

Eli Whitney Papers

*Guide to the Scholarly Resources
Microfilm Edition
by
Diane E. Kaplan*

From the holdings of Manuscripts and
Archives, the Yale University Library

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Wilmington, Delaware

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Acknowledgment

The publisher wishes to thank the staff of Manuscripts and Archives at Yale University Library for their ideas, help, and effort in compiling the microfilm for this collection.

ISBN 0-8420-4205-9

Manufactured in the United States of America

Published 1999

Distributed on microfilm by:

Scholarly Resources Inc.

104 Greenhill Avenue

Wilmington, DE 19805

Distributed outside the USA

in Japan by:

Far Eastern Booksellers

P.O. Box 72

Kanda, Tokyo 101-91, JAPAN

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Introduction

Eli Whitney was born in Westborough, Massachusetts, on December 8, 1765, to Eli and Elizabeth (Fay) Whitney. Eli's father provided well for his family, and when Eli was twelve his father suggested he start preparing for college. Eli declined the opportunity and persuaded his father to let him continue in mechanical work. He began to fix violins in the neighborhood, and at the age of fifteen started to make nails in his father's shop. He continued with this work until the demand began to decline at the end of the Revolutionary War. He then switched to the manufacture of hatpins and monopolized that business in the local area.

When he turned eighteen he reconsidered his rejection of a college education and approached his father for support. His father refused, stating that Eli was now too old to begin preparatory studies and that the elder Whitney no longer had enough funds. Undaunted, Whitney set out to provide his own education and taught school in Grafton, Northboro, Westboro, and Paxton, earning the money necessary to attend Leicester Academy in Leicester, Massachusetts, during the summer.

He entered Yale College in May 1789 at the age of twenty-three. During his three years there he helped support himself by repairing apparatus and equipment around the college. He was graduated in the autumn of 1792 and set out to become a lawyer. To earn the money to read for the law, he agreed to be a tutor for a family in Georgia. Upon arriving in Savannah in 1792, he discovered that his prospective employer had hired another tutor. Whitney was immediately invited to become a guest at the plantation of Catherine Greene, the widow of American Revolutionary War General Nathanael Greene. To repay his hostess for her hospitality, Whitney took every opportunity to repair things around the house and grounds.

At this time agriculture was in a deplorable condition in the South. Large areas of land were unsuitable for growing of rice or long-staple cotton, although they yielded large crops of green seed cotton. Unfortunately, green seed cotton was an unprofitable crop because the process of separating the cotton from its seeds was so labor intensive. It took one workman an entire day to obtain a pound of cotton.

During the winter of 1793 a group of men who had served under General Greene during the Revolutionary War came to visit Mrs. Greene. They remarked that the agricultural troubles of the inland portions of the South would be eliminated if some machine could be devised to clean green seed cotton. Mrs. Greene immediately thought of Whitney and enlisted his aid in creating the machine. Within ten days he had designed a cotton gin. By April 1793 he had created a model that could produce fifty pounds of cleaned cotton in one day.

Thinking this was the end of his obligation to Mrs. Greene, Whitney determined to resume his study of the law, but he was instead persuaded by Phineas Miller, Mrs. Greene's plantation manager, to continue work on the cotton gin, patent it, and engage in its manufacture. On May 27, 1793, the two men drew up a partnership agreement. The partners originally intended to manufacture the gins, purchase the cottonseed, gin it, and sell the product. Because a patent would protect them, the partners believed that they could maintain a monopoly for the sale of cotton. In reality, Whitney was unable to meet the demand for the machine, and his 1794 patent received legal protection only from 1807 to 1812.

Patent problems were caused by a rival machine, which was created by Hodgen Holmes and used circular saws instead of the drum with inserted wires found in Whitney's design. Whitney later proved that this design extension was really his own design and established rights

to the Holmes machines. In the meantime, fabric manufacturers in England claimed that the cotton cleaned by the gin was inferior to hand-cleaned cotton, and the thirty gins in Georgia were shut down for two years while Whitney and Miller proved that the English manufacturers were wrong.

