Oliver Wolcott Gibbs (usually referred to as Wolcott Gibbs) was an even more celebrated scientist than his older brother. Although a graduate of Columbia and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Wolcott Gibbs did not intend to practice medicine, but instead was primarily interested in a career in chemistry and physics research. In 1845 he went to the University of Berlin to study in the laboratories of Heinrich Rose and Carl Rammelsberg. A year later he went to Giessen to study organic chemistry under Liebig. From there he journeyed to Paris, and by the time he returned to the United States in 1857 he was well-schooled in the best scientific theory of his day. After a year lectureship at the College of Physicians and Surgeons and at Delaware College in Newark, Delaware, he became professor of chemistry at the newly-founded Free Academy (now the College of the City of New York). In 1862 he became professor of chemistry and physics at Harvard. He remained there until his retirement in 1887. In his private laboratory at Newport he carried on research for another ten years, and during his long career he made many notable advances in physical chemistry, inorganic compounds, and analytical methodology.

Of the other sons of George Gibbs III, Alfred graduated from West Point and served as an officer in the Mexican and Civil wars before his death at Fort Leavenworth. Francis Cabot [illegible] primarily in the grain export trade. George Gibbs V, the son of Francis [illegible] distinguished career as an electrical engineer and inventor.

Further information about the Gibbs Family may be found in The Gibbs Family of Rhode Island.

Scope and Content

The papers, which are primarily arranged in chronological order, date from the time of George Gibbs III. Included among the correspondence of George III is a letter of advice from his father prior to his trip to China in 1796. An acute observer, young George wrote from Canton of his voyage and of his impressions of China: the price which American merchants had to pay for the privilege of trading in Canton, the oppressiveness of the mandarins, and the quality of silks and tea available. During the period from 1797 to 1815 there is considerable business correspondence, some of which is personal, relating to sales of lands, leases, stocks, and so on, but part of which concerns the affairs of Channing and Gibbs. The latter group contains interesting hints of the difficulties which beset the firm, whose ships were harassed by the restrictions and decrees of the Napoleonic Wars and by the marauding Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean. A number of letters and documents from 1808 to 1825, mainly from Colonel Gibbs to his friend Benjamin Sillimon of Yale show Gibbs' interest in his mineral collection and trace the progress of its transfer to Yale.

Oliver Wolcott wrote frequently to his daughter and son-in-law George III. Many of these family letters from 1812 to 1827 are in the collection. One finds but brief mention of his first election as governor of Connecticut in 1817 or of other politics, but there are interesting comments on such events as the affectionate reception accorded LaFayette in Congress or on the replacement of hand looms by water power in the local Connecticut woolen factory. In addition, there is a small group of typewritten copies of letters written by Wolcott between 1801 and 1806, notable for his frank Federalist statements and opposition to the Jefferson administration. As Wolcott had on