

**Chicago Academy of Sciences / Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum**  
**ARCHIVES – FINDING AID**

**Collections Title:** Elizabeth Emerson Atwater Papers

**Creator:** Atwater, Elizabeth Emerson (Aug. 8, 1812-April 11, 1878)  
Atwater, Samuel T.

**Dates:** 1834-1879, undated, 1834-1875 (bulk)

**Language:** English

**Extent:** 6.4 Linear Feet (1 manuscript box, 6 flat storage boxes)

**Level of Description:** Folder Level

**Repository:** Natural History Collections and Archives, Chicago Academy of Sciences /Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

**Access Conditions:** Open for research.

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**Citation:** Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: [item], [folder], [box], Elizabeth E. Atwater Papers, Chicago Academy of Sciences / Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum.

**Acquisition Information:** Elizabeth Atwater donated her collection materials to the Academy just prior to the Great Chicago Fire and then gave another donation immediately after. Information on these early donations is sparse and is still being researched. A framed photographic card donated November 19, 1985 from Rosalie Foster, niece of Fortune Morrison who originally owned the photograph. She wished the photograph donated to Academy to be with other materials; this donation is part of accession 1985.4.

**Processor and Date:** Amber King, January 2011; Dawn Roberts, January 2018, November 2019.

**Processing Note:** Materials sorted to facilitate use and effective preservation.

**Biographical Sketch:** Elizabeth Emerson Atwater was born to a wealthy family in Norwich, Vermont, August 8, 1812 and died in Buffalo, New York, April 11, 1878. At her request, most of her personal journals were destroyed when she passed away. However, many of her letters remain and, more importantly, her many and varied scientific collections survive in the various institutions of deposition. It is from these records of her life's activities that we can understand who Mrs. Atwater was.

At the age of 16, Elizabeth and a friend were sent off together to a boarding school in Troy, New York. It was noted in her obituary that girls were not often afforded such educational opportunities at that time and that Elizabeth made the most of it.

In July of 1839, Elizabeth married Samuel T. Atwater of Buffalo, New York and moved there to be with him. They were included among the high society of New York and were frequently invited to events, but Elizabeth recorded that she "found no comfort in parties, no good in habitual attendance of them, and so refrained from attendance." She and "T", as she called her husband, preferred each other's company to the parties and spent many happy times together. Later Elizabeth concluded, "I have never been a society woman. My whole nature has revolted at it, but I have realized great enjoyment with nature, with dear friends, and in my pursuits." Despite the fact that she was not a society woman, Elizabeth was a very personable individual and had friends throughout the world who became enthusiastic participants in her enjoyment of nature and other pursuits. She regularly received packages from exotic locales like New Zealand, Italy, and Cuba. So, although she never traveled outside of the U.S., Elizabeth's collections include artifacts and items from around the globe.

In 1856, Elizabeth and "T" moved to Chicago. It was said that "Here, perhaps, more than anywhere else, she sowed and reaped the richest harvests of her useful life." Although Mrs. Atwater was "delicate, always hovering on the borders of invalidism" she did considerable good in this city. She was one of the founders for the Home of the Aged in Chicago and was one of their most active contributors. She was also an extremely active member of the new Humane Society.

She was also involved with the Chicago Historical Society and the Chicago Academy of Sciences, where she sent many of her scientific specimens. Once she lamented, "Before the Chicago conflagration of 1871, I was the possessor of one of the best individual collections in the whole Northwest—consisting of minerals, fossils, rare Italian Marbles of exceeding beauty, precious stones, curiosities, etc., etc. All were absorbed in the devouring element, save a few boxes placed beyond the limit of the fire. My choicest specimens, at the solicitation of our lamented secretary, Dr. William Stimpson, were temporarily deposited at the Chicago Academy of Sciences—all were lost. I have had but little heart in the work since that terrible night."

