

Rodney H. True Papers
1861-1939
Mss.B.T763

American Philosophical Society
2002
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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	True, Rodney H.(Rodney Howard), 1866-1940
Title	Rodney H. True Papers
Date [inclusive]	1861-1939
Call number	Mss.B.T763
Extent	6.0 Linear feet
Location	LH-B-29-2
Language	English
Container	1-12
Abstract	<p>The plant physiologist and historian Rodney H. True (1866-1940) divided his career relatively evenly between the Bureau of Plant Industry in United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Botany and Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania. A specialist in the physiological function of mineral nutrients in plants, True was active in his later career in the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, and the Agricultural History Society. The True Papers consist of 6 linear feet of material relating primarily to the period of his career spent at the University of Pennsylvania. The collection contains roughly equal proportions of personal and professional correspondence, with a few diaries and research notebooks documenting his involvement with professional organizations and his interests in the history of his discipline.</p>

Preferred Citation

Cite as: Rodney H. True Papers, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

The botanist Rodney Howard True (1866-1940) was born and raised in southern Wisconsin, the son of the transplanted New Englanders, John M. and Mary Annie (Beede) True. A farmer, occasional schoolmaster, and state legislator, John True instilled in each of his five children a strong interest in education, and provided them with the academic skills to match. Each of True children graduated from the University of Wisconsin -- Rodney in 1890, followed by Gordon (1894), Ernest (1896), Eunice M. (1905), and Katherine (1910) -- and four of them went on to careers in academia. In addition to Rodney, Gordon worked in animal husbandry at the University of California, while Katherine and Eunice taught at Berea College in Kentucky.

Rodney True's interest in botany was sparked during his high school years, and blossomed at university. After receiving his BS, he was encouraged to continue his studies through a University Fellowship, receiving his MS in 1892. After working as principal of the Wisconsin Academy for a year to shore up his finances, he went overseas to complete his training, studying botany and zoology at the University of Leipzig under Wilhelm Pfeffer, and receiving his doctorate in 1895.

For several years after his return to the states, True passed through academic vagabondage, teaching pharmacognosy at the University of Wisconsin for three years, and serving as an assistant at Radcliffe (1899-1900) and as lecturer in botany at Harvard (1899-1901). From Harvard, however, he secured an important position overseeing the physiological research in the Bureau of Plant Industry of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. During his years at the U.S.D.A., True's own research shifted away from the general botany that had previously occupied him to concentrate on ionic exchange and the absorption of calcium and other mineral nutrients by plants, but he also gained a measure of fame as a "trouble shooter" for the public. Sometimes known as the Sherlock Holmes of plant detectives, he was charged with identifying and combating destructive or invasive plants. His most famous "cases" were the discovery of the source of a mold infecting the cigar industry and the identification of jimson weed as the culprit in "locoing" livestock in the western states, both of which had a profound economic impact.

In 1920, True left the U.S.D.A. under unusual, and less than favorable circumstances. Facing a reduced appropriation for his unit, he resisted the temptation to eliminate staff or lower salaries by reducing his budget through his own resignation. Although he left without having another position in hand, he was soon landed as professor of botany at the University of Pennsylvania, where he spent the remainder of his career. Despite a heavy load teaching everything from elementary botany to advanced plant physiology, he remained active in professional organizations and continued to publish in plant physiology, pathology, and economic botany. After Lydia Morris donated the land and endowment to establish the University's Morris Arboretum in 1932, True became the Arboretum's first Director, serving from 1933 until 1939. He was granted emeritus status at the University in 1937.

Beginning with his article, "Thomas Jefferson in Relation to Botany" in 1916, True devoted increasing time to the history of the plant sciences. Particularly after his remove to Philadelphia in 1920, he worked intensively on Jefferson and André Michaux, the botany of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and more generally, on the history of agriculture. After his remove to Penn, the majority of his research was devoted to historical topics. True was a founding member of the Agricultural History Society in

1919, serving the first of his three terms as its first president, and he was active in the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1923. True also developed a deep interest in the status of his profession, becoming a member of the Committee of One Hundred on Scientific Research of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. During his time at Penn, he helped write several reports on support for basic research in universities and the financial position of university professors, making the case for higher wages.

