

Hiding in the Archives

By Peter G. Lewis & James W. Thomas

A letter arrived at the American Geographical Society last year. “I must have access to your secret files. It is imperative that I know what transpired between Richard Byrd and Isaiah Bowman on December 11, 1930. The confession must be made public.” According to Peter G. Lewis, the Archivist at the AGS, there was, alas, no secret file in the archives holding the truth behind Byrd’s Polar flight. Nor does it hold the secret to the location of Atlantis or the meaning of Stonehenge. The archives simply hold a fascinating, if less explosive, gathering of material from the Society’s past. There was no letter of admission from Byrd confessing to flying his plane home for Christmas instead of heading for the North Pole. There are, however, folders full of letters between Byrd and Bowman. They were friends as well as professional colleagues and Bowman long championed Byrd’s explorations. If you don’t mind tight quarters and a bit of dust in the Archive Room, you can go through cabinets of correspondence from Bowman, who was Director of the American Geographical Society from 1915 to 1935. Reading a letter signed by such a figure as Bowman or Byrd or many more does feel like eavesdropping on history.

Started with the Society’s founding in 1851, the archives are first and foremost a comprehensive institutional record of the AGS. The administrative and editorial correspondence and the Society’s financial records go back 150 years. (AGS will be 150 on 9 October – John Lennon’s birthday.) Now some of this material is scant and some if it is voluminous but chances are good that if it happened within the orbit of the American Geographical Society, there is at least note of it in the archives. We even have a flag carried by Richard Byrd on his November 1929 flight to the South Pole. No secrets there.

There are a lot of personal items, including a stunning array of diaries and notebooks from explorers. For example, there is Hudson Stuck’s diary of his ascent of Mount Denali. The University of Alaska just ordered a copy of it for their files. The archives also have Gerald McKiernan’s diary of five year’s travel through southern Africa in the 1870’s; the Fanning Collection comprising notebooks and correspondence from Edmund Fanning’s exploration of the South Seas from 1799 to 1840; John F. Steward’s diary of the Second Powell Colorado River Expedition; and correspondence regarding the scientific results of the Challenger Expedition of 1872-76.

As the Society started partly in response to the searches for the lost Franklin Expedition, and further polar exploration, not surprisingly the AGS archives contain a wealth of polar materials. A sampling includes notebooks, diaries and original manuscripts of Sir George Hubert Wilkins; the log of Lincoln Ellsworth’s Graf Zeppelin flight to the Arctic in 1931; memorabilia from Robert E. Peary, who was AGS President on his North Pole trek just before his successful one that got to (or really near) the Pole; diaries of Vilhjalmar Stefanson; and – photographically – original materials from Louise Arner Boyd and her expeditions to Greenland.

There is also correspondence from the likes of David Livingstone, John Wesley Powell, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, Alfred Wallace, Charles Francis Adams, and Robert Falcon Scott.

And a propeller from Charles Lindbergh. He was a Fellow of AGS and, after he had made several flights in 1931 in his Lockheed Orion to prove the Great Circle route to Japan was viable, as the story goes, he drove up to the AGS building, then at 156th Street and Broadway, with a propeller sticking out of the back seat of his convertible, walked in and asked, "Hey, do you want a souvenir?" We still have it.

There are, as well, records relating to government contracts carried out by the Society, ranging from the Map of the Arctic Region, done for the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, to country handbooks written during World War II, to the materials relating to the Inquiry of World War I. Colonel Edward House, President Woodrow Wilson's chief adviser, established the Inquiry to amass information needed for Wilson's approach to the post-war world. The information gathered was ultimately shipped to France for the Versailles Peace Conference. The Inquiry was based at the AGS because of the superior library, map collection and cartographic facilities.

This geographical connection led Secretary of State Robert Lansing in 1919 to ask for Bowman and the Society's help with a border dispute between Guatemala and Honduras. Bowman recommended an "Economic Survey" of the disputed territory. The dispute was finally settled in 1933, but, in the meanwhile, AGS took this impetus to start the Millionth Map Series – one inch to one million inches – from Mexico and the Caribbean down to Tierra del Fuego. The 104 sheets were produced between 1922 and 1945 and they still have an impact on border disputes. They were used as authoritative sources to settle disputes with visits to the AGS archives in 1925, 1929, 1932, 1933... In the early 90's, the office would get calls from the Chilean and Argentinian consulates in New York asking for copies of the Isla Wellington-Santa Cruz materials. There was no official word on whether or not they ever settled this. And in October 1998 Peru and Ecuador signed a peace accord on a border dispute after Peruvian diplomats consulted the Archives of the AGS over a three-year period. The Archives are not irrelevant to today's world.

