Guide to the William Eaton Foster Papers
1877-1930

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Collection overview

Title: William Eaton Foster Papers

Date range: 1877-1930

Creator: Foster, William E. (William Eaton), 1851-1930

Extent: 2 box(es)

Abstract: The Foster papers contain William E. Foster’s personal papers during his tenure as librarian at the Providence Public Library. Included are the manuscripts for the many speeches and addresses given to various clubs and organizations on historical and literary matters, subjects Foster was especially interested in. There are also handwritten and typed manuscripts for books and articles written by Foster and some of his writings published in booklet form.

Language of materials: English

Repository: Providence Public Library, Special Collections

Collection number: MSS005

Scope & content

Using this collection will help researchers understand the early history of the Providence Public Librarian and learn about the history of librarianship. The Foster papers contain William E. Foster’s personal papers during his tenure as librarian at the Providence Public Library. Included are the manuscripts for the many speeches and addresses given to various clubs and organizations on historical and literary matters, subjects Foster was especially interested in. There are also handwritten and typed manuscripts for books and articles written by Foster and some of his writings published in booklet form.

In addition, the collection contains personal and professional correspondence with Foster’s peers and professional associates with the bulk of letters being to Mr. Clarence Sherman, Associate Librarian at the Providence Public Library, while Foster was on vacation. Other correspondence concerns Foster’s publications and other literary works as well as Foster’s
anniversaries, retirements, memorials and estate matters. Library historians may want to note that Foster was personally acquainted with the earliest members of the American Library Association and this collection includes personal letters written to Foster from R.R. Bowker.

Because Foster was librarian for over 50 years and dedicated to developing the library and librarianship, he received many acknowledgments and honors for his years of service. After Foster’s death, the library board corresponded with his wife about honoring Foster’s memory with several memorials, the plans for which are included here. The most unique item in the collection is a hand-drawn template for a book plate in Foster’s memory.

Foster enjoyed knowledge for knowledge’s sake and collected various miscellaneous materials that would benefit researchers, including his own newspaper articles and clippings about himself. Also included are items of note that Foster found interesting or useful.

**Arrangement**

The William Eaton Foster papers consists of four series:

- **Series I: Writings and Speeches.** This series contains three subseries: speeches and address, manuscripts and bound publications. Each subseries is arranged chronologically.
  - Subseries I: Speeches and Addresses
  - Subseries II: Manuscripts
  - Subseries III: Bound publications

- **Series II: Correspondence.** Contains personal and professional correspondence with Foster’s peers and professional associates with the bulk of letters being to Mr. Clarence Sherman, Associate Librarian at the Providence Public Library, while Foster was on vacation. Other correspondence in subseries concerns Foster’s publications and other literary works as well as Foster’s anniversaries, retirements, memorials and estate. Each subseries is arranged chronologically.
  - Subseries I: Sherman
  - Subseries II: Anniversaries, Honors, Memorials, Estate
  - Subseries III: Literary correspondence
  - Subseries IV: Miscellaneous correspondence

- **Series III: Commemorations, Memorials and Estate.** Includes acknowledgments and honors for Foster’s years of service. After Foster’s death, the library board corresponded with
his wife about honoring Foster's memory with several memorials, the plans for which are included here. Each subseries is arranged chronologically.

- Subseries I: Sherman
- Subseries II: Anniversaries, Honors, Memorials, Estate
- Subseries III: Literary
- Subseries IV: Miscellaneous

Series IV: Miscellaneous Items. Contains miscellaneous materials that don't fit in any of the other series. This consists of newspaper clippings of Foster's articles, clippings of items of note that Foster found interesting or useful, as well as reference materials and advertising materials for a talk Foster gave at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

- Subseries I: Books Belonging to Foster
- Subseries II: Clippings
- Subseries III: Miscellaneous reference materials
- Subseries IV: Miscellaneous materials

Biographical note

William Eaton Foster was born on June 2, 1851 in Brattleboro, Vermont to Joseph Coggin Foster and Abigail Eaton Foster. He was raised in Beverly, Massachusetts and attended Brown University (class of 1873) in Providence, Rhode Island. Foster skipped as many classes as possible in order to read books. After graduation, Foster worked as the librarian in the Hyde Park, Massachusetts Public Library and earned an M.A. from Brown in 1876. Foster furthered his knowledge by working as the cataloger of the Turner Free Library in Randolph, Massachusetts, a position which he held from 1876-1877. Foster continued his professional development by working at the Boston Public Library part-time for two years under the direction of Justin Winsor.

During the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, Foster attended the "Convention of Librarians" held October 4-6 at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, along with distinguished library professionals Justin Winsor (Boston Public, Harvard), William Frederick Poole (Chicago Public, Newberry), Charles Ammi Cutter (Boston Athenaeum), Melvil Dewey, and Richard Rogers Bowker. The convention marked the birth of the American Library Association, an organization which Foster continued to support throughout his life.

