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## Finding Aid for the Moses G. Farmer Papers, 1830-1893

### Collection number: 771

UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections  
Manuscripts Division

Los Angeles, CA

#### Contact Information

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#### Descriptive Summary

**Title:** Moses G. Farmer Papers,

**Date (inclusive):** 1830-1893

**Collection number:** 771

**Creator:** Farmer, Moses G. (Moses Gerrish), 1820-1893

**Extent:** 5 boxes (2.5 linear ft.) 1 oversize box

**Repository:** University of California, Los Angeles. Library. Department of Special Collections.

Los Angeles, California 90095-1575

**Abstract:** Moses Gerrish Farmer (1820-1893) was born in Boxcawen, New Hampshire. While he was a school principal in Dover, New Hampshire, he invented a machine to print paper window shades. He invented what became the first electric fire alarm system in the U.S., discovered means for duplex and quadruplex telegraph, invented an incandescent electric lamp and in 1866, he patented a self-exciting dynamo. The collection contains correspondence to and from Moses G. Farmer, account books, diaries, clippings, photographs, and other memorabilia. The collection also contains legal and business papers regarding Farmer's patents and inventions, especially the electric railroad and fire alarm system.

**Physical location:** Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact the UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.

**Language:** English

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#### **Restrictions on Access**

COLLECTION STORED OFF-SITE AT SRLF: Advance notice required for access.

#### **Additional Physical Form Available**

A copy of the original version of this online finding aid is available at the UCLA Department of Special Collections for in-house consultation and may be obtained for a fee. Please contact:

- Public Services Division
- UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections
- Room A1713, Charles E. Young Research Library
- Box 951575
- Los Angeles, CA 90095-1575
- Telephone: 310/825-4988 (10:00 a.m. - 4:45 p.m., Pacific Time)
- Email: spec-coll@library.ucla.edu

#### **Provenance/Source of Acquisition**

Charles Scribner's Sons, purchase, 1962.

#### **Preferred Citation**

[Identification of item], Moses G. Farmer Papers (Collection 771). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

#### **Biography**

Moses Gerrish Farmer was born February 9, 1820 in Boxcawen, New Hampshire; entered preparatory school at Andover in 1832; attended Dartmouth, but withdrew because of ill health; he worked briefly in a civil engineer's office and was affiliated with various private schools in New England; married Hannah Tobey Shapleigh in 1844; while he was a school principal in Dover, New Hampshire, he invented a machine to print paper window shades; began work with the electric telegraph, eventually taking charge of the telegraph line between Boston and Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1848 he invented what became the first electric fire alarm system in the U.S.; discovered means for duplex and quadruplex telegraph; in 1858-59 invented an incandescent electric lamp; in 1866 he patented a self-exciting dynamo; appointed as electrician of U.S. Torpedo Station at Newport, Rhode Island; consulting electrician, U.S. Electric Light Company of New York; died in 1893.

#### **Biographical Narrative**

Moses Gerrish Farmer, inventor and pioneer electrician was born on February 9, 1820 in Boxcawen, New Hampshire to Colonel John and Sally (Gerrish) Farmer. He died at the World's Fair in Chicago on May 25, 1893.

In 1832 Moses Farmer entered the preparatory school at Andover, Massachusetts. He also attended Dartmouth College, but had to give up his studies due to ill health. After a brief period of employment in a civil engineer's office, Farmer was affiliated with various private schools in New England including Eliot Academy, Eliot Maine. While in Eliot, Farmer married Hannah Tobey Shapleigh on December 25, 1844. They had one daughter, Sarah Jane Farmer.

Moses Farmer's career as an inventor began while he was principal of a school in Dover, New Hampshire. At that time he devised a machine to print paper window shades. In 1845 he became enthusiastic about electricity. His first project was to construct a miniature electric train which was first exhibited on July 26, 1847. By December of that year he had accepted a position as wire examiner of the new electric telegraph line between Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts. During this time he learned telegraphy and July 1848 was appointed operator in the office at Salem, Massachusetts. Farmer later took charge of the telegraph between Boston and Newburyport, Massachusetts and undertook opening telegraph offices along this line.

In the meantime, Moses Farmer continued his electrical experimentation at home. In 1848 he invented an electric-striking apparatus for a fire-alarm service which he developed with Dr. William F. Channing. This system was installed in the City of Boston in 1851. Farmer became the superintendent of the system. This was the first electric fire-alarm system in the United States.

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Farmer resigned the superintendency in 1853 and worked on his various electrical ideas. In 1855, he discovered the means for duplex and quadruplex telegraph. Succeeding in depositing aluminum electrolytically in 1856, he went into the electrotyping business with several other men. The business failed in the panic of 1857.

