Multitudes: A Celebration of the Yale Collection of American Literature, 1911–2011
On view at Beinecke Library, Yale University, July 8 through October 1, 2011

Checklist and Descriptions: Owen Franklin Aldis, Founder of the Yale Collection of American Literature

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Owen Franklin Aldis, Founder of the Yale Collection of American Literature Yale Collection of American Literature founder, Owen Franklin Aldis Y1874, made his mark as a Chicago real estate developer; Aldis was responsible for some of that city’s most recognizable skyscrapers, including the Montauk, Monadnock, and Pontiac Buildings. Aldis began collecting books around 1890, acquiring primarily American first editions and aiming to include in each volume a letter from the author referring to the specific title. In 1911 Aldis donated his outstanding collection to the Yale University Library, where it has since been maintained as a separate entity with its own curators. In the hope that other Yale alumni might donate their collections of American books, Aldis insisted the collection not bear his name. Thus, his gift became the Yale Collection of American Literature.

Photograph of Owen Franklin Aldis, 1874. Courtesy of the Yale University Manuscripts and Archives Collection.

Books donated to the Yale Library by Owen Franklin Aldis.

Bookseller receipt from the Owen Franklin Aldis papers, including first editions of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, Hawthorne’s Twice Told Tales, and many other distinguished titles.

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Louisa May Alcott, letter to Mr. Niles concerning Little Women [1868], and a list of character names, undated. Gifts of Owen Franklin Aldis.

In this letter, likely written to her publisher in 1868, Alcott discusses the title and shape of her most famous book: “I think ‘Little Women,’ had better be the title for No 1, ‘Young Women,’ or something of that sort, for No 2, if there is a No 2. // Twenty chapters are all that I planned to have and there are but eight more. I don’t see how it can be spun out to make twenty four chapters….”