ONE of the notable additions to the manuscript collections of the Society has been the recent acquisition of the papers of William Jones. This collection, purchased from the lineal descendants of William Jones and designated the Uselma Clarke Smith Collection, comprises over a thousand items. It includes letters and papers from the pens of Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, Clay, Alexander J. Dallas, Albert Gallatin, George Campbell, William H. Crawford, William Pinkney, John Randolph, Nathaniel Macon, Stephen Girard, John Jacob Astor, James McCullough, John Bolton, Joshua Humphreys, David Parish, Jacob Barker, Bainbridge, Decatur, Hull, Stewart, Perry, Wilkinson, Chauncey and many others of importance in the era that came to a close in 1820, the era of the nation's first great economic entrepreneurs, and the epoch of that concomitant of mercantile greatness, naval might.

During the Revolution Jones fought both as an army and naval officer and distinguished himself as an officer of the Pennsylvania Navy. After the Revolution he settled in Charleston, South Carolina, where he became active in the Republican politics of that state. Because of his rather distinguished military record, his affability and political promise, he was elected head of the Charleston Battalion of Artillery. Incidentally an interesting sidelight on Jones' habits is found in the remark of a friend, congratulating him on his captaincy, and stating in effect that he hoped Jones would prove as able in punishing the enemy as he had been the punch bowl on the occasion of a recent soiree of the Artillerymen. While in Charleston, Jones and a Philadelphia partner engaged in coastwise trade. However, because of the dullness of this trade, Jones sold out his business in 1795, resigned his commission in the Charleston Artillery Company and returned to his native Philadelphia.

Here, Jones entered into the political life of the community and was elected to the third Congress. While a member of this body he became involved in an interesting exchange of letters with various influential men on questions of political economy. His correspondence with John Randolph is of particular interest to those delving into Jeffersonian democracy. Later, in 1809, selected by a Philadelphia town meeting to convey assurances of loyalty to Jefferson, Jones
received in reply a lengthy and philosophic discussion in the Jeffersonian style, explaining the needs of the country and justifying the Embargo and other restrictive laws.

From the depredations that plagued maritime commerce prior to the War of 1812 Jones was a heavy loser. Because his trading operations gave him familiarity with conditions in Scandinavia, he was appointed Minister to Denmark, with directions to work out the spoliation cases against that country. Although he accepted the offer, Jones left no record of his activities in the post, which he may never have filled.

The War of 1812 was but a few months old when Jones was mentioned by many people as the logical person to be Secretary of the Navy. Instead, he was made Commissioner of Purchases for the War Department. However, in the latter part of 1812 he was appointed to the Secretaryship of the Navy and assumed office in January, 1813. Jones immediately made sweeping changes in the organization of the Department and corrected much of the shocking inefficiency and graft that had prevailed there under his predecessors. For example, purchasing agents of the Navy had previously been recompensed for their services by deducting for their own use a percentage of the sums set aside for the purchase of supplies. This practice Jones soon outlawed and instituted a salary system in its stead.

The successful naval actions of 1813 and 1814 were the direct result of his planning and administrative skill. His orders to the commanders of United States ships were explicit and detailed. The benefits of his intimate knowledge of trade routes and English commercial practices were passed on to the officers, with the well-known results that nearly crippled British overseas trade. He exhorted his commanders to avoid contact with the warships of the enemy, to take as many prisoners as possible, and under certain circumstances to burn prizes. He began the practice of sending out ships in small squadrons. These were extremely dangerous to the convoys of the enemy, as they were stronger than the warships protecting such convoys. Hence if the convoy scattered they could overtake and destroy a considerable number of ships. He believed in the fast sloop of war as a commerce destroyer and had a number of these placed in commission. During his term of office American men of war appeared
on all the seas from the Channel to the Java Sea and effectively hamstrung British commerce.

On the inland waters of the continent his plan was to gain absolute military control of the Great Lakes and the New York lakes by outbuilding and outfighting the British forces there. Ordnance and crews from blockaded American ships on the seacoast were transferred to the inland lakes by great overland convoys. By 1814 the United States had control of the Lakes, with fifty protecting ships of war in commission, manned by experienced crews, armed with hundreds of heavy cannon from ships such as the Constellation. Simultaneously a large-scale building program was being carried on so that by the end of the war the nation possessed a real offensive force. In December, 1814, Jones issued comprehensive orders to the commanders of various squadrons. Expeditions to intercept overseas convoys were planned. Unfortunately for Jones' place in history these plans never came to maturity. Numerous memos in his papers, giving appropriate and incisive commands, indicate plainly that every minute decision as to location of personnel, purchase of equipment, supply, ordnance and strategy originated in his mind.

The fiasco of Bladensburg discouraged Jones, and he felt keenly the implied criticism when called on to give a report to a Congressional Committee investigating the Washington Navy Yard burning, and another report to the Committee investigating the proceedings of the Cabinet in the President's war council and the movements of the Cabinet members. His personal business suffered severe reverses when John Savage called several of his notes; and the very slight criticism of his administration of the Navy Department, in his mind, overbalanced the considerable approbation it had received. Jones had resigned immediately after the burning of Washington, but President Madison would not accept his resignation until December, 1814. After a few weeks' experience with his successor, the administration urged Jones again to assume the Secretaryship. It is unfortunate that he did not accept the offer, for then he might not have become involved in the unsavory conspiracy to control the Second Bank of the United States for private ends.

Pictures of Jones show him to have been a very handsome man. He was fond of society, liquor and women (this last in a very respectable sense), and was deeply in love with his wife and family.
Unfortunately, he seems to have continually lived beyond his means. Household records in the Jones papers show expenditures that to-day would be comparable to those of families in the highest income brackets. Moreover, his business was not successful in the period of the war, though through no fault of his. He left Washington virtually bankrupt.

Mrs. Jones had not been idle while William was laboring in Washington. She kept up her contacts with important Philadelphia families, particularly with the Dallas family. While her husband was still in Washington she urged him to resign his office and become active in the struggle to establish a national bank. Said she, in a letter of September, 1814:

Mr. Dallas called and said that you were the man to be President of the Bank, that Mr. Parish had said so and had called on Mr. Gerrard, [sic] who it was thought wanted the office for himself, and Mr. G. acquiesced, saying, you must be the man.

When Dallas went to Washington as Secretary of the Treasury in October, 1814, the plans of the Bank’s proponents were pushed in Congress, but it was not until 1816 that the Bank became a reality. In the meantime Jones had become acquainted with the Washington and Baltimore conspirators, McCullough and Buchanan. Evidence of a well-organized plan to control the Bank and to manipulate its stock is contained in the Jones papers. The ups and downs of the Bank during the years 1816–1820 are another story, but the upshot of the struggle was the complete ascendancy of the Girard, Stoney, Cheves faction, the resignation of Jones as President, and the discrediting of McCullough and Buchanan before a Congressional Committee. This time Jones knew what it was to incur the wrath of great numbers of people, but he was not without his defenders. Nor was he financially bankrupt. After a short interlude he entered into a steamship building business with Joshua and Samuel Humphreys, supplying most of the capital. Later he became collector of the port of Philadelphia, but his spirit seems to have been broken after his resignation as President of the Bank. He wrote long letters of complaint to his friends, attacking most violently the administration of Langdon Cheves. He died in 1831, still defending his conduct of the Bank and castigating his enemies, not the least of whom was Stephen Girard.

Kenneth Brown