

Carl Koller Papers

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Prepared by T. Michael Womack

Collection Summary

Title: Carl Koller Papers

Span Dates: 1866-1988

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1884-1934)

ID No.: MSS82987

Creator: Koller, Carl, 1857-1944

Extent: 2,100 items ; 6 containers plus 1 oversize and 1 vault container ; 4.4 linear feet

Language: Collection material largely in German, with English and French

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Summary: Ophthalmologist and surgeon. Correspondence, diaries, speeches and writings, reports, laboratory notes, subject files, biographical material, certificates, awards, newspaper clippings, and other papers documenting Koller's career.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Becker, Hortense Koller--Correspondence.

Breuer, Josef, 1842-1925.

Donath, Julius.

Donders, F. C. (Franciscus Cornelis), 1818-1889.

Einthoven, Willem, 1860-1927.

Fabritius, August.

Freud, Sigmund, 1856-1939--Correspondence.

Gerlach, Leo von.

Javal, Émile, 1839-1907.

Knapp, Herman, 1832-1911.

Koller, Carl, 1857-1944.

Kölliker, Albert, 1817-1905.

Königsstein, L.

Landolt, E. (Edmond), 1846-

Liljestrand, G.

Lustgarten, Sigmund.

Mauthner, Julius.

Moore, William Oliver.

Nordenson, Erik Wilhelm, 1847-1919.

Paneth, Josef.

Rosanes, Ignaz.

Schiff, Emil J., 1869-1927.

Snellen, H. (Herman), 1834-1908.

Organizations

Universität Wien.

Subjects

Anesthesia in ophthalmology.

Chickens--Embryos.

Cocaine.

Eye--Surgery.

Ophthalmology.

Occupations

Ophthalmologists.

Surgeons.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Carl Koller, ophthalmologist and surgeon, were given to the Library of Congress in two installments. The bulk of the collection was given by Koller's daughter, Hortense Koller Becker, in 1994. A small addition was subsequently given by Becker through Albrecht Hirschmüller in 1996.

Processing History

The papers of Carl Koller were arranged and described in 1996. The finding aid was revised in 2009.

Transfers

Photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of the Carl Koller Papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Carl Koller is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Carl Koller are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Carl Koller Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1857, Dec. 3	Born, Schüttenhofen, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Susice, Czech Republic)
1882	M.D., University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
1882-1884	Intern and house surgeon, Allgemeines Krankenhaus, Vienna, Austria, where he was a colleague of Sigmund Freud
1884	Discovered use of cocaine as local anesthetic in eye surgery Presented paper, "Vorläufige Mittheilung über locale Anästhesirung am Auge," at meeting of German Ophthalmological Society, Heidelberg, Germany Presented paper, "Ueber die Verwendung des Cocaïn zur Anästhesirung am Auge," at meeting of Society of Physicians, Vienna, Austria
1885-1887	Assistant to Drs. Snellen and Donders, University of Utrecht, the Netherlands
1888	Emigrated to United States

1888-1930s	Private practice, ophthalmologist and ophthalmic surgeon, Mount Sinai and Montefiore hospitals, New York, N.Y. Authored many articles pertaining to biology and ophthalmology
1893	Married Laura Blum
1902	Became naturalized United States citizen
1922	Awarded gold medal, American Ophthalmological Society
1929	Awarded Kussmaul Medal for his services to science, Heidelberg University medical faculty, Heidelberg, Germany
1930	Awarded medal of honor, New York Academy of Medicine
1934	Awarded medal of honor, Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology
1944, Mar. 21	Died, New York, N.Y.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Carl Koller (1857-1944) span the years 1866-1988, with the bulk of the items concentrated in the period between 1884 and 1934. The collection focuses on Koller's work as a ophthalmologist and surgeon and his discovery of cocaine as a local anesthetic. It consists of four series: [Correspondence](#), [Writings](#), [Subject File](#), and [Oversize](#).

The [Correspondence](#) series comprises correspondence of Carl Koller and that of his daughter, Hortense Koller Becker. Following her father's death, Becker devoted considerable time to insuring her father's priority as discoverer of cocaine as a local anesthetic. Her correspondence consists primarily of letters from her father and from scholars seeking information about him for publication purposes, mostly from the 1960s through the 1980s. Becker was not fluent in German and frequently sought the aid of native German speakers to translate important letters in her father's papers. Correspondence with Ernst Freud serves as an example. Sigmund Freud's letters to Koller were translated by Freud's son, Ernst.

