

CHARLES D. SIGSBEE

PAPERS, 1858-1923

SC16148

QUANTITY: 45 Boxes (20 Cubic Feet)

ACCESS: Open to research

ACQUISITION: Transferred to New York State Library from New York State Museum, 1931

ARTIFACTS: Have been retained by the New York State Museum

PROCESSED BY: Fred Bassett, Librarian, Manuscripts and Special Collection, February 1990

Biographical Note:

Charles Dwight Sigsbee (January 16, 1845 - July 19, 1923), naval officer and inventor, the son of Nicholas and Agnes Sigsbee, was born in Albany, New York. Appointed to the United States Naval Academy in 1859, he was graduated in 1863, being assigned the rank of ensign. He then served several tours of duty, 1869-1877, 1882-1885 and 1887-1890.

His most notable peace-time achievement was his work while in command of the Coast Survey, *U.S.S. Blake*, 1875-1878. During these years, associated with Alexander Agassiz, he was engaged in deep-sea explorations, principally in the Gulf of Mexico, where he made a complete deep-water survey of the gulf. While on this duty he invented a deep-sea sounding machine based on the wire-sounding apparatus of Sir William Thomson, and other devices for specimen collecting at various depths of the sea. These inventions practically revolutionized deep-sea sounding and dredging. For his contributions to the advance of scientific exploration, Emperor Wilhelm I bestowed upon him the decoration of the Red Eagle of Prussia. After completing the coast survey, he served in the Hydrographic Office at Washington from 1878 to 1882 and, from 1893 to 1897, he was chief hydrographer in the Navy Department.

Having been advanced through the preceding ranks, he was commissioned captain, March 21, 1897, and was in command of the battleship *Maine* from April 10 of that year until it was destroyed by explosion in Havana harbor, February 15, 1898. The naval court of inquiry exonerated him and his officers and crew from all blame for the disaster. Sigsbee's temperate, judicious dispatches at the time did much to avert a popular demand for immediate reprisal against Spain. On May 25, 1898, in command of the *St. Paul*, he captured the British collier

Restormed, laden with coal for Cervera's squadron. On June 22, he engaged and defeated the Spanish destroyer *Terror* and the cruiser *Isabella II* off San Juan, Puerto Rico.

After a year spent at League Island Navy Yard, where he was called to improve the management and production of ship building activities, he was commissioned rear-admiral, August 11, 1893. He was then given a command of the Caribbean Squadron (*U.S.S. Newark*), which assisted in the U.S. Marine invasion of San Domingo on June 18, 1905. He sailed for France with a fleet of four ships and brought back the body of John Paul Jones in his flagship, the *Brooklyn*, arriving in Annapolis July 25, 1905. After commissioning the squadron of the North Atlantic fleet for two years, he retired on January 16, 1907.

The remaining years of his life were not particularly happy ones, being greatly distressed because of problems relating to his divorce from Eliza Lockwood Sigsbee, to whom he had been married to in 1870. They had four children. After their separation, he resided with his nurse, Nellie G. Gunther, until his death.

Scope and Content:

The papers of Charles D. Sigsbee (1845-1923), generated mostly between 1870 and 1923, document not only his many achievements as a naval officer, but also the intricate details of his tragic personal relationship with his wife and children. The story of his personal life is revealed mostly through his correspondence with his wife, children, and close relatives. Letters he had written contain lengthy discussions of his daily work routine, especially when at sea. They provide an interesting perspective of working conditions and naval life, in general, during the second half of the nineteenth century. Family matters were also the subject of many letters, especially after his marital problems came to full fruition. In fact, it is evident from his wife's letters that there were problems almost from the beginning of their marriage, where she had often expressed her feelings of loneliness and neglect while he was at sea. In later years her anger became more pronounced with accusations about her husband having affairs with other women. For further consideration of this matter, there are additional files that contain the separation agreement, along with briefs of court proceedings and his letters to Nellie Gunther (Milligan). Other important papers relating to Sigsbee's personal and family matters include a copy of his last will and testament (1921), and land titles of his father's, Nicholas Sigsbee's, property in Albany and Otsego counties of New York.

These papers also contain orders, correspondence, memoranda, and reports generated by his official duties with the United States Navy. The orders from the Navy Department provide a chronological record of his commissions, promotions, and tours of duty. The correspondence and memoranda are press copies of Sigsbee's official communications with his superiors. Included are detailed reports on his experimentation of deep-sea sounding and dredging apparatuses. Similarly, his response to the explosion of *U.S.S. Maine* (1898) is documented. Here, it is difficult to discern whether or not the explosion was a premeditated incident to provoke war with Spain or even the fact that Sigsbee was a willing participant. It appears, nonetheless, that he was a competent commander, judging from the papers relating to his actions in seizing the British

collier and the sinking of a Spanish battleship while in command of the *U.S.S. St. Paul*. Lastly, he was probably a good administrator, as it was his duty to improve the management of the Navy ship yard at League Island, Pennsylvania. Other naval activities documented in detail include his testimony on behalf of Commodore Winfield Schley (1905), his command of the South Atlantic squadron which assisted in the Marine invasion of San Domingo (1905), and transferal of the remains of John Paul Jones from France to the United States (1905).

