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Rocks in Gettysburg College History

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Rocks in Gettysburg College History

Description

The glittering stones fill the cases in the lower lobby of the science center. Each one is has a tag saying where it was collected and what kind of rock formation it is. The cases themselves add to the feeling of being in a museum. Each rock is in pristine order and in good condition, very professional. While it is still not the most noticed of all collections on campus (located as it is on the bottom floor of the Science Center), it is still more obvious than it was just a few years ago. The rock collection is actually several different collections that have been put together over the past century and a half. The history of the mineral collection of Gettysburg College is intertwined with that of the Linnaean Society, John Gottlieb Morris, John J. Shank, and most recently Sarah Principato. Each of these parties is directly involved in the advancement of the mineralogical collection at Gettysburg College. [*excerpt*]

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Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are "hidden in plain sight" around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click "View Photo" to see the image in greater detail.

Keywords

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Disciplines

Public History | United States History

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
Rocks in Gettysburg College History

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Harry Stevens

Spring 2006

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Since very early in Gettysburg College's history, there has been a mineralogical collection of some sort. The first records of mineralogical cabinets come from as early as 1835, only three years after the college was originally founded. In the beginning, the collection was small and relatively unimpressive. It was augmented only sporadically by anyone willing or able to contribute material.¹ The collection would continue to languish until the founding of the Linnaean Society, which ended up saving the natural history collection that the college had started.

The Linnaean Society-named after the famous Swedish botanist Carlos Linnaeus-was formed on June 8th 1844. It elected John G. Morris, an established member of the clergy, also well versed in the sciences and history, as its president. On that day, thirty-six men signed on to join the society, which quickly came to include ninety-two members

¹ President M. Valentine "College History," in *The Pennsylvania college book* ed. E.S. Breidenbaugh (Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1882) pp 47-49.

in all. In September of 1844, the society had “resolved to ‘take under its special care the improvement of the grounds around the college edifice.’” They started their improvement by creating the first road between the college and the town.²

There was an entrance fee for the Linnaean Society of fifty cents if you were a student wishing to become a member. But there was also an honorary membership bestowed upon a few individuals, who did not have to pay anything. Beyond just campus beautification through planting trees, constructing fences and roads, the society also sought to pursue the natural histories as well, leading to the gradual enlargement of cabinets which were used to house the natural history collections of the college and were used for teaching purposes. While the mineralogical collection had already been started, if only perfunctorily, these expansions formed the basis for the scientific equipment and the kind of cabinet that was needed and provided a base from which the college could build.³

John G. Morris, one of the twenty-one original trustees of the college was instrumental to the creation of the society, the cabinets (including the mineralogical collection). Among his other accomplishments, he added to the cabinets when he started a natural history club of sorts in Baltimore with some well off men. After people started dying, the club decided to disband. Members divided up their collections into different sections, and then drew straws to see who would take which collection. Some of the collectors did not get the specimens related to their interests, at which point Morris suggested that those who did not want their collections could donate them to Gettysburg

² E.S. Breidenbaugh “Linnaean Society” in *The Pennsylvania college book*, ed. by E.S. Breidenbaugh (Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1882) pg 125-128.

³ Charles H. Glatfelter *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College), 1987 pg. 108-112, 163.

College. By 1932, the specimens gained from these donations were still the largest addition to the cabinets ever.⁴

The Linnaean society had far bigger goals than just to plant a few trees and forge afresh a natural history collection; they wanted to build a hall that could be dedicated to the advancement of science. Erecting such a building would be costly, and in order to cover the costs of construction they “resolved, that the erection of [Linnaean] Hall be commenced so soon as we can collect money enough to defray one half of the expenses, and have subscriptions to the amount of 1000 dollars more than is sufficient to pay whole.” In order to raise the money that they needed, the students and faculty put on a fair with the help of local townspeople and raised 550 dollars for the new building. The cornerstone of the building was set in 1846. The natural history collections were placed, along with their respective cabinets, into the Linnaean Hall upon its completion.⁵

The cabinets were now called the Morris cabinets because of everything that John G. Morris had done for the college. Beyond specimens for the college, helping to found the Linnaean Society, and expanding the mineralogical collection extensively, he also added zoology specimens as well as specimens to the conchological cabinet. However, the mineralogical collection was nowhere near done growing yet. Despite enlargement, and being moved to a new building, the collection was not out of its formative years yet. It would take an alumnus from the class of 21’ to create most of the collection as it is seen today. It is also important to understand that the Morris cabinets did not just contain the mineralogical collection, but also other collections related to natural history.

