

Finding Aid to the Matthew Forney Steele Papers

Steele, Matthew Forney, 1861-1953

Matthew Forney Steele Papers, 1899-1907, 1920-1952

3.4 linear ft.

Collection number: Mss 128

[Biography](#)

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OVERVIEW

Links: Finding aid to [Matthew F. Steele Photograph Collection](#)

View images on [Digital Horizons](#)

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Citation: [Identification of item]. Matthew Forney Steele Papers, MS 128, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Forney Steele was born in Huntsville, Alabama on June 19, 1861. As one of four children of Matthew W. and Catharine Steele, he grew up in the post-Civil War South on a plantation near Huntsville. Steele's mother taught him at home until he was fourteen, after which he attended a private school in Huntsville. During his school years he read about the lives of great southern military men, including generals Robert E. Lee, Joe Johnston, and Stonewall Jackson.

The emulation of these great generals prompted him to secure an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. He entered the Academy on July 1, 1879, shortly after his eighteenth birthday, and on June 13, 1883 he graduated as a second lieutenant and was assigned to the Eighth Cavalry at Fort Clark, Texas.

The following years were spent serving at various frontier forts including Fort Clark, Fort Davies, and Del Rio, Texas from 1883 to 1888. In 1885 he was involved in the campaign against the Cheyenne Indians. He was stationed at Fort Yates, Dakota Territory from 1888 to 1891 and was a member of the Cavalry unit sent to relieve the besieged Indian police who attempted to arrest Sitting Bull. He was involved in the subsequent campaigns against the Sioux in 1890 and 1891. In 1891 he was promoted to first lieutenant and transferred to Fort Keogh, Montana, then to Fort Meyer, Virginia from 1891 to 1894 and to Fort Meade, South Dakota from 1894 to 1898. In the Spanish-American War he served as an aid to General Wheeler in the Santiago Campaign, including the Battle of San Juan Hill. Promoted to Captain in 1899 he served as adjutant of the Sixth Cavalry until 1899. He served in the Philippine Campaign from 1899 to 1900 as a major in the Thirtieth Volunteers and as commander of Troop K. Sixth Cavalry from 1901 to 1903.

He served as an instructor at the U.S. Army Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and at the War College, Washington, D.C. from 1903 until 1909. During this period he authored a collection of books on the American Civil War entitled *The American Campaigns*. Also during his tenure there he authored the article "The 'Color Line' in the Army" published in the *North American Review*. In this article he advocated the end of "the legal restriction that compels the assignment of colored recruits to one of four regiments." This fascinating article demonstrated his advanced views much ahead of his time.

He returned to the Philippines in 1909 as commander of Squadron Second Cavalry stationed at Jolo and was involved in the campaign against the Moros from 1911 to 1912. He retired from active duty in 1912 and was called back to active service from 1917 to 1919 as commandant of the North Dakota Agricultural College ROTC (now North Dakota State University).

Mr. Steele married Stella Folsom in Fargo October 5, 1887, the daughter of John B. and Lavisia C. (Forsythe) Folsom. After Stella's father died on August 6, 1912, Steele retired from the army and moved to Fargo to take over his father-in-law's real estate, loan, and insurance business. He was very active in the local community as a member of the Fargo Chamber of Commerce, Fargo Commons Club, Fargo Rotary, and the Fargo Country Club. Stella died on November 15, 1945. The Steeles had no children. Matthew F. Steele died on February 25, 1953 and was buried at Riverside Cemetery in Fargo.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The **Matthew F. Steele Papers** consist of newspaper clippings; a short autobiography, reminiscence of his involvement in the death of Sitting Bull; correspondence from January 1899 until October 1907; and diaries covering January 1920 to February 1952.

The newspaper clippings are his obituary and a few articles on Mr. Steele written by Roy P. Johnson, a staff writer for the *Fargo Forum*, and Steele family obituaries. Among the articles is a copy of Steele's article published in the *North American Review* in 1906, titled "The 'Color Line' in the Army."

The reminiscences of his involvement in the death of Sitting Bull and the autobiography are part of a 12-leaf typed written manuscript written for the local Masonic Lodge. The reminiscences are a very good narrative of Steele's observations concerning the death of Sitting Bull in 1890. The autobiography is a good summary but not complete for his early life.

