

McLean County Museum of History

J B Stevenson Letter Book Collection

Processed by
Carol Straka
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Ultimately catalogued with library books but stored with special Archives books due to item's fragility.

Collection Information

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:	1 box
COLLECTION DATES:	1866-1880
RESTRICTIONS:	None
REPRODUCTION RIGHTS:	Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained in writing from the McLean County Museum of History
ALTERNATIVE FORMATS:	
OTHER FINDING AIDS:	
LOCATION:	
NOTES:	See also Ewing Family Collection for civil-war era letters from JB Stevenson.

Brief History

J.B. (James Bell) Stevenson (1838-1890) was the third of at least seven children of John Turner Stevenson (1808-1857) and Eliza Ann Ewing Stevenson (1809-1889) of Kentucky. He married Rowena Ewing (1845-1927) on 10 Sep 1863 in Woodford County, Illinois. He and Rowena, whom he sometimes called "Row," were the parents of at least one child, Annie Mary Stevenson Bullis (1868-1928).

Stevenson came to Bloomington with his family in July 1852. That family included older brother Adlai E. Stevenson (1835-1914) who became US vice president from 1893 to 1897.

J.B. worked as an insurance agent in Decatur, Quincy, and Bloomington. But, he was best known in McLean County for originating the coal shaft on west side of Bloomington in 1867. He served as an officer in the coal company for about two decades.

Ill health prompted him to head to Southern California in 1887 and to sell out of the coal

business about 1888 and move to Colton, CA. He did retain a number of properties in McLean County after departing for CA. In Colton, he maintained a 50 acre orchard and died in December 1890. His widow and daughter remained in California.

Contents & Condition Notes

This bound book contains 500 pages of copies of business letters, nearly all written by Stevenson from January 1866 to January 1880. Most of the letters in the first half involve his life insurance agency business although many in the later half involve the McLean County Coal Company. Letters were written from Decatur (January through July 1866); Quincy (July 25 through early September 1866); and Bloomington (September 11, 1866 through January 1880)

At least one was written by a business partner, William Charles (page 181). Several letters are on the stationary of attorney Adlai E. Stevenson (ex 327-331) but are difficult or impossible to decipher. Unexpectedly, a letter from Dr. T.F. Worrell appears (406) as Worrell writes to Dr. (Jehu) Little in Leroy on behalf of another physician about splitting the revenues of their professional practice.

A few involve financial notes Stevenson has purchased; a number peppered throughout the book involve loans. Other letters focus on efforts to sell his Decatur home shortly after Stevenson returns to Bloomington. A few early letters involve real estate transactions, as do a good many later writings.

At least two (103, 169) were addressed to his father in law, A.G. Ewing, and involve both business and personal. Cousin Wm G Ewing (235), Jos Pendleton of Bethany, West VA (ex: 255-257, 398, 402, 405), W A Davidson who lent Stevenson \$200 (ex: 273, 425-426), Rev. F.N.Ewing, and other family members receive letters with personal comments.

Correspondence early in 1866 indicates that Stevenson is considering moving south to New Orleans or Texas and has offers of good insurance agencies in that area. He cites climate and health issues as his motivation. Then, the National Benefit Life Insurance Co grants him a group of southern states to cover, requiring him to be on the road more to develop these territories.

By spring/summer, he is writing to several companies he wants to represent in Quincy, IL. A July 25, 1866, letter (182) announces that he and William Charles have opened an office in Quincy under the name "Stevenson and Charles." Stevens declares that he needed to stop traveling due to his health. However, he is quickly disenchanted with his partner. By September 11, he has quit the partnership, settled up and moved himself to Bloomington. (231)

One letter shares the premium prices to be charged to Col. John McNulta who is stationed at Brownsville, TX, during the Civil War. For \$2,000 of life insurance coverage, he is charged \$50 for the first 3 months and \$25 per quarter thereafter. In addition, a 2% "climate risk" premium applies, Since McNulta was not informed about that up front, he later demands a refund which is granted. (5,30)

Letters from Stevenson as officer in the McLean County Coal Company begin in April 1867 on page 275 and are interspersed among Stevenson's other business letters. The Coal Company correspondence covers an array of topics. Unfortunately, many are nearly unreadable.

A few letters in 1867 involve Stevenson as an assistant tax assessor along with Lyman Graham. Graham also kept the books for the Coal Company. Stevenson requests (296) leave to head south for a few months for his health from Jan 1-May 1, 1868. Only a couple letters appear in the book from that period, so presumably he did head south

In the late 1860s, the insurance business letters gradually dwindle. Letters involving real estate transactions and related matters intermingle with the coal company correspondence. Mentions of Stevenson's limited health crop up occasionally in letters he pens in the early 1870s. However, a Sept 1875 letter mentions him just returning from Europe.

Condition notes:

Largely intact and in reasonable condition. However, many pages are difficult or even impossible to read due to blurred or faded ink, especially those in the latter half of the book. Pages 186-188 are missing. Page 314 is missing and 313 is pasted into the back of the book. Page 389 is torn but still attached.