



Guide to the Josephine Napoleon Leary papers, 1875-1991

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Summary

Collection Title:

Josephine Napoleon Leary papers, 1875-1991

Source:

Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture

Creator:

Leary, Josephine Napoleon, 1856?-1923.

Abstract:

The papers of Josephine Napoleon Leary contain financial and legal papers, correspondence, biographical materials, and photographs pertaining to the life and business ventures of African American businesswoman Josephine N. Leary and her daughter Clara Ryan. Records document her real estate and other business transactions the coastal town of Edenton, North Carolina, where they resided; the earliest deed dates back to 1875. There are also architectural and historical documents relating to Edenton. Photographs of Leary and Reeves family members date from 1895 to about 1935. Acquired as part of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture.

Extent:

0.5 Linear Feet (1 box)

Language:

Materials in English

Collection ID:

RL.11503

Permalink:

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m15w5p>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Josephine Napoleon Leary papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

The Josephine Leary papers chiefly comprise business papers relating to the properties she owned in Edenton, N.C., and to a barber shop operated by Leary and her husband; these records include deeds, the earliest of which dates to the 1870s; mortgage and estate papers; bank records; and bills and receipts. Other papers include correspondence to Leary, her daughter Clara C. Ryan, Clara's husband Noah Ryan, and Clara's son, Percy Reeves, as well as correspondence pertaining to legal matters and to Leary's estate.

A group of biographical and historical papers contain maps, pamphlets, and other information related to late 19th and early 20th century Edenton and to the Leary legacy. These date mostly from Leary's lifetime, but also include later secondary sources about Edenton and Leary. Included in this group are the original plans for the J.N. Leary building (1894) that still stands on Broad Street in downtown Edenton.

The collection is completed by a few undated writings by Leary, one of which seems to be a eulogy, and by a group of albumen and gelatin silver photographs of Leary and her family, including her daughter, her brother, an uncle, her grandson Percy Reeves, and his family.

Biographical/Historical

Josephine Napoleon Leary was born into slavery in Williamston, North Carolina around 1856. At age nine, she was emancipated. In 1873 she married her husband "Sweety" Archer Leary and they moved to Edenton, North Carolina and operated a barbershop. Mrs. Leary, skillfully navigating the real estate market, acquired six properties in Edenton by 1881 in the "Cheapside" historic district. In 1893, Edenton and the "Cheapside" district, experienced a fire that destroyed all of Leary's investments. After the fire, Leary rebuilt 421-423-425 South Broad Street. This signature building in downtown Edenton still bears the mark "J.N. Leary 1894." Leary was overcome by cancer at the turn of the 20th century and the cost of medical care forced her to sell several of her properties. She died in 1923. Three of her properties were inherited by her daughter, Clara Ryan (born about 1875), but Leary's estate was mired in debt and unpaid mortgages. Leary's daughter Clara, who is listed as "mulatto" in the 1920 U.S. Census and then Black in the 1930 census, married Noah Ryan.

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Arrangement

The Josephine Napoleon Leary papers are arranged into seven small series: Legal Papers, Financial Papers, Coorespondence, Personal Papers, Biographical/Historical Material, Maps and Architetural Materials, and Photographs.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Use Restrictions

The copyright interests in this collection have not been transferred to Duke University. For more information, consult the copyright section of the Regulations and Procedures of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Acquisition Information

The Josephine Napoleon Leary Papers were purchased by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library in 1991.

Accession 2002-0125 was received as a gift from the Historic Edenton State Historic Site in 2002.

Processing Information

Processed by Melissa Delbridge, May 1991. Encoded by Heather McGowan, September 2017. Updated by Paula Jeannet, February 2020.

Accessions described in this collection guide: 1991-0153, 2002-0125.

Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

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Names and Subjects

- African American business enterprises
- African American women -- North Carolina
- African American women -- United States -- Correspondence
- African Americans -- Correspondence
- African Americans -- Land tenure
- African Americans -- North Carolina -- Economic conditions
- African Americans -- North Carolina -- Photographs
- Decedents' estates -- North Carolina
- Lawyers -- North Carolina -- Edenton
- Real estate business -- North Carolina
- Edenton (N.C.) -- Commerce
- Edenton (N.C.) -- History
- Albumen prints
- Black-and-white photographs
- Gelatin silver prints
- Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture
- Leary, Josephine Napoleon, 1856?-1923.

