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Arthur Cleveland Bent Papers

1880-1942

8 boxes (5.5 linear ft.)

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A businessman and ornithologist, Arthur Cleveland Bent was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, on November 25, 1866, and educated at Harvard (AB, 1889). Enjoying success in business despite the tumultuous economic times, Bent rose to executive positions with the Mason Machine Works and Plymouth Light and Electric Co., but from his undergraduate days on, he maintained an abiding interest in birds. Although an amateur, he was well respected by academic scientists, becoming an associate in Ornithology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, a collaborator at the Smithsonian Institute, and an officer of the American Ornithologists' Union. His major work was the multivolume *Life Histories of North American Birds*.

The Bent collection contains a dense series of ornithological field notes kept by Owen Durfee (1880-1909) and Bent (1887-1942), along with photographs and miscellaneous materials relating to Bent's oological and ornithological work. The collection includes lists of nest observations, egg measurements, bird sightings, as well as records pertaining to negatives and specimens provided to organizations such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Bristol County Agricultural School, and the United States National Museum.

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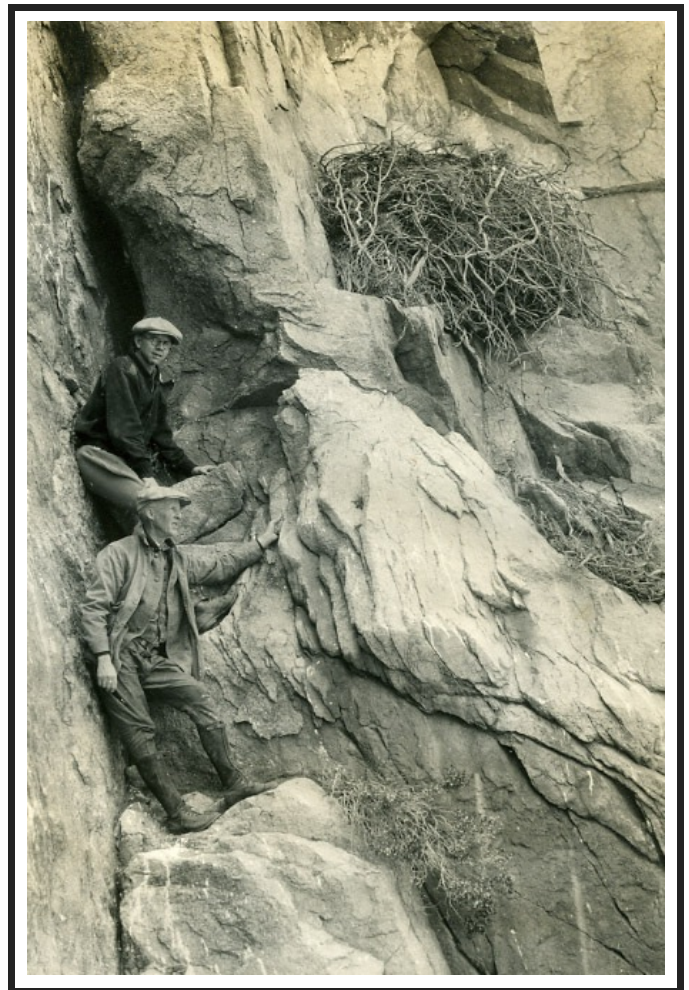
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Background on Arthur Cleveland Bent

A life-long resident of Taunton, Massachusetts, Arthur Cleveland Bent (1866-1954) was only six when his mother died and when a concerned father began to bring his "sickly son" on nature walks to improve his health. Bent's passion for birds began with these walks. Educated formally in local public schools and at the Bristol Academy, Bent entered Harvard College, graduating with honors in the class of 1889. His sickly youth and Victorian ideals of manhood instilled in Bent a deep interest in physical fitness, which was reflected in a broken nose received in a boxing match and a habit of working with an axe and weights until he was 80 years old. His habits served him well as an oologist, as he made precarious climbs to collect eggs until he was nearly 75.

Putting his Harvard degree to work, Bent entered business after graduation, beginning with work in banking before moving on through positions in the cotton industry and as an executive in the utilities business. The apex of his business career came in 1892 when he and John Scott purchased the Plymouth Electric Light Company from General Electric, and although the firm nearly went bankrupt in the panic of 1893, Bent held on and returned the company to profitability, serving as president and treasurer from 1900 to 1931. Well and widely respected, he sat upon a number of boards of directors and was active in a variety of civic and religious organizations.

