

**Letters of W. J. McGee to Elmer Gates
and to H. S. Owen concerning Elmer Gates**

(from the Letter Books of W. J. McGee
at the Smithsonian Institution's
National Anthropological Archives)

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of Ethnology
Washington, D.C.
December 15, 1894

My dear Sir:

Will you allow me to break in on your retirement for research purposes long enough, first, to inquire after your health and that of Mrs. Gates, and, second, to ask whether you desire to have your name presented formally as either resident or non-resident member of the Cosmos Club? I have recently returned from a somewhat protracted trip among the southwestern Indians and have been somewhat disappointed not to find you here. By the way, if you see Mr. Hovenden (in whose care this i[s] addressed) and can bear it in mind, please convey my regards as well as regrets that I was absent from the city when he was last here. Trusting that your work is progressing satisfactorily and that health and happiness attend you and yours, I remain

Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
Care of Thomas Hovenden, Esq.,
Plymouth Meeting, Montgomery Co., Pa.

images 002-004

Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington, D.C.
January 8, 1895

My dear Sir:

Yours of the 31st ultimo is just at hand. The letter to which it is a reply [aroused] yours of the 17th ultimo, and I, perhaps unwisely awaited a reply to the specific inquiry before responding to the most welcome earlier communication. I am now in a position to (speak) definitely concerning the club matter and appreciate the wisdom of your opinion that it would be best to defer action, at least for a few weeks.

It is a pleasure to learn from your previous letter, of the continuation and considerable . . . of your work on the mind art. It is needless for me to repeat expressions in appreciation of this subject and the studies pertaining thereto, especially your own—it still seems to me that the subject is the most important among the many subjects which have engaged attention during recent decades, if not during the history of civilization. If any repetition here needed it would perhaps best made through sending the manuscript (to this) address . . . shortly after your departure from the city. This manuscript I should send with pleasure today, did I not feel that the reading thereof would be a tax on your time; but (such) is my apprehension on this score that I shall not send unless you especially desire. The address was characterized as a lay sermon, its title being “The Gospel of Work”. But it is not needful for you to read that paper to understand that my interest in and appreciation [of] the work remains undiminished. I hope that the new year will in every way bring happiness to Mrs. Gates and yourself, and I am sure that the best way to this end is through the success of your researches.

Were you at hand I should probably scold you a little for isolating yourself and thereby turning a bushel over the light of your genius. I recognize the desirability and wisdom of isolation during the summer for a specific purpose, but am inclined to think that during winter months you should not cut off outside barbarians, even those of Philadelphia, from the benefit of the rays but of course at this distance I cannot advise but only suggest or perhaps only raise the inquiry.

The future of the Bureau of American Ethnology is too uncertain at this date to permit any definite prediction [;] within six weeks, or at the most two months, we shall know what the immediate future has in store and shall begin to predict. Meantime we can do no more than say it would, if it were practicable, to be a great pleasure to so enlarge our official family as to include you among its members.

By the way, in case I have anything to do with the Saturday lectures in the National Museum during the present season, would you like to run down and talk to us again?

With kindest regards to Mrs. Gates

I remain

Yours cordially,

W. J. McGee

Dr. ELMER GATES
c/o Mr. & Mrs. _ _ _
130 Juvenal Street
Philadelphia, Pa.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
April 15, 1895.

My dear Dr. Gates:

Your note is just at hand. I am pained though not surprised to learn of your illness; you will remember my apprehension when you were here. I trust you will give time and attention to recovery, leaving other matters to shape themselves as time goes on.

By the way, Dr. Joseph Jastrow, professor of psychology in the university of Wisconsin and an energetic worker, off duty through persistent nervous prostration and will probably be unable to resume his chair for a year, and I have taken it on myself to make a suggestion which may possibly inure to your benefit—as well as that of the university. Let me inquire also whether there is not to be a successor for Ryder, and whether you have thought of the possibility of taking the place. Should such an opportunity present itself, your friends in Washington may be able to promote your interests.

Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates
130 Juvenal Street
Philadelphia, Penna.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
April 19, 1895

My dear Sir:

Your letter of the 17th instant came duly to hand. It is a pleasure to know that you are recovering.

I have had under consideration for several hours the matter touched on therein and yet feel hardly competent to advise, especially with respect to future relations with Mr. Owen. I have all along been impressed with the apparent integrity of his motives and feel confident that your common disaster is chargeable only to a series of mistakes. On the whole I think you are right in proposing to let the affair of the motor stand as it is, at least until matters have more definitely shaped themselves. If possible, too, it will be best, I think to let the future relations with Mr. Owen be determined by future events.