Collection Inventory

Legal Papers, 1875-1926

Physical Description: 5 folders

Scope and Contents

Legal documents pertaining to the buying of properties and mortgages. The majority of the documents are deeds of trust on the properties Leary bought and eventually sold. The earliest date, 1875, refers to a deed of that year naming Josephine Leary and her purchase of the "Cheshire store house" in Edenton. This property, as with many of Leary's other properties, probably was destroyed by the 1873 fire.

The legal documents also include the death certificate of Josephine Leary and the clerk superior court's appointment of Clara Ryan as the administrator of

Leary's estate. The legal documents after Leary's death are primarily concerned with Clara Ryan's payments of Leary's debts. Folder 4 contains preservation photocopies of several deeds and Leary's death certificate.

Legal Papers, 1875-1898 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Legal Papers](#)

Legal Papers, 1900-1919 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Legal Papers](#)

Legal Papers, 1906-1907 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Legal Papers](#)

Legal Papers, 1921-1926 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Legal Papers](#)

Legal Papers (copies), 1875-1923 Box 1

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Financial Papers, 1901-1935

Physical Description: 6 folders

Scope and Contents

Financial papers in the collection document Josephine Leary's business and personal finances, and include bank records, insurance papers, mortgage checks, and bill payments. The records also include documents that tell of the financial turmoil that followed her passing in 1923.

Receipts and Bills 1901-1919 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Receipts and Bills](#)

Scope and Contents

Receipts of Josephine Leary's payments on her mortgages.

Receipts and Bills 1920-1928 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Receipts and Bills](#)

Scope and Contents

Josephine Leary's and Clara Ryan's tax receipts, receipt for purchased building materials, receipt for electric, water and ice bills.

Receipts and Bills 1934-1935, n.d. (online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Receipts and Bills](#)

Scope and Contents

Receipts of Clara Ryan's business purchases, notices to Clara Ryan for unpaid bills, court of Edenton payment cards, telephone rental bill, receipt for the purchase of a casket, cement, funeral and herse, as well as a deposit list for a grave marker for Josephine Leary.

Bank Records, 1907-1927 (online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Bank Records](#)

Scope and Contents

The bank records contain Josephine Leary's 1913-1917 bank account ledger, deposit slips from Josephine Leary and her daughter Clara Ryan, and a deposit slip from Clara Reeves. All bank records are from the Bank of Edenton, NC.

Insurance Papers, 1919-1935 (online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Insurance Papers](#)

Scope and Contents

The insurance papers include Clara Reeves' receipt book with payment slips for Metropolitan Life Insurance, Wood and Warren Insurance for Josephine Leary's estate, Noah Ryan's receipt book for Metropolitan Life Insurance, a Harford Fire Insurance Company policy for the barber shop, three Virginia Fire and Marine Insurance Company policies for Leary's property on Church Street, a receipt of Clara Ryan's recieved payment from Gate City Life Insurance Company, and lapsed insurance notifications.

Cancelled Checks, 1915-1925 (online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Cancelled Checks](#)

Scope and Contents

Checks stamped paid from both Josephine Leary and her daughter Clara Ryan's payments to various people and businesses. Also includes an empty checkbook with payment stubs.

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Correspondence, 1894-1935

Physical Description: 4 folders

Scope and Contents

Correspondence includes letters to Josephine Leary, her daughter Clara Ryan, Noah Ryan, Clara's husband, and Percy Reeves, a later owner of the Leary's barber shop.

Letters to Josephine Leary include Edenton law firm Pruden, Bond, and Holland correspondence related to Leary's properties; a letter from Mrs. R.D. James; and a letter from M.N. Sawyer, a real estate agent.

Letters to Clara Ryan include correspondence with her husband Noah Ryan; a letter from the NC Department of Revenue making Clara the executor of Josephine Leary's estate; letters from her nieces Maggie and Lulu and her cousin Gary A. Jones; a letter from the Rich Square Institute offering her a job; letters from lawyers concerning her mother Josephine's estate; as well as letters from friends, including a Christmas card from Mr. and Mrs. Garrett. Letters to Noah Ryan include several letters from lawyers and the Undertaker's Supply Company about late payments. There are also two letters to Percy Reeves, one from his daughter Maggie and one from Floris.