The [Correspondence Series](#) consists primarily of letters written to his mother at Avondale, near Birmingham, Alabama from 1899 until 1907. Several letters to his father, sister, and from his mother are also present in the collection. The letters describe in detail his daily activities and the locations where he served during part of his military career. The first six months of correspondence of 1899 include letters from Fargo, North Dakota; Fort Snelling, Minnesota; Fort Meade, South Dakota; Chicago, Illinois; Huntsville, Alabama; New York, New York; Columbus, Ohio; and Sioux City, Iowa. These letters document the time before his assignment to the Thirtieth Volunteer Infantry. The letters from 1899 through 1903 concern primarily his first assignment in the southern Luzon of the Philippine Islands. They describe the formation of the Thirtieth Volunteer Infantry at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, the boat trip to the Philippines, and actions against the rebels. Steele was responsible for the running of the city of Lucban, south of Manila. He was very effective at this task because he was one of the few members of the United States Military on the island who spoke Spanish fluently. Additionally, during this time his wife joined him in the Philippines. The correspondence from 1903 through 1907 was written while he was an instructor at the United States Army Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and includes a trip that he took to Europe.

The [Diaries Series](#) documents 1920 to 1952 and describes his daily activities as a Fargo businessman. These consist of weather information, a record of his appointments and activities, and his opinion of current events. The diaries are very sketchy and do not contain much information, although during World War II he wrote in a little more detail.

SEPARATIONS RECORD

The following non-manuscript items have been removed from the Matthew F. Steele Papers and sent to the section indicated.

Photographs (Institute Photo 2103)

- Matthew F. Steele at ten months, Unidentified child, Katie Fern Steele (M.F. Steele's sister), M.F. Steele's committal at Riverside Cemetery, Fargo (11), M.F. Steele in 1948 and of the celebration of his ninety-first birthday in 1951 (8), M.F. Steele at Christmas (3 sets), Yosemite and San Francisco taken circa 1910 (23), Family photographs with a letter (6), Photographs with a letter (6)

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Box/Folder	Content
1/1	Finding aid, and Funeral book
1/2	Autobiography and reminiscence on the death of Sitting Bull, n.d.
1/3	Newspaper clippings and articles

Correspondence Series

1/4	1 January 1899 - 25 May 1899
1/5	4 June 1899 - 9 July 1899
1/6	19 July 1899 - 22 September 1899
1/7	29 September 1899 - 24 December 1899
1/8	31 December 1899 - 29 April 1900
1/9	13 May 1900 - 26 August 1900
2/1	9 September 1900 - 28 December 1900
2/2	6 January 1901 - 21 July 1901
2/3	21 April 1901 - 21 July 1901
2/4	8 August 1901 - 30 April 1902
2/5	4 May 1902 - 28 June 1902
2/6	6 July 1902 - 28 December 1902
3/1	18 January 1903 - 26 April 1903
3/2	3 May 1903 - 16 August 1903
3/3	16 August 1903 - 27 December 1903
3/4	3 January 1904 - 27 March 1904
3/5	4 April 1904 - 26 June 1904
4/1	7 July 1904 - 26 September 1904
4/2	9 October 1904 - 18 December 1904
4/3	8 January 1905 - 26 March 1905
4/4	2 April 1905 - 25 June 1905
4/5	2 July 1905 - 24 September 1905
5/1	1 October 1905 - 31 December 1905
5/2	7 January 1906 - 25 March 1906
5/3	3 April 1906 - 24 June 1906
5/4	1 July 1906 - 25 August 1906
5/5	2 September 1906 - 30 December 1906
6/1	6 January 1907 - 31 March 1907
6/2	7 April 1907 - 9 July 1907
6/3	1 August 1907 - 20 October 1907 Letters to Steele's father-
6/4	4 April 1902, 17 February 1907, 14 May 1907 Letters from Mrs. M.F. Steele-

6/5 18 April 1899, 10 November 1899, 9 May 1900
Letter to Mrs. John F. Newman (Steele's sister)-
6/6 28 December 1900

Diaries Series

6/7 1920 - 1924
6/8 1925 - 1929
7/1 1930 - 1934
7/2 1935
7/3 1936 - 1939
7/4 1940
7/5 1941
8/1 1942
8/2 1943
8/3 1944
8/4 1945
8/5 1946 - 1947
9/1 1948-1949
9/2 1952

9/3 Note books and address books, 1937-1947