Ancillary papers regarding Sigsbee's naval service include the many letters from friends and admirers, news clippings, and periodical articles, typescripts of speeches, and memorabilia of banquets and programs where he spoke or was a guest of honor. Also included are the records of the *Maine* Monument Association, where he presided over the raising of funds for the monument erected in Washington, D.C. in honor of those who perished in the explosion. There are also patents and specifications for some of his inventions, such as an improvement of the parallel rule (1880), trunk hinges and stays (1881), and electric current regulators (1891). Lastly there is a collection of photographs that include views of Sigsbee himself, family members, close friends, naval vessels, the John Paul Jones Exposition (1905), and the dredging and salvage of the *U.S.S. Maine* (1912).

Box Contents

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | Biographical Sketches
Marital Separation Agreement, 1911
Power of Attorney Agreement with Nellie Gunther, 1916
Last Will and Testament, 1921
Family Correspondence: |
| 2 | 1858-1872 |
| 3 | 1873-1876 |
| 4 | 1877-1886 |
| 5 | 1886-1892 |
| 6 | 1893-1899 |
| 7 | 1900-1914 |
| 8 | 1915-1923 |
| 9 | Family Correspondence, n.d.
Personal Correspondence with Nellie Gunther, 1909-1912 |
| 10 | Personal Correspondence with Nellie Gunther, 1909-1912 (Cont.) |
| 11 | General Correspondence, 1872-1897 |
| 12 | General Correspondence, 1898-1914 |
| 13 | General Correspondence, 1915-1923 |
| 14 | General Orders - U.S. Navy Department, 1859-1906
Official Letters, Memoranda, and Reports: |
| 15 | U.S. Naval Academy, 1869-1871
U.S. Construction Survey Office, 1871-1879
U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office, 1880-1886 |
| 16 | <i>U.S.S. Maine</i> , 1897-1898
<i>U.S.S. Texas</i> , 1898
<i>U.S.S. St. Paul</i> , 1898-1899 |

Box Contents

- U.S.S. Newark*, 1905
U.S.S. Brooklyn, 1905
- 17 Printed reports of special investigations conducted by Congress and President into the explosion of the *U.S.S. Maine*, 1899-1900
- 18 Printed proceedings of the Court of Inquiry in the case of Rear Admiral Winfield Schley, 1901
- 19 Speeches and Articles, ca. 1900-1920
- 20 *Maine* Monument Association Papers, 1910-1912
Invitations and Programs, ca. 1900-1923
- 21 Invitations and Programs, ca. 1900-1923 (Cont.)
- 22-23 Periodical Articles
- 24 Diaries, 1904, 1905, 1909-1912, and 1914
- 25 Diaries, 1915, 1917-1920
- 26 Memoranda Books, 1901, 1904, and 1911
Engagement Books, 1913, 1914, 1917, 1918, and 1919
Address Book, n.d.
- 27-28 Nicholas Sigsbee Estate Papers, 1886-1892
- Letter Copy Books:**
- 29 v. 1 *U.S.S. Blake*, 1876
v. 2 *U.S.S. Blake*, 1876-1877
- 30 v. 3 *U.S.S. Blake*, 1877-1878
v. 4 U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office, 1879-1882
- 31 v. 5 *U.S.S. Kearsage*, 1885-1886
v. 6 *U.S.S. St. Paul*, 1898
- 32 v. 7 *U.S.S. Texas*, 1899-1900
v. 8 Office of Naval Intelligence, 1900-1901
- 33 v. 9 Office of Naval Intelligence, January 1900-March 1901
v. 10 Office of Naval Intelligence, March 1901-June 1902
- 34 v. 11 Office of Naval Intelligence, June 1902-March 1903
v. 12 Office of Naval Intelligence, April 1903
- 35 v. 13 Navy Yard, League Island, Pa., May 1903-February 1904
v. 14 *U.S.S. Newark* and *U.S.S. Brooklyn*, February 1904-May 1906
- 36 Rough Log Book, *U.S.S. St. Paul*, May-September 1898
Report on Deep Sea Sounding and Dredging, 1880
Chart on Spanish War Vessels, 1898
Honorary Citation from Kaiser Wilhelm I
- 37 **Patents and Specifications:**
Improvement of Parallel Ruler, 1880
Trunk Hinges and Stays, 1881
Electric Current Regulators, 1891
High Explosive Shells, n.d.
- Drawings and Illustrations:**
- 38 Photographs, Personal and Family
- 39 Photographs, U.S. Navy
- 40 Photographs, John Paul Jones Exposition, 1905

Box Contents

- 41 Photographs (folio size), Personal and Naval Subjects
- 42 Printed Material (Folios)
 Periodicals, Newspapers, and Music Scores
- 43 Scrapbook, *U.S.S. Maine Disaster* and Spanish American War
- 44 News Clippings
- 45 Miscellaneous

SC16148.doc