



Thurber-Woolson Botanical Collection

1803-1918

4 boxes (2.5 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS065bd

Collection overview

Largely self-educated, George Thurber (1821-1890) began a career as a pharmacist before signing on as botanist to the U.S. Boundary Commission from 1850-1854. After completing a masters degree at Brown University, he emerged as a important horticultural writer and editor of *American Agriculturist* from 1863 to 1885.

Letters, photographs, engravings, and clippings compiled primarily by George Thurber and bequeathed to George Clark Woolson (MAC class of 1871) who added to it and donated it as a memorial to his class, the first to graduate from the College. The collection includes 993 letters written by 336 correspondents, and 35 photographs and engravings, primarily botanists and other scientists, including Asa Gray, Louis Agassiz, John Torrey, Frederick Law Olmsted, John James Audubon, Henry Ward Beecher, Jefferson Davis, Edward Payson Roe, Donald G. Mitchell, and George Brown Goode.

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Background on George Thurber

George Thurber, botanist, naturalist, and editor, was born in Providence, Rhode Island, September 2, 1821 and died at his home near Passaic, New Jersey, April 2, 1890. In his early years he devoted himself eagerly to the study of chemistry and natural sciences in general, but especially to botany, so that at an early age he was already well known as one of the most prominent botanists of the country. This brought him in close intimacy with John Torrey, Asa Gray, George Engelmann, Louis Agassiz and other eminent scientists, whose warm friendship he enjoyed until his death.

In 1850 he obtained the appointment as botanist, quartermaster and commissary of the United States Boundary Commission for the survey of the boundary between the United States and Mexico. During the following four years his botanical work consisted mainly in the exploration of the native flora of these hitherto unknown border regions. His herbarium collected there comprised a large number of species new to scientists, some of which have been named after their discoverer, *Cereus Thurberi* being one of the most important; it is now cultivated for its fruit in the desert regions of North Africa. This historical herbarium formed the subject of

Dr. Asa Gray's important work "Plantae Novae Thurberinanae," published by the Smithsonian Institute.

After his return to New York in 1853, Dr. Thurber received an appointment to the United States Assay Office, of which Dr. John Torrey was assayer. In this position he remained until 1856, when owing to his strong sympathies with Gen. John C. Fremont, who was the first Presidential candidate of the Republican party, he preferred to resign rather than sacrifice his principles. During the following three years he was connected with the Cooper Union and the College of Pharmacy of New York City as lecturer on botany and materia medica. In 1859 he was appointed professor of botany and horticulture at the Michigan Agricultural College, which position he held for four years. This position he resigned in 1863 to accept--on the urgent invitation of Orange Judd, the publisher--the editorship of the "American Agriculturist," which he held to within a few years of his death, when failing health prevented him from continuing his ardent labors. In this position he found his most congenial work and the real mission of his life, for which his previous training had fitted him admirably. Few men have exerted so powerful and effective an influence on progressive horticulture and agriculture. The amount of his writings in the "American Agriculturist" during the twenty-two years of his connection with it was enormous, but as his name but rarely appeared with his articles, it would be impossible to estimate the aggregate, yet whatever he wrote bore the stamp of accuracy of detail and naturalness of style.

While in Michigan he revised and partly rewrote Darlington's "Agricultural Botany," which was published under the title of "American Weeds and Useful Plants." He wrote also the entire botany of Appleton's "New American Encyclopedia." An important part of his contributions to horticultural literature consisted in editing, revising and bringing out the horticultural and agricultural books of the Orange Judd Company.

After the death of Dr. Torrey, he was elected president of the Torrey Botanical Club. He was also president of the New Jersey Horticultural Society; vice-president of the American Pomological Society for New Jersey; and honorary member of many scientific societies throughout the world.

Biographical sketch by F. M. Hexamer from L. H. Bailey's Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture (v. 3).

Scope of collection

Letters, photographs, engravings, and clippings compiled by George Thurber, agrostologist, horticultural writer, and editor of American Agriculturist from 1863 to 1885, and augmented by George Clark Woolson, father of Harry Thurber Woolson. Bulk of the collection is the nearly 1,000 letters written by 336 correspondents, primarily botanists and other scientists, including Asa Gray, Louis Agassiz, John Torrey, Frederick Law Olmsted, John James Audubon, Henry Ward Beecher, Jefferson Davis, Edward Payson Roe, Donald G. Mitchell, and George Brown Goode. Letters are bound; binding done by Reimann.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Harry Thurber Woolson, 1911, 1919

Related Material

Background on George Thurber, Harry Thurber Woolson and the collection can be found in George Clark Woolson's faculty file (RG 40/11).

Processing Information

Processed by Linda Seidman.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

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Search terms

Subjects

- Botany--United States.
- Thurber, George.
- Woolson, George Clark.

Contributors

- Thurber, George, and Woolson, George Clark, compiler **[main entry]**
- Woolson, George Clark.
- Gray, Asa, 1810-1888.
- Agassiz, Louis, 1807-1872.
- Torrey, John, 1796-1873.
- Olmsted, Frederick Law, 1822-1903.
- Audubon, John James, 1785-1851.
- Beecher, Henry Ward, 1813-1887.
- Davis, Jefferson, 1808-1889.
- Roe, Edward Payson, 1838-1888.
- Mitchell, Donald Grant, 1822-1908

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