

**Octave Chanute Papers**  
**A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress**



**Manuscript Division, Library of Congress**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
**1997**

Contact information: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

Catalog Record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm78015560>

Additional search options available at: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms998005>

Prepared by Richard L. McCormack and Allan Teichroew  
Revised and expanded by Karen Linn Femia

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## Collection Summary

**Title:** Octave Chanute Papers

**Span Dates:** 1807-1955

**Bulk Dates:** (bulk 1860-1910)

**ID No.:** MSS15560

**Creator:** Chanute, Octave, 1832-1910

**Extent:** 10,325 items

**Extent:** 46 containers plus 1 oversize

**Extent:** 17.4 linear feet

**Extent:** 25 microfilm reels

**Language:** Collection material in English

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

**LC Catalog record:** <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm78015560>

**Summary:** Civil engineer and aviation pioneer. The bulk of the collection relates to Chanute's experiments with gliders and his scientific and financial support of aeronautical pioneers. Other papers concern his career as a builder of railroads and his service as chief engineer of the Erie Railroad and railroads in Illinois and Kansas.

**Online Content:** Selected items from the papers of Octave Chanute are available on the Library of Congress Web site at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/collmss.ms000022>.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

### People

Ader, Clément, 1841-1925--Correspondence.

Avery, William A.--Correspondence.

Bell, Alexander Graham, 1847-1922--Correspondence.

Cabot, Samuel, 1850-1906--Correspondence.

Chanute, Octave, 1832-1910.

Hargrave, Lawrence, 1850-1915--Correspondence.

Herring, Augustus Moore, 1867-1926--Correspondence.

Huffaker, Edward C.--Correspondence.

Kress, Wilhelm, 1836-1913--Correspondence.

Langley, S. P. (Samuel Pierpont), 1834-1906--Correspondence.

Lilienthal, Otto, 1848-1896--Correspondence.

Maxim, Hiram S. (Hiram Stevens), 1840-1916--Correspondence.

Moedebeck, Hermann W. L. (Hermann Wilhelm Ludwig), 1857-1910--Correspondence.

Montgomery, John J. (John Joseph), 1858-1911--Correspondence.

Mouillard, Louis-Pierre, 1834-1897--Correspondence.

Moy, Thomas--Correspondence.

Niehaus, Earl F. Earl F. Niehaus thesis. 1955.

Pilcher, Percy--Correspondence.

Spratt, G. A. (George Alexander), 1880-1934--Correspondence.

Wright, Orville, 1871-1948--Correspondence.

Wright, Wilbur, 1867-1912--Correspondence.

Zahm, Albert Francis, 1862--Correspondence.

### Organizations

Erie Railroad Company.

Jefferson College (Convent, La.)

### Subjects

Aerodynamics.

Aeronautics.  
Bridges--Design and construction.  
Bridges--Missouri River.  
Gliders (Aeronautics)  
Kites.  
Railroad engineering.  
Railroad ties.  
Railroads, Elevated--New York (State)--New York.  
Railroads--Design and construction.  
Railroads--Illinois--Chicago.  
Railroads--Kansas--Abilene.  
Stockyards--Illinois--Chicago.

### **Occupations**

Aviators.  
Civil engineers.

## **Provenance**

The papers of Octave Chanute, civil engineer and aviation pioneer, were deposited in the Library of Congress in 1932 and converted to a gift by Elizabeth and Octavia Chanute in 1950. The collection, originally in the custody of the Science Division, was transferred to the Manuscript Division in the 1950s. Small additions were made to the collection by gift and purchase between 1957 and 1997.

## **Transfers**

Some photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

## **Processing History**

The papers of Octave Chanute were arranged and described in 1962. Materials received between 1957 and 1997 were processed as additions in 1981 and 1997.

