

## A Guide to the Vernon Family Papers

### Overview of the Collection

Repository: Newport Restoration Foundation, 680 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI 02840. Tel: (401) 849-7300, website: [www.newportrestoration.org](http://www.newportrestoration.org)

Title: Vernon Family Papers

Creator(s): Vernon Family

Dates: 1736-1899 (bulk), 1736-1950 (inclusive)

Media: Books, Catalogs, Clippings, Correspondence, Family Papers, Newspaper, Research Materials

Identification: 2021.001

Language: English, French

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### Biographical Note

William Vernon (1719-1806) was born in Newport in 1719. He was the son of Samuel Vernon (1683-1737) and Elizabeth Fleet (1686-1722). Vernon's family was directly descended from one of Rhode Island's first pioneers, Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643).

William and his two brothers, Thomas (1719-1806) and Samuel (1711-1792), were merchants who profited from the transatlantic slave trade. The Vernon brothers are known to have funded at least forty-one voyages and brought over 3,300 enslaved African heritage people to North America.

In 1774 William Vernon purchased a two-and-a-half story house located at 46 Clarke Street. Census records indicate that at least five enslaved people lived in the house during William's occupancy. One of these enslaved individuals was Cato Vernon, a skilled carpenter who served in the First Rhode Island Regiment during the Revolutionary War. Other enslaved residents of 46 Clarke Street included Barre, Accran, Caesar, Cadys, and Belinda.

Due to the British occupation of Newport in 1776 William relocated to Boston where he served as president of the Revolutionary Naval Board. William returned to his home in Newport after

the war and resumed working as a merchant. He was one of the founders of the Redwood Library and served as its second president.

One of William's two surviving sons, Samuel Vernon (1757-1834) had fought in the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778. In Newport his business interests included shipping and real estate, and he served as president of the Newport Bank (which his father had helped found) and the Newport Insurance Company. He married his cousin, Elizabeth Almy Ellery (1764-1857), in 1784. Between 1786 and 1802 the couple had eleven children, eight of whom survived to adulthood. After Samuel's death in 1834, Elizabeth continued to live in the Vernon House until her passing in 1857. The house passed to their son, Samuel, who died the following year.

William Vernon's other surviving son, William H. (1759-1833), graduated from Princeton in 1776. In 1778 sailed from Boston to Bordeaux, France, in 1778 aboard the Continental Navy frigate *Boston*. The elder William wished his son to master the French language and gain experience in a French counting house, in the hope that this would help the family's business as trade with America expanded after the war. William chose the major port of Bordeaux to learn about French trade, and by 1779 the family was trading with that city. Living at times in Bordeaux and Paris, William H. lived a lavish lifestyle that was beyond his means. Several times he received financial help from Benjamin Franklin, who was in France as the United States ambassador. William H.'s debts eventually landed him in prison twice. His father wanted him to return home in 1782 and made several appeals over the following decade, including threatening to write him out of his will. William H. returned home to Newport in 1797, where he joined his father in business until the latter's death in 1806. The family established offices in New York City in 1812, first as Vernon & Rogers, and later as Vernon & Company. William H. also served as a secretary of the Redwood Library. When he returned from France William brought with him a large collection of oil paintings. Six of these he shipped to Boston for an exhibit at the Boston Athenaeum in 1830. After his death in 1833, the collection of fifty-five paintings were sold at auction in Newport in 1835. One of these, which appears to be a contemporaneous copy of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and listed as "A Nun," was purchased by a relative.

William H. Vernon died unmarried and without heirs, so it was his nephew William Vernon (1788-1867), and his descendants who continued the family line. William Vernon's first wife, Eliza De Wolf (d. 1815), was a member of the prominent Bristol, R. I., family of merchants and slave traders who died in childbirth in 1815. He then married Elizabeth Bryan (1789-1858) in 1817.

Throughout the nineteenth century, men of the Vernon family worked as prominent merchants and lawyers in New York, sometimes in partnership with members of the Olyphant family. The two families first joined in 1786 with a marriage in Newport between Dr. David Olyphant (1720-

1805), a Scottish emigrant, and Ann Vernon (b. 1754), niece of William Vernon (1719-1806). In 1806 when Dr. Olyphant's son, David W. C. Olyphant (1789-1851), joined the New York firm of King & Talbot, the Olyphant family entered what would be eight decades of trading with China under various corporations. During this time cousins in the Vernon and Olyphant families married in 1846, 1853, and 1857. Along with trading in China, the Olyphants (and possibly their Vernon relatives) also supported the work of American missionaries in the country from the 1820s into the 1870s.

As the Vernon family grew during the nineteenth century its members settled increasingly farther from Rhode Island, including Kentucky, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. The family sold the 46 Clarke Street home in 1872. It was acquired by the Newport Restoration Foundation in 2009.

