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Dillwyn and Emlen family correspondence (MSS00173)

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Philadelphia, PA 19107

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Summary Information

Repository:	Library Company of Philadelphia
Creator:	Dillwyn, William, 1743-1824
Creator:	Emlen, Samuel, Jr., 1766-1837
Creator:	Emlen, Susanna Dillwyn, 1769-1819
Title:	Dillwyn and Emlen family correspondence
ID:	MSS00173
ID [aspace_uri]:	/repositories/3/resources/30
Date [inclusive]:	1770-1818
Physical Description:	7.0 containers
Language of the Material:	English .
Abstract:	The Dillwyn and Emlen family was joined in 1795 when Susanna Dillwyn married Samuel Emlen, Jr. Both the Dillwyn and Emlen families were prominent in early America as Quakers and advocates for abolition. This collection consists of five disbound volumes of letters written to and from William Dillwyn of London and his daughter Susanna Dillwyn in America from 1770 to 1795; and thereafter until 1818, to and from Susanna and her husband Samuel Emlen, Jr. of Burlington County, New Jersey. Although Susanna lived almost her entire life apart from her father, their letters are frequent and deal primarily with family matters and kin. However, there is frequent comment concerning such topics as yellow fever; abolitionism and slavery; Native Americans; breast cancer; and American and European politics, including the Napoleonic wars and the embargo, as well as their effects upon trade and merchants in Philadelphia and London.

Preferred Citation note

[Description and date of item], [Box/folder number], Dillwyn and Emlen family correspondence (MSS00173), 1770-1818, Library Company of Philadelphia.

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Biographical/Historical note

The Dillwyn and Emlen family was joined in 1795 when Susanna Dillwyn married Samuel Emlen, Jr. Both the Dillwyn and Emlen families were prominent in early America as Quakers and advocates for abolition.

William Dillwyn was born in Philadelphia on July 21, 1743, the son of John Dillwyn and Susanna Painter. According to Clarkson, William Dillwyn was "a pupil of the venerable [Anthony] Benezet, who took pains very early to interest his feeling on [abolition]," (Clarkson). A Quaker merchant, Dillwyn married Sarah Logan Smith (1749-1769) on May 19, 1768 in Burlington County, New Jersey. On March 31, 1769, their daughter, Susanna, was born, and roughly a month later, Sarah died.

In 1772, William Dillwyn traveled (by Benezet's arrangement) to Carolina to further study slavery, which was "of great use ... in fixing him as the friend of these oppressed people, for he saw so much of their cruel treatment in the course of it, that he felt an anxiety ever afterwards, amounting to a duty to do everything in his power for their relief," (Clarkson). By 1773, he, along with Richard Smith and Daniel Wells, wrote *Brief considerations on slavery, and the expediency of its abolition: with some hints on the means whereby it may be gradually effected*.

In 1774, he traveled to England in order to campaign against slavery. In 1777, he married Sarah Weston, making his stay in England permanent, and they lived at Higham Lodge, Walthamstow, Essex. Throughout his time in England, he helped to establish an anti-slavery committee in London in 1787 and toured parts of England and South Wales. In 1783, *The case of our fellow-creatures, the oppressed Africans, respectfully recommended to the serious consideration of the legislature of Great-Britain, by the people called Quakers*, was published, with William Dillwyn as author along with John Lloyd and Anthony Benezet. In 1803, he wrote, with Mary and Joshua Cresson, *Meditations written during the prevalence of the yellow fever in the city of Philadelphia, in the year 1793: which proved fatal to upwards of 4000 of its inhabitants*. During one of his tours of South Wales in 1807, he purchased the lease of the Cambrian Pottery, Swansea, Glamorganshire from George Haynes, who continued to manage the pottery works. William Dillwyn and Sarah Weston Dillwyn were the parents of eight children. He died, aged 81, on September 28, 1824 and was buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Tottenham, Middlesex.

William's daughter from his marriage to Sarah Logan Smith, Susanna, was born on March 31, 1769 in Houghton, New Jersey, about a month before her mother died. She was raised in Burlington, New Jersey at Oxmead by her aunt Susanna Dillwyn Cox with the additional family support of her uncle and aunt, George and Sarah Hill Dillwyn who were travelling Quaker ministers. On April 16, 1795, Susanna, frequently called Susan or Sukey, married Samuel Emlen, Jr. (1766-1837) and they lived in Philadelphia. They moved to Burlington, to

a newly built home, West Hill, during the 1797 yellow fever epidemic. Like William Dillwyn and his own father, Samuel Emlen, Susanna's husband was "an influential Friend himself [and] concerned himself particularly with the issues of slavery and Indian affairs within the Society of Friends," (Leavitt, page 70). As a result of their Quaker community, business connections, and extensive family relations, the Emlen household resulted in "a close-knit circle of family and friends, radiating outward from Susan Emlen's home at West Hill to Burlington, Philadelphia, and England," (Leavitt, page 71).

