

Livingstone Online News

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Letters from the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth



The manuscript collections at the Museum were assembled by the old Royal Naval Museum from 1952 by donation and purchase, or occasionally through transfer from other institutions. In 2010 the Royal Naval Museum changed its name to the [National Museum of the Royal Navy](#). There are some notable collections relating to

Portsmouth Dockyard, to HMS Victory and to Horatio Nelson, but in fact collecting has been much broader than this. The archive is mainly an aggregate of groups of personal papers and subjective accounts of service from all ranks and branches of the Navy. It is particularly strong in personal diaries, memoirs, journals and collections of letters, c.1780-2000. The collections real strength is as an unofficial collection that is a source for a social and operational history of the Navy.

The collections also include the manuscript items from the Admiralty Library which have gradually been moved to Portsmouth since the autumn of 1997, to be administered by the Museum. These consist of c.700 volumes and c. 2,000 maps, plans and charts assembled in the Library at the Admiralty in Whitehall from 1809 onwards. They include many small collections of historic interest principally from the 17th – early 20th century; Navy Board records, papers of Admiralty officials, ship and dockyard plans, logs, personal diaries, order books, letter books, accounts of exploration and an excellent collection of largely 18th century maps and charts.

[The letters from David Livingstone](#) are found amongst a larger collection of the papers (MSS 120) of Rear Admiral John Washington (1800-1863), 1857-1863. At the time of Livingstone's 'Zambesi Expedition' in HMS Pioneer, Washington was the Royal Navy's Hydrographer. He worked in the Admiralty in Whitehall and had overall responsibility for instructing all naval ships sent to explore and survey, from which the Hydrographic Office would ultimately produce charts. Livingstone's letters describe his explorations and shed much light on the personal difficulties he was having in managing his team.

The collection is particularly interesting as the letters to Livingstone are still in context within the original files of incoming letters and reports covering all aspects of the expedition including: construction, fitting out, the establishment of HMS Pioneer, instructions to officers on expedition, etc.

The papers are really a set of office papers which have gone astray. At some date unknown (but certainly by the 1920s) they were moved from the files of the Hydrographic Office and placed amongst other manuscripts in the Admiralty Library, a very large reference library housed at that time in the same building as the Hydrographic Office. Later again they were given the reference MSS 120. The collections in this Library have since moved a number of times, but the papers are still part of the Admiralty Library Manuscript Collection held at the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth.

Livingstone Online would like to thank Matthew Sheldon, Head of the Curatorial Department, for all his help in facilitating the photography of the material in the Naval Archives and for the preparation of this

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[Livingstone Online](#)

Livingstone Online is an ongoing project that provides access to the manuscripts of the missionary, doctor and African explorer David Livingstone (1813-1873). We currently offer images and detailed transcriptions of many of Livingstone's letters, and we aim to make all of his manuscripts - including his diaries and journals - freely available online. We also run a transatlantic collaboration to apply spectral imaging and processing to restore a series of faded, illegible texts produced by Livingstone during his last travels (1866-1873).

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announcement.

Photograph: Reading Room at the The National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth

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