

The Winter Family Papers

The Gindrat / Thorington / Winter Family Papers represents the many and varied activities of one of the South's most prominent extended families, including their expansive involvements in manufacturing, banking, and law during the 19th century. **John Gindrat** (1777-1851) was an early founder and mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, which became the capital of Alabama in 1846. Taking advantage of Montgomery's rapid growth, Gindrat invested heavily in banking and real estate. By the 1840s iron furnaces, foundries, and steam engines characterized manufacturing throughout the country. In 1847-1848, Gindrat, together with his son-in-law **Joseph S. Winter** (1821-1895), who had married **Mary Elizabeth Gindrat** (1825-1896) and founded a bank (J. S. Winter & Company) in the historic Winter Building in downtown Montgomery, established a large foundry.

The Montgomery Manufacturing Company (Montgomery Iron Works) was generously capitalized at \$250,000 and quickly became one of the most successful manufacturing businesses in the Deep South, employing about 150 workers, including many slaves. In 1851 the business name was changed to the Winter Iron Works. Meanwhile, Joseph S. Winter's father, **John Gano Winter** (1799-1865) of Columbus, Georgia, had become heavily involved in the company's financing and operations. During the mid-1850s the Winter Iron Works reputedly became the largest foundry in the country located south of Philadelphia, certainly south of Richmond. Most of the letters, documents, and records in this collection reflect the operations of the Winter Iron Works and Winter family business during the antebellum, Civil War, and post-war years.

An innovative investor who cultivated a reputation as one of the South's leading financiers, Winter was born in New York and engaged in business and banking in Georgia beginning in the early 1820s. In 1841 he gained control of the Bank of St. Mary's and moved it to Columbus, where he personally saved the city's finances and was elected to a term as mayor in 1844. By 1850 the Bank of St. Mary's had assets of nearly \$900,000. The Chattahoochee River connected Columbus to the Deep South, with cotton bales from the river's rich cotton plantations shipped via the Gulf of Mexico to Mobile and New Orleans. Interior railroad connections to Columbus also increased during the 1850s. At the same time, textile mills were established along the river, making Columbus one of the most

important industrial centers in the South. During the Civil War, Columbus ranked second only to Richmond in the manufacturing of supplies for the Confederate war effort.

At Columbus during the 1840s and 1850s Winter operated the Palace Mills, a dominant flour milling business, securing "an effective corner on the flour market with a radius of 100 miles of Columbus"; the Rock Island Paper Company, located on the Alabama side of the Chattahoochee River, producing 800,000 pounds of printing, wrapping, and writing paper in 1860 (making it reputedly the largest paper mill in the South); the Variety Works, a water-powered timber processing plant that became a woolens mill; the Merchant Mills, large cotton mills with 3,000 spindles and 75 employees in Columbus (which was known as the "Lowell of the South") and another steam-powered mill in Montgomery; proposed the 165-mile long Central Plank Road Company, chartered by the state in 1850 but bankrupt by 1854; and made other major investments in railroads (he was president of the Girard Railroad Company and the Muscogee Railroad Company) and real estate.

In 1851 *De Bow's Review*, the South's leading business journal, proclaimed, "Winter's estate is variously estimated, but from facts known to ourselves, cannot now be far, if any, short of a million dollars, and is still fast accumulating. . . . No man is probably his equal in our country, for foresight and sound judgment; and he has sustained himself in every position with an integrity of character, of which his children, his friends and his state, may well be proud." Hardly immune to financial and legal difficulties, however, John Gano Winter experienced several setbacks and lawsuits and was forced to liquidate many assets, including several dozen slaves in 1854. Winter also built and operated two large rural estates, "Bunker Hill" and "Esquiline Hill," near Columbus.

The Winter Iron Works achieved a special reputation for the design, perfection, and production of steam engines, the most technologically advanced source of power at the time. In 1853 the Winter Iron Works made a huge impression upon industry experts at the famous Chrystal Palace Exhibition in New York City. The *New York Times* reported on a steam engine named "The Southern Belle": "The splendid Alabama engine from the Winter Iron Works, in point of high finish, surpasses any engine work we have ever seen. The Winter Iron Works at present are under the immediate direction of Mr. Joseph S. Winter, whose energy and public spirit are amply manifested in the style of the workmanship of the

“Southern Belle,” which will make his name as widely known as it is throughout the Southern States, where he stands second to none as a mechanic and engineer.”

