

Archives and Special Collections

Dickinson College

Carlisle, PA

COLLECTION REGISTER

Name: **Baird, Spencer Fullerton (1823-1887)** **MC 2000.11**

Material: Papers (1868-1873)

Volume: 0.25 linear feet (1 Document Box)

Donation: Gift of the Friends of the Library, 1984

Usage: There are no usage restrictions on these materials.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Spencer Fullerton Baird, the third of seven children, was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on February 3, 1823 to Samuel Baird and Lydia McFunn Biddle. The family relocated to Carlisle, Pennsylvania following the death of Baird's father from cholera in 1833. Baird entered Dickinson College as a freshman in 1837, receiving his A.B. degree from the institution in 1840. In 1843, the College conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts, and in 1856, an honorary degree of Doctor of Physical Science.

Baird's growing list of specimens impressed older scholars of natural history, and he became good friends with John J. Audubon, the famous ornithologist, among others. Following his graduation from Dickinson College, Baird attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York for one year, but found that he had a dislike for the medical practice and returned to Carlisle to continue with his studies. During this time, Baird married Mary Helen Churchill, and the young couple later had a daughter, Lucy Hunter Baird. Baird was offered a teaching position at Dickinson College in 1845 as Professor of Natural History, and became popular among the students for his practice of taking the young men out into the field to study the natural world; he would become Chair of both the Natural History and Chemistry Departments in 1848. Throughout his time as professor, Baird continued to write on subjects of natural history, quickly becoming a respected ornithologist, zoologist, and naturalist.

In 1850, Baird accepted a position as Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. It reportedly took two freight cars to transport his collection of birds, lizards, fish, skins, and skeletons, weighing 89,000 pounds, from Carlisle to Washington. Many of these specimens can still be found in the Smithsonian

Museums. Upon the death of Joseph Henry in 1878, Baird succeeded him as Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

In addition to the post Baird held at the Smithsonian, he also served as Director of the National Museum from its founding until his death, Secretary of the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, an early member of the National Academy of Sciences, and a trustee of the Corcoran Art Gallery, Columbia University, and Dickinson College. In spite of all of his duties, Baird was still able to develop his career as an authority on natural history. A bibliography of his works from 1843-1882 contains nearly 1,200 titles, including The Birds of North America, Mammals of North America, the translation of the Iconographic Encyclopedia from German, and A History of North American Birds.

In 1871 Baird was appointed the first U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries by President Ulysses S. Grant and he would hold that position until his death in 1887. This position led Baird to spend a great deal of time in Woods Hole, Massachusetts as he was responsible for overseeing the founding of the great Marine Biology Laboratory there. Spencer Fullerton Baird died at Woods Hole on August 19, 1887 and was laid to rest at Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

George Newbold Lawrence, ornithologist and wholesale druggist, was born on October 20, 1806 in New York City to John Burling Lawrence and Hannah Newbold. He married Mary Anne Newbold in 1834 and became head of his father's wholesale drug and chemical business in 1835, however he later retired to devote all of his time to his true interest, ornithology. He made the acquaintance of Spencer Fullerton Baird in 1841, and they became lifelong friends. Baird was influential in Lawrence's decision to retire and begin serious study of ornithology. Lawrence assisted Baird in the preparation of the series Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain...Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, which was published by the War Department. He was one of the founders of the American Ornithologists Union and also of the College of Pharmacy in New York City. Lawrence died on January 17, 1895.

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The Spencer Fullerton Baird Papers are housed in one document box and consist solely of correspondence between Spencer Fullerton Baird and George Newbold Lawrence between 1868 and 1873. The bulk of the correspondence is from Baird to his friend and colleague Lawrence, with a few drafts of letters from Lawrence to Baird. The correspondence has been arranged alphabetically by author, and thereafter chronologically.

The vast majority of these letters contain information relating to natural history specimens the men were exchanging, research each man was doing (generally in the field of ornithology), and the work of other colleagues. With few exceptions, the letters, while friendly, are businesslike; personal information is rarely exchanged. Nevertheless, several of the letters make mention of business trips that Baird made to New York and Newbold made to Washington D.C., and they demonstrate that the relationship between

the two extended beyond their mutual interests, although there is little evidence elsewhere in the collection to that effect.

On the whole, this collection, due to its extreme specificity and continuous use of scientific parlance, is not very accessible to the casual researcher interested in Spencer Fullerton Baird or his colleague George Newbold. For those researchers with advanced knowledge of bird taxonomy and scientific terms, however, the correspondence in this collection provides an interesting look into the day-to-day, research-related concerns of one of the leading scientific minds of the nineteenth-century.

COLLECTION INVENTORY

BOX 1 - MC 2000.11

CORRESPONDENCE

Baird, Spencer Fullerton

- Folder 01) Letters to George N. Lawrence - March 1868
- Folder 02) Letters to George N. Lawrence - April-June 1869
- Folder 03) Letters to George N. Lawrence - July-August 1869
- Folder 04) Letters to George N. Lawrence - October-December 1869
- Folder 05) Letters to George N. Lawrence - January-March 1870
- Folder 06) Letters to George N. Lawrence - May-June 1870
- Folder 07) Letters to George N. Lawrence - July-August 1870
- Folder 08) Letters to George N. Lawrence - October-December 1870
- Folder 09) Letters to George N. Lawrence - January-March 1871
- Folder 10) Letters to George N. Lawrence - April-June 1871
- Folder 11) Letters to George N. Lawrence - July-September 1871
- Folder 12) Letters to George N. Lawrence - October-December 1871
- Folder 13) Letters to George N. Lawrence - January-February 1872
- Folder 14) Letters to George N. Lawrence - April-June 1872
- Folder 15) Letters to George N. Lawrence - July-August 1872
- Folder 16) Letters to George N. Lawrence - October-December 1872
- Folder 17) Letters to George N. Lawrence - January-July 1873

Lawrence, George Newbold

- Folder 18) Drafts of letters to Spencer F. Baird - January-December 1868
- Folder 19) Draft of letter to Spencer F. Baird - May 11, 1869
- Folder 20) Draft of letter to J. H. McIlvaine - June 26, 1870
- Folder 21) Drafts of letters to Spencer F. Baird - February-July 1871
- Folder 22) Drafts of letters to Spencer F. Baird - March-August 1872

This collection register was prepared by Laura C. Dettloff, October 2000.