⁴ Samuel Gring Hefelbower *A History of Gettysburg College 1832-1932* (Gettysburg PA: Gettysburg College 1932) pp 424-425.

⁵Valentine *The Pennsylvania College Book*, pp. 48-49.

In 1866, the collection became far larger and better when the college authorized spending \$2,500 to buy E. Seymour's mineral collection which had been built up for thirty years and was one of the best in the country.⁶ It was

'an extensive collection, the result of thirty years industry, collecting many of the finest and rarest found in this country.' Numerous and valuable additions have been made at various times-probably a thousand specimens in the past three years. At present the Mineralogical Cabinet is in every way excellent, and admirably adapted to the purposes of instruction. Few colleges have a better one.

Despite the size and scope of the collection that the college had acquired from Seymour, the collection did not have enough material for geologists, but was very strong when it came to covering fossils and lithology.⁷ Just over thirty years after the founding of the college, it was able to acquire world class teaching tools for the sciences. This addition made the Morris cabinet a fully functional instructive and visual tool for professors and the college to use.

The mineral collection as it stood would stay in Linnaean Hall for another twenty three years until 1889. There was a great deal of expansion that was occurring because the size of the student body had gradually increased. Because of this, Brua chapel and the New Recitation Building, which is now called Glatfelter Hall, were constructed to meet the demands of the new larger student body. The Linnaean building was turned into a gym and the gym was converted into the new science building under the recommendation of Edward S. Breidenbaugh. The mineral collection was then placed in

⁶ Glatfelter *Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* , 140-141. E. Seymour is the only name given to whomever the college purchased the rocks from. He does not have a first name in any of the sources I found, just abbreviated as "E."

⁷ The first quote in the passage from President M. Valentine *The Pennsylvania College Book* does not have an attributed author in text and there is no footnote. It is also interesting to note that while he makes reference to thousands of specimens, Professor Principato has just over 300 specimens from the special collections boxes that she was given.

the New Recitation Building on display, still in the Morris cabinet, which moved with the mineral collection.⁸

John J. Shank Graduated from Gettysburg College in 1921 as a Phi Gamma Delta. He had gone to high school in Waynesboro, PA, and ended up going back to his hometown and running Wayne Laboratories after graduating from Gettysburg. He was involved in, among other things, the chemical society and the YMCA. He was also a Lutheran and a Republican.⁹ Shank was considered somewhat of a fighter by those who knew him as well as being musical, despite not engaging in music related extracurricular activities.¹⁰ Despite not having much of a connection to science, other than the chemistry society, he was able to make a huge contribution to the sciences through his donation of so many high quality minerals.

John Shank willed 387 items in 1958 from his estate to the existing mineral collection that the college had. The college already had its large collection purchased in 1866 from E. Seymour, and the new collection, with Shanks material, now inhabited forty cubic feet of storage in the already cramped special collections. Since that time, the mineralogical collection has not grown, and the collection now seen in the science center is essentially the same. Because there was not enough space in library special collections room the rocks were put into the climate controlled Knouse Warehouse, which was purchased by the college in 2001¹¹.

The collection was found again in April of 2003 by Robin Wagner, Director of the Library, and Dan DeNicola, Provost, when they were in Knouse “trying to figure our

⁸ Glatfelter, *Gettysburg College, 1832-1985*, pp. 259-260.

⁹ *Spectrum*, 1922, (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College) pp. 49. Despite having graduated in 1921, the pictures and other information of seniors did not appear until the next year's *spectrum*.

¹⁰ *Spectrum*, 1921, (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College) pp. 76.

