Colonial Secretary's correspondence 1859-1903

DR60522 - Standard weather chart of Australasia and surrounding regions, 16 May 1892
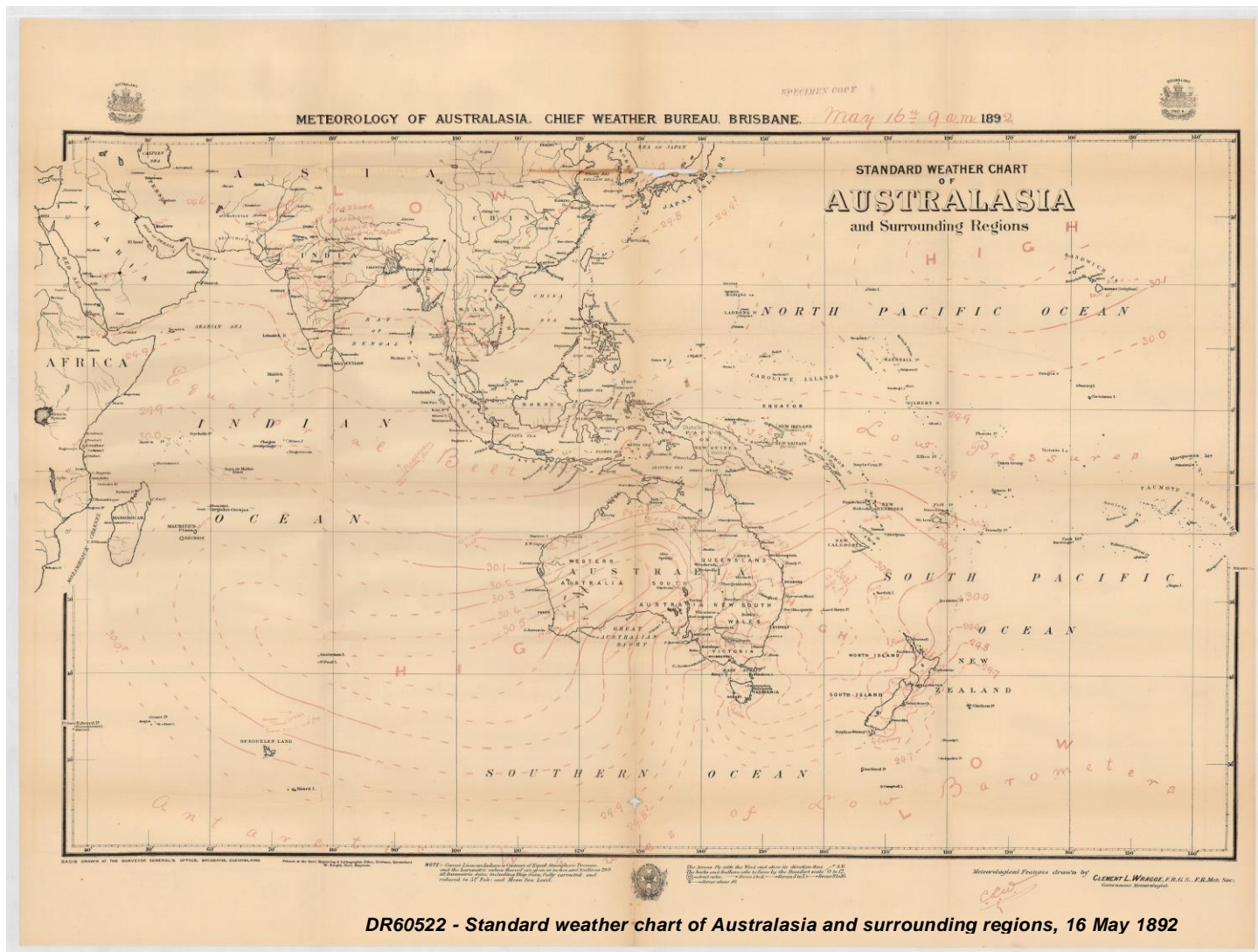
Research Guide to the Colonial Secretary's correspondence records 1859-1903 at Queensland State Archives

Queensland State Archives (QSA) is the official repository for Queensland Government records selected for permanent retention because of their continuing value. The archived public records are from state government departments, state courts, local government authorities and statutory authorities. The records are in our facility at Runcorn, Brisbane, and open records are available for viewing in the Reading Room, free-of-charge.

This guide gives a brief history of the Colonial Secretary's Office (the name of the office was changed from Colonial Secretary to Home Secretary on 6 August 1896), including an explanation of its administrative procedures, a description of the series of records for correspondence from 1859–1903, and how to find letter numbers for the letters received in the Office.

