Ella Costillo Bennett papers finding aid

Title: Ella Costillo Bennett papers
Collection No: MSS.0122
Extent: 3.5 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: circa 1859-1947

Abstract: The Ella Costillo Bennett papers, 1859-1947, includes materials such as speeches, manuscripts, plays, and poems by Ms. Bennett, journalist-author, in addition to two scrapbooks, photographs, clothing, textiles, and artifacts.

Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: Ella Costillo Bennett papers, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis

Publication date: 2023 April
Biographical Information

Journalist-author Ella Costillo was born in Memphis in 1865 to Irish-born parents, Michael Charles Costillo and Ellen Doyle. In the summer of 1874, her father's income dramatically declined, changing the family's lifestyle greatly. Ella attended the Memphis public schools, where she excelled academically. She left Memphis for a time to travel via train with her mother, sister Mary L., and future brother-in-law George Nichols (also recorded as Nickolds) to Louisville, Kentucky and on north to Chicago, which was just recovering from its disastrous 1871 fire. They did not live in Chicago long, but returned to Memphis, where the family survived the Yellow Fever epidemics of the late 1870s. After her sister's marriage to George Nichols, Ella and her mother moved to Denver, Colorado where their lives were totally different from the recent years in Memphis. Ella attended the Arapahoe School, where she wrote her first poem, which received praise for its promise from Denver poet and feature writer, Eugene Fields.

After her mother's death in 1883, Ella married George Sexton Bennett of Lexington, Kentucky. They moved to Portland, Oregon where their three children were born. The younger son was named Raphael Fabian Bennett and the daughter Mary L. Bennett. Following the birth of their third child, economic necessity forced Ella to write for the newspaper, the Portland Oregonian, beginning in 1892. In 1898-99 while living in Chicago, she wrote for Events and the Interocean. From 1902 to 1904 she wrote for the Denver Post and did free-lance and dramatic criticism for a number of California newspapers, including the Sam Francisco Wasp, the Overland Monthly and the San Francisco Bulletin. Some years after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Ella and George Bennett were divorced. Thereafter, Ella supported herself and her children through her writings. She wrote a book Abelard and Heloise (in addition to her newspaper copy.) The last years of her life were spent in Los Angeles, where she died in 1932.

Scope and contents

The Ella Costillo Bennett papers, 1859-1947, includes materials that only fragmentarily document her long life and productive career. There are speeches and plays, some perhaps written by her; and among the speeches are an eloquent review of the Civil War delivered in Chicago by William G. Brownlow between 1866 and 1870 and a sermon preached by a black preacher in a black church, dated 1915. There is also a manuscript, 1920 (?), of a melodrama set in the South in the 18th century and an undated manuscript of a tragic play.

Included in the papers are two scrapbooks concerning Ella Costillo Bennett's life and writing career. The first scrapbook, a memoir of her sister Mary L. Nichols, contains material dated 1859-1947. Nichols maintained and annotated this scrapbook to preserve the family history of the Costillos and the Nichols for later generations of the family. She recorded births, events of individual's development, marriages, and deaths in a wealth of colorful detail. Researchers can gather excellent material on the lifestyle of wealthy slaveholding Whites before the Civil War and the hardships these people suffered after the war in adapting to a less affluent way of life.
She depicted Memphis as a thriving waterfront city lacking public and private schools in the
decade of the 1850s. Memphis children could only receive lessons from their parents or for a few
years from priests and sisters of the Catholic Church. Mary Nichols' visit to a Friars Point,
Mississippi plantation is briefly documented in the scrapbook.

In this scrapbook, there are also photographs of varying formats of beaten slaves, regimental
doctors during the Civil War, Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln (the President's wife) and their son
Robert, Connecticut Senator Lafayette S. Foster during the Lincoln administration, black leader
Frederick Douglass, abolitionists Henry Ward Beecher and John Brown, and of the 1906 Sam
Francisco earthquake. Mary Nichols saved material relating to the change in Denver, Colorado in
the 1880s and 1890s from dependence on Blacks to Chinese for menial labor; to the silver mining
boom towns and the 1894 Coxeys march of unemployed miners on Washington, DC after the
closing of numerous silver mines; and to the fear of a labor war prevalent in the Southwest
during the latter 19th century. The second scrapbook contains poems of varying length written by
Ella Costillo Bennett, a few copies typescript and handwritten, and three photographs of the
author dated 1870, 1905, and 1928. Dominant themes of the poems are love, patriotism, and
religion.

