



# Guide to the William Smith Papers, 1785-1860

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## Table of Contents

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<a href="#">Summary</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Background</a> .....	4
<a href="#">Administrative Information</a> .....	6
<a href="#">Names and Subjects</a> .....	7
<a href="#">Index</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Collection Inventory</a> .....	11

## Summary

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**Collection Title:**

William Smith papers, 1785-1860

**Creator:**

Smith, William, 1756-1835

**Abstract:**

Correspondence, writings, and printed materials relating to Smith's advocacy for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and in Britain's colonies in the West Indies. Collection contains notes, statistics, and research on the slave trade between Africa and the British West Indies; slave revolts and the conditions on sugar plantations in the Caribbean; abolitionist tracts discussing moral, economic, and religious opposition to slavery; and diagrams of slave ships documenting conditions for enslaved people and casualty rates during transport. The bulk of the collection's correspondence is addressed to Smith. Letters of William Wilberforce and the Wilberforce family discuss personal affairs, politics, abolition, and other matters. Letters from Thomas Clarkson discuss the antislavery movement. Letters from Smith's constituents discuss politics, social conditions, parliamentary reform, British foreign trade, slavery in the West Indies, and economic conditions. Correspondents include Priscilla Buxton, Thomas Fowell Buxton, and Zachary Macaulay. Also contains a partially unpublished poem of Robert Southey entitled To the Exiled Patriots.

**Extent:**

1 Linear Feet  
328 Items

**Language:**

English.

**Collection ID:**

RL.01224

**Permalink:**

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1t361>

**Preferred Citation**

[Identification of item], The William Smith Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

## Background

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### Scope and Content

This collection consists of letters and writings to and from William Smith, as well as collected printed materials largely related to Smith's work opposing the slave trade and the abolition of slavery in British colonies in the early 1800s. Outstanding are the 24 letters of William Wilberforce (1759-1833); these discuss such topics as: religion, sickness in the family, his sickness which forced him to leave the House of Commons, his family and his desire for more private life with them, his relatives, political disappointments, trips and engagements, publishers, criminals in Great Britain and their punishment, resolutions and plans for the abolition of slavery, the antl-slavery society, the Jamaica Law, Spanish slave trade, Spanish abolition, William Pitt, Lord Grenville and his estate Dropmore, Dr. Channing, Robert Hall, and Thomas Buxton.

A number of the letters from Smith's many correspondents stand out. There are a number of letters around 1790 from various societies and committees discussing the abolition of slavery and approving Smith's actions; some of them also mention Wilberforce. A letter from J. Yule in Edinburgh of August 13, 1792, tells of the poor Scottish peasants who are being driven from their lands to make room for sheep which are more profitable. Three letters from James Muir between 1793 and 1797 discuss the case of his son who has been banished for fourteen years for joining the Society for Parliamentary Reform. A letter from John Longley on January 31, 1796, tells of a book which he has just published on parliamentary reform and discusses various aspects of the English government from the viewpoint of a reformer. Thomas Coke on March 16, 1809, writes of the different slavery laws in Jamaica. A lengthy 1813 letter from Andrew Wedderburn, a Jamaica plantation owner, discusses the condition of the enslaved people after a storm, their food supplies, sickness and death, his attitude toward their care, the various uses of the land, the crops raised, the market for produce, the purchase and hiring of slaves. A number of letters from Bermuda, Nevis, St. Vincent, Barbados, and Berbice contain similar discussions. An unusually good letter comes from a planter in St. Vincent, April 4, 1816. Some of these planters' letters give in rather emphatic terms the case of the planters against the abolition of slavery. There is copy of a sermon preached at Port Royal, Jamaica, June 7, 1822, on the anniversary of the great earthquake (1692) which contains a very frank and open criticism of the moral life of Port Royal.

One significant in the collection is a letter in very tiny handwriting from John Horseman, July 15, 1817, which includes the text of Robert Southey's poem entitled "To the Exiled Patriots." The only known publication of the poem is in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Essays on His Own Times*, (1850) I, 19-20.

Horseman's edition of the poem contains sixteen stanzas as compared to Coleridge's ten. In addition eight of the lines are different in the two editions.

