

...Alexander Stillman Bio



Alexander Stillman
(from The 1935 Harvard Freshman Red Book)



Stillman Family Crest

Editor's Note: *During the summer of 2009, student intern Helen Reinold helped clear trails here at Stillman. Since she was majoring in history and German at Augustana College, I asked her if she could take a look at the archives and work up a brief biography of Stillman. Her wonderful effort has earned her a new title, the nature center's historian. Please note that Helen used primary sources such as correspondence, military records, and personal documents. If awkward wording is found within quotations, that is the way "Aleck" wrote them.*

Who was Alexander Stillman? by Helen Reinold © 2011

Though the Stillman archives consist of only a handful of documents, they offer an intimate, if truncated, view of the life of Alexander Stillman. A legal document such as a birth certificate can offer basic useful facts, for example, that Stillman was born on September 29, 1911, in New York City, to James and Anne Stillman. But far more interesting are personal items, such as Stillman's passports.

Stillman obtained his first passport at the age of 26, just two years after graduating from Harvard University. He regularly renewed his passport, the last being issued just five months before his death in 1984. To say that Stillman was an avid traveler is an understatement; between 1937 and 1938 he traveled to France, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador. He took his next two passports, issued in 1966 and 1973, to Egypt, France, Hong Kong, Thailand, Cambodia, India, Denmark, and the Bahamas. It is possible to conjecture that Stillman enjoyed his travels to Asia the most, as he brought home many souvenirs to display in his home. Items such as Chinese eggs, painted wooden boxes, geisha dolls, jade figurines, and Chinese lamps appear in his list of possessions.

The notable gap between Stillman's 1937 passport and 1966 passport can be explained by his military service during World War II. He was a lieutenant commander in the United States Navy between 1942 and 1945, fighting mainly in Japan, and receiving many commendations and medals. Documents pertaining to his service praise Stillman's "devotion to duty in the face of antiaircraft fire", saying that his actions were "in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service". Stillman is credited many times with "contribut[ing] materially to the success of his squadron". Over the course of

three attacks in May and June of 1945, Stillman is credited with “the sinking of four enemy Merchant Vessels, two large Fishing Boats, and a Whale Killer. In addition he tracked an enemy cruiser and warded off attacks by an enemy plane.” After the war, Stillman continued his service in the retired reserves of the Ninth Naval District. Upon his death, Stillman was honored with a burial in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Stillman's later years were presumably spent quietly at his property on Penny Road. Though the bulk of any correspondence is lost, there are in the archives some letters between Stillman and his younger brother, Guy. Guy Stillman, a railroad enthusiast, moved to Paradise Valley, Arizona, where he donated the land that would later become the McCormick-Stillman Railroad Park. The brothers seem to have had a friendly relationship, often exchanging gifts of homegrown fruits and homemade marmalades and relishes. Though he is known to us as Alexander Stillman, he most often signed his letters with a simple “much love, Aleck”. Stillman also exchanged letters with his sister-in-law, Guy's wife, and in one such letter relates an interesting anecdote about his grandmother, the rather famous stage actress Cora Brown Potter. He writes, “ she had abandoned her only child in order to flee her very dull marriage to Grandfather, going to London to pursue her career as an actress... the Toast of London, being so it was inevitable that she should meet the Prince of Wales. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, had very little to do except change his clothes four times a day, overeat and drink, of which he died of, and court the most beautiful women of his day. Inevitably Grandmother became his mistress of a long line, but she was one of the last three and to whom he was longest faithful.”

In 1977, seven years before he died, Stillman was recognized for his advocacy of the environment, receiving a Certificate of Life Membership from the National Audubon Society. This award acknowledged his efforts in “promoting the conservation of wildlife and the natural environment, and educating man in regard to his relationship with, and his place within, the natural environment as an ecological system.” Stillman’s reasons for donating his land are probably best summarized in his own words, found in one of his letters: “You do not know how those... acres over the years have protected the birds and the land from vandals. The more we cut into the provenance of the birds, the less free they will be.”

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