



Guide to the James T. Powers Papers, 1860s-1945 and undated

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Summary

Collection Title:

James T. Powers papers, 1860s-1945 and undated

Creator:

Powers, James T., 1862-1943

Abstract:

James T. Powers was a well-known comic actor, songwriter, playwright, and vaudeville entertainer based in New York City. The materials in the collection cover the entirety of his career, from the 1880s to the 1930s, when he retired. There are also items relating to the acting career and family of his wife, Rachel Booth Powers. The materials are arranged into the following series: Correspondence, Financial and Legal Papers, Photographs and Other Images, Print Materials, Rachel Booth Powers Papers, Sheet Music, Volumes, and Other Writings. The collection contains over 260 images, including tintypes, several lithographs, gelatin silver photographs, and albumen prints, dating from approximately 1860 to the early 1940s. The rest of the collection includes scrapbooks, autograph albums, a diary by Rachel Booth Powers, many clippings, drafts of scripts and reminiscences, sheet music, notebooks, and other professional papers. Taken as a whole, the collection provides a rich look at the society and culture of vaudeville theater in New York City during Rachel and James T. Powers' careers.

Extent:

8.0 Linear Feet (12 boxes; 1 oversize folder)
Approximately 1290 Items

Physical Location:

For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Library's online catalog.

Language:

English

Language:

Material in English

Collection ID:

RL.01045

Permalink:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/powersjames/>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], James T. Powers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

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Background

Scope and Content

Most of the collection pertains to James T. ("Jimmy") Powers, spanning his entire career as a comic actor, songwriter, playwright, and vaudeville entertainer from the 1880s to the 1930s, when he retired. There are also materials relating to the acting career and family of his wife, Rachel Booth Powers. The materials are arranged into the following series: Correspondence, Financial and Legal Papers, Photographs and Other Images, Print Materials, Rachel Booth Powers Papers, Sheet Music, Volumes, and Other Writings.

The correspondence, financial, and legal papers chiefly center on professional matters, including contracts and letters of thanks for the Powers' involvement in charity efforts during both world wars. Print materials include scripts of plays, clippings relevant to James and Rachel Powers, autobiographical material, and theater ephemera.

The collection contains a separate series for the writings of Rachel Booth Powers. Included here are several essays she wrote while in school, her teaching certificate, two autograph books dating from 1876 and 1877, and a diary kept in 1897. There is also a scrapbook containing newspaper clippings of poems written by her older sister, Alice Booth. In the Sheet Music series one can find numerous popular pieces dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including songs for which Powers wrote the lyrics.

The Volumes series consists of 24 undated notebooks belonging to James Powers that contain ideas for plays, rough drafts of what seem to be vaudeville skits, lyrics for songs, reminiscences of his career, and other notes. Finally, other writings include loose scripts of plays written by Powers, as well as some prose material. Of note in this series is a script that Powers intended to turn into, in his own words, a "motion picture play."

The Photographs and Other Images series, the largest group in the collection, contains over 260 images, dating from approximately 1860 to the early 1940s, of James Powers, Rachel Booth Powers, their families, and various stage

personalities; there are also a few related clippings and theater programs mentioning either Powers or Rachel Booth. Formats include one ambrotype and 21 tintypes, followed by many late 19th and early 20th century albumen prints, lithographs, and early modern gelatin silver prints. The professionally-taken photographs of persons and theater scenes, along with the other collection materials, are particularly rich as a resource for studying vaudeville and Broadway theater culture during the careers of James T. and Rachel Booth Powers.

Biographical/Historical

James Thomas Powers (1862-1943) was an actor, playwright, musician, and vaudeville entertainer, renowned for his comedic abilities and expressions as well as for his trademark red hair. His wife, Rachel Booth Powers (1862-1955), was also a famous actress and comedian in her own right. The Powers lived most of their lives in and near New York City and, as a result, most of their performances took place on Broadway. Some of the plays in which James T. Powers performed include: *A Runaway Girl*, *San Toy*, *A Princess of Kensington*, *Havana*, *The Rivals*, and *The Geisha*. In addition to living at the Ansonia Hotel in New York City, and in Richfield Springs, N.Y., the Powers also owned a vacation home on Cape Cod that is depicted in several photographs in this collection.

