

## Guide to the Adair Family Papers

### Collection Overview:

**REPOSITORY:** Westport Museum for History and Culture, 25 Avery Place, Westport, CT

**CALL NUMBER:** RG 22

**TITLE:** Adair Family Papers

**DATES:** 1850-1956, n.d.

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 1.25 linear foot (3 boxes, 1 portfolio)

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The Adair Family Papers document the descendants of Benjamin Adair, who was one of the few prominent Black landowners in Westport during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### HISTORICAL NOTE:

Originally hailing from Charleston, South Carolina, where he may have been an enslaved person, Benjamin Adair was one of just a few prominent Black landowners in Westport during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the exact circumstances of Adair's previous life are unknown, the Freedman's Bank Records in New York note that he was the son of Robert and Sarah, who were listed without surnames.

By 1850 Benjamin Adair was working as a waiter in the New York City home of prominent banker Morris Ketchum who would later help finance the Union Army in the Civil War. Ketchum would eventually go on to own an 18<sup>th</sup> century Westport Estate called Hockanum, where Adair was listed as a coachman in 1860. Adair's wife, Ursula Mingo, was of African and Native descent, with family ties to the Shinnecock Reservation near Southampton, Long Island.

Ursula and Benjamin met in New York and married prior to coming to Connecticut. Ursula seems to have grown up on or near the Shinnecock Reservation. She was one of five children born to Horace Mingo and Eliza Cuff. Ursula and Benjamin would themselves have six children. They were Laura Pheobe, Ursula, Emily, twins Benjamin Robert and Eliza, and Samuel. The twins died young with Benjamin being just under one year old when he passed away and Eliza was about seven and a half. They would also lose their son Samuel at the age of twenty-five.

Once the Adairs reached Westport their fortunes would dramatically change. Mr. Adair purchased his first property on Franklin Avenue in the Saugatuck area of the town in 1852 from Sydney Miller. The property was adjacent to a parcel owned by his boss, Morris Ketchum. A savvy businessperson, Mr. Adair later sold the property to the New York and New Haven Railroad, which was then expanding up the Connecticut shoreline for a massive profit.

Continuing to build his wealth in real estate, Benjamin Adair then purchased about 9 acres of land from Morris Ketchum in 1877 across the road from the Hockanum property at what is today known as "Glynn's Corner"—the intersection of Main Street, Route 136 and Route 57 (Weston Road).

For the next 70 years, the Adair family made their homestead a working farm while patriarch Benjamin continued to work for Ketchum. The 1880 Agricultural census shows that their small farm produced 5 tons of Hay, 40 bushels of Indian corn, and 30 bushels of potatoes. They also had cows and used them to

produce 300 pounds of butter and their chickens produced 50 dozen eggs. Benjamin's son Samuel ran the family farm.

A prosperous man during his lifetime, Benjamin Adair was able to leave a sizable estate to his wife and daughters, when he died in 1891, aged 65, due to "Intestinal Tuberculosis (contributing: Dropsey)" his son Samuel having tragically died of Tuberculosis just a few years before his father leaving a widow, Hester, who was also his first cousin, as well as their young daughter, Emily.

For a while, the family of women continued to live at the homestead until, in the 1920s problems began to arise. The daughters and granddaughters of Benjamin and Ursula were struggling to pay the taxes on time. The elder daughter, Laura, responsible for making the payments no longer lived in Westport, she had moved to a home in Brooklyn, NY and continued her school teaching career. Tax liens were placed on the property but then were paid within a few months.

That changed in 1937 when the land value of the estate inexplicably jumped from \$4,644 in 1936 to \$7,740 in 1937 while none of the Adairs' neighbors saw this increase in land value or tax assessments. At the same time, the Merritt Parkway was nearing completion practically in the Adairs' front yard—a circumstance which should have dropped their property values instead of increasing it.

From that point forward, the heirs of Benjamin Adair would struggle mightily to pay the taxes. In 1946, with five years of back taxes owed (a total of \$828.60), the Town of Westport seized the property and auctioned it off to the highest bidder.

Benjamin and Ursula's daughters still went on to have interesting and successful lives, but as black women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they faced obstacles to their success. The eldest Adair daughter, Laura, became a schoolteacher at public schools in Connecticut as well as in Brooklyn, New York. She never married, and when she passed away in 1933, she bequeathed a home in Fairfield to her youngest sister, her share of the family homestead to two of her nieces, and land on the Shinnecock Reservation to her niece Alice Burbridge. The second daughter of Benjamin and Ursula, also named Ursula, married William Dorsey and they built a home in Saugatuck on Davenport Avenue. They had two daughters, Cynthia (a schoolteacher) and Edith (an interior designer). Edith also had two daughters, Marian, and Cynthia.

The Adairs' third daughter, Emily, married John Vincent and they made their home at the family farm. They had two daughters who survived to adulthood, also losing two daughters and a son in infancy. Their daughters Ruth Cordelia and Alice Viola/Violet each became teachers. Alice married Edwin Burbridge. Their only child, daughter Marguerite Doris Burbridge, would go on to become an internationally renowned dancer who went by the stage name of Mika Mingo.

While the Adair family home still stands on part of its original property it has been massively renovated and added over the years to be unrecognizable today. After the property was sold at auction, the son of the next owner subdivided and sold off all but approximately one acre of the original nine that comprised the farm. There are several housing developments on the land currently.

