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Edward H. Abbe Papers

1724, 1879-2009 40 boxes (29 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 736



About SCUA

SCUA home

Credo digital

Scope

Overview

Series 1. Personal

Series 2. Abbe Family

Series 3. Peck Family

Series 4. Photographs

Inventory

Series 1. Personal

Series 2. Abbe Family

Series 3. Peck Family

Series 4. Photographs

Admin info

Download

xml version

print version (pdf)

Read collection overview

Born in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1915 and raised largely in Hampton, Va., Edward H. Abbe seemed destined to be an engineer. The great nephew of Elihu Thomson, an inventor and founding partner in General Electric, and grandson of Edward Folger Peck, an early employee of a precursor of that firm, Abbe came from a family with a deep involvement in electrification and the development of street railways. After prepping at the Rectory and Kent Schools, Abbe studied electrical engineering at the Sheffield School at Yale, and after graduation in 1938, accepted a position with GE. For 36 years, he worked in the Industrial Control Division in New York and Virginia, spending summers at the family home on Martha's Vineyard. Ed married Gladys Howard, a talented musician with a gift for working with people, in 1945 as his career began to take off. Abbe maintained a lifelong interest in transportation, particularly trains, and traveled at any opportunity from the family RV to luxury cruise ships. After retirement in 1975, he and his wife Gladys traveled frequently, cruising both the Atlantic and Pacific.

Ranging from an extensive correspondence from his high school and college days to materials relating to his family's involvement in engineering, the Abbe collection offers an in depth perspective on an educated family with strong ties to New England. An avid traveler and inveterate keeper, Ed Abbe gathered a diverse assemblage of letters, diaries, and memorabilia relating to the history of the Abbe, Peck, Booth, Gifford, and Boardman families. The collection is particularly rich in visual materials, including albums and photographs, depicting homes, travel, and family life over nearly a century.

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Connecticut
Family
Massachusetts (East)
Photographs
Science and technology

Background on Edward H. Abbe

Edward H. Abbe was born in March of 1915 in Syracuse, New York. His father, Harry Allen Abbe, worked as an engineer until his premature death in 1919 at age 35. Elsie Mayhew Peck Abbe, Edward's mother, was the daughter of the businessman Edward Folger Peck and his wife Mary Booth Peck. Edward Folger Peck, Edward's grandfather, introduced the two men who would found General Electric. As an adult, his grandson Edward Abbe would make his 36-year career with this same company. One of its founders, family friend Elihu Thomson, would marry into the Peck family and be remembered by Ed Abbe as Uncle Elihu. In addition to his pivotal role in the founding of General Electric, Edward Folger Peck conducted numerous business ventures primarily in transportation industries. Perhaps it was this influence from his grandfather that drove Ed Abbe's lifelong fascination with trains. William, or Bill, Abbe was born to Harry Allen and Elsie Peck Abbe in 1916, only one year after Edward's birth. Bill would go on to become a successful artist and educator remembered primarily



Brothers Ed and Bill with their mother and grandparents.

for becoming the first teacher of Fine Arts at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire until his death in 1983.

When Edward was young, he moved with his mother and brother from New York to Virginia, but always spent most of his summers at the family cottage on Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts. These vacations allowed Ed to compile a large collection of books, newspapers, photographs, and other material related to Martha's Vineyard over the years. His lifelong interest in trains grew during these years, and Edward began collecting parts for his model train set. This train set would become one of Ed's most prized possessions and was quite valuable. Edward attended the Rectory School in Pomfret, Connecticut and Kent School in Kent, Connecticut before being admitted to Yale University where he received his bachelor's degree in engineering in 1938. It had always been expected that Ed would attend Yale, since his father had graduated from Yale in 1905 with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. Immediately after his graduation, Edward sailed to England on board the *Queen Mary* with his best friend Ralph for a road trip around the British Isles using a small vehicle with essentially a lawnmower sized motor. It was on this trip where Ed first met his future wife, Gladys Howard, on board the *Queen Mary* to be trained in directing a boys' choir and to visit her English/Scottish relatives. Despite their initial fondness for one another, Edward and Gladys communicated very little before 1945 largely because Edward worked long weeks for General Electric as part of the war effort during World War II. Bill Abbe also contributed to the war effort, putting his skills to good use as an artist for the United States military. As the war wound down, Edward married Gladys Howard in New York in 1945 where Gladys worked as a music teacher. Together they had one daughter, Carolyn, and later adopted a son, David. Gladys, a pianist of such talent that she could simply

fake chords for pieces she forgot to practice as a child, would continue to teach and perform music for the remainder of her life. When their children were still very young, Edward and Gladys moved from New York to Virginia after a relocation of Edward's General Electric department.

Edward worked in Roanoke, Virginia for the vast majority of his career with General Electric and lived there after his retirement until 1991. From 1991 to 2001, Edward and Gladys lived permanently on Martha's Vineyard, where they had continued to vacation. Edward and Gladys entertained many local residents with their musical talents during their time on Martha's Vineyard. They are perhaps most well-known for entertaining at church and community functions as the Gracious Jazz Band, a musical group whose members, according to Ed, had to be over 80 years old and never practice. Ed and Gladys decided to move to Easthampton, Massachusetts in 2001 in order to live closer to Carolyn Abbe, their daughter. In 2004, after a gradual decline in health, Gladys Abbe passed away at age 89. Edward has remained busy investigating his family history and spending time with his children and grandchildren. With the help of family history researcher and writer Lisa Lipshires, Ed authored three self-published books: *Ready About Hand Alee: Sailing Through Life, Love, and Family, Riding the Wave of Electrification: The Life of Edward Folger Peck*; and *Making a Joyful Noise: The Life of Gladys Howard Abbe*.