Towards the end of 1813, at the age of 44, Susanna discovered a tumor in her breast; and after some time of deliberation, determined that she needed to seek professional medical help. On June 4, 1814, the tumor was removed by five doctors: Philip Syng Physick (Susanna's brother-in-law), John Syng Dorsey (serving as principal surgeon), [Caspar] Wistar, Joseph Parrish and Dr. Tucker, and a nurse at the Dillwyn home. Susanna recovered from the surgery, despite several lingering issues such as weakness in her left arm and "pain in the operative scar," (Aronowitz, page 34). In 1816, the Emlens traveled to England to visit William Dillwyn and his family. While in England, Susanna discovered that a new tumor had appeared. According to Robert A. Anonowitz, "further surgery was not an option that she wanted to seriously consider," and instead opted for "mind therapies like warmed sea water, vigilance, and careful observation," (Anonowitz, page 38). Eventually, a more stringent approach was seen as necessary, and Susanna was treated with compression therapy. The Emlens returned to New Jersey during the summer of 1818, her health declining until her death on November 24, 1819.

Samuel Emlen, Jr. lived until 1837. During his life, he served as assistant clerk to the Burlington Monthly Meeting from 1800 to 1806 and as clerk to the meeting from 1807 to 1814. At the time of his death in 1837, Samuel Emlen, Jr. "established a trust of \$20,000 for an agricultural school, The Emlen Institute for the Benefit of Children of African and Indian Descent," (Leavitt, page 70). The school was originally located in Ohio, but moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Bibliography:

Aronowitz, Robert A. *Unnatural History: Breast Cancer and American Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Clarkson, Thomas. *The History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament, 2 volumes*. London: L. Taylor, 1808.

Leavitt, Judith Walzer. *Women and Health in America: Historical Readings*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

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Scope and Contents note

This collection consists of five disbound volumes of letters written to and from William Dillwyn of London and his daughter Susanna Dillwyn in America from 1770 to 1795; and thereafter until 1818, to and from Susanna and her husband Samuel Emlen, Jr. of Burlington County, New Jersey. Although Susanna lived almost her entire life apart from her father, their letters are frequent and deal primarily with family matters and kin. However, there is frequent comment concerning such topics as yellow fever; abolitionism and slavery; and American and European politics, including the Napoleonic wars and the embargo, as well as their effects upon trade and merchants in Philadelphia and London. Moreover, events such as the Federal Convention of 1787 and topics such as the health of Benjamin Franklin, the popularity of President Washington and the trials of a new republic are addressed throughout the correspondence.

This collection is largely arranged in chronological order. However, because each letter was assigned a catalog number and catalog numbers are referenced in publications, the arrangement of the collection was not disturbed. As a result, there are letters from 1803, 1808, 1809 and 1811 that are not in correct chronological order. Researchers are advised to peruse the entire collection for any misfiled correspondence.

The first volume, housed in boxes 1 and 2, includes letters dating from 1770 to 1793. The first letter, written January 5, 1770, is marked as "my dear father's first letter to me," and describes Sarah Logan Smith, Susanna's mother who died when Susanna was only one month old. By the time that Susanna was eight years old, William Dillwyn had moved permanently to England and remarried. The letters in this volume are largely regarding family--they were written to and from a child, but as the years progress and Susanna grows into a woman, the tone of the letters changes. There is much information in these letters about Susanna's half siblings, which may prove valuable to researchers studying Lewis Weston Dillwyn (1778-1855), son of William and Sarah Weston Dillwyn, who became a noted naturalist and Whig Minister of Parliament. The letters also describe Susanna's life including the books she read, her Quaker faith, visits to family members' homes, and sending squirrels to England for her siblings. William Dillwyn writes of his travels to Holland with Samuel Emlen (father of Susanna's future husband) and her uncle. Susanna writes several letters to her father in 1792 regarding relations with Native Americans, particularly regarding Cherokee and Oneida representatives who visited Philadelphia. In 1793, Susanna writes of the Indian treaty at Sandusky.