The loss of her collections left her despondent, but her passion was quickly rekindled when Elizabeth visited California in 1873. There she made some of her most important collections. She was astounded by the variety and beauty of the California landscape. She wrote to a friend about a rail trip she took during this time, saying, "took no dinner, but took the time when passengers were eating to secure lovely wild flowers on a plain beyond the track. At suppertime repeated the performance. Some scarlet larkspurs I saw nearly distracted me; I had never even heard of them before." In all, Elizabeth collected over 2,000 specimens during this trip, several of which were new to science.

She wrote her former teacher regarding her most favorite new specimen. "I forward for your acceptance this little specimen. I believe you will feel an especial interest in it, from its having been found by your former pupil. I gathered it with other plants at the foot of Yosemite Falls, in the Yosemite Valley, California, on June 24, 1873. It being an infertile specimen, I hesitated relative to pressing it. Attaching no particular value to it—it being not in fruit—yet greatly interested in its appearance, I did not send it with other plants to friends for whom in my travels I am in the habit of collecting, but chanced to include one in a small parcel to my friend, Dr. Charles Mohr, a German gentleman, resident in Mobile, Alabama, and a fine botanist. He noticed it as new to himself, and immediately forwarded the tuft to Dr. Karl Muller, the distinguished Bryologist in Germany. I quote from Dr. Mohr's letter in reference to it: 'Dr. Muller describes that fine brown moss, of which you had sent me an infertile

specimen, as a new species, naming it in honor of its enthusiastic discoverer, *Bryum atwateriae*. It is nearly allied to *B. alpinum* of Europe. It was reported in the Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical club, New York, August, 1874.”

Although Mrs. Atwater loved botany best, she also made contributions to conchology, mineralogy, and paleontology. Her obituary records, “At the time of her decease she had thirty boxes filled with botanical and other scientific specimens. These she requested her husband to give to the Chicago Academy of Sciences,” along with her entire cabinet of minerals and shells. These remain with the Academy today.

Other institutions holding materials created by Elizabeth E. Atwater include: Chicago History Museum (archival materials); Missouri Botanical Garden (archival materials and plant specimens); National Museum of Natural History (plant specimens); Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences Clinton Herbarium (plant specimens).

### **Scope and Content:**

#### **Series Description:**

##### **Series 1: Personal (1834-1879, undated)**

This series incorporates materials related to Elizabeth Atwater’s personal life and that of her family members, particularly her husband Samuel. It is divided into two sub-series: Biography and Family. The Biography sub-series contains a printed biography produced after the death of Mrs. Atwater by a close personal friend, Mary Clemmer. It serves as a memorial for the friends of Mrs. Atwater and details her life from birth to death citing her lifelong interest in botany and her dedication to working with the Humane Society to improve conditions for animals. The Family sub-series contains correspondence, printed materials and expense books related to both her husband, Samuel Atwater, and herself. The letters focus on how some of Mrs. Atwater’s collections were deposited after her death and contains a printed circular for the Illinois Humane Society, with Samuel listed as Treasurer. The expense book is from the “Santa Cruz House” and has itemized expenses from May to October 1868.

##### **Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)**

This series includes materials related to Mrs. Atwater’s collecting interests. It is divided into two sub-series, Botany and Ethnography. The sub-series Botany, contains a letter detailing a friend’s gift of a native flower to Atwater from her residence in Cuba, a cross-stitched cover for holding pressed plants, and two bound botanical specimen volumes, one containing various algae and mosses and the other a collection of plants sent to her by her friends incorporating other memorabilia items. The Ethnographic sub-series contains a bound scrapbook containing various mounted items of memorabilia from paper to hair with detailed information as to where each item came from and who gave it to her, its historical significance, and the date obtained where applicable. Please note that individual specimens have been integrated into the scientific collection where appropriate; these may be found in the botany, geology, malacology, and anthropology collections.

##### **Series 3: Photography (undated)**

This series contains one card mounted black and white photograph of Mrs. Atwater mounted in a mosaic inlaid wood frame with a blue velvet storage case with the mounted initials, "STA", in the center top of the case.

