

APPENDIX A  
REPORT ON PHASE ONE  
OF THE  
MAY MEMORIAL UNITARIAN SOCIETY  
ARCHIVAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROJECT

OCTOBER 1994

Prepared for

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Site: The May Memorial Unitarian Society  
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Site Visit: August 4, 1994

Report date: October 7, 1994

REPORT CHARGE:

Dr. Suzanne Etherington was asked to carry out an initial survey of the archives, and make recommendations on which, if any, records could be destroyed because they have no continuing historic, legal, or fiscal value.

## INTRODUCTION

The May Memorial Unitarian Society of Syracuse has a long history of community and national activism. Several of their leaders have had national prominence in a variety of reform activities such as abolitionism, women's rights and civil rights. The Society currently holds a wealth of historical records documenting the activities of its leaders and, to a lesser extent, of its membership. The value of these records resides as much in their documentation of this particular organization as it does in their documentation of larger issues acted on in a local context.

Most of the historical records have been identified as such and are stored in two filing cabinets. In addition, there are administrative records that have not been considered historical but have been retained through the years.

This report will address the steps necessary for the appropriate care of the historical records, assess the administrative records, and make recommendations for future actions regarding both types of records.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Administrative Records: Observations

The administrative records include legal, fiscal, and other records which document the on-going activities of the Society. In addition, the administrative records also contain architectural drawings, correspondence, and the records of various committees including minutes and reports. These records may have lasting legal importance as well as historical value for the future. There are approximately 15 cubic feet of records in both loose paper file format and bound in various ledgers.

Administrative Records: Recommendations

Some of these records have been retained well beyond their useful lives. Generally, if information is summarized in a year-end or other compiled report, the supporting documentation may be disposed of after a year or so. For example, the pledge forms from 1985, the cancelled checks, record of deposits and bank statements from 1978 - 1985, and the bank account passbook from 1973-1975 could all be disposed of since the financial information they record should be present in the year end summary report or general ledger/journal.

Enclosed with this report is a copy of a *Records Retention and Disposition Schedule* prepared by the New York State Archives and Records Administration for use by miscellaneous municipal governments. I would strongly urge that this schedule be reviewed by May Memorial Unitarian Society administrators. While this schedule is for governmental bodies, it does provide a model for scheduling records retention and disposition based on the records' function and potential for continuing legal, fiscal, or archival value. Also enclosed with this report is a brochure, *Documenting Community Organizations*, produced by The Central New York Library Resources Council. This brochure will also be useful in considering the historical records which are addressed next.

*Historical Records: Observations*

The historical records of the May Memorial Unitarian Society are wonderfully complete in that a long span of time and a variety of activities are documented. However, the records are not readily accessible for research use, are not kept in secure or archivally standard conditions, and present several challenges to the Society.

The bulk of the records are currently stored in the basement furnace room. The records designated as historical were apparently organized some time ago when the current filing system and finding aid were created. These comprise approximately 26 cubic feet of files

in metal and wooden filing cabinets. These records range from documentation arranged by 'Era' defined by such leaders as May and Calthrop, to the records of the Women's Alliance and the Religious Education Council. In addition to these record series, there is a fairly complete set of newsletters. Upstairs, the Society's scrapbooks are piled onto open shelves and crammed into wooden drawers. A small amount of historically important material such as the building plans from 1964 - possibly the 'as-built' set - are in a loft with exposure to weather and insect damage through openings in the unfinished outer wall.

The filed records are currently in folders which are not archival quality - that is, they are not acid-free folders. Non-archival folders can damage the contents they are meant to protect by imparting damaging acid into the papers contained in the folders. Similarly, wooden file cabinets are not archival standard since the acid in the wood can migrate to the contents, and the varnish on the cabinets emits damaging chemicals.

Scrapbooks present a host of problems. The contents are often inherently unstable - newspaper clippings for example will deteriorate in a 'slow burn', turning yellow and crumbling. Materials glued, pasted, or otherwise fastened into scrapbooks are often damaged by this process, making removal impossible. The only preservation solution to scrapbooks is either microfilming or a painstaking and labor-intensive removal of items

and recreation of the scrapbook in archivally sound volumes containing buffered acid-free pages.

