

The Records

The microfilm edition of the ACLU records covers the period from 1917 to 1950. It consists of the 1886 bound volumes of records through the year 1946, and 226 “volumes” of loose records for the 1946 to 1950 period, and three records center boxes known as Appendixes 1–3, which cover indexed material not previously filmed, mostly from 1940 to 1946. There is a small amount of material relating to an Industrial Workers of the World free speech trial in San Diego, California, in 1912 which antedates the creation of the ACLU and whose origin is unknown. As described below, some ACLU-related materials during this period have not been filmed in this collection.

The Nature of the Records

The volumes are generally devoted either to clippings or to correspondence, with each volume then relating to a single type of record, although sometimes there are several series in a single volume. The series lists that follow provide access by series even though the locations of the information are spread throughout the volumes.

While it is impossible to detail all of the information found in this massive collection, some sense can be given from two examples. The conscientious objector issue during World War I fills over 37 volumes. The ACLU received hundred of letters from people objecting to military service. Some belonged to pacifist religions, while others belonged to political groups opposed to the war. Some of the letters and diaries contain statements of belief and vivid accounts of camp and prison conditions, and some describe noncombative service. ACLU supporters also reported on the treatment of conscientious objectors. When the ACLU took cases, its files include legal briefs, depositions, affidavits, and court transcripts, as well as informal reports. In controversial cases, the files contain letters from officials in President Woodrow Wilson’s administration and letters from other figures such as Felix Frankfurter, John Dewey, Upton Sinclair, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald. Some cases generated extensive press coverage, much of it simply filed as clippings; for example, records document the ACLU’s campaign to stop the practice of chaining objectors to the bars of their cells. The records also reveal the personal concerns of Roger Baldwin and the political and legal preoccupations of his supporters.

The quality of material on labor issues matches that of the material on conscientious objectors. The files hold the letters of union organizers, labor activists, and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Some letters describe the ill treatment at the hands of the law, mob violence, and lynchings; others describe working conditions in mines, factories, and lumber mills. The ACLU files include memoranda and trial documents such as the record of the ACLU involvement in the group trial of the IWW members in Chicago in 1918. Material on Samuel Gompers, Bill Haywood, Emma Goldman, and others appear throughout this period. ACLU publications, press clippings, and unpublished reports offer illuminating details on deportations, alien issues, and the rise of what the ACLU called the “superpatriotic” organizations: the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of Liberty, and others.

Gift of the Materials to the New York Public Library

On January 5, 1920, Albert DeSilver, Director of the National Civil Liberties Bureau, wrote to Edwin H. Anderson, Librarian of the New York Public Library, indicating that the National Civil Liberties Bureau was winding up its affairs and proposing to send the records of the Bureau to the library. DeSilver indicated that the records consisted of approximately 70 volumes, one and one-half inches thick, of bound correspondence “relating to civil liberties and conscientious objection during the war” and “newspaper clippings covering the same period throughout the United States.” DeSilver modestly stated, “In our judgment this is a valuable collection for reference use as historical documents.” The next day Anderson replied positively to the proposal. Thus began a thirty-year relationship between the New York Public Library and what soon became the ACLU.

When the first of these volumes was finally delivered to the Library in December 1921, Roger Baldwin’s cover letter noted: “I feel as if we ought to apologize for the condition of these volumes. It

is due to the fact that they have been roughly handled, having been sent to Washington for a Senate Committee investigation and to the Lusk Committee in New York state for their use in compiling their report.” Both Baldwin and DeSilver enunciated the principle that these records be open to all “interested persons who made inquiries of us.” This desire to make known the work of the ACLU almost immediately after the time during which the records were created has been a hallmark of the ACLU’s approach to its records. Many materials that would be withheld today for a period of time due to concerns about privacy, privilege, and confidentiality were available for all to see upon their annual transfer to the library. The records provide a detailed picture of the day-to-day life of this institution as it grew in the Baldwin years. Its local correspondents and the general public sent correspondence, reports, and hundreds of clippings from small papers across America relating to the issues that formed the ACLU’s agenda.