His patent was finally approved in 1807, four years after Miller's death. In spite of fires that had destroyed his shops in 1795 and patent contracts annulled by the legislatures of South Carolina and Tennessee, Whitney carried on for nine more years. In 1812 the U.S. Congress refused to renew his patent, and Whitney left the cotton business.

Whitney's impact on the cotton business is unmistakable. In 1792, prior to the gin's invention, the United States exported 138,328 pounds of cotton. By 1800 the production of cotton in the United States had risen to 35,000,000 pounds, of which 17,790,000 were exported. Unfortunately for Whitney, the invention, which created great wealth for others who copied his model, gained him little.

During the patent battles and following the fire in 1795, Whitney became convinced that he would never make any money from the gin and that he had to turn to something else. In 1798 he began producing the first firearms with standardized interchangeable parts and secured a U.S. government contract for \$134,000 to produce 10,000 army muskets to be delivered in two years.

Whitney was not a gunsmith, but he refined and successfully applied the "Uniformity System" of production using interchangeable parts. He proposed to make the same parts of different guns so much like each other that any part of one gun could be used in another. However, he met bureaucratic disbelief and delays in implementing his ideas but overcame these obstacles by convincing President John Adams of the workability of the interchangeable parts concept. Whitney showed Adams that randomly selected parts

would fit together as a whole working musket. He then single-handedly designed and built all the machinery to produce the weapons—all before a solitary worker entered the factory.

The expense and time necessary to get his factory into operation greatly exceeded his expectations, but the confidence of the federal government and the support of his financial backers did not waiver. At the end of the first year of the contract he had only produced 500 muskets instead of the 4,000 required by the contract. It was eight years instead of two before all 10,000 muskets were delivered. So liberal was the government in making advances to Whitney that the final balance due him amounted to little more than \$2,200 out of the original sum of \$134,000.

In spite of the delays, Whitney had accomplished what he intended. Workmen with little or no experience could manufacture various parts of the musket by the hundreds. An extremely complex operation had been reduced to simple manageable elements. He obtained further contracts with the federal government and with the state of New York, earning at last the reward he sought.

On January 6, 1817, Whitney married Henrietta Frances Edwards. They had three children. He died on January 8, 1825.

Scope and Content

The *Eli Whitney Papers* consist of correspondence and business papers relating to Eli Whitney's invention and patenting of the cotton gin and to his subsequent development of a system to produce firearms employing interchangeable parts. The papers include drawings for machinery, land records relating to the acquisition of property for Whitney's factory site, patents and other documents relating to the protection of Whitney's inventions, and account books and other financial and legal records relating to business and investments. The papers also document the continuing manufacture of guns at Whitney's factory after his death in 1825, under the management of his estate and later of his son Eli Whitney. In addition, the papers include personal papers of Whitney and other family members.

The Yale University Library acquired the *Eli Whitney Papers* through gifts in 1941 and 1953 from his great-granddaughters, Susan Brewster Whitney, Elizabeth Fay Whitney, Henrietta Edwards Whitney Sanford, Anne Farnam Whitney Debevoise, and Frances Pierrepont Whitney Knight. The papers include photocopies of documents relating to Eli Whitney located in other repositories, including the Connecticut Historical Society, the Harvard College Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the National Archives, the New Haven Colony Historical Society, and the New York Historical Society. Additional photocopies of Whitney material from the Baldwin Family Papers, the Blake Family Papers, the Hillhouse Family Papers, and the Josiah Whitney Papers in the Manuscripts and Archives Department are also included in the papers. This collection of materials was assembled, in part, during the preparation of *The World of Eli Whitney* by Jeanette Mirsky and Allan Nevins.

While the *Eli Whitney Papers* span from 1716 to 1959, the bulk of the material dates from 1785 to 1881, or from Eli Whitney's student days at Yale through the life of his son. The papers are arranged in five series by topic or type of material:

- I CORRESPONDENCE, 1716-1927
- II LAND RECORDS, 1755-1877
- III COTTON GIN PAPERS, 1794-1959
- IV FIREARMS PAPERS, 1801-1906
- V PERSONAL PAPERS, 1771-1923

CORRESPONDENCE includes all loose incoming and outgoing letters, including those pertaining to the acquisition of land, the cotton gin, firearms, or personal matters. **LAND RECORDS** is composed of all deeds, leases, quit claims, and the like documenting the ownership or transfer of personal and business property. **Series III** and **IV** are defined by their topics but exclude the related correspondence or land records. **PERSONAL PAPERS** includes a wide variety of record types and subjects and is organized according to the name of the family member to whom the documents pertain. All oversized material is arranged at the end of the papers.