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## Scope and Content

This collection contains affidavits, correspondence, receipts, bills, catalogs, newspapers, clippings, poetry, contracts, essays, orations, a deed, a diary, a miniature book, a mortgage, notes, and other material pertaining chiefly to members of the Vernon family. The material dates from the early eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, with the bulk of the collection dating to the early nineteenth century.

The records in this collection document the lives of various members of the Vernon family and their activities. Early records relate primarily to William H. Vernon, his time spent in France, and the art works that he collected. Other portions of the collection relate to the Vernon family's business ventures

The nephew of William H. Vernon, William Vernon (1788-1867), and his descendants are the branch of the Vernon family best represented in this collection. William and his wife Elizabeth's relationship is documented in a series of twenty-two letters exchanged between 1816 and 1821, and in their correspondence with other family members in the 1830s and '40s.

The collection also contains essays, critiques, and speeches written by Albert Erdman (1838-1918) during his enrollment at Hamilton College. Erdman's daughter, Alice Clinton Erdman, married into the Vernon family.

The Vernons' interest in their family history is evident throughout this collection, including a circa-1842 Vernon family history, and in the article "The Vernon Family and Arms" written by Harrison Ellery for the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* in July 1879. A circa-

1875 Vernon family tree likely created by Ellery is included in this collection, as well as correspondence between Ellery and lawyer Thomas Vernon (1832-1887) in New York, and Ellery and businessman William Vernon (1828-1910) in New Jersey that is largely about genealogy.

William Vernon (1828- 1910) corresponded with his cousin Joseph Peace Hazard in Peace Dale, Rhode Island, during the 1880s and '90s until Hazard's death in 1892. Also wishing to connect to his storied family ancestry, Vernon's son, William Bryan Vernon (1865-1936), applied to join the New Jersey chapter of the Society of Colonial Wars in 1896.

This collection does not contain any materials that relate directly to the transatlantic slave trade. Researchers interested in this topic may wish to consult the collection of Vernon family papers at the Newport Historical Society.

The materials in this collection have been organized chronologically. An item level description of this collection has been recorded in its catalog records.

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### **Administrative Information**

Access: Any qualified person doing personal or scholarly research is permitted to utilize materials in the Vernon Family Papers.

Preferred Citation: Title or Description of Item, Date, A2021.001, Box Number, Folder Number, Vernon Family Papers, Newport Restoration Foundation, 680 Bellevue Ave, Newport, RI 02840 [www.newportrestoration.org](http://www.newportrestoration.org)

Provenance: The materials in this collection were purchased by the Newport Restoration Foundation from James and Kathy Bush (Unrelated receivers of Vernon family papers through multiple marriages/divorces) of Baton Rouge, LA, 2010. Two other groups of papers were also purchased from the Bush family in collaboration with the Newport Historical Society. A scrapbook containing a 1777 letter written by William Vernon was added to the collection in 2025. This letter was presumably purchased by NRF though its exact provenance is currently unknown. It was created by the Anderson Galleries in New York.

Processed By: Jonathan M. Olly, 2015; Revised by Caleb Goodhouse, 2025

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### **Subject Terms:**

Art auctions--Catalogs.

Newport (R.I.)--Commerce--History--18th century

Newport (R.I.)--History--Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775

Newport (R.I.)—Poetry

Newport (R.I.)--Social conditions--18th century.

Newport (R.I.)--Social conditions--19th century.

Vernon family.

**People:**

Channing, George Gibbs, 1789-1881

Dall, Austin 1819-1899

Dall, Mary Austin Brand, 1829-1903

Ellery, Harrison 1841-1918

Erdman, Albert, 1838-1918

Hazard, Joseph Pearce, 1807-1892

Mann, Catherin Vernon, 1787-1871

Olyphant, Son & Co. (New York, N.Y.)

Olyphant, Robert Morrison, 1824-1918

Otis, James Jr., 1725-1783

Vernon, Alice Clinton Erdman, 1869-1960

Vernon, Daniel, 1643-1715

Vernon, Elizabeth Almy, 1795-1816

Vernon, Elizabeth Almy Ellery, 1764-1857

Vernon, Elizabeth Bryan, 1789-1858

Vernon, Joseph Peace, 1831-1908

Vernon, Mary, 1792-1811

Vernon, Philip Harwood, 1834-1919

Vernon, Rebecca Peace White, 1833-1910

Vernon, Samuel Brown, 1828-1910

Vernon, Thomas, 1832-1887

Vernon, William, 1719-1806

Vernon, William, 1788-1867

Vernon, William, 1828-1910

Vernon, William Bryan, 1865-1936

Vernon, William H., 1759-1833

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### Related Materials:

Samuel and William Vernon Collection, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan

Vernon Family Records, 1738-1829, Winterthur Museum, Garden, & Library.

