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Guide to the Max Mason Papers 1882-1961



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier ICU.SPCL.MASONM

Title Max Mason. Papers

Date 1882-1961

Size 2.5 linear feet (3 boxes)

Repository Special Collections Research Center
University of Chicago Library
1100 East 57th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract Charles Max Mason (1877-1961) mathematician, President of the University of Chicago (1925-1928), and President of the Rockefeller Foundation (1929-1936). The collection primarily documents Mason's work for the National Research Council during World War One, where he developed a submarine detection device that was in regular use on destroyers by the summer of 1918. The device was a precursor to the sonar devices of the 1940s.

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

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

Biographical Note

Charles Max Mason (b. October 26, 1877, d. March 23, 1961) was an American mathematician, former president of the University of Chicago (1925-1928), and former president of the Rockefeller Foundation (1928-1936). He was known by the name 'Max,' rather than Charles.

Mason was born on October 26, 1877 in Madison, WI to Edwin Cole Mason and Josephine Vroman. He graduated from Madison High School in 1894 and from the University of Wisconsin in 1898. In college Mason was a member of the Mandolin Club, held the university high jump record, and was known as the unofficial state golf champion. As his studies progressed, Mason discovered that he had an affinity for mathematics and was encouraged by his professors to explore the field. He taught high school mathematics in Beloit, WI for one year following his college graduation and then moved to Göttingen, Germany to pursue

graduate study in mathematics under David Hilbert. He obtained in PhD degree, magna cum laude, in May 1903. His dissertation was titled: "Randwertaufgaben bei gewöhnlichen Differentialgleichungen" (boundary value functions with ordinary differential equations).

Mason taught mathematics at MIT (1903-1904) and Yale (1904-1908) before becoming Associate Professor of Mathematics (and later Professor of Physics) at the University of Wisconsin. Mason took a leave of absence from the university from July 1917 to June 1919 in order to lead the National Research Council in its effort to develop a submarine detector with the US Navy. A successful first model was tested on Lake Mendota and then later at the Naval Experimental Station in New London, CT. By 1918, Mason's device was adopted as standard equipment on all US destroyers and he was sent to England to expedite installations on Navy vessels. The device – widely known as the Mason Hydrophone -- is often described as a precursor to World War Two era sonars.

Mason returned to teach at the University of Wisconsin in 1919, until being named the President of the University of Chicago in 1925. The first President who was not a founding member of the University's faculty, he served until 1928.

During Mason's tenure as president, the university began the second phase of a major development campaign that would result in new facilities for a number of science departments, a new Divinity School building, a new football stadium and many other major building projects. The size of the faculty also increased by nearly 20 percent during this time.

Mason joined the staff of the Rockefeller Foundation in October 1928 with the understanding that he would be named the president of the foundation following the retirement of Dr. George Edgar Vincent on January 1, 1930. His contributions at the Rockefeller Foundation were especially prominent in its division of natural sciences and he served as president of the foundation until 1936.

Mason moved to Pasadena, California in the fall of 1936 to chair the Observatory Council of the California Institute of Technology. He served as a member of the executive council and coordinated the development and construction of the Palomar telescope. After the observatory was dedicated in 1948, Mason moved to Claremont, California and taught at Claremont Men's College until his retirement in 1951. Mason also served on the Board of Trustees of the California Institute of Technology from 1945-1951.

Mason was married four times. His first wife, Mary Louise Freeman, died in July 1928, shortly before the end of his short tenure at the University of Chicago. He was married to Helen Schermerhorn Young from 1938 until her death in 1944, and to Daphne Crane Drake from 1945 until his own death on March 22, 1961.

Scope Note

The Max Mason Papers are organized into four series: Series I: Personal; Series II: Science and Engineering; Series III: University of Chicago; Series IV: Oversize. The collection contains correspondence; research notebooks and notes; personal and family photos; design and engineering photos; illustrations; academic work; newspaper and article clippings; poetry; and obituary records. Materials date between 1882 and 1961, with the bulk of the material dating between 1914 and 1928. The papers primarily document Mason's work to develop a submarine detection device with the US Navy at the National Research Council during World War One and announcements of his appointment as President of the University of Chicago in 1925.

