

**Johnson Family of Peacham, Vt.,
Papers, 1854-1904
MSA 185**

Introduction

This is a collection of correspondence and related documents from the Leonard Johnson family of Peacham, Vermont, written between 1854 and 1904. The bulk of the collection is comprised of letters written by the daughter, Martha Johnson (1822-1871), who served as a teacher for the National Freedman's Relief Association in the Beaufort/Port Royal area of South Carolina from 1863 to 1871. The collection was donated to the Vermont Historical Society by Leonard Johnson's great great granddaughter, Betty Wilkinson of Barre, Vermont, in 1997 (ms. acc. no 97.10). The collection is stored in one box and occupies .25 linear foot of shelf space.

Family History

Leonard Johnson was born in Peacham, Vermont, on March 17, 1797, and died there on March 5, 1890. His wife, Betsey Merrill, also a native of Peacham, was born November 29, 1800, and died there on November 6, 1855. The couple was married on November 27, 1821. Leonard Johnson was known for his strong abolitionist sympathies. Local tradition has it that his home on Danville Road was used as a way station on the Underground Railroad. Two of his daughters, Martha and Caroline, taught at freedmen schools during the civil war and reconstruction. His brother, Oliver Johnson, was a national publicist and abolitionist leader, and close confidant of Horace Greeley.

According to the donor's notes the couple had nine children, all born in Peacham, though *People of Peacham*, published in 1965 by VHS only lists four. The donor's number is verified in the biography of Martha Johnson, written by her sister, Clarissa, in 1871. The letters in the collection were written by the five children listed below.

Martha, b. Sept. 17, 1822; d. Beaufort, S. Car., Dec. 24, 1871.

Samuel, b. Nov. 12, 1824; d. 1867.

Priscilla, b. Aug. 1, 1831(death date unknown).*

Clarissa, b. Nov., 1833 (year of birth approximate, death date unknown).*

Susan, b. July 3, 1843 (death date unknown).*

*Information found in the donor's notes only.

Biographical Sketch

Martha Johnson was born in Peacham, Vermont, on September 17, 1822. She died in Beaufort, South Carolina, December 24, 1871. She was the oldest of nine children. She never married. Martha received her education at the Peacham common school and the Franklin Academy in New Hampshire. She was received in the Congregational church in 1842. In 1855, Martha took a job as matron of the female department in the workhouse located on Blackwell's Island, New York. She returned home that same year due to her mother's illness and subsequent death. From 1859 to

1861, Martha taught at an industrial school somewhere in New York. In 1863 she received a teaching commission from the National Freedman's Relief Association to teach newly freed slaves in the Union occupied area of the South Carolina lowcountry. She remained in this position until her death in 1871. She is buried in the Episcopal church cemetery in Beaufort, South Carolina. Biographical information is contained in MSA 185:4 and 185:5.

Scope and Content

The Johnson Family Papers is a collection of personal correspondence and documents dating from 1854 to 1871. The bulk of the collection is comprised of letters, 1863-1871, from Martha Johnson, a teacher for the National Freedman's Relief Association in the Beaufort/Port Royal area of South Carolina, to her family in Peacham, Vermont. These letters cover the time of Union occupation of the South Carolina lowcountry, from the war through Reconstruction. There is a gap in Martha's letters between 1865 and 1871. Her sister, Clarissa's, account of Martha's life states that she continued to teach in South Carolina. The collection also contains three National Freedman's Relief Association documents: a letter of offer from the association to Martha, Martha's official certification from the association, and Martha's Broomfield school report to the association.

Only one letter in the collection predates the Civil War. Written in 1854, it is an extremely personal letter between two sisters, Priscilla and Martha, and makes no mention of national political tensions, although it does allude to the westward migration of Americans, one of the contributing factors to the outbreak of the Civil War.

The collection includes one letter written by Samuel Johnson; it is written from Illinois at the start of the war. It contains comments on his personal prosperity, the war's initial popularity, and Abraham Lincoln.

The last letter in the collection is an account of Susan Johnson's 1904 visit to the Andersonville prison site in Georgia.

The collection's strength lies in its interesting, albeit limited, accounts of some of the social causes and consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction, including westward migration, emancipation, and northern economic growth. Social, and perhaps cultural, historians should find it of interest.

Organization

The papers have been divided into two series: I. Martha Johnson; II. Other Family Members.

InventoryI. Martha Johnson

- MSA 185:1 Letters, 1863-1865.
2 _____, 1871.
3 Letter from Priscilla Johnson to Martha, 1854.
4 National Freedman's Relief Association Documents, 1863.
5 Letters about her death and biography, 1871.
5.1 Transcriptions of contents of folders 1, 2, 3, and 5.

II. Other Family Members

- 6 Letter from Samuel Johnson to his father, 1861.
7 Letters of Susan Johnson, 1864 & 1904.
8 Transcriptions of contents of folders 6 and 7.

Alice McShane
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