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Miriam Usher Chrisman Papers

1878-2008 (*Bulk:* 1938-1995)
6 boxes (3 linear ft.)
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Read collection overview

A long-time historian at UMass Amherst, Miriam Usher Chrisman graduated from Smith College in 1941 and spent the war years as an intern and research assistant in various agencies, including the National Resources Planning Board. With the return of peace, Chrisman took masters degrees in economics (American University) and education (Smith), before earning her doctorate in history from Yale in 1962 for a study of Reformation-era Strasbourg. From Yale, she landed a faculty appointment at UMass Amherst, where she remained for her entire career. As a historian of the 16th century, she was awarded a Prix d'honneur by the Societe des Amis de Vieux Strasbourg, an honorary doctor of humane letters by Valparaiso University, and the Wilbur Cross Medal from Yale. Chrisman retired from active teaching in 1985 and remained an active friend of the Du Bois Library until her death in November 2008.

A faithful and colorful correspondent, the bulk of Miriam Chrisman's papers consist of letters written to family and friends stretching from her college days at Smith through the year before her death. The bulk of the correspondence is with her husband, Donald Chrisman, an orthopedic surgeon who was enrolled at Harvard Medical School during their courtship. Soon after the Chrismans married in November 1943, Donald left for active duty in the Navy on the U.S.S. Baldwin. The couple's war correspondence is unusually rich, offering insight on everything from the social responsibilities of married couples to their opinions on the progression of the war. Of particular note is a lengthy letter written by Donald during and immediately after D-Day in which he provides Miriam a real-time description of the events and his reactions as they unfold. Later letters document Miriam's extensive travels including a trip around the world.

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Background on Miriam Usher Chrisman



Miriam Chrisman (passport photo), 1964

A noted scholar of the social impact of the German Reformation, Miriam Usher Chrisman was born in Ithaca, New York, on May 20, 1920. With degrees from Smith College, American University, and Yale, she served for over thirty years on the faculty of the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, becoming a well-loved professor and treasured mentor to a generation of students.

From birth, Chrisman seemed destined for a career in academia. Chrisman's roots in the intellectual elite of Massachusetts ran deep -- an ancestor Hezekiah Usher, imported the press and type with which John Eliot's Indian Bible was printed -- and her father, Abbott Payson Usher, was a distinguished economic historian at Cornell and later Harvard. Graduating magna cum laude with an A.B. from Smith College (1941) shortly before the onset of the Second World War, Chrisman's plans for an academic career were delayed. After marrying Don Chrisman, a medical student at Harvard, on November 29, 1943, Miriam took a series of jobs with the federal government in Washington, D.C., while Don served on active duty with the Navy aboard the Gleaves-class destroyer, U.S.S. Baldwin in the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

At the end of the war, the Chrismans returned home to Massachusetts and settled in Northampton, where Donald began a practice in orthopedics at Cooley Dickinson Hospital while Miriam resumed her studies. After earning graduate degrees in education (Smith College, 1948) and economics (American University), she studied history at Yale (MA, 1959, and PhD, 1962), completing her dissertation, "Church and city in Strasbourg, 1480-1548: A study of the stages of the Reformation," in 1962, just prior to joining the History Department at UMass Amherst.

During her long career, Chrisman became a leading authority on the social history of the German Reformation, the city of Strasbourg forming the intellectual locus of much of her work. The first of her seven books, *Strasbourg and the Reform* (1967), was quickly recognized as a landmark in its field, balancing an understanding of both high and low culture with an appreciation for the impact of the Reformation on the lives of the non-elite. In later works such as *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599* (1982) and *Conflicting Visions of Reform: German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets, 1519-30* (1996), Chrisman explored the impact of print culture in German cities during the early Reformation, again with an eye on social movements and the common people. An avid world traveler, her several research trips to Strasbourg influenced her life in other ways: her experiences there and in other locations abroad led her husband, Donald, to embark on a second career in archaeology upon his retirement from medicine.

Widely recognized for her scholarship, Chrisman was awarded the Prix d'honneur by the Societe des Amis de Vieux Strasbourg, the Wilbur Cross Medal from Yale University, and received an honorary doctor of humane letters from Valparaiso University. She was twice awarded the UMass Chancellor's Medal, first as a Distinguished Faculty Lecturer in 1985 and again in 2000 for her support of the Du Bois Library. In her honor, the Society for Reformation Research established the Miriam U. Chrisman Travel Fellowship, which provides grants of \$1500 every other year to support advanced graduate students in conducting research abroad. Chrisman formally retired in 1985, but continued to teach for almost a decade more.

