

## Alvord Family Collection

### COLLECTION, MS B158

#### DATE

1849 – 1935

1862 – 1953

#### CONTRIBUTOR

Fairfield Museum

#### ADMINISTRATIVE/BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY ELEMENT

Between 1812 and 1849, the Waterbury Button Company was a division of the Benedict and Burnham Manufacturing Company. In 1849, the Benedict and Burnham established its button making division as a separate company, capitalized at thirty thousand dollars. The stock in the newly formed Waterbury Button Company was distributed to Benedict and Burnham's stockholders as a dividend, the original officers were J.S, Mitchell, Benjamin DeForest, G. W. Burnham, J. C. Booth, and Henry H. Hayden, who was also the company's agent. The product line included almost every conceivable kind of button (metal, vegetable ivory, cloth-covered, composition), and later some toys and novelty items as well.

The Waterbury Button Co. followed a familiar pattern of industrial expansion in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the 1850's the letters show a heavy reliance on local orders and individual freelance agents; the employee contracts reflect a scarcity of skilled labor. The new company's influence quickly expanded. The directorships overlapped that of the already-established Holmes, Booth and Haydens Co., the Buttons Co. did a small foreign business through New York agents such as Thomas Prosser and Son.

By 1910, the Waterbury Button Co. had come to resemble a modern corporation. It increasingly abandoned freelance jobbers and relied on its own corporate agents and branch offices. In 1909, it sought to bypass vegetable ivory importers by making direct contact with suppliers in the Amazon. Its European business had grown, and a 1907 item suggests that the Australians, too, were interested in buying Waterbury buttons. Benedict and Burnham was apparently very careful not over-extend itself. Waterbury Button Co. was only one of several major firms that originated as branches of Benedict and Burnham.

The U.S. government had become an important customer, and probably helped to accelerate the formation of a button cartel. During the Spanish-American War, the Waterbury Button Co. colluded with other Waterbury firms to distribute lucrative military contracts and prevent underbidding. That spirit of industrial cooperation continued, resulting in the formation of the National Button Manufacturers' Association (N.B.M.A.) in 1907. That organization attempted to eliminate "destructive competition" among button firms; it established price-fixing and other profit-ensuring practices on the national level. The Association also added a new dimension to the manufactures 'fight a high button tariff, a struggle which date back at least to 1893 (See box 50, Folders H and S). With organizations of NBMA, petition and letter-writing efforts by individual firms gave way to a more modern, industry-wide lobbying campaign.

With expansion and modernization came a whole host of modern problems. For instance, twentieth-century organized labor emerged to complicate the lives of nineteenth-century businessmen: the absence of unions was a strong selling point for semi-rural towns wishing to attract industry (See for instance box 57, Folder R). Old problems, too, continued to haunt the company. The N.B.M.A. correspondence implies that companies stole valued employees from one another, suggesting a continued scarcity of skilled labor.

John A. Alvord born in Southport, CT in 1826 married Mary E. Wilcox from Austerlitz, NY. They lived in Southport CT with 4 children: John A. Alvord, Jr., Edith Alvord, Mary Banks Alvord, Sarah Wakeman Alvord.

#### SCOPE & CONTENT

The collection consists of three series: Administrative Files, the papers of J.R. Smith, and Ledgers spanning the time period of 1849 through 1935. The collection is largely Administrative Files which document the company's development and modernization.

Administrative Files (1849-1935) is housed in boxes 1-59 and consists of bills, correspondence, orders, patents, advertising, and legal files. Some items from the years 1879, 1886, 1892-95, 1897, and 1899-1912 are marked: From the J. R. Smith File. Smith was the president of the Waterbury Button Co. He apparently took a special interest in these particular papers. However, it seemed best to file these papers with the rest of the collection, as they strictly with the business of the Waterbury Button Co. researchers interested in Smith can easily pick out the red listings. The company's use of agents leads to further complications. These agents (often companies themselves) both bought buttons from and sold them to the Waterbury Button Co. It is often difficult to ascertain the direction of the transactions through the records. Of special interest are the records of the agent was Holmes, Booth and Haydens (Boston and New York), who also supplied brass and scrap metal. When possible, the Holmes, Booth and Haydens papers were separated from the rest for easy removal. The same applies to papers from the Button Company's New York Store.

The personal papers of J.R. Smith are contained in boxes 60 and 60a, and reflect the upper class development of Waterbury. Lastly, Ledgers are organized as items #61-96, consists of bound ledgers detailing business transactions. ;The collection consists of 1 box with 7 folders mostly of photographs but does contain one account book with draft of will of John A. Alvord.

#### ARRANGEMENT

Arranged chronologically.



## Collection Contents

### Alvord Family Collection

**Folder 1: Alvord Genealogy**

**Folder 2: John A. Alvord, Sr. Account Book**

**Folder 3: John A. Alvord, Jr.**

**Folder 4: Sarah W. Alvord**

**Folder 5: Edith Alvord**

**Folder 6: Mary Banks Alvord**

**Folder 7: Miscellaneous Photographs**