

**WASHINGTON LITERARY SOCIETY
RECORDS, 1835-1922**

**SKILLMAN LIBRARY
LAFAYETTE COLLEGE**

HISTORICAL SKETCH

In July of 1830 a group of students at the Germantown Manual Labor Academy in Pennsylvania formed a debating club called the Manual Labor Academy Philomathean Society. Shortly before the Academy was moved to Easton in the spring of 1832 to form Lafayette College, the members renamed their organization the Washington Literary Society. The founders of the society were Samuel M. Hamill '36, Benjamin Tyler '36, and Joseph Worrel '36. These students revised their constitution and organized debating sessions before the college officially opened on May 9, 1832. The Washington Literary Society continued to meet weekly until it became defunct in 1923.

The literary society was the first form of extra-curricular activity to appear on the Lafayette campus in the 19th century. Its importance to the student community was tremendous at a time when Greek fraternities did not yet exist on campus. Certain characteristics of the later Greek system could be found in the literary societies, such as rivalry and competition with the sister debating club, great secrecy at meetings, and the "rushing" of the Freshman class each fall. Both the Washington and Franklin Literary Societies provided the young men at Lafayette with an alternative to purely academic study.

The society itself was organized into two main houses. The Lower House consisted of all undergraduate members and officers while the Upper House was comprised of the alumni. Standing committees were the Literary, Business, Member, and Upper House Committee. Membership was not limited to students who followed literary programs of study; civil, mining, electrical and chemical engineering students were permitted to become "library members." Such members were not required to perform in the literary exercises to the extent of regular members, but their privileges were restricted. Library members could not hold office or vote. Honorary membership was also granted by the society. Honorary members were elected from the ranks of eminent politicians, theologians, and scholars, representing both the Lafayette community and the country at large. These members were recognized for their intellectual achievements and were often called upon to give the annual Commencement address before the literary societies.

The Washington Literary Society, also referred to as Washington or Wash Hall, functioned mainly as a debating club. It provided the student with the opportunity to develop his oratorical, arguing, and writing skills outside of the classroom. From 1834 to 1881, meetings were held in a hall in South College. These weekly meetings consisted of a set of prescribed literary exercises, which remained basically the same throughout the existence of the organization. Members were required to deliver original orations, readings, declamations, essays, and debates. The debate topic was announced a week in advance and certain Hall members were assigned to argue either the "affirmative" or the "negative" side of the issue. At the conclusion of the performances, the society voted on the winning side of the debate as well as on the opinions about the issue regardless of who argued the best. This was usually referred to as the "merits of the question."

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Functions of the society were not limited to those that occurred in the secrecy of the Hall. Public performances were frequent throughout the 19th century, where members recited essays and debated before the citizens of Easton. The Junior Oratorical Contest was an annual event between the Washington and Franklin Literary Societies. This public debate was traditionally judged by the audience. Joint meetings between the two societies occurred more frequently by the turn of the century. These meetings included activities such as mock trials and a mock Republican Convention in May of 1908.

The literary society at Lafayette did not function merely as an extra-curricular activity for the student body; it also provided the college with the only library facilities it had for many years. The acquisition of books was based upon donations of students, alumni, and honorary members. A librarian was elected from the society and paid a minimal fee from the treasury for his services. Books were housed in the society library in Pardee Hall. After the 1879 Pardee Hall fire, both literary societies were provided with new quarters in the West Wing, which were dedicated in May, 1881. One of the college's greatest losses was the destruction of the Washington Literary Society library in the second Pardee fire of 1897. Not only was the society's valuable collection of library books destroyed, but also most of the records of the society dating from its establishment in 1830. When the society ceased meeting in 1923, approximately 2,000 volumes were given to Van Wickle Library.

The eventual dissolution of the literary society on campus appears to be related to the growth and popularity of the Greek system. Student involvement in "secret" organizations shifted from the debating society to the fraternity. The Lafayette student became more interested in an organization which emphasized social activities over intellectual pursuits. The records of the Washington Literary Society reflect these changes. By the end of the 19th century, greater emphasis was placed upon social functions than literary exercises. Debates no longer occurred at every meeting and members appeared more interested in organizing dances and socials. Eventually attendance became a problem. In 1919, pressures from the college forced the two societies to call a special meeting to discuss a merger. The college felt that one of the Halls should be surrendered to provide badly-needed classroom space. The decision was postponed until 1921, when faculty members expressed their desire to see the societies merged as an honorary society. By 1923, all efforts to renew interest in the literary society ceased and Washington Hall became defunct

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Washington Literary Society records, 1835-1922 (2.5 linear feet), document the history of this debating club at Lafayette College. Most of the material post-dates the Pardee Hall fire of 1897. The records occur in bound volumes and are arranged by type of volume--minutes, programs of debates, essays, constitution and by-laws, financial records, library records, roll books, and visitor's registers. Unbound material is located with miscellaneous records at the end of the collection.

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The most valuable records in the collection are the minute books, essays, and constitution and by-laws. Minute books relate the business and activities of the society. The essays are of particular interest as early examples of students' writings. Constitution and by-laws describe the organization of the society.

