



American Express Company, Florence Office Records

1867-1890

3 boxes (3 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS298

Collection overview

Express company's account records kept primarily by express agent Watson L. Wilcox. Includes agent's books, waybills, and a personal account book.

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Background on American Express Company (Florence, Mass.)

The express business arose symbiotically with the railroad system in the United States in the 1840's and 1850's. Initially an individual's effort to make a living with a carpetbag and a willingness to travel every day, express companies grew to become complex organizations, utilizing whole railroad cars, covering national and then international distances, and to reap enormous profits in a largely unregulated field. The informal delivery of packages and envelopes from city to city developed into a formal system involving agents, bookkeeping and delivery from customer's home to intended destination. Money, letters, and valuables were entrusted to these new "agents". Eventually trunks, crates and freight cars became units of express delivery as well. Starting as near appendages to the Railroads, Express companies never completely separated from them. The usual arrangement was between a railroad company and an express company, providing for a certain cut of the business, usually around half, to go to the railroad, in return for which the express company received exclusive rights to that railroad line. As incorporation of these companies grew, the stockholders overlapped to a great extent. The American Express Company and the Adams Express Company emerged by the late 1850's as the dominant ones. In the 1860's, an upstart organization, the Merchant's Union Express, fought the prevailing companies with a fierce price war. The American Express Company was especially hard hit by this struggle. A truce was arranged in 1868, merging the latter two as The American Merchant's Union Express Company, with over 3000 licensed express carriers and agents in U.S., paying Internal Revenue tax on more than \$22,000,000 gross receipts.

Express agent Watson L. Wilcox was born in Simsbury, Connecticut in 1832 or 1833. He began selling tickets as well as cords of wood and ended up a successful agent and important man in the community. Charles A. Sheffield's 1895 History of Florence Massachusetts includes an article by Wilcox entitled "The Village

Improvement Society." This society was responsible for the newly improved look to the village, especially for the well-kept neatness of the lawns, hedges, streets and walks. Wilcox died the year after his article was printed, 2 July 1896, of "acute inflammation of the liver and nervous prostration supervening Enlargement of the liver."(Northampton City Clerk's Vital Statistics). His occupation was listed as "Express Agent." He is buried in Simsbury.

Scope of collection

The records of the American Express Company, Florence, Massachusetts office, 1867-1890, consist of agent's books, and three volumes concerning waybills. The agent for all the records except possibly the last was Watson L. Wilcox. The growth of the American Express Company's Florence office is well reflected in these records, which evolved from informal to increasingly formal. The first book in fact is largely Wilcox's own personal account book, begun when he was in Simsbury, Connecticut and continuing with his new position as express agent in Florence, Massachusetts. The last volume is a collection of bound yellow tissue copies of waybills for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. Its connection with American Express Co. and/or W.L. Wilcox is unclear.

Series descriptions

Book 1.

1867-1873

Box 1

In 1867, Watson L. Wilcox moved to Florence, Massachusetts to assume his new position as Express Agent. The first book in this collection is essentially Wilcox's personal Day Book beginning 17 October 1867, apparently in Simsbury, Connecticut. There are frequent references to "at Sims" or "Simsbury." Simsbury was on the New Haven-Northampton, Mass. Railroad line. Wilcox sold tickets to Hartford, New York, Avon, Conn., etc. Accounts are also kept for cash loaned, cash for bank deposits, paying bills, freight bills, express for money, Naugatuck flour, wood, lumber, "weighing at Sims," freight on liquor to New Haven, services provided tallying books, paying taxes, buying groceries for his mother and the household, paying monthly board to his mother, etc. The first reference to an express company is on 20 December 1867, a debt owed to Wilcox by the Adams Express Co., for refunding a charge on freight done by the New York office "in error." In April of 1868, it appears that Wilcox had moved to Florence, as the New Haven-Northampton railroad owes him for two padlocks and for "washing station." At this time he is now working for the Merchant's Union Express Co., perhaps taking advantage of the commercial battle between the express companies to land himself a new position. May 1 finds him getting 20% on the amount collected and prepaid "at Florence office for April." From here on out the book is predominantly an account of his work as an agent, with personal accounts mixed in. Florence at this time was a busy industrial town. Accounts for telegraph messages and shipping of freight reflect the great volume of business done for the prominent companies, such as Nonotuck Silk Co., Florence Sewing Machine Co., Florence Manufacturing Co., etc. and for such businessmen as A.L. Williston, Samuel L. Hill, I.S. Parsons, etc. There are also numerous accounts for local residents sending and receiving telegraphs, express cash, packages, etc. Mrs. Emma P. Baldwin paid sixty-three dollars for the "removal of 2 Bodies to Canastota, [N.Y.]" on 18 March 1871.

Wilcox's personal affairs are reflected in the accounts. From 1867 on, he periodically sent money to the Home for the Friendless in New York City. He made note of the expiration date for subscriptions to The Independent and Harper's in December of 1872. Beginning in the summer of 1869, Wilcox kept accounts of money he was paying to W.J. Warner to build him a house. The merger of the two warring express companies is reflected in the accounts by a shift to the new name American Merchant's Union Express Co. in the spring of 1869.

Book 2.