The correspondence of Carl Koller consists mostly of letters written during the 1880s by fellow medical students, professors, and other physicians during his medical school days at the University of Vienna, subsequent internship at Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna, and assistantship at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, some of whom continued to correspond with Koller after he emigrated to the United States in 1888. The fields of physiology, neurology, psychiatry, surgery, and ophthalmology are well represented in the correspondence by such notables as Josef Breuer, Julius Donath, Franciscus Cornelis Donders, Willem Einthoven, Sigmund Freud, Herman Knapp, Sigmund Lustgarten, Julius Mauthner, Erik Nordenson, Josef Paneth, Ignaz Rosanes, Emil Schiff, and Herman Snellen. Koller and Sigmund Freud were both colleagues and friends, as Freud's letters attest. Letters from family members are also included. The majority of Koller's correspondence is in German.

The [Writings](#) series comprises writings by Koller and writings by others. Of the over forty articles, speeches, and reports by Koller, approximately half relate in some way to his discovery of cocaine as a local anesthetic, while the remainder concern defects and diseases of the eye and Koller's early work on the mesoderm of the chick. A few discuss papers by others. Approximately twenty-five percent of these writings are in German. Also, many of Koller's notes and drafts are written in shorthand. Writings by others consist of over fifty articles by physicians and scientists spanning the past century. Subjects include the discovery and application of cocaine as a local anesthetic specifically relating to eye surgery, the embryonic development of the chick, and the fiftieth anniversary of Koller's discovery. Individual authors of note include August Fabritius, Sigmund Freud, Leo Gerlach, Emile Javal, Herman Knapp, Albert Kölliker, L. Königstein, Edmond Landolt, Göran Liljestrand, William Oliver Moore, and Erik Nordenson. Many of these articles are offprints bearing an inscription to Koller by the author. Hortense Koller Becker's 1963 homage to her father, "Carl Koller and Cocaine," is also among these writings. Approximately forty percent of these writings are in German, while nearly twenty percent are in French.

The [Subject File](#) contains material of a more personal nature, such as Koller's birth and marriage certificates, awards, biographical material, diaries, immigration and naturalization papers, medical school and military service records, and newspaper clippings. The series contains Koller's laboratory notes during his experiments with cocaine as well as letters of congratulation and newspaper articles praising his discovery. Of interest also are a number of controversies involving Koller, the foremost of which concerns the issue of priority as discoverer of cocaine as a local anesthetic. Many ascribed credit to Sigmund Freud, who indeed had experimented with cocaine prior to Koller. Freud, however, failed to make a practical application of the drug's numbing effect, as Koller later realized in surgery on the eye. In 1954 Koller's daughter strongly urged Ernest Jones to note her father's contributions in Jones's biography of Freud, but to no avail. Letters and articles by G. Gärtner and L. Königstein substantiate Koller's claim to priority.

After receipt of his medical degree and until his immigration to the United States, Koller held a medical commission in the Austrian army reserve. In 1885, while an intern in the Allgemeines Krankenhaus, he was challenged to a duel by a fellow medical reservist. Although untrained in the use of sabers, he nevertheless won the duel. Court charges were presented but later dropped. Throughout Koller's career in New York, he made a number of contributions to the field of ophthalmology, including the invention of an illuminating system for the electronic ophthalmoscope. His idea was acquired by an ocular instruments manufacturer, however, and Koller received no credit. Newspaper clippings in the Subject File contain numerous articles of interest, particularly the 9 December 1881 issue of the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, which details the burning of the Ringtheater, during which over 200 people lost their lives. Rooms in the Allgemeines Krankenhaus were used as a temporary morgue.

[Oversize](#) material consists of offprints of articles, illustrations, newspapers clippings, certificates, official records, and programs.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in four series:

- [Correspondence, 1875-1988](#)
- [Writings, 1878-1985](#)
- [Subject File, 1866-1984](#)
- [Oversize, 1875-1934](#)

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