



Legacy Finding Aid for Manuscript and Photograph Collections

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What are Legacy Finding Aids?

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The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., is a community-supported educational and research organization that collects, interprets, and shares the history of our nation’s capital. Founded in 1894, it serves a diverse audience through its collections, public programs, exhibits, and publications.

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS FINDING AID

Title: MS 735 De Lancey Gill Papers, 1860-1996 (bulk, 1880s-1930s)

Processor: Richard J. Ricard, Jr.

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De Lancey Walker Gill (1859-1940) was an illustrator, artist and photographer in Washington, D.C. During his long career with the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, he was responsible for taking thousands of remarkable portrait photographs of Native American tribal leaders on their visits to the capital. His work as an artist included drawings of Washington, D.C., scenes in the 1880s that captured a cityscape of dilapidated frame dwellings soon to disappear in a period of rapid growth and increasing wealth.

Gill was born in Chester, South Carolina, on July 1, 1859. His father, an engineer on the staff of General Beauregard, was killed during the Civil War. When his mother remarried and moved with her husband to Fort Laramie, the teen-age Gill chose not to follow and, in 1874, set off for Washington, D.C., where he initially stayed with an aunt. Here he found work with the government as a messenger and typesetter. By 1877 he had become a draftsman in the Office of the Supervising Architect, where he drew ornamental ironwork, tile floors and linear perspectives.

Without formal training in either draftsmanship or art, Gill was recruited in 1884 to become an illustrator for the United States Geological Survey by William Henry Holmes, a geologist and fellow artist who was then head of the USGS Division of Illustrations. Holmes became Gill's mentor and long-time friend. When Holmes departed for the Smithsonian Institution's new Bureau of American Ethnology, Gill succeeded him as head of the illustrations section, overseeing the production and preparation for publication of the illustrations and photographs that appeared in USGS publications. He also undertook the same role for the BAE, to which he later formally transferred and where he spent the rest of his career as head of its illustrations section.

At the Smithsonian, Gill's technical work required frequent dealings with archaeologists, ethnologists and geologists. From these contacts and friendships he developed considerable familiarity with their fields, going on geological and archaeological expeditions to the American West and elsewhere. In 1900 he accompanied W.J. McGee on a lengthy expedition to little-explored Indian lands in the southwestern United States. The greatest legacy of his years at the Smithsonian, however, lies in his work as a

photographer, another art in which he was self-taught. He was responsible for taking thousands of portrait photographs of American Indian tribal leaders who, on their official visits to Washington, would be ushered into his studio for a portrait sitting. These portraits (he is estimated to have personally taken between 2,000 and 3,000 starting in the 1890s) represent a unique image archive, now part of the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives. A small number of them are contained in this collection. *The Washington Post* reported in 1915 that Native Americans often visited his studio, looking for portraits of their kin and ancestors.

By the 1880s, Gill had also begun to exhibit and sell paintings, watercolors and drawings. The self-trained artist also taught at the Corcoran School of Art and the Art Students League. Many of his works depicted scenes and landscapes in and around Washington, but not the monumental city of marble and mansions. In a series of pen-and-ink drawings done in the 1880s, he depicted simple frame dwellings of the not-well-to-do, structures that would soon disappear as the city grew and modernized. These drawings became the centerpiece of an exhibition organized in 1992 by the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., documenting this vanished part of the city's architectural past. An article in *The Washington Post* noted that "his drawings are almost the only ones known to show what living on the fringes of the capital economy was really like in the early 1880s." The original drawings are absent from this collection but are represented by reproductions.

Gill married three times and had eight children. His first wife, Rose De Lima Draper, died in 1893. He and his second wife, Mary Wright, who was also a Smithsonian illustrator and an artist, divorced. About 1905 he married Katherine Schley. Although of modest means, he was friends with well-known artists, scientists and writers, such as Ambrose Bierce and William Henry Holmes, and was for fifteen years a member of the exclusive Cosmos Club, which has a painting by Gill given in payment of dues. He was an enthusiastic collector of art objects, especially Oriental, which he would purchase even when money was short. His daughter recounted a family tale of Gill being sent out by his wife to buy a new suit and returning with just a suit coat and an Oriental vase, having not had enough money to buy both the vase and the pants to the suit.

