

ArMs 1988.001  
6 Boxes: 4 legal-sized document  
boxes and 2 OS boxes  
(3.6 cubic ft.)  
4C: 4.1.D

Shellens Family Collection  
including  
Papers of Captain Michael Shellens  
1873-1984  
(Bulk dates: 1880-1927)

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**Note: processing note in folder not to be given to researchers./MHP/Jan.07**

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## Introduction

This collection contains personal and business correspondence, business and financial records, books, photographs, and ephemera related to Captain Michael Shellens (1854-1944) and his family. The materials are dated 1873-1984 and are principally about Shellens' life and career as a mariner who advanced in rank to captain, afterward becoming a successful real estate businessman in Brooklyn. The family materials were left upon his death to Ruth Shellens, a daughter of Captain Shellens, and upon her death in 1987 The Brooklyn Historical Society was selected to receive the collection via the agency of her attorneys, Lankenau Kovner & Bickford. Jane Gregory Rubin was the attorney of record, and the donation was accompanied by a gift of \$350,000 for the naming of a gallery after Capt. Shellens, which ensued during the term of David M. Kahn as Executive Director of Brooklyn Historical Society, 1986-1996.

## Biographical Note

Michael Shellens was born in Belgium in 1854 and moved to the United States at a young age, becoming a ship's cabin boy in his teen years.<sup>1</sup> He developed a close relationship with Captain George Wilson while working for him as a cabin boy on the *Castine*, and from that beginning Shellens became a steward for two voyages, one from April 1, 1872 to July 3, 1873 to Calcutta via Boston and New Orleans, and the second, from July 14, 1873 to February 3, 1875, to England and the East Indies.

Shellens joined Captain Wilson in 1877 as the third mate of the *Daniel I Tenney* and made two consecutive voyages to Calcutta, and a later voyage to Manila. He transferred to the *Susan Gilmore* in late 1877 upon being promoted to second mate, and traveled from November 8, 1877 to October 15, 1878. Upon his return in 1878, Shellens became naturalized in Portland, Maine as a citizen of the United States.

Shellens joined Captain Wilson on the *Daniel I Tenney* in 1880 and made two more voyages: one to Calcutta from May 16, 1880 to June 19, 1881, and another to Manila between August 21, 1881 and November 1, 1882, then joined the *Lizzie H* on November 6, 1882 as first mate. He joined the *Agenor* in August 1887 and became its captain in 1892. Shellens made a number of voyages aboard the *Agenor*, including trips to San Francisco, Hong Kong, England, and Australia.

The *Agenor* collided on June 1, 1895 with an Italian ship, the *Giovanni*, off Cape San Antonio in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>2</sup> The *Giovanni* sank but all of its crew survived, and Captain Shellens, to considerable acclaim, rescued and fed the Italian crew, and dropped the men off in Gibraltar. Shellens on the *Agenor* raced the *Lucille* from New York to the port of Melbourne in 1897, and won. He made his last voyage to Hong Kong and retired from the *Agenor* in 1898.

Shellens married Ella Mabel Collamore in Brooklyn in 1899 and lived with her at 291 24<sup>th</sup> Street, Sunset Park in Brooklyn. He moved in 1899 to 342 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn upon the birth of his first child. He and his wife had four children: the first, Marie, born in November, 1899, died at the age of eleven months. The second, Marshall, was born in 1903, the third, Ruth, in 1905, and the fourth, Hazel, in 1909. He became active in various social and professional organizations, including the Royal Arch Masons, Masons of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and the Marine Society of New York.

Shellens made several unsuccessful attempts to find suitable opportunities in seafaring from 1899 through 1902, due reportedly to his lack of experience with steamer vessels. He then became a marine surveyor and at the same time began to acquire property in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. His real

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<sup>1</sup> See The Maritime Career of Captain Michael Shellens, unpublished article by David Demeritt, housed with the finding aid and in the Library vertical files. Various dates are claimed for the initiation of Shellens' maritime experience.