Scope of collection

At the heart of the collection lies the history of the Abbe and Peck families, both quintessential American families of hard-working innovators and inventors. Edward H. Abbe's papers range from materials relating to his lifelong interests, especially his extensive collection of information about trains and the history of Martha's Vineyard, and his 35-year career with General Electric, including his patent received for the automated handling system that he helped design, to materials from Kent School and Yale University where he attended school. The broader history of the Abbe family is captured, too, in items that relate to Bill Abbe's art career, such as his World War II map of France that he drew for the military, and documents related to Gladys Abbe's social work and musical skills. Gladys was instrumental in educating local school children in music. She also worked for charitable organizations such as Toys for Tots and even established the nonprofit assistance organization Help, Inc.

The Peck family, from which Edward is descended through his mother, is featured in papers and photographs documenting the activities of various family members during the 1800s and 1900s. Among these items are materials related to Edward Folger Peck's business and personal life as well as information about his friend, brother-in-law, and one of the founders of the General Electric Company, Elihu Thomson. Finally, a large number of photograph albums created by Edward Abbe or other family members add a visual aspect to the historical record of both families.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Personal 1907-2009

Contains papers and items directly related to Edward H. Abbe's personal and professional life from his childhood to his retirement and beyond. The majority of material from Edward's younger years is from his schooling at the Rectory School in Pomfret, Connecticut, Kent School in Kent, Connecticut, and Yale University. In addition to his letters home, Edward corresponded with Father Sill of Kent School and kept a great deal of information about his various Yale University class reunions. This series also contains material related to Edward's 36-year career with General Electric. Edward gave many reports and talks for the company and also received one patent for an automated Article Handling System. Throughout his life, Edward collected material related to his interests in cars, boats, and especially trains such as photos, articles, and brochures. Especially noteworthy are documents and photos about Edward's personal train set and the model train catalogs he collected as a child, like the original copies of Lionel train catalogs. Edward also collected numerous booklets, articles, and other materials about the history of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts where he vacationed with his family as a child and lived for 10 years as an adult. Other items come from Edward's many travels, particularly the various cruises that he took with his wife Gladys after his retirement.

Series 2. Abbe Family 1724, 1883-2004

The material in this series comes from or contains information about the Abbe family beyond Edward. Especially prominent are Edward's brother, Bill, and his wife, Gladys. Documents about Bill Abbe's various art exhibits and photos of his work are included, as well as a unique map of France that Bill drew when he was an artist with the military during World War II. The material about Gladys Howard Abbe reflects her many accomplishments. She was well educated in music and education, but also devoted much time and energy to volunteer social work such as Toys for Tots and establishing the nonprofit charitable organization, Help, Inc. For these efforts the Roanoke Merchants Association awarded Gladys with the Mother of the Year in Arts and Sciences in 1966. This series also shows the many activities that Gladys and Edward Abbe participated in as a couple. After meeting on board the *Queen Mary* in 1938, Edward and Gladys began exchanging love letters in 1945. They enjoyed working at their church and within the wider communities of Roanoke, Virginia and later Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. In their 80s, Edward and Gladys even played free concerts to help raise money for their church or just to provide entertainment as the "Gracious Jazz Band," an effort recognized in several newspaper articles. The remainder of this series includes genealogical

information about the Abbe family and material about Edward's children (Carolyn and David), father (Harry Allen Abbe) who died at only 35 years of age, and mother (Elsie Peck Abbe) after her marriage to Harry Abbe.

Series 3. Peck Family

1879-2008

This series details the lives of members of the Peck family, relations of Edward Abbe on his mother's side. Information about the genealogy and activities of Peck family members is included, with a significant amount about the famed businessman Edward Folger Peck. Edward Peck led a very active professional life and was involved in groups such as the National Electric Light Association and Citizen's Electric Illuminating Company. His business connections included C. Loomis Allen until Allen became surrounded by scandal in 1918 and Elihu Thomson, a co-founder of the General Electric Company who married into the Peck family. On a personal level, correspondence between Edward Peck and his various family members, like the love letters he exchanged with Mary Booth who later became his wife, is included in the series. Diaries and account books describe the everyday lives and finances of various Peck family members, such as the Civil-War era diary of Charles Peck and the diaries kept by Mary Booth Peck from the 1920s to the mid-1940s. Some geographically-focused information details the activities of the Peck family in places like Hampton, Virginia, New Britain, Connecticut, Brooklyn, New York, and Schenectady, New York. This series also contains information about the wider genealogy of the Peck family, such as information about the Hart, Booth, Boardman, and Gifford families related to the Peck line. Some photos throughout the series show Peck family members from the 1800s-1900s in family, social, and professional settings.

Series 4. Photographs

ca. 1890-1995

The final series is made up exclusively of photograph albums. These albums range from the late 1800s to the 1990s and include family photos, photos of trips, and photos of various locations like Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts and Roanoke, Virginia. Most of the albums belonged to Ed and Gladys Abbe, but some earlier albums were created by Ed's mother Elsie Peck Abbe, by his aunt Katherine Peck Gifford and by his father, Harry Allen Abbe.