## **Related Material**

Additional correspondence between Chanute and the Wright brothers can be found in the Manuscript Division's collection of their papers. The [Wright Brothers' papers](#) also contain correspondence with George Spratt, who, by way of Chanute, helped the Wrights at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

## **Copyright Status**

Copyright in the unpublished writings of Octave Chanute in these papers and in other collections of papers in the custody of the Library of Congress has been dedicated to the public, except that the literary rights are reserved in the case of "such family correspondence as may allude to purely personal and of no historical and scientific interest." Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division for further information.

## Access and Restrictions

The papers of Octave Chanute 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.

## Microfilm

A microfilm edition of the letterbook series is available on twenty-four reels. Consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan. To promote preservation of the originals, researchers are required to consult the microfilm edition as available.

## Online Content

Selected items from the papers of Octave Chanute are available on the Library of Congress Web site at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/collmss.ms000022>.

## Preferred Citation

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

## Biographical Note

Date	Event
1832, Feb. 18	Born, Paris, France
1838	Immigrated with parents to the United States
1849	Began training as a railroad civil engineer
1853-1863	Civil engineer, various Western railroads
1857	Married Annie James
1863-1867	Chief engineer, Chicago & Alton Railroad
1867-1868	Planned and superintended construction of the first bridge across the Missouri River
1867-1873	Chief engineer of several railroads in Kansas
1873-1883	Chief engineer, Erie Railroad; consultant on construction of iron railroad bridges
1889	Began study of aerodynamic theory
1893	President, Chicago Tie Preserving Co.
1894	Published <i>Progress in Flying Machines</i> (New York: <i>The American Engineer and Railroad Journal</i> . 308 pp.)
1896-1897	Experimented with gliders and designed biplane glider of exceptional stability
1901	Visited camp of Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, N.C., to observe and assist in glider experiments
1910, Nov. 23	Died, Chicago, Ill.

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of Octave Chanute (1832-1910) span the years 1807-1965, with the vast bulk of the material dating from 1860 to 1910. Chanute spent most of his civil engineering career working on railroad construction. He turned his energies to aeronautical engineering and glider development relatively late in life. Although these papers are principally concerned with the latter part of Chanute's career, there is some material from his career as a builder of railroads, the Chicago stockyards, and a railroad bridge across the Missouri River as well as his contribution to the technique of preserving wooden railroad ties.

The collection centers largely on the period 1890 to 1910 when Chanute was actively involved in glider experiments. At this time, he corresponded with many of the other important pioneers in the development of the airplane. Chanute advised and helped to finance aeronautical experimenters and served as a conduit of information among them. His *Progress in Flying Machines*, published in 1894, was the first authoritative account of aviation history and established Chanute as an international authority on the history and theory of aeronautics.

The collection consists of correspondence, family papers, articles, patents, photographs, sketches, kite diagrams, plans for Chanute's railroad bridge across the Missouri River, and clippings. [Addition I](#) includes a microfilmed thesis on Jefferson College by Earl F. Niehaus. Chanute's father was vice president of the school beginning in 1838.

There are extensive files of correspondence with Louis-Pierre Mouillard, a French pioneer of glider theory, George A. Spratt, whom Chanute served as mentor for various aeronautical experiments and the development of wing pressure testing equipment (found primarily in [Addition II](#)), and with Wilbur and Orville Wright. Some of Chanute's other notable correspondents include Clément Ader, William A. Avery, Baden Fletcher Smyth Baden-Powell, Alexander Graham Bell, Samuel Cabot, Lawrence Hargrave, Augustus Moore Herring, Edward C. Huffaker, Wilhelm Kress, Samuel P. Langley, Otto Lilienthal, Hiram S. Maxim, Hermann W. L. Moedebeck, John J. Montgomery, Thomas Moy, Percy Pilcher, and Albert Francis Zahm.

## Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in nine series:

- [General Correspondence, 1890-1910](#)
- [Special Correspondence, 1890-1910](#)
- [Aeronautical Papers, 1875-1912](#)
- [Subject File, 1865-1928](#)
- [Letterbooks, 1860-1910](#)
- [Transcripts of Aeronautical Papers](#)
- [Personal Correspondence, 1850-1924](#)
- [Additions, 1807-1965](#)
- [Oversize, 1865-circa 1928](#)

## Description of Series

Container	Series
BOX 1-3	<p><b><u>General Correspondence, 1890-1910</u></b> Copies of letters sent and received. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent.</p>
BOX 4-6	<p><b><u>Special Correspondence, 1890-1910</u></b> Correspondence, legal papers, patents, and articles. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically and by type of material therein.</p>
BOX 7-16	<p><b><u>Aeronautical Papers, 1875-1912</u></b> Manuscripts, notes, pamphlets, patents and related letters, clippings, photographs, and sketches. Arranged by type of material and chronologically therein.</p>
BOX 17-18	<p><b><u>Subject File, 1865-1928</u></b> Business and engineering pamphlets and articles, construction plans and brochures of Missouri River Bridge, clippings, patents and related letters, biographical material, photographs and miscellaneous material. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.</p>
BOX 19-27 REEL 1-24	<p><b><u>Letterbooks, 1860-1910</u></b> Copies of letters sent, with an index in the front of each volume. Volumes for 1874-1881 are missing. Arranged chronologically. Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 16,482</p>
BOX 28-42	<p><b><u>Transcripts of Aeronautical Papers.</u></b></p>
BOX 28-33	<p><b><u>Alphabetical File, 1890-1910</u></b> Transcriptions of correspondence in Containers 1-6. Arranged alphabetically.</p>
BOX 34-38	<p><b><u>Chronological File, 1855-1910</u></b> Transcription of the letterbooks and related letters received. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 39-42	<p><b><u>Special Correspondence, 1890-1910</u></b> Correspondence with Augustus Moore Herring, Edward C. Huffaker, C. F. Marvin, Louis-Pierre Mouillard, G. A. Spratt, Wilbur Wright, and Albert Francis Zahm Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically therein.</p>
BOX 43	<p><b><u>Personal Correspondence, 1850-1924</u></b> Photocopies of personal and family letters sent and received. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 44-46	<p><b><u>Additions, 1807-1965</u></b></p>

**BOX 44**

**Addition I, 1832-1965**

Family papers consisting of biographical data on the Chanute family, correspondence, and genealogical material, and a microfilm copy of a thesis by Earl F. Niehaus. Arranged alphabetically by type of material and name of family member.

**BOX 45-46**

**Addition II, 1807-1911**

Papers of G. A. Spratt consisting mostly of correspondence with Chanute. Also includes blueprints, writings, and a photograph. Arranged alphabetically by type of material and chronologically therein.

**BOX OV 1**

**Oversize, 1865-circa 1928**

Brochures and plans for Missouri River bridge, blueprint and cutout letter enclosures, and miscellaneous material. Organized and described according to the series, folders, and boxes from which the items were removed.

# Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1-3	<b>General Correspondence, 1890-1910</b> Copies of letters sent and received. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent.
BOX 1	A-He
BOX 2	Ho-Mea
BOX 3	Mer-Z
BOX 4-6	<b>Special Correspondence, 1890-1910</b> Correspondence, legal papers, patents, and articles. Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically and by type of material therein.
BOX 4	Mouillard, Louis-Pierre, including legal papers, patents, articles, and partial translation of <i>Le Vol Sans Battements</i>
BOX 5	Wright, Wilbur and Orville <a href="#">Items available online.</a>
BOX 6	Miscellaneous
BOX 7-16	<b>Aeronautical Papers, 1875-1912</b> Manuscripts, notes, pamphlets, patents and related letters, clippings, photographs, and sketches. Arranged by type of material and chronologically therein.
BOX 7	Articles and patents before 1900
BOX 8	Photographs, sketches, clippings, and papers relating to William Paul Butson, J.J. Bennett, Charles W. Hastings, and Wilhelm Kress prior to 1900
BOX 9	1889-1899
BOX 10	1900-1902
BOX 11	1903-1905
BOX 12	1906-1907
BOX 13	1908-1909
BOX 14	1910
BOX 15	1911
BOX 16	Photograph album, scrapbook, and clippings concerning kites
BOX 17-18	<b>Subject File, 1865-1928</b> Business and engineering pamphlets and articles, construction plans and brochures of Missouri River Bridge, clippings, patents and related letters, biographical material, photographs and miscellaneous material. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 17	Biographical material