The physical security of these records is another concern. The files have not been secure so that some folders are currently empty. This may mean that materials were misfiled or that materials were not returned to the files after research use. The finding aid is based on a system which is not readily apparent to the observer. The scrapbooks are simply unattended and unprotected. Weather and potential insect damage is a concern for records stored in the loft.

*Historical Records: Recommendations*

The storage conditions for these records is not appropriate. Given the space limitations for the Society, there may be no other options for storage location but several things could be done to improve the area. The following is a description of the environmental standards for storage of historical materials. These may be impossible for the May Memorial Unitarian Society to achieve, in which case alternative storage should be considered.

Light Guidelines:

Light can damage paper and cause inks to fade. Water colors and writing inks, especially

iron gall ink which was common in the last century, are particularly sensitive to the deteriorating effects of light. Paper materials should receive no more than 5-8 footcandles of illumination.

Ultraviolet light is perhaps paper's worst light enemy. Sunlight and fluorescent lighting are the main sources of ultraviolet light in the archival setting. Blocking or filtering sources of ultraviolet light is important.

Tungsten lighting, while better from the standpoint of ultraviolet light, produces much more heat than do fluorescent lights.

#### Temperature and Relative Humidity Guidelines:

After light, heat and humidity are the next worst enemies of paper. Chemical deterioration rates **double** for every ten degrees increase in temperature. When temperature rates fluctuate rapidly, there is an immediate effect on relative humidity. When relative humidity fluctuates, mechanical stress results within paper as the fibers expand and contract. These actions weaken paper, can cause photographic emulsions to separate from their bases, and warp bound materials.

In addition to the mechanical damage, high humidity creates additional preservation



problems. Since paper is hygroscopic, high humidity is particularly damaging to bound material which, when exposed to relatively high levels of humidity over an extended period, becomes an environment congenial to molds and mildews which can quickly damage paper. Boards can become warped and leather bindings damaged through exposure to high humidity. Molds, mildew and vermin are also attracted to these materials when humidity and temperature levels are high. Proper air circulation can counter the development of 'dead' air pockets where humidity and temperature levels can reach high levels.

The key to acceptable temperature and humidity standards is stability. The optimum range for temperature must balance the requirements of people with the best treatment for the collection. A **steady 65 degrees Fahrenheit** is a good compromise. Fluctuations should be avoided, even if that means a higher fuel cost through leaving the thermostat set constantly at the same level. Similarly, humidity levels should be stable as well. A steady 50% rate for relative humidity is the goal. Although a frequent source of disagreement between many building committees and archivally oriented members, it is far better to leave the thermostat set at a steady point constantly than to sacrifice collections for fuel conservation.

The temperature and humidity levels in storage areas should be monitored regularly and

a log should be kept recording the levels. The pattern of fluctuations will dictate the kind of modifications which will be required. If after monitoring conditions over the course of a year, the fluctuations in temperature and humidity appear to be not acceptable, modifications should be instituted.

**Storage Equipment Guidelines:**

Good storage equipment must be heavy-duty, constructed of non-damaging materials, and designed to impose no stress on collections. It is recommended that all storage equipment, including shelving units, flat files (map cases), cabinets and filing cabinets, be constructed of steel with a baked enamel finish. The finish should be smooth, not bumpy or abrasive, and there should be no sharp edges or corners that could act as cutting edges and thus damage material when it is removed from the unit. If wooden shelving is the only type available, then the shelves should be covered with acid-free paper or mylar.

Oversized volumes such as scrapbooks should be stored flat and, if possible, not stacked on top of each other. Odd sized volumes may be stored spine-side down so as not to cause the text blocks to pull away from the spines. Volumes with loose boards should be tied with cotton twill dressmaker's tape (a non-adhesive).

Storage units should not be placed directly against outside walls because of the possibility of moisture buildup or actual leaks. Nothing should be stored on the floor or under sprinkle heads, windows, or pipe joints.

Storage systems should provide overall support and protect materials from physical or mechanical damage. Storage equipment must be designed to meet the preservation needs of special record formats, such as the architectural drawings, photographs, bound volumes, and magnetic media or sound recordings. Good intellectual controls, such as an inventory and location file, should allow the separation of collection into parts based on storage requirements.

The only exception to the recommendation for steel construction concerns the storage of magnetic media of any type. These should be stored on sealed wood shelving.

