

George Byron Gordon Central America expedition records

1100

Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

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University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Penn Museum Archives
Creator	Gordon, G. B. (George Byron), 1870-1927
Title	George Byron Gordon Central America expedition records
Call number	1100
Date [bulk]	1893-1924
Date [inclusive]	1893-1956
Extent	0.35 linear foot
Language	English
Abstract	<p>George Byron Gordon led expeditions to Copan at the end of the nineteenth century and, with his brother MacLaren Gordon, to Alaska in 1905 and 1907. As Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and as Director of the Museum, Gordon was first to conduct regular lectures to undergraduate and graduate students in Anthropology and oversaw one of the the largest periods of Museum growth. The G.B. Gordon Central America collection includes diaries, surveying notes, reports and stories from the Copan Expeditions and the Yucatan Expedition in 1910, original stories, articles, and book reviews written by Dr. Gordon, communication with The British Museum about Maya site excavation, Gordon's introductions composed for speakers for the Saturday Afternoon Lecture Series, speeches to professional organizations, and class lectures.</p>

Cite as:

[Item name]. Box [Box number]. George Byron Gordon Central America expedition records. Penn Museum Archives. Accessed [Date accessed].

Biography/History

George Byron Gordon, explorer in Central America and Alaska, and first to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, was born in New Perth, Prince Edward Island, Canada on August 4, 1870. He was the son of James Gordon and Jane MacLaren Gordon, one of six children. Gordon attended the University of South Carolina for one year in 1888 then completed his degree at Harvard University. Selected as an assistant to John G. Owens in 1892, Gordon accompanied Owens on the Harvard-sponsored excavation at Copan, Honduras. When Owens died in the field, Gordon was given the leadership to close down that portion of the work and then continued as Director of the next six sessions in Copan, until 1900. While performing these duties, Gordon attained his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1894.

Gordon joined the Free Museum of Science and Art (later the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology) in 1903 as Assistant Curator in the Section of General Ethnology. He led two expeditions to Alaska, in 1905 and 1907 with his brother MacLaren Gordon. The Gordons chose a new approach to exploration of the region. They descended the Yukon River to Tanana, then followed the Tanana south reaching formerly unknown Lake Minchumina, the source of the Kuskokwim River. Gordon named the hitherto unknown aboriginal tribe from this area as "Kuskwagamutes." His trip laid the groundwork for future exploration in the area and was described in Gordon's book, *In the Alaskan Wilderness* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1917).

While selected courses in Anthropology had been offered in the field at the University of Pennsylvania by Daniel Garrison Brinton, George Gordon was first to teach a regular schedule of undergraduate and graduate courses from 1907 through 1915. During this time, the Department of Anthropology was established by Frank G. Speck. Gordon was appointed Director of the Free Museum of Science and Art in 1910 and oversaw one of the largest periods of growth in its collection and prestige. He established the *Museum Journal* which later became the *Museum Bulletin*. Gordon is also known for his keen eye as a collector, purchasing the finest of antiquities and driving a hard bargain to obtain them. He oversaw additions to the Museum's collection of treasures from Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, and the American Continent. Gordon's most lasting gift is the Museum's Chinese collection.

Gordon was a voracious reader and writer of both scholarly works and those in the literary vein. He wrote on the history of London in, *Rambles in Old London* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1924) and this collection contains examples of his attempts to publish more popular material.

In 1926, the University of Pennsylvania conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Science on George Byron Gordon. Gordon died, following an accident at the Philadelphia Racquet Club, on January 30, 1927. At the time of his death, Gordon was Director of expeditions conducted by field staff in Beisan (Bet Sh'ean) in the area then known as Mesopotamia (Israel) and at Ur (Iraq).

Gordon was a member of the American Philosophical Society, the Franklin Inn Club, the Lenape Club,

the Rittenhouse Club, the Explorer's Club of New York, the American Anthropological Association, the American Ethnological Society, and the Authors Club of London. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Scope and Contents

George Byron Gordon was born in New Perth, Prince Edward Island, on August 4, 1870. Educated at the University of South Carolina and Harvard University, he was chosen to accompany John G. Owens on the first Copan Expedition in Honduras sponsored by Harvard. Owens died during this expedition and Gordon was named to close down the trip and subsequently, to head six additional trips to Copan lasting until 1900. Gordon also worked in Alaska with his brother, MacLaren Gordon. They discovered Lake Minchumina, the source of the Kuskokwim River.

