Call Number: Mss. C77-2  
Creator: Birge Company  
Title: Birge Company Records  
Date(s): 1890-1944  
Language(s): English  
Location: Manuscript room  
Size: 5 boxes + 44 oversize v. (10 linear ft.)

Acquisition Information: 77-24  
Donor: Byron Ball  
Restrictions:  
Preferred Citation: Buffalo History Museum Research Library, Mss. C77-2, Birge Company Records  
Processing Information: Reprocessed/retroconverted by Peter Nelson  
Collection Access: Researchers wishing to access this collection must apply for a Scholar Pass and present valid photo ID upon arrival to the library.

Biographical / Historical Note: Martin H. Birge was born on July 20, 1806 in Middlebury, Vermont. He came to Buffalo by way of the Erie Canal on September 24, 1834, and saw the growing city of Buffalo as an opportune place in which to establish a business. On October 15, 1834, he opened a dry goods store at 234 Main St., stocking general merchandise and wallpaper.

By 1866 Birge had devoted his entire business to retail and wholesale paper-hangings, believing himself to be the first such proprietor in the city. The store had made several moves: in 1844 to 144 Main St., and in later years to 160 Main and 174 Main.

The firm’s name was changed to M.H. Birge & Sons in 1875 when Martin’s sons George K. and Henry M. joined after graduating from Cornell University. In 1878 the family began to manufacture its own wallpapers in a five-story factory on Perry and Indiana Streets. On December 17, 1880 fire destroyed the building and much of the stock, and claimed the lives of twelve people. Operations resumed in the former Prince melodeon factory on Seventh and Maryland Streets. Birge & Sons began to sell sets (coverings for walls and ceilings), and business grew increasingly in the direction of wholesale distribution. The Main Street store was closed its retail business in 1891.

Martin H. Birge retired in 1892 and passed the business to his sons. George K. designed a machine to make flocked wallpaper, thus eliminating a great deal of manual labor while maintaining a high standard of craftsmanship.

On August 23, 1900, M. H. Birge & Sons was incorporated. In its first ten years the capital stock increased in value from $150,000 to $500,000. In 1906 George K. Birge’s son Humphrey opened a European office and in 1910 he became a vice-president of the firm.
M.H. Birge & Sons was known for the quality of its wallpaper and for the artistry that characterized it. Local landscape artists were hired to paint and develop the original prints. The best known of these, Charles E. Burchfield, designed landscapes in the mid-1920s that depicted the wildlife and scenic beauty of Western New York. Birge became the first manufacturer to introduce do-it-yourself, wet strength wallpaper. The wallpaper, called “Quick,” included a built-in adhesive and a plastic, washable surface coating. In 1958 Birge developed “Fabrique,” a durable non-warping vinyl that was pre-trimmed with permanent embossed designs.

Birge & Sons produced a high quality but expensive product which could not compete with cheaper imitations. The company was purchased by reed Forest Products Company in 1969. Gradually the Birge operations were shut down; the company was forced to close in 1982 when a buyer could not be found.

Scope and Content Note: Leases, patents, copyrights and contracts, ca. 1904-1940; and financial records, including tax statements, (1921-1936), bank notes (1933-1935), sales books (1913-1919), ledgers (1910-1933), journals (1912-1944), and cash books (1911-1933).


Subject Headings:
Birge, Martin H., 1806-1900  M.H. Birge & Sons Company
Burchfield, Charles Ephraim, 189.-1967  Reed Forest Products
Contracts  Wallpaper New York (State) Buffalo
Ledgers

Series Description:

I. Historical files, ca. 1910-1980
II. Leases, 1907-1939
III. Patents, 1904-1940
IV. Other legal records, 1904-1940
V. Tax records, 1921-1936
VI. Payroll records, 1923-1944
VII. Miscellaneous financial records and correspondence, 1900-1944
VIII. Oversize bound volumes, 1887-1944
IX. Photographs and poster, ca. 1900-1955
Box and Folder List:

Box 1

Series I: Historical files

Folder 1: Birge wallpaper, ca. 1910-1976
2. Press releases, ca. 1955-1960
3: Charles Burchfield, 1922-1980
4: Wallpaper history
5: Decorated leather wallpaper
6: Birge leathers, 1919
7: Sales talk and promotional copy, 1951, and undated
8: Clippings, 1921-1980

Series II: Leases

Folder 9: London and Germany, 1907-1916
10: Buffalo, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, 1935-1939

Series III: Patents

Folder 11: Wallpaper printing machinery, 1904-1940
12: Wallpaper design, 1912-1928
   Includes Burchfield patents.

Series IV: Other legal records

Folder 13: Copyrights, trademarks, and letters of incorporation, 1904-1940

Box 2

Traveling salesman contracts, 1919-1924
Alphabetical by surname

Folder 1: Becker, Calely
2: Campbell
3: Chase, Clancy, Coffey
4: Dennett, Dirksen, Eckardt, Ervin
5: Finnegan, Hartsock
6: Hicks
7: Himmel, Homer, Johnson
8: Knobeloch, Lawrence
9: Leitch
10: Lobdell
11: Lucker, McDougall
12: Mahaffey, Mahler
13: Meyers
Traveling salesman contracts (cont’d.)

