



Smithsonian  
*National Museum of Natural History*

Guide to the Otis Tufton Mason  
papers, 1862, 1881-1905

Leigh H. Coen

1983

National Anthropological Archives  
Museum Support Center  
4210 Silver Hill Road  
Suitland, Maryland 20746  
naa@si.edu  
<http://www.anthropology.si.edu/naa/>

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## Collection Overview

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Repository:</b> | National Anthropological Archives  |
| <b>Title:</b>      | Otis Tufton Mason papers   |
| <b>Date:</b>       | 1862<br>1881-1905  |
| <b>Identifier:</b> | NAA.1973-23  |
| <b>Source:</b>     | National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Department of Anthropology  |
| <b>Creator:</b>    | Mason, Otis Tufton, 1838-1908  |
| <b>Extent:</b>     | 4.3 Linear feet  |
| <b>Language:</b>   | English .  |
| <b>Summary:</b>    | Otis T. Mason served as the first full-time Curator of Ethnology at the United States National Museum (USNM) from 1884 to 1902, as the Acting Head Curator of the Department of Anthropology of the USNM from 1902 to 1905, and as the Head Curator of the Department of Anthropology of the USNM from 1905 until his death in 1908. The majority of the material in this collection pertains to the organization and cataloguing of the ethnology collections of the USNM conducted by Mason in the late 1870s and early 1880s. |

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

The majority of the Otis Tufton Mason papers were transferred to the National Anthropological Archives from the Department of Anthropology in 1965. Some of the materials were found in the NAA's collection.

### Separated Materials

Material originally found with the Otis Mason collection that was, from its nature and arrangement, determined to belong to the Manuscript and Pamphlet file of the Department of Anthropology records, has been moved to that collection. This material consists of numerous articles, notes, and manuscripts, including 14 manuscripts by Thomas Wilson of the Division of Prehistoric Anthropology, correspondence between W. H. Holmes and Zelia Nuttall, and correspondence between A. F. White and Thomas Wilson. All are listed under "Thomas Wilson" in the guide to the Manuscript and Pamphlet file (Box 84).

Papers, consisting of administrative files and correspondence, which were originally found with the Otis Mason collection but clearly belonged to the Department of Anthropology's own administrative files were moved to that collection in the NAA. Correspondents included in the eleven letterpress books moved to the Department of Anthropology records are W. H. Holmes, Ales Hrdlicka, Walter Hough, and E. H. Hawley. These papers relate almost entirely to administrative matters directed by Mason and very little to Mason's own ethnological and anthropological research.

## Related Materials

Material related to the Otis T. Mason collection can also be found in the Bureau of American Ethnology records and the Department of Anthropology records, including the Division of Ethnology Manuscript and Pamphlet file. The following materials in the National Anthropological Archives series of Numbered Manuscripts are also pertinent:

A.S.W./Anthrop., Hist. of, 4821 (pt.): Box 4. "Anthropology in the District of Columbia..." (39 pages, dated 1906) and two letters pertaining to it.

Anthrop., Hist. of, 49033: "Diary of Otis T. Mason.." from 1 July 1884 to 23 May 1891 (approximately 100 pages).

Arch., U.S., 2431: notes, sketches, and letters used in Smithsonian Annual Reports for 1876-1879 and 1881-1883.

Athapaskan, 173 and Tinne (Kutchin), 169: translation and notes from works of Petitot (total of 68 pages).

Choctaw, 666: revision of Byington's grammar of Choctaw (ca. 1872).

Census, 4289: report on Indian education for the 10th census.

Africa, Morocco, 7083: Choctaw, 4056; Fewkes 4408 (5-a); Mohaven 7036; and Pamunkey, 2218: various letters to Mason containing ethnographic or linguistic information (dated from 1891 to 1893).

In the United States National Museum Manuscript and Pamphlet File, Boxes 4, 14, 20, 35-40, and 70, is material on the topics represented in the Mason papers as well as other material produced by Mason.

The Smithsonian Institution Archives has a small series of copies of letters which Mason wrote to the Smithsonian in 1889 while on a trip in Europe to study museum practices (SIA 7086).

## Processing Information

The final two series were found in the NAA and added to the collection in 2020.

Processed by Leigh H. Coen, 1983

Encoded by Katherine Christensen, December 2020

## Preferred Citation

Otis Tufton Mason papers, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

## Restrictions

The Otis Tufton Mason papers are open for research.

