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Common Reader Bookshop Collection

1977-1997

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Co-owned by Dorothy Johnson and Doris Abramson, the Common Reader Bookshop in New Salem, Massachusetts, specialized in women's studies materials, or in their words, "books by, for, and about women." A couple for almost 40 years and married in 2004, Johnson and Abramson opened the store in 1977 and as they grew, relocated to the town's old Center School building across the street in 1983. The shop closed for business in 2000.

Comprised of two scrapbooks and folder of ephemera, the collection highlights the Common Reader Bookshop not only as a place for buying antiquarian books, but also for the community it fostered.

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Background on Common Reader Bookshop

During the spring 1977, life partners Dorothy Johnson and Doris Abramson renovated a shed attached to their home in New Salem, Mass., and opened the Common Reader Bookshop. Despite being located in a relatively obscure -- and decidedly rural -- community, the bookshop became a destination for scholars and collectors of rare and antiquarian books in women's history. Much of their business was done by mail, rather than drop ins, but Common Reader also became a hub for a community of women, fostered by the couple's annual women's parties. In 1983, with their business growing, they relocated across the street into the town's former Center School building.

Apart from operating the bookshop, one of a handful of businesses in New Salem, Johnson and Abramson became stalwarts of small town life, contributing to community theatricals and other local cultural events. An alumna of both Mount Holyoke and Smith Colleges, Johnson had worked briefly as a teacher and then as an editor at major New York publishing houses prior to opening Common Reader, while Abramson worked for many years as a Professor in Speech, and later Theater, at her alma mater, UMass Amherst. The couple were among the first to take advantage of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2004. They decided to close Common Reader in 2000, and Abramson died after a brief illness eight years later.



Dorothy Johnson and Doris Abramson, with cats, on the porch of their New Salem home.

Scope of collection

Comprised of two scrapbooks and folder of ephemera, the collection highlights the Common Reader Bookshop not only as a place for buying antiquarian books, but also for the community it fostered.

Inventory

Common Reader Bookshop scrapbook 1
1977-1980

Includes images of the shop prior to and after renovation, images of Johnson and Abramson

Common Reader Bookshop scrapbook 2
1981-1985

Includes images of the Woman's party 1981; the bookshop and town common; Johnson's and Abramson's cats; Morris dancers on the New Salem town common; news clippings; a party for "EZ." 1984; and a dinner for May Sarton, 1985.

Common Reader Bookshop ephemera
1981-1985

Common Reader Bookshop bookmarks
undated

Common Reader Bookshop flier
ca.1980

Literary Volunteers of Orange-Athol
1996-1997

Letters regarding publication of Cathy Stanton's novel *Trouble on the Wing*, featuring an extract from the novel referencing the Common Reader Bookshop, and a drawing of the interior of the bookshop.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Doris Abramson and Dorothy Johnson, via Joyce Berkman, Jan. 2005 (2005-014).

Related Material

SCUA also houses the papers of Doris Abramson (FS 127), co-owner of the Common Reader.

Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, Feb. 2019.

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Copyright and Use (More information)

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Search terms

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Cats--Massachusetts--New Salem--Photographs
Johnson, Dorothy
New Salem (Mass.)--History

Contributors

Common Reader Bookshop [main entry]

Genres and formats

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