Included in this first volume are also letters regarding the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. In a letter dating September 9, 1793, Susanna writes, "I wish from time to time to give some account of the dreadful distemper which common report will inform you has become so prevalent in Philadelphia. It is indeed, my dear father, such a time of anxiety and deep distress as I believe was scarce ever known before in this country--almost every family, even here, either laments the loss of some near connection or suffers great apprehension on account of their remaining friends who have not left the city. And for those who have no particular connection with this city cannot be unmoved at the continual tales of distress and death we every day hear. In short there seems no prospect but of the entire desolation of the town, not

home but from the mercy of divine Providence." Indeed, she states, "my thoughts are full of the subject. It is difficult to disengage them to obtain even that momentary relief that seems necessary to health." These letters are full of compassion, not only for the patients and families of yellow fever victims, but of the doctors trying so desperately to control the disease. She frequently mentions Dr. Benjamin Rush and his efforts during the epidemic. By September 29, 1793, Susanna writes to her father, "the disease is called the yellow fever. It has spread into I believe all parts of the city and taken away great numbers, among whom are many of the most valuable members of the community, and a great many young people of our society and others. Almost a total suspension of all business has taken place: the distresses of the poor, from sickness, [and] want of business."

The second volume dates from 1794 to 1799. During this time frame, there is significant correspondence regarding the engagement and marriage of Susanna to Samuel Emlen, Jr. Samuel Emlen, Jr. wrote to William Dillwyn asking permission to marry Susanna in March and May 1794, and in June 1794, he received permission. By July, Susanna and Samuel had received a certificate of William Dillwyn's consent to the marriage. Around the same time, they received a similar certificate from Samuel Emlen, Sr. From 1796 to 1797, William Dillwyn writes to Susanna and Samuel regarding his travels through Ireland. There are also letters during this time from Susanna and Samuel regarding the illness of Samuel Emlen, Sr, who died on December 30, 1799.

Letters from 1800 to 1806 are housed in the third volume and letters from 1807 to 1810 are housed in the fourth volume. Researchers will find letters from November to December 1803 out of chronological order in Box 5, Folder 6. Letters are filled with news of family and friends. In 1807, Susanna writes of the marriage of John Syng Dorsey, and in 1808 she writes of her cousin Susan Cox's marriage to Joseph Parrish. Dr. Philip Syng Physick was married to Samuel Emlen, Jr.'s half-sister Elizabeth (he was also later legally separated from her), and he is discussed with some frequency throughout the correspondence. The letters occasionally include descriptions of her family and friends. In a July 5, 1809 letter to her father, Susanna writes, "Dr. Pysick, a person I sincerely love, is ... naturally grave, constantly engaged in occupations that call for his whole attention, and daily a spectator of evils he can only at best, partially relieve, [and] he has acquired what seems to me so gloomy a view of life, that I tell him, I could not live if I did not entertain more cheerful sentiments." Researchers will find letters from 1808, 1809 and 1811 out of chronological order in Box 6, Folder 18.

The final volume contains letters from 1811 to 1818. During the year of 1815, many letters discuss Susanna's breast cancer and demonstrate not only her fear, but the concern and support of her entire family. During this time frame, Susanna's faith is particularly well demonstrated via her letters to her family. Her writing, however, is typically honest and she describes her experience from the time that she "perceived a tumour in [her] left breast, irregularly shaped, about the size of a partridge egg," to her operation without anesthesia, to the relief of recovery when she writes, " the Physicians all agreed that the disease was completely eradicated." Susanna and Samuel's correspondence does not focus solely on her illness, even during the height of the problems, but continues, as throughout the entire collection of correspondence to pay tribute to Quakerism, family, friends and their community. From late 1816 to mid 1818, Samuel and Susanna Emlen visited her father in England. As a result, the depth of correspondence is somewhat reduced during that time period.

This collection should be consulted by any researcher interested in colonial America, the early United States, Quakerism, abolition, Native Americans, history of medicine, women's history, and Philadelphia and New Jersey history. Beyond, the general description of life through the eyes of Quakers in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and England from 1770 to 1818, this family witnessed national events, epidemics, and wars. Susanna's descriptions, in particular, are compassionate and honest and may provide new perspectives on known events in American history.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

Library Company of Philadelphia

1314 Locust St.

Philadelphia, PA 19107

URL: <https://librarycompany.org>

Revision Description

Finding aid prepared by Holly Mengel, 10/20/2010. EAD encoding of finding aid updated by Dana Dorman, Library Company Archivist, after the Library Company took over management of LCP.in.HSP materials. 2/24/2026

Conditions Governing Access note

This collection is open for research use. Please contact Library Company of Philadelphia Reference staff for access to this collection.

