

Related materials

MSS.240. Smith-Buckingham papers.

Subject terms

Miller, Pitser, 1801-1881.
Slave bills of sale.

Inventory

Folder 1. Autobiography and travel journal of Pitser Miller.

Folder 2. Transcription.

Folder 3. Original and transcript of bill of sale for 3 slaves, 1837.

Transcriptions

1. Autobiography of Pitser Miller

Life of Pitser Miller Written by Himself.

Pitser Miller, born Feby 6, 1801, being the oldest son of Jacob Miller, living on the Great Road on Canal Creek in Hawkins County East Tennessee Jacob Miller being a millwright to Trade was poor had a small piece of land & a mill the latter being the chief of his support in the early parts of his housekeeping never owning a servant until 1807 or 8 the writer of this was going to school at the earliest of his recollection until he was 9 years old during which time it was his business of mornings & evenings to nurse the children bring water drive off the Calves hold the Pan Handle etc & of Saturdays to bring water for washing _?_ the clothes & run errands, etc. at about 9 he quit school having went through the Webster Spelling Books being one of the best spellers of the day but knew little of Reading having never been learned the Stops & little of Cyphering except to rule of _?_ & all the Tables.

He then went into the mill to tend it understood Grinding pretty well & got a stiller hand by to put up & trade off the Big Bags for Boys when there was no men about the mill which he repaid to the stilles by doing small Job's of cutting wood filling up the Stills three fold this I did for two years when my Father got a man to tend the mill & I went to the Farm where I worked tolerable hard until the evening of the 18th of March 1815. I did not like to work much yet I was steady & done a good share of it such as ploughing, which I was not good hand at not understanding Horses well never could drive the waggon but was a good hand with axe, cross cut saw & the various work about the Farm

On the morning of 20 March 1815 I started to Boatyard a place 20 miles off to live with Hale Henderson & Beaty I live here until 10th June 1816 doing a great deal of labor in the time I was young Green and awkward & was under all the head man & 2 clerks, arose about day light every morning made a fire in the counting[?] Room, then went about 1/5 of a mile & brought water, then opened the Store swept out and right _?_ up this always brought breakfast after this the employments were various unloading wagons of salt Iron & Lead as we were a warehouse for the reception of all these Articles at the head of the navigation of Holston River for all north Alabama & and most of Tennessee we bought & sold a great deal of corn oats & Hays[Hogs?] and it fell to my lot & to measure in & out this article.

This place would have Suited me well in every respect if the Company that resorted[?] these had not been so vicious & the nature of my business threw me in it constantly & I contracted habits there that I have labored ever since to get clear of. Vis dramming _?_ etc etc

I left the above place 16th June 1816 & went home for the purpose of going to School being very deficient in learning I started to School next day to Mr Hugind [?] a mile off but only went about 2 or 3 weeks when my father agreed I should live with William Lyons where I went 8th July & contd there until 10th April 1826 here I lived very pleasantly Mrs. Lyons taking me under her care as a son, talked & advised me as a child for which I am in debt for all the moral Character I have whilst here I Remained in the store very close selling 6 to 900\$ monthly this & posting the Books kept me very busy as I made a slow hand to post Books being a very bad Scribe but I improved as the business improved until 1818 it reached over 2000\$ pr. month & I still done all the business in Oct. 1817. Mr Lyons let me go a trip to Lynchburg to buy Groceries in 1818 I also went to Augusta Ga. to buy Groceries

in April 1820 I went to Baltimore & bought a stock of Goods in the Fall of 1820 I helped to buy & drive a drove of Cattle bought 370 drove part of them near to Philada, lost about \$2500 on them

spring 1821 went to South Carolina with a drove of horses done well

in June 1821 went to Baltimore & Philada. & bought goods

in Nov. 1821 went to Baltimore again and bought goods

in Jany 1822 went to Sth Carolina & Ga with drove of Horses & Hogs sold the Horses & salted the Hogs done badly with both I remained in Augusta till 1st June & making the Bacon & selling it

bought a small Stock of Goods with it went on to Baltimore in the Fall of 22 & bought Goods.

again went on to Balt. Spring 1823 & bought goods.

in the Fall went again

in the spring of 1824 took a flat Boat down the River as far as Dittos Landing with Bacon Flour Cider Apples Flax & Four L_?_ staid there 4 months selling it and again visited Baltimore in fall of 1824 & bought Goods.

The times were very hard from 1818 on & very few Goods through all the County & but few wanted nor bought very small Stocks with Cash & sold them for few profits but in 1824 the times had got a good deal better & a good many people were recruiting but in 1825 I went on & bought freely & so did a good many merchants & the country had a full supply of goods & competition was now reducing Goods to rather a small profit during the last 5 or 6 years.

