

James Kent Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress

Prepared by Beverly W. Brannan



Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

2007

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Collection Summary

Title: James Kent Papers

Span Dates: 1779-1854

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1798-1847)

ID No.: MSS28498

Creator: Kent, James, 1763-1817

Extent: 1,500 items; 17 containers plus 4 oversize; 7 linear feet; 7 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Jurist and legal commentator. Correspondence, including family letters, journals of official and personal travels, diplomas, and commissions pertaining primarily to Kent's service as judge of the New York supreme court and as chancellor of the New York court of chancery.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Adams, John Quincy, 1767-1848--Correspondence.

Bailey, Theodorus, 1805-1877--Correspondence.

Baldwin, Simeon, 1761-1851--Correspondence.

Baldwin, Simeon, 1761-1851.

Bancroft, George, 1800-1891--Correspondence.

Biddle, Nicholas, 1786-1844--Correspondence.

Carroll, William, 1788-1844--Correspondence.

Clay, Henry, 1777-1852--Correspondence.

Daggett, David, 1764-1851--Correspondence.

Everett, Edward, 1794-1865--Correspondence.

Hamilton, Alexander, 1757-1804.

Hamilton, Elizabeth Schuyler, 1757-1854--Correspondence.

Johnson, William, 1771-1834--Correspondence.

Kent family.

Kent, Elizabeth--Correspondence.

Kent, James, 1763-1847.

Kent, Moss--Correspondence.

Kent, William--Correspondence.

Lieber, Francis, 1800-1872--Correspondence.

Seward, William Henry, 1801-1872--Correspondence.

Silliman, Benjamin, 1779-1864--Correspondence.

Story, Joseph, 1779-1845--Correspondence.

Webster, Daniel, 1782-1852--Correspondence.

Wirt, William, 1772-1834--Correspondence.

Organizations

Livingston and Kent.

Livingston and Thompson.

New York (State). Court of Chancery.

New York (State). Militia.

New York (State). Supreme Court.

Subjects

Courts--New York (State)

Practice of law--New York (State)
Voyages and travels.

Occupations
Educators.
Jurists.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of James Kent, jurist and legal commentator, were given to the Library of Congress by William Kent, 1904 and 1906, and by the heirs of William Stone, 1914. An additional item was purchased in 1969 and transferred from the Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection to the Kent Papers in 2007.

Processing History

The James Kent Papers were prepared for microfilming in 1974. The collection was revised and expanded in 2007.

Additional Guides

The *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* (Nov. 1951) 9:3-8, contains an article about a journal by Kent of a 1793 trip to Washington, D.C.

Related Material

The original of Kent's journal of a trip to Washington, D.C., in 1793, kept in the back pages of Tobias Lear's *Observation on the River Potomack* (New York, 1793), is held by the Library's Rare Book and Special Collections Division. A reproduction is included in the collection.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of James Kent is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of James Kent Papers are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Microfilm

A microfilm edition of part of these papers is available on seven reels. Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan. To promote preservation of the originals, researchers are required to consult the microfilm edition.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, James Kent Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1763, July 31	Born, southeastern New York (now Putnam County)

1781	B.A., Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
1781-1784	Apprenticed to law office of Egbert Benson, New York attorney general, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.
1784	M.A., Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
1785	Admitted to New York bar Married Elizabeth Bailey
1785-1793	Practiced law in partnership with Gilbert Livingston, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.
1786	Commissioned paymaster in the New York state militia
1790-1794	Member, New York assembly
1794-1798	Professor of law, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.
1796-1798	Member, New York assembly
1797-1798	Recorder, New York, N.Y.
1798	Appointed to New York supreme court
1799-1823	Resided in Albany, N.Y.
1804	Appointed chief justice, New York supreme court
1814	Appointed chancellor, New York court of chancery
1823	Forced by provision in state constitution to retire as chancellor of New York court of chancery
1824-1826	Professor of law, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.
1828	President, New-York Historical Society
1847, Dec. 12	Died, New York, N.Y.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of James Kent (1763-1874) span the period 1779-1854, with the bulk of the material concentrated in the years 1798-1847. The collection consists of [correspondence](#), travel [journals](#), and a [register](#) of law cases entered by James Kent and his associate, Gilbert Livingston. Kent's life as lawyer, traveler, and family man is well documented in the collection, and there are records of his military service in the New York state militia and his election to public office.