An index and appendix to the collection are located at the end of the description. The appendix provides a listing of Washington Literary Society essays and publications.

ARRANGEMENT

Box	1	Minute Books: 1897-1922
	2	Program of Debates: 1898-1901
	3	Essays: 1835-1846
	4	Constitution and By-laws: 1881-1898
	5-6	Financial Records: 1871-1917
	7	Library Records: 1877-1919
	8	Roll Book and Visitor's Register: 1899-1920
	9	Publications: 1840-1883
	10, 25-26(FLS)	Miscellaneous Records

DESCRIPTIVE INVENTORY

Minutes: 1897-1922

The two surviving minute books of the Washington Literary Society contain weekly minute entries of the society's general meetings and those of its Business Committee. The earliest entry recorded is December 21, 1897, which was the first meeting of the society after the Pardee Hall fire on December 18 of the same year. The final meeting of the society appears to have been March 22, 1922. While most minutes of 1897-1922 have remained intact, the quality of the minute entry generally diminishes in the 20th century, reflecting the growing lack of interest in the literary societies at this time. Limited information is available in the few entries from the 1920's, and what has been recorded is very difficult to read.

Minutes of the weekly meeting of the entire organization can be found in the two volumes in Box 1. Minutes of the Business Committee are contained in the volume dating 1897-1922. The minutes of October, 1921-February, 1922 are in the "Program of Debates" found in Box 2.

The format of the Washington Literary Society minutes remained basically the same throughout the life of the organization. Information on the literary exercises of the meeting is recorded, including a listing of performances and the members responsible for each, a statement on the debate topic and the verdict of the judges, and the announcement of any new committee

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business. Literary exercises vary over the years and include such performances as orations, essay readings, addresses, declamations, and debates.

The minutes of the Business Committee found in the volume dating 1897-1922 record excuses for fines as well as approval and payment of bills. The actual Business Committee minutes cover 1897-1912. The remaining pages of the volume record the regular minutes of the society and date 1919-1922.

The two minute books of the society are valuable mainly for their record of debates for the last 20 years of the organization's existence. Debate topics generally concern contemporary political issues. These minute books also document the decline of the literary society at Lafayette.

Box 1

Minute Book: 1897(Dec)-1920(Jan)

Minute Book - Business Committee: 1897(Dec)-1922(Mar)

Program of Debates: 1898-1901

The Program of Debates records the weekly debate topic, the members taking the "affirmative" and "negative" sides of the issue, and those acting as judges. Other literary exercises for the meeting, such as orations, are often listed as well. The annual Senior Program is also recorded. It appears that this event was meant to parody the faculty and Franklin Hall. Entries for the Program of Debates end in January of 1901. The remaining pages of the volume contain the minutes of October, 1921-February, 1922 and listings of the guests attending the society's dances in 1921.

Box 2

Program of Debates: 1898-1901(1921-1922)

Essays: ca. 1835-1846

One of the few early records surviving the Pardee fire of 1897, this volume contains nine essays delivered on behalf of the Washington Literary Society at the annual contest with Franklin Hall. It is invaluable as one of the only existing examples of the original essays written by Washington Hall members. Similar publications can be found in Box 9.

Box 3

Essays: ca. 1835-1846

Constitution and By-laws: 1881-1898

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The constitution and by-laws of the Washington Literary Society survive in four volumes. The volume dating 1887 is in manuscript; the others are printed. Articles of the constitution discuss the organization of the Lower and Upper Houses of the society. Order of exercises, election of officers, and standing committees within the organization are described as well. Each volume provides an index at the end. The 1887 volume offers a listing of Hall members dating 1901-1920.

Box 4

Application for a Charter of Incorporation: 1872
Constitution and By-laws: 1881(2 copies)
 : 1887
 : 1898
Constitution: 1919 (pamphlet)

Financial Records: 1871-1917

The financial records consist of four volumes dating 1871-1917. Three of the volumes pre-date the Pardee fire of 1897. Volumes 1-3 are account books which were maintained by the Treasurer. They indicate the fines and general accounts of all Washington Literary Society members. Volumes 1 and 2 contain indexes to the members and their accounts. Volume 4 records the subscriptions for the erection of a new hall for the society, with the earliest entries dating 1871. While their goal was set at \$25,000, only a few subscriptions are entered into this book.

Box 5

Financial Records-Volume 1: 1872-1887
 -Volume 2: 1888-1915

Box 6

Financial Records-Volume 3: 1896-1917
 -Volume 4: ca. 1871

Library Records: 1877-1919

The library records include circulation and accession data as well as catalogs of the books in the Washington Literary Society library. The Circulation Book provides a record of the books borrowed by society members for the period of 1899-1919. This volume also contains lists of Freshmen present at the Washington Literary Society receptions of 1913-1914 and a list of Hall members with their campus addresses, ca. 1919. The Library Record appears to be an accession book containing information on volumes accessioned throughout the 19th century. The two catalogs are in printed form and list books by subject.

