



Smithsonian Institution Archives

William Louis Abbott Papers, 1887-1923

by Smithsonian Institution Archives

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <i>osiaref@si.edu</i>
Creator:	Abbott, William Louis, 1860-1936.
Title:	William Louis Abbott Papers
Dates:	1887-1923
Quantity:	1.81 cu. ft. (3 document boxes) (1 half document box) (3 microfilm reels)

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7117, William Louis Abbott Papers

Historical Note

A native of Philadelphia, William Louis Abbott (1860-1936) was educated at the University of Pennsylvania (A.B., 1881; M.D., 1884). He continued his medical education in England, attaining Licentiate from the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Physicians. Upon receiving his inheritance, however, Abbott left the practice of medicine forever, and from then on indulged his avocation for travel and the study of natural history.

Abbott had already made collections of birds in Iowa and North Dakota in 1880, and in Cuba and Santo Domingo in 1883. His collection of the birds of Philadelphia and southern New Jersey had been received by the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. His serious field work began in 1887 with a two-year exploration of the Taveita region near Mount Kilimanjaro in East Africa, the products of which were presented to the United States National Museum in 1890. The same year Abbott returned to Europe by way of Madagascar and the Seychelles, collecting specimens as he traveled through those regions. Abbott went to Kashmir India in 1891, and traveled and collected throughout Kashmir until 1894, leaving only for a six-month voyage to the Seychelles in June 1892 and an expedition through Turkestan during the winter of 1893-94. In December 1894 Abbott left Kashmir for Madagascar in order to enlist with the native "Hova" army during the Malagasy resistance to the second French occupation of the island. The local suspicion of foreigners caused his resignation, but Abbott continued to travel through the island collecting until his return to Kashmir in September 1895. Abbott sailed to the Far East the next year, where he explored and collected for the Smithsonian along the Malay Peninsula and lower Thailand until he contracted fever. Returning to Kashmir to recuperate in the highlands, Abbott continued his collecting there and in Tibet until 1898.

The hostility between the United States and Spain caused Abbott's return home in 1898, and he was wounded slightly while serving as a volunteer in Cuba.

Upon his recovery in the same year, Abbott returned to Southeast Asia, where he was to remain for the next ten years. Initially he continued his work along the Malay Peninsula, but in 1899 he had his schooner

Terrapin constructed. In her, with a few Malay sailors as crew, and the occasional company of Cecil Boden Kloss (whose *In the Andamans and Nicobars* constitutes the only published account of the explorations of Abbott during this period), Abbott visited virtually all of the Southeast Asian island groups within 600 miles of Singapore. Abbott's collecting extended beyond mammal and bird specimens to include ethnological artifacts found among the local inhabitants he encountered.

Abbott's activities in Asia were halted by eye disease of increasing severity, which forced him to sell the *Terrapin* and return to Europe for treatment in 1909. Smithsonian acquisitions from the region did not cease, as Abbott funded the Borneo expeditions of Henry C. Raven, who continued what Abbott had been forced to leave. Upon his recovery in 1910, Abbott returned to Kashmir, where, while unable to shoot, he trapped specimens until 1915.

Abbott left Kashmir for the last time in 1916 to take up exploring and collecting on the island of Hispaniola. In July 1916 he spent five months in the Dominican Republic, and in 1917-18 fifteen months in Haiti, leaving only after a near fatal attack of dysentery. He returned to Santo Domingo in 1919, and in 1920 returned to Haiti in the company of Emory Clarence Leonard to collect botanical specimens. In 1921 Abbott returned to the highlands of the Dominican Republic, as he was to do for the next two years until he retired in 1923.

William Louis Abbott was, in the words of a contemporary, "one of the greatest field naturalists America has produced." Although he did not engage in taxonomic analysis, his collecting activities were unparalleled in extent and scope, making available for study by Smithsonian naturalists plants, land shells, ethnological material, and vertebrates of all classes, but particularly birds and small mammals. Abbott donated more than 10,000 of the latter. Species described as new number 462, and more than twenty bear his name. Perhaps no other single collector provided as much for the Smithsonian Institution.