Kent corresponded with many of the political and judicial leaders of the period, including John Quincy Adams, Simeon Baldwin, George Bancroft, William Carroll, Henry Clay, David Daggett, Edward Everett, William Johnson, Francis Lieber, William H. Seward, Benjamin Silliman, Joseph Story, Daniel Webster, and William Wirt. A letter to Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, wife of Alexander

Hamilton, dated Dec. 10, 1832, includes the draft of “Chancellor Kent’s Memories of Alexander Hamilton.” In 1847, Simeon Baldwin prepared a similar sketch of James Kent’s life for Kent’s son, William.

The greater part of Kent’s correspondence is with family members—his wife, Elizabeth, his brother, Moss, his son, William, and his brother-in-law, Theodorus Bailey. The originals of many of Kent’s letters to family members are included in the collection. The letters refer frequently to Kent’s interest in the classics.

Among other papers included in Kent’s correspondence files are diplomas, awards, a military commission, certificates of election to public office, and documents related to his career as a jurist. These documents and all of Kent’s correspondence have been indexed.

A single [register](#) records law suits entered by the law firms of Livingston and Kent and of Livingston and Thompson. Kent’s reputation as a legal writer rests chiefly upon his four-volume *Commentaries on American Law*, a work that he began preparing for publication only after his retirement but that was based on his lectures as a Columbia law professor. His outstanding achievements as a jurist were recorded by his long-time associate William Johnson in three sets of reports: ; and *Cases Argued and Determined in the Court for the Trial of Impeachments and the Correction of Errors, 1799-1803* (3 vols.); *Report of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Judicature and in the Court for Trial of Impeachments and the Correction of Errors, February 1806-February 1823* (20 vols.); and *Cases of the State Court of Chancery, March 1814-July 1823* (7 vols.). No manuscripts pertaining to these works are in the collection.

Kent kept detailed accounts of his travels between 1793 and 1847, annotating them in later years and adding pertinent newspaper clippings. The fifteen volumes in the collection describe his journeys that ranged from Quebec to Richmond, Virginia. Volume 14 of the [Journals](#) series contains an account of William Kent’s 1848 journey to his father’s birthplace.

Included in the [Correspondence and Other Papers](#) series is a photocopy of a journal Kent maintained in the back pages of Tobias Lear’s *Observation on the River Potomack* (New York, 1793) while on a trip to Washington in 1793. The original of the volume is held by the Library’s Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in four series:

- [Correspondence and Other Papers, 1779-1854](#)
- [Register, 1793-1803](#)
- [Journals, 1797-1848](#)
- [Oversize, 1781-1814](#)

Description of Series

Container

BOX 1-12
REEL 1-5

Series

Correspondence and Other Papers, 1779-1854

General and family correspondence, memoranda, diplomas, awards, certificates, circulars, travel accounts, notes, and miscellaneous papers and documents.

Arranged chronologically. Oversize items were removed from their chronological sequence and filmed at the end of the series. Also at the end of the series is a photocopy of a journal by Kent, 1793, and a few original notes, dated 1838, that were added to the collection in 2007. The notes have been not filmed. An card index to the series, filmed at the end of the collection, is located in the Manuscript Division Reading Room. Consult a reference librarian for availability of the original index.

BOX 13
REEL 5

Register, 1793-1803

Bound register of the law firms of Livingston and Kent and Livingston and Thompson.