Access to the Otis Tufton Mason papers requires an appointment.

## Conditions Governing Use

Contact the repository for terms of use.

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## Biographical / Historical

Mason began his professional career at his alma mater, Columbian University (now George Washington University), where he spent the middle third of his life (1861-1884) as a teacher and principal of the preparatory department. In 1872, Joseph Henry redirected Mason's interest from Eastern Mediterranean studies to American ethnology and introduced Mason to what was to become a 36-year career at the United States National Museum. For the first twelve years, 1872-1884, Mason worked as one of S. F. Baird's unpaid part-time "resident collaborators." His work in this period included preparing the tribal synonymy

which later became Hodge's Handbook, preparing exhibit schemes for the 1876 Centennial Exposition, arranging and cataloguing the United States National Museum ethnological collections, and editing the anthropology sections of *American Naturalist* (1876-1887) and three other serials in ethnology. In 1884, Mason left Columbian University, where he had worked his way up to "Professor of Anthropology," to become the Smithsonian's first full-time curator of Ethnology. In 1902, he became acting head curator and, in 1905, permanent head curator of the Department of Anthropology, serving as curator of the department until his death in 1908.

#### Sources Consulted

Cattell, J. McKeen, ed. "The Progress of Science: Otis T. Mason," *The Popular Science Monthly* 74 (Jan 1909): 96-100.

The Evening Star Newspaper Company. "Otis T. Mason Dead." *The Evening Star*, November 5, 1908.

Hough, Walter. "Otis Tufton Mason," *American Anthropologist* 10, no. 4 (October-December 1908): 661-667.

Hough, Walter. "Mason, Otis T.," In *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 12, edited by the American Council of Learned Societies, 370-372. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933.

Hrdlička, Aleš. "Otis Tufton Mason," *Science* 28, no. 726 (November 27, 1908): 746-748.

White, James Terry, ed. *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. New York: J. T. White and company, 1900.

*Who's Who in America*, vol. 5. Chicago, Marquis Who's Who, 1908.

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1838      | Born in Eastport, Maine, on April 10; childhood in Philadelphia and then in Haddonfield, New Jersey  |
| 1851      | Mason family moved to Woodlawn, Virginia   |
| 1856-1861 | Student at Columbian University (now George Washington University) specializing in the culture/history of the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean |
| 1861      | Received A.B. degree from Columbian University   |
| 1861-1884 | Principal and teacher of the Preparatory Department of Columbian University  |
| 1862      | Married Sarah E. Henderson   |
| 1872-1884 | Collaborator in Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution   |
| 1879      | With J. M. Toner and G. Mallery, founded the Anthropological Society of Washington and wrote its constitution                                      |
|           | Received Ph.D. from Columbian University   |
| 1879-1905 | Collaborator with the Bureau of American Ethnology   |
| 1881      | The United States National Museum building opened  |
| 1884-1902 | Curator of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution  |
| 1890-1908 | Served on the U.S. Board of Geographic Names   |
| 1892-1895 | President of the Anthropological Society of Washington   |
| 1898      | Received LL.D. from Columbian University   |
| 1902-1905 | Acting head curator, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution   |
| 1905-1908 | Head curator, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution  |
| 1908      | Died in Washington, D.C., on November 5  |

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## Scope and Contents

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Mason was largely occupied with organizing and cataloguing the United States National Museum ethnology collections and with installing them in the new building which was opened in 1881. Much of this collection pertains to these USNM specimens. The largest section of the Mason material relates to the basketry collection and includes slipnote catalogues which were sometimes annotated and/or accompanied by photographs. The letters and notes found with the catalogues contain information similar in nature to accession papers on at least six accessions of basketry, including a "Catalog of the Hudson of Indian Products, 1899," and material on the Fred Harvey Collection. Also present are handwritten and typescript notes; extracts from various early sources; letters from dealers, collectors, and anthropologists; clippings; articles and illustrations, and photographs relating to the basket collection and to mortuary customs. The original arrangement of this material into topical series and the arrangement of Mason's notebooks by topic and type of object reflect the topological approach to specimens that characterized Mason's work in this period. The final two series include two books by Mason and honorary diplomas and certificates awarded to him.

