Milwaukee Public Museum

Accession 25593

James Densmore Papers

1854-1970

**Historical Abstract:** James Densmore (1820-1889) was an American businessman who played a crucial role in the invention and development of the first practical typewriter in the late 19th century. His financial support and championing of Christopher Latham Sholes of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and his invention, the “Type-Writer,” was very important for the advancement and growing efficiency of American business in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

James Densmore was born in Moscow, New York, on February 3, 1820 as the oldest of 8 children to Joel and Sophia (Compton) Densmore. Much of his childhood was spent in and around Rochester, New York. As a young man, James moved to Wisconsin to farm. He also started his career as a journalist there, writing for the *Oshkosh True Democrat*, the *Kenosha Telegraph*, and establishing the *Elkhorn Independent*. Married twice, James had two daughters and one son.

Amos Densmore was born in Rochester, New York, on January 28, 1825 as the third child of Joel and Sophie (Compton) Densmore. After his education at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, Amos took over his father’s wooden bowl business. In the early 1860s, Amos, along with his younger brother, Emmett, entered the oil business, starting the Densmore Oil Company in July of 1863. Amos and Emmett eventually invited their brothers James, William, and Joel into the business, and soon patented a design for railroad tank cars. Within a year, however, more efficient and safer tank cars were designed and utilized by the Standard Oil Company.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Christopher Latham Sholes was developing a mechanical writing machine with the help of machinist Samuel W. Soule, inventor Carlos Glidden, and clockmaker Mathias Scwalbach. By September 1867, they had a working model for a machine that could type the entire capital letter alphabet, numerals 2 through 9, and punctuation marks. In 1868, Sholes, Glidden, and Soule received patent No. 70,265 for a “Type-Writer.” An acquaintance of Sholes’ from his farming and journalism days in Wisconsin, James Densmore came on board as an investor offering to pay the inventor’s back bills of $600 and to provide all future capital, for a 25 percent interest in the machine. Since this investment amounted to all of Densmore’s financial assets, he became a fierce promoter of the invention and recruited his brothers Amos and Emmett in the continued development and improvement of typewriting machines. In 1873, Densmore convinced the Remington Arms Company in Ilion, New York, to bankroll production, and in 1874 they produced the first commercially viable typewriter which they called the Sholes-Glidden. The QWERTY keyboard arrangement still in use today was developed by Sholes and Amos Densmore and was included in an 1878 improvement patent.

Amos and Emmett Densmore began their own typewriter company in 1886, the Densmore Type-Writer Company, and developed their own machine known as “The Densmore” in 1891.

James Densmore died in Brooklyn, New York, on September 16, 1889. Amos Densmore died in New York City October 14, 1898.

The collection was donated to the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1979 by Priscilla Densmore.

**Scope of Contents:** The records of this collection document the business and personal activities of James and Amos Densmore and their descendents in relation to the invention and development of the typewriter in the late 19th century. The collection includes documents dated from 1854 to 1970. The records have been separated into three series: Business Documents, Correspondence, and Miscellaneous.

Series 1 contains business records documenting the various business ventures of the Densmore family from 1854-1935. Account sheets and documents are arranged chronologically and are both formal and informal. Agreements are arranged chronologically and include indentures, sales, title transfers, licenses, arbitration briefs, propositions, settlements, and contracts among other articles of agreement. Financial records are arranged chronologically and include bills of sale, receipts, warranty deeds, loan requests, tax receipts, bonds, and mortgage agreements among other financial documents with financial records relating to the E. Remington and Sons Company filed separately. Patent Material records are arranged chronologically by date of conferral by the United States Patent Office not by date of application. For more specific folder contents and other records that together with the records described above form Series 1, please refer to folder listing below.

Series 2 contains correspondence to and from James Densmore, Amos Densmore, Christopher Latham Sholes, Emmett Densmore, representatives of the Densmore Type-Writer Company, and other related participants in the invention and development of the typewriter in the late 19th century. The series also includes later correspondence from Densmore descendents Clint Densmore and Priscilla Densmore regarding the disposition of the collection. All correspondence is arranged chronologically when available within its assigned designation, made clear by the folder listing below. The correspondence from Sholes to Amos Densmore, dated 1869-1890, will be of particular interest to those interested in the tweaks and improvements made to the typewriter over the course of the 1870s by Sholes and Amos Densmore together. The James and Amos Densmore correspondence, dated 1862-1893, is comprised mostly of letters from James to Amos, but also includes letters to and from both James and Amos to and from other collection related participants including, but not limited to, Sholes, Emmett Densmore, Edward Densmore, Edward Salomon, G.W.N. Yost, E. Remington and Sons Co., William Comes, Edward J. Delehanty, and D.C. Roundy. For more specific folder contents and other records that together with the records described above form Series 2, please refer to the folder listing below.

Series 3 contains miscellaneous records that could not be easily fit into Series 1 or Series 2, including typing examples, handwritten notes, and photographs among other less easily describable documents. Series 3 also contains newspaper clippings of articles about and advertisements of typewriters from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Lastly, Series 3 contains copies of articles and talks given by Densmore family descendents and typewriter experts as well as documentation of the efforts of Priscilla Densmore to find a repository well-suited for this collection.

