

# Potter Collection

## Overview of the Collection

Repository: South County History Center 2636 Kingstown Road Kingston, Rhode Island 02881  
Tel: 401.783.1328

Title: Potter Collection

Dates: 1824-1897, n.d.

Media: Paper

Quantity: 2 boxes, 1 Oversized box, 2 linear feet

Location: Shelf 12, boxes 19-21

Identification: Rec. Gr. 4

Language: English

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## Historical Note

The Potters were an influential family in South Kingstown, Rhode Island from the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They owned large portions of land in South County influenced the history of the area through their involvement in business, politics, and the criminal justice system.

Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr. was born in South Kingstown, Rhode Island in 1764. Although he was first apprenticed as a blacksmith and farmer on Elisha Reynolds farm, he made his reputation as a lawyer and Federalist statesman, serving as a member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives for several terms (1796-1797, 1809-1815). In 1790, he married Mary Gardiner Perkins, who died in 1809. Although he had no children from his first marriage, his second marriage to Mary Mawney produced Elisha Reynolds Potter, Jr., Dr. Thomas Mawney Potter, William Potter, Colonel James B.M. Potter, and Mary Elizabeth Potter. Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr. died in 1835.

Elisha Reynolds Potter, Jr. was born in Kingston, Rhode Island in 1811. Like his father, he gained prominence as a lawyer and as a politician, serving as a member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives (1843-1845) and then as a member of the Rhode Island Senate (1847-1852, 1861-1863). He was first educated at Kingston Academy but graduated from Harvard University in 1830. Elisha Potter, Jr. never married, living most of his adult life with his younger sister Mary. In 1868, he was appointed associate justice to the Rhode Island Supreme Court, a post which he retained until his death in 1882.

Dr. Thomas Mawney Potter was born in Kingston in 1814, the second son of Elisha Reynolds and Mary Mawney Potter. After attending Kingston Academy in his youth, he graduated from Brown University in 1834. He went on to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania medical school in 1838. Thomas Potter spent most of his career as a surgeon for the United States Navy.

Appointed as a United States Navy assistant surgeon in October 1839, he spent most of the period between 1839 and 1865 at sea, other than brief periods of leave, illness, and time between commissions. He served on the sloop-of-war *Boston* (1840), the *Vandalia* (1842-1843), the *Raritan* (1843-1846), the *Cumberland* (1846-1847), the *Scorpion* (1847), and the sloop-of-war *Yorktown* (1848-1850). He had domestic and foreign assignments throughout most of the 1850s, mostly aboard the *John Adams*. During the Civil War, he was on the frigates *Santee* (1861) and *Niagara* (1861, 1864-1865). Promoted to Medical Director in 1871, he continued to fill assignments for the Navy until 1876, at which time he retired to Kingston. He died in 1890 at the Potter homestead in South Kingstown.

William Potter was born in Kingston, Rhode Island in 1816. He attended Kingston Academy during his youth and later graduated from Brown University. In 1857, he married Sarah Corliss (Whipple) Swann. Like several of his brothers, he made his living as a lawyer. The Rhode Island states census marks William Potter as living in Providence with his wife in the 1860s, although the records show him as having returned to South Kingstown by 1880. He died in South Kingstown in 1908.

James Brown Mason Potter was born in Kingston, Rhode Island in 1818. He attended Kingston Academy and then Brown University, where he graduated in 1839. Working in Usquepaug and South Ferry, he became involved in the manufacturing operations that were prominent in South County in the early to mid-1800s. In 1849, he married his cousin, Eliza Palmer Potter, with whom he had two children, James Brown Mason Potter, Jr. (1850-1916) and Mary Lemoine Potter (1860-1938). After the outbreak of the Civil War, James Potter served as a paymaster for the North. He was present at the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theatre and reportedly escorted Mary Todd Lincoln to her hotel after the shooting. As a result of his honorable service during the war, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel after the war, and he remained in the service of the army as a paymaster until his retirement in 1882. He died in South Kingstown in 1900.

Mary Elizabeth Potter was born in Kingston in 1820, the youngest child and only daughter of Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr. and his wife Mary Mawney Potter. Mary Potter helped manage the Potter home in Kingston, with responsibilities that included entertaining visitors and managing daily operations of the household. She never married, choosing instead to live most of her life with her elder brother Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr. She died in South Kingstown in 1901.

