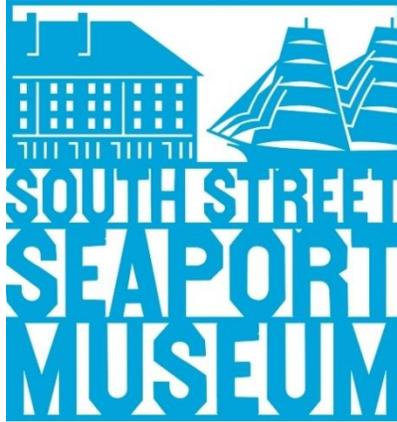


W. & A. Fletcher Company Collection, ca. 1853-ca. 1925,  
Approximately 430 cubic feet



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**Descriptive Summary**

*Title:* W. & A. Fletcher Company Collection

*Dates:* ca. 1853-ca. 1925, bulk dates 1880-1910

*Abstract:* The W & A Fletcher Collection contains both the business papers and ship plans generated by the W & A Fletcher Company.

*Extent:* Approximately 430 cubic feet

*Language:* English

## History

Founded in New York in 1853, W & A Fletcher Co. specialized in boilers and steam engines for Hudson River steamboats. The firm was founded by Andrew Fletcher, his brother, William Fletcher and Joseph Harrison. Originally called Fletcher, Harrison & Co., Andrew Fletcher was the designer, William Fletcher managed the works, and Joseph Harrison was in charge of the office. Their shops, then known as the North River Iron Works, were located on West Street in New York City. In 1880, Joseph Harrison left the firm and soon thereafter, in 1883, William Fletcher died. The firm reorganized as W. & A. Fletcher Co., with Andrew Fletcher Jr. and William H. Fletcher, William Fletcher's son, joining the business. The firm rapidly grew and in 1890, they moved across the river to Hoboken, New Jersey. There they had their own shipyard with piers and the full range of newly built workshops.

W. & A. Fletcher never built vessels from the keel up, though they were frequently credited as the builders on the original plans. They built the engines, boilers and other machinery and sub-contracted out the hull and joinery. Wooden hulls were built in Jersey City, on the east side of Manhattan and in Greenpoint and Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Steel hulls were built by the Marvel Shipyard in Newburgh, New York and at the Delaware River Iron Shipbuilding Company yard in Chester, Pennsylvania. Many engines were shipped in a disassembled state to be installed in boats at distant locations. In addition to New York Harbor, the Hudson River and Long Island Sound, Fletcher beam engines propelled steamboats on Massachusetts Bay, the Coast of Maine, Lakes George and Champlain, the Great lakes, San Francisco Bay, Brazil's Guanabara Bay, and the Coast of China.

Varied as their accomplishments were, perhaps their greatest contribution was the use of the steam turbine in American-built ships. The company produced its last walking beam engine in 1913 for the Brazilian ferryboat Guanabara and began focusing on marine steam turbines. A few years earlier Andrew Fletcher Jr. had obtained the first United States license to build Parsons marine steam turbines. The first three were installed in the coastal steamers Governor Cobb, Harvard and Yale in 1906-1907. During World War I the firm built turbines and boilers for standard cargo ships and tankers.

After the death of the second Andrew Fletcher the shipyard was operated briefly by the third generation of the family as a repair facility. The last Fletcher marine steam engine, numbered 303, went into the double-ended Hudson River ferryboat Albany built in 1925. In 1929, they merged with five other New York based shipbuilding/ship repair companies to form United Dry Docks, Inc. In 1938 it was acquired by the Bethlehem Steel Company which operated it as a repairs and alterations yard until 1980. The only intact Fletcher walking beam engine surviving today is still in the original boat; the Lake Champlain steamboat Ticonderoga of 1906 preserved on shore in Shelburne, Vermont.

## **Scope and Content Notes**

Despite specializing in boilers and engines, the W. & A. Fletcher Collection contains over 20,000 plans of various parts of each ship. Although there is a focus on the mechanical aspect of the building process, there are also plans for decorative details, as well as more commonplace plans such as those for the deck and midship section.

The company papers are arranged into three subseries and document the “back end” of the shipbuilding process. Contracts, specifications and correspondence about each ship manufactured by the W & A Fletcher Company can be found in this series.

### **Arrangement**

Arrangement and processing of this collection is currently on-going and, as such, its arrangement has not been finalized. Currently, it is arranged in two series, the ship plans and the company papers.

#### *Series 1: Ship Plans*

This arrangement of this series is ongoing. Currently, a full inventory of the ship plans exists, but the plans need further arrangement.

#### *Series 2: Company Papers*

The company papers have been arranged into three subseries, based on the amount of information about a given ship.

##### *Subseries 1: Ship Name*

This subseries contains mostly contracts but also correspondence, specifications, work orders for ships that have only been identified by their name, not their engine number. They have been arranged alphabetically by ship name.

##### *Subseries 2: Company Name*

The Fletcher Company contracted work with third parties to help construct ships, and this series documents the agreements between Fletcher and the outside companies they worked with. Telegrams, contracts and specifications can be found in this subseries, as well as documents unrelated to Fletcher, including advertisements for various companies, bank deposit slips, etc. By and large, the ships referred to in this subseries have not been identified.

### *Subseries 3: Engine Number*

The largest subseries in this series contains contracts, specifications, and correspondence for ships according to their engine number (for a guide to ship names and engine numbers, see box 1). Files are arranged in numerical order in keeping with the original order of the collection.

### **Preferred Citation**

W & A Fletcher Collection. South Street Seaport Museum.

### **Provenance:**

Shortly before the final sale of the Bethlehem Steel Company yard, the sailing ship Wavertree was moved there for repairs. Soon after she left the yard, the chief estimator called the Seaport Museum and said there was a vault under one of the company's buildings containing around 100 drawers of "drawings of parts of engines." This proved to be the plan archive of W. & A. Fletcher & Co., over 20,000 original drawings covering the entire span of their activities from the 1850s to the 1920s. Additionally, some of company's business papers can be found in the Seaport Museum's holdings.

### **Related Material**

Staten Island Shipbuilding Company Collection; Ship Plan Collection

### **Access Points**

#### *Corporate Names*

W. & A. Fletcher Company

#### *Topical Subjects*

Steamboats

Engines

Steam Engineering

Blueprints

River steamers

Ferries

#### *Geographical Subjects*

Lower Manhattan (New York, N.Y.)

Hoboken (N.J.)

## **Container List**

Please email [collections@seany.org](mailto:collections@seany.org) for container list.