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Guide to the John Ulric Nef, Sr. Papers 1862-1915



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Descriptive Summary

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| Identifier | ICU.SPCL.NEFJOHNSR |
| Title | Nef, John Ulric, Sr., Papers |
| Date | 1862-1915 |
| Size | 1 linear foot (2 boxes) |
| Repository | Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library 1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A. |

Abstract John Ulric Nef (1862-1915) chemist, who helped establish and develop the Chemistry Department at the University of Chicago. Nef attended Harvard University before completing his doctorate in Munich, Germany. After completing his doctorate, he accepted positions at Purdue University and Clark University, before accepting a position at University of Chicago, where he would stay for the rest of his life. The collection includes correspondence both personal and professional, written for and by Nef, as well as some written by his wife and son; legal documents; certificates; biographical material; academic notes and research. The majority of materials date between 1900 and 1915.

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Nef, John Ulric, Sr., Papers, [Box#, Folder#], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Biographical Note

John Ulric Nef was born July 14, 1862 in Switzerland as the oldest son of John Ulric Nef and Anna Katherine Nef. In 1886, his family immigrated to the United States. During his childhood, Nef did not believe he would go to college due to his family's financial situation. However, after seeking out guidance from the head of a preparatory school in New York, he was able to take the entrance exams for admission into Harvard. Nef attended Harvard at the age of 18, with the class of 1884, where he would develop strong relations with faculty in the chemistry department. He flourished academically at Harvard and received the Kirkland Traveling Fellowship, which allowed him to study in Europe from 1884-1887. With this fellowship, Nef decided to obtain his doctorate in Munich, Germany.

While obtaining his degree, his father died, leaving Nef the added responsibility of taking care of his mother, who was in poor health. Shortly after completing his degree in 1886, Nef accepted a position at Purdue University. In 1889, he spent the summer in Switzerland with his mother, where he began mountain climbing. Nef had a passion for exercise and consistently engaged in mountain-climbing or rowing. From 1891-1897, Nef would spend every summer in the Swiss Alps mountain climbing. In 1889, Nef accepted a position at Clark University, a brand new university, as an assistant professor. During his time there, the university encountered struggles with funding. Such tensions existed within the university, that in 1892, Nef and other important faculty members resigned in protest. When Nef resigned, however, he was corresponding with William R. Harper, who was establishing the University of Chicago.

In 1892, Nef accepted a position as a professor in chemistry at the University of Chicago. One condition of his contract was a private research assistant. Nef would be employed at the University of Chicago for the rest of his life. In 1896, he was named head professor in the Department of Chemistry. One of his passions was the development of research institutions within the United States. He consistently wrote and spoke about the importance of these institutions within a university. On May 17, 1898, Nef married Louise Bates Comstock, a previous student. Louise Nef was an educated and well-traveled woman. She attended the University of Chicago as a graduate student in chemistry, intending to later teach. She was a skilled piano player and had spent six years traveling around Europe with her mother. Following their wedding, the couple traveled around Europe for several months before returning for the start of the university's academic year. The couple had one son, John Ulric Nef Jr., born July 13, 1899.

Nef's later life was marred by tragedy and hardship. In both 1903 and 1911, Nef suffered a nervous breakdown, resulting in time spent at a sanatorium. On March 20, 1909, Louise Nef died of pneumonia. John Ulric Nef never remarried. A year later in 1910, his mother died in Herisau, Switzerland.

In 1915, Nef embarked on a walking trip and began having health problems. A medical examination in July found he was suffering from acute dilation of the heart. In August 1915, Nef went to visit a former student, Dr. Herman A. Spoehr, in California. During this trip, on August 13, 1915, John Ulric Nef died. He was fifty three years old.

During his life, Nef conducted experiments on sugars and glycol-glycerin, publishing extensively. He was fluent in German, demonstrated by his doctorate thesis and other publications in German. He was a member of the American Chemical Society, Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Chicago Academy of Sciences, National Institute of Social Sciences New York, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Royal Society of Sciences in Upsala, and the National Academy of Sciences. He was also awarded an Honorary LL.D. by the University of Pittsburgh.

John Nef's son, John Ulric Nef Jr, also attended Harvard and became an academic. Nef Jr. became a historian as well as a Professor at the University of Chicago.

Scope Note

This collection is divided into two series: Personal and Professional, & Academic Research.

Series I: Personal and Professional includes correspondence, memoranda, reports, legal documents, biographical material, and various certificates. They cover a date range from 1891 – 1930.

Series II: Academic Research consist of hundreds of pages of experiment and research notes, as well as copies of written works.

Related Resources

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

Nef, John U., Jr. Papers

Nef, John U., Jr.-Elinor Castle. Papers

Nef, Elinor Castle. Papers

Subject Headings

- Nef, John Ulric, 1862-1915
- Chemists

INVENTORY

Series I: Personal and Professional

This series includes an assortment of documents. The majority of this series includes correspondence to and from John Ulric Nef Sr in both written letters, telegraphs, and postcards. The correspondence also includes letters written by his wife Louise Nef. Further, the series includes correspondence relating to Nef's involvement in the nomination process of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. The series includes legal documents such as insurance and tax forms, a marriage license, a copy of his will, as well as various types of certificates. In addition, the series also includes materials relating to John Ulric Nef Sr.'s death. These include letters addressed to his son, John Ulric Nef Jr., newspaper clippings, as well as biographical materials about Nef Sr. written by Nef Jr.

Box 1

Folder 1

Correspondence 1884-1891

Box 1

Folder 2

Correspondence 1892

Box 1

Folder 3

Correspondence 1893

Box 1

Folder 4

Correspondence 1894-1901

Box 1

Folder 5

Correspondence 1902-1906

Box 1

Folder 6

Correspondence 1907-1909

Box 1

Folder 7

Correspondence 1910-1911

Box 1

Folder 8

Correspondence 1913-Aug. 7, 1915

Box 1

Folder 9

Documents relating to Nef Sr.'s Death

Box 1

Folder 10

Correspondence Undated

Box 1

Folder 11

Certificates

Box 1

Folder 12

Biographical materials

Series II: Academic Research

This series includes documents relating to John Ulric Nef Sr.'s academic research. These materials include hundreds of pages of written notes relating to his chemistry experiments. Further the series includes copies of his published works, the majority in German, with a few in English. In addition, the series contains a student's research concerning the Walden Inversion that it appears Nef Sr. supervised. The series also includes materials relating to Nef's teaching career, including a notebook of lectures, student grades, and a chemistry examination. Within the series, is also included a copy of a speech, several samples of plants, and a list of psalms and quotes.

Box 2

Folder 1

Glycol-Glycerin Experiments 1901-1904

Box 2

Folder 2

Sugar Experiments 1904-1907

Box 2

Folder 3

Sugar Experiments 1907-1910

Box 2

Folder 4

Sugar Experiments 1910-1913

Box 2

Folder 5

Unlabeled Experiments

Box 2

Folder 6

The Chemistry of Cyanogen and of Isocyanogen

Box 2

Folder 7

The Chemistry of Methylene, Speech, Report on Walden Inversion

Box 2

Folder 8

Published Writings

Box 2

Folder 9

Miscellaneous Material