

## MSS. Collection #68

**William Kerr Papers, ca. 1750-1957. 1½ boxes (123 folders), ca. 265 items.**

NOTE: The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#:Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

### INTRODUCTION

The William Kerr Papers primarily document the **financial transactions** of a prominent **Greensboro merchant** of the early 1830s. They shed considerable light upon the operations of a merchant of this period: **goods traded, transportation, financing**, etc. The Kerr Papers are also notable for materials relating to the recovery of **Kerr's Texas estate**. For many decades after his death (ca.1850) various descendents made claims upon these properties, though it is unclear if these claims were legitimate or if any of these efforts were ultimately successful.

**Arrangement:** The William Kerr Papers are arranged into four series, and within series materials are arranged alphabetically. The four series are: **Correspondence**, 1813-72; **Financial**, 1831-96; **Kerr Estate**, 1797-1933; and **Miscellaneous**, ca. 1750-1957.

**Provenance:** Three different accession numbers are associated with the William Kerr Papers: 1970.156..., 1973.232.1, and 1974.123.5. The 1970 donation was from Mrs. C. Cartland of Greensboro. The gift of 1973 was from Mr. W.S. Houston of Greensboro, and that of 1974 from Mr. William J. Moore. There was also indication of a 1977 donation by Mr. Moore.

**Processing:** This collection was organized and the finding aid prepared by J. Timothy Cole in June 1996.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Kerr (? -1850?) was a prominent merchant in Greensboro, ca. 1830. Kerr was probably born in **Person County**, the son of **John Kerr**. Later he settled and established a business in Greensboro, and he evidently achieved some prominence in the community, as he served as **Chairman of the Board of Commissioners** in 1833. **Ralph Gorrell** became a business partner with Kerr about 1831 (1:2), and Kerr's correspondence (1:9) indicates that he was traveling widely as a **cotton merchant** by 1839. At some point, perhaps about 1840, Kerr purchased extensive lands in Texas. Settling there, he died about 1850, presumably having had no children, though the Campbell correspondence (1:2) would seem to dispute this. Over several generations descendents of his three sisters (**Mary Kerr Buchanan, Clementine "Smithy" Kerr Buchanan, and Margaret "Peggy" Kerr Wagstaff**) made apparently fruitless efforts to obtain remuneration for the Kerr lands. It is unclear if members of his family ever completed the recovery of his large estate or if the claims were legitimate.

**Biographical Sources:** Information on William Kerr would appear to be scant. The reference to Kerr's service on the Board of Commissioners was found in James W. Albright's *Greensboro, 1808-1904: Facts, Figures, Traditions and Reminiscences*, Greensboro: Jos. J. Stone & Company, 1904, p. 36.

### SCOPE & CONTENT NOTE

Types of materials in this collection include **correspondence, promissory notes, receipts, broadsides, bulletins, watercolors, engravings, wills, family histories and genealogical charts**, and various **legal documents**.

The balance of the Kerr Papers relate to William Kerr's **business transactions** in the 1830s. These materials (folders 1:1-5,7-13,15-18,20-23,25, 27-31; 2:1-55,57-58) shed light upon **merchant networks** of the period, **transportation** mechanisms, **merchandising** techniques, and **consumer preferences**. In this group perhaps the most interesting materials are the letters of **Hugh Campbell** (1:2), a Richmond merchant with whom Kerr evidently had an especially close relationship. Also, the letters of **Col. C.J. Chisholm** provide a merchant's view of the **gold region** in Burke County (NC) during the 1830s (1:3).

Those researchers interested in the recovery of the **Kerr estate in Texas** will find a wealth of materials in the third series. Much of this group consists of ca. 1930 correspondence with **Mrs. Conrad S. Whittington** of Greensboro (3:1-2,4-7,11-13,18). Also included are a number of manuscripts which appear to be particularly pertinent to the history of the estate controversy -- in this respect, the **R.D. Bumpass** letter (1860) in 3:15 is particularly noteworthy, as are the **O. Henry** materials in 3:19,22,27 (ca. 1890). The dubious nature of the story is perhaps suggested by the printed matter (ca. 1930) in 3:29-30, as well as the content of the Whittington correspondence.

The miscellaneous materials which complete the collection are perhaps most noteworthy for an early North Carolina **sheriff's appointment (1798)** signed by **Samuel Ashe** (4:1); this series also includes some interesting **watercolors of insects** (4:3) and some 18th century **engravings** related to **astronomy** (4:4).

### SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

#### **1. Correspondence. 31 folders (ca. 90 items). 1813-72.**

Most of the letters in the correspondence series relate to the operation of William Kerr's business in the early 1830s. The letters (1831-33) of Hugh Campbell (1:2) are especially noteworthy -- they include some personal content (one letter refers to "**Mrs. Kerr**" and another may allude to the death of Kerr's wife) and one letter in particular includes a lengthy discussion of Campbell's partnership with Ralph **Gorrell**. Folder 1:3 includes Kerr's correspondence (1831-33) from Col. C.J. Chisholm, a **Morganton, NC**, merchant with whom Kerr worked. Chisholm writes of the connection between his business and "court days," and his letters also provide insight into life in the gold region of Western North Carolina. A **Civil War** letter (1861) of **Capt. James R. Ellis** may be found in 1:6; Ellis, from Davidson County, served as a surgeon in the **35th North Carolina**. Folder 1:9 includes two letters (1839) from Kerr to Ralph **Gorrell**;

these letters discuss Kerr's **travels in the South**, the **cotton market**, and the financial health of the **banks** of the period. In 1:14 may be found an interesting letter (1850) from **R. McCulloch** (?) to **Samuel Kerr** (?) discussing flirtations with the ladies of Philadelphia and the opportunities of that city. Most of the rest of this series consists of mundane business correspondence.

## 2. **Financial. 58 folders (ca. 100 items). 1831-96.**

The financial series includes promissory notes and receipts, primarily from the period 1831-33, for the operation of William Kerr's business. For the most part these are manuscript receipts, though some of these materials (such as 2:1,3,5,9-10,14,16,22,31,53,58) are printed. Most are also associated with **merchants in** larger cities such as **Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York**, though a few of the receipts originate in **Greensboro** (2:2,17,25,44). Combined with the business correspondence above, these materials afford considerable insight into Kerr's business dealings in the early 1830s.

## 3. **Kerr Estate. 30 folders (ca. 65 items). 1797-1933.**

This interesting series concerns the efforts of Kerr descendents to recover the Texas estate of William Kerr. The first part of this group consists of part or all of Greensboro lawyer **S. Glenn Brown's** file on the Kerr estate. Letters addressed to Mrs. Conrad S. Whittington of Greensboro comprise most of this file (3:1-2,4-7). These letters shed light especially upon recovery activities which were conducted in the early 1930s. Included in Mrs. Whittington's correspondence are letters which refer to the formation of **Estate Claims, Inc.** (3:4), a body which was formed to investigate the Buchanan claims, and **Hare, McLearn and Peters**, an Oregon law firm which worked on the matter (3:5). Folder 3:8 includes letters from **W.W. Wagstaff** to Attorney Brown (1905).

Additional letters addressed to Ms. Whittington may be found in 3:11-13, 18 (ca. 1930-32). In 3:14 is a blank invitation from **President James Buchanan** and a postal cover with **Buchanan's free frank signature** (?). Folder 3:15 consists of an important letter (1860) from R.D. Bumpass, addressed to William Buchanan & wife. Bumpass was hired by the Buchanan family to go to Texas and settle the estate for descendents of William Kerr. Bumpass reports from Texas that he has sold 2,000 acres with approximately 1,500 acres left to settle. **C.N. Jordan** of Person, N.C., volunteers the services of his son (**Henry T. Jordan**) to settle the Kerr estate in 3:16 (1873).

Researchers will find the draft of an "affidavit of hiership" (1890), presumably in the hand of O. Henry (William Sidney Porter), in 3:22; an item in 3:27 explains O. Henry's connection to the Kerr lands. A document in 3:23 appoints **Willie Brooks** as attorney for Kerr's Kentucky relatives, **Peter and Anne Overby** (1851). Folder 3:25 includes a purported **will of William Kerr**, dated August 22nd, 1850, but it is not signed. Finally, folders 3:29 and 3:30 include ca. 1930 printed items related to the **Buchanan Clan, Inc.**, and **Estate Claims, Inc.**, both of which were organizations created to recover the Kerr estate.

**4. Misc. 4 folders (9 items). ca. 1750-1957.**

This short, eclectic series includes: a document (1798) appointing **Lewis Yancy** as Sheriff of Granville County (4:1, signed by Gov. Samuel Ashe); a 1957 poem entitled "Kind God and Mankind" by **W.C.D. Kerr** (4:2); a group of watercolors (nd) of moths (including *Actias Luna* and *Catacola*) other insects (4:3); and some mid-18th century engravings related to astronomy (4:4).

**FOLDER LISTING****Series Folder Contents**

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	2	" -- Campbell, Hugh (1831-33)
	3	" -- Chisholm, C.J. (1831-33)
	4	" -- Cunningham & Anderson (1832)
	5	" -- Dawson, Kendal (1833)
	6	" -- Ellis, Capt. J.R. (1861)
	7	" -- Henderson, L. (1836)
	8	" -- Irvine, Hood (1832-33)
	9	" -- Kerr, William (1839)
	10	" -- Kyle, Hazlett (1831)
	11	" -- Lancaster, Denly & Co. (1832-33)
	12	" -- Latta, John C. (1831)
	13	" -- Lucke & Siger (1832)
	14	" -- McCulloch (?), R. (1850)
	15	" -- McGwaine, Dennis (1832-33)
	16	" -- McKimmon, James W. (1832-33)
	17	" -- Meirrell & Stout (1833)
	18	" -- Michal, John (1831)
	19	" -- Misc. (1813-68)
	20	" -- Otis, Dunlop & Co. (1832)
	21	" -- Poland, A. & Co. (1833-35)
	22	" -- Reynolds, William (1832)
	23	" -- Rose, Beverly (1832)
	24	" -- Russell, Sarah (1872)
	25	" -- Smyth, William (1832)
	26	" -- Snider, M. (1868, nd)
	27	" -- Tappan, Arthur (1831)
	28	" -- Townsend & Brother (1835)
	29	" -- Townsend, King & Co. (1832-33)
	30	" -- Welsh, A. & T. (1831)
	31	" -- Williamson, Thomas L. (1832)
2	1	Financial -- Promissory notes (1831)
	2	" -- Receipts -- Anderson, W.F. (1831)
	3	" -- " -- Arents, Edward (1831)
	4	" -- " -- Auchincloss, Jr., Hugh (1833)
	5	" -- " -- Barr, Kneeland & Co. (1833)
	6	" -- " -- Brugiere & Allen (?) (1832)
	7	" -- " -- Buping (?), E. & A. (1831)
	8	" -- " -- Campbell, Jones & Opic (1831-32)
	9	" -- " -- Chandler & Marvin (1833)