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## Scope and Content

The records of the Potter Collection include books, receipts, legal paperwork, correspondence and newspaper clippings regarding the local community, criminal justice, and legislation. The collection is likely an accumulation of a number of acquisitions that took place in the latter half of the 1900s. The series is organized as follows:

Series I: Books

Series II: Correspondence

Series III: Miscellaneous Documents

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## Administrative Information

Access: Any qualified person doing personal or scholarly research is permitted to utilize materials in the South County History Center collections.

Preferred Citation: [item], Folder [number], Box [Number], Potter Collection, South County History Center

Provenance: These records have undergone processing at many points in the previous decades. Due to the number of times these documents have been rearranged, the original identification, provenance, and organization of the documents have been lost. The collection likely reflects acquisitions from multiple sources. When available, a catalog number is provided that may give more insight into the provenance of individual items.

Processed by: Anne Colletta and Alicia Vaandering

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## Subject Terms

South Kingstown (R.I. : Town) -- History.

Kingston (R.I. : Town) -- History.

South Kingstown (R.I. : Town) -- History -- 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Potter family.

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## Related Materials

Researchers interested in this collection may also wish to consult the following sources in the South County History Center holdings:

Individual/Family Vertical Files—contains materials on various members of the Potter family.

Subject Vertical Files—contains materials on the Potter homestead.

Library Genealogy Collection—contains published and unpublished genealogy of the Potter family.

Researchers interested in this collection may also wish to consult the following holdings from other organizations:

Thomas Mawney Potter Papers at RIHS (<http://www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss629-4.htm>)—contains other correspondence from Thomas Mawney Potter during his travels as well as correspondence written to him from his siblings.

## Contents Listing

### Series I: Books

The Books Series contains bound volumes that were owned by various members of the Potter family during the 1800s. The contents include two ledgers, two journals, a published copy of Roosevelt's *True Americanism*, and M.E. Potter's book, *Songs for the Sanctuary*. These books were originally split into two separate boxes, but they were placed together when the collection was processed.

Box	File Title	Dates
1	William Potter's ledger of auction sales	1851
1	<i>True Americanism</i> by Theodore Roosevelt, belonged to William Potter	1897
1	Asa Potter's journal	1892
1	M.E. Potter's book, <i>Songs for the Sanctuary</i>	1879
1	Asa Potter's journal with a transcription of William Blackstone's <i>Commentaries on the Laws of England</i>	1824
1	William H. Potter's account book 2013.018.0001	1853

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### Series II: Thomas Mawney Potter Correspondence

The Thomas Mawney Potter Correspondence Series contains correspondence between Thomas Mawney Potter and his family members from 1841-1864. As the assistant surgeon and then surgeon for the United States Navy, Thomas Mawney Potter sailed around the world, spending time in places like the East Indies and South America. Many of the letters are between Thomas Mawney and his siblings Mary Elizabeth Potter, Elisha Reynolds Potter Jr., and William H. Potter. The letters are organized chronologically.

Box	Folder	File Title	Dates
2	1	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with William and Mary Potter 2013.011.0003, 2013.011.0005	1841
2	2	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with William and Mary Potter 2013.011.0006-.0008	1843
2	3	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter 2013.011.0009-.0014	1844
2	4	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Elisha, William, and Mary Potter 2013.011.0020	1845
2	5	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with William, Elisha, and Mary Potter	1846

		2013.011.0042	
2	6	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Elisha, Mary, and William Potter 2013.011.0064	1847
2	7	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Elisha and Mary Potter	1848
2	8	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	1849-1850
2	9	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Elisha, Mary, and William Potter	1853-1854
2	10	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	1855
2	11	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	1856
2	12	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	1857-1858
2	13	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	1860-1861
2	14	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary, William, and Elisha Potter	1862, 1864
2	15	Correspondence of Thomas Mawney Potter with Mary and Elisha Potter	n.d.

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### Series III: Miscellaneous Documents

The Miscellaneous Documents Series contains a range of paper materials including receipts, legal forms, a small amount of correspondence, and an extensive collection of newspaper clippings related to law and legal cases throughout the United States and England. The materials are organized by type and then chronologically in their folders.

<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>File Title</b>	<b>Dates</b>
3	1	Receipts	1892
3	2	Legal forms	1828-1829
3	3	Newspaper Clippings	1867-1873
3	4	Newspaper Clippings	1874-1885
3	5	Newspaper Clippings	1867-1889, n.d.
3	6	Statement of Elisha Reynolds Potter Sr.'s appointments to House of Representatives	1845
3	7	Miscellaneous documents	1855, 1865, 1893