



Guide to the John W. Williams papers, 1835 May-July

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Summary

Collection Title:

John W. Williams papers, 1835 May-July

Creator:

Williams, John W., 1803-1837

Abstract:

John Worthington Williams (1803-1837) was a white attorney and magazine editor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This collection consists of legal documents, correspondence, case argument outlines, notes on the testimony of witnesses, and other documents compiled by Williams during his representation of Robert Aitken before the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas against Mary Gilmore (1817?-1856) in June-July 1835. Aitken alleged that Gilmore, a young woman living in Philadelphia with her adoptive father, was Emily Winder, a multiracial person enslaved by Aitken who disappeared from his home in Baltimore at the age of 8 or 9 in 1825. The judge decided the case in Gilmore's favor.

Extent:

1 folders (27 items)

Language:

Material in English

Collection ID:

RL.01389

Permalink:

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1m43c>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], John W. Williams Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

This collection consists of legal documents, correspondence, case argument outlines, notes on the testimony of witnesses, and other documents compiled

by Philadelphia attorney John W. Williams during his representation of Robert Aitken before the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas against Mary Gilmore in June-July 1835.

Evidence-related documents include a copy of Milly Winder's manumission papers; affidavits attesting Aitken's ownership of Emily Winder, including details about her age and physical appearance; a copy of the original "Ten Dollar Reward" offer for Emily's return that Aitken had published in August 1825; and affidavits attesting to the character of Robert Aitken and his brother James Aitken. Additional legal documents include a subpoena and other documents related to witness Maria Congo's appearance in court, and warrants of arrest and removal issued against Emily Winder in June 1835.

Williams' notes include outlines of his arguments, questions for witnesses, and his notes on case law and witness testimonies. The collection also includes a newspaper clipping of an article reprinted from the Philadelphia Inquirer concerning the case.

Biographical/Historical

John Worthington Williams was a white attorney and magazine editor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was born in Westerfield, Connecticut, on November 17, 1803, to parents John and Mary Williams. After graduating from Yale University in 1822, Williams relocated to Philadelphia to practice law.

In June-July 1835, Williams represented Robert Aitken (1790-1849), a white druggist and city inspector from Baltimore, Maryland, in Aitken's attempts to claim Philadelphia resident Mary Gilmore (later Gordon) (1817?-1856) as his enslaved property. Aitken alleged that Gilmore was the same person as Emily Winder, an enslaved girl, described as "mulatto," who disappeared from his residence in 1825 at around 8-9 years old; Gilmore denied this claim. Aitken's representatives submitted an affidavit of ownership, a physical description of Winder, and other documentation to a Philadelphia judge to secure a warrant of removal.

After a warrant was issued for Winder's forced return to Baltimore, the Court of Common Pleas commenced a hearing to establish whether Aitken's claim was valid, in accordance with Pennsylvania's 1826 personal liberty law. Among the witnesses who testified on Gilmore's behalf were Jacob Gilmore (approximately 1784-1835), a free Black confectioner and Mary's adoptive father, who asserted that he and his late wife adopted Mary as a young child, years before Emily Winder disappeared from Baltimore. This testimony was supported by several other local witnesses who attested to seeing Mary as a child in Philadelphia. Milly Winder, Emily's mother, who had been enslaved by the Aitken family but manumitted without her daughter in 1824, also testified that Gilmore was not her daughter. Witnesses who testified on behalf of Aitken included Maria Congo, a free Black woman from Delaware who was acquainted with both Millie Winder and Jacob Gilmore's late wife. Dr. James Aitken, brother of Robert Aitken, also

gave evidence on Aitken's behalf. The judge ultimately dismissed Aitken's claim, citing the preponderance of witness testimony affirming Mary Gilmore's identity.

During the hearing, some witnesses also expressed their belief that Gilmore was white due to her light skin. After the claim was dismissed, a local paper reported that interested parties had traced her parents and found them both to be white, leading to editorials in the abolitionist press about the dangers that fugitive slave laws posed to white women as well as free Black people.

Later in 1835, Williams left his law career to become an editor of the American Quarterly Review and the National Gazette. In April 1836, he married Anne Keppele, with whom he had one son. Williams died of an illness in September 1837.

In 1839, Mary Gilmore married James R. Gordon, a Black Philadelphia resident who also became a confectioner. The couple had one daughter, Cordelia Gordon (Carlile), and lived in Philadelphia's Pine Ward. Gilmore died in May 1856 and was buried in Lebanon Cemetery in Philadelphia.