**Series Folder Contents**

2	10	Financial -- Receipts -- Cochran & Brothers (1831)
	11	" -- " -- Cochran, Samuel & Co. (1832)
	12	" -- " -- Cunningham & Anderson (1832)
	13	" -- " -- Denniston, James & Co. (1831-32)
	14	" -- " -- Duhring, Henry (1831)
	15	" -- " -- Earps, Hooper & Wolfe (1831)
	16	" -- " -- Forge, Alexander & Co. (1831)
	17	" -- " -- Financial -- Receipts -- Hack, John (1832)
	19	" -- " -- Hazeltine, John & Co. (1831-32)
	20	" -- " -- Hazeltine, Haddock & Co. (1833)
	21	" -- " -- Henderson, George (1832)
	22	" -- " -- Hoadley & Phelps (1831)
	23	" -- " -- Huber, H. & F.A. (1831-32)
	24	" -- " -- Hull, Oliver (1831-33)
	25	" -- " -- Humphreys, Henry (1832)
	26	" -- " -- Hurst, A. & Co. (1832)
	27	" -- " -- Irvine, Hood (1832)
	28	" -- " -- Key & Mielke (1831)
	29	" -- " -- Key, Mielke & Biddle (1832)
	30	" -- " -- Knox & Boggs (1832)
	31	" -- " -- La Tourrette, James (1833)
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	33	" -- " -- Laverty, Gantly & Co. (1831-32)
	34	" -- " -- Locke, William (1831)
	35	" -- " -- Lucke & Sizer (1831)
	36	" -- " -- McClintock & Holmes (1832-33)
	37	" -- " -- McFarland & Ayers (1831)
	38	" -- " -- McGwaine, Dennis (1832-33)
	39	" -- " -- McNamara, Hugh C. (1832)
	40	" -- " -- Meirrell & Stout (1831-33)
	41	" -- " -- Mielke, E.C. (1833)
	42	" -- " -- Miller & Barton (1831)
	43	" -- " -- Misc. (1831-48)
	44	" -- " -- Moderwell, Robert (1832)
	45	" -- " -- Otis, Dunlop & Co. (1831-32)
	46	" -- " -- Poland, A. & Co. (1832)
	47	" -- " -- Pond, Joseph (1832-33)
	48	" -- " -- Robbins, Granger & Co. (1832)
	49	" -- " -- Rushton & Aspinwall (1831)
	50	" -- " -- Shields & Armistead (1832)
	51	" -- " -- Smith, William (1831)
	52	" -- " -- Smyth, William (1831)
	53	" -- " -- Tappan, Arthur & Co. (1831-33)
	54	" -- " -- Townsend, King & Co. (1831)

**Series Folder Contents**

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	2	" " -- " " -- " -- Doris, A.L. (1932)
	3	" " -- " " -- " -- Jordan, C.N. (1873)
	4	" " -- " " -- " -- Marquand, E.A. (1932)
	5	" " -- " " -- " -- McAlear, E.J. (1931)
	6	" " -- " " -- " -- Phlieger, Mary (1933)
	7	" " -- " " -- " -- Phlieger, S.Z. (1932)
	8	" " -- " " -- " -- Wagstaff, W.W. (1905)
	9	" " -- " " -- Literary -- Buchanan Family Genealogy (nd)
	10	" " -- " " -- " -- Kerr Family Genealogy (nd)
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	12	" " -- " -- Buchanan, F.A. (1931)
	13	" " -- " -- Buchanan, J.H. (1932)
	14	" " -- " -- Buchanan, James (1858)
	15	" " -- " -- Bumpass, R.D. (1860)
	16	" " -- " -- Jordan, C.N. (1873)
	17	" " -- " -- Kerr, Robert (1827)
	18	" " -- " -- Phlieger, S.Z. (1932)
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	21	" " -- Genealogical -- List of Wm. Kerr's heirs (nd)
	22	" " -- Legal -- Affidavit of heirship (1890)
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	30	" " -- " -- Bulletin -- Estate Claims, Inc. (1932)
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