

# Geological Specimens Collected by the First Ohio Geological Survey, 1837–1838

by Mark E. Wolfe

*January 31, 2012*—The Geological Survey of Ohio was first authorized by the Ohio legislature on March 27, 1837. William Williams Mather was appointed principal geologist and along with five assistant geologists, the survey was to be funded at \$12,000 annually for four years. The Mather survey conducted field work in 1837 and 1838, publishing results in two annual reports. Legislative funding was discontinued after the Second Annual Report in 1838, except for \$300 to catalog the mineral specimens. The financial panic of 1837, state budget deficits due to the construction of the Ohio & Erie Canal, and a general disillusionment with the initial results of the geologic investigations are considered the major reasons that additional funding for the geological survey was not appropriated (Hansen and Collins, 1979). It would be 31 years before a geological survey in Ohio was reestablished.



William W. Mather, a native of Connecticut and West Point graduate, was appointed Principal Geologist of the first Geological Survey of Ohio. Mather worked as a geologist with the New York Geological Survey at the time of his appointment.

The catalog of geological specimens collected during the first Ohio Geological Survey was published three years after the Survey disbanded (Mather, 1842). The 1842 catalog contains more than 750 descriptions of rock, mineral, and fossil samples, with most being meticulously hand labeled by Mather. Seven suites of specimens were to be distributed to Ohio colleges in existence in 1842. One suite was to be stored in the geological rooms of the “old courthouse” (Mather, 1842), while one suite was to be displayed in State cabinets with glazed fronts.

The fate of these historic geologic specimens, collected on horseback from throughout Ohio, is obscured by the passage of time. Internal documents are not available from the Ohio Geological Survey prior to the 1920s and the personal papers of Mather have not yet been discovered (Hansen and Collins, 1979). There is no definitive evidence that the geologic specimens were displayed in a State cabinet; this portion of the collection was likely destroyed when the original Statehouse in Columbus burned in 1857 and was later demolished. Limited state resources may have adversely affected distribution of the duplicate suites of specimens to Ohio colleges and the subsequent archiving/preservation. The Ohio Historical Society, Miami University, Ohio University, Kenyon College, and Denison University have no records concerning the geological specimens from the first Ohio Geological Survey. It was feared that all traces of the samples had disappeared over the more than 170 years since the specimens were collected from the outcrop. Fortunately, the geology

staff at Marietta College has “rediscovered” a portion of the original suite of specimens from the Mather survey.


In 2000, Wendy Bartlett, geology instructor at Marietta College, was organizing the extensive collection of geologic specimens housed on campus. Ms. Bartlett, who graduated from Marietta College with a degree in History and a keen eye for historical objects, was fascinated by an old, wooden shipping crate. When the box

was opened, carefully wrapped geologic specimens were found along with a note dated 1934 from Ralph W. Whipple, stating that the 169 specimens were part of the suite of samples collected by the Mather survey. An original library card with a date of February 25, 1842, was enclosed that referenced [Ohio] House Document No. 76 (see **References** below) and Marietta College Stimpson Collection 557.71, Book 037MA, 12347; the card had an additional note that “Mather undoubtedly numbered the specimens in pencil.” The list of specimens with sample numbers (where available) was retyped on May 14, 1953, when the document states that several specimens were used in the Ohio Sesquicentennial Mather Exhibit. It has not yet been verified if a Mather Exhibit was part of the Ohio Sesquicentennial celebration. Ms. Bartlett retyped the list on December 8, 2000, while archiving the specimens.

On February 17, 2011, Survey geologist Mark E. Wolfe examined the geologic specimens, accompanied by Wendy Bartlett, Veronica Freeman, and David Jeffrey from Marietta College. The well-preserved specimens were mostly individually wrapped in paper with corresponding paper labels; a few of the labels seemed to be hand-written originals. The wooden shipping crate was very old, but it could not be determined if it was original to 1842. A cursory comparison of the sample descriptions and label numbers to those contained in the 1842 catalog verified that at least 18 of the specimens were from the Mather survey. It is possible that a number of the specimens thought to be from the first Ohio Geological Survey may be specimens collected by other Ohio geologists working in the early 1800s, such as Dr. S. P. Hildreth or E. B. Andrews. Marietta College is to be commended for its high regard for the history of geological research in Ohio.

If you have information regarding the original specimens collected during the first Ohio Geological Survey or W. W. Mather’s personal papers, please [contact the Ohio Geological Survey](#).

## References

Hansen, M.C., 1987,  [William Williams Mather](#): *Ohio Geology*, Winter 1987, p. 4–5. [2.4 MB PDF]

Hansen, M.C., and Collins, H.R., 1979,  [A brief history of the Ohio Geological Survey](#): *Ohio Journal of Science*, v. 79, no. 1, p. 3–14. [2.5 MB PDF]

Mather, W.W., 1842, Catalog of the geological specimens collected on the late survey of the State of Ohio: Ohio House Document No. 76, 7 p., 11 tables. [View the catalog at Internet Archive here](#).