The Frank C. Armstrong Papers consist of both the business and personal papers of Frank Armstrong who worked as a salesman, traveling field representative, and branch manager for the Electric Vehicle Co. during that company’s most ambitious and prosperous period. The Electric Vehicle Company, an early and unsuccessful attempt to establish a monopoly in the automobile industry, planned to operate electric taxicabs in all the principle cities of the United States. While some 2,000 electric cabs were built in the first large-scale production operation in the American automobile industry, electric cabs proved impractical and awkward, and saw only brief service in a few east coast cities. This fact, together with questionable corporate financing, earned the Electric Vehicle Company the nickname “Lead Cab Trust.” Although the company continued to manufacture both electric and gasoline powered automobiles for several years, its income would rely more heavily on royalties received from acquisition of the rights to George B. Selden’s patent for an internal combustion engine. The Electric Vehicle Co. was ultimately absorbed by United States Motor in 1910. United States Motor ultimately absorbed the Electric Vehicle Co. in 1910.

Frank C. Armstrong worked for the Electric Vehicle Co. in various capacities from 1900 to 1906, playing a significant role in carrying out company plans to establish new markets for its products and services. Armstrong was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Prior to his involvement in the automotive industry, he worked for the Hard Wood Lumber Company in Elizabeth. In 1898, Armstrong was commissioned as a Naval Cadet and was assigned to the U.S.S. Supply during the Spanish-American War where he served as a signal officer and relief watch officer.

By 1900, Armstrong was employed by the Electric Vehicle Co. One of his early assignments involved the establishment of electric cab service in various New Jersey communities including Atlantic City, Allenhurst and Lakewood. He pursued contracts with several
hotels and made arrangements for renting buildings to house taxicab service stations.

In 1901-02, Armstrong traveled throughout the United States seeking individuals and businesses interested in becoming selling agencies for the Electric Vehicle Co. He also served as manager of some of the New Jersey stations during this period.

In 1903, Armstrong became manager of the Electric Vehicle Company’s New York branch, considered to be the main sales unit outside the company headquarters in Hartford, Connecticut. As manager, he was heavily involved with selling vehicles and worked directly with customers. Armstrong continued as the New York branch manager into 1906, when his association seems to have ended.

Beginning in 1904, Armstrong was also involved in a private venture with Charles I. Scott and Theodore Townley, which they named the Ansonia Motor Car Co. Stock in the company was purchased by the three men and some business under that company name was transacted over at least the next two years. The Ansonia Motor Car Co. never produced an automobile, but may have been involved in other automotive activities such as used vehicle sales.

Henry Austin Clark, Jr. donated the Frank C. Armstrong Papers to the Benson Ford Research Center in 1990.

The materials in the collection have been organized into four series: Electric Vehicle, Ansonia Motor Car Co., Armstrong’s personal papers, and Photographs. The first series is then further divided into sub series. This arrangement reflects both the organizational structure of the Electric Vehicle Co. and Armstrong’s own original arrangement of his business and personal records.

Significant correspondents and subjects dealt with in this collection include, but are not limited to, the following:

Walter H. Johnson
Andrew Carnegie
Milton J. Budlong
E. B. Finch & Co.
B. H. Kroger
Charles I. Scott
Theodore B. Townley
Arthur S. Huey
Siemens & Halske Electric Co.
George E. Day
Robert McAllister Lloyd
J. E. Childs
Howard Gibb
Daniel Guggenheim
Alvin Markle
The Electric Storage Battery Co.
Ansonia Motor Car Co.
Leon Bollee
Detroit Riker Automobile Co.
The Electric Vehicle Co. was founded in 1897, when Isaac Rice purchased the Electric Carriage and Wagon Company and began to concentrate on the production of electric powered hansom cabs that operated in New York City. In 1899, a group of businessmen led by financier William Collins Whitney purchased the enterprise from Rice and planned to produce large numbers of the cabs. They intended to monopolize the production of electric automobiles and the market for taxicab service in major American cities including New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Later that year, the Whitney syndicate bought the Motor Carriage Department of the Pope Manufacturing Co. of Hartford, Connecticut. Pope was at that time the largest American producer of bicycles and had also produced a line of gasoline and electric automobiles under the name Columbia.

