Guide to the W. P. Fuller & Co. (San Francisco, Calif.) Records, 1896-1921

Collection number: MS 3356

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History
W. P. Fuller & Co. traces its origins to the pioneer firm of Fuller and Heather which began in 1857 in Sacramento. The firm was established when William Parmer Fuller (1827-90) went into partnership with Seton Heather, a young Englishman. The firm advertised itself as being "Importers and Wholesale Dealers in Paints, Oils, French Window Glass, Brushes, Varnishes, Turpentine, Glue, Gold Leaf, Artists' Materials, etc.". In 1862 Fuller and Heather moved to San Francisco. Heather remained in Sacramento managing what would become a branch operation, while Fuller established the headquarters of the business in San Francisco. By 1867, Fuller and Heather was doing so well that it had outdistanced one of its major competitors in the area, Oliver & Co., and was close on the heels of a second, Cameron, Whittier & Co. That same year the three firms

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considered merging into a joint stock company as a result of competition from English manufacturers who were undercutting the California paint market by setting low rates. D. J. Oliver pulled out of the negotiations but William Franklin Whittier (1832-1919), the surviving member of Cameron, Whittier & Co. eventually decided to form a partnership with Fuller. Fuller bought out Heather's interest in Fuller and Heather, and the new company, Whittier, Fuller & Co. was formed January 1, 1868. The merger made the company the largest dealing in paints, oils and glass on the Pacific coast.

In the succeeding years the company expanded its operations. In 1873 it began manufacturing paints on the Pacific coast by helping to finance the Pacific Rubber Paint Company. Two years later, the company built a white lead and color works in the San Francisco bay region. In addition, the company established branches in Oakland (1876), Portland, Oregon (1883), Los Angeles (1885), San Diego (1886), Stockton (1890), and Seattle, Washington (1892). They also became the largest importers of glass on the Pacific coast and maintained their mirror-making operations, which had been their first important manufacturing enterprise.

In 1890 when Fuller died, Whittier offered to buy out Fuller's interest in the business, but Mrs. Fuller refused. The resulting dissension between Whittier, and Mrs. Fuller and her eldest son William P., II (1861-1936) led to a decline in the business. After an unsuccessful attempt at a reconciliation between Whittier and Fuller, in which a new company was organized with Whittier, Fuller, and F. N. Woods under the same company name, The Fuller family bought out Whittier's and Wood's interest in 1894. Thus, the pioneer firm of Whittier, Fuller & Co. was dissolved and succeeded by W. P. Fuller & Co. The new firm concentrated on paints and glass, having sold its oil business in 1895 to the Standard Oil Co. with whom it had engaged in a bitter struggle for several years.

William P., II became the president of the new firm, and on his retirement in 1905 due to ill health, was succeeded by I. F. Littlefield. Littlefield had been employed by Whittier, Fuller & Co. in 1880 as a bookkeeper and had become the first secretary of W. P. Fuller and Co. He remained president until his death in 1924.

Other Fuller family members also joined the firm. In 1891 Frank W. (1874-1928) came on board and in 1906 followed his mother as vice president. In 1900 George P. (1880-?), the youngest son, entered the firm, becoming the secretary in 1906 and the treasurer in 1910.

Scope and Content

The collection consists of five bound letterbooks of letters sent to W. P. Fuller & Co. from September 1896 to September 1921. The letters are from the Pioneer White Lead Works and the Pioneer Color Works, subsidiaries of the company; and from branch offices in California and Portland, primarily regarding orders for supplies and paints, reports, and other routine business matters.

Paint Industry and Trade--San Francisco
San Francisco--Business

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