The first Colonial Secretary, Robert George Wyndham Herbert, was appointed on 30 August 1859. He arrived in the colony to take up his duties on 10 December 1859 when Queensland separated from New South Wales. With the public reading of the proclamation by Sir George Ferguson Bowen's acting private secretary, Abram Moriarty, the territory described in the Letters Patent was established as the separate colony of Queensland.

In 1859 the Colonial Secretary's area of control was defined as, for all intents and purposes, all matters affecting the colony that were not the responsibility of the Colonial Treasurer or the Attorney-General. There were a large number of sub-departments under the control of the Colonial Secretary. Each had a degree of autonomy and was capable of creating and preserving their records. Each had an identifiable sub-departmental head, either an individual or a board, who was required to refer all major decisions, including monetary decisions to the Colonial Secretary.

Among the functions under the Colonial Secretary's control were education, defence, immigration, livestock, land, public works, law enforcement (including courts of summary jurisdiction presided over by police magistrates), the registration of births, deaths and marriages, communication, health and welfare, and miscellaneous matters including the botanic gardens and the meteorological observatory.

The main finding aid for records held at QSA is the Queensland State Archives' online catalogue (known as ArchivesSearch).

The following citation abbreviations are used throughout our catalogue:

ITM – QSA Item (describes the item)

PR – Physical Representation (generally the original or microfilm copy)

DR – Digital Representation (for a digital image)

S – Series ID (for series of records)archivessea

A – Agency ID (for the creating or responsible agency).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that our catalogue contains images, names and voices of people who have died.

Letters received

The main series of records is S5253, the letters received, or in-letters, also known as inwards correspondence. Various registers, indexes, and special subsidiary series were developed from this series. Under-Secretary Moriarty made the following points while giving evidence on the duties of second-class clerks before a Select Committee on Government Departments:

"The duty of one is to keep a register of all documents coming into the Colonial Secretary's Office - to keep the records in fact. All documents are numbered and an abstract of their contents is entered in the register. These form a complete record of all correspondence in the office. I must state that if I had not thought the Colonial Secretary's office likely to extend in its operations, it is probable that there would not have been such a detailed system of record adopted. But I have endeavoured from the first to provide such a system as would be complete hereafter".

There are three main interconnected series of records: indexes to registers of letters received, registers of letters received, and letters received.

Indexes to Registers of Letters Received
Circa 1/1/1861– Circa 31/12/1877
S11933

There are no indexes after 1877 because the registers became self-indexing. These indexes to registers are traditionally known as the COL/C series. Digital copies are available in our catalogue. Try the steps in Appendix A to find digital copies of the *Indexes to Registers of Letters Received*.

Registers of Letters Received
15/12/1859–Circa 31/12/1896
S11936

These registers are traditionally known as the COL/B series. Digital copies are available in our catalogue. Try the steps in Appendix A to find digital copies of the *Registers of Letters Received*.

Inwards Correspondence
12/10/1859–Circa 31/12/1903
S5253

These letters received or in-letters are traditionally known as the COL/A series. Digital copies are available in our catalogue. Try the steps in Appendix A to find digital copies of the inwards correspondence.

Historical context

In-letters were registered and arranged by a method commonly known as the annual single number system, or when required, a top-numbering system. Each incoming letter was assigned the next available running number from the register of general correspondence. The last two figures of the year were prefixed to the number. For example, the 823rd letter received in 1876 was given the number 76/823. The entry in the register for the number 76/823 includes the date the letter was written, the date it was received (registered), the name or official position of the writer, an abstract of the letter's contents and a statement as to how it was dealt with. Out of this system developed the practice of grouping together items of inward correspondence for the same transaction. The method adopted was that of placing earlier letters under later ones, that is, 'top-numbering' the files. For more details about the practice of top numbering, refer to the *Research Guide to Top-numbering*.

The use of this top-numbering file building method grew apace in the 1880s and 1890s and in many cases large, cumbersome files resulted. Searching the registers became more time-consuming. The only approach the clerk could use was to search the index for the period when correspondence on the transaction began to complete the file building, that is, until the clerk found an entry in the register showing that no subsequent related correspondence was received. Similarly, this presents quite a challenge to today's researchers who may have to search through many entries, which may extend over several years in many different registers.

Even when a researcher finds the correct number, according to the register, for the filing of correspondence, sometimes the letters themselves are not filed under that number. Some explanations for this are given below.

Batch files

The difficulty the filing clerks had in tracing entries through registers when the correspondence became extensive probably explains the creation of separate 'batches' for matters of major administrative concern. Correspondence was registered in the normal way, but the actual letters were placed in separate bundles. A series of special batches, S8400, was created described by subjects such as the annexation of New Guinea, Shearers' Strike 1891, Chinese immigration. Another practical reason for the creation of these special batches is the sheer, physical bulk of the special files. Although the annual single number system was breaking down, it is interesting to note that methods of registration did not change. A good proportion of the inward letters - on those transactions that were quickly completed - were both registered and filed by the old system for many years after the creation of the batches. This practice highlights some of the major limitations of the top numbering system.

