

# United States Naval Observatory Records

A Finding Aid to the Records in the  
Naval Historical Foundation Collection  
in the Library of Congress

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff



Manuscript Division, Library of  
Congress

Washington, D.C.

2011

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# Collection Summary

Title: United States Naval Observatory Records

Span Dates: 1830-1900

ID No.: MSS52837

Creator: United States Naval Observatory

Extent: 8,000 items; 29 containers plus 1 oversize; 12 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Official correspondence and administrative records of offices of the Naval Observatory, located in Washington, D.C., including of the superintendent, *Nautical Almanac*, librarian, and the superintendent of compasses and instruments, concerning activities of the observatory and tracing its development from its origin in the Depot of Charts and Instruments.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### People

Elkin, William L. (William Lewis), 1855-1933.

Ferrel, William, 1817-1891.

Grinnell, Henry, 1799-1874.

Hall, Asaph, 1829-1907.

Henry, Joseph, 1797-1878.

Holden, Edward Singleton, 1846-1914.

Manning, George.

Maury, Matthew Fontaine, 1806-1873.

Michelson, Albert Abraham, 1852-1931.

Mitchell, Maria, 1818-1889.

Peters, Christian Henry Frederick, 1813-1890.

Pickering, Edward C. (Edward Charles), 1846-1919.

Safford, Edward Charles, 1859-1926.

Stone, Ormond, 1847-1933.

Todd, David P. (David Peck), 1855-1939.

Twining, Alexander C. (Alexander Catlin), 1801-1884.

Young, Charles A. (Charles Augustus), 1834-1908.

### Organizations

Centennial Exhibition (1876 : Philadelphia, Pa.)

United States Naval Observatory.

### Subjects

Astronomical observatories--Washington (D.C.)

Astronomy.

Cables, Submarine.

Eclipses.

Navigation.

Scientific expeditions.

### Places

Amazon River--Commerce.

Arctic regions--Discovery and exploration.

South America--Commerce.

## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The records of the United States Naval Observatory were deposited in the Library of Congress by the Naval Historical Foundation in 1951 and converted to a gift in 1998.

### Processing History

The records of United States Naval Observatory were arranged and described in 1974. The finding aid was revised in 2011.

### Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of United States Naval Observatory is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

### Access and Restrictions

The records of United States Naval Observatory are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

### Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, United States Naval Observatory Records, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

## Organizational History

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Event</i>  |
|-------------|---|
| 1830        | Establishment of the Depot of Charts and Instruments, Washington, D.C.  |
| 1843-1844   | Construction of the observatory on its present site   |
| 1846        | Publication of the first volume of <i>Astronomical Observations</i> , continued periodically and known as the "Washington Observations" |
| 1847        | Construction of the superintendent's residence  |
| 1849        | Establishment of the <i>Nautical Almanac</i>  |
| 1860        | Expedition to Canada to view the solar eclipse  |
| 1865        | Installation of the great transit circle telescope  |
| 1869        | Expedition to various western states to view the solar eclipse  |
| 1874        | Expedition to the Pacific to view the transit of Venus  |
| 1878        | Expedition to various western states to view the solar eclipse  |

## Scope and Content Note

The records of the United States Naval Observatory span the years 1830-1900 and reflect the activities of the observatory throughout nineteenth century, from its beginnings in the Depot of Charts and Instruments to its place as the primary observatory in the nation. The collection is organized into seven series: [Superintendent's Office Correspondence](#), [Superintendent's Office Administrative Records](#), [Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence](#), [Librarian's Office Administrative Records](#), [Superintendent of Compasses Office](#), [Instruments Office Correspondence](#), and [Oversize](#).

The [correspondence](#) and [administrative records](#) of the Superintendent's Office are primarily of a routine nature: inquiries about astronomical observation; the acquisition, maintenance, and distribution of instruments and charts; the distribution of observatory publications; and administrative directives of the Navy Department. Early letterbooks reflect the operation of the Depot of Charts and Instruments under Lieutenants Charles Wilkes and J. M. Gilliss and contain material relating to their efforts toward the creation of the observatory as a separate operation. Other matters covered by the remainder of the materials are the construction of the superintendent's residence, the eclipse expeditions of 1869 and 1878, and the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, which dealt with the second expedition to the Arctic of Charles Francis Hall.