It is difficult to determine exactly the dates of most of the material in the Otis T. Mason papers. Only a small percentage of the collection is dated correspondence, the bulk consisting of notes, articles, catalogues, clippings, and illustrations related to the United States National Museum basketry and knife collections and to the topics of "Modes of Travel and Transportation" and "Mortuary Customs." From their content, much of this material seems to date to the late 1870s and 1880s, when Mason was working on these collections. As far as actual dated material goes, Mason's own articles (not counting his collection of articles by other authors) and dated notes and letters cover 1884-1904. The certificates and diplomas date to 1862 and 1881-1905.

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## Arrangement

This collection is arranged in 6 series: (1) Material Relating to the United States National Museum Basketry Collection, circa 1896-1904; (2) Material Relating to Modes of Travel and Transportation, circa 1884-1900; (3) Material Relating to the Knife Collection at the United States National Museum, undated; (4) Information Relating to Mortuary Customs, undated; (5) Bound Volumes, undated; (6) Diplomas and Certificates, 1862, 1881-1905

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## Selected Bibliography

1893. "The human beast of burden." *United States National Museum Annual report for 1887*, 237-295. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893.

1895. *The origins of invention: a study of industry among primitive peoples*. London: W. Scott, Ltd., 1895.

1896. *Migration and the food quest, a study in the peopling of America*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.

1899. "The man's knife among the North American Indians: a study in the collections of the U.S. National Museum." *Report of the U. S. National Museum for 1897*, 725-745. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899.

1904. *Indian basketry; studies in a textile art without machinery*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1904.

## Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Basketwork
- Knives
- Mortuary customs
- Transportation

Names:

- National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Department of Anthropology
- United States National Museum

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Material Relating to the United States National Museum Basketry Collection, circa 1896-1904

#### 0.67 Linear feet

**Scope and Contents:** This series includes six notebooks comprising a slipnote catalogue of United States National Museum basketry specimens numbered from 455 to 209,512; one notebook of printed labels for basketry specimens; a large number of reprints and clipped published articles, all pertaining to American Indian basketry and /or the United States National Museum basketry collection, together with notes, annotations, and correspondence from the authors; additional correspondence from dealers, private collectors, and anthropologists; numerous typed and handwritten notes by Mason and others regarding baskets and basket-making techniques; and one folder full of photographs and drawings of baskets, including some from Mary Wright Gill, Captain D. D. Gaillard, Livingston Farrand (Salish Basketry design article), A. C. Vroman, and L. W. Jenkins (Peabody Academy of Science basketry exhibit). Extensive material on the J. W. Hudson collection, including a "Catalog of the Hudson Collection of Indian Products, 1899" with 368 entries, and the Fred Harvey collection, plus material on at least four other other United States National Museum basketry accessions. Anthropologists and other individuals among the correspondents include: C. P. Wilcomb of San Francisco's Memorial Museum (plant material, Santa Ynez Mission), Miss. Picher, H. E. Williams (Hat Creek), A. M. Lang (Oregon and Washington Tribes), Frank Russell (Pima), Mrs. Harriet and E. T. McArthur (Sasta, Rogue (?), Clapooya, and Modoc), Rust (Rust Collection, USNM acc. #37098, cat. #207, 576-207, 685), Chas. L. Owen of Field Columbian Museum (Apache), Mrs. E. B. Power (Digger), S. L. (Washoe), C. F. Lummis, Washington Matthews (Navajo), C. Hart Merriam (California), G. C. Simms of Field Columbian Museum, Mrs. I. Froham (Alaskan tribes), Mrs. A. Cohn (Washoe), A. L. Kroeber (concerning the Fred Harvey baskets and 37 other baskets), (Klickitat, Umatillas, USNM acc. #41579, cat. #221, 483-221, 499), Frank M. Covert, H. C. Brown, Mrs. Herrick, Mrs. Shackleford, F. V. Coville (botanical notes and list), Rev. M. Eels (Salishm USNM cat. #120, 435 and others), Lt. G. T. Emmons, and Franz Boaz (Alaskan basketry article by Emmons, Haida).