The newly organized company was named the Columbia Automobile Co. Columbia Automobile and the Electric Vehicle Co. became joint owners of the Columbia and Electric Vehicle Co., designated as the manufacturing division that produced Columbia electric and gasoline automobiles. The Electric Vehicle Co. became the holding company for the subsidiaries that operated the taxicab fleet. The electric cabs proved unsuccessful and the company turned its focus to manufacturing automobiles. With the purchase of Riker Electric of Elizabethport, New Jersey in 1901, the name of the manufacturing division was changed once again to Electric Vehicle Co. Despite income from the royalties on the Selden Patent, the company suffered serious financial difficulties and in 1907 the Electric Vehicle Co. went into receivership. A reorganized company continued to produce Columbia automobiles and in 1909 the name was changed again to Columbia Motor Car Company. United States Motor absorbed this last vestige of the Electric Vehicle Co. in 1910.

During Armstrong’s tenure with the company, the Electric Vehicle Company sold both gasoline and electric-powered Columbia automobiles, and the Riker line of heavier trucks and delivery wagons. The company continued to pursue the establishment of cab service in various cities and organized several local transportation companies to handle that part of the business.

This series is divided into the following sub series:
General material dealing with the Electric Vehicle Co., Frank C. Armstrong Accordion Files, the New York Branch, the New Jersey Electric Vehicle and Transportation Co., Other Transportation Companies, and Product Literature.

Sub series I-A
Electric Vehicle Co.
Box 1

This sub series includes correspondence, much of it from Frank C. Armstrong with his suggestions and criticisms of several automobile models and options. Early minutes of the executive committee meetings and information on financial and operational arrangements of the company are included. A small amount of correspondence deals with the company’s business in South America, and the Chicago branch. Two lists of stockholders are also included.

Box 1
1-1 Charging stations, ca. 1901-1906
1-2 Chicago branch, 1904
1-3 Correspondence, 1901-1906
1-4 Correspondence by subject, A-B, 1901-1905
1-5 Correspondence by subject, F-Q, 1901-1905
1-6 Executive Committee minutes, 25 Jul 1889-11 Apr 1900
1-7 General balance sheets, 31 Oct 1899
1-8 Indenture, 1 Nov 1901
1-10 Machinery inventory, 1901
1-11 Miscellaneous, 1901
1-12 Miscellaneous forms, n.d.
1-13 Riker contract, Boettger and Henze, 1901
1-14 Stockholders, 1901

Sub series I-B
Frank C. Armstrong Accordion Files
Boxes 2-3

This sub series contains documents originally found in two accordion files dating from 1901 and early 1902, the period that Armstrong traveled throughout the United States to establish selling agencies for the Electric Vehicle Co. Much of his correspondence relating to this assignment was filed in a
general alphabetical arrangement in accordion files that he
probably carried with him on his travels. The first accordion
file was labeled on the inside flap with the following city
names and subjects: Cincinnati, Cleveland, San Antonio G. [sic],
Kansas City, Louisville, Lexington, Omaha, St. Louis, Toledo,
West End Branch a/c, Dunn & Bradstreet letters. The second
accordion file was labeled: Denver, 'Frisco, Hot Springs, Los
Angeles, Salt Lake, Seattle, Syracuse, Detroit, Lease 39 St.,
estimate N.Y. Situation.

The accordion files contained business correspondence between
Armstrong and officials of the Electric Vehicle Co.,
correspondence to and from individuals interested in becoming
representatives of the company or in purchasing automobiles, as
well as lengthy reports Armstrong sent to the main office in
Hartford with his assessments of the market for electric
vehicles in various cities. The accordion files also contained
letters of introduction and the business cards of many of the
individuals Armstrong had met while on the road.

Armstrong kept detailed notes on his personal expenses while
traveling. Three small notebooks contain daily-itemized
expenditures for food, lodging, transportation, entertainment,
etc. The third notebook also lists station expenses—probably for
one of the New Jersey stations which Armstrong managed.
Armstrong in the accordion files also filed a few receipts and
other miscellaneous items, such as a menu from a railroad dining
car and stationery.

A small amount of personal correspondence was included amount
the business papers in these two accordion files. Armstrong
received letters from acquaintances in New York and New Jersey.
There is a significant amount of correspondence with Bertha (or
Birtie) and Mena, two sisters whom he met in San Francisco in
August 1901.

A few documents from a later period (1903-1904) were found in
the files that do not seem to relate to the period that
Armstrong traveled in 1901 or early 1902.

The papers in the two files have been kept as separate entities
even when a subject or correspondent was found in both.
Therefore, it is advisable to look in both areas to locate all
related material. The original alphabetical subject organization
used by Armstrong has been largely maintained. Photographs found
in the accordion files have been placed in Series IV.

