

**Selden Jennings Coffin (1838-1915)**

**Adam Ramsay McCoy (1833-1893)**

## **BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL SKETCHES**

### **Selden Jennings Coffin**

Selden Jennings Coffin was born on August 3, 1838 in Ogdensburg, New York to James Henry and Aurelia Medici Jennings Coffin. He graduated from Lafayette College in 1858. While as a student at Lafayette, he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the English Salutatorian. Coffin graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1864 and was ordained by the Presbytery of Lehigh in 1874. He received a Ph.D. from Hanover College in 1876.

From 1866-1872, Coffin worked as a tutor and adjunct professor of mathematics at Lafayette College. In 1872, he became a professor of applied mathematics. The following year he was professor of mathematics and astronomy until 1886. Coffin developed throat problems that prevented him from teaching. At his request, the Trustees of the college created a registrar position to maintain student and alumni records. Coffin became Lafayette College's first registrar, a post he held until 1904 when he resigned due to his failing eyesight. In 1914, he was named Professor Emeritus of Astronomy. He was also secretary of the Lafayette Alumni Association from 1859-1905.

Selden's father, James Henry Coffin, was a professor at Lafayette College from 1846 until his death in 1873. After James Henry Coffin's death in 1873, Selden Coffin finished his father's book, *The Winds of the Globe* which was published by the Smithsonian Institution. James Henry Coffin had collaborated with the Smithsonian since 1846 on the Smithsonian Meteorological Project. Selden donated his father's correspondence, writings, clippings and scrapbook to Lafayette College.

In addition to completing his father's *Winds of the Globe*, Coffin also compiled alumni information and produced the first biographical catalog of Lafayette alumni in 1879 called *Record of the Men of Lafayette College*. This was followed in 1890 by a second catalog entitled *Men of Lafayette*. He also revised *Olmsted's Astronomy* in 1882.

Coffin married Mary A. Angle and the couple had two sons, Edward Wells (b.1884) and James Henry III (b.1881) who died in infancy. After his first wife's death in 1889, Coffin married her sister, Emma Frances. They had a son, Robert Allan.

Coffin was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He died on March 15, 1915 and bequeathed his estate to Lafayette College.

### **Adam Ramsay McCoy**

Adam Ramsay McCoy was born on May 12, 1833 in Lower Bethel, Pennsylvania, the son of Trustee Anthony and Jane Ramsay McCoy. McCoy graduated valedictorian from Lafayette College in 1850 and went to work in the leather business in New York City. He married Jannette Baylis, and the couple had one child, Ann McCoy, in 1861. He died in Orange, NJ on December 12, 1893.

### **Meteorology at Lafayette College**

In 1835, Washington McCartney became the first professor of astronomy at Lafayette College which he taught in addition to nautical astronomy, navigation and some mathematics courses. He was joined in 1850 by James Henry Coffin, who persuaded the Trustees to allow him the use of the Model School Building which later became West College, in order to make meteorological observations.

In 1864, Traill Green, professor of Chemistry, paid for the construction of an observatory, known as the "Star Barn," because he wanted to donate his telescope to the college and needed a building to house it. The observatory was built on the present site of Colton Chapel. The chapel was constructed in 1914 at which time the observatory was moved to Sullivan Road, until the construction of Markle Hall in 1929. The foundation of the building is now part of the arch over the steps leading up to the College from the bottom of College Hill.

### **Early American Meteorology**

Before 1834, meteorological observers focused on long-term climate variations and the (potential) effects of weather on illness. Elias Loomis was the first American to attempt to institute a state-wide system of weather observation (in Ohio). Leading scientists in meteorology in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century included Loomis, James Espy, Joseph Henry and James Henry Coffin. Espy's research at the Franklin Institute made Philadelphia a leading area of meteorological study. Pennsylvania awarded the Franklin Institute a grant to create a state-wide program of observation. Also in 1834, the Navy began collecting meteorological data at naval yards, using the same system as Army Medical Department.

In 1838, James Henry Coffin moved to Williams College to work with the first Meteorological Association of Williams College where he came up with 39 potential topics of investigation pertaining to meteorology. By 1842, Coffin had collected data from observers in 171 locations including every state except Arkansas and Kansas. He tried to publish the "Meteorological Register and Scientific Journal" but the publication failed after one issue. In 1846, he wrote a letter suggesting that the recently created Smithsonian Institution take responsibility for the compilation of national weather data. Joseph Henry became the first secretary of the Smithsonian and used the Institution to track storms across the country. The Smithsonian became the first national organization to study meteorology which facilitated the exchange of observations from around the country and established definitive guidelines and standardized procedure for data collection. Observers were classified by the amount of instruments they had at their disposal and were required to measure meteorological phenomena at sunrise, 9 AM, 3 PM and 9 PM, (as suggested by the Army Medical Department). Observers were also asked to take note of "casual phenomena" including storms, frosts, and meteors.

James Henry Coffin was placed in charge of “data reduction” for the Smithsonian, and he essentially compiled the observations from various places around the country. Coffin was at this point working at Lafayette College, and he employed 12-15 individuals part-time to help determine daily, monthly, and yearly averages, humidity, and major storms. Meteorological observation required discipline and organization -- most observers recorded data from the same place for 7-10 years.

Coffin’s connection to the Smithsonian provided him with the information he needed to write *Winds of the Western Hemisphere* and *Winds of the Globe*, the latter completed after his death by his son Selden Jennings Coffin and published by the Smithsonian Institute.

### **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE**

The Meteorological Record of Lafayette College Collection contains two books of meteorological observations and numerous loose records spanning 1849 to 1904. The first book, *The Meteorological Journal at Lafayette College*, contains data from January 1849 to January 1850, April 1856 to June 1858, and December 1859 to February 1860. The book also contains a booklet called the “Record of Rain and Snow at Lafayette College” from 1863-1868, and clippings relating to major storms. On a separate sheet within the book, measurements of the clouds and winds were recorded from January to December 1857. According to a note in the front of the book, the records were started by Adam Ramsay McCoy in 1850 and continued by Selden Jennings Coffin in 1858. A folder in the front of the book contains Meteorological Observations taken at Lafayette College for the Franklin Institute for May 1858 and for the Smithsonian in February 1858 and June 1860. Finally, in the back of the book, the Constitution of the “Meteorological Association of Lafayette College” and its member list had been transcribed and dated December 1849.

The second book, “Voluntary Observer’s Meteorological Record” for the Weather Bureau under the U.S. Department of Agriculture contains charts with daily observations from 1885 to 1904. Complete data exists only for 1891-1904 as the early years have only monthly precipitation. The charts note “climatological” data as well as daily temperature highs and lows. The book also has summary charts with annual mean temperatures and total precipitation.

The four folders contain the rain record for the years 1885-1888. The official forms are addressed to the War Department, Signal Service, U.S. Army, but only exist for January 1885-February 1886. Entries for March 1886 to December 1888 follow the proscribed format but are written on lined paper.

### **PROVENANCE**

According to a note inside the Meteorological Record, the collection is a gift of Charles K. Cabeen, professor of geology at Lafayette College (1928-1962).

**INVENTORY**

**Volumes**

- 1 Meteorological Journal at Lafayette College (1849-1860)
- 2 U.S. Dep't of Agriculture, Weather Bureau: Voluntary Observers' Meteorological Record (1885-1904)

**Folders**

- 1 Rain Record for 1885
- 2 Rain Record for 1886
- 3 Rain and Thermometer Record for 1887
- 4 Rain and Thermometer Record for 1888