**Arrangement:** Arranged by type of material.

|       |                                  |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| Box 1 | Catalog of Basketry<br>6 Folders |
| Box 1 | Basketry Labels                  |
| Box 1 | Articles                         |
| Box 1 | Mrs. E. H. Bradley Collection    |
| Box 2 | J. W. Hudson Basketry Papers     |
| Box 2 | Notes                            |



4 Folders

Box 1

Photographs and Illustrations

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## Series 2: Material Relating to Modes of Travel and Transportation, circa 1884-1900

### 1 Linear foot

**Scope and Contents:** This series includes unbound notebooks, reprints, clipped articles published in newspapers and journals, photographs, drawings, notes, and correspondence, all pertaining to modes of travel and transportation. Some of the notes and drawings are of United States National Museum specimens, prepared for publication. Three of the above-mentioned notebooks, arranged by topic and type of object, form a slipnote catalogue of United States National Museum specimens (including cat. #562-169,047) with annotations and topical and bibliographic notes. A fourth notebook contains material on "Pre-Columbian Watercraft," including a manuscript on "Aboriginal American Canoes." Three folders contain Mason's unbound notebooks arranged loosely by subject, consisting of extracts from various publications, notes, illustrations, and scattered correspondence. Correspondents include O. P. Cook, John Murdock, Frederick Remington, J. Chester Morris, Ira M. Price, G. H. Wallace, and H. I. Smith. These three folders of notes are similar in content and arrangement to material found in the Department of Anthropology records' Manuscript and Pamphlet File.

**Arrangement:** Arranged by type of material or by topic.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Box 2           | Articles   |
| Box 2;<br>Box 3 | Catalog of Specimens<br>4 Folders                |
| Box 3           | Newspaper Clippings                              |
| Box 3;<br>Box 4 | Notes<br>3 Folders                               |
| Box 4           | Pre-Columbian Watercraft in America<br>2 Folders |
| Box 4           | Photographs and Illustrations<br>2 Folders       |

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## Series 3: Material Relating to the Knife Collection of the United States National Museum, undated

### *0.1 Linear feet*

Scope and Contents: This series includes a reprint of Mason's article "The man's Knife Among the North American Indians," and an annotated slipnote catalogue of United States National Museum curved knives.

Arrangement: Arranged by type of material.

Box 5

Catalog and Article

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## Series 4: Information Relating to Mortuary Customs, undated

### *0.11 Linear feet*

Scope and Contents: This series includes Mason's unbound typed notes, including typed extracts from various sources and articles from journals and newspapers. Format of Department of Anthropology records' Manuscript and Pamphlet File.

Arrangement: Arranged topically.

|       |                    |
|-------|--------------------|
| Box 5 | Notes<br>2 Folders |
|-------|--------------------|

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## Series 5: Bound Volumes, undated

*0.42 Linear feet*

Scope and Contents: This series includes two bound volumes of Mason's writing.

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| Box 6 | Papers on anthropological subjects, undated<br>Notes: (Binder's title).  |
| Box 6 | Ethnological Papers, undated<br>Notes: Includes "The Latimer Collection of Antiquities from Porto Rico in the National Museum at Washington, D.C." by Mason. |

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## Series 6: Diplomas and Certificates, 1862, 1881-1905

*2 Linear feet*

*Map-folder 1*

Scope and  
Contents:

This series includes diplomas and certificates of participation and achievement from institutions and expositions as well as correspondence regarding these and other honors. American Institutions included are the Academy of Science of St. Louis, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, the American Archeological and Asiatic Association, the Polynesian Society, the World's Columbian Exposition, the Cotton States and International Exposition, the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, the American Philosophical Society, Columbian College (now George Washington University), the Lewis and Clark Centennial American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair, the United States of America Universal Exposition Saint Louis, the Pan-American Exposition, Vassar College (requesting Mason give a talk), and the American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial Association. International institutions included are Exposition Universelle D'Anvers (Universal Exposition of Anvers); Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory); Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift Selskab (Royal Nordic Society of Antiquaries); Congrès International d'Anthropologie et d'Archéologie Préhistoriques (International Congress of Prehistoric Anthropology and Archaeology); Obshchestvo Liubitelei Estestvoznaniia Antropologii i Etnografii (Society of Lovers of Natural Science Anthropology and Ethnography); Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland; Société d'Anthropologie de Paris (Society of Anthropology of Paris); Società Italiana di Antropologia, Etnologia e Psicologia (Italian Society of Anthropology, Ethnology, and Psychology); and Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi (Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography). Additionally included are large format reproduced pages from the Ethiopic version of the Bible and Eliotipia Martelli Roma.

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