CORRESPONDENCE, Series I, is arranged in chronological order. The bulk of the material in the series dates from Eli Whitney's lifetime. The early correspondence includes recommendations for Whitney as a schoolteacher and Whitney's correspondence with his family while he was a student at Yale College. It is in this early correspondence with his family, as well as with his Yale College friend Josiah Stebbins, that Whitney describes his plans to work in the South and his subsequent meeting and time spent with the family of the late Major Nathanael Greene at Mulberry Grove, Georgia. It is to them as well that he relates his efforts to produce a model cotton gin.

The correspondence from 1793 on contains frequent references to Whitney's efforts to secure a patent for his invention and to protect this patent from infringement. Letters to family members describe trials and tribulations, but Whitney's correspondents expand to include various state and federal government officials, including Thomas Jefferson, who were involved in the various patent conflicts. The folders include letters of agreement and memorials and petitions to Congress. After his 1812 memorial to Congress for extension of his patent rights, Whitney exchanged views on patent law with Robert Fulton.

After Whitney's return to New Haven, the folders also include numerous exchanges with his partner Phineas Miller. The fortunes of Miller and Whitney are the subject of numerous letters throughout the series. [Note that the letterbook of Miller and Whitney, containing copies of outgoing letters, is in **Series III**.] After Miller's death the correspondence includes exchanges with Miller's widow, Catherine Greene Miller, and with Lemuel Kollock, the executor of Miller's estate. Letters of Catherine Greene Miller record the life of a woman managing a plantation on her own.

From the late 1790s on, the correspondence chronicles Whitney's entrance and progress in the field of firearms manufacturing. The correspondence includes numerous exchanges with government officials, such as Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, and arms inspector Decius Wadsworth, and financial backers such as James Hillhouse, as Whitney attempted to secure a contract from and produce muskets for the United States government. These exchanges include numerous details on contracts, financial advances and payments, and inspection and delivery of muskets. Letters to Josiah Stebbins at this time also give details of the developing manufacturing establishment.

During the War of 1812, the files document Whitney's renewed effort to contract with the U. S. government for the production of firearms. The files also highlight Whitney's difficulties with Callendar Irvine, the Commissary General of Purchases, and his efforts to help Wadsworth, now chief of the Ordnance Department, and Roswell Lee, the superintendent of the Springfield Armory, defend the standards used to test muskets manufactured at Springfield. The files of the early 1820s record Whitney's successful negotiation of a third contract with the government and include exchanges with Secretary of War John C. Calhoun.

The **CORRESPONDENCE** series also includes numerous letters relating to Whitney family matters. Whitney's brother Josiah, a Boston merchant, is a frequent correspondent, and with him Whitney discussed the general business climate as well as matters relating to the shipment of cotton and details concerning their sister Elizabeth and her children. He reported to his sister Elizabeth Blake on her son Eli's studies at Yale, and it was to Eli Whitney Blake and his brother Philos that Whitney entrusted the operation of the mill when his health failed. The series includes letters from Eli Whitney Blake concerning work on the government's contract. At the time of Whitney's death in 1825 there are letters describing his illness and passing, as well as letters containing reminiscences of his life.

The correspondence after 1825 is sparser. It includes letters relating to Whitney's estate and the continuance of his business. Materials in 1847 concern the Whitney family's renewed efforts to seek some remuneration from Congress for Whitney's invention of the cotton gin. Exchanges between family members record the lives of Henrietta Whitney and her children.