## Subject File, 1865-1928

### Container

### Contents

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BOX 18	Business and engineering articles (2 folders) (1 folder) Clippings List of principal writings Miscellany <i>See also Oversize</i> Missouri River bridge Brochures describing Missouri River bridge, St. Charles, Mo. <i>See Oversize</i> Miscellaneous notes and letters Plans of construction, Missouri River bridge, St. Charles, Mo. <i>See Oversize</i> Patents Photographic portraits
BOX 19-27 REEL 1-24	<b>Letterbooks, 1860-1910</b> Copies of letters sent, with an index in the front of each volume. Volumes for 1874-1881 are missing. Arranged chronologically. Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 16,482
BOX 19 REEL 1	5 Sept. 1860-3 June 1863
BOX 19 REEL 2	31 Dec. 1864-21 Nov. 1866 22 Nov. 1866-3 June 1869
BOX 19 REEL 3	17 June 1869-28 Sept. 1873
BOX 20 REEL 4	1 Jan. 1871-15 Oct. 1873
BOX 20 REEL 5	16 Mar. 1882-14 Aug. 1883, 31 Jan. 1885
BOX 20 REEL 6	14 July 1883-15 Apr. 1885
BOX 21 REEL 7	15 Apr. 1885-15 Aug. 1887
BOX 21 REEL 8	16 Aug. 1887-18 Apr. 1890
BOX 22 REEL 9	24 Apr. 1890-15 Apr. 1891
BOX 22 REEL 10	21 Apr. 1890-17 May 1892
BOX 22 REEL 11	18 May 1892-11 Sept. 1893
BOX 23 REEL 12	13 Sept. 1893-12 Oct. 1894
BOX 23 REEL 13	15 Oct. 1894-1 Feb. 1896
BOX 24 REEL 14	1 Feb.-23 Nov. 1896
BOX 24 REEL 15	23 Nov. 1896-22 Apr. 1898
BOX 24 REEL 16	25 Apr. 1898-7 June 1899
BOX 25 REEL 17	10 June 1899-28 Sept. 1900
BOX 25 REEL 18	29 Sept. 1900-7 Jan. 1902
BOX 25 REEL 19	8 Jan. 1902-23 Sept. 1903
BOX 26 REEL 20	24 Sept. 1903-24 Jan. 1905
BOX 26 REEL 21	31 Jan. 1905-11 Aug. 1906
BOX 27 REEL 22	12 Aug. 1906-20 Jan. 1908
BOX 27 REEL 23	20 Jan. 1908-29 July 1909
BOX 27 REEL 24	30 July 1909-14 May 1910
BOX 28-42	<b>Transcripts of Aeronautical Papers.</b>
BOX 28-33	<b>Alphabetical File, 1890-1910</b>