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

Gift of Guielma M. Howland, 1884.

Processing Information note

The processing of this collection was made possible through generous funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, administered through the Council on Library and Information Resources' "Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives" Project.

This collection was *minimally processed* in 2009-2011, as part of an experimental project conducted under the auspices of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries to help eliminate processing backlog in Philadelphia repositories. A minimally

processed collection is one processed at a less intensive rate than traditionally thought necessary to make a collection ready for use by researchers. When citing sources from this collection, researchers are advised to defer to folder titles provided in the finding aid rather than those provided on the physical folder.

Employing processing strategies outlined in Mark Greene's and Dennis Meissner's 2005 article, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal With Late 20th-Century Collections*, the project team tested the limits of minimal processing on collections of all types and ages, in 23 Philadelphia area repositories. A primary goal of the project, the team processed at an average rate of 2-3 hours per linear foot of records, a fraction of the time ordinarily reserved for the arrangement and description of collections. Among other time saving strategies, the project team did not extensively review the content of the collections, replace acidic folders or complete any preservation work.

Conditions Governing Use note

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Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

Haverford College: Emlen Institution for the Benefit of Children of African and Indian descent records, 1765-1956 (bulk 1838-1956), Ms. Coll. 999; Edward Wanton Smith collection, circa 1837-1848, Ms. Coll. 955 (see box 3); and Howland collection.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania: Cox, Parrish and Wharton papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Logan family papers; and Vaux papers. National Library of Wales: William Dillwyn diaries, 1774-1790.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Abolitionists
- Breast--Cancer
- Burlington (N.J.)

- Correspondence
- Great Britain
- Indians of North America
- Napoleonic Wars, 1800-1815
- Native Americans
- Philadelphia (Pa.)
- Quaker women
- Quakers
- Society of Friends
- United States--History--Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775
- United States--History--War of 1812
- Yellow fever
- Dillwyn, William, 1743-1824
- Emlen, Samuel, 1730-1799
- Emlen, Samuel, Jr., 1766-1837
- Emlen, Susanna Dillwyn, 1769-1819

Collection Inventory

Volume 1, 1770-1793

General Physical Description note: Yi2 7302

Title/Description	Instances	
1770-1783	Box 1	Folder 1
1784	Box 1	Folder 2
1785	Box 1	Folder 3
1786 January-June	Box 1	Folder 4
1786 July-December	Box 1	Folder 5
1787	Box 1	Folder 6
1788 January-September	Box 1	Folder 7
1788 October-December	Box 1	Folder 8
1789 January-May	Box 1	Folder 9
1789 June-October	Box 1	Folder 10
1789 November-December	Box 1	Folder 11
1790 January-March	Box 1	Folder 12
1790 April-July	Box 1	Folder 13
1790 August-December	Box 2	Folder 1
1791 January-June		

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	Box 2	Folder 2
1791 July-September	Box 2	Folder 3
1791 October-December	Box 2	Folder 4
1792 January-May	Box 2	Folder 5
1792 June-September	Box 2	Folder 6
1792 July-December	Box 2	Folder 7
1793 January-April	Box 2	Folder 8
1793 May-July	Box 2	Folder 9
1793 August-September	Box 2	Folder 10
1793 October-December	Box 2	Folder 11
Fragments, undated	Box 2	Folder 12

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Volume 2, 1794-1799

General Physical Description note: Yi2 7303

Title/Description	Instances	
1794 January-June	Box 3	Folder 1
1794 June-October	Box 3	Folder 2
1794 November-1795 April	Box 3	Folder 3
1795 April-August	Box 3	Folder 4
1795 August-1796 February	Box 3	Folder 5
1796 February-July	Box 3	Folder 6
1796 July-September	Box 3	Folder 7
1796 November-1797 May	Box 3	Folder 8
1797 May-November	Box 3	Folder 9
1797 November-1798 May	Box 3	Folder 10
1798 May-December	Box 3	Folder 11
1799 January-October	Box 3	Folder 12
1799 October-December	Box 3	Folder 13

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Volume 3, 1800-1806General Physical Description note: Yi2 7304