It was his avocational interest in ornithology, however, that came to define his life. Having been fascinated with birds from his undergraduate years at Harvard, Bent's ambition drew him into close correspondence with the emerging class of professional academic ornithologists as early as 1885, when he became a natural history correspondent for Spencer Baird of the Smithsonian Institution. An avid collector and true Victorian scientist, Bent was a scientist with a gun and wide sights. His personal collection of bird specimens eventually rose to almost



Bent inspecting a golden eagle's nest, California, 1929

3,500 skins, most of which are now housed at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, and he was even more industrious as an oologist, collecting over 30,000 eggs which form a significant part of the collections of the United States National Museum. An active member of the National Audubon Society, the Bristol County Academy of Sciences (President, 1915), and the Nuttall, Wilson, and Cooper ornithological clubs, Bent was particularly closely involved with the American Ornithologist's Union (AOU), in which he was named a Fellow (1902) and served as editor of the Union's journal, *The Auk*, vice president (1929-1934), and finally president (1935-1937).

From 1900 on, and particularly after his retirement from day to day work in his firm, Bent took annual birding excursions to far flung sites from Florida to the southwestern U.S., California to the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and Labrador. The culmination of his ornithological work came when Bent approached Baird with the offer to assume control of the influential Smithsonian series, *Life Histories of North American Birds*, after its founder, Charles Bendire, died in 1897. Beginning what he called his "life's work" in 1910, Bent published eighteen volumes on birds between 1919 and 1953, approaching them systematically from blackbirds to raptors. Although he passed away in 1954, a nineteenth volume appeared posthumously under Bent's name, with two more volumes added later by Warren Taber, using the notes, photographs, and outlines left in Bent's collection.

Timeline of Bent's life

1866

Born November 25, Taunton, Massachusetts.

1889

A.B. Harvard University

1891

Agent, Safety Seamless Pocket Company

1893

Treasurer, Plymouth Electric Light Company

1894

Treasurer, Atlantic Covering Company

1900-1931

President and Treasurer, Plymouth Electric Light Company

1900-1914

General Manager, Mason Machine Works

1914

Married Madeleine Vincent Godfrey, January 20

1919-1942

Author, *Life Histories of North American Birds*, and other titles totaling over 20 volumes.

1919-1942

Associate in Ornithology, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University

1919-1942

Collaborator, Smithsonian Institute

1954

Died

Scope of collection

The Bent collection contains the field journals, photographs, and some correspondence of the ornithologist Arthur Cleveland Bent, along with several journals of his childhood friend, Owen Durfee. Spanning the years 1887-1943, these journals offer a valuable index to the evolution of ornithological practice from the work of a Victorian "ornithologist with a shot gun" to the professionalized field notes of a 20th century scientist. Filled with information on the natural history of North American birds, the journals include data on behavior, nesting, plumage, song, and habitat culled from observations in New England, Florida, Texas, California, Alaska, and Labrador, among other places.

Rich in descriptions of Bent's experiences in the field, the journals hints at the impact of new technologies in shotguns, cameras, cars, and optical equipment, but also the culture of birding in the field. Bent's journal for 1924, for example, gives a spectacular description of life on the U.S. Virgin Islands complete with photographic images. Bent often returned to his journals to make corrections or clarifications, usually noted in red, and underlining species of birds that he intended to include in his work on the *Life Histories*.

The Bent collection also contains some valuable longitudinal studies, including two datasets concerning New England raptors. Bent collected osprey data at a nesting site in Rhode Island annually, recording nesting pairs, new nests, abandoned nests, and numbers of eggs for each pair, and he conducted a similar survey of red tailed hawks between 1924 and 1943. One journal contains an inventory of part of Bent's massive egg collection, noting the number of eggs, oological notations, AOU Species number, the location of the collection and collector (Bent had a number of colleagues who helped him gather specimens). Finally,

the collection includes an interesting view on early bird protection in the form of an official Wood Duck census report prepared for the Massachusetts Commission on Ornithology. Descriptions of egg and skin specimen preservation can be found sporadically throughout the collection.

