David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant papers 8527541

This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on January 22, 2026.
Description is written in: English.

Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary

3041 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
Telephone: (212) 851-5606
burke@library.columbia.edu
URL: https://library.columbia.edu/locations/burke.html

Table of Contents

Summary Information 3
Biographical / Historical 3
Scope and Contents 4
Arrangement 5
Administrative Information 5
Related Materials 6
Controlled Access Headings 6
Burke Library record group: 7
Collection Inventory 7

Summary Information

Repository:	Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary
Creator:	Olyphant, David W. C., 1789-1851
Title:	David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant papers
ID:	8527541
Date [inclusive]:	1827 -- 1851
Physical Description:	0.25 linear feet 0.25 linear feet; 1 box
Language of the Material:	English
Material Specific Details:	A PDF of the letters is available at the following link: https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/burke/files/2014/02/Burke_MRL6_OlyphantPapers.pdf
Abstract:	This collection contains typewritten copies of letters originally written by David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant between 1827 and 1851. Olyphant was an American trader with offices in New York and Guangzhou, and a prominent supporter of the American missionary enterprise in China.

Preferred Citation

Item description, MRL6: David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant Papers, 1827-1851, box #, folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Biographical / Historical

David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant was born in Newport, Rhode Island on March 7, 1789. He was the son of Dr. David Olyphant, a Scottish supporter of Charles Edward Stewart who had come to America in the 1740s, and Ann (née Vernon) Olyphant, granddaughter of Richard Ward, governor of Rhode Island. D.W.C. Olyphant was raised Presbyterian, although some sources mention connections to the Religious Society of Friends. After his father died in 1805, Olyphant went to New York City and found employment with King and Talbot, a

trading firm engaged in business in China. In 1820 he went to China himself, where he met the pioneering Scottish missionary Robert Morrison 馬禮遜, 1782- 1834, in Guangzhou 廣州 (Canton) This was the beginning of a long-standing and close relationship between Olyphant and the Protestant missionary enterprise in China.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Biographical / Historical

Olyphant returned to the U.S. in 1823 and had a son, Robert Morrison Olyphant, in 1824 with his wife Ann Archer (née McKenzie) Olyphant. He returned to live in China from 1826 to 1827, during which time he wrote a letter (a copy of which is included in this collection) that is credited with bringing the first American missionaries to China.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Biographical / Historical

In 1828 Olyphant organized the trading firm Olyphant and Company from the remains of his former employer's business which had gone bankrupt. He was well-known for his opposition to the opium trade, and his was one of the only large trading firms not to engage in opium smuggling in China. He again spent time in China from 1834 to 1837, and in 1838 was elected to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the organization that had dispatched the first American missionaries to China in 1829. In addition to his financial support, his trading ships also offered free passage to missionaries traveling to and from China. In 1850 he traveled once again to China, but ill health forced him to set out on a return journey to the U.S. the next year. Olyphant died while en route overland across Egypt on June 10, 1851.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Scope and Contents

This collection contains typewritten copies of letters originally written by David Washington Cincinnatus Olyphant between 1827 and 1851. The recipient of the letters is not recorded. Topics of the letters include missionaries and their work, bringing missionaries to China, opium, and the addition of California to the United States.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Arrangement

This collection is arranged chronologically.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Administrative Information

Publication Statement

Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary

3041 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
Telephone: (212) 851-5606
burke@library.columbia.edu
URL: https://library.columbia.edu/locations/burke.html

Revision Description

XML Instance Created by Sarah Davis. EAD was imported spring 2019 as part of the ArchivesSpace Phase II migration. EAD spot checked and corrected and description updated by Leah Edelman. June 3, 2014 2019-05-20 2020-06-25

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Onsite storage.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Formerly part of the independent Missionary Research Library (MRL), these records were likely donated by David W. Lyon along with his own papers, and accessioned by the Burke Library at the time of the MRL's closure in 1976.

Custodial History

The letters were copied from the originals by hand by Robert Morrison Olyphant, and then typewritten. In 1914 these copies were lent to Henry Blair Graybill, 1880 - 1951, a

missionary educator associated with the Canton Christian College, who copied them yet again. Finally a Chinese typist under the supervision of David Willard Lyon, 1870 - 1949, copied them in 1916. The location of the original handwritten letters is unknown.

Processing Information

Metal clips and staples were removed from materials and folded items were flattened. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes The finding aid was created by Gregory Adam Scott in 2010, reviewed and updated by Brigitte Kamsler in 2014 with the support of the Henry Luce Foundation, and edited by Leah Edelman in 2020.

Conditions Governing Use

Some material in this collection may be protected by copyright and other rights. Information concerning copyright, fair use, and reproduction requests can be consulted at Columbia's Copyright Advisory Office.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Related Materials

Related Materials

MRL 12: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions records, 1878-1958, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Related Materials

MRL 6: David Williard Lyon papers, 1904-1950, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Controlled Access Headings

- Missions -- China
- Guangzhou (China) -- Commerce
- Olyphant, David W. C., 1789-1851

Burke Library record group:

Missionary Research Library Archives: MRL6, China

ˆ Return to Table of Contents

Collection Inventory

Title/Description	Instances	
Canton, 1827-08-06	box 1	folder 1
Canton, 1850-09-23	box 1	folder 1
Shanghai, 1850-09-29	box 1	folder 1
Shanghai, 1850-10-07	box 1	folder 1
Shanghai, 1850-11-23	box 1	folder 1
Canton, 1851-03-27	box 1	folder 1
[No location], 1851-03-28	box 1	folder 1