

# **Frothingham and Roberts family papers**

**Ms. Coll. 1277**

**Finding aid prepared by Holly Mengel.**

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Last updated on March 23, 2017.

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
<b>Creator</b>	Roberts, George W.B. (George Wood Bissell), 1859-1941
<b>Creator</b>	Roberts, Mary Foster Frothingham, 1863-1934
<b>Title</b>	Frothingham and Roberts family papers
<b>Call number</b>	Ms. Coll. 1277
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1862-1936
<b>Extent</b>	1.2 linear feet (2 boxes)
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>The Frothingham and Roberts families were joined when Mary Foster Frothingham (1863-1934) and George Wood Bissell Roberts (1859-1941) were married on February 10, 1886. This collection documents three generations of the Frothingham family of Massachusetts and the Roberts family of Philadelphia and Riverton, New Jersey. The bulk of the material consists of extended family correspondence dating from 1862 to 1936 to and or from George W.B. Roberts and his wife Mary Foster Frothingham Roberts.</p>

**Cite as:**

Frothingham and Roberts family papers, 1862-1936, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare

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## Biography/History

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The Frothingham and Roberts families were joined when Mary Foster Frothingham (1863-1934) and George Wood Bissell Roberts (1859-1941) were married on February 10, 1886. Both families were prominent: the Frothinghams in Boston and the Roberts in Philadelphia and Riverton, New Jersey. Mary Foster Frothingham was the daughter of Ephraim Langdon Frothingham (1826-1902) and Elmira Sophia Rice (1828-1920). Ephraim Langdon Frothingham was a cashier at the Custom House in Boston, as well as the author (with his brother Arthur Lincoln Frothingham (born 1830)) of several books on philosophy. He married Elmira Sophia Rice in 1856 and they were the parents of Ephraim Langdon Frothingham (born in 1858), Benjamin and Mary Foster (twins, both born in 1863), Mark (1864-1920), and Edith, born in 1866. They had another son, "Gardie," who died, probably before the age of six, in 1862. Based upon letters in the collection, Mary Foster Frothingham was extremely close to her family, so much so that she considered calling off her engagement to George W.B. Roberts. In a March 6, 1885 letter, Roberts responds to her concerns, "I can fully appreciate your feelings on leaving your home & a devoted mother and father but ... nearly every woman who decides to marry must make this sacrifice," (box 1, folder 12). They married on February 10, 1886 and lived in Philadelphia.

George W.B. Roberts was the son of Thomas Roberts (1832-1917) and Elizabeth Hill Bissell (1836-1920). Roberts was the founder of Thomas Roberts & Co., a wholesale grocer, importer, and commission merchant in Philadelphia which he headed for more than fifty years. Elizabeth Hill Bissell Roberts appears to have written *Hand-book. Colored work in dioceses of the South. Text book for mission study classes and practical information*, which was published in 1916. Thomas and Elizabeth Roberts, who married in 1858 and moved to Riverton, New Jersey, were the parents of George W.B. (1859-1941), Waters Dewees (1865-1939), Augusta Meade (born 1869), and Thomas (1875-1920). George W.B. Roberts graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1882 and worked as merchant with his father. He was very active in Philadelphia business and civic life, serving on the board of several organizations, including the Trades League of Philadelphia and the Corn Exchange National Bank. Waters Dewees Roberts graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1884 and from Harvard University in 1885, and was ordained at the Divinity School in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1888. He served as rector of St. John's Church in East Boston. He and his wife, Katherine Palmer Chamberlin (born in 1865) were the parents of Elizabeth (born in 1896), Margaret (born in 1898), Augusta (1899), Katherine (born in 1902), Thomas (born in 1904), and Charles (born in 1910).

George W.B. and Mary Frothingham Roberts were the parents of Mary (1887-1960), Dorothy M. (1893-1955), Elizabeth Bissell (1893-1982), Virginia (born in 1894), and Edith S. (born in 1905). In 1914, Elizabeth Bissell Roberts married Robert Chesterfield Clay (born 1891) and they were the parents of Richard, Mary, Robert, George, and Langdon. Robert C. Clay graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1912 and served in France during World War I from June 1918 to June 1919. He was, according to letters in the collection, an alcoholic from at least 1924 to 1928.