BOX 14-17
REEL 6-7

Journals, 1797-1848

Journals describing trips by Kent mostly along the eastern seaboard, including an account by his son, William Kent, to his father's birthplace in Putnam County, N.Y., in 1848.

Chronology in the volumes is irregular. Included at the end of the microfilm edition is a card index of correspondents in the Correspondence and Other Papers series. Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division regarding availability of the original index in the Manuscript Division Reading Room.

BOX OV 1-OV 4
REEL 5

Oversize, 1781-1814

Certificates, awards, and appointments. Oversize material originally in Containers 1-4 that was filmed as part of Container 12 in the Correspondence and Other Papers series.

Arranged in the order in which it was filmed.

Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 16,216

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1-12 REEL 1-5	Correspondence and Other Papers, 1779-1854 General and family correspondence, memoranda, diplomas, awards, certificates, circulars, travel accounts, notes, and miscellaneous papers and documents. Arranged chronologically. Oversize items were removed from their chronological sequence and filmed at the end of the series. Also at the end of the series is a photocopy of a journal by Kent, 1793, and a few original notes, dated 1838, that were added to the collection in 2007. The notes have been not filmed. An card index to the series, filmed at the end of the collection, is located in the Manuscript Division Reading Room. Consult a reference librarian for availability of the original index.
BOX 1 REEL 1	1779-1793 <u>See also Container 12, Certificates, awards, and appointments</u>
BOX 2 REEL 1	1794-1798 <u>See also Container 12, Certificates, awards, and appointments</u>
BOX 3 REEL 2	1799-1808 <u>See also Container 12, Certificates, awards, and appointments</u>
BOX 4 REEL 2	1809-1820 <u>See also Container 12, Certificates, awards, and appointments</u>
BOX 5 REEL 3	1821-1828
BOX 6 REEL 3	1829-1832
BOX 7 REEL 4	1833-1835
BOX 8 REEL 4	1836-1837
BOX 9 REEL 5	1838-1840 <u>See also Container 12, Notes</u>
BOX 10 REEL 5	1841-1846
BOX 11 REEL 5	1847-1854, undated
BOX 12 REEL 5	Certificates, awards, and appointments, 1781-1814 <u>See Oversize</u>
BOX 12 not filmed	Notes, 1838

Correspondence and Other Papers, 1779-1854

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 12 REEL 5	<i>Photocopy of Observations on the River Potomack</i> (1793) by Tobias Lear, with annotations
BOX 13 REEL 5	Register, 1793-1803 Bound register of the law firms of Livingston and Kent and Livingston and Thompson.
BOX 13 REEL 5	Law suits entered by the firm Livingston and Kent, 1791, May 16-1793, Apr. 12
BOX 13 REEL 5	Law suits entered by the firm Livingston and Thompson, 1801, Nov. 25-1803, Nov. 12
BOX 14-17 REEL 6-7	Journals, 1797-1848 Journals describing trips by Kent mostly along the eastern seaboard, including an account by his son, William Kent, to his father's birthplace in Putnam County, N.Y., in 1848. Chronology in the volumes is irregular. Included at the end of the microfilm edition is a card index of correspondents in the Correspondence and Other Papers series. Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division regarding availability of the original index in the Manuscript Division Reading Room.
BOX 14 REEL 6	Vol. 1, 1797-1820
BOX 14 REEL 6	Tour of the western circuit, 1797
BOX 14 REEL 6	Tour up the Connecticut River from New York, N.Y., to Albany, N.Y., 1817
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip from Albany, N.Y., to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1817
BOX 14 REEL 6	Tour to Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H., and Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1818
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to Philadelphia, Pa., 1818
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to Northampton, Mass. 1819
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to the Mohawk River, N.Y., 1819
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to the head of the Delaware River, N.Y., 1819
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to Lebanon Springs, N.Y., 1819
BOX 14 REEL 6	Trip to Bedford, N.Y., 1820
BOX 14 REEL 6	Vol. 2, 1798
BOX 14 REEL 6	Tour of the western circuit, 1798, May 30-June 21
BOX 14	Vol. 3, 1798-1799

