Montgomery Meigs Papers

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Montgomery Meigs Papers
Dates: 1869-1929
Bulk Dates: 1869-1874
Collection Number: mssHM 78105-78234
Creator: Meigs, Montgomery, 1847-1931
Extent: 132 items
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Abstract: The majority of the collection consists of correspondence sent by American civil engineer Montgomery Meigs Jr. (1847-1931) to his parents, Montgomery Cunningham Meigs and Louisa Rodgers Meigs, while he worked as an engineer on the Northern Pacific Railroad in Minnesota and the Dakota and Montana Territories from 1870-1873. Also included are sketches made by Meigs during the same period and his own later typescripts of his letters, along with a few pieces of family ephemera.

Language of Material: The records are in English.

Access
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Preferred Citation
[Identification of item]. Montgomery Meigs Papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Provenance
Purchased from Michael Brown Rare Books on June 20, 2012.

Biographical Note
Montgomery Meigs Jr. (1847-1931), known as "Monty" Meigs, was born in Rouses Point, New York, in 1847. His father, Montgomery C. Meigs (1816-1892), was a civil engineer and Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army during the Civil War. Meigs Jr. attended the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University, as well as the Royal Polytechnic School in Stuttgart, Germany, and completed his college education in 1869. From 1870-1873 he worked as resident engineer surveying the Northern Pacific Railroad before becoming an engineer for the U.S. government. The majority of his career was spent working to improve the Mississippi navigation system from St. Paul to the mouth of the Missouri River. Meigs retired in 1926 and died in Keokuk, Iowa, in 1931.

Scope and Content
The majority of the collection consists of letters sent by Montgomery Meigs to his parents, Montgomery Cunningham Meigs and Louisa Rodgers Meigs, and his sister, Louisa Rodgers Meigs Forbes (known as Loulie), while he was working as a surveyor and engineer on the Northern Pacific Railroad in Minnesota and the Dakota and Montana Territories from 1870-1873. The correspondence begins in May 1870, when Meigs was traveling by rail to Minnesota by way of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and continues with his impressions of St. Paul and his visit to Saint Anthony Falls, including a description of an 1869 bridge collapse there. In June 1870 he accompanied a surveying party to the Old Crow Wing area, where he wrote of Ojibwa Indians, the particulars of running a railroad line, his hunting of prairie chickens, and conflicts between homesteaders and the railroad. In September Meigs went on an expedition through the Detroit Woods, running a line from the Oak Lake area toward Georgetown, Minnesota. During this time Meigs wrote of camp life and the progress of the railroad line, before he was sent back to St. Paul and later the new railroad headquarters in Brainerd. In April 1871 Meigs accompanied new chief engineer Thomas Lafayette Rosser to the Dakota Territory. Although they made some progress past Fort Rice, Meigs wrote that by June the threat of Sioux attacks had forced them to turn back. In the fall of 1871 Meigs
went on the Whistler Expedition to the Yellowstone River, and in April 1872 he was made a resident engineer for the railroad line heading east. His letters frequently mention his difficulties with his new position, including his continual conflicts with the contractors and the slowness of his party's work (Meigs blamed a shortage of men and supplies for their lack of progress). By the end of May he was considering leaving the railroad, and in September 1872 wrote extensively of the Northern Pacific's ongoing economic and management issues. In a December 1872 letter sent from Fargo, Meigs wrote to his parents that "the N.P.R.R. appears to be hard up...[and] they have so disbanded the fine engineer corps we had and were so proud of that I scarcely care whether I stay or go." But in June 1873 Meigs still held his position, and was preparing to serve as chief of party for another Yellowstone Expedition, this one accompanied by the 7th Cavalry ("Custer's Cavalry...present a fine appearance on the march," Meigs wrote admiringly). In September they had established themselves at Camp Thorne in the Montana Territory, and Meigs' final letter of the trip, dated September 9, 1873, was written shortly after he had explored the Musselshell Valley. Meigs' next letter was written in August 1874, when he was in Rock Island, Illinois, waiting to go on an expedition up the Mississippi River. He had apparently left the railroad and was employed in making leisurely surveys to estimate the cost of deepening the channel. His final letter was written on May 17, 1875, and in it he wrote to his father that "I think I may someday work into the place of U.S. Civ. Engr." Individuals Meigs met, worked with, or wrote of throughout his correspondence include Walter Atwood Burleigh, George Washington Cass, Ignatius Donnelly, Thomas Lafayette Rosser, and General Ira Spaulding. Also included in the collection are original sketches made by Meigs during his expeditions; typescripts of his letters, some with extended accounts, made by Meigs in 1929; and miscellaneous Meigs family ephemera.

**Arrangement**

The collection is arranged chronologically.

**Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Huntington Library's Online Catalog.

**Personal Names**

Custer, George A. (George Armstrong), 1839-1876.
Donnelly, Ignatius, 1831-1901.
Meigs, Montgomery, 1847-1931.
Rosser, Thomas Lafayette, 1836-1910.

**Corporate Names**

Northern Pacific Railroad Company--History--19th century.

**Subject**

Frontier and pioneer life--Minnesota.
Homestead law--Minnesota.
Hunting.
Ojibwa Indians--Minnesota.
Prairie chickens.
Railroad engineers.
Railroad travel--United States--History--19th century.
Railroads--Dakota Territory--History.
Railroads--Design and construction.
Railroads--Minnesota--History.
Railroads--Montana--History.
Railroads--Surveying.
Sioux Indians.

**Geographic Areas**

Crow Wing (Minn.)
Dakota Territory--Description and travel.
Dakota Territory--History.
Harrisburg (Pa.)--Description and travel.
Series I: Correspondence

Box 1

Correspondence, 1870-1871.

Physical Description: 63 folders.


Box 2

Correspondence, 1872-1874.

Physical Description: 46 folders.


Series II: Sketches, typescripts, and miscellaneous.

Box 3

Sketches, typescripts, and miscellaneous, 1869-1929.

Physical Description: 23 folders.

Meigs, Montgomery, 1847-1931. "Rear Flagman": sketch. [1870?]. HM 78214.
Meigs, Montgomery, 1847-1931. "Our camp on the prairie 1 1/2 miles from the Otter Tail River": sketch. 1870, June 27. HM 78216.
Meigs, Montgomery, 1847-1931. "Particular episodes dealt with at more length than in the letters": Typescript. 1929. HM 78229.
Certificate of the Royal Polytechnic School at Stuttgart, Germany, for Montgomery Meigs. 1869. HM 78230.
"Documents: General M.C. Meigs on the Conduct of the Civil War": Printed pamphlet. 1921, January. HM 78231.
Meigs family notes. [Undated]. HM 78232.
Meigs family notes (from family Bible). [Undated]. HM 78233.