Sources:

"Case of Mary Gilmore", Saturday Courier (Philadelphia, PA), July 18, 1835: p.1-2. Accessed online 2025 April 29 via [Readex: America's Historical Newspapers](#).

[John W. Williams correspondence finding aid](#), Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania, accessed 2025 April 29.

[Mary Gilmore Gordon memorial](#), Find a Grave. Accessed 2025 September 22.

"Matrimony Notice", Public Ledger (Philadelphia, PA), July 25, 1839: p. 2. Accessed online 2025 September 22 via [Readex: America's Historical Newspapers](#).

Virginius, "Mary Gilmore: Stanzas", Liberator (1831-1865), July 18, 1835. Accessed online 2025 September 3 via [Proquest Historical Newspapers](#).

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Acquisition Information

The John W. Williams papers were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library as a gift in 1973.

Processing Information

Processed by Rubenstein Library staff, 1973

Encoded by Jessica Carew, May 2012

Reprocessed with reparative description by Mary Mellon, September 2025.

Accession(s) described in this finding aid: 1973

Use Restrictions

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Related Materials

Related Material

[African American slavery documents collection](#) (contains many early legal papers relating to slavery and manumission) David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

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Names and Subjects

- African American adoptive parents -- 19th century
- African American families -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia -- 19th century
- African Americans -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia -- 19th century
- Enslaved children -- Maryland
- Enslaved persons -- Emancipation
- Enslaved persons -- Legal status, laws, etc. -- United States
- Enslaved women -- United States
- Freed persons -- Legal status, laws, etc. -- United States
- Fugitive slaves -- Pennsylvania
- Lawyers -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia
- Personal liberty laws
- Slaveholders -- Maryland -- Baltimore
- Slavery -- Law and legislation -- United States -- Cases
- Slavery -- Maryland
- Slavery -- United States -- Legal status of enslaved persons in free states
- Philadelphia (Pa.) -- Trials, litigation, etc.
- Trial and arbitral proceedings
- Affidavits
- Manumission documents
- Williams, John W., 1803-1837
- Gordon, Mary Gilmore, 1817?-1856
- Aitken, Robert, 1790-1849
- Gilmore, Jacob, approximately 1784-1835
- Winder, Emily, 1816 or 1817-
- Winder, Milly, active 1816-1835

Collection Inventory

Deposition by Robert and James Aitken before
Justices of the Peace for Baltimore City, 1835
May 13 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Deposition by Robert and James Aitken before Justices of the Peace for Baltimore City, 1835 May 13](#)

Scope and Contents note

States that Emily Winder, born in 1816 or 1817, had been taken from Robert Aitken's residence on July 26, 1825.

"Robert Aitken manumission to Negro
Milly" (1822 April 3), certified copy, 1835 May 25
(online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Robert Aitken manumission to Negro Milly" \(1822 April 3\), certified copy, 1835 May 25](#)

Scope and Contents note

"Set for 1824 Jan. 1, providing that she continues to be a good servant.
Any children she might have in the intervening period are also to be free."
Baltimore, Maryland.

Letter from Robert Aitken, Baltimore, to John W.
Williams, 1835 June 02 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Letter from Robert Aitken, Baltimore, to John W. Williams, 1835 June 02](#)

Scope and Contents note

Appears to concern the matter for Emily Winder.

"Ten Dollar Reward" advertisement for the return
of an 8 or 9 year old enslaved girl named Emily
(1825 August 24), certified copy, 1835 June 27
(online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Ten Dollar Reward" advertisement for the return of an 8 or 9 year old enslaved girl named Emily \(1825 August 24\), certified copy, 1835 June 27](#)

Scope and Contents note

Description reads, "Nearly white very black eyes and hair; her mother is a yellow woman known by the name of Milly Winder." The ad originally ran 1825 Aug.

24, and it claims she escaped or was taken July 26, 1825. It also mentions Emily may have been taken by another Black individual.

Warrant of arrest for Emily Winder, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, 1835 June 13 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Warrant of arrest for Emily Winder, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, 1835 June 13](#)

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) subpoena of Maria Congo before Honorable Archibald Randall to testify in case concerning Robert Aitken and Emily Winder, 1835 June 15 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Commonwealth of Pennsylvania \(Philadelphia\) subpoena of Maria Congo before Honorable Archibald Randall to testify in case concerning Robert Aitken and Emily Winder, 1835 June 15](#)

Court order to Sheriff of Philadelphia County to ensure Maria Congo appears before the Court of Common Pleas, 1835 June 15 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Court order to Sheriff of Philadelphia County to ensure Maria Congo appears before the Court of Common Pleas, 1835 June 15](#)

