

Henry L. Smith collection of Augustus Le Plongeon correspondence

1099

Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

Last updated on March 02, 2017.

University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

November 2009

Table of Contents

Summary Information.....	3
Biography/History.....	4
Scope and Contents.....	4
Administrative Information.....	5
Controlled Access Headings.....	5
Collection Inventory.....	7
Letters 1906-1907.....	7

Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Penn Museum Archives
Creator	Le Plongeon, Augustus, 1826-1908
Creator	Smith, Henry L.
Title	Henry L. Smith collection of Augustus Le Plongeon correspondence
Call number	1099
Date [bulk]	1906-1907
Date [inclusive]	1906-1945
Extent	05 linear foot (the collection consists of one folder of material with thirteen letters, an article, a program, and the signature of henry l. smith)
Language	English
Abstract	<p>The Henry L. Smith collection of Augustus Le Plongeon correspondence documents the letters received by Henry L. Smith from the photographer, antiquarian, and amateur archaeologist, Augustus Le Plongeon in 1906 and 1907. Le Plongeon is most noted for his photographs in the Northern Yucatan during travels with his wife, Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, during a thirteen year period from 1873 to 1885. These photographs depict ancient ruins and inscriptions some of which were later damaged or destroyed. The collection consists of one folder of thirteen letters from Le Plongeon, and two additional pieces of information sent to Henry L. Smith, an article from Appleton's Booklovers Magazine and a brochure from the Lowell Institute. H. L. Smith's signature is found on a label for the letters.</p>

Cite as:

[Item name]. Box [Box number]. Henry L. Smith collection of Augustus Le Plongeon correspondence. Penn Museum Archives. Accessed [Date accessed].

Biography/History

Augustus Le Plongeon, photographer, antiquarian, and amateur archaeologist was born on the Isle of Jersey in 1826, and first traveled to South America at age nineteen. On news of the gold rush in California, Le Plongeon sought his fortune in San Francisco, working as a surveyor and apprenticing with a physician. In 1851, Le Plongeon returned to England to study photography, opening a daguerreotype portrait studio on his return to San Francisco in 1855. Le Plongeon also maintained a portrait studio in Lima, Peru and established an "electrohydropathic" medical clinic in Lima.

Le Plongeon studied photography in England with Henry Dixon, known for the development of panchromatic photography and William Fox Talbot, considered the father of modern photography. It was Fox who instructed Le Plongeon in the creation of photographic negatives.

Le Plongeon married Alice Dixon, daughter of Henry Dixon, and traveled with her in the Yucatan from 1873 to 1885. Working as a team, Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon methodically photographed hundreds of pre-Columbian ruins, creating three dimensional images of many sites. Le Plongeon also conducted digs on his trip, excavating a Chac-Mool statue at Chichun Itza in 1875.

Le Plongeon maintained adherence to the belief that the ancient Egyptian civilization had its origins in the Maya civilization of the Northern Yucatan despite the fact that later explorations discredited his beliefs. He continued to write and lecture wherever an audience could be gathered or a publisher found. The legacy of Augustus Le Plongeon consists of his photographs which document ancient ruins and inscriptions that were later damaged or destroyed. In some cases, his photographs are the only record.

Henry L. Smith, was a resident of Schenectady, New York and Pittsfield, Massachusetts and an alumnus of Brown University. Smith corresponded with Augustus Le Plongeon in 1906 and 1907. Le Plongeon's letters indicate that Smith may have attempted to arrange lectures at The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University for Le Plongeon. Smith also corresponded with William E. Gates, first President of The Maya Society. In addition to his interest in the Maya culture, Smith was a member of the New York State Agricultural Society.

The Le Plongeon letters came to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, later the Penn Museum, through a gift of Mrs. Henry L. Smith in 1945.

Scope and Contents

The Henry L. Smith collection of the correspondence of Augustus Le Plongeon consists of letters written to Smith in 1906 and 1907, a news clipping, a lecture series program from 1890, and an article from Appleton's Booklovers Magazine. The materials were donated to the Archives by Mrs. Henry L. Smith in 1945.

Augustus Le Plongeon, born on the isle of Jersey, England in 1846, is known as a photographer, antiquarian, and amateur archaeologist. He traveled to South America and San Francisco, California before returning to England to study photography with Henry Dixon and William Fox Talbot. Le Plongeon worked as a surveyor and portrait photographer preceding his studies in the North Yucatan with his wife, the former Alice Dixon. The Le Plongeon studied the Maya culture and photographed monuments and inscriptions from 1873 to 1885. In many cases their pictures are the only record of ruins that were later damaged or destroyed. Le Plongeon excavated a Chac-Mool statue at Chicun Itza in 1875. Augustus Le Plongeon theorized that the Maya civilization preceded and influenced the Egyptian civilization, a theory he maintained despite evidence cited to discredit it by later archaeologists.

The Henry L. Smith collection of Augustus Le Plongeon correspondence consists of thirteen letters from Le Plongeon to Henry L. Smith dated from March 5, 1906 to December 6, 1907. One letter includes two business cards introducing Smith to Verplanck Colvin, a topographical engineer and wilderness surveyor, and John D. Whish of the Office of Forests and Streams, Washington, D.C..

The letters deal with the difficulties Le Plongeon has with publishing his works and gaining acceptance by both the learned and the public at large. Smith received additional enclosures from Le Plongeon. The explorer provided the text of an article from Appleton's Booklovers Magazine, April 1906, which he has corrected and whose author he describes as, "does not know a word of the matter he pretends to present to the public mind." Also a part of this collection is a brochure describing a series of seven lectures given by Augustus Le Plongeon at the Lowell Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, "at the beginning of 1890." Le Plongeon also refers to an address given by Mrs. Le Plongeon at the Lowell Institute.

Two additional pieces of paper detail Mrs. Henry L. Smith's address in Yuma, Arizona and preserve the signature of H.L. Smith.

Administrative Information

University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

November 2009

Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

Use Restrictions

Although many items from the archives are in the public domain, copyright may be retained by the authors of items in these papers, or their descendants, as stipulated by United States copyright law. The user is fully responsible for compliance with relevant copyright law.

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Correspondence

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Colvin, Verplanck, 1847-1920
- Gates, William E., 1863-1940
- Le Plongeon, Augustus, 1826-1908

SUBJECT(S)

- Archaeological expeditions
- Archaeology--History

Collection Inventory

LETTERS 1906-1907.