In addition, there are three boxes of clothing, textiles, and artifacts belonging to Ella Costillo
Bennett and the Costillo and Doyle grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Included are the
pieces to Ella Costillo Bennett's baby layette that were once displayed in a glass case at an
unknown fair. This collection also contains tintype photographs and paper print photographs of
the Bennett and Costillo families including photographs of Ella Costillo Bennett from circa 1872,
1883, 1890, and 1905.

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Related materials

Ella Costillo Bennett collection, Rare and Distinctive Collections, University of Boulder
Libraries, University of Boulder.
Ella Costillo Bennett papers, circa 1896-1926, Online Archive of California, The Bancroft
Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Subject terms

Bennett, Ella Costillo
Clothing and dress--United States.
Ephemera--1850-1950.
Newspapers--History.
Women writers
These papers were acquired by the West Tennessee Historical Society which received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for processing.

**Inventory**

**Box 1**  
**Folder 1**  
**Writings and Publications**  


3 Sermon; “Elias Jefferson Jones Preaches His First Sermon in Darktown”, compiled by Ella Costillo Bennett, 23 typed pages, 1915.

4 Play; “The Dregs in the Cup” by Ella Costillo Bennett, 19 typed pages, 1920 (?) 26 March.

5 Play; “The First Tragedy” by Ella Costillo Bennett, published by Paul Elder, 37 typed pages, date unknown.


Periodicals; “Ladies’ Pearl”, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1877 April and Vol. 11, No. 11, 1877 November.


14 Poem; “Poverty, My Guest,” Ella Costillo Bennett, undated.

15 Essay; “Petty Pilfering,” Ella Costillo Bennett, Los Angeles, California, undated.
Box 2  Photographs
Folder 1  Tintype in frame; Amelia Doyle, note included in frame, date unknown.
2  Paper print in frame; Captain Raphael Semmes, C.S.A., date unknown.
3  Paper print in frame; George Sexton Bennett, note included in frame, date unknown.
4  Paper print in frame: Mary L. Bennett, note included in frame, circa 1890.
5  Paper print in frame; Ellen Doyle Costillo, date unknown.
6  Tintype in frame; two little girls, one is Ella Costillo, about 7 years old, Memphis, Tennessee, note included in frame, circa 1872.
7  Paper print in frame; Ella Costillo Bennett, 18 years old, Denver, Colorado, note included in frame, 1883.
8  Paper print in frame; Raphael Fabian Bennett, circa 1890.
9  Paper print in frame; on left, Mollie Costillo Nickolds, with daughter Winnie Lou, Denver, Colorado, circa 1880.
10  Paper print 4x6; on left, Mollie Costillo Nickolds, with daughter Winnie Lou, Denver, Colorado, circa 1880.
11  Paper print in frame; copied from a painting, Michael Chas. Costillo, died in 1878, date unknown, small paper note, and ribbon included.

Folder 6  Tintype 6.5x9 in frame; Ella Costillo Bennett, taken by Arnold Geuthe, San Francisco, California, 1905.
12  Photographs; Bennett family, date range 1930-1957.
3 x 5 black and white; on the left, Ella Costillo Bennett, on the right, Mary L. Bennett (daughter), Los Angeles, California, 1930.
3 x 5 black and white; Ray (Raphael) Bennett, son of Ella Costillo Bennett, on location, 1956.
3 x 5 black and white; Ray (Raphael) Bennett, son of Ella Costillo Bennett circa 1956-1957.
7.5 x 9.5 black and white; from left, John Merton as Champ, Raphael Bennett as Trigger (son of Ella Costillo Bennett), and Jack Ingram as Slasher in “Dick Tracy Returns” a Republic serial, 1938 June 10-July 15.
7 x 9 black and white; Ray (Raphael) Bennett wearing a Mexican sombrero and outfit, son of Ella Costillo Bennett date unknown.
13  Photograph; 2.5 x 4 sepia, Unidentified male, tails, and top hat, back to camera.

Box 3  Scrapbook
Ephemera and writings; by Ella’s sister, Mary “Mollie” L. Nichols, 1859-1947.