Series I, Correspondence and Biographical, contains a small amount of personal correspondence, and a slightly larger group of letters and telegrams documenting Mason's professional and scientific work, particularly his work for the National Research Council in 1918-1919. Also included are samples of his early academic writing, photos of childhood and adulthood, notes and original poetry, and obituaries and memorials. Of special notes are informational materials from Mason's funeral service in 1961.

Series II, Science and Engineering, contains Mason's scientific notebooks and other notes relating to his work developing a submarine detection device with the National Research Council and US Navy during World War One. Included in the series are many undated pictures, designs, and blueprints of submarine detection equipment and technology along with photos of Mason's time in Europe helping to oversee the installation of the devices on warships. Series II also contains various reports, articles, and other memoranda that accompany the engineering notes and photos. These reports add further context to the work Mason was doing.

Series III, University of Chicago, consists of material pertaining to Max Mason's tenure as president of the University of Chicago (1925-1928). Of special note, the series contains various newspaper articles from around the country that detail Mason's selection and appointment as president of the University of Chicago. The series also contains photos of Mason during his tenure and correspondence he sent and received in his capacity as university president.

Series IV, Oversize, contains one oversize photograph and one oversize blueprint of engineering equipment relating to a submarine detection device.

Related Resources

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

University of Chicago. Office of the President. Mason Administration. Records

Subject Headings

- Mason, Max, 1877-1961
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-
- University of Chicago. Office of the President
- University of Chicago -- Presidents -- History
- Submarines (Ships)

INVENTORY

Series I: Correspondence and Biographical Materials

Box 1

Folder 1

Early notes and academic assignments, 1917-1927

Box 1

Folder 2

Personal correspondence, 1917-1922, undated

Box 1

Folder 3

Professional and scientific correspondence, 1918-1919

Box 1

Folder 4

Poem about leaving the U.S. Naval Experimental Station, 1918

Box 1

Folder 5

Receipts, 1882-1924

Box 1

Folder 6

Photos, Personal, undated

Box 1

Folder 7

Biographies, photocopies, 1964, undated

Box 1

Folder 8

Obituaries and memorials, 1961

Box 1

Folder 9

The Pocket RLS, 1903, with notes, 1904-1906

Series II: Science and Engineering

Box 1

Folder 10

Notebook, 1916

Box 1

Folder 11

Paper, "The Dynamic Theory of an Acoustic Diaphragm and Its Adjoining Medium," and notes, separated from notebook, circa 1916

Box 1

Folder 12-14

Notebooks, 1918

Box 1

Folder 15-16

Notes on mathematics, undated

Box 1

Folder 16

Loose notes, undated

Box 1

Folder 17

Notebook, construction contractors NY, Presidential Project, 1924

Box 2

Folder 1

Partial set of illustrations for unidentified report, undated

Box 2

Folder 2

Type of Multiple Unit Receivers, illustrated report, undated

Box 2

Folder 3-4

Photographs of ships and shipyards, undated

Box 2

Folder 5

Receipts and expense reports, 1909-1918

Box 2

Folder 6

Naval Reports, articles, and memoranda, 1918-1921

Box 2

Folder 7

Academic publications, offprints, 1903-1924

Series III: University of Chicago

Box 2

Folder 8-9

Newspaper articles announcing Mason's appointment as University President, 1925-1926

Box 2

Folder 10

Newspaper clippings and photos, Oct. 16, 1928-1930

Box 2

Folder 11

University of Chicago, Office of the President, Correspondence, 1926-1928

Box 2

Folder 12

Ephemera, 1926-1928

Series IV: Oversize

Box 3

Folder 1

Photograph and Submarine Blueprint, undated