Series II, LAND RECORDS, includes deeds, leases, quit claims, and other documents relating to property in New Haven and Hamden. The documents are arranged in

chronological order. The earliest documents date from 1755, but probably came into the possession of the Whitney family as proof that a Whitney contemporary had title to the land Whitney was about to acquire. It is difficult to match contemporary descriptions of property against today's landmarks, but it seems that most of these land records relate to the site on the New Haven-Hamden border on which Whitney constructed his factory, to the site of his home, or to other acquisitions of property in New Haven. The extent of Whitney's land holdings is outlined in his will in Series V. Later records are negotiated by the executors of Whitney's estate, James Goodrich and Henry W. Edwards, and still later by his son Eli Whitney. These later records include the 1854 contract by which New Haven acquired the right to develop a reservoir for its water supply.

Series III, COTTON GIN PAPERS, includes material relating to the history of the cotton gin. The bulk of the materials concern either the business partnership of Phineas Miller and Eli Whitney or the patent for the cotton gin. Documents in the series include financial records, notes and memoranda, sketches and drawings, and printed matter. Also included are two volumes of letterbooks for Miller and Whitney. These include copies of business letters as well as of letters from Miller to Whitney. The first volume contains an index to the letters contained therein, but there is no similar index in the second volume.

Series IV, FIREARMS PAPERS, includes papers of both Eli Whitney and his son Eli Whitney, which relate to the production of guns. The bulk of the father's papers is composed of financial records relating to contracts with the government and drawings for machinery and buildings on the mill site. The numerous patents in this series are for improvements in gun manufacture during the tenure of Eli Whitney (1820-1895) as head of the gun factory.

Series V, PERSONAL PAPERS, includes papers of several family members, though the largest quantity of personal papers are those of Eli Whitney (1765-1825).

These personal papers include Whitney's student notebooks and other writings from his education at Yale, a copy of a journal Whitney kept while teaching school, financial and legal papers relating to his family in Westborough, Massachusetts, and other records of his personal finances. The series also includes the papers from his estate such as his will and an inventory of his property and biographical sketches composed after his death.

Other family members represented in the series by smaller quantities of papers are Whitney's wife Henrietta Edwards Whitney, her father Pierpont Edwards, brother Alfred P. Edwards, and children Francis Whitney Chaplain, Elizabeth Whitney, and Eli Whitney. Student papers from Princeton, a personal letterbook, business diary, and other financial and legal papers, as well as obituary notices comprise the papers of Eli Whitney (1820-1895) in this series.

Roll Contents

SERIES I CORRESPONDENCE, 1716-1927

Roll Box Folder
No. No. No.

1	1	1	1716, 1785-1791
		2	1792
		3	1793
		4	1794
		5	1795
		6	1796
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 167
		7	1797 Jan-Apr
		8	1797 May-Jun
		9	1797 Jul-Sep
		10	1797 Oct-Dec
		11	1798 Feb-May
		12	1798 Jun-Aug
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 167
		13	1798 Oct-Dec
		14	1799 Jan-Jun
		15	1799 Jul-Dec
		16	1800
		17	1801 Jan-Feb
		18	1801 Mar-Jul
		19	1801 Aug-Dec
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 167
		20	1802
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		21	1803 Jan-Jun
		22	1803 Jul-Nov
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		23	1804 Jan-Apr
1	2	24	1804 May-Dec

Roll Box Folder
No. No. No.

1	2	25	1805 Feb-May
2	2	26	1805 Jun-Dec
		27	1806 Jan-Aug
		28	1806 Sep-Dec
		29	1807
		30	1808 Jan-Jun
		31	1808 Jul-Dec
		32	1809 Jan-Jul
		33	1809 Aug-Oct
		34	1809 Nov-Dec
		35	1810 Jan-Mar
		36	1810 Apr-Oct
		37	1810 Nov-Dec
		38	1811 Jan-Apr
		39	1811 May-Sep
		40	1811 Oct-Dec
		41	1812 Jan-Mar
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		42	1812 Apr-Jun
		43	1812 Jul-Sep
		44	1812 Oct-Dec
		45	1813 Jan-Apr
2	3	46	1813 May-Jun
		47	1813 Jul-Dec
		48	1813 Oct-Nov: correspondence of Calendar Irvine and Eli Whitney
		49	1814 Jan-Jul See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		50	1814 Aug
		51	1814 Sep-Oct
		52	1814 Nov-Dec
		53	1815 Jan-May See also: Roll 7, 1968 Folder 168

Roll Box Folder
No. No. No.