As to the best mode of securing means for continuing experimentation, I find it exceedingly difficult to suggest; but it occurs to me that, if the laboratory is worth \$500 at forced sale, it might be mortgaged for a sufficient sum to carry you over your present straits, and even if it should become necessary finally to dispose of the stock, permit you to make a better sale than can be done at short notice. Perhaps you may have thought of this plan already; I do not remember that it has been suggested.

Greatly regretting my inability to give you more useful guidance at this distance, I remain

Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. ELMER GATES
130 Juvenal Street
Philadelphia, Pa.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
May 6, 1895

My dear Dr. Gates:

Yours of the 4th is just at hand, and it affords me exceeding gratification to know that your affairs are in satisfactory condition. So far as I can judge, your outlook is better than at any time hitherto. It will be a pleasure to see you whenever you find it convenient and agreeable to visit Washington; and it will then be possible to discuss the situation in detail—if occasion for discussion remains.

You own me nothing. I made a small investment in the motor by reason of interest in the principles involved, but never with the idea of return except perhaps from the motor itself; and that I understand is out of your hands.

Congratulating you warmly on your success,
I remain
Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. ELMER GATES
130 Juvenal Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
July 20, 1895.

My dear Sir:

Stimulated by reminder from Mr. Owen, my memory has awakened sufficiently to recall the fact that a definite contract was made between us last January; on looking the matter up, I find that you were quite right as to the understanding at the time the contract was entered into. In order to set the question at rest, I have had the contract transcribed and send you a copy herein. It is, I assure you, a great pleasure to ascertain that you were right with respect to the transaction.

Believe me to remain, with best wishes,
Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
130 Juvenal Street,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
July 20, 1895.

Dear Mr. Owen:

Your note of the 19th instant, and your card as well, are at hand. Oddly enough I had forgotten all about the formal contract signed by Dr. Gates until your note came in. I have now looked it up and learn from it that his understanding of the transaction is correct. For his advice, I have sent a copy of the paper to him; and, assuming that it may be convenient for reference by you from time to time, I send another transcription herein.

It is very good of you to withhold claim for the amount sent to me; but if it should become necessary for you to take up the other notes, or if it is for any other reason desirable, I shall take pleasure in conveying the amount of this payment to you, at least pending final settlement.

With regards to Mrs. Owen, I remain
Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

H. S. Owen, Esq.,
New London, Connecticut.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
September 14, 1895.

Dear Dr. Gates:

There is a physiologic object lesson in town; his stage name is "Unthan, the Armless Wonder", his civil name is C. H. Unthan, and he will be at the Bijou Theater, Wilmington, during the first half of next week, in Philadelphia during the later part of the week. He is practically armless (from birth), and uses his feet for all purposes, with remarkable readiness; he is a skillful violinist and cornetist, a fine marksman, a good penman, etc. Naturally he presents many anomalies of development which are of interest to the intelligent physiologist; I was particularly interested in the question as to corresponding modifications in cerebral development, as manifested in the form of the cranium, but reached no conclusion of any consequence. He is a man of intelligence, though somewhat pronounced individuality; his early training was along the lines pursued by his father toward a German university professorship, but a desire for lucre drew him in other directions; he was a schoolfellow of Hans Virchow, a neighbor of Sandow, and has been studied to some extent by the older Virchow (Rudolf), Dubois-Reymond, and others. All this is to enable you to decide whether you want to see him in Philadelphia. If so, if you drop him a line at the Bijou Theater in Wilmington within a day or two, he will devote an afternoon to you.

Believe me to remain, with kindest regards to Mrs. Gates as well as yourself,

Yours cordially,

W.J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
319 Locust Avenue,
Germantown, Pennsylvania.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
September 25, 1895.

My dear Dr. Gates:

Returning from Atlanta, whither I went immediately after writing you, I find your note of September 16. It is exceeding gratification to learn of the continued success of your researches—to know that the upward curve described by your career continues. By the way, let me add a remark about curves: There is no such thing, as you will, I think, agree, as uniform motion in nature; it follows not only that there are no straight motion lines in nature, but also that there are no motion circles in nature; it follows, hence, that the curvature of every curve is constantly changing, increasing or diminishing as may happen, but never uniform. Such departure from uniformity, moreover, is always cumulative. Now this is the point—if your curve is still upward, it is, or ought to be, accumulatively upward, and I warn you against permitting it to become decumulatively upward, for that is the portion of the curve approaching the point of deflection downward. But it is needless to pursue the discussion of curves, since everything in your note indicates that it is not only upward, but accumulatively so.