Journals, 1797-1848

Container

Contents

REEL 6	
BOX 14	Tour of the western circuit, 1798-June 24-July 14
REEL 6	
BOX 14	Tour of the southern circuit, 1798, Aug.-Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 14	Tour of the circuit in Orange County, N.Y., 1799, June
REEL 6	
BOX 14	Tour of the Delaware circuit, 1799, June
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Vol. 4, 1800-1801
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour of the northern circuit, 1800, June
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Visit to Lansingburgh Hill, N.Y., 1800, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour of the Mohawk, N.Y., circuit, 1801, June
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour of the Orange and Delaware, N.Y., circuits, 1801, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour of the Catskill, N.Y., circuit, 1801, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Vol. 5, 1802-1811
REEL 6	
BOX 15	"Memoranda made on my western circuit in 1802, 1810, and 1811"
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Vol. 6, 1803-1816
REEL 6	
BOX 15	"Memoranda made on my northern circuit in 1803 when I visited Oswegatchie, N.Y."
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and return through Massachusetts, . 1803, Aug
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to the Black River, N.Y., 1808
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1809
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1813
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to New Haven, Conn., 1813
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Lake George, N.Y., 1814
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Lake George, N.Y., 1816
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Vol. 7, 1821-1824
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Washington, D.C., 1821, May
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1821, June
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Cayuga Lake, N.Y., 1822, May

Journals, 1797-1848

Container

Contents

REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to the Catskill Mountains, N.Y., . 1822, Sept
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to the White Mountains, N.Y., and Boston, Mass, 1823, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Waterford, N.Y., 1823, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tours from New York, N.Y., 1824
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to Lake Champlain, N.Y., and Upper Canada, 1824
REEL 6	
BOX 15	Tour to commencement at New Haven, Conn., 1824
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Vol. 8, 1825-1826
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Niagara, N.Y., 1825, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Norwalk, Conn., 1825, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Schooley's Mountain, N.Y., 1825, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Northampton, Mass., 1825, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Albany, N.Y., 1825, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Brunswick, N.J., 1826, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Newport and Providence, R.I., 1826, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Flushing and Jamaica, N.Y., 1826, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Rockaway, N.Y., 1826, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Bedford, N.Y., 1826 July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Quebec, Canada, 1826, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Vol. 9, 1828-1830
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Danbury, Conn. and southeast New York, 1828, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Albany and Lebanon Springs, N.Y., 1828, Aug
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Staten Island, N.Y., 1828, Aug
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Carbondale, Pa., 1830, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Long Branch, N.Y., 1830, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Vol. 10, 1829-1833

REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Philadelphia, Pa., 1829, May
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1829, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to the White Mountains, N.H., 1829, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1830, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Ballston Spa, N.Y., 1830, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to New Haven, Conn., 1830, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Hyde Park, N.Y., 1830, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Ulster County, N.Y., 1831, May
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to New Utrecht, N.Y., 1831, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Rockaway, N.Y., 1831, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Litchfield, Conn., 1831, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Charlie's Hope, N.Y., 1831, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Lebanon Springs, N.Y., 1831, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to New Haven, Conn., 1831, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Bloomfield, N.J., 1831, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Staten Island, N.Y., 1831, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Summer excursion to New Haven and Stratford, Conn., on consequence
REEL 6	of the cholera in New York, N.Y., 1832, July-Sept.
BOX 16	Visit to Jamaica, N.Y., 1833, Apr.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Visit to Saratoga, N.Y., 1833, Apr.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Visit to Harlem, N.Y., 1833, Apr.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Visit to Niagara, N.Y., 1833, Apr.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Vol. 11, 1833
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Tour to Niagara, N.Y., and Montreal, Canada, 1833
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Trip to "Grange," the home of Alexander Hamilton, on York Island, N.Y.,
REEL 6	1833
BOX 16	Vol. 12, 1834-1835

