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A Guide to the Justus DaLee Letters and Autograph Book A0040

This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on July 21, 2019.

English

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

American Folk Art Museum Archives

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Summary Information

Repository:	American Folk Art Museum Archives
Creator:	DaLee, Justus, (1793-1878)
Creator:	DaLee, Richard Waterman Moffitt, (1809–1868)
Title:	Justus DaLee Letters and Autograph Book
ID:	A0040
Date [inclusive]:	c. 1837-1871, 1881-1888
Physical Description:	1 file(s)
Physical Description:	1 object(s)
Language of the Material:	English
Text (OS2) [box]:	AFAM OS-2
[folder]:	11
Graphic Materials [box]:	1

Preferred Citation

[item description], [date], Justus DaLee Letters and Autograph Book, [box and folder number], American Folk Art Museum Archives, New York. Gift of Don Walters and Mary Benisek, 2005.

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Biographical Note

Justus DaLee was a portrait painter active in the mid-nineteenth century, from approximately 1830 to 1848. The DaLee family, most notably his brother Richard Waterman Moffitt DaLee, and son, Amon Gilbert Justus DaLee, were all also portrait painters and many of the paintings attributed to Justus DaLee are collaborative works between family members. Amon in particular would travel with his father, and would often finish the clothing in his father's portraits. Eventually, Amon would begin to paint on his own. As more artworks, some signed, were discovered, and extensive genealogical research was done, differences in style between family members have been noted.

DaLee was born into a Baptist community in Pittsfield, New York in 1793. Justus was the first of thirteen children, and the DaLee family moved often, eventually settling in Cambridge, New York. Before beginning his career as a portrait painter around 1830, he was a musician in the army during the War of 1812, a teacher, a (self described) "professor of penmanship," clerk in his Baptist church, and a farmer. He married Mary Fowler in 1816, and their first child was born in 1817. In total they had ten children. By 1830, Justus and his eldest surviving son Amon began to travel around neighboring New York towns, painting portraits to support his family. By 1837, Justus' brother Richard was also involved in the family business.

Much of what is known about these years comes from the letters in this collection, written among the DaLee family about life on the road. The DaLees traveled to Pittsburgh and Cleveland, as well as all over New York State, and wrote about their travels, those they met on the road and those they painted portraits of, and discussed their plans for the future.

By 1845, life as itinerant artists was becoming too challenging for Justus and Amon, and their letters begin to describe plans to open a medicine business and grocery. In 1848, Justus, Richard, and Amon were all living in Buffalo. The 1848 Commercial Advertiser lists all three DaLees as portrait painters, but also lists Justus and Amon as grocers, and in 1850, Justus is listed in the census as a teacher living in Portland, New York.

In 1856, Justus DaLee applied for a piece of land to homestead in the Midwest, based on his twenty-day military service. This amount was just over the fifteen-day enlistment minimum required, and DaLee was given 160 acres in Lawrence, Kansas. This land was later homesteaded by Amon, after he spent some time in San Francisco, learning the daguerreotype trade. By the time of the 1870 census, Justus was living with his daughter in Wisconsin, and is listed as blind. On January 5, 1878, Justus passed away, and was buried in the Odekirk family cemetery in Wisconsin.

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Scope and Contents

Justus DaLee writes about his family, his wife, and his children: Mary Ann, Amon, Cornelia, Almanzon, Harriet, William, and Albert Waterman who was called "Waterman," and about his life as a painter and the times in which he was living, his scarcity of money, and the difficulty to make a living as an artist as well as detailing the fact his work habits could not include painting at night since candle light was insufficient.

Excerpted: "Troy, Dec. 17 1837, I am pursuing my daily avocation with all diligence and have generally as much as I can do-days short, weather cold...I labor under several disadvantages-the days as I before hinted are short. I cannot paint in evenings, neither can I paint steadily... on account of restless weary sensations produced by too long sitting; I find Amon assisted me greatly by painting the dresses...my price is 1/2 with frame and all... but many who are knowing to my doing them cheaper."

"Meadville Nov. 30, 1841, My dear Wife: We have taken 30 miniatures in this place and not made one poor one...We should have done much better in this place if the days had been longer and times not quite so hard."

He wrote also of the difficulty to be away from home which he had to do to find his painting commissions and of his efforts to find employment to supplement his income. He wrote of starting a grocery store and of trying to market a medicine made from a root. Other letters defined his spirituality, showed his strong faith and his gratitude to God for the gift of his artistic skills. His final letter written in 1871 to his daughter Maria, lamented his failing health; two additional letters are included in this lot, one by his brother Richard W. written to his sister Maria, in 1841, with an illustrated and calligraphic envelope, and lastly an 1841 letter addressing "My dear wife" and signed "H. M. DaLee" and "R. W. DaLee." Of the nine original letters in this lot, eight have been transcribed.

From Skinner auction catalog, (Boston, 2004). Auction 2242, lot 100.

Also in the collection is a family record of births and deaths, written by Justus DaLee, which was taken from an 1828 family bible. A family autograph book is also part of the collection, though the dates in the book are from after the lifetime of Justus DaLee. It is unknown who the book originally belonged to, though it was someone in the DaLee family.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

American Folk Art Museum Archives

Conditions Governing Access

The collection is open for research. Access to sensitive materials may be restricted at the discretion of the American Folk Art Museum.

Conditions Governing Use

The Justus DaLee Letters and Autograph Book is owned by the American Folk Art Museum. The collection is subject to all copyright laws, and is dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Don Walters and Mary Benisek, 2005

Transcription

The letters, which are both fragile and challenging to read, have been transcribed. Copies of the transcription are available.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Art, American -- 19th century
- Itinerant artists
- Correspondence, Personal
- Portraiture