Chronology

Date	Description
1862	Born as James Thomas McGovern in New York; raised on West 12th Street in New York City
1862	Birth of Rachel Booth; raised in Rochester, New York
1883	After performing in several small productions, James T. Powers moved to London
1885	Powers returned to New York and met Rachel Booth while in the Boston production of Charles Hoyt's <i>A Tin Soldier</i>

Date	Description
1892	James Powers and Rachel Booth married
1894	James Powers appeared in The New Boy, one of his earliest performances on Broadway
1899	Joined "The Players" and began to regularly visit club's rooms in Gramercy Park
1901	Appeared in and wrote additional lyrics for The Messenger Boy
1909	Appeared in and revised Havana, one of his most famous roles
1920	Rachel Booth Powers retired from the stage
1935	James Powers appeared in Seven Keys to Baldpate then retired from the stage
1935-1939	Wrote and published autobiography entitled Twinkle Little Star: Sparkling Memories of Seventy Years
1943 Feb. 11	James Powers passed away
1955 July 23	Rachel Booth Powers passed away

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

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 James T. Powers papers were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library as a purchase in 1976.

Processing Information

Processed by Josh Hager, March 2010; additional materials processed and encoded by Paula Jeannet, May 2017.

Accession(s) described in this collection guide: 4-30-76

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Related Materials

Separated Material

James T. Powers' autobiography, [Twinkle Little Star: Sparkling Memories of Seventy Years](#) was transferred to the Perkins Library general collections.

Related Material

[James T. and Rachel Booth Powers Collection \[1864\]-1948, undated](#) [Search for "Rachel Both Powers"]The New York Historical Society

[Historic American Sheet Music](#) [Web site with access to thousands of titles and digitized images of popular American sheet music held at Duke]Duke University. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

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Names and Subjects

- Actors -- United States -- Biography
- Actors -- United States -- Portraits
- Actresses -- United States -- Diaries
- Composers -- United States -- Biography
- Comedians -- United States
- Dramatists, American -- Biography
- Performing Arts -- United States -- History
- Popular culture -- New York (State) -- New York
- Popular music -- United States -- 1901-1910
- Popular music -- United States -- 1911-1920
- Popular music -- United States -- 1921-1930
- Theater -- New York (State) -- New York -- History
- Vaudeville -- History
- Vaudeville -- New York (State) -- New York -- History
- Women entertainers -- United States
- Broadway (New York, N.Y.) -- History
- New York (N.Y.) -- Social life and customs
- Autograph albums
- Albumen prints
- Ambrotypes
- Diaries

- Ephemera
- Gelatin silver prints
- Lithographs
- Scrapbooks
- Sheet music
- Tintypes (prints)
- Theater programs
- Powers, James T., 1862-1943
- Powers, James T., 1892-
- Powers, Rachel Booth, 1862-1955

Collection Inventory

Correspondence, 1888-1945 and undated

Physical Description: 2 folders

Scope and Contents note

Contains letters both written to and by James Powers and Rachel Booth Powers. Major subjects include discussions of theatrical performances, letters of thanks for Powers' charitable work during both World War I and World War II, and reviews of and feedback on Powers' autobiography. In a particularly amusing undated letter Powers sarcastically examines the merits of Einstein's theory of relativity.

1888-1939	Box 1
1939-1945 and undated	Box 1

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Financial and Legal Papers, 1884-1921 and undated

Physical Description: 3 folders

Scope and Contents note

Contains several receipts for items as well as legal agreements of employment; there are also oversize legal and financial papers housed separately.