**Disaster Preparedness:**

It is important to have a disaster plan in the event of fire or water damage either from a burst pipes or roof failure. The New York State Library offers assistance in developing disaster plans, and there are a number of publications aimed at helping institutions create this important document.

It is also important to have an insurance policy to cover the loss or damages sustained in the event of disaster or theft. An agent who has worked with historical agencies should be prepared to write such a policy.

At a minimum, a disaster plan should address such concerns as which collections materials would be a priority for immediate removal after a disaster, who would be notified in the event of a disaster, who would be in charge of disaster response, who would be the spokesperson for public statements concerning the disaster, and clarification of the levels of insurance-coverage for the collection and required documentation to begin a claim. Considerable literature has been developed to aid in devising such plans. It should be reviewed by the Board, and discussions involving staff, Board members, emergency personnel, and insurance agents should begin.

Disaster preparedness supplies should be stored in the vicinity so as to be available immediately upon need. Minimally these should include plastic sheeting to cover collection storage areas in the event of water from a roof leak, buckets and mops, flashlights, and a list of telephone numbers for personnel to be contacted in case of disaster. This list should include the insurance agent who should also have been provided with a collection description. A secure location where the collection could be temporarily stored should be identified and a plan for emergency relocation should be

developed with volunteers or staff assigned specific responsibilities for the archival collection. A duplicate copy of a shelf-list or other collection information should be stored off-site as additional information for use in the event of a disaster.

**General Collection Management Concerns:**

Archival collections require an on-going commitment in funds and time. The 'return' is often of intangible value to the community, as is the case with any library or school, and rarely are archival collections a revenue-generating aspect of an organization's activities. The costs of responsibly caring for archival collections are initially steep and maintaining a collection requires consistent investment.

In order for the collections to be available for use, there must be a balance between preservation and accessibility. The best way to achieve this balance is to provide the best possible storage environment for the collections. This will stabilize the material and slow the rate of inherent deterioration. It is extremely important that the physical condition of the collection storage containers and area be as non-destructive as possible. White cotton gloves should be worn whenever collection material is handled, and only pencils should be permitted.

Now is the time to address these issues by developing a plan to appropriately care for

the material.

### OPTIONS

The May Memorial Unitarian Society has several decisions to make concerning its historically significant archives. *Documenting Community Organizations* provides some useful discussion about the implications of maintaining an in-house archives.

The historical records and documents currently housed in the basement, the multi-use room on the first floor, and in the loft area are at risk. The storage conditions are well below archival standards both in terms of micro-climate and storage containers. In addition, access by researchers would present problems. Who would retrieve the records, where would researchers work, who would monitor research use, and who would maintain the collection's order are just the biggest questions that need to be raised. In addition, considerable funding for collection management and preservation would be required, along with secure and appropriate space for storage and research use.

Given the space limitations currently faced by the Society, an alternative to continued on-site storage should be considered. There are several potential candidates for relocating

the collection, and two different approaches to such a transfer. Syracuse University's Special Collections Department at the Arents Research Library would certainly be an appropriate location for such a collection. Their collecting policy supports the acquisition of locally significant materials and their research facility is professionally run. The Onondaga Historical Association would be an appropriate location but the organization is facing budgetary constraints of its own which could limit the accessibility of the collection to researchers. The Onondaga County Public Library's Local History Department would be another potential location.

The method of transfer also must be considered. A direct transfer of title would mean the May Memorial Unitarian Society would relinquish any future claim to the records. Placing the records on long-term deposit would be an alternative. Most archival repositories are willing to negotiate the terms of a transfer but it should be borne in mind that the repository is incurring costs in processing and storing the collection which they may not be willing to do without clear title to the materials.

### CONCLUSION

The May Memorial Unitarian Society must begin to realistically address the issues raised above. A decision to care for its own archives means a commitment in time, space, and

funds that may not be possible. Conversations with alternative repositories should begin soon.

Several things should be discussed during those conversations. The first is whether the repository is willing to accept the materials and under what conditions. The second is whether the Society is willing to donate or deposit and under what terms. The third is whether the Society is prepared to continue to transfer records to the collection as they pass a useful active retention life.

The May Memorial Unitarian Society is taking an important first step by investigating the requirements of maintaining an archives. The members should not stop here.