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Elizabeth Henderson Papers

1967-2007

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A farmer, activist, and writer, Elizabeth Henderson has exerted an enormous influence on the movement for organic and sustainable agriculture since the 1970s. Although Henderson embarked on an academic career after completing a doctorate at Yale on the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1974, by 1980, she abandoned academia for Unadilla Farm in Gill, Mass., where she learned organic techniques for raising vegetables. Relocating to Rose Valley Farm in Wayne County, NY, in 1989, she helped

establish Genesee Valley Organic CSA (GVOCSA), one of the first in the country, and she continued the relationship with the CSA after founding Peacework Organic Farm in Newark, NY, in 1998. Deeply involved in the organic movement at all levels, Henderson was a founding member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) in Massachusetts, has served on the Board of Directors for NOFA NY, the NOFA Interstate Council, SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) Northeast, and many other farming organizations at the state, regional, and national level, and she has been an important voice in national discussions on organic standards, fair trade, and agricultural justice. Among other publications, Henderson contributed to and edited *The Real Dirt: Farmers Tell about Organic and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast* and co-wrote *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (1999, with Robyn Van En) and *Whole Farm Planning: Ecological Imperatives, Personal Values, and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast* (2003, with Karl North).

Offering insight into the growth of the organic agriculture movement and the organizations that have sustained it, the Henderson Papers document her involvement with NOFA, SARE, and the GVOCSA, along with her work to establish organic standards and promote organic practices. Henderson's broad social and political commitments are represented by a rich set of letters from her work educating prisoners in the late 1970s, including correspondence with Tiyo Atallah Salah El and John Clinkscales, and with the American Independent Movement in New Haven during the early 1970s, including a nearly complete run of the *AIM Bulletin* and its successor *Modern Times*.

See similar SCUA collections:

Massachusetts (West)

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Background on Elizabeth Henderson

Activist, educator, farmer, Elizabeth Henderson is perhaps best known for her contributions to the movement for organic and sustainable agriculture. Henderson's first foray into farming was at Unadilla Farm in Gill, Massachusetts. In 1979 she and a group of friends purchased 65 acres of land and almost immediately began the process of relocating their lives to the countryside. Over a period of two years Henderson tied up loose ends at Boston University where she was a professor of Russian literature and culture, and an instructor in the university's Prison Education Program. Through the program Henderson taught inmates at Norfolk, a correctional institution in the Boston area; work she found both meaningful and rewarding. After leaving her position at BU, she applied for a job at Beacon College. The school, which was nontraditional and had no campus, assigned students to Program Advisors who created curricula and matched the students with tutors; students and tutors then communicated via letters and written worksheets. Henderson was hired as a Program Advisor, an ideal position for her because it allowed her to work flexible hours.

While she was getting settled at Beacon College, Henderson was also easing into an entirely new lifestyle at Unadilla. The land did not come with even the basics necessities, such as plumbing, electricity, or housing, so the landowners' first priority was to make the farm habitable. For months they slept in tents while constructing their house (which they incorporated into a hillside), a barn, and a greenhouse. When the plumbing was installed and the floors finished, the real work began. During the construction process, the farmers began cultivating the land, but they were now able to devote the majority of their time to farming. Unadilla was to be a place for likeminded people to gather and trade information, ideas, and tips on farming. It was what the group referred to as a "skills exchange" farm--the learning experience was the most valuable commodity they offered. They farmed on only 15 of the 65 acres, as the rest was covered in brush, although they had plans to make more land available by clearing it in the future. Most of the crops gathered during the growing season was for the farmers themselves, but the little extra they had was sold to neighbors and local businesses.

In 1988, Henderson left Unadilla to accept a position in New York on Rose Valley Farm. She partnered up with David Stern who had been managing Rose Valley organically since 1979. Together they worked 25 acres out of 60 acres. The farm had been certified organic by NOFA in 1986, and in 1995 they started the process of becoming a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organization. They mainly supplied produce to the Genesee Valley Organic Community Supported Agriculture (GVOCSA) program, but they also provided local stores and restaurants with fresh vegetables. During the winter when the farm work was reduced, Liz taught and wrote. Henderson eventually published two books: *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* and *Whole-Farm Planning: Ecological Imperatives, Personal Values, and Economics*, and she edited a handful of others, including *The Real Dirt: Farmers Tell about Organic and Low-Input Practices in the Northeast*.

