

Manuscript Collections:

The Irish-Preston Papers, 1832-1972

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One of the richest and most familiar manuscript repositories in the state is the two-story brick building on Iowa Avenue in Iowa City that houses the library, offices, and manuscript collections of the Iowa State Historical Department, Division of the State Historical Society. The Irish-Preston Papers, recently accessioned and inventoried, are not included in any previous description of the Society's collections. Although many Iowans with an interest in history are familiar with the mercurial John P. Irish—who, among other things, first supported and then opposed women's suffrage—few are familiar with the other, less remarkable perhaps, but just as able members of the Irish clan in Iowa.

—David Crosson
Manuscript Collections Editor

The Irish family came to Iowa City in 1840 among the very earliest settlers. Frederick and Elizabeth Irish raised four sons, Charles, Gilbert, Thomas, and John P., and one daughter, Libby. Their home and farm was called Rose Hill, and the house still stands today. Gilbert and Libby remained at Rose Hill until their deaths—Gilbert as a farmer and local government official. Abbie Preston, a granddaughter, wrote an exceptional reminiscence of Rose Hill which is among the papers. John P. Irish, the

most widely known member of the family, was a newspaper publisher active in Democratic politics in Iowa and California. Charles W. Irish was a civil engineer who worked on early railroads in Iowa, the Sante Fe in the West, and the Chicago and Northwestern across Minnesota and Dakota Territory. He was surveyor-general of Nevada Territory and chief of the bureau of irrigation during the Cleveland administrations.

Charles Wood Irish (1834-1904) and Susannah Abigail Yarbrough (1837-1925) were married in 1855. This union resulted in the production and preservation of a rich and varied collection of women's correspondence spanning four generations. The couple had two daughters, Ruth and Elizabeth. Ruth married Charles Preston and had twin daughters, Abbie and Ella, and one son, Charles. The Irish, Yarbrough, and Preston mothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins added to the correspondence. None of the Irish-Preston women became prominent in state or national affairs, but they did make significant contributions in the area of education. Researchers in the field of women's history will find a wealth of information in this collection which fills nine linear feet.

Susannah Abigail Yarbrough (known as Abigail) was one of five sisters who came to Iowa with their pioneer parents from North Carolina in 1846. In her autobiography in the Johnson County history of 1913, Abigail described herself as a frontiers-woman, living in camp on the Dakota plains for a year at a time when her husband located the Chicago and Northwestern. But, her letters indicate that she did not enjoy frontier life. As they grew older, Abigail and her husband lived apart, she in Iowa City and he in the state of Nevada. The collection includes diaries kept by Abigail during the years 1867-68, 1870-75, and 1895.

Elizabeth, daughter of Charles and Abigail, is one of the most interesting women in the family, and she reveals her independence and strong personality in her letters. Elizabeth began her career as business manager for her uncle, John P. Irish, when he published the *Iowa State Press* in Iowa City, and she went with him and his family to California in 1882 and worked as his bookkeeper when he edited the *Oakland Times*. She held many other positions at various places in California, including

at the United States Mint and Wells-Fargo. Elizabeth was very close to her father and spent more time with him in his later years than did her mother, working for him as chief clerk, stenographer, and bookkeeper when he was surveyor general of Nevada. She established a business school in Reno, Nevada, while her father worked as a mining engineer, and returned to Iowa City after her father went to Washington, D.C., in 1893. In 1895, at the age of thirty-nine, she established a School of Shorthand and Typing, which eventually became Irish's University Business College. This was her last move, although she tried to visit her father and Uncle John in the West every summer, and she continued as proprietor of the school until 1940, when she was eighty-four.

Gilbert Irish's daughter Jane worked for her cousin Elizabeth at the business school in the early 1900s. Jane was left in charge of the school when Elizabeth visited her father in the West or her sister Ruth in Davenport. The Irish-Preston collection includes a series of thirty-three letters (1902-5) from Jane to Elizabeth reporting on school affairs and town gossip. They wrote in shorthand, which allowed the cousins to comment freely on people and events without having other family members read the letters. Elizabeth asked Jane to destroy her letters, which she apparently did, since they were not found. If Jane made the same request, Elizabeth did not comply with her wishes.

