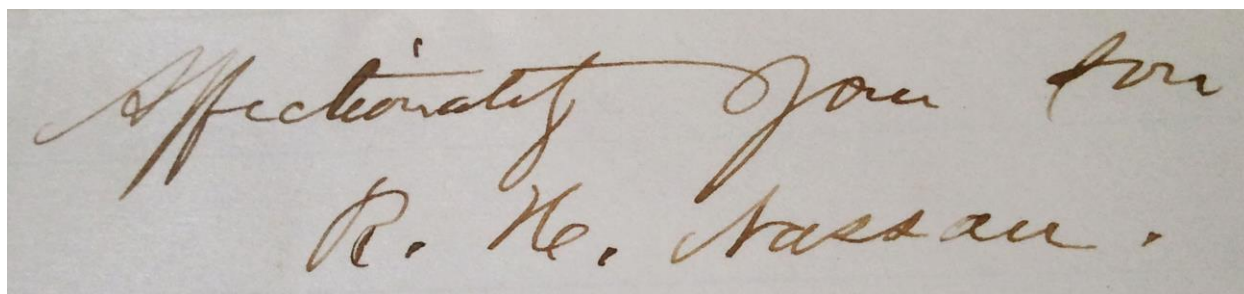


The Burke Library Archives, Columbia University Libraries,  
Union Theological Seminary, New York

Missionary Research Library Archives: Section 1

Finding Aid for

**Robert Hamill Nassau Papers, 1856-1976**



Credit to: MRL 1: Robert Hamill Nassau Papers, 1856-1976,  
The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Finding Aid prepared by: Brigette C. Kamsler, September 2011  
With financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation

**Summary Information**

Creator: Robert Hamill Nassau, 1835 – 1921  
Title: Robert Hamill Nassau Papers  
Inclusive dates: 1856-1976  
Bulk dates: 1868-1906  
Abstract: Robert Hamill Nassau was a Presbyterian missionary who served throughout West Africa, including Benita; Belambla; Kangwe; Talaguga; Baraka (Libreville); and Batanga. Founded mission station in Kangwe, later known as Lambaréné. Papers consist of letters sent to and received by Nassau from friends and family, and a small series of personal and biographical information.  
Size: 3 boxes, 1.50 linear feet  
Storage: Onsite storage  
Repository: The Burke Library  
Union Theological Seminary  
3041 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Email: [burkearchives@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@library.columbia.edu)

### Administrative Information

- Provenance:** Originally part of the independent Missionary Research Library, which acquired the papers before February 23, 1922, the records were moved with the MRL to the Brown Memorial Tower of Union Theological Seminary in 1929. In 1976 the records were accessioned to the Burke Library archives with the closure of the MRL.
- Access:** Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to [burkearchives@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@library.columbia.edu), or by postal mail to The Burke Library address on page 1, as far in advance as possible. Burke Library staff is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on archival or special collections research.
- Access Restrictions:** The collection is unrestricted to readers. Certain materials, however, are in a fragile condition, and this may necessitate restriction in handling and copying.
- Preferred Citation:** Item description, MRL 1: Robert Hamill Nassau Papers, 1856-1976, series #, box #, and folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

### Biography

Robert Hamill Nassau was born in 1835 at Montgomery Square, Pennsylvania. He attended the Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, after which he was awarded a bachelor's degree from the College of New Jersey (later to become Princeton University.) After two years of teaching at Lawrenceville, he attended Princeton Theological Seminary from 1856-1859, obtained an MA from the College of New Jersey, and the degree of MD from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1861.

Upon graduation, Nassau was ordained by the Presbytery of New Brunswick and became a missionary for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. His first appointment as a medical missionary was on Corisco Island, off the coast of West Africa. Nassau served throughout West Africa, including Benita; Belambla; Kangwe; Talaguga; Baraka (Libreville); and Batanga. Nassau also founded a mission station in Kangwe, later known as Lambaréné. His final missionary placement was in Batanga until 1906, after which he returned to the USA, and took a stated supply position in Florida.