Donald Chrisman died in 2002, with Miriam following on November 17, 2008. They are survived by two sons, Nicholas Ramsey Chrisman and David Abbott Chrisman.

Scope of collection

The Chrisman collection details the life of an affluent, well-educated, New England woman, Miriam Usher Chrisman. Beginning in the late 1930s while Chrisman was in her late teens, the collection contains extensive personal and (to a lesser degree) professional correspondence throughout her life. Of particular note are a dense series of courtship letters written during the Second World War mixing a budding romance with information from the front lines in Europe. A series of meticulous continuous account books, beginning in 1944 and stretching through the 1990s, outline the daily aspects of wartime life, along with the complexities facing a new bride in arranging the domestic sphere of her new life.

Chrisman was unusually well-traveled, as illustrated in a copious series of notes, itineraries, and receipts from both professional and personal trips. The three major research trips to Strasbourg are particularly well documented, augmented by extensive personal correspondence during that trip with her two sons. In its most recent years, the collection focuses on Chrisman's personal life, with ample correspondence demonstrating a rich, cherished relationship with her grandchildren. Overall, Chrisman comes across as a highly organized, detail-oriented person who spent significant time planning and organizing her life.

Series descriptions

[Series 1. Correspondence](#)

1878-2008

73 folders (1.5 linear feet)

Series 1 contains extensive correspondence between Chrisman and the people she held close throughout her lifetime. Beginning with a letter from Donald Chrisman's mother in 1878, this series spans Miriam Chrisman's entire life, beginning during Chrisman's college years at Smith (roughly 1937 to 1941) and ending with several letters from a niece in 2008. The earliest letters detail Chrisman's daily experiences in college and her involvement with the American Friends Service Committee in Northampton.

Of particular note are the courtship, engagement, and newlywed letters between Miriam and her husband, Donald Chrisman. Not only do these letters reveal the couple's feelings for one another, they offer a glimpse into the conventions of courtship and marriage in World War Two-era America, even to the details of how they planned to arrange the furniture in their new home. Their letters after the wedding are equally interesting, written while Donald was deployed on the destroyer, U.S.S. Baldwin, off the European coast. This extensive correspondence hints at the feelings of thousands of wartime couples, and offers a perspective on censorship issues of the day -- many of Donald's letters were modified by the United States government to ensure they revealed nothing sensitive -- all while providing insight into the experiences of husband in the theatre of conflict and wife on the home front. Of special note is Donald's long and unusually detailed letter regarding his experiences on D-Day, outlined hour-by-hour, and a letter reflecting on Donald's experiences at Yalta.

After the war, the focus of Chrisman's correspondence returns to her educational pursuits, from discussing her fears at writing her first thesis to letters to her publisher for her second book. There is extensive correspondence with her two sons, Abbott and Nick, from their childhood days at boarding school and camp to their collegiate years and early adulthood. Also of note is Chrisman's correspondence home during three research trips to Strasbourg: rather remarkably, each trip resulted in a new book on the German Reformation. Finally, this series contains some correspondence between Don and his parents in his earlier years, including his acceptance into Harvard Medical School.

[Series 2. Travel](#)

1938-2001

23 folders

A rambling record of Chrisman's world travels, series two begins with detailed notes of museum trips around the Mediterranean in 1952, and continues for almost five decades, including a round-the-world trip in 1972, an early visit to the newly opened Peoples Republic of China in 1982, travel to Russia in 1985, and the Spice Route in 1985. The series also contains a wonderfully detailed diary of a summer-long trip to France.

The series is arranged chronologically.

[Series 3. Family](#)

1930-2008

20 folders

Series three is a somewhat scattered collection of family memorabilia from the Chrismans' lives. Several folders of postcards and Christmas cards, mostly undated, join a small number of professional and community honors, such as an award for volunteer service from the University of Massachusetts Library and newspaper clippings of Don Chrisman's achievements. The series includes an autobiography written by Don in 1935 as well as an audio cassette of Don's father's memories of post-Civil War politics in Missouri. A large portion of the series consists of home publications and artwork made by her grandchildren. One of the most fascinating items in this series is a folder of Christmas Lists, with corresponding receipts, from 1991 through 2000.

[Series 4. Account books](#)

1944-1995

43 folders

Series four consists of a continuous set of household account books from 1944 through 1985 kept by Miriam Chrisman and her husband, Don. Beginning in 1944, these accounts detail annual household budgets, rent or mortgage payments, taxes including some years' W2 forms, food, clothing, entertainment, travel, and education expenses among others. In addition to tracking daily costs, Ms. Chrisman detailed the items needed to set up a household after their marriage in extensive, meticulous lists within many of the earlier account books. She also kept detailed size, item, and cost information for both her and her husband's clothing for many years. There is limited information as well on the costs associated with operating her husband's medical practice.

