Jesse Walter Fewkes field recordings of the Passamaquoddy Indians (1890)
Added to the National Registry: 2002
Essay by Kelly Revak (guest post)*

The 30 wax cylinders in this collection document the songs, stories, and vocabulary of the Passamaquoddy people of Maine. These recordings are notable as they are largely credited as the first use of recording technology in ethnographic work, as well as the first recordings of Native American music. They were recorded in 1890 in Calais, Maine, by anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes. The deep historical and cultural value of the songs and stories contained in these recordings to the Passamaquoddy people cannot be overstated. The Passamaquoddy are the easternmost tribe in the United States, with ancestral homelands which border what is now Maine and New Brunswick, Canada. Referring to the 1890 recordings, Passamaquoddy people of today have said, “These recordings are dear to us. They connect us across time to our ancestors. We are the cultural authorities for this material.”

The 130+ year history of these fragile recordings reflects changing practices within recorded sound, as well as evolving relationships between ethnographic repositories and indigenous communities.

Jesse Walter Fewkes, a marine biologist by training, turned to ethnology after a visit to California in 1888. Frustrated with the limitations of musical transcription as a method of accurately capturing songs and excited about Edison’s newly developed phonograph, he became determined to test the machine for ethnographic use. He managed to earn the patronage of Mary Hemenway and the Peabody Museum, likely through her son, Augustus Hemenway, who was Fewkes’ Harvard college friend. In 1889, Fewkes was named leader of the Hemenway Expedition after its former director Frank Hamilton Cushing fell gravely ill. Mary Hemenway was a major stockholder in Thomas Edison’s phonograph companies, and supported Fewkes’ request to test the phonograph for ethnographic work. She very likely provided the machine to

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1 See the Passamaquoddy People’s Portal at https://www.passamaquoddypeople.com/about
Fewkes, as commercially they were really only available to lease at that time. As described by Thomas Vennum in the Federal Cylinder Project: 

Jesse Walter Fewkes’s Passamaquoddy cylinders, recorded in 1890, are historically important, for they represent the first efforts to collect music for scientific analysis. Scarcely a year after Edison’s invention became available commercially, Fewkes made an experimental field trip to the Passamaquoddy settlements in Maine to gain familiarity with the new equipment and to develop his own procedures for recording Indian speech and song. The trip was undertaken in preparation for the second Hemenway Expedition later that year, on which Fewkes was to record Zuni songs and narratives.

Though Edison had invented the basis of the technology over a decade earlier, the commercially viable phonograph was not on the market until 1888. In “A Spiral Way,” Erika Brady discusses the history of wax cylinders and Fewkes’ role in bringing recorded sound to bear on ethnography. She noted that while the objects of study (the so-called “primitive peoples” at the time) seemed to accept the introduction of phonograph into their midst as no more surprising than the rest of the “white man’s culture,” “in contrast, it was participants in American mainstream culture who maintained an attitude of mythically-charged wonder, albeit somewhat posed and affected, toward the phonograph and its inventor.”

Indeed the only two non-Passamaquoddy recordings in this collection are of Fewkes speaking while demonstrating the phonograph to visiting Passamaquoddy, presumably in 1891 in Boston. In these short and nearly identical spiels, Fewkes somewhat comically poses as “Mr. Phonograph” offering to remember what the others will say and speak it back.

Over the course of three days (March 15-18, 1890), Passamaquoddy community members allowed Fewkes to record 36 cylinders of partial songs, legends, creation stories, and linguistic terms. This collection includes several Passamaquoddy narratives, including the Story of Glooscap and the Animals, the Story of the Raccoon, the Story of Leux and the Three Fires, the Story of the Fisher and the Sable, the History of the Swamp Woman, the Story of the Medicine Man, as well as vocabulary and number lists, song and descriptions of the Snake Dance, a war song, and a trading song. The primary speakers/singers were Peter Selmore and Newell Josephs (also spelled Noel Joseph or Noel Josephs), with one song recently identified as attributable to Peter Lacoute (also referred to as “Perle Lacoot” in Fewkes’ field notes). Cylinders at this time could only hold two to three minutes of recording. Because of this, longer narratives were split across several cylinders, and very few narratives were recorded in their entirety.

After Fewkes completed his expeditions, the recordings changed hands several times. “The Federal Cylinder Project” notes, “The state of the Fewkes Passamaquoddy collection reflects the

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2 Related correspondence between Jesse Walter Fewkes and his sponsor Mary Hemenway is at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.
5 Fewkes’ field notes are in a notebook at the National Anthropological Archives (ms. 4408: 9)
age of the recordings and a history of being stored in various places over a long period of time.”

