

Grand Rapids History & Special Collections

Archives

GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Finding Aid for the

Wright L. Coffinberry & Coffinberry Family Papers

Collection # 061

September 2007 version

Abstract

The bulk of Coffinberry Family Papers consists of those of Wright L. Coffinberry (Apr. 5, 1807-Mar. 26, 1889), an early settler in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Largely self-taught, he was a watchmaker, a civil engineer and archaeologist. He learned his civil engineering trade while working on several canal projects in Ohio, where he was born. Moving to Grand Rapids ca. 1848, he was responsible for a large number of additions platted for the city, as well as several state road projects, principally the road from Kent County to Northport. Included in his collection are items spanning 1808 to 1889, such as his autobiography, maps from his work as a civil engineer, and various documents on the excavations of the Norton Mounds during the 1870's. Also included in the collection are items from two of Coffinberry's children. An 1855 document by daughter Rebecca describes the City of Grand Rapids. Programs and school orations collected by Andrew span 1858 to 1872. The documents describe pioneer life in Michigan, the life of a civil engineer in blazing roads through the wilderness, and spiritualism, as well as documenting intellectual thought in a frontier community.

Collection #: 061

Accession #: 00.000

Donor: Charles M. Burbach (Burback?)

Span dates: 1808-1889

Original archival processing date: February 1988

Size: 0.5 cu.ft. ; x linear ft.

Subject term: Coffinberry, Wright L.

Restrictions

This collection contains images from another institution. Requests of reproductions of those images should be placed with that institution.

Related Collections

The Public Museum of Grand Rapids has the papers of the Kent Scientific Institute, which contain many of Coffinberry's original scientific reports of his findings from various archaeological investigations.

GRHSCC Coll. #04, The Thomas W. Porter Archaeological, Architectural & Geological Graphics. Porter worked with Dwight Coffinberry on archaeological digs, and drew images of items found, as well as site sketches.

Box Summary

Box No.	Description of Contents	Box Description
1	Papers	standard legal
2	volumes	slim
FF.XV.B	6 Maps & 1 broadside (copy)	1 OVE folder

History

Dwight Lewis Coffinberry (4/5/1807-3/26/1889) was a self taught civil engineer, watchmaker and archaeologist. Born in Ohio, he received a rudimentary primary education in a frontier school taught by his older brother. He learned civil engineering while working on several canal projects in Ohio. In 1831 he married Jane Beech (1805-1895) and for a time settled in Mt. Vernon, Ohio. During the mid-1840s he moved his family to Michigan, following two of his brothers who had moved to Michigan earlier. By 1848, Coffinberry resolved to move to Grand Rapids.

In Grand Rapids, Coffinberry worked as a watchmaker and civil engineer. He was responsible for a large number of additions platted for the city as well as several state road projects, principally the road from Kent County to Northport. During the Civil War he helped organize and was an officer of Co. C., 1st Regiment, Michigan Engineers.

Following the war Coffinberry was able to devote more attention to archaeology, a field in which he had been interested from childhood onward. He became a recognized expert in archaeology in West Michigan and was part of a three person team that first excavated the Indian mounds on Captain Norton's farm (commonly called the Norton Mounds). He also examined many mounds throughout the region and presented results of his findings to the Kent Scientific Institute.

Coffinberry and his wife had four children: Eunice (1836-1844); Andrew Beech (1837-1907); Rebecca Jane (1840-1930); and Julia Frances (1842-1926).

Scope and Content

The collection contains several plat maps drawn by Coffinberry, correspondence and working papers as a civil engineer, diary entries, an autobiography by Coffinberry, and a copy of some of his scientific papers. The autobiography describes the vicissitudes of pioneer life in both Ohio and Michigan, 1840s spiritualism, the Civil War and the pioneer village of Grand Rapids. Also included are a few programs collected by Andrew Coffinberry and a description of Grand Rapids in 1855 by Rebecca Coffinberry.