Inventory

Series 1. Personal 1907-2009 Automobile Information 1924-2001

Box 1: 1

Birthday

1934-1936

Box 1: 2

Boyhood Memorabilia

ca.1923-1996

Box 1: 3

Boyhood Sketchbook

ca.1927

Box 1: 4

Boyhood Sketches

ca.1920s-1930s

Box 1:5

Certificates and Membership Cards

ca.1922-1985

Box 1: 6

Childhood Memorabilia: Hampton, Virginia

1922-1993

Box 1: 7

Childhood Obituaries

1952-2003

Box 1: 8

Childhood Photos

ca.1920s

Box 1: 9

Correspondence to Edward Abbe

ca.1944, undated

Box 1: 10 Finances

1937-2005 Box 1: 11

Finances, Record Book

1930s-1950s Box 1: 12

ca.1970s-2006

Box 1: 13

Food

Freddie Bartholomew Memorabilia and Correspondence

1935-1936 Box 1: 14

General Electric: Article About

1940 Box 1: 15

General Electric: Automation Proposal and Studies

1957-1958 Box 2: 1

General Electric: Awards

1964-1974 Box 2: 2

General Electric: Certificate, Professional Business Management Course

1959 Box 33:

General Electric: Early Correspondence

1937-1940 Box 2: 3

General Electric: First Job

1937-1954 Box 2: 4

General Electric: History Booklets

1917-1953 Box 2: 5

General Electric: History Booklets

1978-1983 Box 2: 6

General Electric: Later Work

1939-1999 Box 2: 7

General Electric: Measuring Tools and Stencils

undated Box 2: 8

General Electric: Notebook

undated Box 2: 9

General Electric: Patent

1962-1965 Box 2: 10

General Electric: Photographs

1944-1975 Box 2: 11

General Electric: Proposals and Reports

1959-1965 Box 3: 1

General Electric: Published Papers

1947-1959

Box 3: 2

General Electric: Research for a Proposed Patent, Reversing Plugging Control with Dynamic Braking

1945-1956

Box 3: 3

General Electric: Retirement

1974-2007 Box 3: 4

General Electric: Retirement Book

1975 Box 34:

General Electric: Talks and Presentations: programs, speeches, papers, correspondence

1945-1970 Box 3: 5

General Electric: Unpublished Papers

1954 Box 3: 6

Humor Pieces

undated

Box 3: 7

Information on Friends: Obituaries and Weddings

1943-2008 Box 3:8

Interests: Auctions of Toys and Trains

1969-1990 Box 3: 9

Interests: Auctions of Toys and Trains, Mail

1990 Box 3: 10

Interests: Automobile Trivia: books, newspaper, article, pictures

ca.1937-1980s Box 3: 11

Interests: Boats, Pictures and Photos

1981-2004 Box 4: 1

Interests: Boats, Trivia

1971-1996 Box 4: 2

Interests: Bridges

1975 Box 4: 3

Interests: Canadian Trains

1977 Box 4: 4

Interests: Collector's Catalogs and Magazines- Trains, Cars, Boats

1933-1989 Box 4: 5

Interests: European Trains

ca.1970s Box 4: 6

Interests: Ives Catalogs- Reproductions and Originals

ca.1930s-1970s

Box 4: 7

Interests: Lathrop Train Exhibit

2004 Box 4: 8

Interests: Lionel Train Catalogs

1939-1982 Box 4: 9

Interests: Lionel Train Catalogs: Record

1947

Box:

Interests: Märklin Model Railroad

ca.1982-1986 Box 4: 10

Interests: Model Railroads

1939-1975 Box 4: 11

Interests: Model Railroads, Stationery

undated Box 4: 12

Interests: Oswego, NY Railroad History, 1848-1995

ca.1975-1995 Box 4: 13

Interests: Railroad Stations

1969-1999 Box 4: 14

Interests: Railroad Trivia, Newspapers

1939-2005 Box 4: 15

Interests: Railroad Trivia, Magazines and Articles

ca.1930s-1980s

Box 5: 1

Interests: Railroad Trivia, Other

ca.1930s-1980s

Box 5: 2

Interests: Train Fan Trips

1968-1977 Box 5: 3

Interests: Train Fan Trips, Independence Limited III

1975 Box 5: 4

Interests: Train Pictures

ca.1970s-1990s

Box 5: 5

Interests: Trains of Northeast Corridor

1939-2007 Box 5: 6

Interests: Trains, Excursion Advertisement and Menu

undated Box 26: 5

Interests: Trains, Menu

undated Box 26: 5

Interests: Trains, Record of Train Sounds

1947 Box 5: 7

Interests: Trains, Trains Album of Photographs Nos. 6 and 17

1944, undated Box 29: 2

Interests: Trolley Cars ca.1960s-1980s

Box 5: 8

Interview in Newspaper

2005 Box 5: 9

Kent School, Athletics: Photo

ca.1931 Box 29: 3 Kent School, Diploma

1934

Box 26: 1

Kent School: Father Sill and Dr. Parker Dooley

1936-1966 Box 5: 10

Kent School: Information

undated Box 5: 11

Kent School: Memorabilia

1930-1934 Box 5: 12

Kent School: Memorabilia

1929-1971 Box 6: 1

Kent School: Reunions

1990-1999 Box 6: 2

Kent School: Reunions, Fiftieth

1983-1984 Box 6: 3

Letters: Family Members

1921-1931 Box 6: 4

Letters: Father Sill of Kent School

1935-1941 Box 6: 5

Letters: Grandparents

1925-1936 Box 6: 6 Letters: Mother 1925-1934

Box 6: 7

Letters: Mother (from Yale)

1934-1935 Box 6: 8

Letters: Mother (from Yale)

1936 Box 6: 9

Letters: Mother (from Yale)

1937-1938 Box 6: 10 Letters: Mother

1939 Box 6: 11

Letters: Mother VI, to and from

ca.1943 Box 6: 12

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Booklets and Magazines

1904-1940s Box 7: 1

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Journals

2002-2008 Box 7: 2

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Newspapers

1939-1942 Box 7: 3

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Newspapers

1986-1999

Box 7: 4

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Newspapers

1999-2001 Box 7: 5

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Other Memorabilia

ca.1930s-2000

Box 7: 6

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Photographs

undated Box 7: 7

Martha's Vineyard: 300 Year History, Photographs, Large

undated Box:

Martha's Vineyard: Abbe and Peck Families

undated Box 7: 8

Martha's Vineyard: Calendar and Photograph

1999

Box 26: 7

Martha's Vineyard: Hart Haven and Hart Family, Current Events of the World

1919-1996 Box 7: 9

Martha's Vineyard: Hart Haven and Hart Family, Information

ca.1930s-2007 Box 7: 10

Martha's Vineyard: Hart Haven and Hart Family, Photos

ca.1900s-2001 Box 7: 11

Martha's Vineyard: Hurricanes

1944-2005 Box 7: 12

Martha's Vineyard: Jaws

1974 Box 7: 13

Martha's Vineyard: Legendary Figures

ca.1970-2008

Box 8: 1

Martha's Vineyard: Natural History

1966-2004 Box 8: 2

Martha's Vineyard: Natural History, Photo

2002 Box 8: 3

Martha's Vineyard: Postcards

1907, undated

Box 8: 4

Martha's Vineyard: Steamer Ships, Newspapers

1974-2007 Box 8: 5

Martha's Vineyard: Steamer Ships, Other

ca.1980s-2000s

Box 8: 6

Music: Cassette List and Equipment Information

1937-1991

Box 8: 7

Music: Organ Information

1942-2009

Music: Record Catalogs from England Trip

1938

Box 8: 9

Patches

ca.1930s-1940s

Box 33:

Pins

ca.1930s-1950s

Box 36:

Performances Attended

1935-1941

Box 8: 10

Performances Attended

1942-1944

Box 8: 11

Performances Attended

1945-1948

Box 8: 12

Performances Attended

1949-1954

Box 8: 13

Performances Attended

undated

Box 9: 1

Photographs

1937-2007

Box 9: 2

Photograph Collage, Clambake

undated

Box 29: 1

Postcards from Family Florida Trip

1931

Box 9: 3

Program, Ziegfeld Theatre

ca.1928

Box 9: 4

Rectory School Memorabilia

1928-1929

Box 9: 5

Ribbon

1961

Box 9: 6

Sailing

1967-1998

Box 9: 7

Stamp Collection Summary

1991

Box 9: 8

Stamps, HD&W

undated

Box 30:

Travel: Abbe Memorabilia

1939-2009

Box 9: 9

Travel: Aegean Odyssey

1993

Box 9: 10

Travel: American Canadian Caribbean Line (ACCL) Cruises

1998-2008

Box 9: 11

Travel: Australia Cruise, Photo

1987 Box 9: 12

Travel: Bareboat Cruising

1972-2009 Box 9: 13

Travel: Belize Cruise

1996 Box 9: 14

Travel: Bermuda Cruise

2008 Box 9: 15

Travel: Boyhood Trips

ca.1920s-1940s

Box 9: 16

Travel: Boyhood Trips, Photos

1920s Box 9: 17

Travel: Caicos-Nassau Cruise

1997 Box 9: 18

Travel: Delta Queen Cruise

undated Box 9: 19

Travel: England, Photojournal

1938-1939 Box 10: 1

Travel: England, Planning

1938 Box 10: 2

Travel: European Grand Tour

1970 Box 10: 3

Travel: Greek & Turkish Islands

1998 Box 10: 4

Travel: Hampton and Roanoke, Virginia

2004 Box 10: 5

Travel: Jazz Cruise

2002 Box 10: 6

Travel: Labrador-Newfoundland

1999 Box 10: 7

Travel: Maps for Trips and Cruises

ca.1990s-2005 Box 10: 8

Travel: Maps for Trips and Cruises, AAA

1961-1998 Box 10: 9

Travel: Maps for Trips and Cruises, World Map

1922 Box 10: 10

Travel: New England Islands

1994 Box 10: 11

Travel: Orinoco River Cruise

1993

Box 10: 12

Travel: Panama Canal

1993

Box 10: 13

Travel: Panama Cruise

1995

Box 10: 14

Travel: Trinidad-Panama Cruise

1999 Box 11: 1

Travel: Virgin Islands

1998 Box 11: 2

Travel: Virgin Islands Cruise

1990

Box 11: 3

Toy Catalogs and Instruction Books

1924-1932

Box 11: 4

Volunteering, Boy Scouts

ca.1942-1947

Box 11:5

Volunteering, Boy Scouts: Certificate

ca.1940s

Box 26: 6

Writings

ca.1977-1989

Box 11: 6

Yale, Degree: Bachelor of Engineering

1938

Box 29: 7

Yale, Exhibitions

1937-1938

Box 11: 7

Yale, General Information

1938-1991

Box 11:8

Yale, Graduation

1937-1938

Box 11: 9

Yale, Graduation Program

1938

Box 26: 2

Yale, Memorabilia

1934-1938

Box 11: 10

Yale, Records and Memorabilia

1932-1997

Box 11: 11

Yale, Reunion

1963-1983

Box 11: 12

Yale, Reunion

1988-1993

Box 11: 13

Yale, Reunion Photographs

1958, 1968

Box 26: 8

Yale, Reunions: 45th, 50th, 55th

1983-1993

Box 12: 1

Yale, Reunions: 60th

1993

Box 12: 2

Series 2. Abbe Family

1724, 1883-2004

Abbe, A. Parker

1908-1958

Box 12: 3

Abbe, A. Parker: Bible

1894

Box 12: 4

Abbe, A. Parker: Paddle

1907

Box 33:

Abbe, A. Parker: Photos

1908-1980

Box 12: 5

Abbe, Bill: Artwork and Exhibits, Newspapers, Photos, and Other Ephemera

1940s-1980s

Box 12: 6

Abbe, Bill: Artwork and Exhibits, Papers

1940-2004

Box 12: 7

Abbe, Bill: Artwork and Exhibits, Photograph Album

1981

Box 12: 8

Abbe, Bill: Biographical Information

1938-1989

Box 12: 9

Abbe, Bill: Boat Memorabilia

1930s-1960s

Box 12: 10

Abbe, Bill: Boat Memorabilia, Photograph

undated

Box 12: 11

Abbe, Bill: Buddy L. Toy Parts

undated

Box 12: 12

Abbe, Bill: Christmas Cards

1930s-1981

Box 12: 13

Abbe, Bill: Coins

1964-1965, undated

Box 12: 14

Abbe, Bill: Collections and Donations

1990-2005

Box 12: 15

Abbe, Bill: Correspondence to

1938-1983

Box 12: 16

Abbe, Bill: Drawings and Designs

1920s-1992

Box 12: 17

Abbe, Bill: Drawings and Designs, World War II Map of France

1945

Box:

Abbe, Bill: Drawings and Designs, Yale Song Books

1970s

Box 13: 1

Abbe, Bill: Financial and Legal Papers

1941-1983

Box 13: 2

Abbe, Bill: Fun

1972, undated

Box 13: 3

Abbe, Bill: Items from Relatives

1980s

Box 13: 4

Abbe, Bill: Letter from former Student as Banner

1963

Box 33:

Abbe, Bill: Letters to and from Edward Abbe from Rectory School

1928-1931

Box 13: 5

Abbe, Bill: Letters to Edward Abbe during World War II

1941-1945

Box 13: 6

Abbe, Bill: Letters to Family Members

1920s-1930s

Box 13: 7

Abbe, Bill: Medal, St. Paul's School

undated

Box 36:

Abbe, Bill: Obituaries, Notices

1983-2000

Box 13: 8

Abbe, Bill: Official Papers

1922-1949

Box 13: 9

Abbe, Bill: Photos

1920s-1980s

Box 13: 10

Abbe, Bill: Photos, Large

1920s-1980s

Box 13: 11

Abbe, Bill: Photo with Commentary

undated

Box 26: 3

Abbe, Bill: Posthumous Exhibit, Rectory School

1991-1992

Box 13: 12

Abbe, Bill: Posthumous Exhibits and Sales

1985-1989

Box 13: 13

Abbe, Bill: Posthumous Exhibits and Sales

1991-2000

Box 13: 14

Abbe, Bill: Protégés and Friends

1974-2005

Box 13: 15

Abbe, Bill: Retirement

1981

Box 13: 16

Abbe, Bill: Retrospective Exhibit, Old Sculpin

1997-1999

Box 13: 17

Abbe, Bill: Sketchbook

1920s-1930s

Box 13: 18

Abbe, Carolyn

1946-2009

Box 14: 1

Abbe, Carolyn: Family Photographs

1940s-1970s Box 14: 2

Abbe, Carolyn: Trips to Afghanistan

1972 Box 14: 3

Abbe, Dakkan: Photos

1970s-1980s Box 14: 4

Abbe, Dakkan: Wedding

2003

Box 14: 5

Abbe, David and Cindy

1967-1986 Box 14: 6

Abbe, David and Cindy, Photographs

1950-1980s

Box 14: 7

Abbe, Elsie Peck

1913-1956

Box 14: 8

Abbe, Elsie Peck: List of Wedding Gifts

1913

Box 14: 9

Abbe, Elsie Peck: Photographs

1891-1954

Box 14: 10

Abbe, Elsie Peck: Ration Cards

1943-1945 Box 14: 11

Abbe, Elsie Peck: Recipe Book

1920s

Box 14: 12

Abbe, Elsie Peck: Wedding Journal

1913 Box 35:

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Awards and Commendations

1966-1990 Box 14: 13

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Biography

undated Box 14: 14

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Certificates and Diplomas

1914-1944 Box 14: 15

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Family History

1934-2007 Box 14: 16

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Family Papers

1884-1978 Box 14: 17

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Family Photographs

1800s-1989

Box 15: 1

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Funeral Service and Obituaries

2004

Box 15: 2

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Memorabilia

1935-1998 Box 15: 3

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Musicals and Concerts

1940s-2003 Box 15: 4

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Newspaper Article

1990 Box 28: 9

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Photographs, Early

1914-1960s Box 15: 5

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Photographs, Late

1960s-2000s Box 15: 6

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Schooling Information

1938, undated Box 15: 7

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Scrapbook

1930 Box 35:

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Scrapbook Contents

1945 Box 15: 8

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Social Work

1956-1998 Box 15: 9

Abbe, Gladys Howard: Song Lists

undated Box 15: 10

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Birth of Daughter

1946 Box 16: 1

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Correspondence

1938-1945 Box 16: 2

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Departure from Roanoke and Martha's Vineyard

1990-2001 Box 16: 3

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Gracious Jazz Band

1994-2002 Box 16: 4

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Love Letters

1945 Mar-Apr Box 16: 5

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Love Letters

1945 May Box 16: 6

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Love Letters

1945 June-July

Box 16: 7

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Memorabilia

1933-1996 Box 16: 8

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Musical Performances

1938-2001

Box 16: 9

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Photographs

1945-2000s

Box 16: 10

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Photographs, Christ Church in Roanoke, Virginia

1991

Box 16: 11

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Possessions

1969

Box 16: 12

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Possessions, Videotape of William Abbe Trust House

1994

Box 36:

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Queen Mary

1938, 1997 Box 16: 13

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Queen Mary Photographs

1938

Box 16: 14

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Roanoke History

1970s-1980s

Box 16: 15

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Social Work and Awards

1950-2001 Box 17: 1

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Sympathy Cards Edward Received after Gladys's Death

2004

Box 17: 2

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Sympathy Cards

2004

Box 17: 3

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Sympathy Cards

2004

Box 17: 4

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Travels

1986-1996

Box 17: 5

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Travels, 45th Anniversary

1990

Box 17: 6

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Wedding

1945

Box 17: 7

Abbe, Gladys and Edward: Wedding Anniversary Book

1995

Box 36:

Abbe, Harry Allen: Degree and Diploma

1902, 1905 Box 29: 6

Abbe, Harry Allen: Flood of 1907 Information (copies)

undated Box 18: 1

Abbe, Harry Allen: Photographs in Case

ca. 1885-1910

Box 30:

Abbe, Harry Allen: Photograph, Yale Class

1905 Box 27: 3 Abbe, Harry Allen: Photos

1883, undated

Box 18: 2

Abbe, Harry Allen: Yale Memorabilia and Obituaries

1905-1930 Box 18: 3

Abbe, Harry and Elsie Peck: Furniture

undated Box 18: 4

Abbe, Harry and Elsie Peck: Wedding and Honeymoon

1913 Box 18: 5

Cottage: Construction

1929-2003 Box 18: 6

Cottage: Photograph Album

1981 Box 18: 7

Cottage: Photographs

1930s-1980s Box 18: 8

Drafting Set, Partial

ca. 1885-1910

Box 33:

Drafting Sets

ca. 1910

Box 32:

Estates: A. Parker Abbe

1959-1963 Box 18: 9

Estates: Abbe Family

1923 Box 18: 10

Estates: Deed for Virginia Home, Elsie Peck Abbe

1919 Box 18: 11

Estates: Elsie Peck Abbe

1916-1962 Box 18: 12

Estates: Nellie Abbe

1930-1940 Box 19: 1

Estates: Sale of Virginia Home to Elsie Peck Abbe

1918-1922 Box 19: 2

Estates: William P. Abbe

1983-1984 Box 19: 3 Genealogy 1800s-2003 Box 19: 4

Genealogy Photocopies

undated Box 19: 5

Items of Historical Significance: Newsweek and Life magazines about the Assassination of John F. Kennedy

1963

Box 27: 1

Items of Historical Significance: New York Herald Tribune about New York World's Fair

1939

Box 28: 10

Items of Historical Significance: Newspapers, New York Times 75th Anniversary

1926

Box 29: 4

Items of Historical Significance: Newspapers, World War II, Moon Landing, Challenger Explosion

1945, 1969, 1986

Box 27: 2

Knife

1905

Box 33:

Land Grants

1724, 1828

Box 26: 4

Letter, Nellie P. and A. H. Abbe

undated

Box 19: 6

Memorabilia

undated

Box 19: 7

Obituaries

ca. 1915-1999

Box 19:8

Photograph Album

undated

Box 19: 9

Photographs

1800s-1900s

Box 19: 10

Photographs

ca. 1875-1915

Box 19: 11

Photographs, Encased

ca. 1875-1890

Box 30:

Photographs, Large

ca. 1875-1915

Box 20: 1

Photographs, Large

ca. 1875-ca. 1915

Box 20: 2

Photographs, Abbe Hardware Store in New Britain, Connecticut

undated

Box 27: 4

Photographs, Summer Ramblings Connecticut

1800s

Box 20: 3

Photocopies of Abbe Family Information

1904-1972

Box 20: 4

Series 3. Peck Family

1879-2008

Boardman-Peck Family

1895-1991

Box 20: 5

Booth Family

1882-1949

Box 20: 6

Booth Family, Photographs

1800s

Box 20: 7

Booth Family, Photographs, Encased

1800s

Box 30:

Case with Money Holder and Calling Card

1800s Box 31:

Davis, Emerson, Rev. Dr.

1855-1929 Box 20: 8

Estates: Peck Family

1938 Box 20: 9

Estates: Peck, Edward Folger

1930-1945 Box 20: 10

Estates: Peck, Mary Booth

1934-1945 Box 20: 11

Estates: Sale of Peck House in Schenectady, New York

1919 Box 20: 12

Genealogy: Mayhew-Peck

1900s Box 20: 13

Genealogy: Peck Family

1915, 1939 Box 21: 1

Genealogy: Peck Family, Chart

1981 Box 29: 5 Gifford Family ca. 1915-2004

Box 21: 2

Gifford Family, Photographs

ca. 1915 Box 21: 3

Gifford Family, Photograph, Large

undated Box 28: 2

Hart Family Genealogy Chart

undated Box 28: 3

Hart Family Genealogy Chart, Large

1985

Information: Peck Family

1884-2002 Box 21: 4

Information: Peck Family (copies)

1855-1921 Box 21: 5

Letters, Written by Mary Booth Peck (copies)

1932 Box 21: 6 Moore, John 1985

Box 21: 7

Obituaries, Funeral Booklets, and Death Certificates

1900-1944

Box 21: 8

Peck, Charles: Diary

1861-1862 Box 21: 9

Peck, Edward Folger: Accident

undated Box 21: 10

Peck, Edward Folger: American Electrical Works

1887-1891 Box 21: 11

Peck, Edward Folger: Birthday, 50th

1911

Box 21: 12

Peck, Edward Folger: Business and Colleagues

1884-1956 Box 21: 13

Peck, Edward Folger: Business and Colleagues, C. Loomis Allen

1918 Box 21: 14

Peck, Edward Folger: Business and Colleagues (copies)