Box 2    File #1
The Electric Vehicle Co. maintained branch offices in New York City and Chicago. Frank C. Armstrong served as the New York branch manager from 1903 until some time in 1906. The New York Branch office conducted a considerable amount of business for the Electric Vehicle Co. As manager, Armstrong dealt directly with a number of prominent customers, such as Andrew Carnegie, Daniel Guggenheim, Alvin Markle and Howard Gibb.
A significant amount of the correspondence in this series is made up of letters to and from customers regarding purchases, repairs, and problems ranging from slow delivery and faulty batteries, to poor performing tires and the high costs of refurbishing the exterior finish. Monthly financial statements that detail sales and expenses for the branch during 1903-1905 are included. There are also a few miscellaneous documents regarding office furniture, leases, telephone contracts, etc.

Box 4
4-1 Correspondence, 1902-1906
4-2 Customer correspondence, A-B, 1903-1905
4-3 Customer correspondence, Carnegie, Andrew, 1904-1905
4-4 Customer correspondence, C, 1903-1905
4-5 Customer correspondence, G, 1903-1905 (1 of 2)
4-6 Customer correspondence, G, 1903-1905 (2 of 2)
4-7 Customer correspondence, H, 1903-1905 (1 of 2)
4-8 Customer correspondence, H, 1903-1905 (2 of 2)
4-9 Customer correspondence, I-L, 1903-1905
4-10 Customer correspondence, M, 1903-1905
4-11 Customer correspondence, N, 1903-1905
4-12 Customer correspondence, R-S, 1903-1905
4-13 Customer correspondence, W, 1903-1905
4-14 Financial statement, 1903
4-15 Furniture, 1898-1901
4-16 Lawsuits, 1901, 1905
4-17 Property leases, 1902, 1904, 1905
4-18 Sales and expenses, 1903
4-19 Sales and expenses, 1904
4-20 Sales and expenses, 1905
4-21 Telephone contract, 1901
4-22 Vehicle parts list, 1904

Sub series I-D
New Jersey Electric Vehicle Transportation Co.
Boxes 5-6

The New Jersey Electric Vehicle Transportation Co. (NJEVTC) was one of several subsidiary companies the Electric Vehicle Co. set up to provide sales facilities for its vehicles and taxicab service. Transportation companies were established in several locations including New York, Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New England, Mexico and Europe. The NJEVTC focused its efforts largely on establishing contracts with several hotels in the state’s resort areas to provide cab services for patrons.
Armstrong managed the New Jersey stations at times during his employment with the Electric Vehicle Co.

This series contains financial statements for various stations in New Jersey, correspondence, accident reports, forms, building plans, and battery test results. Newspaper clippings relating to automobile accidents and licensing fees are included.

Box 5

5-1 Accident reports, 1900
5-2 Account book-charges automobile, 1900-1901
5-3 Balance sheets, Apr 1900-Feb 1901
5-4 Batteries, 1900
5-5 Bills paid, 5 Mar 1900-6 May 1901
5-6 Clippings-Atlantic City, 1900
5-7 Correspondence, Nov 1899-Feb 1900
5-8 Correspondence, Mar 1900-Apr 1900
5-9 Correspondence, May 1900-Sep 1900
5-10 Correspondence, Oct 1900-May 1901
5-11 Miscellaneous forms
5-12 Newark, 1900

Box 6

6-1 Allenhurst station
6-2 Atlantic City station
6-3 Atlantic City station-stock reports, Jun 1900-Feb 1901
6-4 Lakewood station
6-5 Lakewood station-earnings reports, 14 Dec 1900-30 Mar 1901
6-6 Longbranch (West End) station
6-7 Longbranch (West End) & Allenhurst station-Branch office statement, 1903-1904
6-8 Seabright station

Sub series I-E
Other Transportation Companies
Box 6

This series includes financial reports on earnings, payroll, insurance and etc. for the Washington Electric Vehicle Transportation Co. and rates for cab service for the New York Electric Vehicle Transportation Co.

6-9 Washington Electric Vehicle Transportation Co.; Financial reports, 1900
6-10 Washington Electric Vehicle Transportation Co.; Insurance, 1900-1901
6-11 New York Electric Vehicle Transportation Co.; Rates 1900

Sub series I-F
Product Literature
Box 7

This series contains product literature dealing with Electric Vehicle Co. products. The material was found in a binder that apparently was used in the New York Branch office. The binder had been organized into sections: types of vehicles, type of literature (such as bulletins), and etc. This organizational structure has been maintained in this series.

The typed and manuscript material includes technical bulletins, miscellaneous contract forms, and correspondence sent by the company to its selling agents. The assortment of material suggests that it was probably used by company salesmen probably used it as reference for styles, prices, options and specifications for particular vehicles.