When Gill retired from the Smithsonian in 1932, he had been the "leading illustrator of the Smithsonian Institution" (as William Henry Holmes praised him) for nearly fifty years. He died in Alexandria, Virginia, on August 31, 1940.

Scope and content: The collection contains Gill's papers, as well as a catalog and curator's notes from a 1992 exhibition of Gill's drawings of Washington, D.C., scenes. The collection includes photographs, reproductions of art works, correspondence, papers related to Gill's position in the Bureau of American Ethnology, newspaper clippings and memorabilia. Dates of the material included range from 1860 to 1996, but most material is from the 1880s to the 1930s.

The collection is arranged in seven series:

SERIES I: EXHIBITION, *BECOMING THE CAPITAL CITY*, 1992, contains the catalog of an exhibition that featured Gill's pen-and-ink drawings of Washington, D.C., in the 1880s, organized in 1992 by the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., as well as notes by the exhibition curator.

SERIES II: DRAWINGS, PAINTINGS AND WATERCOLORS, 1880s-1921, contains reproductions of some of Gill's pen-and-ink drawings of Washington, D.C., done in the 1880s. There are also a few miscellaneous and chiefly unattributed pieces of artwork and two catalogs of exhibitions in which Gill's work was displayed.

SERIES III: PHOTOGRAPHS, 1888-1928, contains photographs of Washington, D.C., scenes, taken by Gill chiefly in the 1880s; 22 of his portrait photographs of American Indian tribal leaders, from among the thousands he took as photographer for the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology; 23 field photographs of American Indians taken, presumably by Gill, in the American West; portraits of Gill and his family; and miscellaneous photographs that are unattributed and chiefly unidentified.

SERIES IV: CORRESPONDENCE, 1860-1935, contains personal and business correspondence, including family correspondence and letters concerning the sale of his art works.

SERIES V: PERSONAL AND FAMILY RECORDS, 1902-1996, contains newspaper clippings about Gill and family members; a handwritten narrative by Gill (a ghost story); and a 1996 volume of art, poems and newspaper columns by Gill's daughter Agnes Gill Webster.

SERIES VI: BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY, 1886-1930, contains documents relating to Gill's work at the Bureau of American Ethnology, including correspondence, reports and a summary of his employment history with the Federal government.

SERIES VII: MEMORABILIA, 1880-1933, contains items relating to the Capital Bicycle Club and other organizations of which Gill was a member; text and verse fragments; autographs; and other miscellaneous items.

Donors: Lance Webster, Agnes Gill Webster, Barry Fitzpatrick

Size: 0.55 cubic feet (two containers)

Restrictions: None

Related materials:

Archival collections:

Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives: *Bureau of American Ethnology Collection of Glass Negatives*. Archival collection of glass negatives, including American Indian portraits by Gill and other BAE photographers.

Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives: *Bureau of American Ethnology-United States National Museum Photographs of American Indians*. Archival collection of prints by Gill and other BAE photographers.

Other sources:

Becoming the Capital City: De Lancey Gill's Washington. Washington, D.C.: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., 1992.

Conroy, Sarah Booth. "Home Sweet Homely." *The Washington Post*, April 19, 1992.

Cosentino, Andrew J., and Glassie, Henry H. *The Capital Image: Painters in Washington, 1800-1915*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983.

Glenn, James R. "De Lancey W. Gill: Photographer for the Bureau of American Ethnology." *History of Photography*, v. 7, no. 1 (1983), pp. 7-22.

McMahan, Virgil E. *The Artists of Washington, D.C., 1796-1996*. Washington, D.C., The Artists of Washington, 1995.

Oehser, Paul H. "De Lancey Gill (1859-1940)." *Cosmos Club Bulletin*, v. 30, no. 7-8 (July-August 1977), pp. 4-8.

Smithsonian American Art Museum/ National Portrait Gallery Library, artist file: *Gill, DeLancey, 1859-1940*. Newspaper clippings and other biographical material. Includes a brief autobiographical synopsis in Gill's hand.