**Container List:**

<b>Box 1</b>			
<b>Series 1: Personal (1834-1879, undated)</b>			
<b>Sub-series 1: Biography</b>			
1	<i>Memorial Sketch of Elizabeth Emerson Atwater: Written for Her Friends</i> by Mary Clemmer, published 1879, Buffalo: The Courier Company, Printers.		1879
<b>Sub-series 2: Family</b>			
2	Samuel T. Atwater – Correspondence – S.T. Atwater and S.D. Hager		September- November 1878
3	Samuel T. Atwater – Printed Materials – “Report of Illinois Humane Society” (incomplete)		1872
<b>Sub-series 3: Activities</b>			
4	“Fifth Annual Report of the Old Ladies Home of Chicago, Illinois”		1868
<b>Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)</b>			
<b>Sub-series 1: Botany</b>			
5	Correspondence – E.E. Atwater and Emma Taylor		1863
6	Correspondence – E.E. Atwater and Charles R. Burtis		1864
7	Correspondence – E.E. Atwater and Ben B. Wiley		1870
8	Correspondence – E.E. Atwater and W. [Wilbrius]		1872
9	Correspondence (fragment) – E.E. Atwater and unknown		1874
10	Loose specimen, artifact, and miscellaneous labels		undated
<b>Series 3: Photography (undated)</b>			
11	Portrait – Elizabeth E. Atwater (b/w card mounted, originally in frame), taken at “Manhattan Hotel, Chamber and Pearl Street,” New York, NY		undated
<b>Box 2</b>			
<b>Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)</b>			
<b>Sub-series 1: Botany</b>			
	Cross-stitched cover “Ferns” for holding pressed plants with blue ribbon-edged binding and ties and containing old press papers (no plants present)		undated
<b>Box 3 (stored separately, RVWD.302.Bot 11.M)</b>			
<b>Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)</b>			
<b>Sub-series 1: Botany</b>			
	Blue, leather-bound botanical specimen volume, “Sea Mosses” “Elizabeth E. Atwater”, 131 paper mounted specimens various		1849, 1862, undated

	localities: Maine, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Prince Edward Island, English Channel, Ireland, France, Africa, and unidentified	
<b>Box 4 (stored separately, RVWD.302.Bot 11.N)</b>		
<b>Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)</b>		
	<b>Sub-series 1: Botany</b>	
	Black, leather-bound botanical specimen volume, "Mementos," "Elizabeth E. Atwater", 125 mounted specimens, 29 loose specimens various localities: Africa, Canada (Quebec and Ontario), Cuba, Europe (England, France, Italy, Scotland), Mexico, Morocco, South Africa, Niagara Falls, United States (California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia)	1834-1836, 1838-1841, 1844-1854, 1856, 1862-1864, 1868, 1870-1871, 1875, undated
<b>Box 5</b>		
<b>Series 1: Personal (1834-1875, undated)</b>		
	<b>Sub-series 2: Family</b>	
	"Santa Cruz House" Expense book	May-October 1868
<b>Series 2: Collecting (1809-1875, undated)</b>		
	<b>Sub-series 2: Ethnographic</b>	
	Blue leather-bound book with gold embossing "Scraps": contains various scraps of cloth, letters, invitations, hair samples, paper samples, botany specimens and other memorabilia highlighting historic people and their possessions, historic places and events, or important people in Mrs. Atwater's life.	1809, 1829, 1847, 1849-1857, 1862, 1865, 1868, 1870, 1874-1875, 1877
<b>Box 6</b>		
<b>Series 3: Photography (undated)</b>		
	Blue velvet covered hinged box. Box lid is lined with white silk and white velvet. Original housing for mosaic frame containing portrait of Mrs. E.E. Atwater. Top center of box has metal monogram, "STA".	undated
<b>Box 7</b>		
<b>Series 3: Photography (undated)</b>		
	Dark wood frame, possibly ebony, with inset marble and semi-precious stone inlaid mosaic flowers in four corners and oval cut out in center for display of photograph. Monogram in crest shape at top of frame, "EEA". Condition of frame is very fragile and currently it is in 4 pieces. Accompanying card (housed with photograph) indicates artist that made frame as: "Henri Bosi" of Florence, Italy. Handwritten note on one card indicates this frame purchased on "Fifteenth St, New York"	undated