## Transcripts of Aeronautical Papers.

### Container

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	Transcriptions of correspondence in Containers 1-6. Arranged alphabetically.
BOX 28	Ae-He
BOX 29	Ho-Mo
BOX 30	Mo-Wa
BOX 31	We-Wr
BOX 32	Forney, M. N., correspondence Wright, Wilbur and Orville, correspondence Miscellaneous letters (1 volume)
BOX 33	(2 volumes)
BOX 34-38	<b>Chronological File, 1855-1910</b> Transcription of the letterbooks and related letters received. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 34	1885-1894
BOX 35	1895-1897
BOX 36	1898-1902
BOX 37	1903-1906
BOX 38	1907-1910
BOX 39-42	<b>Special Correspondence, 1890-1910</b> Correspondence with Augustus Moore Herring, Edward C. Huffaker, C. F. Marvin, Louis- Pierre Mouillard, G. A. Spratt, Wilbur Wright, and Albert Francis Zahm Arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent and chronologically therein.
BOX 39	Correspondence with Augustus Moore Herring, Edward C. Huffaker, C. F. Marvin, G. A. Spratt, Albert Francis Zahm 1900-1903
BOX 40	1904-1910
BOX 41	Mouillard, Louis-Pierre English translations, 1890-1897
BOX 42	French transcripts, 1890-1897 (3 folders) Wright, Wilbur From Chanute, 1900-1904 To Chanute, 1900-1910 (4 folders)
BOX 43	<b>Personal Correspondence, 1850-1924</b> Photocopies of personal and family letters sent and received. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 43	Photocopies of personal and family letters
BOX 44-46	<b>Additions, 1807-1965</b>

## Additions, 1807-1965

### Container

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BOX 44	<p><b>Addition I, 1832-1965</b></p> <p>Family papers consisting of biographical data on the Chanute family, correspondence, and genealogical material, and a microfilm copy of a thesis by Earl F. Niehaus. Arranged alphabetically by type of material and name of family member.</p>
BOX 44	<p>Family papers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Boyd, Alice Chanute, 1912-1925, undated</li><li>Chanute, Annie Octavia, 1871-1924</li><li>Chanute, Elizabeth, 1889-1960, undated</li><li>Chanute, Elizabeth and Octavia, 1911-1947 (2 folders)</li><li>Chanute, Gertrude DeBonairo, 1863</li><li>Chanute, Joseph, 1964-1965, undated</li><li>Chanute, Octave, 1832-1910, undated (2 folders)</li></ul> <p>Niehaus, Earl F., "Jefferson College in St. James Parish, Louisiana: 1830-1875," microfilm copy of thesis on Chanute, 1955</p> <p>Microfilm shelf number 17,096. Not available on interlibrary loan.</p>
BOX 45-46	<p><b>Addition II, 1807-1911</b></p> <p>Papers of G. A. Spratt consisting mostly of correspondence with Chanute. Also includes blueprints, writings, and a photograph. Arranged alphabetically by type of material and chronologically therein.</p>
BOX 45	<p>Spratt, G. A.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Blueprints and photograph, 1898, undated</li><li>Correspondence with Chanute <i>See also Oversize</i> 1898-1908 (13 folders)</li></ul>
BOX 46	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1909-1911 (3 folders)</li><li>Printed matter, 1904-1910</li><li>Writings<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Chanute, Octave, 1907-1908, undated</li><li>Miscellaneous, 1807, undated</li><li>Spratt, G. A., undated</li></ul></li></ul>
BOX OV 1	<p><b>Oversize, 1865-circa 1928</b></p> <p>Brochures and plans for Missouri River bridge, blueprint and cutout letter enclosures, and miscellaneous material. Organized and described according to the series, folders, and boxes from which the items were removed.</p>
BOX OV 1	<p>Subject File</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Miscellany, circa 1870-circa 1928 (<a href="#">Container 18</a>)</li><li>Missouri River Bridge<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Brochures describing Missouri River bridge, St. Charles, Mo., 1865 (Container 18)</li><li>Plans of construction, Missouri River bridge, St. Charles, Mo., undated (Container 18)</li></ul></li></ul> <p>Additions</p>

**Oversize, 1865-circa 1928**

**Container**

**Contents**

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Addition II

Spratt, G. A.

Correspondence from Chanute

Enclosure: blueprint and cutouts of wing shapes, 29 June 1900 ([Container 45](#))