The field notes in Bent's later journals are limited compared to the earlier, but in some cases they were used as first drafts for his *Life Histories for North American Birds*. Many are illustrated with photographs of Bent and his associates in the field, general shots of the scenery, as well as images of birds and their nests.

The collection is organized into six series: Durfee's Field Notebooks, Bent's Journals, Photographs, Lists, Mimeographed and Printed Materials, and Handwritten index cards for books in Bent's collection. The field notebooks and journals are arranged chronologically, the photographs by plate number when applicable, and the lists are alphabetical by topic.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Owen Durfee Field Notebooks

1880-1909

Birding field notes kept by Bent's childhood friend, Owen Durfee, with observations primarily in and around Fall River, Massachusetts, and Plymouth and Barnstable Counties.

Series 2. Arthur Cleveland Bent Journals

1887-1942

Birding and ornithological field notebooks kept by Arthur Cleveland Bent covering expeditions to North Dakota, Florida, Magdalen Islands, Saskatchewan, Virginia, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Labrador, the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, British Columbia, the Canadian Rockies, Texas, Arizona, California, and the Caribbean. Most volumes also contain notes relating to Bent's birding activities in Plymouth County and Cape Cod (including favorite spots in Taunton, Swansea, Rehoboth, Carver, Middleboro), with occasional trips to Rhode Island, Martha's Vineyard, and elsewhere in the region.

Series 3. Photographs

1925-1946

Images of birds, eggs, and nests, including plates used for two volumes of *Life Histories for North American Birds* that appeared after Bent's death.

Series 4. Lists

1862-1934

Lists and miscellaneous materials kept by Bent relating to his ornithological and oological work.

Series 5. Mimeographed and Printed Materials

1897

Durfee, Owen: Series 6. Index cards for books in Bent's collection

undated

9 boxes

Manual card catalogs for Bent's book collection (two boxes) and reprints. Many of the books were transferred into the library's general collections, while the reprints were not retained.

Inventory

Series 1. Owen Durfee Field Notebooks

1880-1909

Durfee, Owen: Field notes

1880-1882

Box 1

Durfee, Owen: Field notes

1883-1884

Box 1

Durfee, Owen: Field notes

1885 Jan.-May

Box 1

Durfee, Owen: Field notes

1888 Feb.-May

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1888 June-1890 Apr.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1890 Apr.-1891 Apr.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1891 Apr.-Dec.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1892 Jan.-1893 Oct.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1894 Jan.-1896 May

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1896 May-1897 May

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1897 May-1900 Dec.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1900 Dec.-1902 Apr.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1902 Apr.-1904 May

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1904 May-1906 Dec.

Box 1
Durfee, Owen: Field notes
1906 Dec.-1909 Feb.

Box 1
Series 2. Arthur Cleveland Bent Journals
1887-1942
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties)
1887 Jan.-1897 Oct.
287 pp. bound

Box 2
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties) and Maine (Sedgwick and Washington Counties)
1898 Mar.-1900 Dec.
280 pp. bound

Box 2
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: North Dakota (Steele County)
1901 Jan.-Oct.
114 pp. ring

Box 2
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Florida (Brevard County, St John's River, and Florida Keys)
1902 Mar.-1903 Nov.
256 pp. ring

Box 2
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Magdalen Islands, Nova Scotia (Barrington), Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties)
1904 Apr.-1904 Aug.
108 pp. ring

Box 2
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Saskatchewan (Crane Lake), Massachusetts (Barnstable County)
1905 Apr.-Aug.

140 pp. ring

Box 2

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Saskatchewan Crane Lake, Big Stick Lake), Massachusetts (Barnstable County)

1906 Mar.-1907 Sept.

240 pp. string

Box 2

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Florida (Miami and the Keys), Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties)

1908 Mar.-1908 Dec.

152 pp. string

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Labrador (Eskimo Point, Piastre Bar), Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties), Louisiana (Breton Island, coastal regions)

1909 Feb.-1911 Apr.

172 pp. string

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Aleutian Islands

1911 Apr.-1911 Jul.

222 pp. ring

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Newfoundland, Labrador, Manitoba (Lake Winnipegosis), Maine (Jericho Bay)