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Box 7

Circulation Book: 1899-1919
Library Record: nd
Catalogue of the Library: 1877
: 1888

Roll Book: 1914-1920

The roll book contains the attendance records of 1914-1920. It is a detached section of a larger volume.

Box 8 Roll book: 1914-1920

Visitor's Register: 1899-1920

This register contains the name and residences of visiting honorary members, alumni, family, and friends of the Washington Literary Society. The most extensive entries concern reunions.

Box 8 Visitor's Register: 1899-1920

Miscellaneous Records

Miscellaneous records include bound and unbound material pertaining to the Washington Literary Society. Box 9 contains publications of the society, such as addresses, essays, and accounts of Hall events. The only early correspondence of the society which still exists can be found here. The gavel and a diploma dating 1846 are housed with the Franklin Literary Society records (Boxes 26-27).

Box 9

Publications-Addresses-W.G. Clark: 1840
 -S.M. Hamill: 1867 (2 copies)
Publications-Aula Washingtonia: 1882
 : 1883
Publications-Essay-A.B. Howell: 1869 (2 copies)

Box 10

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Brief History of the Washington Literary Society, by E.A. Weaver
Correspondence: 1854-1912 (1 folder)
Financial (1 folder)
Library (1 folder)
Memorabilia (3 folders)
Notes-General (1 folder)
Portrait Label, Germantown Manual Labor Academy
Box 26(FLS) Gavels
Box 27(FLS) Diplomas (1 folder) (oversized)

APPENDIX - ADDRESSES, ESSAYS, AND PUBLICATIONS, 1833-1888

The following list of publications includes manuscript essays written by students as well as printed addresses delivered before the literary societies by honorary members at the annual Commencement ceremonies. Notation in parenthesis at the end of each entry indicates the collection (Franklin Literary Society and Washington Literary Society) and box number in which the work may be found.

Allen, R.P. "Benjamin Franklin." 1886. (FLS-25)

Banks, J. "Address." 1840. (FLS-25)

Breckinridge, R.J. "A Discourse on the Formation and Development of the American Mind." September 20, 1837. (FLS-25)

Brewster, F.C. "Religio et Justitia His Dirige Te." July 30, 1861. (FLS-25)

Brown, Alexander E. "Dedication of the FLS Hall." December 20, 1839. (FLS-23)

Chapman, C.J.A. "Woman." March 20, 1844. (WLS-3)

Clark, W.G. "Address." July 4, 1840. (WLS-9)

Coulter, D. "The Influence of Benevolent Association Upon the American People." April 1, 1835. (WLS-3)

Dallas, G.M. "Address." July 4, 1835. (FLS-25)

Ditts, J.N. "The Triumph of Christianity - A Poem." March 22, 1843. (WLS-3)

Dougherty, D. "Fears for the Future of the Republic." July 26, 1859. (FLS-25)

Elliott, C. "The Effects of the Reformation on the Progress of Knowledge." March 31, 1837. (WLS-3)

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Hamill, S.M. "Address." February 22, 1867. (WLS-9)

Harris, J.M. "The Egyptian Prince; and Hebrew Lawgiver." 1868. (FLS-25)

Heckman, George. "Claudius of Turin; An Original Oration." September 17, 1844. (FLS-23)

Heckman, George. "Passing Away." March 19, 1845. (FLS-23)

Henry, S.C. "Address." July 27, 1852. (FLS-25)

Ingersoll, J.R. "Address." July 4, 1835. (FLS-25)

Levin, L.C. "Intemperance: The Prelude to Gambling and Suicide, as Illustrated in the Life of Rev. C.C. Colton, Author of Lacon. September 18, 1844. (FLS-25)

Lewis, J.M. "The Divine Superintendence Manifested in the Discovery and Settlement of America." April 3, 1839. (WLS-3)

March, F.A., Jr. "Dedication of the New Hall of the FLS." May 2, 1881. (FLS-23)

McClure, A.K. "Everyday Life." June 20, 1871. (FLS-25)

McPhaine, J.H. "On the Study of History." nd. (WLS-3)

Mendenhall, H.G. "The Reflector." 1871. (FLS-23)

M'Jilton, J.N. "The Path of Life." 1841. (FLS-25)

Moore, J.G. "The Rise and Progress of Liberal Principles." March 24, 1842. (WLS-23)

Nairne, C.M. "The Morals and Manners of the Class Room." 1858. (FLS-25)

Porter, T.C. "Egypt: A Poem." March 25, 1840. (WLS-3)

Porter, W.A. "Address." September 20, 1843. (FLS-25)

Scott, J.M. "Address." July 4, 1834. (FLS-25)

Stein, F.D. "Joan of Arc, or, The Heroine." March 19, 1846. (WLS-3)

Wood, J.W. "Ancient Civilization on the Nile." July 25, 1865. (FLS-25)

Aula Washingtonia. "An Account of the Annual Reunion." June 26, 1883. (WLS-9)

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Aula Washingtonia. "An Account of the New Hall and Library." April, 1881. (WLS-9)

Aula Washingtonia. "An Account of the Dedication of the New Hall." April 7, 1881. (WLS-9)