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A Guide to the  
William Romaine Newbold Papers  
1894-1926

3.5 Cubic feet

UPT 50 N533

Prepared by Timothy H. Horning  
August 2012

The University Archives and Records Center  
3401 Market Street, Suite 210  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3358  
215.898.7024  
Fax: 215.573.2036  
[www.archives.upenn.edu](http://www.archives.upenn.edu)  
Mark Frazier Lloyd, Director

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

PROVENANCE..... 1

ARRANGEMENT..... 1

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE..... 1

SCOPE AND CONTENT..... 3

CONTROLLED ACCESS HEADINGS..... 4

INVENTORY..... 5

CORRESPONDENCE..... 5

CRYPTANALYSIS..... 5

MISCELLANEOUS..... 6

NEWBOLD-PIPER SITTINGS..... 6

NOTEBOOKS/NOTECARDS..... 8

PHOTOSTATS..... 9

PUBLICATIONS..... 9

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**PROVENANCE**

The collection was donated to the University Archives by Dr. Rowley in May 1958.

**ARRANGEMENT**

The papers of William Romaine Newbold are divided into seven series: correspondence, cryptanalysis, miscellaneous, Newbold-Piper Sittings, notebooks and notecards, Photostats, and publications. The material within each series is arranged chronologically except where no date could be determined. The undated material is arranged alphabetically by title.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

William Romaine Newbold was born in Wilmington, Delaware on November 20, 1865 to William Allibone Newbold and Martha Smith Baily. Newbold attended the Cheltenham Military Academy

in suburban Philadelphia. He enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1884 as a sophomore with the Class of 1887.

Newbold was an honors student during each of his undergraduate years and made a name for himself as an academic talent, graduating with prizes in both Latin and Philosophy. Newbold even taught an informal class on Hebrew in only his second semester on campus. He was also a member of the Senior Book Committee and the Philosophical Seminar.

After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree, Newbold returned to the Cheltenham Military Academy where he taught Latin while simultaneously working toward a doctoral degree at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1889 Newbold left the military academy to join the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania as an instructor in Latin. The following year, Newbold was named lecturer in philosophy while he maintained his position as instructor in Latin. He earned his Ph.D. in 1891 with a dissertation entitled, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Belief." After earning his Ph.D., Newbold temporarily left the University to study in Germany at the University of Berlin.

Newbold returned to the United States and the University of Pennsylvania in 1892 and resumed his positions as an instructor in Latin and a lecturer in philosophy. In 1894, he was promoted to Assistant Professor of Latin. Two years later, in 1896, he was named the Dean of the Graduate School. During his tenure as dean Newbold worked to elevate the status and prestige of the Graduate School by raising the admissions standards and improving administrative aspects. In 1903 Newbold was promoted to Professor of Philosophy and in 1907 he was named the Adam Seybert Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy. He was named an honorary member of the Philomathean Society during their centennial celebration in 1913. During World War I, Newbold taught the political and historical causes of the war to the Reserve Officers Training Corps. The University honored Newbold with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree (LL.D) in 1921.

Newbold's passions throughout his lifetime were all things ancient and mysterious. In the late 1890s he became interested in the psychology of religion and researched the topic to great extent, writing a series of papers on hypnosis, hallucinations, telepathy, and trances and how they related to religious experiences. He was a member of the Society for Psychical Research and from served as the psychology editor of the *American Naturalist* for one year, 1895-1896. In the early 20th century he turned his attention to ancient Greek philosophy. He prepared many translations of works by Aristotle and Plotinus, but for unknown reasons, he never submitted these for publication. He did however publish a well-received paper on the philosopher Philolaus in 1905.

Following World War I, Newbold turned his interests towards early Christian theology. In 1920 he delivered a series of lectures on Valentinian Gnosticism in Philadelphia at the Bohlen Foundation

Lectureship, an annual series of lectures on Christian themes delivered at the Church of the Holy Trinity that were made possible by an endowment by the eponymous Philadelphia merchant. These lectures, like his earlier Greek translations, were never published. Nevertheless, Newbold's body of knowledge on early Christian theology became so great that at one point in the 1920s that the Episcopal Theological Seminary of New York offered him a position as a chair of ecclesiastical history. Though the offer was a great honor for a layperson, Newbold chose to remain at the University of Pennsylvania.