Several letters from Thomas Clarkson between 1825 and 1827 discuss the methods to be used in the drive for complete abolition of slavery. A letter from T. Gisborne in 1829 accuses Smith of being a Papist. A lengthy petition in 1829 signed by 95 principal native inhabitants of Bombay, India, protests to the House of Commons against certain grievances and asks redress. A letter of Gilbert Shelton in Bermuda in 1832 comments with keen insight on the recent Reform Act, on Irish independence, and on the types of Christian missionaries in the West Indies; later letters from him give considerable details regarding the purchase of a life insurance Policy in England. Different letters in 1833 tell of the methods and problems involved in the abolition of slavery. A letter from James Stephen announces Wilberforce's death, July 29, 1833; also a letter from Wilberforce's son, Robert, tells of the death. There is a copy of a petition to Rev. H. W. Wilberforce signed by 127 members of both houses of Parliament requesting that William Wilberforce be buried in Westminster Abbey and that they be granted permission to attend the funeral. Several letters between the Clarksons and William Smith shortly after Wilberforce's death concern Robert Wilberforce's proposed life of his father and his ideas of attacking some of Thomas Clarkson's claims for himself in the abolition movement.

The correspondents in this collection include: M. Babington, J. Barham, Richard Bickell, Henry Bright, Richard Brodbelt, Priscilla Buxton, Thomas Powell Buxton, Catherine Clarkson, Thomas Coke, Benjamin Cooper, John Frederick Garling, T. Gisborne, Andrew Grant, Robert Grosvenor, George Hibbert, John Horseman, Robert Harry Inglis, John Longley, Men Leith, Zachary Macaulay, A. Mavrocordato, James Muir, J. Plymley, D. Power, William Rathbone, Gilbert Salton, Philip Sansom, John Scott, B. Shank, Granville Sharp, E. Sharpe, James Stephen, W. Villers, Andrew Wedderborn, James Weeker, Barbara Ann Wilberforce, Robert I. Wilberforce, William Wilberforce, John Wright, and J. Yule.

In addition to the letters mentioned above, there is extensive evidence in the miscellaneous papers and the printed material on slavery. It includes Smith's notes and research on: spies in the slave trade, deaths (of crew and captives) on slave ships, food carried on slave ships, methods of obtaining slaves in Africa, conditions of Africans in Africa, British exports to Africa, eyewitness accounts and lists of witnesses, general information on the West Indies, estates and plantations, diseases and epidemics, population, mistreatment of slaves, breeding of slaves versus importation, description of a riot in Barbados in 1823 and the destruction of a Methodist chapel, printed petitions from the West Indies showing the increasingly difficult financial position of the sugar planters due to high taxes, shipping costs, and low prices, lists and copies of British Laws concerning slavery in the colonies, a planter's plan for the emancipation of slaves over a period of 34 years, conditions of slaves in French colonies, papers comparing the raising of sugar cane in the West Indies and in the East Indies and India, letters regarding the abolition of slavery in Ceylon, speeches

in Parliament or manuscripts of books, Parliamentary resolutions, printed statements for and against slavery, history of the movement for abolition, newspaper excerpts, and magazine articles.

## **Biographical/Historical**

William Smith (1756–1835) was a leading independent British politician, sitting as Member of Parliament (MP) for more than one constituency. He was an English Dissenter and was instrumental in bringing political rights to that religious minority. He was a friend and close associate of William Wilberforce and a member of the Clapham Sect of social reformers, and was in the forefront of many of their campaigns for social justice, prison reform and philanthropic endeavour, most notably the abolition of slavery. He was the maternal grandfather of pioneer nurse and statistician Florence Nightingale.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

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## **Administrative Information**

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### **Publication Statement**

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URL: <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/>

### **Access Restrictions**

Collection is open for research.

### **Use Restrictions**

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

## Acquisition Information

The William Smith papers were acquired by Duke University between 1954 and 1967.

## Processing Information

Processed by: Duke University. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library Staff

Completed ca. 1967. Updated 2018.