As with nearly every aspect of this collection, Chrisman proves herself once again to be a highly organized,

meticulous individual through the consistency and detail of these account books. As their professional lives advance, their movement into the upper middle class can be tracked by extensive line item details regarding luxury expenditures, charitable giving, and professional development costs.

Inventory

Series 1. Correspondence

1878-2008

1.5 linear feet

Correspondence: Miriam Chrisman notes

1878

Box 1: 1

Correspondence: Travels in France and Spain

1927

Box 1: 2

Correspondence: Father to Miriam and Eunice

1929

Box 1: 3

Correspondence: Don Chrisman

1932

Box 1: 4

Correspondence: To Miriam

1935

Box 1: 5

Correspondence

1936

Box 1: 6

Correspondence

1937

Box 1: 7

Correspondence: Miriam to her family; AFSE

1938

Box 1: 8

Correspondence: College: Miriam and Family

1939

Box 1: 9

Correspondence

1940

Box 1: 10

Correspondence: College: Miriam and Family; Courtship

1941

Box 1: 11

Correspondence: Courtship

1942

Box 1: 12

Correspondence: Engagement

1943 January

Box 1: 13

Correspondence

1943 February

Box 1: 14

Correspondence

1943 March-April

Box 1: 15

Correspondence

1943 May-July

Box 1: 16

Correspondence: Charleston Naval Yard, Casablanca I [August-September 25], Casablanca II [October 15-November 24]

1943 August-October

Box 1: 17

Correspondence: The Wedding

1943 November- December

Box 1: 18

Correspondence

1944 January-March

Box 1: 19

Correspondence: Lead up to D-day

1944 April-May
Box 1: 20
Correspondence: D-day
1944 June
Box 1: 21
Correspondence
1944 June-July
Box 1: 22
Correspondence
1944 August
Box 1: 23
Correspondence
1944 September
Box 1: 24
Correspondence
1944 October-December
Box 1: 25
Correspondence: Yalta, Washington
1945-1946
Box 1: 26
Correspondence
1948
Box 1: 27
Correspondence
1949
Box 1: 28
Correspondence
1950
Box 1: 29
Correspondence
1951-1955
Box 1: 30
Correspondence: From Father; Miriam Chrisman's professional/academic advancements
1956-1960
Box 1: 31
Correspondence
1961
Box 1: 32
Correspondence
1962
Box 1: 33
Correspondence: Abbott, Cottonwood Gulch, Pasquany, photos
1963
Box 2: 1
Correspondence: Strasbourg
1964 May-August
Box 2: 2
Correspondence
1964 September-December
Box 2: 3
Correspondence: Choate
1965
Box 2: 4
Correspondence
1966
Box 2: 5
Correspondence
1967
Box 2: 6
Correspondence
1968
Box 2: 7
Correspondence: Strasbourg
1969
Box 2: 8
Correspondence
1970 January-February
Box 2: 9

Correspondence
1970 March
Box 2: 10
Correspondence
1970 April-May
Box 2: 11
Correspondence
1970 June-August
Box 2: 12
Correspondence
1970 September-December
Box 2: 13
Correspondence
1971 January-August
Box 2: 14
Correspondence
1971 September
Box 2: 15
Correspondence
1971 October
Box 2: 16
Correspondence
1971 November-December
Box 2: 17
Correspondence
1972
Box 2: 18
Correspondence: Strasbourg
1973
Box 2: 19
Correspondence: Strasbourg
1975
Box 2: 20
Correspondence
1976
Box 2: 21
Correspondence
1977
Box 2: 22
Correspondence
1978
Box 2: 23
Correspondence
1979
Box 2: 24
Correspondence
1980
Box 2: 25
Correspondence
1981
Box 2: 26
Correspondence: Strasbourg
1983 February
Box 2: 27
Correspondence: Grandchildren
1988-1990
Box 2: 28
Correspondence
1992
Box 2: 29
Correspondence
1993
Box 2: 30
Correspondence: Abbott
1994
Box 3: 1
Correspondence
1995

Box 3: 2
Correspondence
1996

Box 3: 3
Correspondence
1997

Box 3: 4
Correspondence
1998

Box 3: 5
Correspondence
2004

Box 3: 6
Correspondence: Arlene
2005

Box 3: 7
Correspondence
2006

Box 3: 8
Correspondence
2007

Box 3: 9
Correspondence
2008

Box 3: 10
Series 2. Travel
1938-2001
23 folders
Correspondence: Don Chrisman
1938-1954

