The Chamberlain Family Papers contain the personal and business papers of three generations of residents of Peacham, Vermont, during the period 1764 to 1881. The principal figures represented in the collection are William Chamberlain (1755-1828) and his sons Mellen (1795-1839) and Ezra (1799-1877). The collection also includes the minutes of the first proprietors meeting in Peacham (1764) as well as the charter of Lyndon, Vermont, (1838) and lotting maps for Hardwick and Littleton, Vermont. The collection came to the Vermont Historical Society in 1942 from the estate of Jennie Chamberlain Watts, one of the compilers of The People of Peacham and the great granddaughter of William Chamberlain. Bernard P. Chamberlin, Jr., gave two documents (a 1794 brigade order and a 1798 certificate of election) to the Vermont Historical Society in 2010. The collection is stored in one document storage box (1 linear foot).

Biographical Notes

William Chamberlain was born on April 27, 1755, in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. He was the third of nine children born to Samuel (1724-1802) and Martha Mellen Chamberlain (1730-1820). He was educated at the common school in Hopkinton, where he became the instructor at the age of seventeen. In 1774, William moved with his father to New London, New Hampshire. It was here he joined the Revolutionary War in 1775, serving as an orderly sergeant. During the war, he fought at Lexington, in the invasion of Canada, the Battle of Trenton, and the Battle of Bennington.

In 1780, he moved to Peacham, Caledonia County, Vermont. Here he was a surveyor, farmer, town clerk, justice of the peace, legislator, and U.S. Congressman. He was a member of the Vermont House of Representatives in 1785, 1787-96, 1805 and 1808; justice of the peace, 1786-1796; delegate to the state constitutional convention in 1791; representative to the United States Congress 1803-1805 and 1809-1811; and Lieutenant Governor of Vermont 1813-1815. He died on September 27, 1828 in Peacham, survived by his wife of 47 years, Jenny (Jane) Eastman Chamberlain (1762-1830), and seven of their children.

Mellen Chamberlain was born to William and Jenny E. Chamberlain on June 17, 1795. He grew up in Peacham, Vermont, with his six siblings. He attended Dartmouth College from 1814-1816, studying law. His homes included Castine, Maine (hometown of his wife Catherine H. Crosby); Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and New York City. Although he had studied law, Mellen Chamberlain made his living as a businessman. In 1838, Mellen embarked on a business trip to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East to demonstrate the newly invented telegraph. On May 14, 1839, while on this tour, Mellen drowned in the Danube River, leaving behind his wife and daughter, Katherine.
William Chamberlain, Jr. was born in Peacham, Vermont on May 24, 1797. William graduated from Dartmouth College in 1818 and taught in Moor’s Charity School from 1818 to 1819. He then read law with Daniel Webster for the next year and was appointed as Professor of Latin and Greek at Dartmouth College in 1820. He married Sarah L. Gilman of Wells, Maine in July, 1823. They had three children. He died July 16, 1830, in Peacham, Vermont.

Ezra Carter Chamberlain was the youngest child of William and Jenny Chamberlain to survive to adulthood. He was born on October 17, 1799, and was named after Ezra Carter, the first principal of the Caledonia County Grammar School located in Peacham. Ezra C. Chamberlain lived in Peacham throughout his life. He worked as a farmer, landowner, businessman, and town officer. He married Deborah Shedd (1801-1876), daughter of Henry and Sarah (Bediford) Shedd, on March 22, 1827. They had five children. He died August 8, 1877.

Josiah Shedd was the son of Abel and Ruth (Haskell) Shedd. He was born in Rindge, New Hampshire, on November 1, 1781. He married Lydia Chamberlain (1790-1862), daughter of William and Jenny Chamberlain, on March 1, 1812. He was a physician in Peacham. Josiah died on September 4, 1851. They had one child, a daughter, Jane Eastman Shedd (1816-1842); she died before a year of her marriage had passed. No children survived her.

Scope and Content

The bulk of the collection spans the period 1785-1881, though there are relatively few papers at either end of this range. The earliest dated item in the collection is the minutes of the first proprietors meeting in Peacham from 1764. The earliest item relating directly to William Chamberlain, dated 1785, is a deed wherein William is shown to purchase 100 acres of land in Peacham for 25 pounds.

The first series of the collection contains William Chamberlain’s personal and business papers. Among his personal papers there is an undated typescript of a short autobiography written by William detailing the early years of his life; the original is not in the collection. Paired with this is a handwritten, undated obituary for him. Among William Chamberlain’s business papers are accounts and inventories. The business papers also include correspondence relating to William’s political offices. All of William Chamberlain’s deeds, and some other official documents, are found in two folders: one for the 1700s and one for the 1800s. Located in a separate folder are William Chamberlain’s commissions.

