

BURKE, WILLIAM B., B. 1864.
William B. Burke papers, 1887-1964

Emory University
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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Burke, William B., b. 1864.
Title: William B. Burke papers, 1887-1964
Call Number: Manuscript Collection No. 187
Extent: .5 linear ft. (1 box)
Abstract: Papers of Methodist Episcopal educator and missionary William Blount Burke.
Language: Materials primarily in English with some in Chinese.

Administrative Information

Restrictions on Access

Unrestricted access.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction

All requests subject to limitations noted in departmental policies on reproduction.

Related Materials in Other Repositories

[William Blount Burke papers](#), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Source

Gift, 1943.

Citation

[after identification of item(s)], William B. Burke papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Processing

Processed by DEW, 1974.

Collection Description

Biographical Note

William Blount Burke (June 12, 1864 - December 19, 1947), for 56 years Methodist missionary to China, was born in Macon, Georgia, the son of John William Burke, publisher and preacher, and Caroline A. (White) Burke. There he attended Hunter's private school and the Macon public schools before entering Emory in 1879. Four years later he received a B. A. from Emory, and more than 60 years later, in recognition of his achievements in the mission field, the same institution awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Divinity and alumni membership in Phi Beta Kappa. Rev. Burke spent a year (1884-1885) in theology school at Vanderbilt, where he edited the *Vanderbilt Observer* and was licensed to preach. From 1885-1887 he served the South Georgia Conference as circuit preacher.

Rev. Burke's stint in China began in 1887. He was based in Sungkiang, a town about twenty miles from Shanghai. As principal of Soochow University Bible School, secretary of the Board of Trustees of Soochow University, chairman of the Sungkiang Public Health Association, and head of the Sungkiang Orphanage, Rev. Burke won the respect of the people who had originally regarded him as a "foreign spy." In recognition of his rescue work during the civil war of 1923, the Sungkiang people erected a memorial arch. While at Vanderbilt Rev. Burke had made the acquaintance of Charlie Soon (later Soong). In China the two renewed their tie and Rev. Burke remained close to the famous Soong family throughout his stay in China. The Soong daughters, later to become Mme. Chiang Kai-shek and Mme. Sun Yat-sen, were educated at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia at the urging of Rev. Burke.

Rev. Burke's "retirement" in Macon in 1937 was interrupted by the Japanese invasion of China and the subsequent bombing of Sungkiang. He returned to China in January 1938, doing relief work until April 1942 when he was arrested and imprisoned by the Japanese. Released several months later, he was kept under continuous surveillance until he was again taken prisoner in March 1943. He was finally released onto the Swedish exchange ship *Gripsholm* on September 3, 1943, which returned him to the United States. He spent his last years lecturing throughout the South on conditions in China and serving the Mulberry Street Methodist Church in Macon as assistant pastor.

Rev. Burke was twice married; first to Addie Gordon of Port Gibson, Mississippi in 1889, who died, probably of bubonic plague, enroute from China to the U.S. in 1904; and second to Leila Gerdine of Macon in 1913. Burke had four children by his first marriage, William Blount, Jr., Gordon Lee, Edward Walter, and John William(s); and two by his second, Caroline, who died at age two, and James Cobb. Biographical source: Burke's Emory Alumni folder, included in the collection, and the biography *My Father in China* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1942) by James Burke, which contains a full account of Burke's time as a missionary.

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of the collection consists of 168 letters written by William B. Burke to his son James between August 29, 1933 and December 12, 1941. These letters are of a personal nature and make little mention of political events or of Rev. Burke's missionary activities in Sungkiang. For the most part, the letters describe Rev. Burke's daily life-his vigorous exercise routine, the solace afforded by his radio and dogs-and contain fatherly advice to James, who was an Emory student

at the time, on topics of religion, liquor, marriage, and school. He does take note briefly of the changes wrought by the New Life Movement (November 18, 1934 and October 15, 1935) and of student protests over Japanese activities (December 20, 1935), and reflects momentarily on the lack of progress made by China in world affairs (April 6, 1935). There are frequent references to Bishop Arthur J. Moore, then director of all foreign work of the Methodist Church, South, showing him to be a close friend and companion of Rev. Burke (see especially February 9, 1935).

The letters in 1937 are written from Macon where Rev. Burke had retired until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War propelled him back into the mission field. Rev. Burke writes that Japan is capitalizing on China's lack of allies (October 20, 1937), but blames the military machine in Japan, not the people, whom he characterizes as "progressive and hardworking" (December 20, 1937). His personal feelings of restlessness and desire to return to China come through in the letter of November 3, 1937. He describes his difficulties in getting through the Japanese blockade to Sungkiang (January 29, 1938), the carnage and destruction wreaked by the Japanese (January 10 and March 9, 1938), and criticizes America for continuing to furnish Japan with the "means" to carry on such work (March 9, 1938). Upon returning to Sungkiang, he finds that there is not much for him to do, but that his presence is a psychological help to the people (April 30, 1938). Letters in the collection dealing with Rev. Burke's arrest and capture by the Japanese include a letter from the Methodist Board of Missions to wives of arrested missionaries (December 14, 1942); a letter from James to his family advising them how to handle publicity on Rev. Burke's arrest; and a message sent from Rev. Burke, July 14, 1942, through the International Red Cross, the last direct word before his return to the States in 1943.

The collection also includes nineteen letters from Rev. Burke to his wife Leila (November 1, 1936-December 8, 1947) and four letters to Rev. Burke from his younger brother John (August 21, 1887 - May 8, 1893). Among miscellaneous materials are two photographs of Rev. Burke in China, clippings from Chinese newspapers on Rev. Burke's retirement, articles written by Rev. Burke for the *North China Daily News*, a translation of the petition from the citizens of Sungkiang to save the memorial arch erected in honor of Rev. Burke, and a booklet, "In Remembrance of Rev. W. B. Burke and His Work in Sungkiang." Both William Burke's and James's Emory Alumni folders are in the collection. James Burke's folder contains articles written during his career as a photographer-journalist for Time-Life in the Far East and information relating to his death in 1964, the result of a fall from a ledge in the Himalayas. Drafts of the manuscript for *My Father in China*, chapters 40 and 41, by James Burke are included in the collection.

Arrangement Note

Arranged by record type.

Container List

Correspondence

Box	Folder	Content
1	1	1887-1893
1	2	1933-1934
1	3	1935
1	4	1936
1	5	1937
1	6	1938
1	7	1939
1	8	January 1940-June 1941
1	9	November 1940-June 1941
1	10	July 1941-November 1942

Book Drafts

1	11	"My Father in China," Chapter 40 [3 drafts]
1	12	"My Father in China," Chapter 41 [3 drafts]

Miscellaneous Materials

1	13	Miscellaneous
1	14	William Burke, alumni file
1	15	James Burke, alumni file