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## Scope and Contents

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This collection documents three generations of the Frothingham family of Massachusetts and the Roberts family of Philadelphia and Riverton, New Jersey. The bulk of the material consists of family correspondence dating from 1862 to 1936 to and or from George W.B. Roberts and his wife Mary Foster Frothingham Roberts. The collection is arranged in four series: I. Letters sent to the first generation, II. Letters sent to the second generation, III. Letters sent to the third generation, and IV. Autograph album, travel notes, and photographs.

Series I. Letters sent to the first generation includes letters addressed to Ephraim Langdon and Elmira Sophia (née Rice) Frothingham (parents of Mary Foster Frothingham Roberts) and Thomas and Elizabeth Hill Bissell Roberts (parents of George W.B. Roberts). The letters to Elmira Sophia Frothingham include letters of condolence on the occasion of the death of her son "Gardie," who must have died before the age of six. There are letters to her from her husband, her son Mark, her son Ephraim, her sister Lucy, her niece Mary, and several friends. Of note are several letters to and from her husband's aunt, Sarah Swain (sister to Ephraim Langdon Frothingham's mother, Eunice), who died at 88. Along with these letters are a few clippings reporting her death and an inventory of the contents of her home. Letters addressed solely to Ephraim Langdon are from a friend and his son, Mark. Only one letter is addressed to Thomas and Elizabeth Hill Bissell. This letter is from George W.B. and Mary Roberts (their son and daughter-in-law) reporting on the birth of their daughter Mary.

Series II. Letters sent to the second generation includes letters largely sent to Mary Foster Frothingham (later Roberts) and George W.B. Roberts. The bulk of these letters were sent to Mary from George prior to their marriage on February 10, 1886. Following their marriage there are a number of letters written to her by her parents and siblings; and eventually by her own children. There are a few letters written to her by friends, but her family, which was apparently important enough to her that she considered calling off her engagement to remain geographically close to them, appears to have been the focus of her time and energy. Letters to George W.B. Roberts, for the most part were sent from his brother Waters Dewees Roberts. These letters include, in addition to type-written letters from him, letters from his wife and children (sent to W. Dewees Roberts) that seem to have been forwarded to George. Of interest may be the letters from his daughter Elizabeth Roberts who taught school in Shanghai. There are a few letters to George from his wife, and from his children, particularly Elizabeth and Edith Roberts.

Series III. Letters sent to the third generation focus largely on Elizabeth Bissell Roberts (later Clay), the daughter of George W.B. and Mary Roberts. There are a number of letters sent to her before she married Robert Chesterfield Clay in 1914--these letters indicate an active social life and many friends. There are a few courtship letters to her from her fiancé Robert C. Clay, which are particularly interesting when examined with the later letters written to and from Elizabeth. According to a 44-page letter that Elizabeth wrote, but never sent, to her children, Robert C. Clay was an alcoholic and had an affair with the children's German nurse, Ding Bergforth. Letters from Clay's sisters, Agnes and Josephine, offer support; and a letter that Elizabeth sent to her father, four years later in 1928, indicates that Robert C. Clay was still suffering from the disease as well and that Elizabeth would welcome a divorce. There are two letters written to Clay; one from his daughter Mary while the family (sans Robert C. Clay) were in Europe and one from Clay's mother in which she indicates her pleasure at his seeking treatment for his alcoholism. The final series, Series IV. Autograph album, notes, and photographs include a "Floral Album" in which autographs are addressed to "Miss Mamie" or "Mame." It is unclear who "Mamie" was, but it is possible,

