

The Laura Hecox Collection

Creator: Laura Hecox, with later contributions by others

Extent: Approximately 500-600 objects

Abstract

This collection consists of materials related to and collected by Laura Hecox. Laura Hecox was born in Santa Cruz in 1854, the daughter of lighthouse keeper Adna Hecox. Upon his death in 1883, she became the new keeper of the light. Throughout her life she was deeply interested in natural history as well as many other topics. She developed a well-known shell collection, and received specimens and artifacts as gifts and in trade from all over the world. She made her collection available for viewing to lighthouse visitors, and in 1904 she gave a portion of this collection to the City of Santa Cruz. This collection laid the foundation for what would become the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History. The Laura Hecox collection contains natural history specimens, ethnographic collections from the Americas, Asia and Europe, scrapbooks, souvenirs, and related books.

Location

The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, Santa Cruz, CA

Preferred Citation

The Laura Hecox Collection, The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, Santa Cruz, CA

Historical Notes

Laura Jane F. Hecox (1854-1919) was the daughter of Adna and Margaret Hecox, who made the trek from Illinois to California overland in 1846. In 1869, Adna Hecox was appointed the first lighthouse keeper in Santa Cruz. His family moved into the lighthouse and young Laura became fascinated by shells and collecting Native American artifacts, minerals, fossils and other such specimens. Over time she gained a reputation for her avocation of collecting natural history specimens and her informal collection at the lighthouse was enjoyed by many visitors. In 1883, upon the death of her father Adna Hecox, Laura Hecox was appointed the new lighthouse keeper by the federal government. She kept this post for 33 years, giving tours of the lighthouse and her collection. Tending the light restricted her ability to travel, so many pieces of her collections were gifts to her from various people. She also corresponded with scientists regarding her specialty, mollusks. Though we have no surviving copies of this correspondence, she had at least two species named in her honor. In 1904 she deeded a portion of her collection to the City of Santa Cruz to open a public museum. It opened in 1905, at the Carnegie funded library in downtown Santa Cruz. Over the years the collection has had several homes, including a move to the Santa Cruz High School in 1917. Laura Hecox never married. She retired as lighthouse keeper in 1917, at the age of 63, and died two years later. The Laura Hecox collection was united with the Humphrey Pilkington Collection in 1932, when these collections and others were housed in the Craft House in Seabright's Tyrell Park. The museum remained there until 1954, when the Craft House was condemned and the collections moved to the Seabright Branch Library. This is the current home of the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, the current steward of the Laura Hecox Collection. Laura Hecox's story remains an important part of the museum's identity to this day.

Arrangement

SERIES I. Original Acc. #1 Hecox Materials

Subseries I.A. "History Dept"

Subseries I.B. "Indian Dept"

Subseries I.C. "Mineral Dept"

Subseries I.D. "Marine Dept. (Shells, Fauna and Ship Module)"

Subseries I.E. "Natural Sciences Dept "

Series II. Non Acc. #1 Hecox and Hecox Related

Subseries II.A. Shell Cabinet

Subseries II.B. Photographs

Subseries II.C. Original Indenture

Series III. Hecox Bibliography

Subseries III.A. During her lifetime

Subseries III.B. Biographical

Subseries III.C. Reference or Historical

Content

SERIES I Scope and Content Summary: Series 1 accounts for objects in the original accession documents of Laura Hecox's gift as it was transferred to the Santa Cruz City Museum in Seabright in the 1930s. It hosts a diverse natural history collection as separated into categories set by Laura herself. It does not include items lost or destroyed between 1904 and the time of transfer.

Subseries I. A. Scope and Content Summary: Around 135 objects originally catalogued by Laura Hecox in a group in her curiosity book. Includes many objects that would be categorized as novelties or souvenirs related to historical events, also extending to many objects from localities such as China, Japan and the Philippines, and Jerusalem. Some highlights include: a peach stone carved into a monkey, a fused nail found in the ruins at Pompeii, Chinese dominoes and pinecones from the Donner Party site.

Subseries I.B. "Indian Dept" Scope and Content Summary: 130 objects related to primarily native american artifacts originally held by Laura Hecox but also including other ethnographic components from other indigenous populations. Highlights include: a Haida carved spoon, a bag made of bear intestines and decorated with tufts of feathers, and Philippine tightly woven fan in the form of a battle axe.

Subseries I.C. "Mineral Dept" Scope and Content Summary: Originally consisting of about 30 specimens from the United States but only 3 that retained their documentation remain. These are: a piece of quartz crystal from Calaveras, CA, red cinnabar from Napa, and stibnite from Nevada.

Subseries I.D. "Marine Dept. (Shells, Fauna and Ship Module)" Scope and Content Summary: Approximately 130 shell specimens from all over the world, 20 faunal marine specimens, primarily crabs and 5 specimens categorized under the Ship Module heading. Highlights include: a diverse collection of various snail shells. Few, if any, remain.

Subseries I.E. "Natural History Dept" Scope and Content Summary: Contained roughly 150 specimens originally consisting of primarily wood samples and birds. Several ornithological specimens remain.

Series II. Non Acc. #1 Hecox and Hecox Related Scope and Content Summary: Encompasses later gifts and donations that pertain to Laura Hecox but were not included in her original collection as gifted.

Subseries II.A. Shell Cabinet and ledgers Scope and Content Summary: Includes a wooden shell display cabinet that Laura had gifted to the California School of the Deaf that housed a land and sea shell collection, gifted to the museum in 1993.

Subseries II.B. Photographs Scope and Content Summary: Photographs related to Laura or of Laura.

Subseries II.C. Original Indenture Scope and Content Summary: Original document drawn up and signed by Laura Hecox gifting her collection to the city.

Series III. Hecox Bibliography Scope and Content Summary: Research bibliography developed to bolster information on the collection and the life of Laura Hecox.

Subseries III.A. During her lifetime Scope and Content Summary: This includes information produced by Laura, her family and peers discussing Miss. Hecox during her lifetime. Highlights include: Copies of Hecox Family Scrapbooks, Shipwreck logs, and scientific publications referencing Laura.

Subseries III.B. Biographical Scope and Content Summary: Made up of information produced after her death about her life, about women lighthouse keepers and other things written about Laura in a biographical format. Highlights include: *Women of the Light* (a play), and *Women Who Kept the Lights: An Illustrated History of Female Lighthouse Keepers*.

Subseries III.C. Reference or Historical Scope and Content Summary: This includes information produced on the history of Santa Cruz that references Laura Hecox in passing, genealogical records and other such materials.

Guide Prepared By: Isabelle West, Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, 2018.