After the business failure, Moses Farmer experimented with electricity as a source of light and in 1858-59 he invented an incandescent electric lamp. Becoming the superintendent of a tobacco-extracting manufactory in Somerville, Massachusetts, allowed Farmer to do further experiments. In 1866 he patented, a self-exciting dynamo. His attention was then concentrated more and more upon electric power generation and distribution.

In 1872 Farmer was appointed to the office of electrician at the United States Torpedo Station at Newport, Rhode Island. For a period of nine years he greatly advanced torpedo warfare until his health made his resignation imperative. As far as his health permitted, he then acted as consulting electrician for the United States Electric Light Company of New York. After several years he retired with his family to their summer home at Eliot, Maine, where he established a public library.

Moses Gerrish Farmer led the way by thirty years in many applications of electric current. His electrical patents rivalled Thomas A. Edison's. He received less fame and less profit because of his constant impulse to plunge into the unknown rather than to develop and perfect a marketable invention. Farmer's patents were purchased by the United States Electric Light Company and were later sold to Westinghouse.

### **Scope and Content**

Collection contains correspondence to and from Moses G. Farmer, account books, diaries, clippings, photographs, and other memorabilia. Correspondents include inventors Joseph Henry and William Francis Channing. Also contains legal and business papers regarding Farmer's patents and inventions, especially the electric railroad and fire alarm system. Includes correspondence and papers of members of the Farmer, Shapleigh, and Little families.

### **Expanded Scope and Content**

The Moses Gerrish Farmer collection was purchased in July 1962. The collection contains correspondence to and from Moses Gerrish Farmer and papers regarding his patents and inventions, especially the electric railroad and fire-alarm system. There is some biographical material in the collection including an autobiography of Farmer. Various other writings by Farmer are also present. The remainder of the collection is composed of correspondence and papers of members of the Farmer, Shapleigh and Little families, including legal papers, diaries and photographs.

### **Organization and Arrangement**

Arranged in the following series:

1. Correspondence of Moses G. Farmer (Box 1).
2. Correspondence of other family members (Box 2).
3. Legal papers of Richard Shapleigh, Sally Gerrish Farmer's diaries, photographs (Box 2).
4. Autobiography, biography, and biographical materials on Moses G. Farmer (Box 2).
5. Various writings of Moses G. Farmer, insurance policies, and legal papers (Box 3).
6. Notes re: inventions, electric railway, fire alarm system (Box 3).
7. List of patents, patent applications and agreements, published patents (Box 4).
8. Letters of Moses G. Farmer and miscellaneous material (Box 5).
9. Journal of Hannah Farmer, 1844-53 (Box 6).

### **Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Farmer, Moses G.--(Moses Gerrish),--1820-1893--Archives.

Inventors--United States--Archival resources.

Diaries.

Box 1, Folder 1 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer as a young man during 1835-1844 and mainly during his college years from his family, relatives, and friends--in particular Jacob H. Little.**

- Box 1, Folder 2 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1851-1859 concerning replies from the U.S. Patent Office and personal letters.**
- Box 1, Folder 3 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1860-1869 concerning business between him and William F. Channing, and replies from the U.S. Patent Office.**
- Box 1, Folder 4 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1870-1879 mainly from William F. Channing concerning inventions and patents.**
- Box 1, Folder 5 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1880-1881 concerning business with Frank L. Pope (his patent attorney) and the U.S. Electric Lighting Company.**
- Box 1, Folder 6 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1882-1886 concerning his inventions with Frank L. Pope, Parker W. Page, Attorney at Law, and Charles C. Coffin.**
- Box 1, Folder 7 **Letters received by Moses G. Farmer from 1887-1893 concerning business with Page, Pope, and others.**
- Box 1, Folder 8 **Letters sent by Moses G. Farmer from 1853-1861 to Joseph M. Batchelder concerning his patents on inventions.**
- Box 1, Folder 9 **Letters sent by Moses G. Farmer from 1874-1879 to Charles Stowell concerning an invention referred to as machines D and B.**
- Box 1, Folder 10 **Letters sent by Moses G. Farmer from 1880-1893 to Charles Stowell, Pope, etc. dealing mainly with the electric light invention.**
- Box 2, Folder 1 **Correspondence received and sent by Hannah (Shapleigh) Farmer, wife of Moses Farmer from 1851-1883 and undated. Included are her poems under the name of Mabelle. Many of the letters concern miscredit given to Farmer's invention of the Fire Alarm Telegraph.**
- Box 2, Folder 2 **Correspondence received and sent by Sarah J. Farmer, daughter of Moses G. Farmer from 1880-1904 concerning replies received on invitations she sent out commemorating her father's electric train invention at the Electrical Convention in 1897. Also a phrenology on her, and her last will and testament of 1893 and 1902.**
- Box 2, Folder 3 **Correspondence received and sent by John and Sally (Gerrish) Farmer, mother and father of Moses G. Farmer, from 1825-1848 concerning in particular letters to Mrs. Farmer from her son Moses who was at Andover attending school.**
- Box 2, Folder 4 **Correspondence received and sent by various members of the Shapleigh and Little families between 1816 and 1861.**
- Box 2, Folder 5 **Legal papers of Richard Shapleigh between 1822-1859 containing a series of land deeds under his name.**
- Box 2, Folder 6 **Sally Gerrish Farmer's diaries--complete years 1813, 1815, 1831, and 1844 at the ages of 23, 25, 41, and 54 respectively; and partial diaries for the years 1848, 1852, and 1856 including a set of recipes and medicants.**
- Box 2, Folder 7 **Photographs--two of Moses G. Farmer, one of their home in Eliot, Maine, two of their home in Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, a picture of Hannah S. Farmer and an unknown woman.**
- Box 2, Folder 8 **Autobiography of Moses G. Farmer. The first written in 1885 and covers the first sixteen years of his life (to 1836). The second began in 1826 and ended in 1848. The third one is a brief summary of his inventions up to 1849.**
- Box 2, Folder 9 **Biography of Moses G. Farmer's life from his birth to 1848 with many extracts taken from Farmer's autobiography.**
- Box 2, Folder 10 **Partial biographical material on Moses G. Farmer's life including an extract from a book; an account of his inventions up to 1852; a phrenology of his character; a biography of his life up to 1877; a medical report of his health in later years; and miscellaneous--certificate of admittance into school, his marriage certificate, his obituary notice, and two newspapers items on his accomplishments.**