Encoded by Stephen Douglas Miller

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

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## Names and Subjects

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- Parliament -- Reform
- Abolitionists -- Great Britain
- Great Britain
- Great Britain -- Social conditions
- Anti-slavery movements -- Great Britain
- Great Britain -- Commerce -- 19th century
- Great Britain -- Politics and government -- 1800-1837
- Slavery -- West Indies
- West Indies -- Economic conditions
- Sugar -- Manufacture and refining -- West Indies
- Slave trade -- Africa -- History
- Slave trade -- Great Britain -- History
- Slave insurrections
- Slave trade -- Caribbean Area -- History
- Macaulay, Zachary, 1768-1838
- Southey, Robert, 1774-1843
- Wilberforce, William, 1759-1833
- Buxton, Priscilla
- Buxton, Thomas Fowell, Sir, 1786-1845
- Clarkson, Thomas, 1760-1846

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## Index

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This partial index was compiled by library staff in the 1980s as part of catalog work on the library's autograph file. Information included here has not been verified since (as of May 2018).

- Abinger, James Scarlett, First Baron See Scarlett
- Addington, Henry, First Viscount Sidmouth 1805, Apr. 21-28 (Memo.); 1812, Apr. 17.
- Animals. Treatment 1828, Jan. 4
- Army in Calabria 1806, Sept. 3
- Art Galleries 1805, July 12, 13
- Art. Medieval. 1810, Dec 3
- Auckland, William Eden, First Baron See Eden
- Augustus Frederick, First Duke of Sussex 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Barham, Charles Middleton, First Baron See Middleton
- Belsham, William 1806, Sept. 28
- Bentinck, William Henry Cavendish, Third Duke of Portland 1807, May 9
- Bexley, Nicholas Vansittart, First Baron See Vanisittart
- Blomfield, Charles James 1829, June 28
- Bonaparte, Jerome 1806, ca. Sept.
- British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom 1805, July 12, 15
- Buckinghamshire 1820, Feb. 19
- Buckinghamshire, Robert Hobart, Fourth Earl of See Hobart
- Bullbaiting 1828, Jan. 4
- Cambridge University 1807, Feb. 12
- Canada. New Brunswick 1825, March 20
- Canada. Nova Scotia 1825, March 20
- Canning, George 1805, Apr. 21-28 (Memo.); 1827, Aug 31.
- Carrington, Robert John, Second Baron Barrington (While known as Robert Smith) 1820, Feb. 19
- Chatham, John Pitt, Second Earl of See Pitt
- Church of England 1829, June 28; 1831, Apr. 29; 1834, March 3.
- Clarkson, Thomas 1807, Feb. 12 (Possibly)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 1806, Sept. 3; 1806, ca. Sept..
- Commerce 1808, Feb. 22
- Copley, John Singleton, First Baron Lyndhurst 1828, Jan. 4; 1829, June 28; 1830, Apr. 30, May.
- Crime and Criminals. Great Britain 1828, Jan. 4
- Cuesta, Feliciano 1809, April 13, May 6, 8
- Curtis, Sir John 1806
- Denman, Thomas, First Baron Denman 1828, Jan. 4
- Denmark, Relations with 1808, Jan. 23, Feb. 16