Financial papers, 1920-1921	Box 1
Legal papers, 1884-1905	Box 1
Oversize financial papers, undated	Box 8

Oversize legal paper, 1887

Box 8

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Photographs and Other Images, circa 1860s-circa 1940s

Physical Description: 4 boxes and oversize material

Scope and Contents note

Contains six subseries, described fully below: Ambrotype and Tintypes; Postcards; James Thomas Powers Photographs; Rachel Booth Powers Photographs; James Thomas Powers and Family Photographs; and General Photographs. Note that James and Rachel Powers are also depicted on the cover of the sheet music in this collection, "Dem White Pants at a Swell Cake-Walk."

Ambrotype and Tintypes Subseries, circa 1860s-circa 1890s

Scope and Contents note

All of these early images were professionally taken in a studio setting. Some display hand tinting of the subject's cheeks. The single ambrotype in the collection is an image of James Donnellon, the grandfather of James Thomas Powers. The rest of the subseries consists of 21 tintypes. The first three folders contain images of Rachel Booth, especially as a child and teenager. The next two folders contain images of Rachel Booth posed with her mother Cecilia Booth and her sisters Jessie and Alice Booth. The last folder contains two images of James Powers with Rachel and Cecilia Booth, one childhood image of James Powers with his brother Gus McGovern, and one image probably of Jessie Booth.

Ambrotype of James Donnellon, grandfather of James Thomas Powers	Box 5
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Tintypes of Rachel Booth (3 folders)	Box 5
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Tintypes of Rachel Booth with family (2 folders)	Box 5
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Tintypes of James Powers with Rachel and Cecilia Booth, James Powers with Gus McGovern, and Jessie Booth (?)	Box 5
--	-------

Postcards Subseries, before 1910-1937

Scope and Contents note

The 19 postcards contained in this subseries depict both professional studio portraits (such as in promotional postcards for James Powers as a "leading artist of the American stage") as well as outdoor photographs from

various vacations. Subjects include James Powers, Rachel Booth Powers, and a vacation to Fort Benton in 1937. The James Powers postcards are particularly noteworthy. In addition to the promotional photographs, other postcards depict Powers as a clown for an unnamed production, in costume for the production Havana, and as a guest of honor at the Daschund Club of Cleveland, Ohio in 1912. Of note in the set of postcards from Fort Benton is an image of a Native American wearing a traditional headdress with a Western suit and tie. Some of the postcards in this subseries contain brief correspondence to various recipients.

James T. Powers postcards, before 1910-circa 1930s	Box 6
Fort Benton postcards, 1937	Box 6
James and Rachel Booth Powers, undated	Box 6
Unnamed individuals, undated	Box 6

James Thomas Powers Subseries, circa 1880-circa 1940s

Scope and Contents note

Contains 64 black-and-white albumen, gelatin silver prints, and several lithographs. There are 52 small and medium sized prints; the albumens are mostly cabinet cards (4 x 5.5") and cartes de visite (2.25 x 3.5") while the gelatin prints are sized up to 8x10 inches. There are also over two dozen larger photographic portraits ranging roughly 11x14 and 16x20 inches. The vast majority of the photographs are undated, but dates seem to range from the 1880s to 1930.

Most are professional portraits of Powers taken in a studio setting, some from his earliest years as an actor. Others are photographic duplications of hand-drawn depictions of Powers in various costumes. One photograph from 1888 depicts Powers with other actors portraying professional baseball players at the Polo Grounds.

Small to medium prints	Box 6
Physical Description: 52 items, 10 folders	
Oversize prints	Box 11
Oversize prints	Box 12

Scope and Contents

Large portraits of Powers from his youth (circa 1880s) to his later years (circa 1930s). Several are lithographs. Includes a mounted photograph of a group of actors in costume on a stage set, including Powers and two

blackface actors; from a banner on the set, the title of the musical is almost certainly Wild Duck.