Care of the Records at the New York Public Library

The first volumes sent to the NYPL were canvas-backed, postbound original documents or clippings pasted on paper. Volumes were numbered starting with 1 for each series for each year or set of years. Over the years the NYPL employed conservation measures on many of these volumes that involved removing the originals from the postbindings, and cutting and pasting them into scrapbooks. This process often increased the number of volumes and split materials described as a single volume between two or more volumes. In some cases, volumes were renumbered as a part of the process, so one can see multiple numbering schemes for the filmed volumes.

At some point the ACLU began to forward loose materials arranged in series to the NYPL, which became responsible for the pasting and binding process. In order to improve access to the volumes, the NYPL eventually renumbered the entire run of volumes starting with 1. In assigning the numbers, or upon undergoing conservation work, some volumes were numbered with a combination of volume and letter designations (e.g., 595A and 595B). There is also an enormous gap in the numbering system from 1099 to 2000 which appears to have been a mistake made by the person applying the numbers to the volumes. There are also some missing numbers, but there is no internal evidence that would indicate that those volumes are missing. Again, it is likely that those numbers were not assigned by mistake.

Preparation of the Microfilm

In 1952 the NYPL decided that it could no longer house a vast and growing collection like that of the ACLU and made plans to film the materials on hand and then destroy them. For the future, the NYPL planned to film on an annual basis, a strategy that was never implemented. The ACLU apparently hoped to preserve the originals and in 1953 signed an agreement with Princeton to bring the records to the University’s spacious new Firestone Library. By the 1970s, despite several additions to the main library, Princeton too had run out of space. Upon completion of the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library on the Princeton campus in 1976, the records were transferred to this still spacious facility.

When the NYPL prepared its microfilm between 1953 and 1957, it had already bound material into volumes through most of 1946, but the rest of the material through 1950 still remained loose in boxes. In addition, three boxes of pre-1950 indexed material at Princeton (not filmed by the NYPL) were filmed as Appendixes 1-3 of this microfilm edition.

Self-Indexing Nature of the Volumes

In many ways the volumes themselves are self-indexing in that a fairly elaborate, although usually unpaginated, index outline is found at the front of each volume. The researcher should remember that the index, while originally prepared for a single volume, may now relate to material spread over two or more volumes created as a result of rehousing for conservation. The index outline for each volume is carried over throughout its contents with each new section of the outline listed on what is a blue

paper section header pasted in before the records. While this blue paper marker helps to locate the sections of the outline in the bound volumes, finding it is somewhat more difficult due to the black and white nature of the film.

Arrangement of the Material in the Volumes

Throughout the records there is a clear division between correspondence and newspaper clippings. For the most part, materials are then arranged chronologically by year (or set of years in the early volumes) for each series. For each topic within a series (roughly equivalent to a file folder), there is also a chronological arrangement. There are, of course, occasional overlaps of material at the beginning and end of each year and breakdowns in the order as materials were pasted into volumes.

At the beginning of the run, there are relatively few series. Except for separate runs for organizational matters and conscientious objectors, most early materials fall under general correspondence/clippings or state case correspondence/clippings. Over time, with the increasing complexity of the organization, other series dealing with academic freedom, censorship, federal agencies and legislation, outside organizations, and labor injunctions became a part of the organization of these records. There are also special series for the records of the Pennsylvania Civil Liberties Committee and the Philadelphia Branch (1930–1933), the New York City Civil Liberties Committee (1936–1950), and the personal papers of Walter Nelles (1920–1926).

While there is an apparent organization to these bound volumes, the task for the researcher is to determine which series (and there are often several, all of which may contain records) are appropriate for the research task. A combination of the reel and series lists, the card index, and the volume outlines found on the film should enable the researcher to find the appropriate records with a modest degree of effort.

Omissions from the Microfilmed Records

The microfilm does not include all ACLU records prior to 1950. The major series omitted, but available on other microfilm, are board minutes, mailings to the board, policy guides, legal briefs, press releases, and publications. Portions of these series appear under appropriate topics (for instance, board actions and publications are often found as related to a particular subject, but there are no complete runs of minutes or publications). Other materials relating to the Elizabeth Gurley Flynn ouster in 1940 and to labor and radio were not filmed since they came directly from the ACLU to Princeton at a later time.