

Collection #
SC 2970

**JONATHAN JENNINGS
LETTER TRANSCRIPT, 5 JANUARY 1813**

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF
COLLECTION: 1 folder

COLLECTION
DATES: January 5, 1813

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Jennings (1784—July 26, 1834) was born most likely in Virginia to Jacob Jennings and Mary Kennedy, both of whom may have held medical degrees, and the latter of whom was also a minister in the Presbyterian church. Jennings was the sixth of eight children, and his mother, Mary, passed away when Jennings was only seven years old. Jennings' father's occupation as a minister led the family to spend time in New Jersey, and then in nearly frontier Fayette County, Pennsylvania in 1792, where Jennings spent his formative years. However, Jennings did not subscribe to his father's strict religious practices, and left home when he was able for the frontier. He stopped for a while at Steubenville, Ohio, where he helped his brother Obediah with his law practice, but continued on to Indiana territory in 1806, travelling down the Ohio River to Jeffersonville and then on to Vincennes on the Wabash River. Jennings was asked to assist John Ballodet, who managed the Federal Land Office, to help keep the accounts in the absence of Jennings' old friend from Pennsylvania, Nathaniel Ewing. The boost in income and social status from the new job propelled Jennings into the political circles of Vincennes.

Jennings was a political foe of William Henry Harrison, who was, at the time, the territorial governor. Jennings mostly attacked Harrison on account of his pro-slavery views and the patronage system of his administration. When Congressman Benjamin Parke resigned in 1808, an election was held to fill the vacant seat. Jennings ran against the Harrison-backed candidate, Thomas Randolph. Jennings travelled the territory to campaign on a platform that was anti slavery and anti political patronage. Jennings was ultimately successful in a very close and hotly disputed election, and went to Washington D.C. During his term, Jennings married Ann Gilmore Hay of Jeffersonville, Indiana. Jennings was elected for three more terms.

By now, Jennings was sowing up support from the anti-slavery factions, and during his fourth term in 1816, passed a statehood bill for Indiana. At the constitutional convention in Corydon, Jennings was named as president of the assembly, and he ensured there was a provision in the state constitution banning slavery in the state and also that the constitution gave the governor limited powers. Jennings also announced his candidacy for governor at the end of the convention. Jennings handily won the race and took office as the first Governor of the State of Indiana on December 12, 1816.

As governor, Jennings promoted infrastructure improvements to roads and canals in the state as well as the creation of a public school system. However, most of his administration was plagued by economic woes. Jennings also served as a United States Commissioner to negotiate a treaty with Native Americans in the northern parts of the state, the Treaty of St. Mary's. This allowed the state to purchase millions of acres of land to increase settlements in the state. However, due to a clause in the constitution stating that a person could not hold a position with both the state and federal government, Jennings political foes

attempted to impeach him, but were ultimately unsuccessful. Jennings even won a second term in 1820 by a landslide.

However, the economic troubles in the state and the country affected Jennings' personal finances. In his second term, Jennings agreed to serve as governor without a salary to help the state finances, but that left him with no personal income. He had a farm, but had no time to manage it. He also had a home in Corydon where he entertained friends and political allies. Hence, he resigned from the governorship in order to return to the United States Congress, where he would again be able to earn a salary. He ran unopposed and was elected in 1822 to serve in the 17th Congress.

Jennings served in Congress until 1831, but his health and finances had been on a downward spiral for some time. Jennings was an alcoholic, and his drinking only got worse after his wife Ann died in 1826. Jennings retired from Congress and moved back to Charlestown, Indiana, but he was too afflicted to tend to his farm, and attempt to pay his creditors. Jennings died of a heart attack in 1834, without enough money or assets left to purchase a headstone for his grave. However, in 1888, the State of Indiana paid to have him reburied in the Charlestown cemetery with a headstone.

Sources:

Randy K. Mills, *Jonathan Jennings: Indiana's First Governor*. Indiana Historical Society Press, 2008.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection contains a typed transcript of an original letter that was written and signed by Jonathan Jennings. In the letter, addressed to Jennings' brother-in-law George Mitchell, Jennings expresses his unhappiness and frustration with living in Washington D.C. and inquires into the health of his wife, Ann, who was living with Mitchell and Jennings' sister at the time.

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CATALOGING INFORMATION

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1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog:
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2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
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