Rachel Booth Powers Subseries, 1865-circa 1930s

Scope and Contents note

Houses 37 albumen and gelatin silver prints, chiefly black and white, covering most of Rachel Booth's life. There are 32 small and medium sized prints, of which the albumens are mostly cabinet cards (4 x 5.5 inch print) and cartes de visite (2.25 x 3.5 inch print) while the gelatin prints range up to 8 x 10 inches. Some of the albumen prints, particularly of Rachel as a child, are significantly smaller than cartes de visites. The vast majority of these photographs were taken in a studio setting; many of them depict Rachel in costume for various productions. Notably, the first photograph is Rachel at the age of 2 as Hanny in Uncle Tom's Cabin. There are also five larger prints ranging up to 11 x 14 inches, including three photographs of Rachel as Carry Story in A Tin Soldier, one of which is fully colored. One photograph of note depicts Rachel's high school graduation.

Small to medium prints

Box 6

Physical Description: 32 items, 5 folders

Oversize prints

Box 11

Physical Description: 5 items

James T. Powers and Family Subseries, circa 1860s-circa 1940s

Scope and Contents note

This subseries contains 57 albumen and gelatin silver prints whose subjects are either family of James and Rachel Booth Powers or group portraits. Subjects include Anne McGovern (James Powers' mother), Cecilia Booth (Rachel Powers' mother), and Jessie and Alice Booth (later Jessie Booth Church and Alice Booth Clark, Rachel Powers' sisters). Most of the photographs were taken in a professional studio setting, although some are casual snapshots that depict scenes of home life such as the Powers' first automobile and vacations at their second home in Cape Cod. This subseries contains 53 small and medium sized prints that range up to 8x10 inches. In addition, the subseries also contains four larger prints ranging up to 10.5 x 14 inches with several notable photographs of Cecilia Booth.

Alice Booth (Clark)

Box 6

Physical Description: 14 items, 2 folders

Cecilia Booth

Box 6

Physical Description: 4 items

Jessie Booth (Church)	Box 6
Physical Description: 7 items	
Unidentified man	Box 6
Physical Description: 1 item	
Anne McGovern	Box 7
Physical Description: 3 items	
Family group snapshots	Box 7
Physical Description: 24 items, 4 folders	
Oversize prints	Box 11
Physical Description: 4 items	

General Subseries, circa 1860s-circa 1940s

Scope and Contents note

Contains 65 albumen and gelatin silver prints whose subjects are persons unrelated to James Thomas Powers, and other miscellaneous subjects. There are 59 small and medium sized prints that range up to 8 x 10 inches. Subjects in this group include: J.K. Adams, Mary Anderson, H.C. Babcock, Digby Bell, Laura Joyce Bell, Frank W. Comyni, Eugene Cowles, Peter Donnellon, Willie Edouin, Max Ehrmann, Terry Ellen, Della Fox, Mrs. G.H. Gilbert, Pauline Hall, Evelyn Baker Harrier, Leon Harrier, Sal Harrison, Herbert Kelcey, Wilton Laekayz(?), Fanny Legan, Richard Mansfield, Jon. Mullen(?), Louis Payne, Lillian Russell, Elfie Shannon, Grant Stewart, and some unnamed individuals as well as several group shots. The other general photographs depict urban scenes, vehicles, a house exterior, and interior designs. This subseries also includes six larger prints ranging to 8.5 x 14 inches depicting Lew Fields, Manuel Klein, Jon. Urban, Henry Norway, and other individuals. Most of the photographs in this collection were professionally made in a studio setting although several may have been shot by an amateur.

People	Box 7
Physical Description: 48 items, 7 folders	
Other scenes	Box 7
Physical Description: 11 items, 2 folders	
Oversize prints	Box 11
Physical Description: 6 items	
Oversize print	Oversize-folder 1

Scope and Contents

Contains one oversize mounted photograph, a composite of over 100 tiny portraits of notable actors. Copyright is 1908 by an H.F. Jordan.

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Print Materials, 1883-1939 and undated

Physical Description: 1 box

Scope and Contents note

Arranged in the following four subseries: Autobiographical Material, Magazine and Clippings, Ephemera, and Scripts.