Mr Lyons was anxious I should enter into partnership with him this I declined as I had long had my Heart firxt on a western situation so that in April 1826 after buying Mr. Lyons a stock of goods I quit his service

and bought a stock for myself for Bolivar Tennessee having visited & selected the place in about[?] 1825.

I bought my goods in the prepare[?] of May 1826 Philada. where Goods were very low so that in opening here 1st Ausust & marking them at small profits I had no difficulty in selling them as I had no competition but merchants who was buying their Goods in New Orleans at full 50 pr cent more than I paid for same goods in the spring of 1837 I ordered about \$3000 worth of Goods which was put on the Pliades sailing from Baltimore to New Orleans which was disabled by a storm & put into Savannah Ga. I thought for some time they were lost & became discouraged & lay all summer without doing anything but in Decr. 1837 these Goods came in from Savannah together with a small Stock that I had ordered from Philada. in Oct. so that I

might by this time I had got out my Brother Willie & had made a good many acquaintances & from this time I might date my getting fairly under weigh in business I then had a good Stock & had acquaintances I then went on in Feby. 1838 & bought largely & in the intervals ordered & continued going regularly every year until 1836 when I sent my young man H.L. Goodrich in 1837 the pression came & I neither on nor ordered Goods in 1837 or 1838.

These were times marked with great convulsions in business Merchants & Banks blowing up in every direction throughout the Union & consequently great fall in prices of products & property of every kind Cotton down from 15 to 8 ct in 1839 I had got my business quite easy nearly out of debt & then bought goods largely again & went in debt for the Norment[?] Factory \$21,000 this was in partnership with Capt. Roberts & is a bad trade as the Capt. becomes dissatisfied & I have to let him off which throws so much trouble on my hands that I am forced to do much by Agents & the Goods has declined so much in price that it is not profitable in 1840 the Banks which in April & May 1837 stopt cash payments & continued until Jany. 1, 39 suspended them commenced again and again suspended in Octr. 1839 & again distrust and want of confidence made times hard & in 1840 I bought no goods but in Jany 1841 cotton took a gradual rise & continued so until June 41 which made collections very fine & again in 1841 I bought largely & made fine sales of goods throughout all 1841 & until 1842 but from the a continued fall of cotton in the early part of 1842 & the preparation of the Banks to return to cash payments it made money extremely tight so that we might truly say July 1 1842 was the tightest time about money that I have ever seen & property of every description sold lower & was duller of sale so that goods of all descriptions was hard to find buyers for....
[End of Diary]

2. Travel journal of Pitser Miller

Note: These letters are written in a different hand from the diary.

Letters of Pitser Miller written from Europe to the Bolivar Democrat Commencing June 16th 1856.

Cairo Illinois

Mr. Editor. Dear Sir:

Having left our county for a trip to visit some of the countries of the old world, I have thought it might not be uninteresting to you and some of our friends at home to hear from me occasionally as I am travelling from place to place. Therefore with your permission, I will jot down hastily some notes of my journey & send you for publication if you think proper.

I left home on the 14th according to appointment at 12 oclock at night by road to the junction lay near our railroad and approached it in several places all of which were about ready for the iron.

At the junction I met the Engineers who were very busy preparing to lay the track which they will commence about the 24th when they will be fully ready and the work will go on rapidly. I reached Memphis about ten oclock where I saw large quantities of the iron and they were hourly expecting the arrival of the locomotives.

A few hours waiting enabled us to take passage on the steamer "Crescent City", four days

from New Orleans.

She reports the City healthy and business nearly over for the season.

She landed here at 8 o'clock (32 hours from Memphis) two hours too late for this morning's train of cars; but will take the cars this evening at 6 o'clock and they will carry us to Detroit tomorrow night (30 hours) six hundred miles farther from you.

This place (Cairo) will be the great outlet for the grain & coal of Illinois; in these productions she excels any place on the Globe. The state is large & is composed of one rich grand Prairie; the coal answers for fuel and the many Rail Roads she is checkered with can supply her with the timber she needs.

I consider her the richest country in the world, but our own Hardeman the best. I will write you again so soon as I land in Europe.

Pitser Miller

Letter 2nd

New York June 20th, 1856

Mr. Editor:

As I wrote you from Cairo, the slow boat lost the trip of the cars and I had to remain over that day and have at night, reaching Chicago at 4 o'clock next day causing me to ride a second night and got to Niagara falls in less than two days (1,000 miles) where I remained part of a day and night, ~~and~~ reached here this morning and will sail tomorrow on the fine steamer Ericson. Illinois is the same fine country I travelled 500 miles & did not see a foot but would produce well it is nearly all Prairie but full of coal for fuel and the Railroads deliver all kinds of lumber on their Road for about 2\$ pr 100 for inch plank.

