

## Western Massachusetts Library Advocates Records

1898-2011

8 boxes (3.75 linear ft.)

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Situated in a region known for its progressive spirit, the Western Massachusetts Library Advocates was established as the Western Massachusetts Library Club in 1898 to respond to the unique needs of librarians overseeing small or rural libraries, and to foster camaraderie among local colleagues. Almost immediately, however, the club expanded its focus, taking positions on issues ranging from modern library practices to national legislation, and leading the way in the expansion of services for public libraries, all while maintaining its identity as an advocate for local libraries and librarians.

The collection is richest in records that document the early history of the club including detailed meeting minutes, news clippings,

programs, and circulars. Beginning in the late 1960s, the club's activities are captured primarily in membership lists and meeting notices and programs. Taken together, the records trace the growth of the WMLC for more than 100 years from its establishment to the present.

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## Background on Western Massachusetts Library Advocates

At the end of the nineteenth century, librarianship in the United States underwent a dramatic transformation as the private subscription libraries that had long catered to the needs of scholars and the wealthy were rapidly supplanted by free public libraries that provided services to a more diverse population, including the working class, recent immigrants, and children. Just as libraries began to grow in number and size, the librarians who supervised the buildings and maintained their collections changed too. With the establishment of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1876 and the first library school in 1887, librarians increasingly began to identify themselves as professionals, and began applying modern standards to their traditional work. Within two decades of the founding of the ALA, more than 100 library clubs had been established throughout the country in the spirit of professionalization and the Progressive spirit of the age. The Western Massachusetts Library Club (WMLC) was one such organization.



Deerfield public library.

Hoping to bring together librarians from the western half of the Commonwealth, W.I. Fletcher broached the idea of forming a new library club in the spring of 1898. A group of local librarians discussed his proposal in a meeting held at the art museum in Springfield on June 21, and they must have concluded that a club addressing topics of concern and interest to librarians in western Massachusetts was indeed necessary. Within four months, the club was organized, a constitution written and officers elected, and the group held its first meeting. Even more remarkably, the great energy that went into forming the club did not abate: within its first eight years of existence, the group held 23 meetings.

Despite the fact that WMLC was formed specifically to address the needs of local librarians, they immediately established a close affiliation with the state-level Massachusetts Library Club. Members of the local club, however, recognized that many of the issues faced by their colleagues in small or rural libraries were not shared by their counterparts in the eastern part of the state. The statewide club was centered in eastern Massachusetts, was focused primarily on libraries and librarians there, and most of its meetings were held in or near Boston. Because travel to Boston was a barrier to so many librarians in the west, WMLC made an effort not to repeat the mistake of limiting the location of their meetings to one or two of the larger towns in the region, opting instead to schedule meetings in towns throughout the western portion of the state so that any librarian who wished to attend would be able to make at least some of the meetings. To ease the burden of traveling to and from meetings, as late as 1937, notices were distributed in advance of assembly meetings that included information about train and trolley schedules.

In addition to regular professional meetings, the WMLC convened Library Institutes twice a year throughout the region. These informal programs were targeted at connecting the public with their local libraries, and each was designed to address specific issues of interest to the neighborhood in which it was held. These outreach efforts were an integral part of the club's activities, with early institutes focusing on topics as diverse as libraries as educators, the helpful influence of books, the farmer and the library, and the comparative advantages of a private house or a public building for a library. The latter topic may have been prompted by the surge in new library construction in western Massachusetts at the turn of the 20th century -- Conway, Sunderland, Granville, Brimfield, Southampton, and Tyringham all built libraries within the first five years of the new century.