Container List

Container 1

SERIES I: EXHIBITION, *BECOMING THE CAPITAL CITY*, 1992

Becoming the Capital City: De Lancey Gill's Washington was an exhibition at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., April 11, 1992 to January 1993. Gill's drawings

and paintings of scenes and simple frame dwellings in the city, done in the 1880s, were prominently featured.

Folder 1: Exhibition catalog, 1992. Illustrated. 14p.

Folder 2: Catalog notes and outlines, 1992, by curator Diane Tepfer.

SERIES II: DRAWINGS, PAINTINGS AND WATERCOLORS, 1880s-1921

NOTE: This series, as described below, contains almost entirely reproductions, not originals.

Folder 3: Gill's pen-and-ink drawings of Washington, D.C., frame structures and residences, ca. 1992 reproductions of 1883 originals. Contains 17 black and white 35mm slides of Gill's original drawings.

Folder 4: Gill's pen-and-ink drawings of Washington, D.C., frame structures and residences, ca. 2006 reproductions of 1883 originals. Contains 14 reduced-size copies of Gill's original drawings, two to a sheet.

Folder 5: Gill's pen-and-ink drawings and paintings of Washington, D.C., scenes, undated reproductions of 1883, 1880s?, 1894 and 1921 originals. Contains photo-reproductions (chiefly black and white): five drawings of Washington, D.C., frame structures in the 1880s--three of which are identified as "Meridian Hill," "Dupont Circle" and "15th St. near L St.;" two watercolors identified as "Sand Boats on Tiber Canal" and "The Navy Yard;" an oil painting, "Mouth of James Creek," showing the Capitol dome in the distance; a painting of a pond, beyond which stand simple houses with the Capitol dome in the far distance (color reproduction); a painting of a boat builder's workshop on the bank of the Potomac River (sepia reproduction); a drawing of frame houses, "Eighteenth and D Streets, Northwest" (photocopy from *The Washington Herald* newspaper, October 16, 1921)

Folder 6: Graphite drawings, 1880s? Contains two original drawings: a tree (unsigned, possibly by Gill) and a pencil tracing of ramshackle frame houses, done on the reverse side of a photograph of the houses. Rub marks on the photo show the pencil tracing was burnished onto another sheet, perhaps a technique that Gill sometimes used as a starting point for pen-and-ink drawings.

Folder 7: Miscellaneous art, undated. Contains four small art works, unsigned; a graphite drawing of a child, signed by M.B. Chapman; and a small folded paper design accompanied by folding instructions in Gill's hand.

Folder 8: Exhibition catalogs, 1885, 1921. Contains catalogs of two exhibitions in which Gill's work appeared. The catalog of the 18th annual exhibition of the American Water Color Society (New York, 1885) lists two of Gill's works (#141, "On the Suburbs of

Washington," and #710, "Virginia Beach (Sketch)") The catalog of an exhibition by the Landscape Club (Washington, 1921) lists four works by Gill.

SERIES III: PHOTOGRAPHS, 1888-1928

Folder 9: Gill's photographs of Washington, D.C., scenes, 1888, ca. 1920 and undated. Contains a view of Washington, D.C., from Anacostia (undated, folded and torn); "View of the Capitol from James Creek" (ca. 1920), a small matted photo with incised grid lines, perhaps used as the basis for a similar painting (see Folder 5); two images on one sheet, one showing the north side of the 1400 block of G Street NW, the other showing unidentified buildings in downtown Washington, D.C. (undated); a negative image of a commercial storefront, The Shoemaker Co., importers of wines and liquors, 1331-1333 E Street NW; and a view of a boat maker's workshop, which appears to be the basis for a painting by Gill (see Folder 5)

Folder 10: Gill's portrait photographs of American Indians, undated. Contains 22 portrait prints (approximately 8 x 10 inches, some vary) from among the thousands taken by Gill as photographer for the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology. Many of the sitters are identified by name and tribe. Also includes Gill's handwritten list, "Type specimens-- American Indians."