Researchers interested in this collection should also consult the Newport Historical Society and the Redwood Athenaeum.

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### Contents Listing

Box	Folder	Description	Dates
1	1	Affidavits of Daniel Updike, Katherine Updike, Elisha Dyer, and Hannah Place regarding Daniel Vernon (copy)	1736
1	1A	Bill of Landing for the Sloop Lydia	1766
1	2	"Declaration of Defiance" by James Oates	circa 1770
3	-	Scrapbook containing letter written by William Vernon while he was serving as president of the Revolutionary Naval Board	1777
1	3	Correspondence, William Vernon to William H. Vernon	1782
1	4	Correspondence, William Vernon to William H. Vernon	1790
1	5	Correspondence, William Vernon to William H. Vernon	1792
1	6	Receipt from Catelan brothers to William H. Vernon	1795
1	7	Partial list of rent payments signed "WV"	1795
1	8	List of William H. Vernon's personal and business expenses	1795
1	9	French Assignats	1792-1793
1	10	Deed for sale of Township No. 8, Maine	1795

1	11	Correspondence, Samuel Vernon to William H. Vernon	1801
1	12	Exchange notes and receipts	1801-1806
1	13	Correspondence, William H. Vernon to the directors of the Rhode Island Bank	1809
1	14	Proposed rules and regulations for Redwood Library	1810
1	15	Correspondence regarding death of Mary Vernon (1792-1811)	1811
1	16	Bryan Family Correspondence	1815
1	17	Correspondence, Elizabeth Bryan to William Vernon	1816-1821
1	18	Poem "The Rose of November" by Sarah Marchant Case	1819
1	19	Correspondence, James Hamilton Cooper to William H. Vernon	1823
1	20	Notice from William Read Staples to William H. Vernon regarding election of Rhode Island Historical Society Officers	1823
1	21	List of tonnage copied from the Boston Custom House	1827
1	22	Correspondence related to William H. Vernon's loan of paintings to the Boston Athenaeum	1830
1	23	Catalogues of paintings and lists of buyers at auction	1831-1835
1	24	Envelope addressed to Samuel Vernon (1757-1834)	1831
1	25	Correspondence to William Vernon (1788-1867)	1831-1833
1	26	Receipts and contracts	1830-1835
1	27	Miniature book of Greek poetry by Anacreon	1751
1	28	Vernon Estate Documents	1835-1839
1	29	Correspondence written by Elizabeth Almy Ellery Vernon	circa 1835
3	-	<i>New York Journal of Commerce</i> , July 24, 1841	1841
1	30	"Statement of the Pedigree of the Family of Vernon from the recollections of Thomas Hornsby of Newport. Family Bible &c."	1842
1	31	Mortgage for William Vernon's (1788-1867) New York City Property	1843
3	-	<i>Newport Mercury</i> , December 23, 1843	1843
1	32	Correspondence, William Vernon (1828-1910) to William Vernon (1788-1867), 1847	1847
1	33	Essay "French Spoliation and Claim for Indemnification"	circa 1850
1	34	Correspondence, Mary and Elizabeth Peace White to Rebecca Peace White	1852
3	-	<i>Providence Daily Journal</i> , July 2, 1853	1853
3	-	<i>New York Evening Express</i> , October 12, 1854	1854
1	35	Endowment Certificate	1854
1	36	Essays and Critiques by Albert Erdman	1854-1858
1	37	Albert Erdman's Diary	1857-1858
1	38	Albert Erdman's Hamilton College Papers and Speeches	1857-1858
1	39	Various Correspondence	1861-1872
1	40	Receipts for items purchased by Mary Austin Brand Dall	1866-1868

1	41	Envelope Addressed to Thomas Vernon (1832-1887)	1879
1	42	Correspondence, Harrison Ellery to Thomas Vernon	1880
1	43	Correspondence between Joseph Peace Hazard and William Vernon	1881-1886
2	44	Newspaper Clippings	1882-1889
2	45	Correspondence, William Vernon (1828-1910)	1883-1889
2	46	Will of Almy E. Vernon (1830-1887)	1888
2	47	Correspondence, William Vernon (1828-1910)	1889-1891
2	48	Correspondence, William Vernon (1828-1910)	1891-1896
2	49	Application of William Bryan Vernon to the Society of Colonial Wars	1896
2	50	Newspaper clipping commemorating the life of Eliza De Wolf Vernon Thayer	1899
2	51	Vernon Family Research	1946-1950
2	52	William H. Vernon Poetry and Riddles	undated
2	53	Correspondence, William H. Vernon	undated
2	54	William H. Vernon writings	undated
2	55	Correspondence	undated
2	56	Vernon Family Tree	undated
2	57	Newspaper Clippings	undated
2	58	Vernon Family research notes	undated