Researchers in women's history will find that these letters include very personal and outspoken details not ordinarily found in the letters and diaries of women of this time. Men friends and their own health were common topics. From a letter of 1902: "So . . . the squaws wear corsets. Well, if they like them all right. I don't and I will never wear one again. . . ." And in a letter of 1905: "I am sorry you are so foolish as to make yourself sick and spoil your visit worrying over a goddam idiot Bohemian."

When the Division of the State Historical Society advertised for a volunteer who could read and transcribe Pittman shorthand, the woman who responded had been a student at the Irish Business School and was also a distant cousin and had stayed with Abigail when Elizabeth was away from home. Because of

her relationship to the Irish family, the transcriber's sense of discretion would not allow her to include the most personal parts of the letters in the copies filled with the papers. Another, less-involved person will need to fill in the gaps.

Jane Irish worked as a stenographer for various businesses in Iowa City until at least the 1940s. She raised Leghorn chickens and Mammoth Pekin ducks and lived until 1963 at Rose Hill. Some of the material in this collection came from her estate. Jane's mother, Josie Strawbridge Irish, and her Aunt Libby have letters and scrapbooks in the collection which should not be overlooked by the researcher.

Ruth, Elizabeth's younger sister, born in 1859, taught school in Iowa City until she married Charles Preston at the age of twenty-eight. The Prestons lived in Davenport, where he practiced medicine. Her lifestyle was more traditional than her older sister's, but she had many interests outside her home. Ruth was an artist and writer, and the collection includes examples of her work.

She took lessons from one of Iowa's most prominent portrait painters, Isaac Wetherby, and continued to correspond with him and his daughter about art. A descendent of Quakers, but an active Unitarian, Ruth wrote articles on Iowa Unitarian church history and local history. Her diaries have been preserved from 1905-1946. These diaries and her extensive correspondence with her family provide a good record of the life of a woman who chose a family while her sister chose a career.

The Preston family correspondence begins in 1832, when the family was still in Ohio. Charles Preston's father died in 1844, and Charles came to Oskaloosa, Iowa, with his mother and brother in 1865 when he was eighteen. The writings of a sister, who died earlier, are included in the collection. Charles Preston taught school in various towns in Iowa and graduated from The University of Iowa Medical School in 1873. He married Ruth Irish in 1887. The courtship correspondence of Ruth and Charles is included. The majority of the correspondence in the collection was received by Ruth and her family, since it came from the estate of her son, Charles, who died in 1977, the last heir of Charles Wood Irish. The collection also includes the poetry, drawings, and correspondence of his sisters, who did not

marry. After 1937 the volume of letters falls off sharply.

The aging of Susannah Abigail and her daughters, Ruth and Elizabeth, is yet another possible topic of research. They all lived past the Biblical three-score-years-and-ten, and the daughters recorded the difficulties they encountered as their mother grew older. Elizabeth and her mother lived together in Iowa City from about 1895 until Abigail died in 1925 at age eighty-eight. Elizabeth continued to operate her school until 1940, when she was eighty-four, and she died in 1952 at age ninety-six in Davenport, where she had gone to live with her nieces and nephew. Ruth Irish Preston also lived a long life. She died in 1949 at age ninety.

Although the women's papers dominate this description, the records of the men in the family are also rich in research possibilities. There are ten volumes of notebooks from Charles Preston's medical practice in Davenport from 1873-1903, with several years missing. The collection also includes notes from his medical classes at The University of Iowa. Dr. Preston died in 1914, thirty-five years before Ruth. His son, Charles Irish Preston, served in France during World War I and lived away from Davenport frequently in his early adult years, so there is a large quantity of correspondence with his mother and sisters.

The Irish-Preston Collection includes correspondence, diaries, scrapbooks, historical and literary writings, medical records, photographs, financial records, drawings, etc. A brief descriptive inventory of the Irish-Preston Papers is available at the Historical Society. Several members of the Irish-Preston family collected and compiled genealogical records. Other family names included in the material gathered are Hale, Hicklen, Myrick, Robinson, Stout, and Merrill.

The Papers of Charles Wood Irish, 1852-1904, 1923-27 (4 ft.) are located at the Special Collection Department of The University of Iowa Libraries. All Irish-Preston correspondence which involved Charles as writer or recipient is filed there. The Papers of John P. Irish, 1882-1923 (bulk 1916-21), are located at Stanford University. Both of these repositories have descriptive registers or inventories.

For more information on the Irish-Preston Papers, contact Joyce Giaquinta, Manuscript Librarian, Division of State Historical Society, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

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