1885-1956 Box 21: 15

Peck, Edward Folger: Citizen's Electric Illuminating Company

1890s Box 21: 16

Peck, Edward Folger: Clubs and Associations

1913-1941 Box 21: 17

Peck, Edward Folger: Clubs and Associations, National Electric Light Association

ca. 1885 Box 21: 18

Peck, Edward Folger: Clubs and Associations, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine

1893 Box 28: 6

Peck, Edward Folger: Correspondence, Elsie Peck

1892-1906 Box 21: 19

Peck, Edward Folger: Correpsondence, Family Members

1879-1918 Box 21: 20

Peck, Edward Folger: Correspondence, Mary Augusta Booth before Marriage

1882, undated Box 22: 1

Peck, Edward Folger: Correspondence, Mother

1880-1904 Box 22: 2

Peck, Edward Folger: Correspondence, Oliver Peck

1906 Box 22: 3

Peck, Edward Folger: Electricity, Humor

1893, undated Box 22: 4

Peck, Edward Folger: Funeral

1930 Box 22: 5

Peck, Edward Folger: Life Insurance Information

1920, undated Box 22: 6 Peck, Edward Folger: Photographs

1861-1920 Box 22: 7

Peck, Edward Folger: Photographs, Clambake

undated Box 28: 7

Peck, Edward Folger: Photographs, Large

early 1900s Box 28: 8

Peck, Edward Folger: Photographs, National Electric Light Association

1891 Box 22: 8

Peck, Edward Folger: Photographs, National Electric Light Association, Large

1891 Box 28: 1

Peck, Edward Folger: Articles, Letters, and Photographs (copies)

ca. 1885-1915 Box 22: 9

Peck, Edward Folger: Watch Information

undated Box 22: 10

Peck, Edward Folger: World's Fairs

1904, undated Box 22: 11

Peck, Edward Folger and Mary (Minnie): Daily Prayer Books

1877, undated Box 22: 12

Peck, Edward Folger and Mary Booth: Account Books

1915-1932 Box 22: 13

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Address Book

1902 Box 22: 14

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Childhood

ca. 1890 Box 22: 15

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Diary

1911-1912 Box 22: 16

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Letters from Friends

1907 Box 22: 17

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Letters Home

1907 July-Sept Box 22: 18

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Letters Home

1907 Sept-Oct Box 22: 19

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Notebook with Sites Visited

1907 Box 23: 1

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Passenger Lists and Souvenirs

1907 Box 23: 2

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Postcards

1907 Box 23: 3

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Postcards

1907

Box 23: 4

Peck, Elsie Mayhew: Europe Trip, Postcards III

1907 Box 23: 5

Peck, Katherine D.: Childhood

1908 Box 23: 6

Peck, Katherine D.: Photographs

early 1900s Box 23: 7

Peck, Mary Booth: Account Book

1932-1944 Box 23: 8

Peck, Mary Booth: Diary

1921-1924 Box 23: 9

Peck, Mary Booth: Diary

1925-1933 Box 24: 1

Peck, Mary Booth: Diary

1941-1944 Box 24: 2

Peck, Mary Booth: Europe Trip, Letters

1892 Box 24: 3

Peck, Mary Booth: Europe Trip, Programs and Postcards

1892 Box 24: 4

Peck, Mary Booth: Letter from Hellen Blow, Housekeeper

1931 Box 24: 5

Peck, Mary Booth: Photos

ca. 1885-1915 Box 24: 6

Peck, Mary Booth: Scrapbook of European Trip

1892 Box 32:

Peck, Mary Booth: Scrapbook of Items related to Edward Folger Peck's Career

1880-1915 Box 34:

Peck, William E.