¹¹ Jim Hale “Look What I Found!” *Gettysburg Magazine*, Spring 2005, pp. 23-25.

how to squeeze one more item in.¹²” They went about opening some of the boxes to try and figure out exactly what was inside when they stumbled upon the mineral collection which had been languishing in the storage facility. They immediately decided that these pieces should be put out for everyone to see them. The location they ended up choosing was the Science Center, which had been recently completed and would be perfect to house the re-discovered mineralogical collection.¹³

The mineral collection was handed off to Professor Sarah Principato of the environmental studies department, one of the only people on campus with a background in geology. The collection is “quite excellent” which seems like an understatement given how brilliant some of the pieces are. She would know. She is the one who had to organize the collection and get it from the boxes to the display cases. Her task was that of un-packing, organizing, cleaning, and presenting the mineral collection, no mean feat. For help in this area, she hired Alexis Melusky of the class of 05’, who worked for eight hours a week cataloguing and cleaning the specimens. Some of the specimens were (and still are) unlabeled, and as such hard to put together in a form of coherent presentation, most were labeled and have been put into one of the presentation cabinets. Quite a few of the rock specimens were not only well labeled, but polished, and needed only cleaning with water and indexing before they could be put on display.¹⁴

There are five display cases out in the hallways. Two of the cases are in the downstairs lobby, one in the hallway by the environmental studies office, and two in the cabinets in the corners by the rear doors. There is also another set of drawers that are

¹² Robin Wagner, as quoted in- Jim Hale “Look What I Found!” Gettysburg Magazine, Spring 2005, pg. 24.

¹³ Jim Hale “Look What I Found!”

¹⁴ Sarah Principato, personal interview, February 27th 2006 The other method of cleaning involves using acid, but Professor Principato indicated that they did not do this because there was no need given the state of the specimens.

used in professor Principato's classroom for teaching earth systems science (E.S. 223). The cases were made by the environmental studies office administrator, Donna Plank, and her husband Edward. Professor Principato was looking to buy cases from several companies, Donna found out and said that her husband was a carpenter and could make the cases for the department. They started building the cases by the Summer of 2004 and began to finish them by the end of 2004, with the entire project completed by Spring 2005. All the funding came from the provost and did not have to be supplied by the environmental studies department. This was good because while the environmental studies department did not have to pay for the minerals themselves, they did have to pay for supplies involved in cleaning, labeling, and mostly storing the collection.¹⁵

Edward Plank, who did most of the work involving making the cases, had only recently begun his career in wood craftsmanship. Previously, he had worked in an industrial manufacturing plant, and had retired four years before. He had "mimicked the design of some displays in Musselman library."¹⁶ Edward does other jobs for the college such as wooden plaques used by the Alumni office as awards, and does his work from his house in Biglerville, PA.¹⁷

The mineral collection is still not all displayed, there are still six boxes of specimens that were unlabeled and are not on display. Furthermore, the specimens that are in the drawer case are used by Professor Principato for teaching purposes, and are not on display to the public.¹⁸ It is interesting that Principato only made reference to just over 300 specimens that they had. This is a far cry from the thousands suggested by

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jim Hale "Look What I Found!" pp 25.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 25.

¹⁸ Principato, personal interview.

President M. Valentine. One possible explanation is that he was referring to more than just the mineralogical collection, but everything involving stones (fossils included).

Gettysburg College has numerous organizations and some of them have their own running games. The ultimate Frisbee team on campus has a game where someone hides a head, called Erica, and then other people have to find the head, at which point in time the person/people who just found the head have to find someplace new to hide it. The mineralogical collection was used on one occasion as the location for the head. This action and others like it further solidify the place of the collection on campus.¹⁹ The history of the rock collection will only continue to be remembered as long as the rocks are out for everyone to see and use, even if the use is as a distinctive place on campus for a game.

The collection today still stands in the five cases located in different places on the ground floor of the Science Center around the environmental studies department. The cases display a large collection of interesting minerals from all around the world, which can be easily ascertained by the note cards labeling each piece. The mineral collection is not only serving the purpose of campus beautification, but also as an aide in the classroom, bringing back together the basic principles of the Linnaean Society of over a hundred years ago. Hopefully a collection as beautiful and useful as the mineralogical collection in the science center will not go missing again.

¹⁹ Emily Reid, personal interview February 27th 2006.

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