Nassau was married twice: First to Mary Cloyd Latta on Corisco in 1862 (died 1870), also a missionary and mother of three sons: William Latta, George Paull and Charles Francis; and to Mary Brunette Foster (died 1884), mother of daughter Mary Brunette Foster. Daughter Mary was the first white child born in Equatorial Africa.

Nassau was a prolific writer and wrote many books, including *Fetichism in West Africa* (1904). He also learned African dialects and translated materials. He continued writing until his death in Ambler, Pennsylvania in 1921.

### Further Sources

Another Robert Hamill Nassau collection of note is held by the Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey and the following link is to the Finding Aid of that collection: <http://digital.library.ptsem.edu/ead/collection/100#ead-descgrp>.

The Presbyterian Historical Society sponsored the creation of microfilm using diaries; correspondence; publications; and other selected documents written by and relating to Nassau. The microfilm is available at a variety of locations including Yale University; the Hamilton Campus of Miami University; and the Presbyterian Historical Society. The Library of Congress holds an 1881 notebook; and Lincoln University holds handwritten Bekano legends written in journals.

### Collection Scope and Content Note

The collection is organized in two series:

- **Series 1: Correspondence, 1856-1906 (2 boxes, 1.00 lin. ft.)**

This series contains letters sent to and received by Robert Hamill Nassau, and letters received by his second wife Mary Brunette Foster (died 1884). The majority of the letters were written by his family, including his parents, Reverend Charles William Nassau and Hannah Hamill Nassau; and an older sister, Isabella Ann Nassau. Isabella was also a missionary in Africa. Additional letters are from other sisters, Matilda Nassau Lowrie and Emma Nassau Swan; colleagues and pastors. These are arranged in chronological order by letters sent and letters received. The letters are inscribed with locations and dates, and many include the original envelopes.

The letters are of interest because they discuss in detail the life and work of a medical missionary in Africa. They illustrate the relationship between Nassau and his family, his colleagues and members of the Mission Board. Included are daily accounts of the mission; health concerns and deaths of people around him; weather occurrences; the delay of mail deliveries; who came to the mission and what occurred that day. He wrote to his sister on August 23, 1895 after he asked the Mission Board to send him back to America, "unless the mission shall be willing to relieve me of my limitations here or give me another place to work."

The letters are also of interest because of their deeply personal nature. In one letter to his father dated March 17, 1871, Nassau writes that he is glad for letters from his family because they make him less depressed. Nassau wrote eloquently after the death of second wife, Mary Brunette Foster, in a letter dated August 9, 1884: "I keep my sorrow and bury my heart here with the rare woman with whom I have passed, without exception the 3 happiest years of my life, years made happy by her..."

- **Series 2: Personal and Biographical, 1890-1976 (1 box, 0.50 lin. ft.)**

Within this series are personal items owned by Nassau, including summaries of work and programs from Presbyterian churches that he attended. It also includes biographies written about Nassau posthumously. This series is arranged chronologically.

### **Processing**

Metal clips and staples were removed from materials and folded items were flattened. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes. Acidic items were separated from one another by interleaving with acid-free paper as needed.

This collection was originally processed in winter 1977 by Paul A. Byrnes. It was updated in 2011. A detailed item-level inventory is available upon request to [burkearchives@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@library.columbia.edu).

## Contents list

### **Series 1: Correspondence, 1856-1906**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
1	1	1-14	Letters sent by Nassau to his sisters and parents, 1868-1898 [items 1-256]
1	2	1-12	Letters sent by Nassau to his sisters and parents, 1898-1906 [items 257-381]
1	3	1-9	Letters received by Nassau and/or his wife Mary Brunette Foster Nassau from family and friends, 1874-1906 [items 382-536]
1	3	10	General Letters, 1856-1902

### **Series 2: Personal and Biographical, 1890-1976**

2	3	11	Report of Committee on Outfit and Outfit List for the Interior, Gaboon and Corisco Missions, 1890
2	3	12	Session Work Summaries, Batanga and Kribi Church, 1902
2	3	13	Corisco Presbytery Narrative, 1903
2	3	14	Presbyterian Church Programs, 1904
2	3	15	Secondary Biographical Information, 1963-1976