



Dundas Museum and Archives

Inventory No. 7

James Lesslie fonds

2009 March
revised 2010 February

Dates of creation: 1828-1885

Physical description: 12 cm of textual records

Biographical sketch:

James Lesslie was born in 1802 in Dundee, Scotland, the third child of Edward Lesslie and Grace Watson. He arrived in Canada from Dundee in 1821, expecting to work at the family's business in York, but was advised to set up shop in Kingston. He remained there for four years by which time his parents and remaining siblings arrived in Dundas, where the "partnership" between John Lesslie and William Lyon Mackenzie had dissolved. All three operations were known as Lesslie and Sons.

James moved to York in 1826, the flagship store, and was assisted by his father and Joseph, his youngest brother. Edward Lesslie died in 1828, but the businesses continued to operate under the Lesslie and Sons name.

As a prosperous businessman, James Lesslie entered politics and was an active participant in public service. He was elected alderman in the first civic elections which saw his friend William Lyon Mackenzie elected mayor of the newly created city of Toronto. He was involved in the establishment of the Mechanics' Institute, and was among a group of reformers who supported the creation of a House of Industry in response to the increasing problem of poverty in the city. In 1835 he was involved in the creation of the Bank of the People, a response from Reformers to the Bank of Upper Canada which was associated with the government.

By 1837 James Lesslie was a member of the radical wing of the Reform Movement who associated with Mackenzie. Although he was radical in his leanings, Lesslie was not implicated in the rebellion itself, although in the aftermath of the Yonge Street uprising, he and his brother William were arrested and briefly imprisoned.

After the rebellion, many reformers were prepared to leave Canada and move to the United States. The Mississippi Emigration Society was created in 1838 to facilitate this move and James Lesslie was among the delegates chosen to negotiate for land. While there, James fell ill, and in any case, upon learning of the mission of Lord Durham, decided to remain in Canada. His brother Charles, though, emigrated to Davenport, Iowa and remained there for the rest of his life.

In the years following the rebellion Lesslie continue to campaign for responsible government, although in a more moderate tone. Changes in the family business also occurred: John remained at the Dundas store, William merged his store with James' Toronto operation and in 1841 the Lesslie Brothers opened a new brick store. Joseph would also work there, but responsibility for the business was largely vested with James, especially after the death of William in 1843.

In 1842, James embarked on a new venture: publishing the *Toronto Examiner*. Lesslie's *Examiner* faced competition from another reform paper, George Brown's *Globe* and eventually the *Examiner* allied with the Clear Grits, the left-wing branch of Upper Canada Reform. The *Examiner* was not the only paper supporting the Clear Grits, however, and by the 1850s the popularity of the paper began to decline. Lesslie sold the *Examiner* to George Brown in 1855.

Lesslie continued to be involved in public affairs as a supporter of non-sectarian education. He was elected school trustee, and was a justice of the peace.

He sold his business around the same time he sold the *Examiner* and bought a farm estate in Eglinton which was, coincidentally, adjacent to Montgomery's Tavern, Mackenzie's headquarters during the rebellion. Lesslie's friendship with Mackenzie continued in their later years. Although he was retired from business, Lesslie's farm, his properties in Toronto, and his close ties to his family kept him busy. He lived for thirty years in Eglinton with his second wife Jacqueline and an adopted daughter. He died in 1885.

Custodial history:

Fonds is believed to have been acquired by the Dundas Historical Society Museum in the 1950s. Custodial history prior to donation to the Museum is unknown.

Scope and Content note:

Fonds consists of diaries, a memorandum book, and a memorial card.

Restrictions on Access:

Due to the age and condition of some of the material, access may be supervised or limited. Typed transcriptions of some of the diaries are available.

Accruals:

No further accruals are expected.

Box Listing**Box I**

I-1 "Notable Events and Memorandums" book, 1828, 1830-1831. Includes James Lesslie's description of the death of his father.

I-2 Removed to Lesslie Family fonds.

I-3 Diary, 1860.

I-4 Diary, 1866.

I-5 Diary, 1868.

I-6 Diary, 1872.

I-7 Diary, 1877.

I-8 Diary, 1878.

Box 2

2-1 Diary, 1879.

2-2 Diary, 1880.

2-3 Diary, 1881.

2-4 Diary, 1882.

2-5 Diary, 1883.

Box 3

3-1 Diary, 1884.

3-2 Memorial card, 1885.