



Guide to the Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at Newport's Colony House

Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island
Last update on 2013 April 02

Descriptive Summary

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| Repository | Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island |
| Location | Newport Historical Society, 82 Touro Street, Newport, RI 02840 |
| Call No. | MS.FIC.2013.6 |
| Creators | Commerford, Arthur B., 1865-1942 Wetmore, Edith Malvina Keteltas, 1870-1966 |
| Title | Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at Newport's Colony House |
| Date(s) | 1939 July 17-1940 May 24, undated |
| Abstract | The bulk of this collection comprises of correspondence between Arthur B. Commerford and Edith Wetmore as they make efforts to reclaim the George Washington portrait by Gilbert Stuart back into the Colony House after its relocation to the Newport County Courthouse. |
| Extent | approximately 25 items |
| Accession Info | Material was found at the Newport Historical Society in 2013 with no transfer records, information on provenance, or original order. They may have been salvaged from a former employee's records. |

Biographical Note

Arthur B. Commerford (1865-1942), a Newport resident and very active member of the Emmanuel Church, lived on Ayrault Street. He followed his father into the tailoring business until World War I when he organized the first Roll Call of the Newport Chapter of the Red Cross. He remained with the Red Cross until they closed their war time program. Afterwards he returned to his former profession, operating a successful custom tailoring business.

Commerford was prominent in civic affairs. He had leadership roles in many clubs and societies in town including, the Tops Club, Newport Lodge of Elks, Newport Rotary Club, St. John's Lodge No. 1, Newport Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, the Washington Commeandery or the Knights Templar, Miantonomi Club, Newport Tuberculosis Association, and a charter member of the Society for the Restoration of of the Old State House.

He was also active in the arts, starring in several Newport Opera House productions and was an active member of his church choir.

Edith M.K. Wetmore (1870-1966) was a resident of both New York and Newport. Edith and her family, were very active in Newport social and civic life. Her father, George Peabody Wetmore, was a governor and U.S. Senator for Rhode Island. Wetmore was a member of the famed '400' included on Ward McAllister's list.

She was a charter member of the Old State House in Newport, Inc., as well as chair of the women's division of the Rhode Island Tercentenary celebration, a founder and early officer of the Newport Casino Theatre, and a member of the Newport Garden Club and Newport Horticultural Society. After donating her large collection of children's books to the Providence Public Library, they established the Edith Wetmore Wing.

Her Newport home, Chateau-Sur-Mer is located on Bellevue Avenue was built by her grandfather, William Shepard Wetmore, a China trade merchant in 1854. It was purchased by the Preservation Society of Newport County in 1969.

Scope and Content

The bulk of this collection comprises of correspondence between Arthur B. Commerford and Edith Wetmore as they make efforts to reclaim the George Washington portrait by Gilbert Stuart back into the Colony House after its relocation to the Newport County Courthouse.

Commerford composed a petition to rally support from the Old State House in Newport Inc. and presented it at their annual meeting. That document outlines the history of the portrait:

Two paintings were commissioned by the State to Gilbert Stuart, who was paid \$1200 for both. The finished painting was put in the care of Joseph Anthony and Co. while it was framed in Philadelphia. It was shipped to Rhode Island aboard the Gibbs and Channing's sloop 'Eagle' in 1801. It was hung in the Colony House. In 1905, it was restored, a process in which one newspaper noted, the painting "lost much of its former beauty."

In 1926/27, when the new Newport County Courthouse was built, and the CH was no longer used as a courthouse, the Newport County Courthouse Commission asked that "all books, records, and papers, and such furnishings and furniture of the building now occupied as a court house as may be deemed advisable by said commission...and court...and sheriff of Newport County to be removed to said new courthouse." On Constitution Day, September 17, 1927, a group of unknown persons snatched the painting from the Colony House and hung it in the new Newport County Courthouse. Obviously fearing a possible hostile takeover, the custodian of the Colony House, James Anthony, and his deputy had taken extra precautions that day to secure the painting, by placing an extra Yale lock on the door of the Senate Chamber. Yet, the painting was taken, despite there having been no request of official surrender.