Box 7  
7-1 Batteries
7-2 Bulletins (1 of 2)
7-3 Bulletins (2 of 2)
7-4 Contracts
7-5 Correspondence
7-6 Delivery wagons and trucks
7-7 Miscellaneous
7-8 Price lists
7-9 Wagner Electric Manufacturing Co.
Series II
Ansonia Motor Car Co.
Box 7

Frank C. Armstrong, Charles I. Scott, and Theodore B. Townley incorporated Ansonia Motor Car Co. in New York in early 1904. Each of these men purchased stock in the company. Townley served as manager of the company which initially rented a store and basement at 1964 Broadway in New York City. The Ansonia Motor Car Co. apparently did not produce any automobiles but some business in selling cars (possibly previously owned) did take place. Ansonia may have also operated an automotive school for mechanics or drivers in addition to maintaining a charging station or repair facility. Ansonia conducted business until at least 1906.

The documents in this series include stock certificates, financial records, and inventories from 1903-1906.

Box 7
7-10 Financial records, 1903-1905
7-11 Scott, Charles I. account
7-12 Stock certificates
7-13 Miscellaneous
(Townley may have written many of the documents in this file, which are written on the back of Ansonia stationery. It is not clear if these documents reflect Ansonia Motor Car or Electric Vehicle Co. business.)
Series III
Frank C. Armstrong Personal Papers
Box 8

This series includes some of the personal correspondence and financial records of Frank C. Armstrong. The periods covered include his employment at Hard Wood Lumber Co. in 1898, his service in the Spanish-American War, and correspondence to friends and family to 1906. Miscellaneous receipts and club memberships are included as are checking account records. A significant amount of the correspondence is from Armstrong’s friend Bertha. Other letters deal with Catherine Leanore “Bonnie” Felix, the woman Armstrong eventually married in 1903. (More personal correspondence is located in Boxes 3 and 4.)

Box 8
8-1 Checks and account book, Oct 1902-Apr 1903
8-2 Checks and account book, Mar 1903-Jan 1904
8-3 Correspondence, 1899
8-4 Correspondence, 1900
8-5 Correspondence, 1901
8-6 Correspondence, 1902
8-7 Correspondence, 1904-1906
8-8 Correspondence, Automobile Club of America, 1900-1901
8-9 Correspondence, Felix, Bonnie
8-10 Hard Wood Lumber Co., 1898
8-11 Miscellaneous
8-12 Receipts, Thomas H. Graham, Merchant Tailor, 1900-1901
8-13 Spanish-American War, Correspondence, 1898-1899 (1 of 2)
8-14 Spanish-American War, Correspondence, 1898 (2 of 2)
8-15 Spanish-American War, Miscellaneous

Sub series I-G
Additional information about Armstrong’s life and career from the time he left the employ of the Electric Vehicle Co. in 1906 until his death in 1936 have been acquired. These materials were not part of the original collection of documents donated by Henry Austin Clark, Jr., but were obtained in 1993 under the Freedom of Information Act.

Included in this series are Armstrong’s application for a pension from the Veterans Administration (a document with an incredible amount of detail such as his height, weight, hair and eye color, medical condition at the time of the application, current and previous addresses, and a copy of his marriage license); Armstrong’s obituary (listing his date of birth, day and place of death, site of burial, names of his wife and children—although the New York Times printed Mrs. Armstrong’s middle name “Leanore” instead of using either her given name “Catherine” or nickname “Bonnie”); Armstrong’s death certificate; a claim for burial expense; correspondence between Mrs. Armstrong and the Veterans Administration as she sought to receive a death compensation as Armstrong’s beneficiary; and finally, Mrs. Armstrong’s death certificate.

8-16 Application for Pension – Frank C. Armstrong
(This packet of materials was submitted to the Veterans Administration on Armstrong’s behalf by Lyon & Lyon, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, 17 Sep 1932.)

8-17 Obituary – Frank C. Armstrong (published in the New York Times, 2 Oct 1936)

8-18 Correspondence and Application for Death Benefits; Death Certificate – Catherine L. Armstrong (Frank C. Armstrong’s widow), Nov 1936-May 1960.

At the time of his death, Armstrong listed his occupation as “mining engineer and promoter,” and his various business enterprises late in his life appear to have been surrounded in controversy. In the 1920s, Armstrong was involved in a number of well-publicized lawsuits against business interests whom Armstrong claimed had defrauded him. Clippings from the New York Times trace three significant cases to their final judgment in the courts.
Madison Square Garden Lawsuits – In 1921, Armstrong filed suit against sports promoter George L. “Tex” Rickard, claiming that he (Armstrong) had been an equal partner in all of Rickard’s enterprises “for the past ten years, including the lease of Madison Square Garden for boxing exhibitions,” but had not received his share of the profits. The judge ruled that Armstrong had failed to prove that there had ever existed a partnership between Tex Rickard and himself.