Introduction

This finding aid was digitized with funds generously provided by the Smithsonian Institution Women's Committee.

Descriptive Entry

The papers of William Louis Abbott consist of letters to Smithsonian curators and specimen lists, 1892-1917; letters to his mother and sister, 1887-1923; photographs taken by Abbott in the field, 1890-1923; and some miscellaneous material.

In describing the individual pieces of this collection, particular attention was paid to material relating to the natural and social history of the regions Abbott visited, the activities and people associated with the Smithsonian Institution and similar bodies, and, to a lesser extent, material that illuminated the character of the man. No attempt was made to highlight the personal relationships of the Abbott family except where larger issues were involved. Material on these matters may, however, be found in virtually every manuscript.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Anthropologists
Anthropology
Natural history

Types of Materials:

Manuscripts
Photographs

Names:

Abbott, William Louis, 1860-1936.
Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.
Kloss, Cecil Boden
Leonard, Emery C.
Raven, Henry Cushier, 1889-1944.
Royal College of Physicians of London
Royal College of Surgeons in London
United States National Museum.
University of Pennsylvania

Container Listing

Series 1: LETTERS TO THE SMITHSONIAN AND RELATED MATERIAL, 1891-1917. ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY.

This series is composed primarily of letters written by William Louis Abbott to Smithsonian naturalists. The letters are identified by the name of the recipient, the place from which they were written, and the date on which they were written. A manuscript copy of an article written by Abbott and specimen lists, identified by locality and the dates of the expedition, may also be found.

Box 1

Folder 1 **ca. 1890.**

Folder 2 **1892-1993.**

Folder 3 **1894-1897.**

Folder 4 **1898-1899.**

Folder 5 **1900-1901.**

Folder 6 **1902-1903.**

Folder 7 **1904-1905.**

Folder 8 **1907-1917.**

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Series 2: LETTERS TO THE ABBOTT FAMILY 1887-1923. ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY.

This series is composed of the letters from William Louis Abbott to members of his family, predominantly his mother, Susan F. Abbott, and his sister, Gertrude Abbott. A few pieces addressed to his sister and brother-in-law, "Dollie" and "Val" de Calry, will also be found.

Box 2

Folder 1 **1887.**

Folder 2 **1888.**

Folder 3 **1889.**

Folder 4 **1890.**

Folder 5 **1891.**

Folder 6 **1892.**

Folder 7 **1893.**

Folder 8 **1894.**

Folder 9 **1895.**

Folder 10 **1896.**

Folder 11 **1897.**

Folder 12 **1898.**

Box 3

Folder 1 **1899.**

Folder 2 **1900.**

Folder 3 **1901.**

Folder 4 **1901.**

Folder 5 **1902.**

Folder 6 **1903.**

Folder 7 **1904.**

Folder 8 **1905.**

Folder 9 **1906.**

Folder 10 **1907.**

Folder 11 **1908.**

Folder 12 **1909.**

Box 4

Folder 1 **1910.**

Folder 2 **1911.**

Folder 3 **1912**

Folder 4 **1913.**

Folder 5 **1914.**

Folder 6 **1915.**

Folder 7 **1916.**

Folder 8 **1917.**

Folder 9 **1918.**

Folder 10 **1919.**

Folder 11 **1920.**

Folder 12 **1921.**

Folder 13 **1922.**

Folder 14 **1923.**

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Series 3: PHOTOGRAPHS, 1891-1923.

These are photographs taken by William L. Abbott during the period 1891-1923; the bulk being from the later date. Virtually all were identified by Abbott with captions on the border or reverse of the photo.

Box 4

Folder 15 **1891-1904.**

Folder 16 **1923.**

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Series 4: MISCELLANEOUS.

This series consists of divers material found with the letters of series 2. Note the letter to Abbott from his nephew Awley (Item 9).

Box 4

Folder 17

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