

Frank Siebert Papers
1932-1998
Mss.Ms.Coll.97

American Philosophical Society
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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Siebert, Frank T. (Frank Thomas), 1912-1998
Title	Frank Siebert Papers
Date [inclusive]	1932-1998
Call number	Mss.Ms.Coll.97
Extent	56.0 Linear feet
Extent	56 linear feet.
Location	LH-SB-15-6; LH-B-32-7 (Box 97)
Language	English
Container	1-112
Abstract	<p>Frank Siebert (1913-1998) is one of the key contributors to the field of Algonquian linguistics. While he did not pursue a degree in linguistics or anthropology, he independently acquired the skills and knowledge of a professional scholar. His work on Penobscot is some of the best and most comprehensive in existence. The Siebert Collection documents the interest and work of Frank Siebert in the linguistics of the Algonquian family of languages, particularly Penobscot. The collection includes correspondence, research notes, drafts and published manuscripts by Siebert, as well as secondary sources consulted by Siebert. To a lesser extent, it contains material that documents Siebert's personal life, his interest in book collecting and his career as a physician.</p>

Background note

Frank Siebert (1913-1998) is one of the key contributors to the field of Algonquian linguistics. While he did not pursue a degree in linguistics or anthropology, he independently acquired the skills and knowledge of a professional scholar. His work on Penobscot is some of the best and most comprehensive in existence.

Siebert began his Penobscot research in 1932 while an undergraduate studying chemistry at Haverford College. It was in this year that he made his first trip to Indian Island, Maine in the Penobscot Reservation. While a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, Siebert continued to pursue his interest in anthropological linguistics. He received training in this field by attending lectures by Franz Boas and Edward Sapir. He associated with Frank Speck and the anthropologists and linguists who congregated in Speck's office. Throughout his career as a pathologist, Siebert continued his Penobscot field work. He also had an interest in Catawba, which he did field research on in 1941, during a six month break from medical school. Later in life, he studied secondary sources on the language. After his retirement, Siebert dedicated all his time to his research. In 1968, he moved to Old Town, Maine so he could work more frequently with his informants.

When Siebert began his research, there were about one hundred fluent speakers of Penobscot. Over the years, Siebert worked with many informants. His longest collaboration was with Andrew Dana, with whom he worked closely for over thirty years. Over the course of Siebert's life, most of the Penobscots fluent in their native language died. This left Siebert among, or possibly, the last speaker with any great knowledge of the language. He continued his work up to his death in 1998, leaving much of it unpublished.

Some of Siebert's work built on existing studies of Algonquian languages. Siebert's mentor, Frank Speck, had worked on both Penobscot and Catawba. Also, Siebert's work on Proto-Algonquian began with a correction of Leonard Bloomfield's reconstruction. However, as Siebert felt strongly that scholars should do their own research, all his writings have come from his own field work. This research formed the basis of some of the most important contributions to the field of Algonquian linguistics. His Penobscot Dictionary is the most complete documentation of the language in existence. Siebert also collected folklore and history of the Penobscot Indians, which he compiled in a volume called Penobscot Texts. While most of his work was linguistic, Siebert also wrote articles on Algonquian history. He combined these interests in his reconstruction of Proto-Algonquian and a study of eighteenth century Virginia Algonquian. He used a knowledge of natural history as well as linguistics and history to identify the original homeland of the Algonquians.

Siebert maintained a frequent correspondence with his mentors and colleagues, including C.F. Voegelin, Frank Speck, Edward Sapir, Ives Goddard, Gordon Day and Willard Walker. Through letters, they shared ideas and augmented each other's work. Siebert was also an avid book collector, amassing a large and valuable collection of works on United States and American Indian history. In addition, he belonged to several historical and archeological societies. Siebert was awarded grants by the Guggenheim Foundation, the NSF and NEH to carry out his research.

Scope & content

The Siebert Collection documents the interest and work of Frank Siebert in the linguistics of the Algonquian family of languages, particularly Penobscot. The collection includes correspondence, research notes, drafts and published manuscripts by Siebert, as well as secondary sources consulted by Siebert. To a lesser extent, it contains material that documents Siebert's personal life, his interest in book collecting and his career as a physician. Siebert carried on frequent and long standing correspondence with others in the field of American Indian linguistics. In their letters, Siebert and his colleagues presented and discussed linguistic theories and evidence and kept each other notified about their current projects. Often these letters included articles of interest or drafts of papers with a request for comments.

Siebert's research, and thus his field notes, center on the Penobscot language. The field notes also display an interest in related topics, such as Indian history and anthropology, Maine geography and natural history. His two major projects on Penobscot, the Penobscot Dictionary and Penobscot Texts, demonstrate Siebert's desire not only to understand the linguistic operation of the language, but to preserve the language itself as well as the culture and history of the Penobscot people. Siebert made several sound recordings of Penobscot songs, stories and speech to this end. While Algonquian languages were Siebert's main interest, he did a significant amount of research on Catawba, a Siouan language. He kept extensive field notes on Catawba from which he produced a published article.

Siebert's field research was augmented by a study of secondary sources. He consulted many journals, articles and manuscripts on the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology as well as on Algonquian and Catawba linguistics. Also included are documents particularly useful as sources for Siebert's work on Indian history. A small portion of the collection represents Siebert's interest in book collecting, his medical career and his personal life. He kept articles, newspaper clippings and notes on diseases and medical practice. In addition, he accumulated book advertisements, catalogues and auction notices. Siebert kept up personal correspondence with friends, whose letters he kept with those from his colleagues. He was also interested in politics and saved newspaper articles on current political and social issues.

Native American Images note : Nearly 800 ink and pencil sketches, photographs, newspaper clippings, and black and white photocopy images of Catawba and Penobscot tribes collected and drawn by Frank Siebert from 1932-1946 and 1985-1994. The ethnological sketches in notebooks reflect social life and customs, including tools, traps, design motifs, ball games, wampum and picture writing. Research notes contain photocopies from various sources. Many original and printed maps of North Carolina and Maine pinpointing tribal distributions.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

Processing Information

Inventory is not complete, only scanned images are noted.

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Gelatin silver prints
- Newspaper clippings.
- Photographs--Color
- Picture-writing
- Sketches.

Subject(s)

- Catawba Indians
- Eastern Woodlands Indians
- Indians of North America--Maine
- Indians of North America--North Carolina
- Penobscot Indians
- Petroglyphs
- Photocopies
- Southeast Indians

Collection Inventory

Ball game rackets	1937
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Ball game rackets , 1937

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1612\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1612)

Canoe paddles

1932-1946

Canoe paddles , 1932-1946

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1614\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1614)

Cherokee child

1900

Cherokee child , 1900

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1616\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1616)

Iroquois family

1984-1985

Iroquois family , 1984-1985

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1615\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1615)

Margaret George Brown, 1838-1922 1900

Margaret George Brown, 1838-1922 , 1900

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1613\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1613)

Wampum belt designs

1936

Wampum belt designs , 1936

[\[http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1611\]](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/fedora/repository/graphics:1611)