Correspondence, 1894-1922 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Correspondence](#)

Correspondence, 1923-1935 (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Correspondence](#)

Correspondence, undated (online item available) Box 1

Digital Object: [Correspondence](#)

Correspondence (copies), 1894-1935 Box 1

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Personal Writings and Ledger, undated

Physical Description: 1 folders

Scope and Contents

This series includes two personal writings by Leary, as well as a ledger of names and addresses.

Personal writings, undated (online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Personal writings](#)

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Biographical/Historical Information, 1893-1988

Physical Description: 2 folders

Scope and Contents

The biographical/historical information comprises documents related to the history of the town of Edenton and Josephine Leary. The documents include: a pamphlet from Central Barber Shop (Leary's business); a ticket to the Edenton Amusement Club banquet at the Colored Hotel; two historic Edenton brochures that feature Leary's properties; a biography of Leary's assumed father; an article about the economic and social development of Edenton; an article about the Edenton fire and the "Cheapside" neighborhood; a copy of the inheritance document that transferred property to Clara Ryan; a copy of a 1932 story on the Leary barber shop; an article about Leary's properties; and a copy of the "Representative House and Prominent Men of Edenton, NC," including names of individuals with whom Josephine Leary sold and bought properties.

Biographical/Historical Information, 1893-1988
(online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Biographical/Historical Information](#)

Biographical/Historical Information (copies),
1923

Box 1

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Maps and Architectural Materials, 1894-1991

Physical Description: 2 folders

Scope and Contents

This group contains the plans for the J.N. Leary Building on South Broad Street in Edenton (1894) and a building permit for Noah Ryan, Leary's son-in-law, to build on Leary's property. They also include an announcement by the

Edenton Women's Club of a publication about the architecture in Edenton, titled Edenton: An Architectural Portrait.

Maps and Architectural Materials, 1894-1991
(online item available)

Box 1

Digital Object: [Maps and Architectural Materials](#)

Maps and Architectural Materials (copies),
1894-1991

Box 1

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Family Photographs, 1890-1935 (online item available)

Physical Description: 14 photographs

[Josephine Leary Photographs](#)

Scope and Contents

Black-and-white photographs of Josephine Leary and her family consist of formal portraits and informal snapshots. Includes mounted albumen prints as well as early modern gelatin silver photographs. Family members include Percy Reeves, Clara Reeves, Octavius (Josephine's brother) and Mazuria Williams, and Mallie McDonald of the Reeves family; includes formal portraits of Josephine Leary.

Paper photocopies of the photographs, with names and dates, exist in a separate folder in the box.

Alternative Form Available:

The photographs have been scanned and are available for viewing through the link in this collection guide.

Photograph of Uncle Walter, circa 1920

Box 1

Image #1, 1920

Box 1

Scope and Contents

Photograph of Mallie McDonald.

Image #12, c. 1917

Box 1

Scope and Contents

Josephine Leary in Washington D.C.

Image #3, 1927

Box 1

Scope and Contents

Miss Fannie Badham (principal of Edenton Grade School), Miss Santoria Leigh, and Mr. Percy Reeves taken one year before Percy and Santoria were married.

Image #6, undated Box 1

Scope and Contents

Unknown subject.

Image #7, 1913 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Percy Reeves at age 16.

Image #2, c. 1900-1910 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Josephine Leary.

Image #13, 1890 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Clara Reeves.

Image #9, 1926 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Percy Reeves.

Image #8, c. 1925 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Percy Reeves and Santoria Leigh, later married.

Image #10, 1926 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Percy Reeves.

Image #11, 1935 Box 1

Scope and Contents

Percy Reeves and Clara Reeves.

Image #4, undated

Box 1

Scope and Contents

Uncle Walter written on the back of the photograph.

Image #5, c. 1916

Box 1

Scope and Contents

Octavius William, brother of Josephine Leary, and his wife Mazuria.

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