

# Washington Irving Chambers Papers

A Finding Aid to the Papers in the Naval  
Historical Foundation Collection in the  
Library of Congress

Prepared by J. McElroy



Manuscript Division, Library of  
Congress

Washington, D.C.

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# Collection Summary

Title: Washington Irving Chambers Papers

Span Dates: 1871-1943

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1911-1919)

ID No.: MSS50799

Creator: Chambers, Washington Irving, 1856-1934

Extent: 12,000 items; 48 containers; 12 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Naval officer. Correspondence, subject files, logbooks, memoranda, blueprints, photographs, printed matter, and other papers relating primarily to Chambers's service in the navy and with the Greely Relief Expedition to the Arctic and the Nicaragua Canal survey expedition of 1884-1885.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### People

Baldwin, Thomas S.--Correspondence.

Burgess, W. Starling (William Starling), 1878-1947--Correspondence.

Chambers, Washington Irving, 1856-1934.

Curtiss, Glenn Hammond, 1878-1930--Correspondence.

Ellyson, Theodore Gordon, 1885-1928--Correspondence.

Ely, Eugene--Correspondence.

Godard, Louis, 1847-1928--Correspondence.

Greely, A. W. (Adolphus Washington), 1844-1935.

Knabenshue, Roy, d. 1960--Correspondence.

Loening, Grover, 1888-1976--Correspondence.

Martin, Glenn L. (Glenn Luther), 1886-1955--Correspondence.

Means, James, 1853-1920--Correspondence.

Richardson, Holden Chester, 1878- --Correspondence.

Rodgers, John, 1881-1926--Correspondence.

Towers, John H. (John Henry), 1885-1955--Correspondence.

### Organizations

Greely Relief Expedition (1884)

Naval War College (U.S.)

New York Naval Shipyard.

Pensacola (Screw steamer)

Portsmouth (Sloop of war)

United States Naval Torpedo Station (Newport, R.I)

United States. Navy Dept.

United States. Navy Dept. Bureau of Navigation.

United States. Navy Dept. Bureau of Ordnance.

United States. Navy--Aviation.

### Subjects

Aeronautics.

Airships.

Balloons.

Canals--Nicaragua.

Flight.  
Fortification--Rhode Island.  
Helicopters.  
Naval aviation--United States.  
Navy-yards and naval stations--New York (State)--New York.  
Navy-yards and naval stations--Rhode Island--Newport.  
Ordnance, Naval.  
Parachutes.  
Shipbuilding.

Places  
Arctic regions--Discovery and exploration.  
Nicaragua Canal (Nicaragua)  
Nicaragua--Discovery and exploration.

Occupations  
Naval officers.

## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The papers of Washington Irving Chambers, naval officer, were deposited in the Library of Congress by the Naval Historical Foundation from 1954 to 1962 and converted to a gift in 1998.

### Processing History

The collection was processed in 1967. The finding aid was revised in 2011.

### Additional Guides

In 1967 the Library published *Washington Irving Chambers, a Register of His Papers in the Library of Congress*.

### Copyright Status

Copyright in the unpublished writings of Washington Irving Chambers in these papers and in other collections of papers in the custody of the Library of Congress has been dedicated to the public.

### Access and Restrictions

The papers of Washington Irving Chambers are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

### Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Washington Irving Chambers Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

## Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1856, Apr. 4	Born, Kingston, N.Y.

1876                    Graduated, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.  
Duty in *Pensacola* (Screw steamer)

1877-1878            Duty in *Portsmouth* (Sloop of war)

1879-1882            Duty in *Marion*  
Promoted to ensign

1883-1884            Duty in the Bureau of Navigation

1884                    Duty in *Thetis* and *Alert*, Greely Relief Expedition to the Arctic

1884-1888            Duty in the Office of Naval Intelligence  
Promoted to lieutenant, junior grade

1888-1889            Duty in the New York Naval Shipyard

1889-1891            Duty in *Petrel*

1891-1892            Duty in *Atlanta*  
Promoted to lieutenant

1892                    Married Isabella Reynolds

1892-1893            Duty at Naval War College

1894-1895            Inspector of ordnance, Philadelphia, Pa.

1895-1897            Duty in *Minneapolis*

1898-1899            Duty in Newport Torpedo Station, Newport, R.I.  
Promoted to lieutenant commander

1899-1900            Duty in *Texas*

1900-1902            Duty in *Annapolis*

1902                    Duty in *Frolic*

1902-1904            Duty in Newport Torpedo Station, Newport, R.I.

1905-1906            Duty in *Nashville*

1906-1907            Duty in *Florida* and *Newark*

1907-1909            Assistant chief, Bureau of Ordnance  
Promoted to captain

1909                    Duty in *Louisiana*

1910                    Assistant in charge of aviation matters, Navy Department General Board

1910-1911	Arranged aviation test flights from ships
1911-1913	In charge of aviation matters, Bureau of Navigation
1913	Ordered to retirement from navy; consented to remain on active duty at retired pay in Division of Operations Chairman of board to study the needs of an aeronautical organization within the navy
1914	Established the first Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla.
1915-1919	In charge of aviation matters, Naval Operations Office
1919	Released from all active duty and retired
1934, Sept. 23	Died enroute to Washington, D.C., from the Pacific Coast

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of Washington Irving Chambers (1856-1934) span the years 1871-1943, with the bulk of the material falling between the years 1911 and 1919. The collection consists primarily of correspondence, subject files, and logbooks, supplemented by journals, notebooks, memoranda, reports, designs, blueprints, photographs, printed matter, newspaper clippings, and miscellaneous material. The collection is roughly divided into two parts: pre-1910 material generally concerned with Chambers's naval career and his activities as an officer at sea and on land; and post-1910 material relating to Chambers's interests in the newly emerging field of naval aviation and his role as one of the pioneer naval officers in aviation. Chambers's accomplishments as a pioneer naval officer in aviation activities tend to obscure many of his earlier achievements in the fleet, at the United Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, in the New York Naval Shipyard, and in the administrative offices of the Navy Department. There is relatively little material concerning Chambers's personal or family life. The collection is organized into six series: [Official Correspondence](#); [General Correspondence](#); [Subject File](#); [Aircraft Logbooks](#); [Naval Logbooks, Notebooks, Journals, and Order Books](#); and [Miscellany](#).