3	3	54	1815 Jun-Aug
		55	1815 Oct-Dec
		56	1816 Jan-Aug
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		57	1816 Sep-Dec
		58	1817
		59	1818 Jan-Feb
		60	1818 Mar-Jun
		61	1818 Jul-Nov
		x-ref	1818 Dec
			See: Roll 7, Folder 168
		62	1819
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 168
		3	4
64	1821 Jan-Aug		
65	1821 Sep-Dec		
66	1822 Jan-Mar		
67	1822 Apr-Oct		
68	1822 Nov-Dec		
69	1823		
70	1824		
71	1825 Jan-Mar		
72	1825 Apr-Dec		
73	1826-1829		
74	1830-1835		
75	1837-1845		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 169		
76	1846-1847		
77	1848		
78	1850-1854		
79	1858-1860		
80	1861-1871		
81	1873-1897		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 169		

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.	
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3	4	82	1901
		83	1904-1912, 1922-1927
		84	not dated

SERIES II LAND RECORDS, 1755-1877

4	5	85	1755-1769
		86	1770-1777
		87	1779-1786
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		88	1787-1795
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		89	1796-1802
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		90	1803-1805
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		91	1806-1809
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		92	1810-1812
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		93	1813-1815
		94	1816-1819
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		95	1820-1827
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 170
		96	1828-1829
97	1830-1839		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 170		
98	1840-1843		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 170		
99	1844-1850		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 170		
100	1852-1877, not dated		
	See also: Roll 7, Folder 170		

SERIES III COTTON GIN PAPERS, 1794-1959

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.		
4	6	101	Miller and Whitney account book	1795-1810
		102	Miller and Whitney letterbook	1794 May- 1798 Jun
		103	Miller and Whitney letterbook	1798 Feb- 1803 Jan
		104	"Memoranda of Ginning Concerns" and letterbook of Eli Whitney (1820-1895)	1797-1799, 1842-1843
5	7	105	Miller, Phineas: estate papers	1804-1806 1818
		106	Financial records, miscellaneous	1806
		107	Newspapers and newspaper clippings See also: Roll 7, Folder 171	1795, 1796, 1802, 1885, 1901, 1923, not dated
		108	Patent: notes, remarks	1794, 1804- 1812, 1845, not dated
		109	Patents: printed matter, general	1805, 1807
		110	Patents: printed matter concerning legislative actions See also: Roll 7, Folder 172	1800-1808
		111	Sketches, drawings and photographs See also: Roll 7, Folder 173	not dated

Roll Box Folder
No. No. No.

5	7	112	Translation of a French work on machinery by A. L. Hillhouse	not dated
		113	Miscellaneous printed matter	1822, 1898, 1915, 1959, not dated

SERIES IV FIREARMS PAPERS, 1801-1915

5	8	114	Financial papers: general	1801-1815, 1821, not dated
		x-ref	Financial papers: account book of armory and personal expenses, 1808-1816 See: Roll 7, Folder 174	
		x-ref	Financial papers: account book of armory and personal expenses, 1811-1823 See: Roll 7, Folder 175	
		115	Financial papers: "Certificates of Inspection of 10,000 Muskets"	1801-1809
		116	Financial papers: receipts for 10,000 muskets	1801-1809
		117	Financial papers: vouchers for muskets	1815-1824
		118a	Machinery: sketches, plans, drawings See also: Roll 7, Folders	1915, not dated
		118b	Mill site: sketches, plans, drawings See also: Roll 7, Folder 178	
		119	Musket production: Eli Whitney; (1765-1825)	1810, 1816, 1820, not dated statement, notes, etc.