Folder 11: Field photographs of American Indians, undated. Contains 23 photographs (approximately 3.5 x 4 inches, some vary) of American Indians, individually and in groups, in outdoor settings in the American West. Locations and subjects are not identified. Gill is not explicitly named as the photographer but is known to have accompanied one or more Smithsonian field expeditions that visited American Indian tribal areas. Some photographs have stain damage.

Folder 12: Portrait photographs of Gill, undated. Contains ten photographic portraits, taken at various ages. Some include other people: a young Gill "and friend," Gill and his wife (Katherine?), Gill with his daughter Agnes, and Gill with his first wife, Rose, and young children. One portrait of Gill is in the form of a copper engraving.

Folder 13: Miscellaneous photographs, 1894, 1928 and undated. Photographers unidentified. Contains a group photograph taken at John Wesley Powell's Smithsonian farewell dinner (1894); a portrait photograph of Powell (1894?); 13 prints and negatives from a friend, Charles Richmond, taken at a camp near Great Falls (1928); two photographs of Gill's house in Alexandria; four portraits of Gill's friend Gerard Fowke; and other unidentified photographs.

Folder 14: Miscellaneous photographs, undated. Photographers unidentified. Contains nine small photographs of the exterior and grounds of Mount Vernon estate and twelve negatives of a horse-drawn plough.

Folder 15: Miscellaneous photographs, 1900 and undated. Contains a variety of unidentified photographs by unknown photographers.

SERIES IV: CORRESPONDENCE, 1860-1935

Folder 16: Correspondence, 1860-1899. Contains personal and business letters to Gill, including letters from his mother and correspondence concerning the sale of art works.

Container 2

Folder 17: Correspondence, 1900-1935 and undated. Contains letters to Gill from various correspondents, as well as a small number of letters by Gill himself: a letter from Gill to his third wife, Katherine, that alludes to difficulties in their marriage (June 27, 1905); a series of letters in 1927-1928 exchanged between Gill and his daughter Agnes ("Babe"), then in boarding school; and copies or drafts of letters from Gill to his stepfather (December 18, 1918) and to his longtime friend William Henry Holmes (December 1, 1926)

SERIES V: PERSONAL AND FAMILY RECORDS, 1902-1996

Folder 18: Newspaper clippings, 1902, 1915, 1927-1932, 1940. Includes clippings about Gill's photographic work at the Smithsonian; the obituary of his second wife, Mary Wright Gill (1929); clippings about the drowning death of his son Wylie Gill (1930); a notice of his retirement (1932); and Gill's obituary (1940)

Folder 19: Narrative manuscript, undated. Contains a 30-page untitled narrative--a ghost story--in Gill's hand. Pages 15-16 are missing.

Folder 20: *Brentsville Bound: Collected Poems and Art of Agnes Gill Webster*, 1996. A volume of poems, art and newspaper columns by Gill's daughter.

SERIES VI: BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY, 1886-1930

NOTE: Photographs of American Indians, taken by Gill in the course of his work for the BAE, are found in *Series III: Photographs*.

Folder 21: Records, 1910-1930 and undated. Correspondence, reports, drafts and other material related to Gill's work in the Bureau of American Ethnology. Includes end-of-

fiscal-year statements of work completed and summaries of Gill's work history and accomplishments.

Folder 22: Illustrations, 1886. Contains three colored plates from the seventh annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

SERIES VII: MEMORABILIA, 1880-1933

Folder 23: Capital Bicycle Club, 1882-1887 and undated. Gill was a member of the club and, at one time, a team captain. Includes a pamphlet, *Laws for the Government of the Capital Bicycle Club, with Statistics*, 1886 (40 p.), several membership directories and other items.

Folder 24: Other membership organizations, 1880-1930 (scattered dates) and undated. Membership cards and notices.

Folder 25: Text fragments and verses, 1908, 1920, 1921 and undated. Verses, short texts and quotations, some by Gill, some by other writers or unattributed.

Folder 26: Autographs, 1904 and undated. Gill's autograph and card, and eight autographs of friends and acquaintances.

Folder 27: Miscellaneous, 1894, 1903, 1933 and undated.