The progressive spirit embodied in the group's public institutes was also reflected in an increase of services offered to library users. At the forefront of these reforms, both nationally and locally, was Charles A. Cutter, librarian of the Forbes Library in Northampton. The first president of WMLC and always an active member, Cutter was remembered by his colleagues at the time of his death in 1903 as having led the way in western Massachusetts in expanding library services to the public. Believing that the books in a public library were collected to be used, Cutter was said to have "no patience with methods and regulations which tend to restrict rather than encourage their use." Wishing that every public library would lend any book to any person for any period of time, Cutter led the push to extend hours of operation, open the library stacks to browsing, build a separate children's room, and establish a program for interlibrary loan.

Determined that the library had to be protected as the "people's university," it wasn't long before members of WMLC began taking positions on proposed legislation that might in any way impede the mission of the public library. As early as January 20, 1906, the club held a special meeting to discuss the proposed amendment to the U.S. copyright law that would prohibit public

libraries and other educational institutions from importing books without first receiving the written consent of copyright holders in America. On behalf of the 41 public libraries it represented, the WMLC wrote a resolution objecting to this amendment, which in essence would have prohibited libraries from importing materials due to the labor, time, and expense involved in attempting to secure permission. Afraid such an amendment would hinder their ability to provide the best books to their patrons in the shortest time, the club sent their resolution to the Librarian of Congress, to library representatives at the copyright conference, and to all state library commissions, associations, clubs, and the leading library journals. From this point forward, the WMLC would take stands on issues relating to libraries, ranging from public financing to the importance of instructing teachers on the value and use of libraries.

As they have for more than a century, the Western Massachusetts Library Club continues to meet regularly, and the group continues to undertake outreach efforts to promote libraries and the field of librarianship. Their assemblies have generally included a business meeting, followed by discussions of library topics ranging from remodeling library buildings to reference services for academic libraries, and meetings typically conclude with a presentation on a literary, historical, or cultural topic. From the beginning, the group has expanded their scope to consider topics outside of the library field, a practice reflective of their understanding of the important role that librarians fill in the United States. Members of WMLC have never been satisfied to serve their patrons by increasing their library skills alone. Instead they have always tried to serve the public by broadening their knowledge across all fields, just as professors of the people's university should. After the merger of the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System into a statewide system in 2010, the Western Mass Library Advocates assumed the responsibility of continuing the work of the Friends of WMRLS and the WMLC.

## Scope of collection

The records of Western Massachusetts Library Advocates are richest in quantity and quality during the earliest days of the club from 1902 through 1927. The minute books from this period are especially revealing, containing not only summaries of the group's meetings, but also news clippings that feature articles on library issues from local papers, meeting notices and programs, circulars for their library institutes, and resolutions drawn up in response to state and national legislation. Among these records are the club's annual lists of recommended books for small libraries distributed throughout western Massachusetts. An examination of these lists suggests just how progressive the club was, not only in pioneering new library services, but in recommending some of the most modern and forward-thinking works from the fields of sociology, religion, and natural science for even the smallest of local public libraries.

Interested in reducing barriers that prevented the public from taking full advantage of their libraries, members of WMLC were also interested in examining barriers within the library community and identifying those obstacles that stood in the way of librarians serving the public. In 1909 the WMLC conducted a survey of its 41 member libraries to try to identify the most salient issues and concerns confronting them. The collection includes more than 20 completed questionnaires, offering real insight into the communities these librarians served and the ways in which library professionals connected with their users. The survey's questions ranged from whether a library held books for foreigners and in which languages, to how librarians got their users interested in non-fiction works, and from how a librarian brought the library to the attention of the people, to whether a librarian was restricted by the trustees.

Another indication of the important role public libraries played in their communities during the early 20th century is found in one of the club's minute books. A 1917 notice invites members to a special wartime meeting to address the government's call to U.S. libraries to assist in raising \$1,000,000 for the construction of libraries at military training camps. Librarians were called on, in particular, to encourage their communities to support this campaign, and librarians were asked to get their users involved by collecting books and magazines for the camps, making scrapbooks and picture books for wounded soldiers, collecting photographs of local soldiers, and preserving all local war materials for historical interest.