When Fewkes had completed his work with them, the recordings were eventually deposited in Harvard University's Peabody Museum, and later donated by the Museum to the Library of Congress in 1970. They are now housed at the American Folklife Center. Of the 36 original recordings made by Fewkes, only 26 remain playable. Several were known to be broken or damaged prior to deposit at the Library of Congress. Two additional cylinders were rendered unplayable after the Library took custody, but they had already been transferred to tape, so the audio has been preserved. Additionally, the Passamaquoddy material was mixed with Zuni and Hopi cylinders recorded by Fewkes in 1890-91. It is possible that some of the missing Passamaquoddy cylinders may be later recovered from the unidentified Fewkes recordings. The 30 cylinders that currently form the collection include 28 of the original cylinders as well as two versions of Fewkes demonstrating the phonograph to visiting Passamaquoddy.

Among the very first activities of the American Folklife Center was the Federal Cylinder Project (1977-1987). This large-scale initiative aimed to preserve and provide access to historic and fragile field recordings captured on wax cylinders, with a particular focus on approximately 7,500 cylinder recordings of Native American cultural expressions. Thousands of such historical recordings were gathered, from among those held at the Library, in national and international repositories, at universities, and in private collections. Additional “cylinder-based” disc copies of recordings were included in the project, when original cylinders were retained by holding institutions. Federal Cylinder Project staff identified and cataloged the recordings, preserved the audio on reel-to-reel tape, and shared the recordings with communities of origin to support their work in linguistic revitalization and reclamation and ownership of cultural heritage. Between 1983 and 1988, Federal Cylinder Project staff visited about 100 tribal communities and returned cassette copies of cylinder recordings (cassette being the most accessible format at the time). The Passamaquoddy recordings were among those preserved through the Federal Cylinder Project, and copies of the tapes were returned to the Passamaquoddy in the early 1980s.

However, this was not the end of the story for these 30 cylinders. In 1983, David Francis, a Passamaquoddy elder from the Pleasant Point reservation near Eastport, Maine, visited the Library of Congress and listened to many of the recordings. He provided translations, titles, and cultural context, which were incorporated into the descriptions of the cylinders in the published Federal Cylinder Project texts. David Francis’ notes and translations of the 1890’s recordings are separately maintained as a related collection at the American Folklife Center. David Francis became part of a dedicated group of Passamaquoddy language experts and cultural educators working together to develop ways to revitalize their language. In 2009, Wayne Newell and

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7 See Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology miscellaneous cylinder recordings collection -- AFC 1970/070
8 “Jesse Walter Fewkes collection of Passamaquoddy cylinder recordings” (AFC 1972/003), https://lccn.loc.gov/2013655231
9 Related translations and clarifications of the Fewkes Passamaquoddy cylinder recordings were made by David Francis in May 1983. See AFC 1983/025 David Francis translations of the Jesse Walter Fewkes Passamaquoddy cylinder recordings, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.
Blanch Sockabasin spoke about the recordings in a performance at the Library of Congress. Newell remarked, “These wax cylinders are being worked on, at home, by speakers of the language, so we can sort of resurrect older songs, as they were recorded by people more than a hundred years ago.” Again in 2013, Passamaquoddy participants, including Wayne Newell and Blanch Sockabasin, spoke alongside American Folklife Center staff at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival referring to the recordings’ impact on language revitalization efforts.

The Passamaquoddy recordings were seen as so historically critical, they were selected to pilot the “Ancestral Voices” project, begun in 2015. This initiative is, in many ways, the successor to the Federal Cylinder Project. It is a collaboration with communities of origin to increase access to the rich Native American collections held at the American Folklife Center. It initiates a new paradigm of classification, preservation, and methods of access for indigenous materials, introducing ideas of co-curation and collaboration with tribal communities in culturally responsive and respectful presentation of cultural heritage. Ancestral Voices combines the use of emerging digital technologies to salvage obsolete and fragile legacy recordings with innovative approaches to co-curation and intellectual access for the benefit of both archival repositories and source communities. The model established by the Ancestral Voices project aims to begin to dismantle colonial practices by acknowledging tribal communities as authorities over their heritage.

The Ancestral Voices project has been the result of collaboration between the American Folklife Center and the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University, which has developed the Mukurtu Content Management System. The Mukurtu CMS platform provides indigenous communities with a content management system to gather and present cultural heritage materials with total control over description and access. Mukurtu, in turn, partners with Local Contexts, the creators of Traditional Knowledge Labels—protocols which are designated and defined by the community to inform how the cultural resources should be accessed, attributed, and used. The labels are modeled after Creative Commons licenses. They serve as a social intervention, not a legal intervention.

