

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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,

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 none s l

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 15<sup>th</sup> 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**