While the first two decades of the club's activities are well documented, there is a noticeable dearth of records documenting the period between the 1930s and the 1950s. Indeed, the bulk of the records for the years leading up to and following World War II consist merely of meeting notices and programs, and while these items certainly capture issues of importance to the library profession, they do not contain the wealth of detail found in the earlier reports of the secretary. The collection picks up again in the late 1960s, capturing WMLC activities through meeting minutes and membership lists, which trace shifts in the club's membership from the earliest days to the present, albeit with periodic gaps. The membership lists compiled during the 1960s-1970s also include lists of the officers, affiliated institutions, and the club's constitution with current amendments. More recently, the group's records reflect a renewed interest both in preserving the history of the club and in maintaining and increasing membership.

## Inventory

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Attendance register

1901-1909

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Attendance register

1909-1910

Box 1: 2

Attendance register

1911-1925

Box 1: 3

Attendance register

1926-1950

Box 1: 4

Board meeting minutes

1989-2006

Box 1: 5

Book list

1927

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A list of books found to be most in demand in the libraries of western Massachusetts.

Bylaws and constitution

ca. 1984-2004

Box 1: 7

Correspondence

1900-1901

Box 1: 8

Correspondence

1942-1946

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Correspondence

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Correspondence

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Correspondence

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Correspondence

1997-2006, undated

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Histories

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Two club histories, "W.M.L.C.: A Backward Look" by Eunice M. Bates and "100th Anniversary, 1898-1998."

Library legislation

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Membership applications

2004-2006

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Membership list

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Membership list

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Minutes

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Minutes

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Newspaper clippings

1976, 1993-2003

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Newspaper clippings: possible speakers

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Notes

1978, undated

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Obituaries and memorials

1943, 1991-2005

Box 3: 17

Officers duties

undated

Box 3: 18

Descriptions of the duties of the president, first vice-president, corresponding secretary, recording secretary, treasurer, auditor, and archivist.

Officers list

1966-1969

Box 3: 19

Listing club officers from 1941 until the late 1960s.

Officers list

1997

Box 3: 20

Updated listing of club officers.

Pen

1998

Box 5

Commemorating the WMLC100th anniversary.

Photographs: meetings

ca. 1977-1986

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Photographs: meetings

2001-2004

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Photographs: retirements

1980-1986

Box 3: 23

Printed material

1901-1929

Box 3: 24

Includes an issue of *The Massachusetts Library Club Bulletin*, a Mount Hermon School visitor's guide, a *Northfield Schools Bulletin*, and library articles.

Printed material

1945-1982

Box 3: 25

Includes an Old Colony Library Club program, an MLA conference program, *Holyoke Public Library 1870-1970*, and a *Holyoke Public Library and Museum Newsletter*.

Printed material

1990-2006

Box 3: 26

Includes library brochures and pamphlets, postcards, and maps.

Ribbons

1963

Box 5

Commemorating the WMLC 65th anniversary.

Retirements: announcement and tributes

1981-2002

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Survey: correspondence

1909

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Survey: questionnaires

1909

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Survey: questionnaires

1909

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Survey: questionnaires

1909

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Survey: results

1909

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Survey

ca. 2003-2004

Box 4: 7

Treasurer's account book

1936-1939

Box 4: 8

Treasurer's bank book

1926-1940

Box 4: 9

Treasurer's bank book

1940-1991

Box 4: 10

Treasurer's report

1907-1938

Box 6

Treasurer's report

2005

Box 4: 11

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Acquired from the Western Massachusetts Library Club in 2006 and later.

### Processing Information

Collection processed by SCUA staff in December 2007.

### Language:

English

### Copyright and Use (More information )

Please use the following format when citing materials from this collection:



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## Search terms

### Subjects

Librarians--United States

Libraries--Massachusetts

Library Science--Massachusetts--History--20th century

Library science--Massachusetts--History--19th century

Public libraries--Massachusetts--History

Western Massachusetts Library Advocates

Western Massachusetts Library Club

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