The people say it is healthy and the number of inhabitants are increasing as fast as any state yet they do not appear to be a thrifty people - they are improving very slowly.

The U. States gave a large quantity of land to the Illinois C.R.R. Co. to help them to build roads in 1847 at which time there were but 28 miles in the state which gave such an impulse to building roads so that since that time they have built about 2500 miles which is more than any state has done in the same period, and all the roads are popular.

Chicago had, when I was there in 1841 7 or 800 inhabitants now she has 100,000. then scarcely a tri weekly stage now she has 7 railroads and about 200 trains of cars daily - probably not a parallel on earth. These roads were easily made; the country is so level that it required very little grading and but few bridges.

From Chicago to Detroit the country is sandy and not so productive but well watered & well timbered and is much better improved.

At Detroit I crossed into the Queens dominion and went to Niagara Falls it is a good country and very heavily timbered & finely improved; they are sending a great deal of timber to market which pays well.

I conversed with two negroes at London Canada, one a young fellow hunting work; I talked as though I were going to employ him he offered to cut wood for me at 75 cts and find himself.

I asked him if he was raised there he said he was raised in Lauderdale county Ala. (3,000 miles) and came here last year, via Memphis & Paducah in a boast. A white man was abusing the other negro; he got on the car; I talked with him; he said the negro came from Tenn. 5 years ago - was a trifling fellow, and frequently said he would have done better to have staid in Tennessee.

A large amount of the old crop still on hand and the new one is of average promise. All kinds of provisions will rule low while this surplus remains on hand. The spring has been a cold backward one, and the corn through New York is only three or four inches high oats 6 or 7. Much of the wheat they raise here they sow in the spring and it is as backward as the oats strawberries are just ripening here.

I saw a lump of ice at the foot of the American Fall at Niagara not yet melted as large as a small cabin they said the water would wash it away this month. I find a good deal of feeling on the Kansas matter here and it so happens I have met all free soil men who are very rabid. I think Buchanan's nomination is quite as popular as anybody we could start.

Letter 3rd July 6th 1856
Off Liverpool, River Mersey

Dear Sir. We got off from N. York Sunday 22nd at 10 o'clock in the steamer Ericson; she is the boat built to be run by Caloric; but the experiment failed, and she was afterwards changed to run by steam and sails.

She is a fine _?_ boat but having head winds all the time has increased the length of her passage at least two days We will land to night making the passage in fourteen and a half days. We have had rough weather and passengers generally sick four or five days since then we have had a fine time. The officers of the boat and passengers generally very pleasant.

We have had but few incidents transpiring worthy of record; 58 passengers 12 of whom were Cubans the remainder Americans. We met and passed never less than two and from that to 8 vessels every day during the voyage besides what we passed during the night. We can see a vessel in clear weather 15 miles. Some of the passengers saw two whales and when and when out six days we encountered a school of porpoises which produced quite an excitement they were thousands in number and followed us many miles, were very amusing endeavoring like a lot of showmen each to excel the other in feats, gambolling and activity. We made Cape Clear last evening at 4 oclock which and the sight of land brought all hands on deck & caused much joy. It was a pretty sight to see the hills of old Ireland looming up in the distance. Dark brought on lighting of the various light houses stationed along the coast of Ireland; to us they were joyful, but how much more so they must be to many sailing vessels which make these lights first from the far west who have not seen the like for 40 to 60 days.

These lights in order that each may be known are shown differently, for instance; the light on Cape Clear is a revolving one and so arranged that every two minutes it burns up very brightly for one half minute then is entirely hid for one and a half minutes & so on through the night.

We are now passing up the coast of Ireland it looks broken and some small mountains appear in the distance.

We had a lively 4 of July on board the ship went through in fine style with the reading of the declaration of independence, an address, 13 cannons fired; a fine dinner; toast; songs, music etc I don't know when I have enjoyed myself more.

Pitser Miller

P.S. July 7th. Just landed; breadstuffs getting plenty and dull though if it continues raining it

must shorten the crop here and keep it from further decline. They appear to be astonished here that we should because we discharged Crampton. They people about Liverpool are better Americans than they are Queens people anyhow.

P.M.

