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Guide to the J. T. McWilliams Family Papers

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Summary Information

Repository:	University of Nevada, Las Vegas. University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives.
Creator:	McWilliams, Iona, 1876-1969
Creator:	McWilliams, J. T. (John Thomas), 1863-1941
Title:	J. T. McWilliams Family Papers
ID:	MS-00153
Date [inclusive]:	Approximately 1900 to 1968
Physical Description:	1.25 Cubic Feet (4 boxes)
Physical Description:	3.17 Linear Feet
Language of the Material:	English
Abstract:	The collection consists of letters, greeting cards, survey maps, newspaper clippings, legal papers, photographs, collected recipes, land sales and expense journals, and survey reference books. The material was created or collected by pioneering Nevada surveyor, engineer, and real estate entrepreneur J. T. (John Thomas) McWilliams and his wife, Iona, between 1900 and 1968.

Preferred Citation

J. T. McWilliams Family Papers, approximately 1900-1968. MS-00153. Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas, Nevada.

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Biographical Note

Nevada pioneer, engineer, and surveyor John Thomas (J.T.) McWilliams was born in Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada, on December 10, 1863. In 1879, he moved to Detroit, Michigan, before settling in Chicago, Illinois in 1883. While in Chicago, McWilliams studied civil engineering at the University of Chicago, and in 1884 he began surveying for the Northern Pacific Railroad.

In 1893, he was appointed a delegate to the National Irrigation Congress in Los Angeles, California by the governor of South Dakota, Charles H. Sheldon. While in Southern California, McWilliams pursued surveying work in Needles, California, where he met his eventual wife Iona, and they

were married at Fort Mohave in 1897. For the next four years, McWilliams designed municipal water systems for towns in Arizona and California.

In 1901, the McWilliams family moved to Goodsprings, Nevada, and soon after to the Las Vegas Valley when he was asked to survey the Stewart Ranch in 1902. In 1904, he purchased an 80-acre section of land from Helen Stewart, and subdivided the land into plots. He called the area "McWilliams Original Townsite of Las Vegas" and advertised the lots for sale at up to \$200 each in Los Angeles newspapers for the rest of 1904. After brisk initial sales and an influx of businesses, investors, and residents, the McWilliams townsite suffered several setbacks, culminating in a fire that swept through the tents that served as buildings and pushing both residents and businesses to the new Clark townsite located a scant half mile to the east.

McWilliams' reputation in Southern Nevada was built in part on his willingness to confront the Union Pacific Railroad on issues that impacted the growing Las Vegas community; including water rights, land claims, and timber claims. Significant successes included stopping the railroad from dumping waste in Las Vegas Creek and, over the course of ten years, convincing them to pump water into what remained of his original townsite, the only city area outside of the Clark townsite to receive "city water."

Throughout the 1930s, McWilliams worked with the CCC to establish what is now the Lee Canyon Ski and Snowboard Resort; he was still planning new projects when he died in 1941. His wife, Iona, continued to hold the reins of his many interests until her death in 1969.

Source: K. J. Evans, "J. T. McWilliams," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 10, 1999. <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/jt-mcwilliams>

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Scope and Contents Note

The J. T. McWilliams Family Papers date from approximately 1900 to 1968, and contain a mix of personal and professional materials that describe the lives of J. T. and Iona McWilliams. In addition to personal letters and cards that highlight the couple's relationship with Nevada luminaries of the day, the collection documents his work as a civil engineer in Nevada, his efforts to establish a townsite in the Las Vegas Valley in 1904, and his work protecting the natural environment of the area while defending early settlers' land and water rights from encroachment by the railroad.

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Arrangement

Materials are arranged alphabetically.

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Administrative Information

Access Note

Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights

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Acquisition Note

Materials were donated in 1971; accession number T62.

Processing Note

In 2017, as part of an archival backlog elimination project, Melise Leech processed the materials and revised the collection description to bring it into compliance with current professional standards.

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Related Materials

Separated Materials

The majority of photos in this acquisition were removed from the collection and placed in J. T. McWilliams Photograph Collection, 1900-1970. MS-00025. Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas, Nevada.

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Names and Subjects

- Westside (Las Vegas, Nev.)
- Clark County (Nev.) -- History
- Railroads -- Nevada -- History
- Lee Canyon (Clark County, Nev.)
- McWilliams Townsite of Las Vegas
- photographs

Collection Inventory

Title/Description	Containers
Birthday Cards, undated	box 01
Christmas Cards, undated	box 01
Easter and St. Patrick's Day Cards, undated	box 01
Mother's Day Cards, undated	box 01
Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day Cards, undated	box 01
Christ Church, Las Vegas, 1959	box 01
Diaries, Iona McWilliams, 1923-1940s	box 01
Finances, 1940s-1960s	box 01
Litigation: Leavitt vs. Vegas Artesian Water Syndicate, 1951	box 01
Road maps, undated	box 01
Las Vegas Mint Hotel, 1960-1961	box 01
Newspaper clippings, 1927-1963	box 01
Personal correspondence, 1939-1961	box 01
Poetry and short story, 1921-1936	box 01
Surveying, 1941	box 01
Las Vegas Townsite sales records, 1904-1905	box 02
Las Vegas Townsite Ledger, 1904-1929	box 02
Manual of Survey Instructions for the Survey of Public Lands, 1902	box 02
Elevation and Stadia Tables, 1906	box 02
Recipes , 1932	box 02
Recipes, undated	box 02

Recipes, 1939	box 02
Recipes, undated	box 02
Manual of Instructions for the Survey of the Mineral Lands of the United States, 1909	box 03
Nellie McWilliams High School Commencement program, 1916	box 03
J.T. and Nellie McWilliams, undated	box 03
Family photos, undated (sod2025-080) (view online)	box 03
J.T. McWilliams survey and plat maps, 1902-1938 (sod2025-081) (view online)	box 04