Folder 1: Millikin, Montville, Morrison
2: Power, Reed
3: Stevens, Timmons, Walsh, Wehner, Wessling

4. Foreign powers of attorney, 1890, 1920
   Includes United Kingdom, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay.

5: Fire Dept. permit, 1931
   New Brunswick Industries mortgage and bankruptcy, 1932

Series V: Tax records

Folder 6: 1921-1936

Series VI: Payroll Records

Folder 7: Utica Mutual payroll audits, Jan. 1923-July 1926

Payroll summaries

Folder 8: Jan. 1-June 28, 1938
9: June 29, 1938-Jan. 3, 1939
10: Jan. 4-June 27, 1939
11: June 26-Dec. 31, 1940
12: Jan. 1-June 24, 1941

Box 4

Payroll summaries (cont’d.)

Folder 1: June 25-Dec. 31, 1941
2: Jan. 7-June 30, 1942
3: July 1, 1942-Jan. 12, 1943
4: Jan. 13-June 22, 1943
5: June 30, 1943-Jan. 4, 1944
6: Jan. 5-June 27, 1944

Series VII: Miscellaneous financial records and correspondence

Folder 7: 1900-1926
8: 1928-1936
9: 1938-1940
10: 1941
11: 1942-1944
13: Birge Illinois annual reports, 1921-1933

Box 5

Series IX: Photographs and poster

Envelope
1: Birge plant with original office complex, 1920
2: Wallpaper designers (2 photos)
3: [Birge Christmas party], 1946
4: Trade show exhibit
5-6: Sample book illustrations, hand painted (3 photos)
7-23: Photographs of paper hangings, from 1904 pamphlet (33 photos)
24: Photographs of paper hangings, unidentified series (3 photos)
25: Leather paper used on the galleries of the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh
26: Dwight D. Eisenhower boyhood home, Abilene, Kansas, with Birge wallpaper restoration
27: Photographs of murals (9 photos)
28-31: Scenic wallpaper examples (not Birge), including Portsmouth, New Hampshire Athletic Club (7 photos)

Posters: Birge wall papers: the standard of quality, showing the process of machine printing. Works, Buffalo, N.Y., ca. 1930. Ca. 71 x 56 cm. : color.

Historical wallcoverings – established in 1834, undated. 51 x 38 cm.

Sample of Birge wallpaper, embossed Art Nouveau design in maroon. Exhibited in Esenwein & Johnson exhibit, 2006 (Oversize Drawer C77-2 manuscript room).

Series VIII: Bound volumes [spine labels given in brackets]

Subseries A: London office cashbooks
1. Dec. 1915-Mar. 1921
2. Apr. 1921-July 1925
3. Aug. 1925-Sept. 1928

Subseries B: Trial balance books
1. July 1933-June 1936
2. July 1936-June 1939

Subseries C: Agents’ sales books [volume date on spine]
1. 1913
2. 1914
3. 1916
4. 1917
5. 1918
6. 1919

Subseries D: Ledgers
1. 1910-1912 [3]
2. 1914-1918 [4]
3. 1926-1933
Subseries E: Journals

Subseries F: Cash expenditure books

Subseries G: General cashbooks
5. Sept. 1922-Aug. 1924 [8]

Subseries H. Closed accounts payable
1. 1900-1922

Subseries I: Salesmen’s accounts book
1. (alphabetical order)

Subseries J: Inventory books
1. Aug. 1900-June 1908
2. July 1908-May 1920

Subseries K: Scrapbooks
1. 1922-1925
   Includes newspaper articles, advertisements, wallpaper history, and press releases.
2. 1932-1935
   Includes trade journal advertisements, newspaper articles, and advertisements, wallpaper samples,
   brochures, and photographs of showrooms, murals, stores selling Birge wallpaper (not local), and national
   home show.

Subseries L: Reproduction d’étoffes orientales tissées en imprimés.

Subseries M: Tag books
1. Sample/account book, 1887-1888
   Includes hand-painted swatches on pages labeled “Block a/c”, “Hangings”, “Borders”, “Extension & corners”,
   and “Hand”.
2. Tag book #20, 1920
   Lists companies next to swatches; includes swatch #5232-7270, and another set of swatch numbers, in no
   apparent order.
3. Birge colonial papers, undated
   Includes swatch #8312-8766.
4. Birge colonial papers, undated
   Includes swatch #8766-9106.

5. Authentic colonial wallpapers by Birge, undated
   Full-page samples with historic description, price, and pattern number.

6. Hand-made 22-inch hangings, undated

7. The Birge book, ca. 1918-1919
   Full-page reproduction leather samples.

8. Book of full-page reproduction leather hangings, undated

9. Book of full-page reproduction leather hangings, undated

10. Book of full-page reproduction leather hangings, undated

11. Book of full-page reproduction leather hangings, undated

**Subseries N: Pattern illustration books**


2. Same as above, ca. 1906. Stamped on cover: “George K. Birge”.

Patricia M. Virgil
1998