Box 4  Scrapbook and scrapbook loose leaf items:
Folder 1

Poems; Ella Costillo Bennett; circa 1930.

Separated items from scrapbook in Box 3:

2 Baby bib; beige cotton and embroidered with two cloth ties; date unknown.

3 Piece of lace; beige and at its longest edges is approximately 10 inches x 4 inches, date unknown.

4 Piece of textile; maroon and possibly velvet, some shedding, at its longest edges is approximately 4.5 inches x 3.5 inches, date unknown.

Piece of fabric; blue, green, and red flower print, at its longest edges is approximately 6 inches x 4.5 inches, date unknown.

5 Copy of poem; typed copy of “Dear Mother Mine” by Ella Costillo Bennett; date unknown.

Lullaby; handwritten, “A Juvenile Vaudeville Lullaby”, from Ella Costillo Bennett to Harold Nickolds and Miles Bennett; date unknown.


Document; printed illustration of six young girls in a flower field, on the back is handwritten sheet music “Now I lay me down to sleep”, date unknown.

Document; printed illustration of young girl sitting on luggage by Walter Goodman, handwritten is “Ella” and “Mr. Hanson met us at the station in a spring wagon and took us out to his farm; date unknown.

4.5 x 5.5 cardboard cover; “U.S Grant Album”, on the back is an illustration of men and soldiers, “Interview between Generals Grant and Pemberton, July 3rd, 1863, to arrange terms for the surrender of Vicksburg”, date unknown.


Advertisement/business card; “C. Garrabrant, 885 Broad Street, Newark, N.J., Dealer in Boots and Shoes of every description, has a full line of Burt’s Goods manufactured expressly for him by Edwin C. Burt, New York”, on the back is a printed illustration of two young children looking at a ladies’ shoe, “Edwin C. Burt, Fine Shoes, Presented by C. Garrabrant, 885 Broad Street, Newark, N.J.”, copyright by A. B. Steely, 1881.

5 inches x 8 inches sepia photograph, two young girls with bonnets sitting in a wagon being drawn by a donkey with another small child looking on in the background, handwritten is “On Sunday we often went on picnics to Cherry Creek – Madeline & Dorothy?”, date unknown.

Document; “American Poets of the Soil” by Eugene Field, Monograph Number Four in The Mentor Reading Course, prepared by the editorial staff of The Mentor Association, illustration for The Mentor, Vol. 4, No. 11, Serial No. 111, Copyright 1916 by The Mentor Association, Inc., on the back is a black and white photograph of Eugene Field.

1.5 inches x 2 inches clipping; sepia and embossed with “OUR HOME”, date unknown.

Box 5

Clothing, Textiles, and Artifacts
Lace collar; beige, belonged to Ellen Doyle Costillo, date unknown.
Paisley shawl, piece of; red, orange, and green, date unknown.
Llama lace Spanish shawl; beige, belonged to great-grandmother Costillo who brought it over to Memphis, Tennessee, from Ireland, circa 1832.
Silk jacket; black, some damage/tearing, especially under the arms, belonged to great-grandmother Doyle who brought it over to Memphis, Tennessee, from Ireland, circa 1836.
Lace handkerchief; white, has “Bennett” written in black ink in the top right-hand corner, belonged to Ella’s mother, Ellen Doyle Costillo, date unknown.
Embroidery piece; black velvet background with green leaves and red flowers, circa 1874.

**Box 6**  
**Clothing, Textiles, and Artifacts**
Baby layette; belonging to Ella Costillo Bennett, date unknown.
  - Booties; beige, leather with lace-up front.
  - Stockings; beige, long in length.
  - Under garment top; beige, cotton with lace sleeves, can be fastened in the back.
  - Bib; beige, crochet with “Baby” sewn on the front.
  - Silk dress; beige, with embroidery flowers and lace trim.
  - Night robe; beige, with long ribbon ties at the chest, embroidered flowers and trim.
  - Mittens, beige with blue trim embroidery.

**Box 7**  
**Clothing, Textiles, and Artifacts**
China doll; black dress with ruffles and lace trim collar, belonged to Ella Costillo Bennett, circa 1870s.
Baby bonnet; beige with embroidery, belonged to Ella Costillo Bennett, date unknown.
Cameo; in pieces except the black with a white face came front; date unknown.
Piece of paper; with handwritten notes about the China doll, date unknown.