Autobiographical Material, after 1935-1940

Scope and Contents note

Contains notes for Powers's autobiography entitled *Twinkle Little Star: Sparkling Memories of Seventy Years*. Also houses reviews of that book from various publications.

Autobiographical material

Box 1

Magazine and Clippings Subseries, 1883-1939 and undated

Scope and Contents note

Consists of one issue of *Munsey's Magazine*, August 1899, that discusses various issues relevant to New York City. The clippings are relevant in some way to James Powers, his family, or his theatrical shows and other projects. One oversize item is a theater program for the comic opera *Nadja*, with synopsis and characters. In addition, the subseries contains several images of Powers and other actors clipped from various sources. Arranged chronologically.

Munsey's Magazine, August 1899

Box 1

Clippings, 1800-1896

Box 1

Clippings, 1903-1909

Box 1

Clippings, 1910-1939

Box 1

Clippings, undated

Box 1

Physical Description: 5 folders

Oversize clippings, 1883-1939 and undated	Box 8
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Casino Theater program advertising the comic opera Nadjy, 1888	Box 12
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Scope and Contents

Newspaper size theater program includes cast of characters with actors' names and plot synopsis; Powers appears in a lead role. The shows took place at the Casino, New York, N.Y., in May 1888. Includes many advertisements for pianos, restaurants, headache medicine, and others.

Ephemera Subseries, circa 1890s-circa 1920s

Scope and Contents note

Houses promotional materials as well as other materials related to various plays with which Powers was involved. In addition, contains various images of James Powers that do not fit into either the Photographs or Printed Materials series. The oversize pieces include promotional material for the plays *The Rivals* and *Blue Moon*.

Ephemera, circa 1890s-circa 1920s	Box 1
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Physical Description: 2 folders

Oversize ephemera, circa 1890s-circa 1920s	Box 8
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Physical Description: 12 items

Scripts Subseries, circa 1890-circa 1935

Scope and Contents note

Contains copies of scripts of plays with which Powers was involved. Distinct from the scripts held in the Writings Series that are Powers' own works. Arranged alphabetically by title.

The Geisha and The Jewel of Asia	Box 1
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The Medal and the Maid	Box 1
------------------------	-------

The Messenger Boy and The Princess of Kensington	Box 1
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The Rivals	Box 1
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San Toy and untitled	Box 2
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Rachel Booth Powers Papers, circa 1870-1901

Physical Description: 1 box and 1 oversize box

Scope and Contents note

Consists of all of the original writings and personal papers for Rachel Booth Powers. Included are several essays she wrote while in school, her teaching certificate, two autograph books dating from 1876 and 1877 (with the second containing poems written by Alice Booth Clark), and a diary kept in 1897. One oversize box contains two scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. Arranged alphabetically by contents of folders.

Alice Booth Clark autograph book with clippings of poetry, undated	Box 2
Autograph book, 1876-1877	Box 2
Diary, 1897	Box 2
Personal papers, 1875-1901 and undated	Box 2
Writings, circa 1870s and undated	Box 2
Clippings book, undated	Box 10
Clippings book, 1883	Box 10

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Sheet Music, circa 1890s-circa 1930s

Physical Description: 2 boxes

Scope and Contents note

Contains various popular compositions that Powers wrote for his theatrical productions as well as for his other performances. Arranged alphabetically by title; oversize material housed separately. This material may contain offensive language or negative stereotypes reflecting the culture or language of a particular period or place. These items are presented as part of the historical record.