London July 24th, 1856

Dear Sir:

I posted you up to my arrival here 17th Slept at Queens hotel opposite the General post office. First day I visited the tower the place where they formerly beheaded the sovereigns but now is a curiosity shop. It contains original models of the old weapons of war; here are horsemen & horses carved, with arrows made of sheet steel, some of them weighing 100 lbs; then the old pikes battle axes, bows and arrows the first guns which were invented (very rude indeed) then the more recent ones cannons, pistols swords, etc.

It is really curious to see how rude and dangerous were the old warlike instruments & how handsome some of them are now.

Here they deposit the captured flags and arms; but I found no record of how much they had lost.

Here too & in plain view is deposited the Crown of Queen Victoria which is valued at 7 millions of dollars. Here I encountered a regiment of Crimea soldiers who were taking a jollification dinner given them by the duchess of Cambridge. They looked like they had seen hard service, all fine looking fellows of good size - they will not enlist any others.

Next day I went to Sydenham where they removed thy Christal palace to. They have it there similar to what it was before with the exception of its being higher.

The main building is 1650 feet long 400 wide, 100 ~~long~~ high & made entirely of iron and glass they have added two wings in it making it enclose about 40 acres. It is filled vis. Lower story with all kinds of carriages, carts, waggon, etc. in fact every useful agricultural article you could think of.

Next floor were all the hot house plants every shrub tree bush almost in the world and then the copy in plaster of almost everything in Europe. You can scarcely think of a man from Adam down but what you find there and thousands you never heard of before; outside they have every ornamental flower they could procure in fine condition.

In a word, not a people on earth animal shrub or flower but they have represented here, in person or in plaster intimating that a man need go no farther than here than to understand most things it excels by tenfold any other exhibition on earth & I think they will succeed.

Monday we traversed a good many of the best streets in the city found all full of people waggons drays hacks omnibuses going to & fro far more crowded than any of our american cities.

In the evening we visited the Zoological gardens that are so far famed. They have a good many curiosities & all in fine condition though not so many as they had five years ago.

The two hippopotamuses attract much attention. They are from Egypt and look more like a buffalo than anything else but stay in the water.

I next visited the western part of London where they are improving as fast as any city in the world blocks on blocks of new houses are going up constantly. The population is now much

greater than any city in the world & improving so fast that it is hard to say what its size may be. The present size and prosperity is to be attributed to the railroads that are entering here.

It is a very rich city altho' thousands of beings live here & drag out a miserable existence live on offals & sleep in the streets. I tried to get into see parliament but Mr. Dallas had issued all his tickets a week ahead I found him a nice gentleman indeed; he says everything is going right between the two countries. I talked to several intelligent Englishmen about the relations between the countries they expressed the most friendly desire & attribute the dismissal of the British minister at Washington as a party move of Lin Pierce to get him the Presidential nomination instead of Buchanan.

They speak in the very highest terms of Mr. B. The british are a prosperous people & want no war they are scarce of people to carry on their immense trade wages are getting higher every year which raises the prices of the articles they have to sell & must cut off some of their trade. Crops of wheat and hay are very good yet wheat keeps up say \$2.25 per bushel. Cotton & wheat must continue to bring fair prices.

I see our gold comes over here about as fast as we get it from California. I took my two charges[?] into the Bank of England where they were boxing up the gold to ship by tons

Each tried and lifted a \$25,000 bar. The gentleman told me they were shipping it as fast as they got it from Australia & America. I remarked it was a pity they had to let it go. he said no; if we were to keep here it would run up our prices for every thing too high we dont want too much of it. Everything is looked on as in a fine condition in a financial & commercial way which must continue the prosperity that reigns in our free & happy land.

Pitser Miller

Letter 5th
Paris 1856

Mr Editor Dear Sir:

My last letter to you was from London, where I left on the 24th for this place.

I mentioned that I slept at Queens hotel next door to General post office & in view of the outside doings of it. Every morning & evening at 7 oclock the dispatched about 50 waggons and carts loaded with mail for the railroad & the sub offices about the city all driven by men dressed in red.

Every man that has anything to do with the mail in London is dressed in red and they travel the streets in London six times a day so a man that prepays his letter to a friend has it[?] delivered to his friend _?_ expense _?_ an _?_ after its arrival _?_ the _?_ [two clippings pasted over remainder of entry]

3. Bill of sale

[recto]
Bill of Sale
S.C. French
Reny & 2 children

[verso]

Bolivar T. 1st June 1837

Recd of Harry Hodge eight hundred and ~~fifty~~ twelve dollars in pay of negro woman named Renie[?] aged about forty years and her two children Joe & Jack. I warrant said negroes to be sound and warrant the teller to the said Hodges and his assigns. Given under my hand & seal this day & year above.

S.C. French (Seal)

Test

Austin Miller

Pitser Miller