1871-2008 Box 24: 7

Peck Family in Brooklyn, New York

1884, undated Box 24: 8

Peck Family in Hampton, Virginia

ca. 1915-2007 Box 24: 9

Peck Family in Hampton, Virginia: Newspapers

1934-1947 Box 24: 10

Peck Family in Hampton, Virginia: Photographs and Postcard

ca. 1915 Box 24: 11

Peck Family in New Britain, Connecticut

1900-2009

Box 24: 12

Peck Family and Abbe Family in Schenectady, New York

1904-2002

Box 24: 13

Photographic Portrait of Elsie Peck

1902

Box 24: 14

Photograph, Front Street House, Schenectady, NY

undated

Box 28: 5

Photograph, Lowell Road House, Schenectady, NY

undated

Box 28: 4

Photographs, Copies

1890s-1925

Box 24: 15

Photographs, Scrapbook

ca. 1885-1915

Box 24: 16

Photographs, Small

ca. 1875-1935

Box 25: 1

Photographs, Large

ca. 1875-1920

Box 25: 2

Portraits

1890s-ca. 1915

Box 25: 3

Schenectady History

undated

Box 25: 4

Schoolwork Possibly by E.F. Peck or Mary B. Peck

ca. 1885

Box 25: 5

Social Life

1880-1913

Box 25: 6

Thomson, Elihu: Awards and Articles About

1920s-1984

Box 25: 7

Thomson, Elihu: Family Members

1937, undated

Box 25: 8

Thomson, Elihu: Obituaries

1937

Box 25: 9

Thomson, Elihu: Photograph

1922

Box 25: 10

Thomson, Elihu: Swampscott Historical Society

1938-1990 Box 25: 11

Thomson, Elihu: Writings and Cards

1894-1934

Box 25: 12

Thomson, Mary Louise Peck

1917

Box 25: 13

Thomson Family: Obituaries

undated

Box 25: 14

Vacations

1921

Box 25: 15

Series 4. Photographs

ca. 1890-1995

Photograph Album

ca. 1885-1930

Box 39

Photograph Album

1903

Box 39

Photograph Album

1904

Box 39

Photograph Album

1905-1909

Box 39

Photograph Album

1907

Box 39

Photograph Album

1909-1928

Box 39

Photograph Album

1910-1911

Box 39

Photograph Album

1910-1913

Box 39

Photograph Album

1912-1920

Box 39

Photograph Album

1918-1920

Box 39

Photograph Album

1927-1945

Box 39

Photograph Album

1928-1934

Box 39

Photograph Album

1928-1937, 1941-1945

Box 37

Photograph Album

1929-1935

Box 37

Photograph Album

1936-1942

Box 37

Photograph Album

1945-1955

Box 37

Photograph Album

1950-1965

Box 37

Photograph Album

1967-1968

Box 37

Photograph Album 1968-1969 Box 37 Photograph Album 1970 Box 38 Photograph Album (part 1) 1970-1972 Box 40: 1 Photograph Album (part 2) 1970-1972 Box 40: 12 Photograph Album 1972 Box 38 Photograph Album (part 1) 1973-1976 Box 40: 3 Photograph Album (part 2) 1973-1976 Box 40: 4 Photograph Album (part 3) 1973-1976 Box 40: 5 Photograph Album (part 1) 1977-1980 Box 40: 6 Photograph Album (part 2) 1977-1980 Box 40: 7 Photograph Album 1977 Box 38 Photograph Album (part 1) 1980-1983 Box 40: 8 Photograph Album (part 2) 1980-1983 Box 40: 9 Photograph Album (part 1) 1983-1985 Box 40: 10 Photograph Album (part 2) 1983-1985 Box 40: 11 Photograph Album (part 3) 1983-1985 Box 40: 12 Photograph Album (part 4, loose photographs) 1983-1985 Box 40: 13 Photograph Album 1983-1984 Box 40: 14

Box 40: 15 Photograph Album 1987

1986

Photograph Album

Box 38

Photograph Album (part 1)

1991-1994

Box 40: 16

Photograph Album (part 2)

1991-1994

Box 40: 17

Photograph Album

1992

Box 38:

Photograph Album (part 1)

1993

Box 40: 18

Photograph Album (part 2)

1993

Box 40: 19

Photograph Album (part 3)

1993

Box 40: 20

Photograph Album

1993

Box 40: 21

Photograph Album (part 1)

1993

Box 40: 22

Photograph Album (part 2)

1993

Box 40: 23

Photograph Album

1994

Box 40: 24

Photograph Album (part 1)

1995

Box 40: 25

Photograph Album (part 2)

1995

Box 40: 26

Photograph Album (part 1)

1995

Box 40: 27

Photograph Album (part 2, loose items)

1005

Box 40: 28

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Edward H. Abbe, 2012.

Separated Material

Books that came with the Edward H. Abbe Papers were removed from the collection and will be cataloged separately. These books include:

1905 Annual: Schenectady High School

Chamberlain, Samuel. Martha's Vineyard: A Camera Impression (New York: Hastings House, 1941)

Christ Episcopal Church Roanoke, Virginia 1892-1942

Christ Episcopal Church Roanoke, Virginia 1892-1961

Class Book 1905, Yale University

Davis, Emerson, Rev. Dr. *The Franklin Intellectual Arithmetic: For the Use of Schools* (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam, 1832) *Day by Day* (St. Paul's School, 1976)

Decennial Record Class of 1905 Sheffield Scientific School compiled by William McK. Barber (1916)

Ellsberg, Edward, Commander. On the Bottom (New York: Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1929)

Extracts from the Memorial of Captain Thomas Abbey compiled by Alden Freeman (Enfield, CT: Magnani & McCormick, 1975) Family Prayer and Record Book, Abbe and Parker Families

Five Year Record Class of 1905 Sheffield Scientific School Yale University compiled by William McK. Barber (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse, & Taylor Press, 1910)

Havemeyer, Loomis and Dudley, Samuel W. The Engineering Heritage at Yale 1852-1957 (New Haven: 1959)

Hill, Henry Chase. The Wonder Book of Knowledge (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co, 1921)

History of the Class of 1938 (New Haven: Yale University, 1938)

History of the Class of 1908 Yale College Vol. 1 edited by Walter G. Davis, Jr. (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Co., 1908) Kent School Yearbooks (1930 and 1934)

Memorial of Captain Thomas Abbey (East Orange, NJ: Abbey Printshop)

Miller, John A. Men and Volts at War: The Story of General Electric in World War II (New York: Bantam Books, 1947)

Official Guide Book: New York World's Fair (New York: Exposition Publications, Inc., 1939)

Quarter Century Record Class of 1905 Sheffield Scientific School compiled by G. Gifford Symes (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Co., 1930)

Rectory School Alumni Directory Book (White Plains, New York: Bernard C. Harris Publishing Co., 1986)

Smith, Richard R. History of the Class of 1908 Yale College (Cornwall, New York: Cornwall Press, 1940)

The 1934 Pioneer: 100th Commencement Number edited by Helen M. Lockwood (1934)

Thomson, Elihu. The Mountain Top (Boston, 1937)

Turner, Harry B. The Story of the Island Steamers (Nantucket: Inquirer and Mirror, 1910)

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Search terms

Subjects

Electrical engineers

General Electric

Kent School--Students

Martha's Vineyard (Mass.)--Description and travel

Rectory School--Students

Roanoke (Va.)--Description and travel

Yale University--Students

Contributors

Abbe, Edward H. [main entry]

Genres and formats

Diaries

Letters (Correspondence)

Photographs

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