- Dissenters 1808, June 3; 1812, Apr. 17, May 27; 1820, Feb. 19; 1827, Jan. 1; 1829, June 28; 1831, Apr. 29; 1833, Jan. 17; 1834, March 3; [?], May 2 (Lord Holland).
- Duncombe, U. 1796, June 30
- Dundas, Henry, First Viscount Melville 1805, Apr. 21-28 (Memo.)
- Economic Conditions 1808, Feb. 22
- Eden, William, First Baron Auckland 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Elections 1802, July 7; 1806, Oct. 13, 26, 30, Oct. [?], Nov 19 (2); 1806; 1807, May 9, 11; 1820, Feb. 19; 1831, Apr. 29.
- Exchequer 1806, March 1, Dec.
- Exmouth, Edward Pellew, First Viscount See Pellew
- Fane, John, Tenth Earl of Westmorland 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Fawkes, Walter Ramsden 1807, May 9
- Fellowes, Robert 1806, Oct. 25; 1807, May 9.
- Fisher 1806, Oct. 30
- Fitzpatrick, Sir Jeremiah 1799, June 10
- Fitzpatrick, Richard 1827; Aug. 31
- Foreign Policy 1804, April 4
- Fox, Charles James 1804, Jan. 23, April 4; 1805, Apr. 21, 28 (Memo.); 1806, Sept. 3, 10 (2), 11, Sept.; 1806, Autumn; 182?, Aug. 31; n. d. (Wyvill to Fox).
- Fox, Henry Richard Vassall, Third Baron Holland 1819, Oct. 7
- France, Relations with 1794, Oct. 14; 1795, Nov. 27-29, Dec. 1; 1800, June 26; 1804, Jan. 23; 1808, Jan. 23, Feb. 16; 1810, Dec. 3; n. d. (Wyvill to Fox).
- Francis, Sir Philip 1794, Nov. 29-Dec. 21; 1795, Jan. 13.
- Frederlok Augustus, Duke of York and Albany 1809, April 13, May 6
- Fremantle, Sir William Henry 1806, Oct. 30, Oct.; Nov. 19.
- Gascoyne, Isaac 1807, May 11, 18
- George III 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Goderich, Frederick John Robinson, Viscount See Robinson
- Grattan, Henry 1808, June 3
- Grenville, William Wyndham, First Baron Grenville 1804, April 4; 1806, Oct. 30, Nov. 19 (2); 1806; 1809, Dec. 22.
- Grey, Charles, Second Earl Grey 1815, Feb. 9; 1834, July 14.
- Harrowby, Dudley Ryder, First Earl of See Ryder
- Hawkesbury, Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Baron See Jenkinson
- Heywood, Samuel 1806
- Hobart, Robert, Fourth Earl of Buckinghamshire 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Holland, Henry Richard Vassall Fox, Third Baron See Fox
- Indians. Canada 1825, March 20
- Jenkinson, Robert Banks, Second Earl of Liverpool (While Lord Hawkesbury) 1805, April 21-28
- Jews 1829, June 28
- Kempt, Sir James 1825, March 20
- Kerrison 1806, Oct. 30
- Liverpool 1807, May 11, 18
- Liverpool, Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Earl of See Jenkinson
- Lyndhurst, John Singleton Copley, First Baron See Copley

- Macaulay, Thomas Babington, First Baron Macaulay 1830, March 1
- Mackintosh, Sir James 1828, Jan. 4
- Manchester Riots 1819, Oct. 7
- Melville, Henry Dundas, First Viscount See Dundas
- Middle Ages 1810, Dec. 3
- Middlesex 1819, Oct. 7
- Middleton, Charles, First Baron Barham 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Mortality 1799, June 22
- Navy 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Oxford University 1809, Dec. 22
- Parliamentary Reform 1794, Nov. 29-Dec. 21; 1795, Jan. 13; 1796, April 27, May 23, June 30; 1804, Jan. 23; 1811, March 12, Apr. 29; 1833, Jan. 17 (Possibly).
- Patterson, John (1755-1833) 1806, Oct. 26, 30, Oct.
- Peel, Sir Robert, Second Baronet 1828, Jan. 4
- Pellew, Edward, First Viscount Exmouth 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Pitt, John, Second Earl of Chatham 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Pitt, William (1759-1806) 1794, Oct. 14; 1796, April 27, May 23, June 30; 1804, Jan. 23, April 4; 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.).
- Ponsonty, George 1808, June 3; 1815, Feb. 9.
- Portland, William Henry Cavendish Bentinck, Third Duke of See Bentinck
- Portugal, Relations with 1807, Feb. 11
- Pringle, Thomas (1789-1834) [Possibly about Thomas Pringle] 1831 [Watermark].
- Robinson, Frederick John, First Earl of Ripon 1827, Aug. 31
- Roman Catholic Emancipation 1804, April 4; 1806, Autumn; 1808, June; 1820; 1827, Aug. 31; 1828, April 28, June 17; 1829, June 28; 1831, April 29; [?], May 2 (Lord Holland).
- Russell, Lord John, First Earl Russell 1831, Apr. 29
- Ryder, Dually, First Earl of Harrowby 1827, Aug. 31
- Scarlett, James, First Baron Abinger 1828, Jan. 4
- Sherbrooke, Sir John Coape 1825, March 20
- Sidmouth, Henry Addington, First Viscount See Addington
- Sierra Leone 1807, Feb. 11
- Slave Trade 1799, June 10, 22; 1806, Autumn; 1807, Feb. 11, 25, 26, 28, March 5, May 11, 18.
- Smyth, William 1807, Feb. 12
- Society of Friends of the People 1794, Dec. 21; 1795, Jan. 13.
- Spain. Napoleonic Conquest 1809, April 13, May 6, 8
- Strickland, Mr. (Of York) 1804, Jan. 23
- Sussex, Augustus Frederick, First Duke of See Augustus Frederick
- Tarleton, Sir Banastre, First Baronet 1807, May 11, 18
- Taxation 1815, Feb. 9
- Thornton, Henry 1815, Jan. 19
- Thornton, Marianne (Sykes) 1815, Jan. 19
- Thornton, Samuel 1815, March 6
- Thornton, Robert (1759-1826) 1814, Sept. 19; 1815, March 6.