Title/Description	Instances	
1800 January-March	Box 4	Folder 1
1800 April-May	Box 4	Folder 2
1800 June-July	Box 4	Folder 3
1800 July-September	Box 4	Folder 4
1800 September	Box 4	Folder 5
1800 October-1801 March	Box 4	Folder 6
1801 February-March	Box 4	Folder 7
1801 April-July	Box 4	Folder 8
1801 June-September	Box 4	Folder 9
1801 September-1802 June	Box 4	Folder 10
1802 August-December	Box 4	Folder 11
1803 January-April	Box 4	Folder 12
1803 May-June	Box 4	Folder 13
1803 June-October	Box 4	Folder 14
1803 November	Box 4	Folder 15
1804 January-March	Box 5	Folder 1
1804 March-April	Box 5	Folder 2
1804 April-June	Box 5	Folder 3
1804 June-August	Box 5	Folder 4
1804 August-October	Box 5	Folder 5
1803 November-December, 1804 November-December	Box 5	Folder 6
1804 January, 1805 January	Box 5	Folder 7
1805 February-March	Box 5	Folder 8
1805 March-June	Box 5	Folder 9
1805 June-September	Box 5	Folder 10
1805 October-December	Box 5	Folder 11
1805 December-1806 February	Box 5	Folder 12
1806 February-March	Box 5	Folder 13
1806 March-May	Box 5	Folder 14

1806 June-July	Box 5	Folder 15
1806 August-October	Box 5	Folder 16
1806 October-December	Box 5	Folder 17

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Volume 4, 1807-1810

General Physical Description note: Yi2 7305

Title/Description	Instances	
1807 January-February	Box 6	Folder 1
1807 March-May	Box 6	Folder 2
1807 May-June	Box 6	Folder 3
1807 July-August	Box 6	Folder 4
1807 August-December	Box 6	Folder 5
1807 December-1808 February	Box 6	Folder 6
1808 March-April	Box 6	Folder 7
1808 May-June	Box 6	Folder 8
1808 July-September	Box 6	Folder 9
1808 September-December	Box 6	Folder 10
1808 December-1809 January	Box 6	Folder 11
1809 February-March	Box 6	Folder 12
1809 March-April	Box 6	Folder 13
1809 May-June	Box 6	Folder 14
1809 July-August	Box 6	Folder 15
1809 September-October	Box 6	Folder 16
1809 October-December	Box 6	Folder 17
1808 December, 1809 December, 1811 January	Box 6	Folder 18
1810 January-March	Box 6	Folder 19
1810 March-May	Box 6	Folder 20
1810 May-July	Box 6	Folder 21
1810 July-August	Box 6	Folder 22
1810 September-October	Box 6	Folder 23
1810 September-December	Box 6	Folder 24

1810 December	Box 6	Folder 25
Extraneous material found in volume 4, 1816, undated	Box 6	Folder 26

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Volume 5, 1811-1818

General Physical Description note: Yi2 7306

Title/Description	Instances	
1811 January	Box 7	Folder 2
1811 February-March	Box 7	Folder 3
1811 March-May	Box 7	Folder 4
1811 May-June	Box 7	Folder 5
1811 June-July	Box 7	Folder 6
1811 July-August	Box 7	Folder 7
1811 October-December	Box 7	Folder 8
1811 December-1812 January	Box 7	Folder 9
1812 January-February	Box 7	Folder 10
1812 February-March	Box 7	Folder 11
1812 March-May	Box 7	Folder 12
1812 May-July	Box 7	Folder 13
1812 July-August	Box 7	Folder 14
1812 September-November	Box 7	Folder 15
1812 November-December	Box 7	Folder 16
1813 January-March	Box 7	Folder 17
1813 March-May	Box 7	Folder 18
1813 June-July	Box 7	Folder 19
1813 August-October	Box 7	Folder 20
1813 November-1814 January	Box 7	Folder 21
1814 January-June	Box 7	Folder 22
1814 June-July	Box 7	Folder 23
1814 August-September	Box 7	Folder 24
1814 October-December	Box 7	Folder 25
1814 December-1815 May	Box 7	Folder 26

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1815 May-September	Box 7	Folder 27
1815 October-December	Box 7	Folder 28
1816 January-June	Box 7	Folder 29
1816 June-July	Box 7	Folder 30
1816 July-1817 September	Box 7	Folder 31
1817 October-December	Box 7	Folder 32
1818 August-1820 April	Box 7	Folder 33
1818 June-December	Box 7	Folder 34

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