8-19 Newspaper Clippings: Madison Square Garden Lawsuits, Apr 1921-Dec 1922

Oil Stock Lawsuits – In 1922, Armstrong claimed that Edgar T. Marston, President of the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company, had misrepresented the value of 100 shares of stock that Armstrong purchased from him in 1919. Armstrong sought to recover $55,707. The case began to gather more public attention when it was rumored that Marston’s attorneys planned to call John D. Rockefeller to testify on Marston’s behalf. In December 1924, a judge ruled that Armstrong had not proved that Marston had attempted to defraud Armstrong and the case was dismissed.

8-20 Newspaper Clippings: Oil Stock Lawsuits, Jun 1922-Dec 1924.
Copper Mine Merger Lawsuits – As a stockholder of the Ray Consolidated Copper Company, Armstrong charged in 1925 that shareholders in that company would lose $12 million if a proposed merger between the Ray Company and the Nevada Consolidated Copper Company was allowed to take place. Armstrong asserted that the defendants were promoting the merge in an attempt to control the copper market of the U.S. in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust law. A small notice appeared in 1926 stating simply that the case had been settled, although no further details were given.

8-21 Newspaper Clippings: Copper Mine Merger Lawsuits, Dec 1925-Jul 1926.

Series IV
Photographs
Box 9

This series contains original photographs, dating from ca. 1898-1903, of various electric and gasoline automobiles produced by the Electric Vehicle Co. The electric vehicles pictured include surreys, runabouts, Victorias, cabs, buses, and delivery wagons. The gasoline vehicles pictured include different styles of runabouts. The negatives included in this series are copy negatives of the original photographs created by the donor, Henry Austin Clark, Jr.

Also included are personal photographs. This group of photographs includes images believed to be Armstrong’s personal friends and business associates. Inscriptions or signatures written on the fronts or backs of the photographs identify some of the individuals pictured.

There are several photographs of men in this collection, some of which may be of Frank C. Armstrong. Unfortunately, none of these images have any identifying inscriptions that would positively identify the man pictured as being Armstrong. The only exception
is a very dark and faded photo of a man standing next to railroad tracks [Acc 1750, Box 9, Folder 5, August 1901; photo #90.1.1750.34.1]. This snapshot was found in an envelope addressed to "Frank C. Armstrong" with a letter written to Armstrong by his friend, Bertha, who lived in San Francisco [Acc. 1750, "Bertha ------ to Frank C. Armstrong," 23 October 1901," Acc. 1750, Box 8, File 5]. A handwritten note on the back of the snapshot reads, "Why don’t you get on your train Frank." The style of handwriting on the snapshot matches the handwriting on the envelope, as well as the handwriting on the pages of the letter itself. Armstrong was in San Francisco during the summer of 1901 after spending much of the year crisscrossing the country on a sales trip for the Electric Vehicle Company. He apparently befriended Bertha and her sister, Mena, at this time, as there are other letters to Armstrong from Bertha and Mena (as well as a photo of Bertha) among Armstrong’s papers.

Two tintypes have been removed from the collection and are housed in the General Photograph Collection – Tintypes. [Tintype #90.1.1750.2 is an image of two women and a man in swim clothing. Tintype #90.1.1750.3 is an image of seven men on bicycles.]

All of the photographs in this series have been cataloged individually on ARGUS.

Box 9
9-1 Cabs and buses
9-2 Delivery wagons
9-3 Electric vehicles
9-4 Gasoline vehicles
9-5 Individuals–Male, believed to be Frank C. Armstrong (found in a letter sent to Armstrong from his friend, Bertha—SEE FILE 9-6)
9-6 Individuals–Bertha
9-7 Individuals–Felix, Catherine Leanore “Bonnie”
9-8 Individuals–Scott, Charles I.
9-9 Individuals–Unknown, Male
9-10 Individuals–Unknown, Female
9-11 Copy negatives--#90.1.1750.10.2–#90.1.1750.21.2
9-12 Copy negatives--#90.1.1750.22.2–#90.1.1750.34

OVERSIZE MATERIAL

Box 10 Size C
10-1 Vehicle blueprint; Coal wagon, 1901
10-2 Map, Atlantic City, 1897
10-3 Vehicle blueprint, 1901
10-4 Blueprint; Allenhurst station, 1900