True was married twice, to Katherine McAssey (d. 1926) and Martha. A son by his first marriage, Rodney Philip (Philip), became a noted plant pathologist in his own right. After several years of illness and physical decline, Rodney True died in his home at the Arboretum on April 8, 1940.

Scope & content

The True Papers consist of 6 linear feet of materials relating to the life and career of the plant physiologist, Rodney H. True. In addition to 4.5 linear feet of correspondence, divided approximately equally between personal and professional, the collection includes ten diaries, 29 notebooks, and a number of photographs and other miscellaneous items.

The picture that emerges of True is intriguing, but often all too sparse. Coming almost exclusively from the last twenty years of his career, the collection primarily reflects True's late-career interests. Initially a general botanist, and subsequently a plant physiologist, by the time True landed at the University of Pennsylvania in 1920, his research interests centered largely on the history of his discipline, with a particular focus on Thomas Jefferson, John and William Bartram, and the plant sciences in early Philadelphia. As a result, his important work at the U.S.D.A. as -- for lack of a better term -- a forensic botanist is nearly entirely undocumented. One interesting exception is a case involving a suit lodged by Hillborn Darlington against the local gas company, in which the florist sought to demonstrate damage to his roses caused by a leaky gas main. True was called upon as an expert witness.

The earlier portions of True's career are partially documented in a series of notebooks maintained while he was a student at the University of Leipzig in 1893-1894, by a miscellaneous assortment of notes, and by a very small number of letters with family members in Series II.

The True Papers may be most valuable as a resource for examining True's activities on behalf of several professional organizations and institutions, including the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, the Morris Arboretum, the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, and the Allegheny Forest Experiment Station. Although most of the correspondence relating to these organizations is of an administrative nature, they are useful for understanding the role those organizations fulfilled in mediating between academia and the great public. As a member of Committee of One Hundred on Scientific Research of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, True was also involved in evaluating support for basic research in academia and the (inadequate) range of salaries.

Series I. Professional correspondence	1899-1939	2.5 linear feet
Series II. Personal correspondence	1862-1938	2 linear feet
Series III. Notebooks	1889-1929	0.5 linear feet
Series IV. Diaries	1883-1926	0.5 linear feet

Series V. Printed material

1846-1938

0.5 linear feet

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2002

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Accessioned 1957.

Processing Information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2002.

Related Materials

Related Material

The Papers of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture are available in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at the University of Pennsylvania (Ms. Coll. 92). True appears as a correspondent in the Papers of William Jacob Robbins (Ms. Coll. 92).

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Allegheny Forest Experiment Station
- American Association for the Advancement of Science. Committee of One Hundred on Scientific Research
- Pennsylvania Horticultural Society
- Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture.
- University of Pennsylvania. Morris Arboretum
- Universität Leipzig

Genre(s)

- Blueprints
- Diaries.
- Field notes.
- Maps
- Notebooks
- Photographs

Geographic Name(s)

- California--Description and travel
- Haiti--Description and travel

Personal Name(s)

- Arndt, C. H.
- Bartram, John, 1699-1777
- Frazer, John
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826
- Michaux, André, 1746-1802
- Okie, John M.
- True, Katherine McAssey, d.1926

Subject(s)

- Agriculture--History
- Botanical gardens--Pennsylvania
- Botany
- Botany--History
- Franklinia alatamaha
- Plant physiology

Bibliography

Schafer, Joseph, "Rodney Howard True: A Wisconsin Gift to Washington and Philadelphia,"
Wisconsin Magazine of History 24, 3 (1941), 336-356.

Edwards, Everett E., "Rodney H. True and His Writings," *Agricultural History* 18 (1944), 23-34.
Includes a complete bibliography for True.

Series I. Professional correspondence

Collection Inventory

Series I. Professional correspondence	1899-1939	2.5 Linear feet
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Rodney True's professional correspondence is heavily stilted toward the years spent at the University of Pennsylvania, post-1920. Although there is comparatively little to document True's work as a plant physiologist, the letters offer insight into his historical research, particularly on Thomas Jefferson and the Bartrams, and his activities on behalf of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (P.S.P.A.) and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. In addition to the folders filed under the name of the organization, several individual correspondents were involved with the P.S.P.A., most notably George F. Curwen and John M. Okie.