Just last December, we brought out the Fliers' and Explorers' Globe from the Archives. This Globe was given to the Society in 1929 by John H. Finley, President of the AGS from 1925 through 1934, and later Editor-in-Chief of The New York Times. Finley had a habit of inviting outstanding fliers and explorers to draw their routes on the Globe and then sign their names. After Finley presented the Globe to the Society, AGS continued the tradition. With over sixty names, the Globe is a unique collection of priceless graffiti. Some of the names on the Globe might be recognizable: Roald Amundsen, William Beebe, Louise Boyd, Richard Byrd, Amelia Earhart, Lincoln Ellsworth, John Glenn, Mathew Hensen, Edmund Hillary, Charles Lindbergh, Fridtjof Nansen, Robert Peary, Wiley Post, and, the last to sign before the year 2000, Anders Borman and Lovell from the first Apollo flight around the Moon.

The American Geographical Society updated the archival Globe on 11 December 2000 with six new signers: Bertrand Piccard, Brian Jones, Walter Pittman, William Ryan, Neil Armstrong, and Don Walsh. Brian Jones and Bertrand Piccard were the first fliers ever to circumnavigate the earth by balloon in 1999. Walter Pittman and William Ryan explored the Black Sea floor and discovered a massive flood that occurred there about 7,500 years ago, possibly explaining the source of the story of Noah's Flood. William Ryan and colleagues explored the Mediterranean Sea floor and discovered a massive desiccation and then inundation that occurred there about five million years ago. Neil Armstrong was the first man to step on the Moon in 1969. Don Walsh, along with Jacques Piccard, Bertrand Piccard's father, descended to the deepest part of the ocean, the Challenger Deep in the Marianas Trench in 1960 in the bathyscaphe Trieste.

Besides the famous names from the Archives, a wide variety of people, from scholars to the simply curious have made good use of the Archives. Just call us and ask for Peter Lewis, our Archivist, if you need to poke around. There is more. Oh, did I mention the Inuit stone axe head and, as the label says, "the matchbox with its contents left intact in a cabin built by Roald Amundsen on Mt. Betty, Queen Maud Mountains, Antarctica, on his way home from the Discovery of the South Pole in December 1911"? But then they're no secret, merely further examples of the scope of the Archives befitting a scholarly society that first saw the light of day when Millard Fillmore was president, who himself, indeed, is a well-kept secret.

"Hiding in the Archives" was presented at the:

Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers - 3/2/01
Rendezvous Room, New York Hilton
New York, New York

AGS – Continuity and Change (Sponsored by AAG and Association History Committee)
Organizer: Christopher Baruth, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Panelists: Mary Lynne Bird, American Geographical Society
Miklos Pinther, United Nations
Geoffrey Martin, Southern Connecticut State University
James W. Thomas, American Geographical Society
Christopher Baruth, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

The Arthur Holzheimer Lecture Series: Maps and America – 5/18/01
American Geographical Society Collection, Golda Meier Library
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

PROGRAM

Welcome

John Wanat, Provost & Vice Chancellor, UWM
Peter Watson-Boone, Director, Golda Meier Library

Christopher Baruth, Curator, AGS Collection
AGS Exploration: A Century on the Frontiers
Jerome E. Dobson, Oak Ridge National Laboratory and
Director of Exploration, AGS
The AGS Cartographic Collections
Dr. Christopher Baruth, Curator, AGS Collection
The History of Cartography at the American Geographical Society
Miklos Pinther, United Nations (Retired)
The Archives of the American Geographical Society
James Thomas, Programs Coordinator,
American Geographical Society
The Inquiry, the Paris Peace Conference and the AGS
Geoffrey Martin, Distinguished Professor Emeritus,
Southern Connecticut State University
AGS: Continuity and Change
Mary Lynne Bird, Executive Director
American Geographical Society
Maps and Their Makers: A Sense of Where We Are
John Noble Wilford, Senior Science Correspondent,
New York Times and AGS Councilor

Transparencies used in 18 May 2001 presentation follow:

Letters:

- 1859 - Dr. David Livingstone, River Zambezi, Eastern Africa, postmarked Providence RI report on conditions in Africa
- 1862 - William H. Seward, Secretary of State
Society resolution submitted for the consideration of the President
- 1873 - Dr. Henry [sic] Schliemann, archaeologist, Athens
excavations of Troy, with photograph
- 1874 - General William T. Sherman, Headquarters Army of the United States
visit to New York
- 1876 - John Wesley Powell, Department of the Interior
visit to New York
- 1903 - Frederick A. Cook, Brooklyn
proposal to President R.A. Peary and Society for expedition to Mount McKinley
- 1903 - Robert E. Peary, President, AGS
in favor of lending a helping hand when its reasonable
- 1906 - Robert Falcon Scott, polar explorer
thank you for the AGS Cullum Geographical Medal
- 1909 - Secretary Bridgman, Peary Arctic Club telegram
North Pole discovered April sixth 1909 by Peary Arctic Club Expedition
- 1918 - Theodore Roosevelt, New York
regrets for missing presentation of Cullum Medal to Professor Newell
- 1927 - T.E. Shaw (T.E. Lawrence, aka Lawrence of Arabia)

