

**Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection, 1869-1874**  
**1869-1874**  
**Mss.B.B16**

American Philosophical Society  
2004  
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## Table of Contents

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|   |   |
|---|---|
| Summary Information .....               | 3 |
| Background note .....                   | 5 |
| Scope & content .....                   | 6 |
| Administrative Information .....        | 7 |
| Related Materials .....                 | 7 |
| Indexing Terms .....                    | 7 |
| Bibliography .....                      | 8 |
| Collection Inventory .....              | 9 |
| Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection..... | 9 |

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## Summary Information

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| <b>Repository</b>       | American Philosophical Society  |
| <b>Creator</b>          | Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887   |
| <b>Title</b>            | Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection, 1869-1874   |
| <b>Date [inclusive]</b> | 1869-1874   |
| <b>Call number</b>      | Mss.B.B16   |
| <b>Extent</b>           | 0.25 Linear feet  |
| <b>Location</b>         | LH-MV-C-1   |
| <b>Language</b>         | English   |
| <b>Container</b>        | 1   |
| <b>Abstract</b>         | <p>The naturalist Spencer Fullerton Baird worked as Assistant Secretary and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution from 1850 until his death in 1887. A prolific collector and writer, Baird made important contributions to American ornithology, mammalogy, and herpetology, completing three monumental works, <i>The Mammals of North America</i> (Philadelphia, 1859), <i>Birds of North America</i> (Philadelphia, 1860), written with John Cassin, and <i>History of North American Birds</i> (Boston, 1874-1884), 5 vols., with Brewer and Robert Ridgway.</p> <p>The Baird Collection includes twelve letters written by Baird to the Boston printing firm, Welch, Bigelow and Co., all regarding editorial details in printing of the <i>History of North American Birds</i>.</p> |

**Preferred Citation**

Cite as: Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection, American Philosophical Society.

## Background note

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At only 27, the ornithologist Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823-1887) was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, a precocious appointment that suited a precocious scientist. Born into a well to do family in Reading, Pa., and raised in Carlisle, Baird acquired an interest in natural history even prior to enrolling at Dickinson College at age 13. Although he was not an outstanding student, he was unusually committed to his course in life, keeping meticulous notes of naturalizing expeditions, collecting specimens of birds and animals, and teaching himself preservation techniques by the age of 16.

Baird's primary interest rapidly settled on ornithology, and by 17 he had initiated a correspondence with the best known ornithologist in America, John James Audubon. After graduating from Dickinson, Baird entered medical school at his family's insistence, a practical decision to ensure his future employment, but he soon dropped out and settled into a quiet life of private study at home, focusing, of course, on natural history, roaming widely over the countryside, often with his brother William, and amassing a huge collection of bird specimens. Having sent Audubon a new species of yellow-bellied flycatcher, Audubon, in return, sent the majority of his personal collection of birds to Baird and also named a species of bunting after him. Baird used this period, too, to further his contacts in the field, arranging meetings with Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, John Cassin, and Thomas M. Brewer, and working for James Dwight Dana in identifying the crustacean collected on the Charles Wilkes expedition. His persistence paid off in the fall of 1846 (the year he married) when he earned an appointment as Professor of Natural History and Curator of the Museum at his alma mater, while still barely older than the students he was teaching.

In 1850, Baird was recruited to become Assistant Secretary at the new Smithsonian Institution, brought in by Dana (who had become one of its Regents) and seconded by his old correspondents, Audubon, Agassiz, and George Perkins Marsh. It took two boxcars to transport his collections of birds and mammals, pickled reptiles and fish to Washington, but the collections he brought were only one of the several benefits he brought to the institution. Baird's family connections served the institution materially. A Biddle on his mother's side, Baird had married the daughter of the Inspector General of the Army, which gave him a perfect entree to the military, enabling him to solicit specimens from officers stationed in the west, but more importantly to attach naturalists to Army exploring expeditions. Through his connections with the military, Baird added over 6,000 specimens to the Smithsonian collections. During his time at the Smithsonian, the collections increased from approximately 6,000 specimens to over 2.5 million. Baird was promoted from Assistant Secretary to Secretary in May 1878, continuing in that capacity until his death on August 17, 1887. He also served without salary as head of the United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries from its founding in 1871 until his death, and helped establish the Marine Biological Station at Woods Hole, Mass.

A remarkably prolific scientist, even by the standards of the day, Baird's list of publications extends to almost 1,100 titles on a wide range of subjects. Although most of these are relatively brief notices, he completed three monumental works, *The Mammals of North America* (Philadelphia, 1859), *Birds of North America* (Philadelphia, 1860), written with John Cassin; and the *History of North American Birds* (Boston, 1874-1884), 5 vols., with Brewer and Robert Ridgway. Baird was elected to the APS in 1855.

## Scope & content

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The Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection includes twelve letters written by Baird to the Boston printing firm, Welch, Bigelow and Co., all regarding editorial details in the printing of *History of North American Birds*.

## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2004

## Provenance

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### Acquisition Information

Purchased from Richards for \$75.00 and accessioned, 10/20/1969, (1969 1420ms).

### Processing Information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2004.

## Related Materials

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### Related Material

A prolific correspondent, Baird appears in a number of APS collections, including (among others) the Bowers, Gray, Lawrence, LeConte, Lesley, Morton, Wheatley Papers.

The main body of Baird Papers is located at the Smithsonian Institution Archives (Record Unit 7002).

## Indexing Terms

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### Corporate Name(s)

- Welch, Bigelow, and Co.

### Subject(s)

- Ornithology

- Printers--Massachusetts

## **Bibliography**

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Baird, Spencer Fullerton, (Philadelphia, 1860). **Call no.:** 598.297 B16b

Baird, Spencer Fullerton, (Boston, 1875). **Call no.:** 598.297 B16h.e v.1-3



## Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection

## Collection Inventory

| Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection                                       | 1869-1874    | Box 1 |
|--|--------------|-------|
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1869 June 26 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1869 Nov. 4  | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Jan. 14 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Jan. 18 | 3p.   |
| Regarding placement of illustrations.                                    |              |       |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Feb. 9  | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Mar. 10 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Dec. 20 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1872 Dec. 26 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1873 Aug. 14 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b><br>to Welch, Bigelow, and Co. | 1873 Sept. 2 | 1p.   |
| <b>Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887</b>                               | 1873 Dec. 18 | 2p.   |

Spencer Fullerton Baird Collection

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to Welch, Bigelow, and Co.

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**Baird, Spencer Fullerton, 1823-1887**

1874 Mar. 30

1p.

to Welch, Bigelow, and Co.

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