There is some documentation of his activities as Director of the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania and administrative correspondence relating to the Allegheny Forest Experiment Station run by the U.S.D.A.

True's correspondence with John Frazer represents the happy merger of his interests in botany and history. True and Frazer exchanged a number of letters in their efforts to determine the original site of discovery of the "Franklin Tree," *Franklinia alatamaha* (also called *Gordonia alatamaha*), but were also busy exchanging information of plant physiology. True's correspondence with I.I.R. Henry is focused on study of the Bartrams and Bartam's Garden.

An interesting series of letters relate to the "Darlington Gas Case," the Darlington Florists sued the local gas company over damage to its plants from a leaky gas main. True's plant forensic skills were called in to testify in a case that eventually made its way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court before being decided in favor of the plaintiffs. A series of newspaper clippings related to the case are housed in Series V.

Other correspondence of note includes a series of letters from the botanist C.H. Arndt describing his work in Haiti in the 1920s, letters from George F. Mitchell on tea (True had an interest in promoting tea cultivation in America), and the letters of several correspondents relating to botany and natural history in Maine, where True summered (see, e.g., Frank Morgan Jones, William T. Hussey, Mary Carpenter Kelley, Anne E. Perkins).

Academy of Natural Sciences	Box 1
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Ackley, Louise	Box 1
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Addison, Steaven		Box 1
Agricultural History Society	4 folders	Box 1
Anderson, Russell H.		
Edwards, Everett E.		
Carrier, Lyman		
Stine, C. C.		
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Kellar, Herbert A.		
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Albertson, F. W.		Box 1
Albrecht, Otto E.		Box 1
Allegheny Forest Experiment Station	7 folders	Box 1
Cope, Francis R.		
Forbes, R. D.		
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Silcox, F. A.		
True, Rodney H.		
Cope, Francis R.		
Lipman, Jacob G.		
Schnur, F. Luther		
Schuster, George L.		
Appleby, Paul H.		
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Chapline, W. R.		
Clapp, Earl H.		
Swartley, John C.		
Wood, O. M.		
Foley, John		

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McClung, C. E.
 Smith, J. Spencer
 Wallace, H. A.
 Whitman, Ezra B.
 Doak, K. D.
 Kriebley Ralph M.
 Perry, George S.
 Wildman, Edward E.

Allen, C. E.		Box 1
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Allen, E. W.		Box 1
Allen, Henry Butler		Box 1
Allyn, Herman B.		Box 1
Alsberg, Carl L.		Box 1
American Association for the Advancement of Science		Box 1
Livingston, Burton E.		
Baker, O. E.		
Bastin, Edson S.		
Daly, Reginald		
Kay, G.		
Littlefield, May		
Hughes, A. L.		
Metcalf, Maynard M.		
Randall, H. M.		
Raney, M. L.		
American Association for the Advancement of Science. Committee of One Hundred of Scientific Research	6 folders	Box 2

Series I. Professional correspondence

Bowie, William
 Noyes, W. A.
 Hargitt, George T.
 Taylor, Walter P.
 White, David.

American Association of University Professors		Box 1
Himstead, Ralph E.		
American Birth Control League		Box 1
American Foundation for the Blind		Box 1
American Historical Association		Box 1
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American Philosophical Society	5 folders	Box 1
Conklin, E. G.		
Hanson, Laura E.		
Moore, Percy		
Morris, Roland S.		
Noonan, Julia		
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Skinker, C. F.		
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American Society of Plant Physiologists		Box 1
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Anthony, Pierce W.		Box 1
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"Associate Administrators--Duties and Qualifications"	Box 1
Atkins, Charles D.	Box 1
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Balch, Francis N.	Box 1
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Barnett, Claribel R.	Box 1
Bartlett, J. E.	Box 1
John Wiley and Sons	
Beal, Ruth	Box 1
Bessey, Ernst A.	Box 1
Bedlinger, Fred	Box 1
Bergen, Fanny (Mrs. J. Y.)	Box 1
Berne, Thelma G.	Box 1
Bernhardt, F.	Box 1
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Blakeslee, A. F.		Box 1
Blueprint, Gas Main and Darlington Greenhousesm Doylestown		Box 1
Bogle, Sarah C. N.		Box 1
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Calcott, W. A.	Box 2
Caldwell, Arthur C.	Box 2
Calov, Curt	Box 2
Calvert, Philip P.	Box 2
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Carrier, Lyman	Box 2
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Chapin, Mrs. Charles H.	Box 2
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Communication to Internal Revenue Service	Box 2
Conklin, E. G.	Box 2
Connecticut Fire Insurance Company	Box 2
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Crane, H. L.	Box 2
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Crawford, Joseph	Box 2
Crocker, P. S.	Box 2
Crocker, William	Box 2
Cross, Whitman	Box 2
Curwen, George F.	Box 2
Dane County, Wisconsin (Map)	Box 2
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Claypool, John H.