<sup>2</sup> Cape San Antonio/Cabo San Antonio is on the coast of Mediterranean Spain between the cities of Valencia and Alicante, opposite Ibiza and the Mallorcas.

estate venture became notably successful and in 1905 he bought a block of twenty-five lots in Bay Ridge, from whence his substantial estate derived.

. Shellens died on April 22, 1944, just a month after the death of his wife, and he left his personal and business papers to his daughter Ruth Shellens along with his property at 371 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, Bay Ridge, where she resided until her death in 1986. Ruth Shellens's will left instructions to her attorney to donate Shellens's belongings, memorabilia, and a sizable financial gift to a suitable repository, and the Brooklyn Historical Society was selected. The \$350,000 gift in 1987-88 funded the recovery of the Society's space at street level and, renovated as a gallery, was named "the Shellens Gallery."

### **Scope and Content**

The Shellens collection consists of business and financial records, correspondence, books, newspaper clippings, and ephemera assembled during the course of business in Captain Shellens's sailing and real estate career. It also consists of the Shellens family's personal materials, including correspondence, employment letters, certificates, property ownership papers, and professional and social affiliation materials.

The bulk of the collection dates from 1880 to 1927 and consists of family papers, chiefly those of Captain Shellens, with some from others of the immediate family and also from Shellens's family in Antwerp. The materials collected from voyages consist of discharge papers received at destination ports, business and financial records, and correspondence compiled during Shellens' various sailing trips. The Far East materials include accounts and service agreements, calculation and log books, and bills from *Agenor* trips. The *Agenor* was lost off the coast of Japan in 1906 under another captain.

Shellens's business records comprise an assortment of materials relating to Shellens' sailing and real estate career, including inventory of properties of interest to Shellens, professional certifications, survey reports from Shellens' career as a Surveyor, and log books. Financial records include bank accounts, ledger books, and real estate transactions. Correspondence contains both business and personal materials, including employment applications, letters received and written to colleagues, tenants, and family members. Personal correspondence includes letters between Captain Shellens and his daughter Ruth from her childhood to womanhood. Personal correspondence also includes letters from Captain Wilson and other colleagues.

Materials relating to the Shellens family include correspondence between Shellens and his brother, M. Henry Shellens, and his Antwerp cousins, 1890-1940. The letters, written in English, refer to their well being, requests for funds and letters of gratitude, Shellens's mother's death, and Shellens's ill health in the 1940's. Other family papers include materials related to Shellens's wedding to Ella Collamore and her correspondence, including a condolence note from Captain Wilson's wife after the death of their first child, Marie. Also included are obituaries of family members and materials relating to Shellens' and his wife's deaths such as funeral memoirs, legal and financial documents including wills, bank balances, an inventory of Shellens's real estate holdings, certificates and birth records for Ruth Shellens.

The last portion of the collection consists of books on sailing and ships and on religion. Two books belonged to other family members: a book of Melbourne views belonged to Ella Shellens, and a Masonic Lodge Bible belonged to Marshall Shellens.

Note from MHP, Jan. 2007: The materials were arranged by the student processor in rough subject order: "financial records," "business records," "correspondence," and "personal papers," roughly chronological within those subjects. Oversized boxes five and six contain oversized materials and rolled certificates. Note that I added a code to the folder titles keyed to the principal subject of the folder; S=Sailing career; RE = Real Estate; M = Mixed materials; FP = Family and personal materials. See "processing note" in FA file for further edits and suggestions for re-folding the collection.

