

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)

Brooklyn Historical Society  
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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.

## 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

<b><u>Box</u></b>	<b><u>Folder</u></b>	<b><u>Title</u></b>	<b><u>Dates</u></b>
6	26 FP	Michael Shellens: Associations- Framed certificate of membership in New York Marine Society	1912
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	

**Box**    **Folder**   **Title**

**Dates**

4        51. FP   Bible, Masonic Edition

**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)