Newbold also had a great interest in puzzles, codes, and cryptography. This interest led to the last major undertaking of his professional life. He worked to decipher a famous coded text, commonly referred to as the Voynich Manuscript. He believed it had been written by Roger Bacon, a thirteenth century English monk, scientist, astrologer, and inventor. According to Newbold's complex system for deciphering the code, Bacon had made numerous scientific discoveries which no one else would "rediscover" for centuries. Newbold died before he could decipher the whole manuscript, but the partial decipherment was published posthumously as *The Cipher of Roger Bacon* (1928). In the years immediately following Newbold's death, his version of the meaning of the code in the Voynich Manuscript was seen as the truth. Several years later, however, other experts began to look at Newbold's method with a critical eye. They correctly noted that his system was faulty as it was based on a number of unproven assumptions. Newbold's interpretation of the Voynich Manuscript was eventually completely disregarded, with experts questioning if Roger Bacon was the author of the manuscript. None of these questions regarding the validity of his decipherment surfaced during his lifetime.

William Romaine Newbold died on September 8, 1926. A memorial service was held for him in College Hall. He was survived by his wife Ethel Sprague Kent Packard, whom he had married in 1926. They had no children.

### **SCOPE AND CONTENT**

The William Romaine Newbold Papers pertain to his work with ciphers and codes for the most part. Much of the collection is hard to assign a date to, but comparing it to the material that is dated and with the knowledge that cryptanalysis was something that Newbold took only took on in the later years of his life, it could be surmised that anything relating to ciphers and codes date to circa 1918-1926.

The series of correspondence concerns Newbold's decipherment of what is now referred to as the Voynich Manuscript, a 13th century manuscript written in a coded text. Newbold did not finish deciphering the whole text, however his partial translation was published in 1928 as *The Cipher of Roger Bacon* (Roger Bacon being the monk whom Newbold attributed the authorship of the manuscript).

The cryptanalysis series includes Newbold's translations of coded texts. There is little to no information about the original texts he was translating, though each folder contains numerous pieces of scratch-paper where Newbold worked out the ciphers. In some instances there is also what appears to be longer form translation on the texts he was working with.

The large series called *The Newbold-Piper Sitzings* consists of writing tablets with large, illegible hand-written text in them. Sometimes there are what seem to be translations into English of the illegible text written in smaller text above the larger text, but this is not the case for every tablet. A newspaper clipping included within hints that the "Piper" named is Leonora Piper, a controversial medium whose authenticity is still debated by parapsychologists to this day. Piper reached the height of her popularity in the late 19th century, the same time that Newbold researched hypnosis, hallucinations, trances, and telepathy. The sittings with Piper could have been part of this research.

Also included are several folders of notebooks and notecards which are Newbold's transcriptions from original texts, with additional notes and bibliographic references. Many of the transcriptions are written in Latin. There are also several folders of Photostats, some of which are from the Voynich Manuscript with Newbold's notations on where they were to appear in his book.

Finally, there are two publications. The first is lecture on the Voynich Manuscript delivered by Newbold delivered in 1921. The second is entitled *Five Transliterated Aramaic Inscriptions* from 1926.

## CONTROLLED ACCESS HEADINGS

### Subject(s)

- Cryptography--United States
- Philosophy--Study and teaching--United States.

**William Romaine Newbold Papers  
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**INVENTORY**

<b>CORRESPONDENCE</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Richard Hodgson (1), 1891-1913	1	1
Richard Hodgson (2), 1894-1902	1	2
re: Bacon's cipher, 1918, 1921-1922	1	3
Miscellaneous, 1919	1	4
Micellaneous, 1920-1923	1	5
Professor Manley, 1922	1	6
Monseigneur August Pelzer, 1922	1	7
Micellaneous, 1923-1926	1	8
Roland G. Kent, 1928	1	9
Josiah H. Penniman, n.d.	1	10
<hr/>		
<b>CRYPTANALYSIS</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Phunuit Appears, 1894	1	11
Micellaneous, 1924	1	12
Bodleian Digby, n.d.	1	13
Legends, n.d.	1	14



Miscellaneous (1), n.d.	1	15
Miscellaneous (2), n.d.	1	16
Oxford study, Oedes version, n.d.	1	17
San. Med., n.d.	1	18
Speculum Alchemical, n.d.	1	19
Zodiac and Nebula, n.d.	1	20