## Container List

| <u>Box</u> | <u>Folder</u> | <u>Title</u>   | <u>Dates</u> |
|------------|---------------|--|--------------|
| 1          | 1 S           | Michael Shellens: Voyages-Certificates of discharge  | 1873-1891    |
|            | 2 S           | Michael Shellens: Far East trip- Account logs, service agreements  | 1897-1898    |
|            | 3 S           | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Cashbook, Portland, Maine   | 1890         |
|            | 4 S           | Michael Shellens: Financial records-Portland, Maine  | 1890         |
|            | 5 S           | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Ledger book   | 1890         |
|            | 6 M           | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Bank account book   | 1895-1901    |
|            | 7 M           | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Drafts, check receipts, statements                                      | 1892-1941    |
|            | 8 RE          | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Accounts, lot survey  | 1905-1941    |
|            | 9 M           | Michael Shellens: Financial records- Agenor log book & RE accounts   | 1893-1944    |
|            | 10 S          | Michael Shellens: Agenor book of longitude   | 1898         |
| 6          | 11 S          | Michael Shellens: Business records- Framed certificate, Master Inspector License                             | 1899         |
| 1          | 12 S          | Michael Shellens: Business records- Sailor's Snug Harbor Rules & Report                                      | 1900         |
|            | 13 RE         | Michael Shellens: Business records- Real estate survey reports   | 1900-1902    |
| 5          | 14 S          | Michael Shellens: Business records- T. O.LeRoy & Co's property inventory book- descriptions and maps         | 1859         |
| 1          | 15 M          | Michael Shellens: Business/Financial records- Book of accounts, logs of travel, and real estate transactions | 1893-1944    |
| 2          | 16 S          | Michael Shellens: Correspondence- Copy book  | 1893-1901    |
|            | 17 RE         | Michael Shellens: Correspondence- Recommending letters for employment  | 1898-1901    |
|            | 18 S          | Michael Shellens: Agenor trips- Correspondence, business   | 1895-1898    |
|            | 19 S          | Michael Shellens: Agenor trips- Correspondence, personal   | 1895-1899    |
| 5          | 20 M          | Michael Shellens: Correspondence- Letter book, real estate   | 1900-1912    |
| 2          | 21 FP         | Michael Shellens: Correspondence- letters related to accident, greeting cards                                | 1916-1940    |
|            | 22 FP         | Michael Shellens: Personal papers- Citizenship papers  | 1878         |
| 6          | 23 FP         | Michael Shellens: Associations- Grand Lodge of Scotland- Master Masonic Certificate                          | 1878         |
| 2          | 24 FP         | Michael Shellens: Associations- Royal Arch Masons, Portland Lodge- Certificates, correspondence, by-laws     | 1884-1907    |
| 6          | 25 FP         | Michael Shellens: Associations- Royal Arch Masons- Framed Master Mason certificate                           | 1890         |
|            | 26 FP         | Michael Shellens: Associations- Framed certificate of membership in New York Marine Society                  | 1912         |