Like the Federal Cylinder Project, Ancestral Voices effort begins with preservation. In 2015, audio engineers at the Library's National Audiovisual Conservation Center (NAVCC) employed the then latest technology, notably the Archéophone cylinder playback machine, to extract the content directly from audio cylinders to digital files. For access copies, the digital files were then restored and enhanced, using the Computer Enhanced Digital Audio Restoration System—CEDAR, for short. Using these techniques, the Library has made new digital transfers of the Passamaquoddy cylinders and restored the audio. Passamaquoddy community members commented that the digitally restored recordings have dramatically improved the sound quality and significantly enhanced their comprehension of their ancestors’ voices and teachings. Library archival staff extensively researched the Passamaquoddy recordings in preparation for

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11 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, “One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage” program
collaboration with the indigenous knowledge keepers, providing the recordings along with all known information and previous cataloging to the Passamaquoddy community.  

After extensive listening to the new digital transfers, Passamaquoddy elders and knowledge keepers built a Mukurtu site, introducing cultural narratives and traditional knowledge to accompany each recording. In the Passamaquoddy Peoples Portal, the community has total control over who has access to the digital recordings as well as control over how materials are described. On this portal, community members describe this listening work, and the impact it has had within the community:

> Over the last three years, there have been regular gatherings to listen to the wax cylinder recordings and to decipher words, songs and stories. This work has been long. Sometimes listening to one song of three minutes can take the whole day. Then there is the translation of the song into Passamaquoddy, then the transition into English and then the work of remembering the cultural contexts that the songs belong within. Some of the songs are really fun and funny—like the Snake Dance song—it is a welcoming song still sung today. The Passamaquoddy that is being spoken in these recordings has a strong French language influence as most Passamaquoddy people at the time (1890) spoke Passamaquoddy and French. English was the third language. Listening to the ancestors speaking back into our present has been exciting and emotional. We are still here to listen and learn from our ancestors.

With the enthusiastic consent of the Passamaquoddy people, the Library of Congress uses the community-centered perspectives to enhance the description of the items in the Library’s online presentation and catalog records. Only those recordings that the Passamaquoddy community have decided are appropriate for outside listeners have been shared on Library of Congress public websites. The Library has incorporated the Passamaquoddy-defined Traditional Knowledge labels into the online display, to guide access protocols. Further, the community’s cultural context, traditional knowledge, translations, titles, and other descriptions have been incorporated into the Library of Congress catalog records. In the new composite records, we want to be clear about the source of each piece of information, distinguishing the community’s voice from those of Jesse Walter Fewkes, the processing archivist, and the engineer who transferred the cylinders. In a lot of ways this project has revealed limitations of the existing systems and standards for cataloging. However, the catalog records, both those in the Passamaquoddy People’s Portal and those at the Library of Congress, will no longer be a static resource. Rather, this new process of shared metadata and descriptive information will allow records to be updated as new interpretations come to light.

In 2018, the Ancestral Voices Roundtable was held to celebrate the launch of the online presentation of the Passamaquoddy cylinders. At this event, Dwayne Tomah performed two songs, learned from the cylinders, which had not been performed in over a hundred years. He spoke emotionally of the power of that moment:

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12 Related field notes by Jesse Walter Fewkes are in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.  
14 The full roundtable presentation is available at Ancestral Voices Roundtable. 2018. Video.  
https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-8530/.
We’re still here. Our language is STRONG. We’re still here. And with the help of you people. I don’t know you, but I feel your spirit in this room. And I want to thank each and every one of you, for making this possible. Without you people, and our people, this would not happen. It would not go forward. And for me to be able to stand before you, in 2018, and be able to sing our songs, to bring them back home, is very powerful. And to be able to stand before you, and to know that our language is still alive.

The Ancestral Voices pilot and ongoing collaboration with the Passamaquoddy people will serve as a model for how the American Folklife Center will work with other tribal communities in the future to make cultural materials stewarded by the Library of Congress more accessible and meaningful to the communities documented. At the Ancestral Voices Roundtable, Donald Soctomah, the Passamaquoddy tribal historic preservation officer, said, “It’s so much work ahead. And so much work’s been done.... For us it gives us a little bit of control on our cultural films, music, books... That’s pretty powerful in itself. Everyone else has had control over our songs, over our stories, this puts it back onto us. And to me, that’s the way it should be. Because our ancestors shared the stories, they didn’t GIVE the stories to anybody.”

Kelly Revak is currently Head of the Digital Object Metadata Management unit at University of California, San Diego Library. Previously, she was an archivist at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, where she worked on the Ancestral Voices project. She performed the initial MARC cataloging of the Passamaquoddy recordings, and enhanced the catalog records with Passamaquoddy cultural narratives, translations, and context in preparation for the online presentation.
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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.