The correspondence with the wind and current chart agents reflects an activity of the observatory which was the inspiration and accomplishment of Superintendent Matthew Fontaine Maury. With the assistance of ship captains, who collected data for him, Maury was able to plot the normal winds and currents of the oceans during different periods of the year and on that basis to suggest the most advantageous courses for ships to take. He entered this data on charts and sold them through the agency first of George Manning and then A. G. Seaman. His correspondence with Manning, which consists entirely of letters sent by Maury, reflects the wide range of Maury's activities. There are discussions about the production and sale of the charts, but also about Atlantic soundings and an Atlantic telegraphic cable; trade on the Amazon and other South American rivers; a planned expedition to the Arctic by Henry Grinnell; Maury's investments; his lecture tours; the publication of his book, *Physical Geography of the Sea*; and the attempt to remove him from the navy.

The correspondence of the [Nautical Almanac Office](#) is primarily of a routine nature. The *Nautical Almanac* was a navigational guide consisting of computations of the apparent positions of the moon and various stars and planets. The computations were done by various astronomers and mathematicians scattered about the country. The correspondence deals primarily with the hiring of these "computers," their compensation, and the scheduling and assignment of their work, as well as with the distribution of the *Nautical Almanac* itself. There is also correspondence concerning various questions of astronomical observation, an American prime meridian, the eclipse expeditions to Canada in 1860 and to Wyoming in 1869, the French expedition to observe the transit of Mercury, and experiments to measure the velocity of light. The correspondents include a number of noted figures of nineteenth-century American science: W. L. Elkin, William Ferrel, Asaph Hall, Joseph Henry, Edward Singleton Holden, Albert Abraham Michelson, Maria Mitchell, Christian Henry Frederick Peters, Edward C. Pickering, Edward Charles Safford, Ormond Stone, David P. Todd, Alexander C. Twining, and Charles A. Young.

The correspondence between the *Nautical Almanac* Office and its agents for the sale of the *Nautical Almanac*, as well as that between the office and the Navy Department, is of a routine administrative nature.

The correspondence and administrative records of the [Librarian's Office](#) are also routine. The material primarily concerns the acquisition of books and periodicals, as well as their binding for library use. There is some discussion of the distribution of observatory publications, particularly their exchange with other institutions.

The correspondence of the Superintendent of Compasses Office is of a routine nature and deals primarily with the acquisition, testing, and construction of compasses, and with magnetic observation, particularly in terms of the problems encountered in such observations when conducted on iron ships.

The Instruments Office correspondence, which is also routine, relates to the procurement and maintenance of chronometers and includes some letters which discuss the calculation of time

## Arrangement of the Records

This collection is arranged in seven series:

- Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900
- Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900
- Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence, 1849-1885
- Librarian's Office Administrative Records, 1868-1899
- Superintendent of Compasses Office, 1875-1895
- Instruments Office Correspondence, 1882-1885
- Oversize, 1869

## Description of Series

| <i>Container</i> | <i>Series</i>   |
|------------------|---|
| BOX 1-13         | <p><u>Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900</u><br/>Outgoing and incoming letters and wind and chart agent correspondence. Arranged chronologically within the groupings. Letters sent to wind and current chart agent George Manning by Matthew Fontaine Maury, and received by him from chart agent A. G. Seaman, are at the end of the series.</p> |
| BOX 13-15        | <p><u>Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900</u><br/>Administrative records including personnel lists, memoranda, building contracts, financial records, and biographical information. Arranged by type of material.</p>   |
| BOX 15-25        | <p><u>Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence, 1849-1885</u><br/>Outgoing and incoming correspondence, letters sent and received by agents for the sale of the Nautical Almanac, and letters sent and received from the Navy Department by the <i>Nautical Almanac</i> Office. Arranged chronologically within the groupings.</p>                                  |
| BOX 25-28        | <p><u>Librarian's Office Administrative Records, 1868-1899</u><br/>Outgoing and incoming correspondence. Arranged chronologically within the groupings. Invoices and lists are filed at the end of the correspondence.</p>  |
| BOX 28-29        | <p><u>Superintendent of Compasses Office, 1875-1895</u><br/>Copies of letters sent in letter copy books. Arranged chronologically.</p>  |
| BOX 29           | <p><u>Instruments Office Correspondence, 1882-1885</u><br/>Copies of letters sent in a letter copy book.</p>  |
| BOX OV 1         | <p><u>Oversize, 1869</u><br/>Contract and specifications for buildings. Arranged and described according to the series, containers, and folders from which the items were removed.</p>  |