Standard Size Sheet Music

"Another Job"	Box 2
"Becky Rosenstein"	Box 2

"Bride Belle"	Box 2
"Carburetor"	Box 2
"Chain of Love"	Box 2
"Cute As Ever"	Box 2
"Dance With My Wife"	Box 2
"Frog and Firefly"	Box 2
"Give Us Peace"	Box 2
"Grandpa"	Box 2
"Ho! The Briny Deep"	Box 2
"Hooray"	Box 2
"If The Moon Weren't Out"	Box 2
"If You Want Mary"	Box 2
"I'm the Gun Man"	Box 2
"In the Morning"	Box 2
"Income Tax"	Box 2
"Jean's Harp"	Box 2
"The Lickings"	Box 2
"Lion's Cage"	Box 2
"The Little Kangaroo," 1922 and undated	Box 2
Physical Description: 2 folders	
"Little Willie"	Box 2
"McCarty"	Box 2
"March's Wake"	Box 3
"Michael Feeney"	Box 3

"Mississippi"	Box 3
"Mother Dear"	Box 3
"Oh! Mary"	Box 3
"O'Scarpano"	Box 3
"Ringmaster's Gallop"	Box 3
"The Serenade"	Box 3
"Soldier"	Box 3
"Spanish"	Box 3
"Wall Street"	Box 3

Oversize Sheet Music

"Can't You Take My Word"	Box 8
"Captain Told the Mate"	Box 8
"Cavalleria Rusticana"	Box 8
"Dance of the Bobolinks"	Box 8
"Dem White Pants at a Swell Cake Walk" (features the Powers on the cover)	Box 8
"Doll's Dust"	Box 8
"Floradarn"	Box 8
"For the Old Love's Sake"	Box 8
"Has Anybody Seen Our Cat?"	Box 8
"He's My Soft-Shell-Crab on Toast"	Box 8
"Hero Bold"	Box 8
"How Did the Bird Know That?"	Box 8
"I'se A-Workin' I'se A Hustlin': Coon Song and Chorus"	Box 8

"It Was in a Laundry That I Seen Her First"	Box 8
"Keep Your Eye on Your Friend Mister Johnson"	Box 8
"Little Dan"	Box 8
"The Maid on the 'L' Road"	Box 8
"Medley"	Box 8
Minstrel songs	Box 9
"Miss Venus"	Box 9
"Mother Dear"	Box 9
"Mother Take Me On Your Knee"	Box 9
"Mr. Flynn"	Box 9
"No Moon"	Box 9
"Oh! Madeline"	Box 9
"Paddy Stole the Rope"	Box 9
"Sailor Life"	Box 9
"The Sign of Love"	Box 9
"Take My Word"	Box 9
"Three Little Faces"	Box 9
"Waiting For Me"	Box 9
"Waltz Without a Kiss"	Box 9
Waltzes	Box 9
"Yarns"	Box 9
"Your Dear Little Demon"	Box 9

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Volumes, circa 1890s-circa 1930s

Physical Description: 2 boxes

Scope and Contents note

Houses multiple manuscript volumes kept by James Powers recording potential comedic sketches, ideas for songs and lyrics, motion picture scripts, reminiscences of his life, and inventories of goods. Arranged alphabetically by subject of content.

Comedy and dialogue notes	Box 3
Physical Description: 2 folders	
Comedy sketch of Havana	Box 3
Dialogue and lyrics notes	Box 3
Inventory, choreography, and notes	Box 3
Prose notes	Box 3
Reminiscences, circa 1930	Box 3
Reminiscences	Box 3
Physical Description: Folders 1-2 of 4	
Reminiscences (Folders 3-4 of 4)	Box 4
Reminiscences and notes	Box 4
Song lyrics	Box 4
Song lyrics and motion picture scripts	Box 4
Song lyrics, letters, and reminiscences	Box 4

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Other Writings, circa 1900s-circa 1940s

Physical Description: 1 box

Scope and Contents note

Consists of James Powers' original manuscript prose, notes, lyrics (without musical accompaniment), and scripts. Arranged alphabetically within each group of writings.

Lyrics	Box 4
Notes	Box 4
Prose	
Autobiography excerpts	Box 4
Tin Soldier	Box 4
Scripts	
Act Three	Box 4
The Leading Man	Box 4
The Millionaire: A Moving Picture Play	Box 4
Private Party	Box 4
Why It's Binks	Box 4
A Wife to Order	Box 4
untitled	Box 4

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