Box 3: 11
Travel: Turkey, Crete, Greece, Palermo, Naples, Paris
1952

Box 3: 12
Travel: Three Mile
1955-1958

Box 3: 13
Travel: World tour preparations
1971

Box 3: 14
Travel: World tour, part 1
1972

Box 3: 15
Travel: World tour, part 2
1972

Box 3: 16
Travel: World tour, part 3
1972

Box 4: 1
Travel: China, part 1
1982

Box 4: 2
Travel: China, part 2
1982

Box 4: 3
Travel: Russia
1985

Box 4: 4
Travel: Indonesia
1986

Box 4: 5
Travel: Spice Route
1986

Box 4: 6
Travel: Spain
1987

Box 4: 7
Travel: Pacific Northwest

1989
Box 4: 8
Travel: Strasbourg
1990
Box 4: 9
Travel: Florence
1997
Box 4: 10
Travel: Southwest
1998
Box 4: 11
Travel: Saint Barths
2000
Box 4: 12
Travel: Tucson
2001
Box 4: 13
Travel Diary: Scotland, London, Brussels, Italy
Box 4: 14
Travel Diary: France
Box 4: 15
Travel: Notes on the British Museum
Box 4: 16
Travel: Passports
1964
Box 4: 17
Series 3. Family
1930-2008
20 folders
Family: Alfred Mainzer Postcards
2006-2008
Box 5: 1
Family: Christmas Lists
1972-2000
Box 5: 2
Family: Christmas and other Cards
Box 5: 3
Family: The Chronicles of Simon De Montfort
Box 5: 4
Family: Don Chrisman in the News
1991-1996
Box 5: 5
Family: Don Chrisman's Autobiography
1935
Box 5: 6
Family: Don Chrisman's Official Matters
1942-1943
Box 5: 7
Family: Ellen Thompson Weiss: Memories of Growing up at Brushwood
1930-1937
Box 5: 8
Family: Gocky Newsletter and Letters from Lindsey
Box 5: 9
Family: Gramps Chrisman Oral History
Box 5: 10
Family: Grandchildren, Part 1
Box 5: 11
Family: Grandchildren, Part 2
Box 5: 12
Family: Library Award 2000
Box 5: 13
Family: Nick's School in France
Box 5: 14
Family: Notes on Archiving Papers
Box 5: 15
Family: Notes for Career Day
Box 5: 16
Family: Obituary of Miriam's Father

1947
Box 5: 17
Family: The Peasant's Alphabet
Box 5: 18
Family: Photograph Cards
Box 5: 19
Family: St. John's Church Bulletin
1992
Box 5: 20
Series 4. Account books
1944-1995
43 folders
Accounts
1944
Box 6
Accounts
1945-1946
Box 6
Accounts
1947
Box 6
Accounts
1948
Box 6
Accounts
1949
Box 6
Office
1949
Box 6
Accounts
1950
Box 6
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Accounts

1985
Box 6
Account Books
1993-1995
Box 6

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Chrisman, 1999.

Processing Information

Processed by Rusty Annis, Yolanda Clarke, and Catherine Sebastian, December 2010.

Bibliography

Chrisman's major published works (all housed in the Du Bois Library) include:

- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Strasbourg and the Reform: A Study in the Process of Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. Call no.: BR848.S7 C45
- Miriam Usher Chrisman (editor, with Otto Grundler). *Social Groups and Religious Ideas in the Sixteenth Century*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1978. Call no.: CB367.C66
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Bibliography of Strasbourg Imprints, 1480-1599*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. Call no.: Z2184.S83 C47
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. Call no.: DC801.S77 C47
- Miriam U. Chrisman, "Printing and the Evolution of Lay Culture in Strasbourg, 1480-1599," *The German People and the Reformation*, Edited by R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cornell University Press, 1988).
- Phillip N. Bebb and Sherrin Marshall, eds. *The Process of Change in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of Miriam Usher Chrisman*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988. (Festschrift for Chrisman). Call no.: D231.P74 1988
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Conflicting Visions of Reform: German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets, 1519-1530*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996. Call no.: BR355.P36 C47 1996

Related Material

In addition to the papers of several of Chrisman's colleagues in the History Department at UMass Amherst, SCUA holds the papers of [Children's Aid and Family Service \(MS 008\)](#) , of which Chrisman was President in the mid-1950s.

Language:

English

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Search terms

Subjects

- China--Description and travel.
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- France--Description and travel.
- Historians--Massachusetts.
- Smith College--Students.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst--Faculty.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst. Department of History.

- World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--France--Normandy.
- World War, 1939-1945.

Contributors

- Chrisman, Miriam Usher. [main entry]
- Chrisman, Donald.

Genres and formats

- Photographs.
- Watercolor painting.

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