Today, Mika Mingo's daughter Annette T. Thomas who is also a dancer, lives in Florida with her husband Timothy. J. Thomas. She teaches classical ballet technique as applies to figure skaters. Thomas has three children who comprise the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of the Adair Family. Thomas' daughter Heather Thomas Flores is an anthropologist working to identify and understand the power dynamics of systemic racism. Daughter Rachel Davis (nee Thomas) is an artist and interior designer with two young children—the 6<sup>th</sup> generation of Benjamin Adair's Family and son Brendon Thomas, lives in California where he is an executive at Paramount Pictures.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT:

The Adair Family Papers date from 1850 to 1956 and include documentation primarily related to the women of the family – Ursula (Adair), Laura (Adair), Emily (Adair Vincent), Alice Viola (Vincent Burbridge), and Marguerite (Burbridge, known professionally as Mika Mingo). The collection includes correspondence, legal and financial documents, biographical documentation, and numerous photographs. Material related to activities of Mika Mingo includes documentation of the Cranberry Harvest Festival and Native American food and crafts.

## ARRANGEMENT:

The collection is arranged in five series:

1. Correspondence
2. Legal and Financial Documents
3. Biographical Documentation
4. Photographs
5. Collected Books

### Series 1: Correspondence

Box	Folder		Date
1	1	Margaret Ketchum to Ursula Adair, sympathy upon death of Ursula's daughter	1869 February 10
1	1	Bella Jones (future wife of Landon Ketchum) to Ursula Adair, upon death of Ursula's daughter	1869 February
1	2	Laura Adair to her sister Emily Vincent	1923
1	2	2 postcards and 1 note from Laura Adair to her niece Viola Vincent Burbridge (note attached to photo #40)	1929, n.d.

### Series 2: Legal and Financial Documentation

Box	Folder		Date
1	3	Legal and financial documents	1860-1875
1	4	Legal and financial documents	1878-1893
1	5	Legal and financial documents	1902, 1914
1	5	Letter conveying documents	1952

### Series 3: Biographical Documentation

Box	Folder		Date
1	6	Photocopy of marriage certificate of Benjamin Adair and Ursula Mingo	1854 May 11
OV1		Oversize portfolio containing diplomas for Alice Viola Vincent, upon graduation from Westport Public Schools (1914), Staples High School (1918), New York University (1930)	1914, 1918, 1930

1	7	Program from Staples High School Commencement listing oration by Alice Viola Vincent; NY Board of education ID card of Viola Vincent Woodcut by Marguerite Burbridge	1918 June  1942 June n.d.
1	7	4 certificates of completion of courses fulfilled by Viola A. Burbridge, City of New York Board of Education	1949-1952
1	8	Documentation of participation of Mika Mingo (Marguerite Burbridge) in Cranberry Harvest Festival as Cranberry Princess Silverfoot	1956
1	9	Miscellaneous collected documentation regarding the Cranberry Harvest Festival	
1	10-11	Miscellaneous collected documentation regarding Native American food and crafts	

#### Series 4: Photographs

Box	Folder		Date
		<b>Portraits:</b>	
1	12	Emily Adair Vincent (b. 1859)- 4 photos John H. Vincent (b. 1860) – 1 photo	
1	13	Ruth Cordelia Vincent (b. 1895) – 6 photos	
1	14	Alica Viola Vincent Burbridge (b. 1900) – 3 photos	
1	15	Marguerite Doris Burbridge (Mika Mingo) (b. 1923) – 16 photos	
1	16	Margaret Ketchum – 1 photo Morris Ketchum – 1 photo	
1	17	Unidentified men – including possibly Samuel, possibly Benjamin, white man with cane, Native American with weapon – 8 photos	
2	1	Unidentified women possibly including Ursula Sr. or Jr., Cynthia, Edith, Eliza, Minnie, Hester – 13 photos	
2	2	Unidentified children possibly including Eliza, Samuel, Emily Adair (Thompson) – 8 photos	
		<b>Groups</b>	
2	3	Various groupings that include Viola Vincent Burbridge, Edwin Smith Burbridge, Marguerite Burbridge, Ruth C. Vincent, Laura Adair, Emily Vincent, possibly Ursula and Emily Adair – 8 photos	
2	4	Unidentified family group (framed) Group of children Adair descendant visiting in Saugatuck, view from train station	
		<b>Scenes</b>	
2	5	Family farm of Emily and John - 3 photos	
2	6	Textiles and students with textiles – probably from Home Economics classes taught by Viola Vincent – 6 photos	
		<b>Album</b>	
2	7	Unidentified individuals	

## Series 5: Collected Books

		<b>Belonging to Ursula Mingo Adair</b>	
3	1	<i>Bell Martin</i> by T. S. Arthur (published 1850) <i>Cheap Repository Tracts</i> by Hannah More & others (1852) <i>The Lamplighters</i> (1854)	
		<b>Belonging to Laura Adair</b>	
3	2	<i>An Old Fashioned Girl</i> by Lousia May Alcott (1870) <i>The Canterbury Poets – Coleridge</i> (1885) <i>The Story of Robins</i> (1864)	
		<b>Belonging to Emily Adair</b>	
3	3	<i>Little Mary</i> (1865)	
		<b>Belonging to Annette Conklin</b>	
3	3	<i>The Gold Bug</i> by Edgar Allen Poe (1859)	
		<b>Other books, not inscribed</b>	
3	4	New Testament, New Testament with “Eliza” in gold on cover	