In 1877, Foster returned to Providence to assist in the opening of the Providence Public Library. He selected, classified and catalogued the library’s initial 10,000 volume collection.
On February 4, 1878, the first Providence Public Library opened on the second floor of the Butler Exchange building in downtown Providence with Foster serving as librarian. While working as the public librarian, Foster devised his own cataloging system unaware that Melvil Dewey was working on a similar system. Though an early adopter of Dewey’s classification system, Foster was unsatisfied and exchanged the 800s (language and Literature) with 300s (Social Sciences). In 1880, Foster directed the library’s move to larger quarters in street-level rooms below the Messers. Goff, Rice and Smith’s English and Classical School on Snow Street Foster then moved the collection to the present library building, on Washington Street, which was built specifically to house the library. The building opened on March 15, 1900 with Foster serving as librarian.

Foster was an innovator who believed firmly in library service. He aimed to meet the needs of the library patrons by providing them with specific services tailored to their specific needs. Foster introduced the segregation of activities to the library. The Providence Public Library was among the first to feature an information desk and a reference desk and reference room. Foster also introduced an art department, music Division, and foreign department all to serve the needs of the growing community. Foster also started the children’s department and developed social library services for grammar school children. Under Foster’s direction, the Providence Public Library grew to include departments for special collections, architecture, Civil War, printing; adult education as well as a standard library and business branch. The library also featured monthly Reference Texts on important topics. During his tenure as librarian, Foster also actively collected library materials with varying points of view and encouraged patrons to suggest books to be purchased. Foster also wrote numerous articles for the Providence Journal in order to promote the library and spread the news about library services. In addition to writing for the newspaper, Foster also gave numerous speeches and addresses to various groups around the city as well as published books such as The Civil Service Movement (1881), Libraries and Readers (1883), Stephen Hopkins: A Rhode Island Statesman (1884), Town Government in Rhode Island (1886), The Point of View in History (1906), How to Choose Editions (1912) and The First Fifty Years of the Providence Public Library (1928). The library grew to include not only the central library, but a library system including 12 branches and over 100 miscellaneous agencies. The library collection grew from just 10,000 volumes to 400,000 with nearly 90,000 registered patrons. Foster continued to improve library service by lecturing new library trainees at the New York State Library School.

Foster was forced to retire in February 1930 due to illness. His dedication to library service was rewarded with numerous honors including an Honorary Litt.D from Brown 1901 and an honorary membership to the Rhode Island School of Design in 1930. A book plate and
a plaque for the library entrance were also dedicated to him. Also in 1930, Foster was given the title “Librarian Emeritus for life” by the library trustees. Foster humbly accepted the honors given to him and insisted that all attention focus in the library itself. To Foster “an inquiring mind and an appropriate book could be one of life’s happiest unions,” a quote which summarizes Foster’s unfailing dedication to his profession. Foster died on September 10, 1930 after a long illness. He was survived by his wife of 44 years, Julia Appleton Foster. Though William E. Foster and his wife Julia did not have children, Foster left behind an incomparable legacy which continues to influence library service into the 21st century.

Access & use

Access to the collection: There are no restrictions on access. This collection is open under the rules and regulations of the Providence Public Library Special Collections department.

Use of materials: Researchers are requested to cite the collection name and the Providence Public Library in all bibliographic references.

Preferred citation: William Eaton Foster Papers, MSS005, Providence Public Library, Special Collections

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Administrative information

About the collection

Aquisition:

About the finding aid

Encoding: Finding aid encoded by Stacie M. Parillo, 2014 September 12
Descriptive rules: Finding aid based on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)

Additional information

Related material: The Foster Papers are part of the Library Archives and Foster’s published materials are part of the Providence Public Library Special Collections and Rhode Island Collections. Some published materials are available in the Ocean State Libraries circulating collections.

- Foster, William E. The first fifty years of the Providence public library, 1878-1928. Providence: Providence Public Library, 1928. Call numbers 027.43 P9f, RIColl 027.43 P9f.
- Foster, William E. Public support of public libraries: Read before the American Library Association, at San

Search terms

Names:

Subjects:

Types of materials:

Librarians -- Rhode Island
Libraries -- Rhode Island -- Providence.
Providence Public Library (R.I.) -- History

booklets
books
clippings (information artifacts)
theses
letters
speeches (documents)
Inventory

Series 1, Writings and Speeches, 1883-1930

Series 2, Correspondence, 1897-1940

Series 3, Anniversaries, Commemorations, Memorials,

Series 4, Miscellaneous Items, 1891-1930
Contains miscellaneous materials that don’t fit in any of the other series. This consists of newspaper clippings of Foster’s articles, clippings of items of note that Foster found interesting or useful, as well as reference materials and advertising materials for a talk Foster gave at the Rhode Island Historical Society.