**Collection highlights:**

**H35495** (internal catalog number at the Milwaukee Public Museum)**:** **Box 1-Folder 5** (folder location) – C.L. Sholes selling his last interests in the typewriter to Amos Densmore on May 5, 1873.

**H35494: Box 4-Folder 5** – Example of Sholes typewritten correspondence from October 4, 1869.

**H36008: Box 7-Folder 6** – James fighting with Amos over royalties to be paid to Sholes from November 1, 1882.

**H36009: Box 7-Folder 6** – History of Sholes family written by James Densmore to Amos Densmore from November 1, 1882.

**H39889: Box 8-Folder 3** – Solicitous letter created by the Densmore Typewriter Co. for advertising purposes from 1892.

**H40306: Box 10-Folder 1** – Drawing made entirely on the Ball Bearing Densmore Typewriter, “Rear Admiral Sampson and His Flagship ‘New York’.”

**James Densmore Collection Folder Listing**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **BoxNo.** | **Series 1: Business Documents, 1854-1935** | **Folder No.** |
| 1 | Business – Accounts, 1870-1888 | 1 |
| 1 | Business – Accounts, 1890-1892 | 2 |
| 1 | Business – Accounts, 1893-1920 | 3 |
| 1 | Business – Accounts, Undated | 4 |
| 1 | Business – Agreements, 1861-1885 | 5 |
| 1 | Business – Agreements, 1886-1890 | 6 |
| 1 | Business – Agreements, 1891-1935 | 7 |
| 1 | Business – Agreements, Undated | 8 |
| 2 | Business – Financial Records, 1858-1888 | 1 |
| 2 | Business – Financial Records, 1892-1902 | 2 |
| 2 | Business – Financial Records, Undated | 3 |
| 2 | Business – Financial Records: E. Remington and Sons Company, 1875-1877 | 4 |
| 2 | Business – Financial Records: E. Remington and Sons Company, 1878-1884 | 5 |
| 2 | Business – Amos Densmore Account book, 1876-1886 | 6 |
| 2 | Business – Amos Densmore Account book, 1887-1891 | 7 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, 1854-1877 | 1 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, 1878-1881 | 2 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, 1883-1887 | 3 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, 1888-1890 | 4 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, 1891-1893 | 5 |
| 3 | Business – Patent Material, Undated | 6 |
| 4 | Business – Certificates of Sale, Winona, MN, 1865-1881 | 1 |
| 4 | Business – Blueprints, Franz X. Wagner, Typewriting Machines, Undated | 2 |
| 4 | Business – Miscellaneous: Amos and James Densmore Disagreement #1 | 3 |
| 4 | Business – Miscellaneous: Amos and James Densmore Disagreement #2 | 4 |
|  |  |  |
| **BoxNo.** | **Series 2: Correspondence, 1862-1970** | **Folder No.** |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1869-1873 | 5 |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1875 | 6 |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1876 January-June | 7 |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1876 July-December | 8 |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1877 January-April | 9 |
| 4 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1877 May-June | 10 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1877 July-September | 1 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1877 October-December | 2 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1878 | 3 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1879 | 4 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1880-1881 | 5 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1882 | 6 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1883-1886 | 7 |
| 5 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, 1887-1890 | 8 |
| 6 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, Undated – Complete | 1 |
| 6 | Correspondence – C.L. Sholes to Amos Densmore, Undated – Fragments | 2 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1862-1875 | 3 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1876 January-June | 4 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1876 July-December | 5 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1877 January-August | 6 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1877 September-December | 7 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1878 January-May | 8 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1878 June-December | 9 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1879 January-June | 10 |
| 6 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1879 July-December | 11 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1880 | 1 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1881 January-June | 2 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1881 July-December | 3 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1882 January-April | 4 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1882 May-August | 5 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1882 September-December | 6 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1883 | 7 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1884 January-March | 8 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1884 April-December | 9 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1885 | 10 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, 1886-1893 | 11 |
| 7 | Correspondence – James and Amos Densmore, Undated | 12 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Emmett Densmore, 1891 January-May | 1 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Emmett Densmore, 1891 June-December | 2 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Emmett Densmore, 1892 | 3 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Densmore Typewriter Co., 1886-1891 | 4 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Densmore Typewriter Co., 1892-93 | 5 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Densmore Typewriter Co., 1894 January-March | 6 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Densmore Typewriter Co., 1894 April-December | 7 |
| 8 | Correspondence – Densmore Typewriter Co.: George S. Heath to Amos Densmore, 1891-1893 | 8 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Miscellaneous, 1881-1897 and Undated | 1 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Clint Densmore, 1892-1918 | 2 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Clint Densmore, 1921-1970 | 3 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Priscilla Densmore, 1929-1945 | 4 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Priscilla Densmore, 1946-1977 | 5 |
| 9 | Correspondence – Plaque Dedication, 1956 | 6 |
| 9 | Correspondence - Envelopes | 7 |
|  |  |  |
| **BoxNo.** | **Series 3: Miscellaneous** | **Folder No.** |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Documents | 1 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Photographs | 2 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Edison Invention Controversy | 3 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Clippings #1 | 4 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Clippings #2 | 5 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Clippings #3 | 6 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Clippings #4 | 7 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Clippings #5 | 8 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Typewriter Articles and Talks, 1922-1965 | 9 |
| 10 | Miscellaneous – Collection Documentation, 1930-1966 | 10 |

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