<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Clippings, 1921-1922	1	21
Newbold Memorial Meeting, 1927	1	22
Notes from public records office, n.d.	1	23
Pages from the notebook of one of Roger Bacon's students, n.d.	1	
Philosophical Society paper, n.d.	1	24
Photograph-unidentified child, n.d.	1	25
Photograph-William R. Newbold, n.d.	1	26
Steele's manuscript, n.d.	1	27
Writing tablet, n.d.	1	28

<b>NEWBOLD-PIPER SITTINGS</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Original manuscript May 4-June 23, 1894 (1)	1	29
Original manuscript May 4-June 23, 1894 (2)	1	30
Original manuscript May 4-June 23, 1894 (3)	1	31
Original manuscript May 4-June 23, 1894 (4)	1	32
Original manuscript May 4-June 23, 1894 (5)	1	33
Original manuscript June 25-26, 1894 (1)	1	34

William Romaine Newbold Papers

UPT 50 N533

Original manuscript June 25-26, 1894 (2)	1	35
Original manuscript June 27 and November 7, 1894 (1)	1	36
Original manuscript June 27 and November 7, 1894 (2)	1	37
Original manuscript June 27 and November 7, 1894 (3)	1	38
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (1)	2	1
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (2)	2	2
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (3)	2	3
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (4)	2	4
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (5)	2	5
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (6)	2	6
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (7)	2	7
Original manuscript May 7-June 17, 1895 (8)	2	8
Original manuscript June 13-July 8, 1895 (1)	2	9
Original manuscript June 13-July 8, 1895 (2)	2	10
Original manuscript June 13-July 8, 1895 (3)	2	11
Original manuscript June 13-July 8, 1895 (4)	2	12
Original manuscript June 18-21, 1895 (1)	2	13
Original manuscript June 18-21, 1895 (2)	2	14
Original manuscript June 18-21, 1895 (3)	2	15
Original manuscript June 18-21, 1895 (4)	2	16
Original manuscript June 22-26, 1895 (1)	2	17
Original manuscript June 22-26, 1895 (2)	2	18
Original manuscript June 22-26, 1895 (3)	2	19
Original manuscript June 22-26, 1895 (4)	2	20

Original manuscript June 27-28, 1895 (1)	2	21
Original manuscript June 27-28, 1895 (2)	2	22
Original manuscripts July 1-July 8, 1895 (1)	3	1
Original manuscripts July 1-July 8, 1895 (2)	3	2
Original manuscripts July 1-July 8, 1895 (3)	3	3
Original manuscripts July 1-July 8, 1895 (4)	3	4
Transcripts of Piper Sitzings 1894-1895 (1)	3	5
Transcripts of Piper Sitzings 1894-1895 (2)	3	6
<b>NOTEBOOKS/NOTECARDS</b>		
Bacon, bibliographical notes in Europe, etc., n.d.	3	7
Derivation of the Bilateral Alphabets, n.d.	3	8
Manuscript of chapter III (Principles of Roger Bacon's Cipher), n.d.	3	9
Names of Planets-Text of Nebula-Anula Ecl., n.d.	3	10
Notes on slides, n.d.	3	11
Odes of Solomon, n.d.	3	12
Oxford Story, n.d.	3	13
Oxford Story Revised; Reputation of Green Lion, n.d.	3	14
Philobiblion Club, n.d.	3	15
Saints Peter and Paul in Rome, n.d.	3	16
Secretum Secretorum; Trium Verborum, n.d.	3	17
The Green Lion, n.d.	3	18
Untitled manuscript, n.d.	3	19
Untitled notebook, n.d.	3	20
Voy. 82, Voy. 66, Green Lion, n.d.	3	21

Voynich's Astr. Ms, Steele's, Lull notes Ket et. al., n.d.	3	22
Xn Arch Notes, n.d.	3	23
<b>PHOTOSTATS</b>		
Miscellaneous photostats, n.d.	OS 1	
Miscellaneous, n.d. (1)	3	24
Miscellaneous, n.d. (2)	3	25
Miscellaneous, n.d. (3)	3	26
Miscellaneous, n.d. (4)	3	27
Miscellaneous, n.d. (5)	3	28
Miscellaneous, n.d. (6)	3	29
Miscellaneous, n.d. (7)	3	30
Miscellaneous, n.d. (8)	3	31
<b>PUBLICATIONS</b>		
The Voynich Roger Bacon Manuscript-The Mary Scott Newbold Lecture-Lecture V, 1921	3	32
Five Transliterated Aramaic Inscriptions, 1926	3	33