After 1877 the registers became self-indexing. The letters were not entered in one numerical sequence but under a subject, similar to the earlier indexes. Letters from individuals are entered under the initial letter of the sender's surname. To follow the top numbered sequence may require searching several subject sequences. When new departments were created, earlier correspondence was sometimes relocated and registers were annotated accordingly. In 1897 a new Register of letters received (*S12844*) was created by the Home Secretary. Series [12844](#) covers the years 1897 to 1935. Letters were received from government officers, non-government individuals, and organisations.

COL/B – Annotated copies

The inwards correspondence records of the Colonial Secretary's Office are possibly the more important historical series of records held by Queensland State Archives. However, finding letters in the inwards correspondence bundles often challenges researchers as any subsequent or top-numbered letters must be found to get the exact filing location.

To assist researchers with finding subsequent or top-numbered letters, the microfilmed registers from 1859 to 1896 were copied in paper format, and an project of annotating these registers with the previous system identifier or bundle number for the individual letter numbers began. In 2021, these annotated registers were digitised and are available to view and search the Reading Room on the computers under the *Selected QSA records* tile. This is a useful value-added resource for academics and other researchers.

Quick search tip for finding in-letter bundles:
To search for an exact COL/A number, e.g., COL/A31, use the *Search for* picklist to select *Previous System ID*.

Outwards correspondence

Indexes to Letterbooks of Letters to Other Departments
Circa 01/01/1861– 31/12/1883
[S11940](#)

This series is an index to the letterbooks of letters sent by the Colonial Secretary to other departments of the colonial administration. These indexes are used to find letters in letterbooks, S5360, Letterbooks and S5370, General Letterbooks. Digital copies of these indexes are available in our catalogue (ITM6956–ITM6971).

Letterbooks - Colonial Secretary's Office
01/01/1861–30/12/1876
S5360

This series of departmental letterbooks records letters sent by the Colonial Secretary to other departments of the colonial administration for the period 1861 to 1876. Traditionally known as the COL/Q series, to find letter numbers, search the indexes, S11940 available online in our catalogue.

General Letterbooks - Colonial Secretary's / Home Secretary's Office
02/01/1877–08/10/1915
S5370

This series of general letterbooks is the main series of outward letters of the Colonial Secretary/Home Secretary's office from 1877 to 1915 and includes most letters sent, except for those to the Agent-General, London and, until the end of 1883, letters sent to addressees outside the colony. Traditionally known as the COL/G series, to find letter numbers, search the indexes, S11940 available online in our catalogue.

How to find Home Secretary's Office correspondence
1904 – 1935

1904–1930 – Index
This partial index to General Correspondence, S5263, 1902-1935 is accessible on the Reading Room computers under *Finding Aids by Others.*

1930–1935
To find Home Secretary's correspondence from 1930 to 1935, begin by finding letter numbers in Registers of Letters Received, S12844, 1897–1935.

Related finding aids

- *Research Guide to Top-numbering*

- *The Colonial Secretary's Office 1859-1896, Departmental Guide*. This QSA guide is available on the Reading Room computers in the *Other Finding Aids by QSA* folder, under the *Finding Aids* tile.

- COL/B (annotated) registers under *Selected QSA records*.

Appendix A - Finding digitised records

Indexes to Registers of Letters Received
Circa 1/1/1861– Circa 31/12/1877
S11933

Digital copies of indexes (also known as COL/C) are in ArchivesSearch. Try searching using these steps:

- Enter S11933 in *Search for*
- Limit to: Item
- Tick *Records with digital objects only*
- Limit to: [year] e.g., 1861 to 1861
- *Submit*

Registers of Letters Received
15/12/1859–Circa 31/12/1896
S11936

Digital copies of registers (also known as COL/B) are in ArchivesSearch.

- Enter S11936 in *Search for*
- Limit to: Item
- Tick *Records with digital objects only*
- Limit to: [year] e.g., 1896 to 1896
- *Submit*

Inwards Correspondence
12/10/1859–Circa 31/12/1903
S5253

Digital copies of the inwards correspondence (also known as COL/A) are being added to our catalogue. One way to search our catalogue for the registers is by using these steps:

- Enter S5253 in *Search for*
- Limit to: Item
- Tick *Records with digital objects only*
- Limit to: [year] e.g., 1892 to 1892
- *Submit*

Need more information?

Check our online catalogue ArchivesSearch.
Phone us on (07) 3037 6777 or you can email an archivist.