



The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

Simeon A. Stearns papers

1834-1842

MssCol 2866

Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2014

Summary

Creator: Stearns, Simeon A. (Simeon Albert), b. 1815

Title: Simeon A. Stearns papers

Date: 1834-1842

Size: .2 linear feet (1 volume, 1 folder)

Source: Purchased from Collectors' Antiques, 1964

Abstract: Simeon A. Stearns (b. 1815) was a U.S. Marine quartermaster sergeant on board the U.S.S. Vincennes, the flagship of the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842) which circumnavigated the world under the command of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes of the U.S. Navy. The Simeon A. Stearns papers consists of one volume containing his journal of the Expedition, 1839-1841, with related writings, 1838-1840. Also present are three letters, one to Simeon A. Stearns dated 1842, and two to his brother Daniel B. Stearns, dated 1834 and 1837. The journal covers voyages in the Pacific Ocean from Polynesia to Sydney, Australia and Antarctica, and then to Tonga and the Fiji Islands via Sydney and New Zealand, 1839-1840. Entries for 1841 concern a land expedition from Fort Nisqually on Puget Sound in Oregon.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Simeon A. Stearns papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

Processing note: Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2014

Creator History

Simeon A. Stearns (b. 1815) was a U.S. Marine quartermaster sergeant on board the U.S.S. Vincennes, the flagship of the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842) which circumnavigated the world under the command of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes of the U.S. Navy. Stearns commanded the Marine contingent attached to the Expedition for the entire cruise. He was the son of Simeon and Lydia Bailey Stearns of Winchendon, Massachusetts. The United States Exploring Expedition, also known as the Wilkes Expedition, was a scientific voyage of discovery which explored and charted large areas of

the Pacific Ocean, the coast of Antarctica, and the Northwest coast of America.

Scope and Content Note

Simeon A. Stearns (b. 1815) was a U.S. Marine quartermaster sergeant on board the U.S.S. Vincennes, the flagship of the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842) which circumnavigated the world under the command of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes of the U.S. Navy. The Simeon A. Stearns papers consists of one volume containing his journal of the Expedition, 1839-1841, with related writings, 1838-1840. Also present are three letters, one to Simeon A. Stearns dated 1842, and two to his brother Daniel B. Stearns, dated 1834 and 1837. The journal covers voyages in the Pacific Ocean from Polynesia to Sydney, Australia and Antarctica, and then to Tonga and the Fiji Islands via Sydney and New Zealand, 1839-1840. Entries for 1841 concern a land expedition from Fort Nisqually on Puget Sound in Oregon.

Stearns' journal (p. 1-195) begins 1839 August 13 on board the Vincennes in the Tuamotu Archipelago of the South Pacific Ocean, continuing to Tahiti in the Society Islands and then to the Samoan Islands. His sparse entries for a voyage to Antarctica, leaving Sydney 1839 December 26 and returning there 1840 March 10, conclude with a brief account of the voyage (p. 44-45). The Expedition then proceeds to New Zealand, Tonga and the Fiji Islands. Stearns' account of these voyages ends on 1840 September 5 (p. 153), as the Vincennes sails for Oahu, Hawaii.

Journal entries describe the ship's present location and weather, general events and the location and activities of other Expedition ships, and encounters with Pacific islanders, European and American settlers, and others. There is mention of landings, provisioning and specimen collecting. Stearns describes his land expedition with members of the Scientific Corps in the attempt to reach Mount Orohena on Tahiti (1839 September 12-18), and the reprisal against the people of Malolo in the Fiji Islands for the deaths of two naval officers (beginning 1840 August 1). In addition to chronological entries for Tahiti and the Fiji Islands, there are extensive notes on their people and customs (Tahiti: p. 127-148; Fiji Islands: p. 52-63, 107, 154-195). Stearns also mentions his readings; describes his work on his shell collection, which he had to relinquish to the Expedition (1840 August); and writes down his thoughts on the nature of civilization with respect to the island societies they encounter. There is little discussion of shipmates or ship matters on board the Vincennes, although he mentions a disciplinary problem with an unnamed Marine (1840 August 14). A few random thoughts are written in Spanish.

Related writings beginning from the reverse side of the volume consist of a table listing the dated landfalls of the Vincennes for 1838-1840 ("Abstract of a Cruise...") and a list of officers attached to the Expedition, 1840 April, followed by brief journal entries for 1841 May 17-22 describing an expedition on land out of Fort Nisqually on Puget Sound in Oregon. The rough start of a poem and a list of American poets are also included.

The collection also contains three letters. One from J.G. Brown to Simeon A. Stearns at Providence, Rhode Island, dated 1842 August 11, asks to meet Stearns so that he can deliver letters from the Navy Department and discuss an important matter "respecting the Ex.Ex. as connected with Captain Wilkes." Brown was a member of the Expedition's Scientific Corps. Two letters are addressed to Stearns' brother Daniel B. Stearns in New Hampshire, both from Winchendon, Massachusetts: one a jocular letter from his friend Russell Brown regarding mutual friends and work at a textile mill, dated 1834; and one from Stearns' father asking him to write home, dated 1837.

Key Terms

Geographic Names

Antarctica -- Discovery and exploration
Fiji -- Description and travel
Oceania -- Discovery and exploration
Oregon -- Discovery and exploration
South Pacific Ocean -- Discovery and exploration
Tahiti (French Polynesia : Island) -- Description and travel
United States -- History, Naval

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Diaries

Occupations

Explorers
Marines
Seamen

Subjects

Scientific expeditions -- United States
Seafaring life
United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)
Voyages around the world

Names

Stearns, Daniel B. (Daniel Bailey), b. 1818 -- recipient
Stearns, Simeon A. (Simeon Albert), b. 1815
Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877
United States -- Marine Corps -- Non-commissioned officers
United States -- Navy -- Officers
Vincennes (Sloop of war)

Container List

- v. 1 Journal 1838-1841
- f. 1 Letters 1834-1842