Journals, 1797-1848

Container

Contents

REEL 6	
BOX 16	Montaug Point, N.Y., 1834
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Rockaway, N.Y., 1834, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Pennsylvania, 1834, July-Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Ballston Spa, N.Y., 1834, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Albany, N.Y., 1834, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Richmond, Va., 1835, May
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Norwalk, Conn., 1835, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Middleton, Conn., 1835, June
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Ulster County, N.Y., 1835, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Staten Island, N.Y., 1835, July
REEL 6	
BOX 16	Ramapo River, N.J., 1835, July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Vol. 13, 1835-1838
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Ballston Spa, N.Y., 1835, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Rockaway, N.Y., 1835, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Burlington, Vt. 1835, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Paterson, N.J., 1835, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Flushing, N.Y., 1835, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Princeton, N.J., 1835, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	"The Eastern States. Mr. Biddle's below Bristol, Pa., and again in 1836,"
REEL 6	1836, June-July
BOX 17	Plattsburgh, N.Y. (two visits), 1836, June-July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Albany, N.Y., 1837, May
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1837, June
REEL 6	
BOX 17	New Rochelle, N.Y., 1837, July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Oswego and Auburn, N.Y., 1837, July-Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Long Island, N.Y., 1837, Sept.

Journals, 1797-1848

Container

Contents

REEL 6	
BOX 17	Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1837, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1838, June
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Chatham, N.J., 1838, June
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Plattsburgh, N.Y., 1838, July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Chatham, N.J., 1838, July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Vol. 14, 1838-1848
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Delaware, Otsego, Black River, and Rochester, N.Y., 1838, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Chatham, N.J., 1838, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Bridgeport, Conn., 1838, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Chatham, N.Y., 1838, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1839, Mar.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Boston, Mass., 1838, Nov.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1839, Mar.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Boston, Mass., 1839, Nov.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1840, Feb.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Boston, Mass., 1840, Mar.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Boston, Mass., 1840, Dec.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Boston, Mass., 1841, May
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Springfield and Albany, N.Y., 1841, Sept.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1842, Mar.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Baltimore, Md., 1842, Apr.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Goshen, N.Y., 1842, June
REEL 6	
BOX 17	New Haven, Conn., 1842, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1842, Nov.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Albany, N.Y., 1843, May

Journals, 1797-1848

Container

Contents

REEL 6	
BOX 17	Great Barrington, Mass., 1843, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Dutchess and Putnam Counties, N.Y., 1844, July
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Sharon Springs, N.Y., 1844, Aug.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Philadelphia, Pa., 1845, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Albany, N.Y., 1846, May
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Memorandum of a visit by Kent to Putnam County, N.Y., 1848, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Vol. 15, 1846-1847
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Cambridge and Boston, Mass., 1846, Oct.
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Cambridge and Boston, Mass., 1847, May
REEL 6	
BOX 17	Card index of Correspondence and Other Papers series <i>Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division concerning originals of index in the division's Reading Room</i>
REEL	
BOX OV 1-OV 4	Oversize, 1781-1814
REEL 5	
	Certificates, awards, and appointments. Oversize material originally in Containers 1-4 that was filmed as part of Container 12 in the Correspondence and Other Papers series. Arranged in the order in which it was filmed.
BOX OV 1	Correspondence and Other Papers
REEL 5	
BOX OV 1	Certificates, awards, and appointments, 1781-1814
REEL 5	
BOX OV 1	1781-1798 (Containers 1-2)
REEL 5	
BOX OV 2	1784 (Container 1)
REEL 5	
BOX OV 3	1804 (Container 3)
REEL 5	
BOX OV 4	1814 (Container 4)
REEL 5	