Gordon joined the staff of the Free Museum of Science and Art (later the Penn Museum) in 1903 as assistant curator of the Section of General Ethnology. He was first to establish regular courses in Anthropology at the University and taught graduate and undergraduate students from 1907 to 1915. During this time, Gordon was named Director of the Museum. He oversaw a period of tremendous growth in both the collection and prestige of the Museum. Gordon established the Museum Journal and purchased items from Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, the American Continent, and, most notably, China, for the collection.

Gordon died in an accident in January 1927. At the time he was supervising the field work in Bet Sh'ean and Ur.

The George Gordon Central America collection fills ten folders in an archival box. The collection consists of diaries, surveying notes, reports and stories from the Copan Expeditions and the Yucatan Expedition in 1910, original stories, articles, and book reviews written by Dr. Gordon, communication with The British Museum about Maya site excavation and Gordon's introductions composed for speakers for the Saturday Afternoon Lecture Series, professional organizations, and class lectures.

The first four folders deal with the Copan Expeditions and hold a group of books and three manuscripts. Gordon's diary from the fourth Expedition and smaller book in very fragile condition contain written entries, small pictures and maps. A letter from the law firm of Lowell, Stimson and Lowell dated 2/25/1893 instructs Gordon in the steps he is to take to close down the first Copan expedition following the death of John G. Owens. A bound book, also from the first expedition, is full of surveying data and drawings.

The data related to the trip to Yucatan in 1910 includes a small ten-page diary written in tiny script. There is a list of "Photos from Yucatan" in very fragile condition. A drawing depicts the "right shore of Usumasintla, Guatemala."

Maya Archaeology notes and reports relates to communication between Gordon and Sir Frederick Kenyon, Director of The British Museum. Additional material includes two pages of hand-written Maya text on Museum stationery and Dr. Gordon's contributions to the "Memoirs" of The Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. A manuscript is also with this material, dealing with "An Unpublished Inscription from Quirigua."

Stories, Articles, and Book Reviews authored by Gordon are titled "The Mystery of the Spanish Main", "London's Loom of Time" and "The 'Eathen'". A rejection letter from Charles Scribner and Sons is dated 6/6/22. An additional story, "The Home Coming" is hand-written and tells of the funeral and interment of Edith Cavell, a British nurse executed in 1915 for aiding in the escape of Allied soldiers from occupied

Belgium.

Gordon's composed several typewritten introductions for the speakers series at the museum, entitled "A Course of Lectures on The History of Mankind." There is some indication that the series may have run from 1903 to 1904 in the materials. The speakers included Professor J.B. Carter, Director of the American School of Classical Studies in Rome; Dr. Edward Sapir, Human Research Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania; composer, Mr. Arthur Harwell; and Mr. Lawrence Binyon, Deputy Keeper of Oriental Arts at The British Museum.

The speeches given by Dr. Gordon include those to the American Anthropological Association, the American Folklore Society and Section H of the "British Association." Gordon's class lectures are on topics such as the linguistic families in America, the physical characteristics of humans, the scope and limitations of Anthropology, the biological development of mankind, diseases of mankind, and the races peculiar to Asia.

Administrative Information

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Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

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Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

- George B. Gordon Director's Office Records-
- George B. Gordon General Ethnology Section Records-
- George Byron Gordon Personal Papers-

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Faculty papers
- Field notes

GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Guatemala

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Bowditch, Charles P., 1842-1921
- Cavell, Edith, 1865-1915
- Gordon, G. B. (George Byron), 1870-1927

SUBJECT(S)

- Archaeological expeditions
- Archaeological surveying
- Excavations (Archaeology)
- Guatemala--Antiquities

Collection Inventory

COPAN EXPEDITIONS 1893-1900. .	Box 1
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YUCATAN EXPEDITION 1910. .	Box 1
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MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY, 1896-1924. .	Box 1
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STORIES, ARTICLES, BOOK REVIEWS, 1920-1925. .	Box 1
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INTRODUCTIONS, 1903-1904. .	Box 1
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SPEECHES, 1920-1925. .	Box 1
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CLASS LECTURES, 1907-1915. .

Box

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