

Boas Family Papers
1862-1942
Mss.B.B61f

American Philosophical Society
3/2002
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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Boas, Franz, 1858-1942
Title	Boas Family Papers
Date [inclusive]	1862-1942
Call number	Mss.B.B61f
Extent	9.0 Linear feet
Extent	9 lin. feet
Location	LH-B-14-1; LH-MV-E-1 (FBI Files)
Language	English
Abstract	Letters between various family members of Franz Boas, nearly all in German. Although the topics relate primarily to personal, familial matters, information about Boas's career and (more generally) his intellectual formation and beliefs.
Preferred Citation	Cite as: Boas Family Papers, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

Born in Minden, Germany, on July 8, 1858, the anthropologist Franz Boas was the son of the merchant Meier Boas and his wife, Sophie Meyer. Raised in the radical and tradition of German Judaism, Franz's youth was steeped in politically liberal beliefs and a largely secular outlook that he carried with him from university through his emigration to the United States.

At the universities of Heidelberg and Bonn, Boas studied physics and geography before completing a doctorate in physical geography at Kiel in 1881. Intending on testing then-current theories of environmental determinism, he signed on to an anthropological expedition to Baffin Island in 1883-1884, expecting that he would document the close adaptative fit of Central Eskimo cultures to their extreme climate. His experiences in the arctic, however, led him to the contrary conclusion: that social traditions, not environmental, exerted a dominant influence over human societies, and from this point onward, he was led to pursue the cultural over than physical dimensions of humanity.

Although he returned to Berlin after the expedition, Boas emigrated to the United States in 1885 to assume an editorial position with the journal *Science*, hoping to use it as a stepping-stone to an academic appointment. In 1886, he embarked upon a second major field excursion into what would become his most famous ethnographic project, working among the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) Indians of the Northwest Coast, after which he secured his first academic position in 1889, at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. After three years at Clark and a failed appointment at the Field Museum in Chicago in 1892 (during which he played a part in organizing the anthropological exhibits for the Columbian World's Fair), Boas moved to New York City.

The restless activity of Boas's early years slowed in New York. Hired by the American Museum of Natural History (1895-1905), which became the recipient of the amazingly rich anthropological collections he accumulated on the Northwest Coast, Boas began to teach classes at Columbia University in 1896, where three years later he was appointed Professor of Anthropology. For the next 37 years, Boas ruled the anthropological roost at Columbia, accruing unprecedented power in his discipline, wielding grants, recommendations, and appointments with remarkable dexterity, and collecting about him a remarkable group of younger scholars as students and colleagues.

Distancing himself from some of the main currents of contemporary anthropological thought in the United States, and particularly from the evolutionist assumptions that riddled the discipline, Boas championed an anthropology that viewed human cultures as shaped more by historical "tradition" than biological propensity. Claiming to resist any overarching, synthetic theories of human relations, and particularly evolutionary theories of sociocultural development, Boas laid the theoretical groundwork for what became modern cultural relativism. In the process, he helped to clarify the demarcation between the concepts of culture and race and its expression in the divergence of the four fields in anthropology -- linguistics, ethnography, physical anthropology, and archaeology.

Boas's relatively few forays into physical anthropology included a pioneering anthropometric study in 1910-1911, demonstrating that the alleged mental and physical inferiority of immigrants disappeared statistically by the second generation. Opposed to immigration quotas and disdainful of the claims to

science used to justify them, Boas was a consistent, strident opponent of racial determinism in intellect or behavior. A committed, politically active Socialist, he was frequently an outspoken critic of American policy. During the First World War, he spoke out against the treatment of German Americans and "enemy aliens" -- to the point of putting himself at risk -- and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany proved an even greater crusade. Despite his age, Boas took an active role in the anti-fascist struggle in the United States and was involved with numerous committees to assist refugee scholars. He was equally ardent in his efforts to criticize racial and ethnic bigotry in the United States.

As a mentor, Boas had a reputation of being directive, at times overbearing, and at the same time of doing too little to prepare his students for the rigors of fieldwork. The extraordinary number of students coming out of Columbia under his care, however, has arguably done as much to extend the Boasian approach than Boas's own writing. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Elsie Clews Parsons, Alfred Kroeber, Frank Speck, Edward Sapir, Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Deloria, Melville Herskovits, Leslie Spier, Paul Radin, and Ashley Montagu are all students of Boas. Many continued in the same intellectual stream, some diverged, yet all bore traces of Boas's influence. He left a mark as well on the institutions of the discipline, as one of the founders of the American Anthropological Association and of the *International Journal of American Linguistics*.

Scope & content

Letters between various family members of Franz Boas, nearly all in German. Although the topics relate primarily to personal, familial matters, information about Boas's career and (more generally) his intellectual formation and beliefs.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 3/2002

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Series I.: Gift of Helene Boas Yampolsky, 1961-1962; and Dr. Cecil Yampolsky, 1964, with many later additions from Norman F. Boas.

Series II.: Requested by Stephen Catlett through Freedom of Information Act, 1983 (accession number 1985-225ms).

