

# United States Naval Observatory Records

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



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Manuscript Division, Library of Congress  
Washington, D.C.  
2011

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<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms011184>

LC Online Catalog record:

<http://lcn.loc.gov/mm70052837>

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

## 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

**Location:** Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Summary:** 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--Correspondence.

Ferrel, William, 1817-1891--Correspondence.

Grinnell, Henry, 1799-1874.

Hall, Asaph, 1829-1907--Correspondence.

Henry, Joseph, 1797-1878--Correspondence.

Holden, Edward S. (Edward Singleton), 1846-1914--Correspondence.

Manning, George, (Naval chart agent)--Correspondence.

Maury, Matthew Fontaine, 1806-1873--Correspondence.

Michelson, Albert A. (Albert Abraham), 1852-1931--Correspondence.

Mitchell, Maria, 1818-1889--Correspondence.

Peters, C. H. F. (Christian Heinrich Friedrich), 1813-1890--Correspondence.

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

Safford, Truman Henry, 1836-1901--Correspondence.

Stone, Ormond, 1847-1933--Correspondence.

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

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

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

### Organizations

Centennial Exhibition (1876 : Philadelphia, Pa.)

United States Naval Observatory.

United States Naval Observatory. Nautical Almanac Office--Correspondence.

### 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><b><u>Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900</u></b></p> <p>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><b><u>Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900</u></b></p> <p>Administrative records including personnel lists, memoranda, building contracts, financial records, and biographical information. Arranged by type of material.</p>
BOX 15-25	<p><b><u>Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence, 1849-1885</u></b></p> <p>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><b><u>Librarian's Office Administrative Records, 1868-1899</u></b></p> <p>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><b><u>Superintendent of Compasses Office, 1875-1895</u></b></p> <p>Copies of letters sent in letter copy books. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 29	<p><b><u>Instruments Office Correspondence, 1882-1885</u></b></p> <p>Copies of letters sent in a letter copy book.</p>
BOX OV 1	<p><b><u>Oversize, 1869</u></b></p> <p>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	<b>Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900</b> 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 (2 folders)
BOX 2	1846, undated (2 folders)
BOX 3	1847, undated (2 folders)
BOX 3	1849-1850
BOX 3	1851-1854, 1860
BOX 4	1865-1866 (3 folders)
BOX 4	1867
BOX 4	Jan.-May (2 folders)
BOX 5	June-Dec. (2 folders)
BOX 5	1868-1870 (4 folders)
BOX 5	1871
BOX 5	Jan.-May
BOX 6	June-Dec.
BOX 6	1872-1876 (6 folders)
BOX 7	1877 (4 folders)
BOX 8	1878-1880 (4 folders)
BOX 8	1881-1882, 1889
BOX 8	1893-1895
BOX 9	1900 (2 folders)

## Superintendent's Office Correspondence, 1830-1900

### Container

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BOX 9	Wind and current chart agents
BOX 9	Outgoing
BOX 9	1848-1849 (3 folders)
BOX 9	1850
BOX 9	Jan.-Mar.
BOX 10	Apr.-Dec. (2 folders)
BOX 10	1851-1852 (4 folders)
BOX 11	1853-1854 (6 folders)
BOX 12	1855-1856 (5 folders)
BOX 12	1857
BOX 12	Jan.-Feb.
BOX 13	Mar.-Dec. (2 folders)
BOX 13	1858
BOX 13	Incoming, 1858-1859
BOX 13-15	<b>Superintendent's Office Administrative Records, 1858-1900</b> Administrative records including personnel lists, memoranda, building contracts, financial records, and biographical information. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 13	Building contracts and specifications, 1869, undated <i>See also Oversize</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 (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

### Container

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BOX 15	Receipts, 1858-1859
BOX 15-25	<b><i>Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence, 1849-1885</i></b> 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.
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 (7 folders)
BOX 19	1863-1868 (6 folders)
BOX 19	1869
BOX 20	Jan-June
BOX 20	July-Dec.
BOX 20	1872-1875 (5 folders)
BOX 21	1876-1878 (6 folders)
BOX 21	1879
BOX 21	Jan.-June
BOX 22	July-Dec. 1880-1884 (5 folders)
BOX 22	Agents
BOX 22	Outgoing, 1879-1883
BOX 23	Incoming, 1866-1869 (4 folders)
BOX 23	Navy Department, incoming
BOX 23	1849-1863 (4 folders)
BOX 24	1864-1872 (6 folders)

*Nautical Almanac Office Correspondence, 1849-1885*

*Container*

*Contents*

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BOX 25	1873-1879 (3 folders)
BOX 25-28	<b>Librarian's Office Administrative Records, 1868-1899</b> Outgoing and incoming correspondence. 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 (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	<b>Superintendent of Compasses Office, 1875-1895</b> Copies of letters sent in letter copy books. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 28	1875-1883
BOX 28	1877-1879
BOX 29	1893-1895
BOX 29	<b>Instruments Office Correspondence, 1882-1885</b> Copies of letters sent in a letter copy book.
BOX 29	Outgoing, 1882-1885
BOX OV 1	<b>Oversize, 1869</b> Contract and specifications for buildings. 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)