The second series in the collection contains papers relating to William’s children: Mellen, William, Ezra, Abigail, and Lydia. Mellen Chamberlain is of peculiar interest because of his association with Samuel F.B. Morse. One will find Mellen’s agreement with Morse in which Mellen acquires all rights for Morse’s telegraph in Africa, Asia, and Europe, excepting France and England. Also included in this series are Mellen’s travel
documents relating to his fateful trip through Europe, parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Among Mellen’s personal papers one will find many letters from his father, written while Mellen was studying at Dartmouth College.

William Chamberlain, Jr.’s papers include correspondence from his relatives and from Dartmouth classmates. Of particular interest is a letter written in 1819 by Lawson Carter describing his stay in South Carolina and his impressions of slavery.

Ezra Chamberlain’s papers include some letters written to his wife, Deborah, from friends and family; correspondence regarding Mellen Chamberlain’s estate; the beginning of his own will; receipts, accounts and inventories.

The Shedd family papers consist of personal letters, business letters, accounts, inventories, deeds, and wills. The bulk of the letters are addressed to Lydia Chamberlain Shedd, written to her by family members. The two most common correspondents are her sister-in-law, Sarah Gilman Chamberlain and her daughter, Jane. There are several “crossed” letters.

Series II also contains letters written to Abigail Chamberlain by relatives, including her brothers, Mellen and William while they are attending Dartmouth College, as well as letters from her sister-in-law Sarah, her brother-in-law Josiah Shedd and from some of her nieces and nephews.

Series III contains letters written to the children of Mellen Chamberlain, Ezra Chamberlain, and William Chamberlain, Jr. Within folder 15, the letters of Abigail (Abba, Abby, 1840-1916) are a letter from her brother Henry Shedd Chamberlain (1829-1856) and his business card. Letters regarding taking care of Katherine (Katy, Kitty), Mellen Chamberlain’s daughter, are among the papers.

Series IV contains the minutes of the first proprietor’s meeting of Peacham (1764); the charter of Lyndon (1838); a lot map of Hardwick (no date); a lot map of Littleton, Vt. (now Waterford, Vt.); and an assortment of newspaper clippings about Peacham, its residents, or people in some way associated with the Chamberlain family.

Organization

The collection is organized into four series. The first three correspond to the three generations of the Chamberlain family represented in this collection; the fourth series contains town records and miscellaneous documents. Documents within series are organized by person. Within folders, documents are arranged chronologically, with the exception of the Shedd estate papers.
Related Collections

In the VHS library’s picture file (F-PO-Chamberlain) there are a few pictures of William Chamberlain, one picture of Mellen Chamberlain, and many pictures of Abby Chamberlain, daughter of Ezra.

There are entries for various Chamberlain family members in both the card catalog and the Brigham Index. For Joseph Chamberlain, William’s brother, there is a manuscript request for a pension due to a wound received at Lacolle River in the War of 1812. In Doc 95, there is a letter from Ezra C. Chamberlain to Governor Erastus Fairbanks. Doc 12 contains notes on the genealogy of the Chamberlains and related families written by Clara Chamberlain Howard.

The research material that Jennie Watts assembled in writing *The People of Peacham* are in MS-12 and MSC-161. These items may have come to the VHS in 1942 along with the Chamberlain Family Papers. MS-12 includes many documents associated with William Chamberlain’s work as town clerk and a town officer of Peacham, Vt. For instance, there are the minutes of Peacham proprietors meetings as recorded by William Chamberlain.

Inventory

I. First Generation, 1755-1828

Doc 73:1 William Chamberlain, personal papers
2 _____, business papers
3 _____, deeds, 1700s
4 _____, deeds, 1800s
5 _____, commissions and orders
Framed _____, 1798, from Isaac Tichenor (document size: 11.5” x 15.5”; framed size: 19.5” x 22.75”)

II. Second Generation, 1786-1877

Doc 73:6 Mellen Chamberlain, personal papers
7.1 _____, business correspondence (including Samuel F.B. Morse material)
7.2 _____, business documents
Size C _____, United States passport, identification
Size C _____, Turkish passport
8.1 Ezra Chamberlain, business and personal letters
8.2 _____, Legal documents and accounts
9 Abigail Chamberlain, letters
10 Dr. Josiah & Lydia Chamberlain Shedd, and Jane Shedd, letters
11 _____, estate papers
12 William M. Chamberlain, Jr., papers
13 Sarah E. Chamberlain (Watts), letter
14 Strong Family, papers

III. Third Generation, 1855-1881

Doc 73:15 Abigail (Abba, Abby) Chamberlain, letters
16 Kitty (Katherine) Chamberlain
17 William M. Chamberlain, papers

IV. Town Records and Miscellaneous Documents

Doc 73:18 Minutes of first proprietors meeting, Peacham, 1764
19 Charter of Lyndon, 1838
Size C Lot map, Hardwick, no date
20 ______, Littleton, Vt., no date
21 Miscellaneous newspaper clippings
22 Miscellaneous papers

Miles Price
September 2000
(revised September 8, 2001; January 2012)