

THE WESTERN RESERVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

REGISTER: William MacWilliams Papers  
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William MacWilliams (1841-1887) was born in Newtownards, County Down, Northern Ireland, to a Presbyterian and Ulster Scottish family, the fourth son and only child of William McWilliams (1801-1880) and Elizabeth Russell. This family had strong Irish pro nationalist political leanings, believing in a united, independent and non-sectarian Ireland. They supported the United Irishmen movement which sought to overthrow British rule. In addition, Williams' grandfather fought with the rebels at Ballynahinch and Antrim in Northern Ireland in the 1798 uprising. William received a primary school education, and as a youth, was fascinated with the history of Ireland and the stories of various nationalist movements. He later involved himself in nationalist activities, and in doing so, endangered himself, resulting in his parents sending him to America after arrests were made in Belfast and Down in 1859, to avoid imprisonment. MacWilliams came originally to New York and then moved to Pennsylvania where he married Elizabeth J. Dawson (b. 1839), a Scottish immigrant. He lived most of his life in the United States, in various cities. His grandson, Heber MacWilliams, resides in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Fenian Brotherhood was an Irish nationalist organization in the United States from 1858 to 1886. William and Elizabeth MacWilliams returned to Ireland for one year, during which time MacWilliams first became active in the Fenian movement. Upon his return to the United States, not only was MacWilliams an active member from 1863 to 1871, he also held key positions, including that of Organizer. Working in that capacity, he traveled around the United States seeking out and encouraging the Irish immigrants to involve themselves in the fight for Irish freedom from British rule. This proved extremely worth while, and resulted in MacWilliams founding dozens of Fenian Circles and enlisting thousands of Irishmen in the Fenian Brotherhood. A man of much energy and ambition, William married three times, fathered fourteen; he set up seven businesses and founded two towns, during his short life of just forty-seven years. William was also renowned for his public speaking abilities and his writing skills.

The William MacWilliams Papers, 1801-1880, consist of three histories that document the life of William MacWilliams and his father William McWilliams.

The collection is arranged alphabetically by document type, and then chronologically.

This collection is of value to individuals interested in Irish history and Irish American history. It is also of value to those seeking information about the Irish community in northeast Ohio. This collection will be of special interest to those seeking information about first generation Irish immigrants and their adaptation to life in the United States. It will be of particular interest to those seeking information about the history of Irish nationalism and the fight for Irish freedom. Those interested in the Fenian Brotherhood movement in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century will find these papers to be particularly interesting. Historians with a special interest in the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland will find pertinent data to references made to various historic events, particularly during the life of William McWilliams.

Provenance: Dr. Heber MacWilliams, 2002.

Number of Containers: 1    Oversize Folders: 0    Oversize Volumes: 0

Size: 0.20 linear feet / 0.06 linear meters

Restrictions: None.

Container

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|---|---------------|--|
| 1 | <u>Folder</u> | 1: History, <i>William MacWilliams Irish Nationalist and Fenian Organizer</i> , Heber MacWilliams, 2002. |
|   | <u>Folder</u> | 2: History, <i>William McWilliams (1801-1889)</i> , Heber MacWilliams, 2002.                             |
|   | <u>Folder</u> | 3: History, <i>William MacWilliams (1840-1887)</i> , Heber MacWilliams, 2002.                            |