Always loyal to the Union, John Gano Winter communicated widely with other Southern Unionists. When Georgia, Alabama, and the other Deep South states seceded from the Union, he wrote fellow Unionist and future president Andrew Johnson, calling secession “a diabolical heresy” and vowing, “I wish to live for my country, and see the Rascals out to the bitter end.” Worried about persecution by local secessionists, however, Winter stated in an editorial in the April 16 issue of the *Columbus Sun*, “The solemn duty and allegiance which I owed to the United States I now owe to the Confederate States.” Then suddenly he fled to the North and Europe, where he remained throughout the Civil War and corresponded continually with his wife and other family members.

By the 1850s Montgomery was the state’s most active slave trading center, providing a market for planters throughout Alabama to buy and sell slaves. John Gano Winter’s son Joseph S. Winter, besides managing the Winter Iron Works, was a successful cotton planter and slaveholder near Montgomery, where he constructed the family’s venerable town home “Winter Place.” The owner of dozens of slaves, Joseph Winter valued them so highly that he bought insurance policies for at least fifteen of them. During the Civil War, Joseph Winter served as captain of Company F, Third Alabama Infantry. After convincing Confederate officials that he was more valuable to the war effort as a businessman, he returned home to operate the Montgomery Gas & Light Company and Rock Island Paper Company. But like his father, he soon fled to England, and he carried on a sustained correspondence with his family. Many of the most interesting and important Winter letters herein are the wartime correspondence between diehard Unionists John Gano Winter, who died shortly after the war, Joseph S. Winter, and several anxious Winter family members, whose loyalties were divided or strongly pro-Confederate.

After practicing law in New York, Joseph S. Winter returned to Montgomery in 1870, established a highly successful law practice, ran a large cotton plantation, and strongly supported the Democratic Party. Joseph S. Winter’s son, **John Gindrat Winter** (1846-1904), unlike his father and grandfather, was an ardent Confederate. At the age of 16 in 1862 he became a student at the University of Alabama. A year later he joined a company of cadets and enlisted as a lieutenant in the Seventh Alabama Cavalry. After the war he graduated from Columbia College in New York. For several decades he was a prominent

lawyer, served as Solicitor of Montgomery County, and was later Judge of the City Court of Montgomery. In 1903 he was appointed as presiding judge of the 15th Judicial Circuit.

John H. "Jack" Thorington (1810-1871), related by marriage to Joseph S. Winter, founded the Alabama Company, a real estate firm with John Gindrat as partner. The firm offered 200 town lots for sale in Montgomery during the early 1830s. In 1834 Thorington began practicing law, and in 1837 he became director of the Montgomery branch of the Alabama State Bank. Two years later he was elected mayor, served until 1840, and then opened a law practice with Henry W. Hilliard as partner. During the Civil War, Hilliard was Colonel in command of Hilliard's Alabama Legion, and Jack Thorington served as Lieutenant Colonel. In late 1862 Hilliard resigned and Thorington replaced him as Colonel and commander. After the war he returned home to practice law and died in 1871. His son, also named **Jack Thorington**, served with Joseph S. Winter in the Seventh Alabama Cavalry during the Civil War. A brother, **William S. Thorington** (1847-1915), was a successful attorney in practice with Chief Justice William P. Chilton, whose daughter he married, and was later associated in practice with John T. Morgan. He was appointed Associate Justice of the state Supreme Court in 1892, and from 1897 to 1915 he was Dean of the Law School at the University of Alabama. Another brother, **Robert Dinning Thorington**, served during the Civil War as a staff officer to General Wright Hannon, commander of the 53rd Alabama (Partisan Rangers). Married to **Sallie Gindrat Winter** (daughter of Joseph S. and Mary Winter), Robert Thorington was a prominent merchant in Montgomery until his death in 1882.*

*Copied verbatim from McCall appraisal written by Dr. Michael Parrish of Baylor University