Related Materials

Related Material

Other Franz Boas Collections

Franz Boas Papers, 1862-1942 (Mss B B61)

[View Collection](#)

Franz Boas Professional Papers, ca. 1860-1942 (Mss B B61p)

[View Collection](#)

Boas-Rukeyser Collection, 1869-1940 (Mss B B61ru)

[View Collection](#)

Franz Boas field notebooks and anthropometric data, ca. 1883-1912 (Mss B B61.5)

[View Collection](#)

The American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Native American Languages, Franz Boas Collection of Materials for American Linguistics ([Mss 497.3.B63c](#)) is a large collection of primary materials on Native American languages assembled, in part, under Boas's supervision, and including a large quantity of material written by Boas himself.

Boas appears as a correspondent in numerous APS collections, and in addition to its rich collections for the history of anthropology, the library houses the papers of several of Boas's former students and proteges, including Frank Speck ([Mss. Ms. Coll. 126](#),), Elsie Clews Parsons ([Mss. Ms. Coll. 29](#),), John

Alden Mason ([Mss. B M384](#),), Paul Radin ([Mss. 497.3 R114](#),), and Ashley Montagu ([Mss. Ms. Coll. 109](#)).

The APS also houses a microfilm (372.3, reel 1) of original materials in the Office of Anthropology Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., relating to Boas's trips to Baffin Island (N.W.T.) and British Columbia, during which he studied and collected cultural materials, 1885-1909.

The papers of Boas's son Ernst Boas ([Mss. Ms. Coll. 10](#)) are housed at the APS. A physician, Ernst Boas shared his father's liberal political outlook and activist social views.

Indexing Terms

Occupation(s)

- Anthropologists -- United States.

Personal Name(s)

- Boas, Ernst P., (Ernst Philip), 1891-1955

Subject(s)

- Anthropology--Research--United States
- Anthropology--United States--History.
- Anthropology--United States.
- Communists--United States
- Ethnology--North America
- Jewish scientists
- Refugees, Political
- Scientists, Refugee
- Socialists--United States

Bibliography

Rohner, Ronald P., ed., *The Ethnography of Franz Boas: Letters and Diaries of Franz Boas, Written on the Northwest Coast from 1886 to 1931* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1969). **Call no.:** B B61e.r

Stocking, George, ed., *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1974). **Call no.:** 572.081 B63s

Cole, Douglas, *Franz Boas: The Early Years, 1859-1906* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1999).

Boas, Franz, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1911). **Call no.:** 572 B63m

Boas, Franz, *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl* (Washington, D.C.:Government Printing Office, 1921). **Call no.:** 572.97 B63e

Boas, Franz, *Primitive Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1927). **Call no.:** 571.7 B63p

Boas, Franz, ed., *General Anthropology* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1938). **Call no.:** 572 B63g.r

Boas, Franz, *Race, Language and Culture* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1940). **Call no.:** 572.081 B63r

Series I. Boas Family Papers

Collection Inventory

Series I. Boas Family Papers	1862-1942	9 linear feet
Family correspondence	1862-1885 June	Box 1
Family correspondence	1885 July-1888	Box 2
Family correspondence	1889-1892	Box 3
Family correspondence	1892-1894 November	Box 4
Family correspondence	1894 December-1895	Box 5
Family correspondence	1896-1898 March	Box 6
Family correspondence	1898 April-1900	Box 7
Family correspondence	1901-1902	Box 8
Family correspondence	1903-1905	Box 9
Family correspondence	1906-1908 April	Box 10
Family correspondence	1908 June-1910 August	Box 11
Family correspondence	1910 September-1911	Box 12
Family correspondence	1912-1913 October	Box 13
Family correspondence	1913 November-1915 August	Box 14
Family correspondence	1915 September-1919	Box 15
Family correspondence	1920-1931	Box 16
Family correspondence	1925-1932	Box 17

Series I. Boas Family Papers

Family correspondence	1909-1932		Box 18
Boas, Gertrude	1922		Box 18
Boas, Gertrude and Henry. Letters from Franz and Marie Boas #1	1922		Box 18
Boas, Gertrude and Henry. Letters from Franz and Marie Boas #2	1922		Box 18
Boas, Gertrude and Henry. Letters from Franz and Marie Boas #3	1922		Box 18
Boas Family correspondence	1909-1921		Box 18
Boas, Helene	1910-1934	8 folders	Box 18
Boas, Helene. Letters from aunts	1930-1932		Box 18
Boas, Henry B. Letters to Ernst Boas	1914-1917		Box 18
Boas, Henry B. Letters to Ernst Boas	1918-1919		Box 18
Krackowitzer, Emilie			Box 18
Krackowitzer, Emilie	1885		Box 18
Yampolsky, Helene			Box 18

Series II. United States Federal Bureau of Invest...

Mss.B.B61.f.1 Series II. United States Federal Bureau of Investigation Files	1862-1942	49.0 p.	Box 1
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Franz Boas's FBI files, concerning the FBI investigation into Boas' alleged connections with the Communist party. The continuation of the files beyond the date of Boas' death most likely resulted from similar investigations into the activity of Boas' outspoken son, Ernst Boas.