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Davis, Bradley M.	Box 2
Davis, H. Allen, Jr.	Box 2
Davis, J. B.	Box 2
Davis, Lucy Tennant	Box 2
Davis, R. H.	Box 2
Denny, Frank E.	Box 2
Day, Margaret (Mrs. Charles)	Box 2
DeForest, Howard	Box 2
Dengler, Robert E.	Box 2
Dewey, John	Box 2
Dick, G. A.	Box 2
Dictionary of American Biography	Box 2
Dietrich, Irwin	Box 2
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Donaldson, Henry K., & Company	Box 2
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Series II. Personal correspondence

Series II. Personal correspondence**1862-1937****2.0 Linear
feet**

Correspondence of various members of the families of Rodney H. True and his wife Katherine. Although the bulk is purely personal, True's research interests and personal interests often overlapped, and several correspondents mingle the professional and personal. His brother Gordon, an agricultural scientist at the University of California (Berkeley and later Davis), is particularly prone to discuss his academic endeavors and his efforts to better himself professionally, and True's sisters Eunice and Katherine, teachers at Berea College, also provide details on their academic careers. The remaining correspondence provides a perspective on the social and family life of Rodney and Katherine True, including . The bulk of the correspondence falls in the period between 1910 and 1930.

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Series III. Notebooks

Series III. Notebooks

1889-1929

0.5 Linear
feet 28 vols.

Notebooks, memorandum books, and accounts kept by Rodney H. True. The series includes a valuable set of notes kept by True while studying for his doctorate at the University of Leipzig, including notes for comparative anatomy, general botany, general zoology, and paleontology.

Several later notebooks pertain to True's research in plant physiology and to his research on Thomas Jefferson. Series I includes three "logs" of botanical excursions 1930, 1931 and 1936. One volume includes fairly extensive genealogical notes of True's.

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Seed Experiments, Doylestown, no. 2			

Series IV. Diaries

Series IV. Diaries**1883-1926****0.5 Linear
feet 9 vols.**

Miscellaneous diaries of Rodney H. True, kept sporadically. For the most part, the diaries written prior to 1917 include perfunctory daily notes on True's professional activities, with occasional personal comments, but the diaries for 1917-1919 include longer and more interesting passages. Although True was not a retrospective diarist, he commented regularly on the news from Europe and, to a lesser degree, on the home front, where he used his knowledge of agricultural science to assist in raising food for the war effort. The diaries for 1883 and 1926 are very brief, the latter being more an appointment book than a true diary.

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True, Rodney H. Diary	February-July 1919	1 vol.	Box 11

Series IV. Diaries

True, Rodney H.
Diary

1926

1 vol.

Box 11

Series V. Printed material

Series V. Printed material	1846-1938	0.5 Linear feet
A completely miscellaneous assemblage of printed materials, ranging from newspaper clippings to reprints, ephemera, and small publications by groups in which True had a professional or personal interest. These include a few pamphlets relating to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, and the University of Pennsylvania.		
Benevolent societies	1925-1927	Box 12
League of Neighbors Near East Relations		
Botanical	1909-1938	Box 12
Botanical Society of Pennsylvania Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture		
Invitations	n.d.	Box 12
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Newspaper clippings -- Darlington gas damage case	1930	Box 12
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University of Pennsylvania	1924-1928	Box 12
Miscellaneous	1911-1937	Box 12