Chambers's pre-aviation career, during which he advanced from midshipman to captain, is thoroughly documented. Included are journals, logbooks, and notebooks, several containers each of official and general correspondence, and assorted material. Many of Chambers's early reports, memoranda, and recommendations have been retained, most of them in his own handwriting. After graduation from the United States Naval Academy in 1876, Chambers's career was that of a typical line officer, with alternate tours of duty at sea and ashore. He served afloat as a midshipman from 1876 to 1878 in the screw steamer *Pensacola* and sloop of war *Portsmouth*. In the years from 1878 to 1910 his sea service broadened to include duty in just about every type and variety of ship that was then afloat in the United States Navy. Of exceptional interest are the records of his participation in the Greeley Relief Expedition to the Arctic in 1884 and his participation in the Nicaraguan Canal Survey Expedition of 1884-1885. Chambers, in his years at sea, served in both the Pacific and the Atlantic squadrons, and his letters, logbooks, reports, recommendations, and other papers generated on board the ships he served, give evidence of his duty as a navigator, shiphandler, and seaman and of the growth of the United States Navy.

Alternating with his sea service Chambers's shore duty included tours at the Bureau of Navigation, at the Naval War College, at the Bureau of Ordnance, and at the Torpedo Station in Newport, Rhode Island. He was a member successively of the Navy Department's General Board, Board on Rules for the Construction of Vessels, and Board on Rules for Steamship Inspection, and finally an

assistant to the aide for material of the General Board. Letters, reports, memoranda, and printed material, especially Chambers's personal evaluations and recommendations, originating during these tours of duty, demonstrate that he was a capable officer, well experienced, and above all thoroughly versed in the specialities of ordnance, intelligence, construction and repair of ships, and naval armament. Chambers began early the practice of submitting intelligence reports and of making specific recommendations for improvements in guns, mines, torpedoes, and other ordnance. He also suggested new designs or better construction methods for work on naval vessels.

In September 1910 Chambers was detached from command of the battleship *Louisiana* and reported ashore on orders from the secretary of the navy "to keep himself informed on aviation matters." Thus began his career in naval aviation. Although without official title, Chambers was the first director of Naval Aviation and served as such until several months after the end of World War I. Papers in this collection representing these ten years, the most important in his military career, pertain almost exclusively to the development of a naval air service and of naval aircraft. Within the general topic of naval aviation, Chambers covered a variety of specific subjects including dirigibles, helicopters, balloons, aviation camps, parachutes, and transatlantic flights.

Chambers was the chief correspondent for the Navy Department in its dealings with airplane manufacturers such as the Wright Company, Glenn Hammond Curtiss, W. Starling Burgess, and other manufacturers. Correspondence concerning would-be inventors and inventions offers insight into the early technology of aviation mechanisms. The collection includes correspondence with such well-known names in the aviation field as Thomas S. Baldwin, Theodore Gordon Ellyson, Eugene Ely, Louis Godard, Roy Knabenshue, Grover Loening, Glenn L. Martin, James Means, Holden Chester Richardson, John Rodgers, and John H. Towers. The training methods of the early aviators, the testing given their aircraft, and the instruction given to fledgling pilots are documented in the [General Correspondence](#) and [Subject File](#). The material for the decade from 1910 to 1920 includes correspondence, reports, memoranda, blueprints, designs, printed matter, photographs, and aviation logbooks.

## Arrangement of the Papers

The collection is arranged in six series:

- [Official Correspondence, 1871-1934](#)
- [General Correspondence, 1874-1943](#)
- [Subject File, 1884-1917](#)
- [Aircraft Logbooks, 1911-1917](#)
- [Naval Logbooks, Notebooks, Journals, and Order Books, 1872-1909](#)
- [Miscellany, 1884-1932](#)

## Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1-4	<u>Official Correspondence, 1871-1934</u> Official letters sent and received. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 5-24	<u>General Correspondence, 1874-1943</u> Letters sent and received, orders, reports, memoranda, designs, and blueprints. Arranged in two files, chronological and subject, with subject material organized alphabetically.
BOX 25-36	<u>Subject File, 1884-1917</u> Memoranda, designs, blueprints, notes, photographs, printed matter, and newspaper clippings. Arranged alphabetically by subject.
BOX 37-40	<u>Aircraft Logbooks, 1911-1917</u> Test data, training information, performance charts, reports, and operational data. Arranged alphabetically by name of airplane manufacturing company.
BOX 41-43	<u>Naval Logbooks, Notebooks, Journals, and Order Books, 1872-1909</u> Logbooks, journals, order books and other accounts. Arranged chronologically and identified according to type of volume.
BOX 44-48	<u>Miscellany, 1884-1932</u> Photographs, poetry, literary work, newspaper clippings, printed matter, a biographical file, awards, diplomas, drawings, notes, articles, and memoranda. Arranged by type of material.

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General Correspondence, 1874-1943

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