| <u>Box</u> | <u>Folder</u> | <u>Title</u>  | <u>Dates</u>   |
|------------|---------------|---|----------------|
| 2          | 27 S          | Michael Shellens: Associations- Correspondence, meeting programs, Marine Society of New York  | 1912-1944      |
|            | 28 S          | Michael Shellens: Events- Accident in Mediterranean, race and assault   | 1895-1937      |
|            | 29 FP         | Michael Shellens: German Marks (currency)   | 1920           |
|            | 30 FP         | Michael Shellens: Autograph book, Portland, Maine   | 1887-1890      |
|            | 31 FP         | Michael Shellens: Ephemera- Cards, business cards, newspaper clippings, and brochures   | 1938 & Undated |
|            | 32 FP         | Michael Shellens: Newspaper clippings   | 1941-1943      |
|            | 33 FP         | Shellens Family: Baptism records and genealogy  | 1899-1908      |
| 3          | 34 FP         | Shellens Family: Antwerp Family- Correspondence, invitations in German, tourism guide to Antwerp  | 1918-1940      |
|            | 35 FP         | Marriage to Ella Mabel Collamore  | 1899-1902      |
|            | 36 FP         | Ruth Shellens: Certificates: Birth, and Registered Nurse Licenses   | 1909-1928      |
| 5          | 37 FP         | Ruth Shellens: Bay Ridge High School Diploma (rolled up)  | 1924           |
|            | 38 FP         | Ruth Shellens: Certificates: M.E. Hospital, Nursing School (rolled up)  | 1927           |
| 3          | 39 FP         | Ruth Shellens: Yearbooks (Methodist Hospital Nursing School)  | 1925-1927      |
|            | 40 FP         | Ruth Shellens: Correspondence- Personal, recommendation letters, Marine Research Society  | 1925-1947      |
|            | 41. FP        | Ruth Shellens: Ephemera- Bills, receipts, accident claim, mortgage and insurance correspondence, sports programs  | 1939-1944      |
|            | 42 FP         | Marshall Shellens: Certificates, Navy discharge, birth certificate, ID  | 1925-1984      |
|            | 43 FP         | Deaths: Michael and Ella Shellens- will, funeral memorabilia, obituaries  | 1944-1948      |
| 4          | 44 FP         | Religious book in Flemish (prayer book, no date)  |                |
|            | 45 FP         | Hotton & Doyle insurance rate book  |                |
|            | 46 FP         | Book of Common Prayer (Church of England, 1867)   |                |
|            | 47 FP         | Holy Bible (King James version) imprinted "Michael Shellens, 1880" given to him at Newburyport, Massachusetts when he was attached to the <i>Daniel I. Tenney</i> , c. 1877.  |                |
|            | 48 S          | Sailing and Ship Books: Rosser, W.H., <i>Short Notes and Sailing Directions, North Atlantic; The Requisite Nautical Assistant; Comer's Manual of Instructions in Practical Navigation</i> ; McKay, Richard Cornelius, <i>Donald McKay and the Ships that He Built; Rules for Building and Classing Wooden Vessels</i> |                |
|            | 49 FP         | Suggestions in Punctuation and Capitalization   |                |
|            | 50 FP         | The Traveler's Guide  |                |
|            | 51. FP        | The Album of Melbourne Views  |                |
|            | 51. FP        | Bible, Masonic Edition  |                |

Processing Note – not to be included with finding aid for public use.

The original collection was housed, and still is housed, in six boxes (four half cubic feet boxes and two 0.8 cubic feet oversized boxes) with changes to the organization of the materials by the student processor. The collection was originally divided into Captain Shellens's seafaring career, his correspondence, financial records, and miscellaneous. The collection included Shellens's real estate materials and his family, including wife Ella, daughter Ruth, and son Marshall. Also included are materials relating to the Antwerp family, family baptism records, and materials on Shellens's and his wife's deaths. The boxes had no particular order and materials related to Shellens's seafaring career were unevenly spread across the collection. Unrelated materials were collated together and marked miscellaneous. Yearbooks, autograph books, and books were mixed as well.

Clippings on a sea race between the *Agenor* and the *Lucille* and the accident between the *Agenor* and the *Giovanni* in the Mediterranean Sea were removed from their original folders and housed in a new folder titled 'Events.' Original order has been maintained in organizing materials relating to Shellens's Far East trips and Shellens' social and professional associations. The folders were arranged first by form and genre, and then in chronological order. These folders have been re-titled to indicate their contents in details for ease of access.

Materials were sorted according to the individual and subdivided by form and genre.

Photographs of the Shellens family were added to the extant Shellens images.

Note from MHP, Jan. 2007: text and memo were severely edited, file folders were coded and some folder titles amended. The two "series" were eliminated. The collection will remain as it is for the present but the arrangement is abstruse, the processor was overly cautious about what she termed "original order," and the folder titles are too long. I suggest that the materials be sorted according to Capt. Shellens's maritime records in chronological order, real estate records in chronological order, and personal papers of him and his family members, also in chronological order. This finding aid is not to be marked up for EAD but an AMC record can be created.

### **Access Points**

#### **Personal names:**

Shellens, Michael  
Shellens, Ruth  
Shellens, Marshall  
Shellens, Hazel

#### **Topical subjects:**

Real estate  
Sailing

#### **Formats/genres:**

Correspondence  
Business records  
Books  
Clippings

#### **Geographic subjects:**

Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)  
Antwerp (Belgium)