Warrant of Removal granted to Robert Aitken for the return of Emily Winder, 1835 June 15 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Warrant of Removal granted by Archibald Randall, Esq., judge of the Court of Common Pleas for the City and County of Philadelphia Pa., to Robert Aitken for the return of Emily Winder to his possession](#)

Scope and Contents

Warrant of Removal granted by Archibald Randall, Esq., judge of the Court of Common Pleas for the City and County of Philadelphia to Robert Aitken for the return of Emily Winder to his possession

"Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, City and County of Philadelphia, In the matter of Emily Winder, a fugitive slave", 1835 June 15 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, City and County of Philadelphia, In the matter of Emily Winder, a fugitive slave", 1835 June 15](#)

Scope and Contents note

Handwritten copy of Archibald Randall's initial judgment in the case regarding Robert Aitken and Emily Winder.

"Transcript from the Docket of Alderman Binns",
Commonwealth vs Maria Congo, 1835 June 16
(online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Transcript from the Docket of Alderman Binns", Commonwealth vs Maria Congo, 1835 June 16](#)

"Andrew Aitkin's 1st Administration
Account" (1814 March 23), certified copy, 1835
June 25 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Andrew Aitkin's 1st Administration Account, 1835 June 25](#)

Scope and Contents note

Deals with the administration by Robert Aitken of his father's will.

Letter from Brantz Mayer, Baltimore, to John
Williams, 1835 June 26 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Letter from Brantz Mayer, Baltimore, to John Williams, 1835 June 26](#)

Scope and Contents note

Reference to providing legal volume with information on similar cases and laws/
statutes that support the case.

William Pechin affidavit regarding Emily Winder,
1835 June 27 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [William Pechin affidavit regarding Emily Winder, 1835 June 27](#)

Scope and Contents note

Includes clipping of advertisement for ten dollar reward for Emily's return.

Biographical / Historical

William Pechin was the editor of the Commercial Chronicle & Baltimore Advertiser, the newspaper in which Aitken's original reward for Emily's return appeared in 1825.

Letter of reference as to the character of James
Aitken, M.D., and Robert Aitken from their family
physician, 1835 June 27 (online item available)

Folder 1

Digital Object: [Letter of reference as to the character of James Aitken, M.D., and Robert Aitken from their family physician, 1835 June 27](#)

Letter of reference as to the character to James Aitken, M.D., from his former private tutor, 1835 June 27 (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Letter of reference as to the character to James Aitken, M.D., from his former private tutor, 1835 June 27](#)

"Release: James Aitken to Andrew Aitken", 1835 June 29 (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Release: James Aitken to Andrew Aitken", 1835 June 29](#)

Questions for Jacob Gilmore, 1835 June 29 (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Questions for Jacob Gilmore, 1835 June 29](#)

Transcript of witness testimonies, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Transcript of witness testimonies, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Scope and Contents note

Includes the testimonies of various individuals from Baltimore and Philadelphia, such as Maria Congo, a cousin of the late Mrs. Gilmore who apparently informed Mr. Aitken of Emily's presence in Philadelphia. Also contains testimony of Jacob Gilmore, Emily's adoptive father, and Amelia (Milly) Winder, who said she did not believe the woman in question was her daughter that went missing after she was freed.

Williams's argument notes, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Williams's argument notes, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Questions for Williams's examination of a witness, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Questions for Williams's examination of a witness, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Scope and Contents note

This witness was present in the Aitken household when Emily went missing. Includes more notes for arguing the case.

Robert Aitken affidavit regarding Emily Winder, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Robert Aitken affidavit regarding Emily Winder, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

List of laws and statutes related to the case, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [List of laws and statutes related to the case, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

"Directions to Mr. Aitken" , approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Directions to Mr. Aitken, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Scope and Contents

Memo from Williams to Robert Aitken concerning the evidence they would need for the case

Notes and witness testimony analysis, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Notes and witness testimony analysis, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Clipping of report on the case from the Philadelphia Inquirer, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Clipping of report on the case from the Philadelphia Inquirer, approximately 1835 June-July](#)

Scope and Contents note

Gives detailed summary of major points of the case.

"Matter of Emily [Winder] a slave. June 15-July 1st 1835" cover sheet, approximately 1835 July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: ["Matter of Emily \[Winder\] a slave. June 15-July 1st 1835" cover sheet, approximately 1835 July](#)

Narrative case summary, approximately 1835 June-July (online item available) Folder 1

Digital Object: [Narrative case summary, approximately 1835 June-July](#)