United States Fish Commission Records

NMAH.AC.0256
Grace Angle and Robert S. Harding
1988
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## Collection Overview

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<th>Repository:</th>
<th>Archives Center, National Museum of American History</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>United States Fish Commission Records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifier:</td>
<td>NMAH.AC.0256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>1871-1892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent:</td>
<td>4.66 cubic feet (20 boxes, 1 oversize folder)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>Transportation, Division of, NMAH, SI.</td>
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<td>United States Fish Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td>English</td>
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## Administrative Information

### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Collection donated by the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Interior, circa 1940.

About 1940 when the Bureau of Fisheries became part of the Department of the Interior and was renamed the Fish and Wildlife Service, most of these photographs were given to Mr. Frank Taylor of the U. S. National Museum, Department of the Interior. The collection was transferred to the Division of Transportation of the NMAH in 19 __. The collection was transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Transportation on April 10, 1987.

Many of the photographs, particularly those identified in Bulletin No. 27 of the U. S. National Museum were taken by Thomas W. Smillie on the staff of the Smithsonian and also of the U.S. National Museum.

### Ownership and Custodial History

Transferred from the Division of Transportation, NMAH, SI.

### Processing Information

Collection processed by Robert harding and Grace Angle, 1988

### Preferred Citation


### Restrictions

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Historical Note

The United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, established in 1871, launched and carried out the first sustained study of marine biology in the United States. It was instrumental in the artificial propagation of fish, thus increasing the country's fish resources and in concentrating attention on the preservation of natural resources. In 1877 the Commission initiated the collection of detailed and reliable data on American commercial fisheries, their modernization and improvement.

The immediate origin of the Fish Commission lay in a dispute in southern New England between the owners of traps (nets, weirs, or other means of capturing large quantities of fish) and a much larger group of fishermen who fished from small boats or the shore with single lines. Accusations that traps were responsible for the diminution in the supply of coastal fish raged. Spencer Fullerton Baird, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, with a keen interest in marine biology had followed the dispute closely. He recognized that the practical work related to its solution would contribute to proving the utilitarian value of science and provide excellent opportunities for basic marine biological research. Backed by prominent friends and his own knowledge of the political dynamics of Washington he sought a congressional appropriation for an extended investigation of coastal fisheries.

At the request of Henry L. Dawes, chairman of the Appropriations Committee of the House of Representatives to whom Baird had turned for help, he outlined in a letter of January 3, 1971 the dispute in southern New England, including a proposal for a commission charged with determining the scientific reason for the decrease in coastal species and headed by a mediator empowered to consult with the states and seek a fair solution. As it shortly emerged from Congress the resolution established the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries. This created a body with no time limits, and without restriction as to area, thus opening the way to a national investigation. The head of this new agency was to be appointed by the President, to be an officer of the government and to serve without additional pay. With its basic authorization assured, a $5,000 appropriation was quickly approved and Spencer Baird, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, was appointed Commissioner by President Grant. He took the oath of office on March 8, 1871.

While its appropriations for the propagation of fish far exceeded those for research, the Commission on Fish and Fisheries was influential in promoting scientific development in the federal government. In 1881 the Congress at Commissioner Baird's request, appropriated $190,000 for a sea going vessel, the Albatross, especially equipped for marine biology. He settled on Wood's Hole in Massachusetts as the site for a permanent scientific station and arranged for the purchase of the land by private subscribers such as the Johns Hopkins University, Princeton University and Williams College. Such institutions had a right to send a specialist to the station to do research. The marine biological laboratory at Wood's Hole developed into a world famous research institution.

In 1903 the independent commission became the Bureau of Fisheries in the Department of Commerce and Labor. The Bureau was transferred to the Department of the Interior in 1939 and in 1940 was merged with another bureau to become the Fish and Wildlife Service.
Scope and Contents

Most of the collection consists of drawings, both pen and ink and pencil, photoengravings and photographs and blueprints of fish, fishermen, fishing gear, nets, traps, seines, fishing vessels both small and large, and fish processing. Some are identified by type, some by location; others lack specific identification. Many carry comments and directions for reduction. These may have been illustrations for annual or other reports and publications. Many of the photographs were taken in the 1880’s and 90’s. The key to a number of them is in U.S. National Museum Bulletin No. 27, which consists of descriptive catalogues of the collections sent by the United States to the International Fisheries Exhibition held in London in 1883. Where a photograph has been identified in Bulletin No. 27, a notation of the appropriate page number has been made on the back of the photo.

Also included is a bound, handwritten journal of the Commission with entries that relate to official actions such as its establishment, its appropriations, and Congressional authorizations for specific activities. These identify the statute or House or Senate journal entry that is applicable. The entries run from February 9, 1871 to December 24, 1892. There is an index by subject. There are some handwritten notes about fishing vessels made by Captain J. W. Collins and his partial draft manuscript describing fishing vessels. A draft of his annual report for 1884 is also included. A small amount of correspondence relates to descriptions of fishing vessels as well.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
Fish and fisheries
Fishes
Fishing

Types of Materials:
Cyanotypes
Drawings -- 1870-1910
Photoengravings

Names:
Transportation, Division of, NMAH, SI.
Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1  Actions Relating to the United States Fish Commission-Appropriations, Authorizations, Appointments, etc.

Box 1, Folder 2  J. W. Collins Annual Report, 1884

Box 1, Folder 3  J. W. Collins Miscellaneous Memoranda

Box 1, Folder 4  J. W. Collins Notes on Fishing Vessels

Box 1, Folder 5  Correspondence, September 15, 1881-October 13, 1892 and undated

Box 1, Folder 6  Correspondence, June 20, 1906-June 22, 1906; February 4, 1915

Box 1, Folder 7  Description of Fishing Vessels, handwritten

Box 1, Folder 8  Description of Fishing Vessels, draft manuscript

Box 1, Folder 9  Fishing Vessels, pencil sketches

Box 1, Folder 10  Fishing Vessels, photoengravings

Box 1, Folder 11  Guide to Photographs

Box 1, Folder 12  Miscellaneous

Box 1, Folder 13  Negative Numbers, Negative Catalogue

Box 1, Folder 14  Note Regarding Unidentified Photograph

Box 1, Folder 15  Fishing Trap Patent, H. Webb, May 6, 1877

Box 1, Folder 16  U. S. Department of Agriculture Bulletins, Personnel Administration, , April 15, 1938; June 20, 1938; February 28, 1939

Box 2, Folder 1  Fish Processing Pen and Inks

Box 2, Folder 2  Fishing, Indians, Aleuts, Eskimos and Others

Box 2, Folder 3  Herring, graphics

Box 2, Folder 4  Sea Elephants

Box 2, Folder 5  Sea Scallops

Box 2, Folder 6  Seals

Box 2, Folder 7  Walrus, Sea Otter, Manatee
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<td>Whales</td>
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<td>3, Folder 1</td>
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<td>Gear, II</td>
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<td>Miscellaneous Sketches, H. W. Elliott and J. W. Collins</td>
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<td>Nets, other countries</td>
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<td>Fishing Vessels and Boats I</td>
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<td>Boat Models, identified in Bulletin #27</td>
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<td>7, Folder 2</td>
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Box 8, Folder 2  Fishermen, not identified in Bulletin #27
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