Editorials in the paper called the removal “clandestine,” and “a disgusting, disreputable and contemptible piece of business.” The President of Rhode Island Bar Association said, “Washington belonged to the historic and the political rather than to the legal life of the people.”

Wanting to protect their new acquisition, the Newport County Courthouse Commission proposed a bill appropriating \$2,000 for the painting’s restoration and to have it officially be moved to the new building – which the General Assembly passed on March 23, 1928. The Daily News noted, “Thursday’s action of the General Assembly designates the Court House for the hanging of the portrait, and it will be difficult for those who desire the Stuart masterpiece in the State House to have it returned there.”

That same year the Courthouse Commission had the painting was restored by Mr. Thompson at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1939, Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore started a campaign to try reclaim the portrait from the Courthouse. The correspondence between Commerford in Newport, and Wetmore in New York, comprises the bulk of the collection. They learn that the painting is in the safe of the Clerk of the Superior Court. It was resting on the ground, not on stretchers, which has broken off pieces of the frame, including a part of the eagle and an arrow. By January 1940, they are desperate to know more about the condition of the painting. They fear that the painting has been “hermetically sealed” in a metal encasement against glass and that the lack of air has deteriorated the painting; perhaps the canvas has adhered to the glass. After physically examining the painting, Commerford assures Wetmore that the painting has not adhered to the glass and is in good shape.

In February 1940, they hire Fredrick Rhineland King to draw up a plan on how the painting can be hung in the CH. In April, King delivers a blueprint (which we have in the collection, and it’s horribly light sensitive) showing new recesses in the Senate Chamber with fireproof doors for the portrait. In May, the builder James N. Gibson quotes \$1,600 for the work.

The scope of work needed to achieve their goal seems to exceed their resources. Wetmore replies after seeing the builder’s quote and understanding all that would be involved, “it seems to me that though our members have wanted to get the portrait back, it really would not be possible, apart from the fact that I also do not believe we would be given permission to do so.”

Organization

This collection is arranged by type and then chronologically in one series:
I. George Washington portrait papers

Related Material

The Newport Historical Society also houses Arthur Commerford's scrapbooks, "The Colony House" volumes 1-3 which detail many civic happenings in town organizations. An original of his 1939 petition to the Old State House in Newport, Inc. can be found there as well.

The Preservation Society of Newport County owns and maintains Edith Wetmore's residence, Chateau-Sur-Mer.

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on physical access to this material. This collection is housed onsite at the Newport Historical Society. Researchers can be seen by appointment during operating hours at the Newport Historical Society, call to make an appointment.

Subject Access

Personal Name Subject

Commerford, Arthur B., 1865-1942
Gibson, James
King, Frederick Rhinelander, 1887-1972
Stuart, Gilbert, 1755-1828
Wetmore, Edith Malvina Keteltas, 1870-1966

Subject Headings

Colony House (Newport, R.I.)
Newport (R.I.)--Buildings, structures, etc
Newport (R.I.)--History--20th century
Presidents--United States--Portraits

Form/Genre

blueprints (reprographic copies)
correspondence

Administrative Information

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|-------------------|--|
| Processor | Finding aid prepared by Stacie M. Parillo |
| Descriptive Rules | Finding aid based on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) |
| Citation | Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at the Colony House, MS.FIC.2013.6, Newport Historical Society. |

Inventory

Series I. George Washington portrait papers

This collection is arranged by type and then chronologically in one series:

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|-----------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Box 1, Folder 1 | Papers regarding the removal and recovery of Stuart's Washington Portrait in the Colony House | 1939 July 17 - 1940 May 24, undated |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Blueprint, Detail of Installation of Gilbert Stuart Painting in Old Colony House, Newport RI | 1940 April 17 |