The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute

Elihu Thomson scrapbook, lantern slides, and photographs

Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.

Last updated on September 12, 2016.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary Information</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography/History</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Contents</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Information</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Materials</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled Access Headings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary Information

Repository
The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute

Creator
Thomson, Elihu, 1853-1937

Title
Elihu Thomson scrapbook, lantern slides, and photographs

Call number
30

Date
circa 1890-1930

Extent
3.75 linear feet

Language
English

Abstract
Elihu Thomson (1853-1937) was an English-born American electrical engineer and inventor active in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was co-founder of the Thomson-Houston Electric Company, which merged with Edison General Electric Company in 1892 to establish General Electric Company. Elihu Thomson scrapbook, lantern slides, and photographs, circa 1890-1930, consist of materials relating to Thomson's time at General Electric, as well as images of various types of lighting fixtures, images of Thomson and his inventions, and other materials.

Biography/History

Elihu Thomson (1853-1937) was an English-born American electrical engineer and inventor active in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was co-founder of the Thomson-Houston Electric Company, which merged with Edison General Electric Company in 1892 to establish General Electric Company.
"Elihu Thomson was born in Manchester, England, on 29 March 1853. His family moved to the United States in 1858, settling in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], where he graduated from the Central High School early in 1870. He entered a laboratory as analyst, but was appointed assistant professor of chemistry at Central High School later in the same year. In 1876, when twenty-three years old, he was given the Chair of Chemistry in the same school. This position was retained until 1880, when, having become deeply interested in the future applications of electricity, he resigned to devote his entire time to electrical research.

"Thomson's...first important invention was the 3-coil arc dynamo, which, with its automatic regulator and other novel features, was the basis of the successful electric lighting system produced by the company that Thomson and a former high-school colleague, E. J. Houston, established...in [1880]: [American Electric Company of New Britain, CT, later known as] Thomson-Houston Electric Company [Lynn, MA]. In 1892 [Thomson-Houston] merged with the Edison General Electric Company to become the General Electric Company. In the early years of the new company Thomson was elected chief engineer, producing many of the fundamental inventions upon which General Electric was based.

"Thomson received about [700] patents...many of the inventions used widely in lighting, railways, power transmission, etc. Thomson's electric meter, as an example, which received first prize in a meter competition in Paris in 1890, was made by the millions. His discoveries and inventions in alternating currents are well known. He was also the inventor of the electric air drill, and pioneered also in high frequency electricity, upon which some wireless telegraphy techniques were based. He was the originator of the method of electric welding by resistance, a process applied extensively to metal manufactures.

"Thomson was the first recipient of the Edison Medal, bestowed upon him in 1909...Thomson was quite active in the American Institute of Electrical Engineers (AIEE), serving at various times as committeeman, and as vice president and president. He was... [a] member of the Institution of Civil Engineers, London; Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston; member of American Philosophical Society, of the American Physical Society, Chemical Society and the National Academy of Science; and of many other societies in the United States and abroad. He was the recipient of many awards and honors. In 1889 he was decorated by the French Government for his electrical inventions, being made Chevalier et Officier de la Legion D'Honneur. He received the honorary degree of A.M. from Yale (1890). Tufts College in 1892 gave him the degree of Ph.D., and in 1899 he received a D.Sc. from Harvard. He was awarded the Rumford Medal in 1901, the Grind Prix at the Paris Expositions of 1899 and 1900, the Hughes Medal by the Royal Society of Great Britain for Experimental Researches in Electricity in 1916, and the John Fritz Medal also in 1916. He was president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1920 to 1923.

"Thomson was married twice, first to Mary Louise Peck, in 1884. They had four children. After she died in 1916, he married Clarissa Hovey. He died at his home in Swampscott, Massachusetts, on 13 March 1937."

Bibliography:

Scope and Contents

Elihu Thomson scrapbook, lantern slides, and photographs, circa 1890-1930, consist of materials relating to Thomson's time at General Electric, as well as images of various types of lighting fixtures, images of Thomson and his inventions, and other materials.

The first portion of the scrapbook, 1890-1930, is a ledger for the Thomson Quarter Century Club, an organization (named after Thomson) within General Electric for members who have worked for the company for a minimum of twenty-five years. The remaining part of the scrapbook is pasted-in materials, including magazine and newspaper articles about Thomson and his accomplishments; segments from the General Electric News, the company newsletter, and the Lynn Works News (newsletter from the GE lab in Lynn, MA); various other GE materials, such as notices to employees and memos; a typed list of guests for Thomson's 75th birthday party and list of people who sent cards or telegrams; and other materials.

The lantern slides date from the late-19th century to the early-20th century and consist of fifty slides illustrating lighting fixtures, both ancient and modern.

The photographs include images of Thomson and his inventions. Of special interest is the first stereoscopic x-ray picture from original negatives taken by Thomson, 1897.

Other materials in the collection include ephemera, such as Thomson's membership cards for various organizations. There are a number of artifacts associated with this collection that were not included as part of this survey.

Administrative Information

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Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.

Sponsor

This preliminary finding aid was created as part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories. The HCI-PSAR project was made possible by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
Access Restrictions

Contact The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute for information about accessing this collection.

Immediate Source of Acquisition Note

Gift of Estate of Elihu Thomson, circa 1939

Processing Information Note

Summary descriptive information on this collection was compiled in 2014-2016 as part of a project conducted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make better known and more accessible the largely hidden collections of small, primarily volunteer run repositories in the Philadelphia area. The Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories (HCI-PSAR) was funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

This is a preliminary finding aid. No physical processing, rehousing, reorganizing, or folder listing was accomplished during the HCI-PSAR project.

In some cases, more detailed inventories or finding aids may be available on-site at the repository where this collection is held; please contact The Historical and Interpretive Collections of The Franklin Institute directly for more information.

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Related Materials

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Related Archival Materials Note

American Philosophical Society: Elihu Thomson papers, 1865-1944, Mss.Ms.Coll.74

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Controlled Access Headings

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Corporate Name(s)

- General Electric Company. River Works (Lynn, Mass.)
- General Electric Company
• Thomson-Houston Electric Company

Geographic Name(s)

• Lynn (Mass.)
• Philadelphia (Pa.)

Personal Name(s)

• Thomson, Elihu, 1853-1937

Subject(s)

• Electrical engineering
• Electrical engineers