

Table of Contents

- [Collection Summary](#)
- [Historical Note](#)
- [Scope and Content Note](#)
- [Subject Headings](#)
- [Related Material](#)
- [Administrative Information](#)
- [Access and Use](#)
- [Encoding Information](#)
- [Container List](#)

Collection Summary

Repository: Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries

Creator: Vassar College Natural History Museum

Title: Vassar College Natural History Museum Records

**Inclusive
Dates:** 1866-1969

Bulk Dates: 1906-1944

Quantity: 0.4 cubic feet (1 box)

Abstract: The collection contains correspondence between Natural History Museum administrators, other museums and educational institutions, and vendors and collectors; annual reports; inventories and lists of specimens kept by the museum; clippings about the museum; advertisements for, and descriptions of, various anatomical and biological specimens and models; records of specimen loans and purchases; and floor plans for a proposed addition to the New England Building.

[Top](#)

Historical Note

In late 1862, seeing a need for Vassar students to have the same first-hand access to science education specimens as their male counterparts, the Vassar College trustees hired Henry A. Ward, a professor of natural sciences at the University of Rochester, to put together a "cabinet" collection of scientific specimens. Ward's cabinet, conceived of as a teaching tool comprised mostly of geological and mineralogical specimens, was installed by 1864 and was housed in Main Building. In 1865, Sanborn Tenney was hired as Vassar's first professor of Natural History, as well as the first curator of the Collection. In 1874, the college decided to move the Collection to the nearby Calisthenium and Riding Academy in order to create more space in Main. On February 22, 1875, the newly named Vassar College Museum of Natural History celebrated its grand opening.

The Museum became home to numerous historically and scientifically important artifacts and included a comprehensive assortment of books about birds, the subjects of which ranged from the aesthetic lure of birds to scientific discussions of migration, anatomy, and physiology. One of the greatest possessions in the collection was a specimen of the extinct bird the Great Auk. The Vassar Auk was of particular importance because it was the specimen that John James Audubon had used in his descriptions of the bird.

In 1918, in order to create more classroom space, the Museum was moved to the New England Building. The museum in the New England Building extended from the first floor to the third, with collections being displayed both on the stair landings as well as in the central hall of the third floor. The impressive collection included nearly 3,000 mounted birds, a majority of the North American species, most of which were gathered together by James Orton and Poughkeepsie resident Jacob P. Giraud.

In 1979, multiple factors, including the poor state of the collection and a need for more classroom space, spurred the decision to start phasing out the museum. With its closure, the remaining collections were distributed among various national and state institutions. In 1992, what was left of the museum was moved to the first floor of Ely Hall. In April 2006, the museum, now called the A. Scott Warthin Museum of Geology and Natural History, celebrated its re-opening, complete with a newly renovated space and new display cases.

Source: ["Natural History Museum," Vassar College Encyclopedia, 2007.](#)

[Top](#)

Chronology of Museum Curators

1865-1869	Sanborn Tenney (Professor of Natural History)
1869-1877	James Orton (Professor of Natural History)
1878-1906	William Buck Dwight (Professor of Natural History)
1906-1936	Aaron L. Treadwell (Professor of Zoology)
1937-1963	Rudolf T. Kempton (Professor of Zoology)
[1964?]-1969	Madelene E. Pierce (Professor of Zoology)
[1970?]-1977	Margaret R. Wright (Professor of Biology)

[Top](#)

Scope and Content Note

The collection contains correspondence between Natural History Museum administrators, other museums and educational institutions, and vendors and collectors. Also included are annual reports, inventories and lists of specimens kept by the museum, clippings about the museum, advertisements for and descriptions of various anatomical and biological specimens and models, records of specimen loans and purchases, and floor plans for a proposed addition to the New England Building.

Arranged alphabetically.

[Top](#)

Access and Use

Access

This collection is open for research according to the [regulations of the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections Library](#) without any additional restrictions.

Restrictions on Use

Permission to quote (publish) from unpublished or previously published material must be obtained as described in the [regulations of the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections Library](#).

[Top](#)

Related Material

Related Materials

- Jacob Post Giraud, Jr. Papers
- Margaret Wright Papers
- William Buck Dwight Papers
- [James Orton Papers.](#)
- [The Vassar College Archives Files contains records of the Natural History Museum prior to 1900.](#)
- [The Vassar College Subject Files contains additional files on the Natural History Museum.](#)

[Top](#)

Subject Headings

Names:

- Kempton, Rudolf T.
- Pierce, Madelene E.
- Treadwell, Aaron L. (Aaron Louis), 1866-1947

Organizations:

- Vassar College. Department of Biology
- Vassar College. Department of Natural History
- Vassar College. Department of Zoology
- Vassar College. New England Building

Subjects:

- Natural History Museums--New York (State)--Poughkeepsie
- Natural History--Study and teaching

Document Types:

- Clippings
- Correspondence
- Financial records
- Floor Plans

VCL Categories:

- Vassar College Administrative Offices and Functions

[Top](#)

Encoding Information

Encoded by Emma Gronbeck, October 2023.

[Top](#)

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Vassar College Natural History Museum Records, Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College Libraries.

Processing Information

Processed by Emma Gronbeck, October 2023.

Acquisition Information

Unknown. Presumably transferred from the Biology Department in the 1980s.

Four letters to Aaron Treadwell from 1907 were the gift of Robert Suter, January 2009. (A2009-009)

[Top](#)

Container List

Folder 1 Advertisements, anatomical and natural history specimens (French and German), circa 1890s

Folder 2 Annual reports, 1916-1938

Folder 3 Clippings, 1939-1948

Folder 4 Correspondence, 1906

Folder 5 Correspondence, 1907

Folder 6 Correspondence, 1908

Folder 7 Correspondence, 1909

Folder 8 Correspondence, 1910

Folder 9 Correspondence, 1911

Folder
10 Correspondence, 1912

Folder
11 Correspondence, 1913

Folder
12 Correspondence, 1914-1917

Folder
13 Correspondence, 1922-1924

Folder
14 Correspondence, 1925

Folder
15 Correspondence, 1926

Folder
16 Correspondence, 1927

Folder
17 Correspondence, 1928

Folder
18 Correspondence, 1929-1930

Folder 19	Correspondence, 1931
Folder 20	Correspondence, 1932-1933
Folder 21	Correspondence, 1934
Folder 22	Correspondence, 1935-1936
Folder 23	Correspondence, 1937-1938
Folder 24	Correspondence, 1953-1955
Folder 25	Correspondence, circa 1963-1969
Folder 26	Correspondence regarding mollusks and shells, circa 1923-1944
Folder 27	Correspondence: Palmer, Ralph S., regarding the Great Auk and other bird specimens, 1942 (photocopies) "Criticism Invited Upon Vassar College Collection of North American Birds," visitor comment book, 1867-1871 [see catalog entry QH70.U52 P68 1867]
Folder 28	Floor plans, "Addition to New England Building", 1934 "Guide to the Museum of Natural History," by Aaron L. Treadwell, 1944-1945 [see catalog entry QH70.U52 P68 1945] "Guide to the Museum of Natural History," by Aaron L. Treadwell, 1950-1951 [see Vassar College Subject Files, Folder 20.36]
Folder 29	Inventories of shells and other invertebrates, 1866, undated
Folder 30	"Inventory of Anthropological Exhibits and Storage in the New England Building", 1935
Folder 31	Invoices, 1897, undated
Folder 32	List of North American birds not in the J.P. Giraud Collection, undated
Folder 33	Notes on museum cabinets and specimens, undated

[Return to the Table of Contents](#)