

Whelan was involved with a number of charitable organizations, including those with ties to his home country. He served on the board of St. John's Orphan Asylum and as treasurer of the Association of the "Friends of Ireland." Whelan's obituary declared that "he was a man of quick perception and of great kindness of heart, always ready to assist the young and deserving with his advice and means, prominent in charities, both public and private, managing many trusts for widows and orphans and generally declining compensation...In Mr. Whelan's death we have lost one of our best citizens. In him has passed away one of the monuments of our city."

A devout Catholic, Whelan was a member of St. Joseph's Church (founded in 1732) where, in 1807, he married his wife Catherine; she died in 1858. Among their children was Dr. William Whelan (1808-1865), a surgeon and chief of the United States Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery during the Civil War.

Collection Overview

The William Whelan Papers are not a complete record of Whelan's lifespan, interests, or activities, but do provide a glimpse of his stature within the city. They are arranged in four series: Series I, Correspondence (1811-1841); Series II, Documents (1824-1836); Series III, Association of the Friends of Ireland (1829); Series IV, St. John's Orphan Asylum (1835-1840).

Series I, Correspondence (1811-1841) mostly contains letters that concern routine business arrangements, such as that from Stephen Holt Jr. regarding the possibility of receiving a shipment of cloves on a schooner from Cayenne arriving in Salem, MA. There are, however, a few letters that focus more on connections within the Irish community in the United States, on both a personal and organizational level. In the latter case, the collection holds a single circular letter from the Philadelphia Repeal Society inviting Whelan and all Irishmen to a meeting at Ryan's Hotel. In the personal realm, the Colebert, Fortune, Leahy, O'Brien, Powers', Ryan, and Wallace folders all show some reliance on Whelan for assistance or favors. In addition, the collection holds nine letters from William Roche, a dry goods merchant in Missouri. The first is addressed to Michael Skeeahan in Manayunk (now part of Philadelphia), and describes Roche's trip from Philadelphia to St. Louis as well as the state of the markets there; at the end of the letter he asks Skeeahan to show the letter to Whelan. The next was written to Roche's parents in County Waterford and explained where he had established himself "after all my perambulation." The letter is also signed by his siblings John, Bridget, and Ellen, who were living and working with him; Roche asks that any response be sent to William Whelan who will forward it on. The remainder of their letters concern shipments of merchandise from Whelan to St. Louis, and mention the many transportation challenges faced by settlers in the Midwest.

Julia Power, writing from Ireland, addressed Whelan as "Mr. Phelan," but her envelope carried the description "Merchant at the corner of fourth and Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, America," which allowed for its delivery.