1912 June-1913 Dec.

214 pp. ring

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: South Carolina (Mount Pleasant), Maine (Penobscot Bay, Jericho Bay), Magdalen Islands, Virginia (Princess Anna County), Saskatchewan (Reddick), Massachusetts (Barnstable County, Martha Vineyard)

1915 Apr.-1919 July

160 pp. ring

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties)

1920 Apr.-June

50 pp. ring

Box 3

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Arizona (Chiricahua Mountains, Cochise County)

1922 Apr.-May

84 pp. ring

Box 3

Includes Arizona trip, 80 photographs

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Arizona (Huachuca Mountains, Pima County)

1922 May-June

106 pp. ring

Box 3

66 photographs

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Texas coast (Galveston to Corpus Christi)

1923 May-1925 Apr.

166 pp. ring

Box 4

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: California (Mohave desert, Orange County, Los Angeles)

1929 Feb.-1929 May

80 pp. ring

Box 4

53 photographs

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Florida (Dade and Brevard Counties)

1930 Jan.-Mar.

52 pp. ring

Box 4

Includes Florida trip, 9 photographs

Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Lesser Antilles, British Guiana

1936 Apr.
20 pp. ring
Box 4
Bent, Arthur Cleveland: Journal: Massachusetts (Plymouth and Barnstable Counties)
1942 Apr.-June
9 pp. ring
Box 4
Series 3. Photographs
1925-1946
Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos, and their allies, plates 1-15.
1933-1941
Box 5
Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos, and their allies, plates 16-30
1929-1933
Box 5
Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos, and their allies, plates 32-42
1932-1935
Box 5
"Unsorted" plates 2-34, used in a number of publications
1911-1945
Box 5
"Unsorted" plates 37-81, used in a number of publications
1929-1939
Box 5
"Unnumbered and unsorted" photographs: various species of birds and eggs
1929-1935
Box 5
"Unnumbered and unsorted" photographs: various species of birds and eggs
1946-1949
Box 5
Catalog of negatives
1896 May-1930 June
Box 5
Lists of negatives given to Massachusetts Audubon Society and the U.S. National Museum.
undated
Box 5
Correspondence with photographers Earle Forrest and Arthur A. Allen and lists of available prints or negatives.
1925-1946
Box 5
Series 4. Lists
1862-1934
List of bird sightings recorded from the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club* and *The Auk*
1885-1900
Box 6
List of eggs shipped to the Bristol County Agricultural School, including oological notes for each species
1926-1928
Box 6
Draft of portion of *Life Histories of American Wood Warblers*
1953
Box 6
List of eggs of North American birds wanted by the U.S. National Museum
1931-1934
Box 6
List of egg measurements by correspondents
undated
Box 6
Journal of egg collection, including collector, nest location, American Ornithological Union species number, number of eggs, date
of collection
1862-1934

Box 6
Packing list of nests shipped
1931-1934

Box 6
Series 5. Mimeographed and Printed Materials
1897

Massachusetts Wood Duck Census Project reports. C. Barlow, *The Story of the Farallones*
1953

Box 6
Series 6. Handwritten and typed index cards for books in Bent's collection
undated
Index cards for books in Bent's collection

Box 7-8

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

The papers of Arthur Cleveland Bent (1866-1954), which were given to the University in 1959 by Mrs. Bent with a collection of Mr. Bent's books, remained in the possession of Professor Lawrence Bartlett of the Zoology Department until they were received in the Archives in 1983 after Professor Bartlett's death. Books have been cataloged and incorporated into the Du Bois Library's circulating collection.

Processing Information

Processed by Linda Seidman, 2003, and Stephen Manuel, 2010.

Additional Finding Aids Available

A card catalogue for Bent's book collection is available on level 25.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

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Copyright and Use (More information)

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Search terms

Subjects

American Ornithologists' Union
Bent, Arthur Cleveland, 1866-1954. Life Histories of North American Birds
Birds
Birds--Eggs
Birds--Eggs--Photographs
Birds--Nests
Birds--Photographs
Bristol County Agricultural School (Bristol County, Mass.)
Massachusetts Audubon Society
Ornithologists--Massachusetts
United States National Museum

Contributors

Bent, Arthur Cleveland, 1866-1954 [main entry]
Bent, Arthur Cleveland, 1866-1954
Durfee, Owen

Genres and formats

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