- regrets for refusal to review books by Alois Musil on Arabia
- 1928 - George Hubert Wilkins, Detroit News-Wilkins Expedition to the Arctic to Isaiah Bowman listing code words for radio broadcast
- 1930 - Richard Byrd, Little America, Antarctica, radiogram thanks to John Finley and AGS for receiving the Livingstone Medal
- 1931 - Charles Lindbergh list of English and corresponding Russian words for emergencies
- 1931 - Rudyard Kipling, Burwash, Sussex, England to Isaiah Bowman thanking him for The Pioneer Fringe
- 1932 - Franklin D. Roosevelt, Executive Mansion, Albany, New York resignation from AGS Council because of new job offer

unused letters

- 1864 - Charles Francis Adams, U.S. Ambassador to Britain, to Charles Waddell
- 1881 - Frederick Schwatka, to Robert Curren
- 1886 - Alfred Wallace, Quincy Hotel, to Albert Browne
- 1897 - Franz Boas, American Museum of Natural History, to Charles Daly
- 1916 - Roald Amundsen, Consulate of Norway, Chicago, to Isaiah Bowman
- 1919 - Hudson Stuck, Grace Church, Providence, Rhode Island, to John Greenough
- 1923 - William Beebe, Williams Galapagos Expedition, to Isaiah Bowman
- 1930 - Charles Lindbergh, Guggenheim Fund for Aeronautics, to Gladys Wrigley
- 1931 - Vilhjalmur Stefansson, New York, to Isaiah Bowman
- 1939 - Louise A. Boyd, Ritz-Carlton Hotel, to John K. Wright
- 1948 - Finn Ronne, Department of Commerce, to John K. Wright

Illustrations:

- undated Nathaniel Palmer painting in AGS library
- 1971 - first day cover 10th anniversary of Antarctic Treaty
The First Sighting of the Antarctic Mainland November 16, 1820
Portrait Courtesy of American Geographical Society
- 1855 - Memorial to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States supporting relief for Kane's 1853 expedition in search Sir John Franklin
- 1862 - Elisha Kent Kane engraving
- 1869 - engraving of Charles P. Daly, Chief Judge of the Common Pleas, AGS President
- 1870s John Wesley Powell photograph with Paiute Indian
- 1892 - Albert Operti painting, Last Franklin Search 1879
Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka and W.H. Gilder
- 1904 - Eighth International Congress photograph of R.A. Peary, President IGC & AGS
- 1916 - The Three Polar Stars, Bellevue Stratford Hotel, (Chicago ?)
Captain Roald Amundsen, Sir Ernest Shackelton, Rear Admiral Robert Peary
- 1920 - New York Times, 23 Educators Taking Vast Data, Go With Wilson
American Geographical Society Announces Personnel
"Inquiry" Collated Facts Compiled by Staff of 150 Persons in U.S. and Abroad
- 1926 - Chart of Route Flown by Richard E. Byrd to the North Pole
autographed For Dr. Bowman
- 1931 - American flag carried over South Pole by Richard E. Byrd

- to Dr. Bowman
- 1947 - Commander Finn Ronne, Leader of AGS 1947-48 Antarctic expedition
last privately financed Antarctic expedition
- undated Lowell Thomas drawing
- 1955 - Louise Boyd's North Pole Expedition 1955 photograph
- 1969 - New York Daily News photograph, Apollo XI crew, July 1969
Edwin Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins
- 2000 - AGS Globe Signers
Neil Armstrong, Don Walsh, Bertrand Piccard, Brian Jones, William Ryan,
Walter Pittman

Unused illustrations:

- 1872 - Henry M. Stanley's First Lecture in New York, "The Discovery of Livingstone"
- 1874 - Memorial Meeting to Commemorate the Life of the Late Dr. David Livingstone
- 1907 - New York Times, January 24, 1907,
Peary Quits Office In Geographical Society
Explorer Anticipates Election of a New President; A.M. Huntington Is Named
The Commander's Successor Would Have Been Chosen Last Year but for His
Absence in the Arctic
- 1927 - Charles Lindbergh, notes on lat. and long., San Diego, St. Louis, New York, Paris
- 1928 - New York Times, April 23, 1928, Two Cents
Wilkins Sends The Times His Own Story of Polar Flight;
Found No Land Where Peary And Others Thought It Lay:
Changed Course 22 Times Before Blizzard Trapped Them

James W. Thomas has been with the American Geographical Society since 1988. Starting as an administrative assistant, he moved up to Programs Coordinator, which covers a multitude of opportunities from teacher liaison to author. It's a day job that turned into a career. Immediately preceding AGS, he was Associate Director of the American Directors Institute, a theatre directors' service organization, and New York Showroom Manager for Kartell USA, an Italian-designed, high-tech plastic furniture and accessories company. The theatre was the chosen field and the showroom was the day job. Before this, temporary and short-term jobs stretch from his early days in Manhattan back to selling aluminum siding during the summer just after college. *Death of a Salesman* made a lot more sense that July. During 'free time' now, he is the President of the St. David's Society of the State of New York, a Welsh heritage association, and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Welsh-American Foundation. He is also an actor and playwright with the Institute Theatre Lab at the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York. Keeping up with the American Geographical Society is a long distance run. And Mr. Thomas is looking forward this November to his seventeenth finish in the New York City Marathon.