After nearly a decade at Rose Valley, Henderson embraced another new opportunity: she became a full-time farmer on land she was granted through the GVOCSA. She and her farming partner, Greg Palmer, had access to 15 acres of land which they named

Peacework Organic Farm. Palmer and Henderson had a history of working together--Greg had been an apprentice at Rose Valley since 1991. Like Rose Valley, Peacework is a CSA located in New York. Community members sign up for volunteer shifts and in exchange for their labor they receive a portion of the vegetables grown that season; in addition to the shares that are allotted to individuals and families, a large percentage of the crops are set aside and go to the GVOCSA. Henderson enjoys personally knowing the people she grows for and she likes for these same people to be involved in the cultivating process. She believes it is important for people to understand what is involved in getting food from the fields to their tables. Henderson continues to operate Peacework Organic Farm.

Throughout her career in agriculture, Henderson has been deeply engaged in the organic movement at all levels. She was a founding member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) in Massachusetts, has served on the Board of Directors for NOFA NY, the NOFA Interstate Council, SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) Northeast, and she made significant contributions to national discussions on organic standards, fair trade, and agricultural justice.

Scope of collection

The Elizabeth Henderson Papers documents her activities in both the organic and sustainable farming movements as well as in other areas, such as prison education and the American Independent Movement (AIM). Henderson was a founding member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) and served on their board of directors; she kept nearly all of the organizational materials related to her involvement with NOFA. Outside of her agricultural work, Henderson was involved in prison education programs and saved years of correspondence between herself and several students whom she taught. She also kept issues of newsletters and periodicals, including *The Bulletin of the American Independent Movement*, *Modern Times*, and *View From the Bottom*.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Agriculture

1980-2007

Materials in this series relate to Henderson's work in farming, both as a farmer and as a contributor to various local and national agricultural organizations. While some materials relate directly to the activities involved in managing a farm, such as plans for seed rotation and expense logs, the bulk of it relates to Henderson's involvement in organic and sustainable farming organizations. Because she was on the board of directors for the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY), Henderson acquired and saved much of the paperwork amassed over the fifteen years she was a member. This includes summaries of meetings, drafts of proposals, reports, conference agendas, and copies of the newsletter they produced entitled *NOFA-NY News*. Henderson also belonged to the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG). Her involvement in the Genesee Valley Organic Community Supported Agriculture (GVOCSA) is well documented, as well as plans having to do with the two farms associated with the organization (Rose Valley and Peacework).

Series 2. Activism

1967-1985

The activism series explores Henderson's involvement with activist activities outside of farming. Much of the material is associated with the American Independent Movement (AIM), a group that advocated for minorities and the poor living in cities where their needs weren't met. AIM produced a newspaper, *Modern Times*, and released additional bulletins twice a month. Henderson saved copies of most of these issues from the years 1970 to 1974. The publications cover topics ranging from indignation over fuel usage to commentary on housing problems in New Haven, Connecticut.



Brochure for Rose Valley Farm

Just as important to the series, though not as extensive as the AIM material, is a group of letters exchanged while Henderson was working with Beacon College. The correspondence covers a six year time period starting in the late 1970s when she began transitioning from Boston University to Beacon, and includes letters from six men, all of them prisoners. Although the majority of the content centers around school work, these letters contain the most personal information on Henderson found in the entire collection. Through letters to her students from Norfolk--Arthur Banks, John Clinkscales, and Kevin Hicks--Henderson reveals much about her transition into the farming world, and about the transition from BU to Beacon. Her correspondence with Joseph Mealey, a former student at Norfolk, is the most intimate in nature and follows a year of their friendship. Her last two correspondents, Norman Spencer and prison activist Tiyo Attallah Salah-El, were involved in the Prisoner Education Project associated with her work at Beacon. Also featured in this series is Henderson's mother, Laura Berliner, who tutored writing composition from 1980-1984. Though the letters make up only a small part of the collection, they are a rich resource for a more in depth look at personal aspects of Henderson's life.

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Contributors

Henderson, Elizabeth, 1943- **[main entry]**

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Clinkscale, John

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