- Box 2, Folder 11 **Biography of Moses G. Farmer in a bound book with notes and dates of discoveries made by him but not written by him; also a list of names and dates.**
- Box 3, Folder 1 **Various writings of Moses G. Farmer including school compositions of his youth and part of a paper on predictions into the future of transportation.**
- Box 3, Folder 2 **Insurance policies on fire protection and the life of Moses G. Farmer between 1856 and 1859.**
- Box 3, Folder 3 **Legal papers of Moses G. Farmer concerning claims of debt or damage during 1857 and 1861.**
- Box 3, Folder 4 **Miscellaneous notes, drawings, and calculations of Moses G. Farmer regarding his inventions.**
- Box 3, Folder 5 **Miscellaneous accounts of Farmer's construction materials used in his invention from 1856-1889 including a bound ledger for the years 1852-1855.**
- Box 3, Folder 6 **The electric railway invention of Moses G. Farmer including newspaper clippings, a pamphlet, notes, drawings, and a picture of the invention.**
- Box 3, Folder 7 **Fire Alarm System invention by Moses G. Farmer with articles concerning who was the real inventor by Charles C. Coffin and others; also published patents and notes.**
- Box 3, Folder 8 **Fire Alarm System continued with pamphlets and a Record of Proceedings of the U.S. Patent Office regarding the extension of the patent; included are articles on William F. Channing.**
- Box 4, Folder 1 **Lists of patents issued to Moses G. Farmer from 1852 to 1888.**
- Box 4, Folder 2 **Original patents of three of Farmer's inventions-- Magneto-Electric Machines 1875, Repeaters for Submarine Cables 1885, and Electric Cable Recorders 1885.**
- Box 4, Folder 3 **Applications for patents by Moses G. Farmer consisting of both written and typed copies and the originals from 1854-1891.**
- Box 4, Folder 4 **Agreements regarding patents of Moses G. Farmer with associates like J.M. Batchelder, J.F. Boynton, Charles C. Coffin, etc. in original and copied forms from 1851-1859.**
- Box 4, Folder 5 **Agreements regarding patents by Moses Farmer continued from 1880 to 1889.**
- Box 4, Folder 6 **Published patents of Moses G. Farmer's inventions from 1852-1879.**
- Box 4, Folder 7 **Published patents of Moses G. Farmer's inventions from 1881-1891.**
- Box 5, Folder 1 **Published patents of Thomas A. Edison's inventions from 1878-1881**
- Box 5, Folder 2 **Published patents of other inventors in alphabetical order such as Amos E. Dolbear, A.W. Hall, C.J. Kintner, Ernst W. Siemens, H.C. Spalding, J.C. Swan, and others.**
- Box 5, Folder 3 **Copies of letters, applications and original patents of inventors other than Moses G. Farmer from 1855-1878.**
- Box 5, Folder 4 **Miscellaneous material regarding the field of electricity in general including newspapers, pamphlets, and clippings with emphasis on the electric light, the telephone, and the electromagnetic telegraph invented by Joseph Henry.**
- Box 6 **Journal of Hannah Farmer December 25, 1844-May 9, 1845.**