- Trinidad 1807, Feb. 11
- Unitarian Churches 1829, June 28
- Vansittart, Nicholas, First Baron Bexley 1805, Apr. 21-28 (Memo.); 1806, Oct. 30, Oct. [?].
- Vyse, Richard (1746-1825) 1806, Nov. 19 (2)
- Wellesley, Arthur, First Duke of Wellington 1829, June 28
- Westmorland, John Fane, Tenth Earl of See Fane
- Whitbread, Samuel 1815, Feb. 9
- Wilberforce, William 1795, Dec. 1; 1796, May 23, June 30; 1807, Feb. 26, March 5, May 18; 1815, Jan. 19, March 6.
- Windham, William (1750-1810) 1806, Oct. 30
- Yorke, Charles Philip 1805, April 21-28 (Memo.)
- Yorkshire 1794, Oct. 14; 1795, Jan. 19, Nov. 27-29, Dec. 1; 1796, June 30.

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## Collection Inventory

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General manuscripts: correspondence, essay drafts, and notes, 1787-1860, undated	Box 1 Oversize-folder 1
<b>Physical Description:</b> 6 folders	
Manuscript notes, gathered statistics, and research regarding slavery in the Caribbean and West Indies, 1780s-1840s	Box 1
Manuscript notes, gathered statistics, and research regarding slave trade and conditions in Africa, 1790s-1840s	Box 1
Drafts of speeches, papers, and resolutions regarding slavery, 1800s	Box 1
Drawings, notes, and statistics regarding slave trade, deaths, and conditions on vessels between Africa and the Caribbean/West Indies	Box 1
Manuscript notes, statistics, and research regarding Great Britain crime and punishment, economics, and military, 1820s-1830s	Box 1
"Dimensions of ships in the port of Liverpool, employed in the African Slave Trade", 1788	Box 2

**Scope and Contents**

Fragile fold-out broadsheet that has deteriorated along creases. Includes tables of slave ship measurements as well as calculations of provisions and conditions for enslaved people during transport.

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Printed pamphlet with a resolution in favor of Britain continuing to allow the slave trade, agreed to by "planters, merchants, and others, interested in the West Indies" at a meeting "held at the London-Tavern", 1789 May 19

Box 2

**Scope and Contents**

Resolution outlining support for the protection of the slave trade and imports of slaves persisting among British colonies in the Caribbean, with 19 reasons articulated including: the right to property, the calculated financial gains from sugar imports, the need to compete with the Spanish, the risks and dangers of the West Indies climate to slaves (meaning population growth was not sufficient to meet demand for laborers), racial stereotypes about the physical constitution of both English and African laborers, and the importance of the colonies to the Empire.

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"An Address to the Public of Great Britain and Ireland on the Occasion of the Approaching Termination of Colonial Slavery, on the First Day of August Next", 1834 June 27

Box 2

**Scope and Contents**

Printed by Order of the Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society, Aldermanbury.

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"Colonial Laws respecting Slaves," House of Commons, 1816 April 5

Box 2

**Scope and Contents**

Printed compilation of slave laws for British colonies enacted between 1788 and 1816, including Antigua, Bahamas, Barbadoes, Bermuda, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Nevis, St. Christopher, St. Vincent, and Tobago.

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Proclamation by Walter W. Lewis announcing a British blockade of Galinas, Sierra Leone, to curtail slave ships and the slave trade, 1826

Box 2

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General printed materials including bills, petitions, articles re: British colonial slave trade and sugar trade, 1780s-1820s

Box 2

Printed materials: clippings from West Indies newspapers regarding Barbadoes slave riot and general slave trade press coverage, 1823-1827

Box 2

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Printed materials: abolitionist tracts, pamphlets, and essays circulated for British public

Box 2