It is a satisfaction to learn of your facilities in the School of Industrial Arts. It is my judgment that, for several reasons, both objective and subjective, it will be well for you to continue researches in connection with inorganic materials, and especially such as have industrial applications. It is equally gratifying to know that means have been forthcoming for enabling you to regain control of your loom, yet I must confess to a shade of apprehension concerning this matter. That which is required to get your invention into use; and if the withdrawal from the business connection will delay or prevent this, it will, it seems to me, prove a misfortune, even if greater ultimate gain promises. This of course is a somewhat general feeling, which may have no good foundation; you, being acquainted with all of the facts, can form a better judgment than I.

Especially gratifying, too, is your intelligence concerning connection with Professor Cliff and the Normal School. Here you will have opportunities, not only for work in your own special line—that line which I still think will revolutionize education and lead to further intellectual progress in the next quarter century than in all the centuries before—but will enable you to plant the seeds of permanent reputation.

I shall be glad to confer with you, and hope it will be convenient for you to visit Washington at some early day; I should be glad to go to Philadelphia, save that various circumstances render it exceptionally difficult to do so. By the way, though, I spend Saturday night and Sunday forenoon next in Harrisburg, being tied there by bad train connections; if it were convenient for you to run over there Saturday evening, I should be exceedingly glad to have several hours with you, and you would find a good train back to Philadelphia between 1 and 2 o'clock Sunday afternoon.

Believe me to remain, as ever,
Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
319 Locust Avenue,
Germantown,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
October 19, 1895.

My dear Dr. Gates:

Your note was delivered to me last evening, and assuming that you might be desirous of going to press at once, I wired authority for printing the quotations specified. In this and other matters my convictions have the support of my stolidity—whether wholly right or partly erroneously they are sincere, and I know of no reason for concealing them when it is proper that they should be stated.

I am inclined to think that it might be better to limit yourself to a single quotation from each of your supporters, unless perhaps you will go further in the case of Ryder.

It gives me great satisfaction to know that you are progressing well in your connection with the School of Industrial Art. The institution is an admirable one, and will, I feel confident, give you such facilities as you require, and will no doubt profit in turn by your genius. I am glad to know, also, of the interest in your work expressed by Professor Cope. He is a brilliant man, somewhat disposed to destructive criticism, and his favorable criticism is, for that reason, of exceptional value.

By the way, Cushing returned to the city yesterday, and in response to my inquiry, expressed his great regret that he had failed to see you before leaving Philadelphia; he mentioned a pleasant meeting with Professor Miller on one of the occasions when he looked for you unsuccessfully, and agrees with me as to the fitness of your present situation. Although he has been greatly pressed with work (two publications have been withheld in proof in order that he might finish writing for them) his health continues to improve, and complete recovery seems to be in sight.

It would be an exceeding pleasure to attend your lecture, and I thank you for the invitation. Unhappily I am on the eve of departure for the deserts of Sonora, Mexico, and cannot spare the time—even if I am not already started before the date for the lecture.

Please convey my regards to Mrs. Gates, and believe me to remain, with the best of wishes,
Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
418 South Broad Street,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
February 18, 1898.

My dear Sir:

It is a pleasure to acknowledge receipt of your note of yesterday. I regret to say that the program of the Anthropological Society is full for a considerable part of the season, else it would be a pleasure to make provision for hearing Miss Munroe. I am sorry, too that I shall be out of town Saturday evening, and shall therefore be unable to accept Mrs. Blount's obliging invitation and avail myself of your courtesy. I hope to see her during the week, and also at an early day to call upon you at your laboratory with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell.

Yours cordially,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates
Chevy Chase
Maryland.

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Smithsonian Institution
Bureau of American Ethnology
Washington,
June 5, 1900.

My dear Dr. Gates:

Your note came to hand duly. I was already in receipt of a note from Dr. Spencer, intimating that a certain package of material would soon reach me by express, to be forwarded to you, and I had written him that it would be a pleasure to serve him. But, apparently through some misunderstanding, the material has not reached me. This note is merely to say that so soon as it comes to hand I shall at once advise you.

I trust that your enterprises are proceeding satisfactorily. It is a gratification now and then to happen on loose straws indicating the ways of your progress.

Believe me to remain
Cordially yours,
W. J. McGee

Dr. Elmer Gates,
Elmer Gates Laboratory,
Chevy Chase, Maryland