

United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Correspondence
Document Types
Letters

Related Collections

Genealogical data about the McAllister family can be found in a McAllister and Young family genealogy album created by William Y. McAllister in 1894 and now held by the Library Company's Print Department; the library also owns a McAllister family bible containing genealogical inscriptions. There are additional McAllister Family Papers (Coll. 2139) at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and in the Marian S. Carson Collection in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has many McAllister family letters, as well as letters to family member including many written to John A. McAllister, in other collections such the Ferdinand J. Dreer Collection (Coll. 175) and the Benson J. Lossing Papers (Coll. 1807).

Biographical/Historical Notes

The McAllister family was important in Philadelphia for over a century as businessmen, manufacturers, and collectors. There were three generations of distinctly different men named John McAllister, all with antiquarian interests, which has been cause for confusion in the past. The first, John McAllister Sr. (1753-1830), emigrated from Scotland in 1775 and became a successful whip and cane manufacturer in the city. In 1796 he bought a stock of spectacles; from that point, what had been an unusual sideline became the McAllister family's future as manufacturers and proprietors of optical equipment which, by 1830, had totally eclipsed their earlier specialty. In 1807 his son John McAllister Jr., a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, joined the business, and became a named partner in 1811. The McAllister company remained prominent on Chestnut Street for decades after as it expanded to become nationally known manufacturers and retailers of optical equipment, mathematical instruments, and commercial photographs.

John McAllister Jr. (1786-1877) and his wife Eliza Young (1790-1853), the daughter of the noted Philadelphia printer and bookseller William Young (1755-1829), had ten children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. The eldest, William Y. (1812-1896), worked as a partner with his father from 1830, and took over the McAllister firm upon his retirement in 1835. Of the three daughters—Frances W. (1815-1892), Agnes Y. (1817-1879), and Sarah A. (1819-1870)—two married and Agnes kept house for her father. Thomas H. (1824-1898) became a partner with William as McAllister & Brother from 1853 through 1865 when he moved to New York and established his own optical shop, first at 627 Broadway and then at 49 Nassau Street. The youngest sibling, Wardale G. (1829-1874), had a law career in Philadelphia.