1869-1871

Box 1

This book overlaps the dates of the first one. It is strictly an accounting of express business. The change from the personal, informal style day book to the beginning of a "professional" accounting is readily apparent, as information is entered into columns with headings, including whether accounts were prepaid or collect. Some of the accounts are apparently put on a running tab. All items shipped or received are listed only by the containers not by the contents, e.g., kegs, crates, cases, packages, etc. The industries of Florence and their business contacts throughout the northeast are well documented. Residents also appear, many of them formerly connected to the Northampton Association of Education and Industry which gave Florence its start as burgeoning village on the Mill River in Northampton.

Book 3. Receipt Book 8

1873 February-
10 November

Box 1

The title of this book shows that the merged company had reverted to the name American Express Company by 1873. By this time the railroad, which had started up to Haydenville, Skinnerville and eventually Williamsburg in 1867, had helped generate a lot of business with the industries located along the Mill River in those locations. This is reflected in the receipts, and in residents of those villages' receiving goods for their homes and families. Bellows Falls, Vermont, Hartford, New Haven, New York, Boston are some of the more frequent points of origin as well as local towns like Easthampton, Northampton and Westfield.

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| Book 4. Receipt Book. | 1874
September-
1875 June | Box 1 |
| This is identical to Book 3, all received items. Newer companies such as the Florence Furniture Co., known locally as the Casket Shop, and the Sheffield Manufacturing Co., set up by Samuel Hill's son-in-law, figure into the accounts. The last four pages tally amounts paid by frequent users of the express business. | | |
| Book 5. In Trip and Delivery Receipt Book. | 1878 January
21-December
14 | Box 2 |
| Accounts are similar to those of the other receipt books. In-Trip is the opposite of out-going. | | |
| Book 6. Receipt Book. | 1878
December-
1879 August | Box 2 |
| Label on inside front cover, "Form 3" in parentheses, reads: American Express Company This Book takes the place of the In-Trip Book, Delivery Book, Statement Book, Post Office Record, and Collection Register | | |
| Instructions to agents follow. Number and date of waybill is included in this consolidated book. Accounts are similar to other receipt books. Inside the back cover is a notation of "US Mail and District Am Ex Co from Hygienic Hotel, NY." | | |
| Book 7. Receipt Book. | 1882
November 1-
1883 April 14 | Box 2 |
| Inside cover is "American Express Company," and "Instructions to Drivers and Delivery Men...." | | |
| Book 8. Charts of line charges by location and date. | 1868 July-1870
October | Box 2 |
| This is a series of charts in alphabetical and chronological order of line charges. Columns read: | | |
| Fragment of a large ledger book. Record of Waybills Forwarded. | 1879 January
16-1880 May
26 | Box 3 |
| On the spine is printed OUT TRIP BOOK. The name of the company is the heading of all pages. "Record of Waybills forwarded from _____ Office, _____ 188__" is the subheading and over the many columns. The use of preprinted titles continues to increase. W.L. Wilcox's dealings with the General Office in Buffalo, and the Treasurer in New York City is well documented here with monthly notations of Statements and Waybills sent out, as well as "money packages" containing the revenues of the month. He also sends monthly sums to "Miss Carrie Clark, Agent" in Northampton. Other accounts show the same families and businesses. | | |
| OUT TRIP BOOK. Record of Waybills Forwarded. | 1883 March
15-1884 June
12 | Box 4 |

This is identical to the ledger book of Box 3 except that is intact. Nonotuck Silk Co., the "Brush Shop" and the Florence Manufacturing Co. are almost daily shippers. The Silk Co. is doing business now with branch offices in Chicago, St. Louis, Gloversville, NY, Boston and Cincinnati. W.L. Wilcox is still the agent.

Waybills for New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. 1890

Box 5

Written on cover is "July 1st 1890 To Nov 29 Inc." These are overprinted yellow tissue copies of waybills apparently bound afterward. Whether there is any direct or indirect connection to the American Express Co. is unclear. The car number of the railroad is listed as well as waybill number, destination, etc. Various stations are written, such as Harlem River, Jersey City, East Albany, Westfield, etc. The closeness of the railroads to the express companies is perhaps reflected by the inclusion of this bound volume in with the records of the American Express Co.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Louis Greenbaum, 1990.

Processing Information

Processed by Paul Gaffney, 1990.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

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Search terms

Subjects

- American Express Company (Florence, Mass.)--Records and correspondence.
- American Merchant's Union Express Company--Records and correspondence.

- Express service--Massachusetts--Florence--History--Sources.
- Florence (Mass.)--Economic conditions--Sources.
- Florence Manufacturing Company.
- Florence Sewing Machine Company.
- Hill, Samuel L.
- Industries--Massachusetts--Florence--History--Sources.
- New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad Company--Records and correspondence.
- Nonotuck Silk Company--Records and correspondence.
- Parsons, I. S.
- Simsbury (Conn.)--Economic conditions--Sources.
- Wilcox, Watson L., 1832 or 3-1896--Finance, Personal.
- Wilcox, Watson L., 1832 or 3-1896.
- Williston, A. L.

Contributors

- American Express Company (Florence, Mass.) **[main entry]**

Genres and formats

- Account books.
- Receipts.
- Waybills.

Link to similar SCUA collections

Business and industry

Massachusetts (West)