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.		
5	8	x-ref	Patents	1858, 1867
			See: Roll 7, Folder 179	
		120	Patents	1870-1871
		121	Patents	1872-1874
		122	Patents	1877-18795
		123	Patents	1880-1881
		124	Whitney Arms, Co.	1863, 1867
		125	Miscellaneous notes, lists, statements, etc.	1862, 1868, 1878-1881
			See also: Row 7, Folder 180	
		126	Miscellaneous printed matter	1803, 1808, 1822, 1823, 1853, 1869, 1885, 1893 1906, not dated

SERIES V PERSONAL PAPERS, 1771-1914

Eli Whitney

6	9	127	Biographical sketches	1825, 1832 1886, 1904, 1912, 1914, not dated
		128	Account books	1793-1794
		129	Financial papers: checks	1823
		130	Financial and legal papers: general	1771-1784, 1806-1814, not dated
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 181	
		131	Financial and legal papers: Jesse Potter)	1788, 1805- 1813, not dated
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 181	
		132	Journal (transcript)	1788-1789
		133	Poems	not dated
		134	Porter, Samuel: diary and	1803-1808

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.		
6	9	134	account book describing tour to the South with Eli Whitney (photocopy)	
		135	Portraits	1792
		136	Student papers: "A Dialogue between a Justice and an Attorney"	1784
		137	Student papers: disputes	1789-1792, not dated
		138	Student papers: disputes See also: Roll 7, Folder 181	not dated
		139	Student papers: essay regarding life of deceased friend, R. Grant	[1789-1792?]
		140	Student papers: essay on suicide and other writings	1790-1791
		141	Student papers: "Extracts" (short sayings)	[1789-1792?]
		142	Student papers: extracts from essays	[1789-1792?]
		143	Student papers: Greek tables	1789
		144	Student papers: mathematical theorems	[1789-1792?]
		145	Student papers: notes on astronomy	[1789-1792?]
		146	Student papers: notebook	[1789-1792?]
		147	Student papers: pocket account book	1787
		148	Student papers: miscellaneous papers	not dated
		149	Miscellaneous papers Eli Whitney estate See also: Roll 7, Folder 182	1795, not dated
		150	Drafts of will and related documents	1823-1826, not dated

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.		
6	9	151	Inventory of real and personal estate	1825
6	10	152	Record book	1825-1830, 1839, 1843

Other Family Members

		153	Chaplain, C. L. and Chaplain, Francis E. Whitney and family Edwards, Alfred P. See also: Roll 7, Folder 183	1842-1844, 1872, 1877- 1880
		154	Account book	1825
		155	Bill for sponges	1830
		156	Regarding Percival case- testimony	1826-1827
7	10	157	Scrapbook and miscellaneous documents	1831-1834, 1847-1861
		158	Edwards, Pierpont: will	1817

Whitney, Eli (1820-1895)

		x-ref	Letterbook, 1842-1843 See: Roll 4, Folder 104	
		159	Financial and legal papers	1844, 1857- 1864, 1871, 1888, not dated
		160	Obituary notices	1895
		161	Student papers	1831-1841
7	11	162	Data on lumber	1842
		163	Business diary	1852-1860
		164	Elizabeth Whitney (1819- 1854): miscellaneous papers	1842, not dated
		165	Henrietta F. (Edwards) Whitney: miscellaneous papers	1861-1865, not dated

**Roll Box Folder
No. No. No.**

7	11	166	Miscellaneous papers unidentified	1869, not dated
			See also: Roll 7, Folder 184	

OVERSIZE

7	12	167	Correspondence	1796-1801
		168	Correspondence	1802-1819
		169	Correspondence	1837, 1882
		170	Land records	1784-1856
			Cotton gin	not dated
		171	Newspapers and newspaper clippings	1795-1796, 1802, 1885, 1901, 1923, not dated
		172	Patents: printed matter concerning legislative actions	1801
		173	Sketches, drawings, and photographs Firearms	not dated
7	13	174	Financial papers: account book of armory and personal expenses	1808-1816
		175	Financial papers: account book of armory and personal expenses	1811-1823
7	14	176	Machinery: sketches, plans, drawings	not dated
		177	Machinery: sketches, plans, drawings	not dated
		178	Mill site: sketches, plans, drawings	1915, not dated
		179	Patents	1858, 1867

Roll No.	Box No.	Folder No.		
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7	14	180	Miscellaneous notes, lists, statements, etc.	1862, 1868, 1878-1881
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Personal Papers

181		Eli Whitney: financial and legal papers; student papers: disputes	1799-1803, 1805-1814, not dated
182		Eli Whitney estate	1825, 1841
183		Edwards, Alfred P.: permits for sailing	1833
184		Other family members: miscellaneous	not dated