# Container List

| <i>Container</i> | <i>Contents</i>  |
|------------------|--|
| BOX 1-13         | Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900<br>Outgoing and incoming letters and wind and chart agent correspondence. Arranged chronologically within the groupings. Letters sent to wind and current chart agent George Manning by Matthew Fontaine Maury, and received by him from chart agent A. G. Seaman, are at the end of the series. |
| BOX 1            | Outgoing   |
| BOX 1            | 1833-1837  |
| BOX 1            | 1837-1842  |
| BOX 1            | 1865, 1873   |
| BOX 1            | 1864-1885, undated   |
| BOX 2            | Incoming   |
| BOX 2            | 1830-1834  |
| BOX 2            | 1845, undated<br>(2 folders)   |
| BOX 2            | 1846, undated<br>(2 folders)   |
| BOX 3            | 1847, undated<br>(2 folders)   |
| BOX 3            | 1849-1850  |
| BOX 3            | 1851-1854, 1860  |
| BOX 4            | 1865-1866<br>(3 folders)   |
| BOX 4            | 1867   |
| BOX 4            | Jan.-May<br>(2 folders)  |
| BOX 5            | June-Dec.<br>(2 folders)   |
| BOX 5            | 1868-1870<br>(4 folders)   |
| BOX 5            | 1871   |
| BOX 5            | Jan.-May   |
| BOX 6            | June-Dec.  |
| BOX 6            | 1872-1876<br>(6 folders)   |
| BOX 7            | 1877<br>(4 folders)  |
| BOX 8            | 1878-1880<br>(4 folders)   |
| BOX 8            | 1881-1882, 1889  |
| BOX 8            | 1893-1895  |

Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900

| <i>Container</i> | <i>Contents</i>   |
|------------------|---|
| BOX 9            | 1900<br>(2 folders)   |
| BOX 9            | Wind and current chart agents   |
| BOX 9            | Outgoing  |
| BOX 9            | 1848-1849<br>(3 folders)  |
| BOX 9            | 1850  |
| BOX 9            | Jan.-Mar.   |
| BOX 10           | Apr.-Dec.<br>(2 folders)  |
| BOX 10           | 1851-1852<br>(4 folders)  |
| BOX 11           | 1853-1854<br>(6 folders)  |
| BOX 12           | 1855-1856<br>(5 folders)  |
| BOX 12           | 1857  |
| BOX 12           | Jan.-Feb.   |
| BOX 13           | Mar.-Dec.<br>(2 folders)  |
| BOX 13           | 1858  |
| BOX 13           | Incoming, 1858-1859   |
| BOX 13-15        | Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900<br>Administrative records including personnel lists, memoranda, building contracts, financial records, and biographical information.<br>Arranged by type of material. |
| BOX 13           | Building contracts and specifications, 1869, undated <i><u>See also Oversize</u></i>  |
| BOX 13           | Documents   |
| BOX 13           | Centennial exhibition, Philadelphia, Pa. (1876), 1875-1877  |
| BOX 13           | Eclipse expedition  |
| BOX 13           | 1869  |
| BOX 13           | 1878  |
| BOX 13           | Lists   |
| BOX 13           | Observatory personnel, 1877   |
| BOX 14           | Distribution of observatory publications, 1871-1900, undated  |
| BOX 14           | Memoranda, reports, and memorials, 1877-1882, undated   |
| BOX 14           | Miscellaneous lists and writing, 1866-1881, undated   |
| BOX 14           | Receipts relating to the distribution of observatory publications   |
| BOX 14           | 1866-1872<br>(4 folders)  |
| BOX 14           | 1877, Jun.  |
| BOX 15           | 1877, July-1878, July   |
| BOX 15           | Wind and current chart agents   |
| BOX 15           | Monthly accounts, 1858-1859   |
| BOX 15           | Monthly reports, 1858-1859  |

Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900

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|-----------|---|
| BOX 15    | Receipts, 1858-1859   |
| BOX 15-25 | <i>Nautical Almanac</i> Office Correspondence, 1849-1885<br>Outgoing and incoming correspondence, letters sent and received by agents for the sale of the <i>Nautical Almanac</i> , and letters sent and received from the Navy Department by the <i>Nautical Almanac</i> Office.<br>Arranged chronologically within the groupings. |
| BOX 15    | Outgoing  |
| BOX 15    | 1849, Mar.-1852, July   |
| BOX 15    | 1863, Jan.-1869, Oct.   |
| BOX 16    | 1869, Oct.-1873, June   |
| BOX 16    | 1870, Nov.-1879, Jan.   |
| BOX 16    | 1877, Mar.-1878, May  |
| BOX 17    | 1878, May-1879, Jan.  |
| BOX 17    | 1882, Nov.-1883, Sept.  |
| BOX 17    | 1884, June-1885, Feb.   |
| BOX 17    | Incoming  |
| BOX 17    | 1851  |
| BOX 18    | 1852-1862<br>(7 folders)  |
| BOX 19    | 1863-1868<br>(6 folders)  |
| BOX 19    | 1869  |
| BOX 20    | Jan-June  |
| BOX 20    | July-Dec.   |
| BOX 20    | 1872-1875<br>(5 folders)  |
| BOX 21    | 1876-1878<br>(6 folders)  |
| BOX 21    | 1879  |
| BOX 21    | Jan.-June   |
| BOX 22    | July-Dec.<br>1880-1884<br>(5 folders)   |
| BOX 22    | Agents  |
| BOX 22    | Outgoing, 1879-1883   |
| BOX 23    | Incoming, 1866-1869<br>(4 folders)  |
| BOX 23    | Navy Department, incoming   |
| BOX 23    | 1849-1863<br>(4 folders)  |
| BOX 24    | 1864-1872<br>(6 folders)  |

*Nautical Almanac* Office Correspondence, 1849-1885

*Container*

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|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| BOX 25    | 1873-1879<br>(3 folders)   |
| BOX 25-28 | Librarian's Office Administrative Records, 1868-1899<br>Outgoing and incoming correspondence.<br>Arranged chronologically within the groupings. Invoices and lists are filed at the end of the correspondence. |
| BOX 25    | Outgoing   |
| BOX 25    | 1868-1871  |
| BOX 25    | 1875-1878  |
| BOX 26    | 1878-1883  |
| BOX 26    | 1883-1885  |
| BOX 26    | 1891-1894  |
| BOX 27    | 1894-1899  |
| BOX 27    | Incoming   |
| BOX 27    | 1869-1878, undated   |
| BOX 27    | 1879-1883<br>(3 folders)   |
| BOX 27    | 1884   |
| BOX 27    | Jan-Apr.   |
| BOX 28    | May-Dec.   |
| BOX 28    | 1885   |
| BOX 28    | Invoices, 1868-1870  |
| BOX 28    | Lists of books and periodicals to be bound and acquired, 1867-1876, undated  |
| BOX 28-29 | Superintendent of Compasses Office, 1875-1895<br>Copies of letters sent in letter copy books.<br>Arranged chronologically.   |
| BOX 28    | 1875-1883  |
| BOX 28    | 1877-1879  |
| BOX 29    | 1893-1895  |
| BOX 29    | Instruments Office Correspondence, 1882-1885<br>Copies of letters sent in a letter copy book.  |
| BOX 29    | Outgoing, 1882-1885  |
| BOX OV 1  | Oversize, 1869<br>Contract and specifications for buildings.<br>Arranged and described according to the series, containers, and folders from which the items were removed.                                     |
| BOX OV 1  | Superintendent's Office Administrative Records   |
| BOX OV 1  | Building contracts and specifications, 1869, undated (Container 13)  |