

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS FINDING AID

Title: MS 435 Alexander Robey Shepherd Collection, 1869-1942

Processor: Brett Keener

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Alexander Robey Shepherd (“Boss”) was born January 31, 1835 in Southwest Washington. After dropping out of school at age 13, Shepherd eventually found work at a plumbing firm when he was 17. Shepherd moved up the company ladder until he eventually became the owner. On the heels of his accomplishments in the plumbing business, Shepherd turned to real estate. His success in that field led to wealth and influential standing in Washington society.

When the District of Columbia turned to territorial government in 1871, Boss Shepherd was there to use his influence to land a spot in the new governing body. His first appointment was to the Board of Public Works, where he saw massive infrastructure improvements to the city. Shepherd was made territorial governor in 1873, where he continued his huge beautification and modernization projects. In the two years that Shepherd served as governor, streets were paved, sewers were laid, the fetid and stagnant Washington Canal was filled in, and tens of thousands of trees were planted in the city.

Boss Shepherd’s improvements brought Washington into the modern age, but also set the city back. Washington was driven into bankruptcy by the enormous costs of Shepherd’s improvements, and it was his lavish spending, cronyism, and corruption that led to his downfall. The territorial government was abolished, and Shepherd was dismissed in 1874. He declared bankruptcy two years later, and moved his family to Batopilas, Mexico in 1880 to enter the silver mining business. Shepherd’s mines produced 20 million ounces of silver during the next twenty years, and Shepherd made many of the same improvements in Batopilas that he made in Washington. Boss Shepherd died in May 1902 and was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery.

Scope and Content: The Alexander Robey Shepherd Collection, 1869-1942 contains various public and personal documents relating to Boss Shepherd. The collection includes: newspaper articles concerning various residences of Shepherd, 1916-1942, and his post-gubernatorial life 1886-1929; financial, advertising, and personal documents from Boss Shepherd’s time in Mexico, 1892-1905; the certificate of appointment from President Grant naming Shepherd as governor of the District of Columbia, signed December 23, 1873; a letter to the Secretary of the Interior from Shepherd informing the Secretary of Shepherd’s appointment, December 27, 1873; and a scrapbook of the Shepherd family’s personal effects and newspaper clippings.

Donors: Joel D. Sweimer, W.M. Kiplinger, unknown sources

Size: 1 Container

Restrictions: none

Container 1

Folder 1: Newspaper articles concerning various Shepherd residences in the city, 1916-1942. Photocopy of title page and “Bleak House” of Stratford’s Shakespeare (1886) owned by Boss Shepherd.

Folder 2: Various Washington, New York, and Mexican newspaper articles concerning Shepherd’s post-governor life, 1886-1929. Events include Shepherd’s Mexican mining operation, his triumphant return to Washington in 1887, and his funeral and burial in Washington. Also copies of telegrams sent to Mrs. Shepherd in Mexico relaying scores of Sewanee (sic) – Vanderbilt football games.

Folder 3: Financial, advertising, and personal documents from Boss Shepherd’s time in Mexico, 1892-1905; includes letter from Porfirio Diaz, original telegrams to Mrs. Shepherd, Batopilas Mining Company money, advertising, and Stock Certificate from the Capuzaya Mining Company. Folder also includes a page from Shepherd’s 1893 diary.

Folder 4: Appointment from President Grant naming Shepherd as governor of the District of Columbia, signed December 23, 1873.

Letter to Secretary of Interior from Shepherd informing the Secretary of Shepherd’s appointment, December 27, 1873.

Folder 5: Scrapbook of Shepherd family personal effects and newspaper clippings. Invites from the Shepherds to functions at their 10th Street and Connecticut Avenue homes, 1869-1874; article of sale of Bleak House, social articles on Shepherd family deaths, marriages.