based upon the dates of the album that Mamie or Mame was Mary Foster Frothingham. The album contains poems and verses. The travel notes, notes on geographic regions, and notes on literary figures include handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, and clippings from what appear to be journals. There are a few "Philatelic Portraits" articles included. The handwritten notes may be in the hand of Ephraim Langdon Frothingham (Mary Foster Frothingham Robert's father) and one of his business cards can be found in the midst of the clippings. Regions include Hawaii, Italy, Spain, Africa, Asia, Russia, India, and the Netherlands. Authors include Thackeray, Emerson, and Carlyle. There are a few mentions of Boston history as well. There are two photograph albums containing unidentified photographs, probably from the Frothingham and/or Roberts families. The first photograph album contains seven pages and all the photographs are of children. Only one of these photographs is identified with the name "Jack," which is not a name that is immediately connected with the families, although could be a nickname. The second album may be associated with the W. Dewees Roberts family as one photograph is labeled Margaret W. DeWees (possibly the daughter of W. Dewees and Kate Roberts). There are a few photographs of travel, but the majority are portraits of people varying in age from very old to children. Very few of the photographs are labeled and those that are, do not appear to be family members.

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## Administrative Information

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts  
Finding aid prepared by Holly Mengel.

### Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

### Use Restrictions

Copyright restrictions may exist. For most library holdings, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania do not hold copyright. It is the responsibility of the requester to seek permission from the holder of the copyright to reproduce material from the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

### Source of Acquisition

Sold by The Book Shop, 2016.

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## Related Materials

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## Related Archival Materials note

At Princeton University:  
Frothingham Family Collection, 1850-1950, C0303

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## Controlled Access Headings

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### FORM/GENRE(S)

- Autograph albums
- Correspondence
- Photograph albums
- Photographs

### GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Philadelphia (Pa.)--Social life and customs--19th century

### PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Clay, Elizabeth Bissell Roberts, 1893-1982
- Clay, Robert C. (Robert Chesterfield), 1891-
- Frothingham, Elmira Sophia Rice, 1828-1920
- Frothingham, Ephraim L. (Ephraim Langdon)
- Roberts, Waters Dewees, 1865-1936

### SUBJECT(S)

- Alcoholism
- Courtship
- Families
- Manners and customs
- Marriage
- Women

## Collection Inventory

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### SERIES I. LETTERS SENT TO THE FIRST GENERATION.

	Box	Folder
Frothingham, Elmira, letters of condolence to her from [Emma] (neice), Mary (possibly sister), Louisa Schermerhorn, regarding the death of her son, "Gardie", 1862-1863.	1	1
Frothingham, Elmira, letters to her from Ephraim Langdon Frothingham (husband), 1882-1885.	1	2
Frothingham, Elmira, letters to her from Mark Frothingham (son), 1882-1885.	1	3
Frothingham, Elmira, letters to her from Mary (niece), Ann B. Wainwright, and [Edith] Prescott Wolcott, 1882-1886.	1	4
Frothingham, Elmira, letters to her from "Ephie" (probably Ephraim Frothingham, son), 1883-1884.	1	5
Frothingham, Elmira, letters to her from [Lucy] (sister), 1883, undated.	1	6
Frothingham, Elmira and Ephraim, letters to them from Sarah Swain (Ephraim's aunt, sister of his mother, Eunice), includes death notices, inventory of household effects, and a letter to Sarah Swain, possibly from Elmira, 1884-1888.	1	7
Frothingham, Ephraim, letters to him from Jeremiah Colburn, Mark Frothingham (son), and illegible, 1882, 1885, 1891.	1	8
Roberts, Thomas and Elizabeth H. Bissel, letter to them from George and	1	9



Mary Frothingham Roberts (son and daughter-in-law) regarding the birth of their daughter Mary Frothingham Roberts, 1887 June 14.

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**SERIES II. LETTERS SENT TO THE SECOND GENERATION.**

	Box	Folder
Frothingham, Mary ("May"), letters to her from Maggie, Mary Anne (cousin), C.E. Frothingham, Charles F. Rice, Augusta Meade Roberts (future sister-in-law), W. Dewees Roberts (future brother-in-law), and Alice Winslow (includes one letter from Mary to Alice), 1882-1886, undated.	1	10
Frothingham, Mary ("May"), letters to her from George W. B. Roberts (future husband), 1885 January-February.	1	11
Frothingham, Mary ("May"), letters to her from George W. B. Roberts (future husband), 1885 March-August.	1	12
Frothingham, Mary ("May"), letters to her from George W. B. Roberts (future husband), 1885 September-December.	1	13
Frothingham, Mary ("May"), letters to her from George W. B. Roberts (future husband), 1886 January-February 5, undated.	1	14
Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from George W. B. Roberts (husband), 1886 April-1910.	1	15
Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from Ephraim Langdon and Elmira Frothingham (her parents), Edith Frothingham (sister), Augusta Meade Roberts (sister-in-law), and W. Dewees Roberts (brother-in-law), 1886-1887.	1	16
Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from Ephraim Langdon	1	17

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and Elmira Frothingham (her parents) and [Olive (sister)], 1892-1900.

Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from Ephraim Langdon and Elmira Frothingham (her parents) and W. Dewees Roberts (brother-in-law), 1901-1923. 1 18

Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from Mary and Elizabeth Roberts (daughters), 1910-1923. 1 19

Roberts, Mary ("May") Frothingham, letters to her from E.B. "Baldy" Edwards, Edith Gee, J.G. Greene, [illegible] Kennedy, Dr. and Mrs. Joseph F. Rothrock, and Harriet Wolcott, 1887-1920. 1 20

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Waters Dewees Roberts (brother); with family letters apparently sent to Dewees Roberts and forwarded to George W.B. Roberts, 1885, 1910-1925 March. 1 21

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Waters Dewees Roberts (brother); with family letters apparently sent to Dewees Roberts and forwarded to George W.B. Roberts, 1925 April-1926. 1 22

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Waters Dewees Roberts (brother); with family letters apparently sent to Dewees Roberts and forwarded to George W.B. Roberts, 1927. 1 23

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Waters Dewees Roberts (brother); with family letters apparently sent to Dewees Roberts and forwarded to George W.B. Roberts, 1928-1934. 1 24

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Mary Frothingham Roberts (wife), 1900, 1924, 1926. 1 25

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from W.J. Crocker and E.B. "Baldy" Edwards, 1887, 1918. 1 26

Roberts, George W.B., letters to him from Edith and Elizabeth (daughters), 1922, 1928. 1 27

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Roberts, George W.B. and Mary Frothingham, letters to them from Elizabeth Bissell Roberts Clay (daughter), 1927 November-December.	1	28
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Roberts, Waters Dewees and Katherine, letter to them from Katherine Roberts (daughter), 1934 October 14.	1	29
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**SERIES III. LETTERS SENT TO THE THIRD GENERATION.**

	Box	Folder
Roberts, Misses (Dorothy and Elizabeth), letters to them from Gabrielle Boyer and "Dory", 1911, undated.	1	30

Roberts, Elizabeth Bissell, letters to her from Dan, Edward, Harry, Walter [illegible], Pauline [Angell], Virginia Harrison, G.S., Katherine Thompson, Mary von H., and Danielle Winant, 1906-1914.	1	31
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Roberts, Elizabeth Bissell, letters to her from Robert C. Clay (future husband), 1914.	1	32
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Roberts, Elizabeth Bissell, letters to her from Elmira Sophia Frothingham or Elizabeth Bissell Roberts (grandmother), Kate Palmer Chamberlin Roberts (aunt), and Mary (probably sister Mary Frothingham Roberts), circa 1911-1913.	1	33
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Roberts, Elizabeth Bissell, letter from her to her children (Richard, Mary, Robert, George, and Langdon) regarding their father's alcoholism and infidelity, 1924 November 29.	1	34
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Roberts, Elizabeth Bissell, letters to her from Agnes and Josephine Roberts (sisters-in-law) and Margaret (possibly cousin Margaret Roberts), circa 1928-1936.	1	35
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Roberts, Robert C., letters to him from Mary Frothingham Clay (daughter) and his mother, 1927, undated.	1	36
Unknown authors and recipients, letters and an account sheet, 1906, undated.	1	37

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**SERIES IV. AUTOGRAPH ALBUM, NOTES, AND PHOTOGRAPHS.**

	Box	Folder
"Miss Mamie"/Mame (possibly Mary "May" Frothingham Roberts), "Floral Album" autograph album, circa 1877-1883.	1	38
Unidentified travel notes, notes on geographic regions, and notes on literary figures, undated.	1	39
Unidentified photograph albums, undated.	2	1-2