Series Descriptions

Series I. Wright L. Coffinberry, 1805-1889, n.d.; 0.4 cu. ft.

Scientific papers, diaries, plat maps and autobiography. Arranged alphabetically.

Series II. Andrew Beech Coffinberry, 1858-1872, n.d.: 0.05 cu. ft.

School orations and programs from social events.

Series III. Rebecca Julia Coffinberry, 1855; 0.05 cu. ft.

"The City of Grand Rapids"

Contents

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Description</u>
		Series I. Wright L. Coffinberry, 1805-1889, n.d.;
1	1	City Surveyor Charges, 1849, 1863, 1865.
1	2	Civil Engineer Papers, 1870s.
1	3	Grand River Locks proposal, 1848.
1	4	Plat Descriptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baar's Addition to Grand Rapids, 1872. • Hersey, Michigan, n.d. • Long's Addition to Grand Rapids, 1872. • Merrill's Addition to Grand Rapids, n.d. • Power's Addition to Grand Rapids, 1872.
FF.XV.B		Oversized Maps Plat Maps: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tanner Taylor's Addition, [1889] [Gift of Charles M. Burbach. 7/21/1928. 2. Ellsworth Addition, n.d. / drawn by W.L. Coffinberry, C. Eng. [M1715 July 1912 accession] 3. Dexter Tract / Kendall's Addition, n.d. Includes Bostwick, Ransom, Barclay, Lafayette & Prospect perpendicular to Bronson St. 4. Plat showing Lansingberry Company land marked "L" in Blendon Township,[Ottawa County], n.d. F.6 N.B. 14W <p>Also found 5/1999:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. [Sheldon at Wealthy & Blakeley Avenues, with property own names,n.d.] 6. Waterloo Street / platted by W.L. Coffinberry, Oct. 1880, [showing John Ball lot no. 2 & A. Wood lot no. 1 near Ferry St.] 7. [BROADSIDE, copy] Union House at Richland City / by J.W. Coffinberry. Rules ... Printed at the Observer Office, Richland Center, Wis.
1	5	State Road to North port diary, 1859 (note: map of this project is in the State Archives at Lansing) - second copy has an introduction by Edmond P. Gibson.

- Series I. Wright L. Coffinberry, 1805-1889, n.d.:**
- 1 6 Correspondence, 1856, 1877, 1882.
- 1 7 Inventions:
Cheese Cutter, 1865.
Archimedean Pump, n.d.
- 1 8 Scientific Papers:
"Slate," n.d.
"Specimens to Marietta, Ohio," 1888.
"Mound Excavations," 1877.
"Magnetism," n.d.
Smithsonian Circular on Archaeology, 1878
vol. 2 Typescript of various scientific papers, 1870s-80s, n.d. (typescript done in 1923).
- 1 9 Miscellaneous:
Sweet's Hotel Grand Opening program, 1869
Muster Roll, Co. 2, 2nd Reg., 1st Brig., 11th Div., Ohio Military, 1840
- 1 16 [Added May 1999. Photocopies, with copyright limitation statement]
Letter or report to F.W. Putnam(?), Peabody Museum, [October(?), 1885]
For the Ann Arbor Meeting of the A.A.A.S. August 1885 Archaeology:]
- Autobiography:
- 1 10 Vol. 1 manuript, n.d. (2 copies).
- 1 11 Vols. 1 & 2 manuscript, 1887.
- 1 12 Vols. 3 & 4 manuscript, 1876.
- 2 x Vol. 1 Typescript, done in 1929
- 1 13 Miscellaneous, 1889, n.d. Obituary.
- Series II. Andrew Beech Coffinberry, 1858-72, n.d.**
- 1 14 School orations, Odretta programs, 1858-72, n.d.
- Series III. Rebecca Julia Coffinberry, 1855**
- 1 15 "The City of Grand Rapids," 1855.