



Guide to the Mary Octavine (Thompson) Cowper Papers, 1895-1969

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Table of Contents

Summary	3
Background	3
Administrative Information	7
Names and Subjects	8
Collection Inventory	9
Personal correspondence, 1900-1969 and undated	9
Writings:	9
Topical Series:	10
Durham Nursery School Association	10
Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation:	12
Durham Milk Delivery Controversy	13
Miscellany:	13
Photographs:	13
Oversize Materials	14

Summary

Collection Title:

Mary Octavine (Thompson) Cowper papers, 1895-1969

Creator:

Cowper, Mary Octavine (Thompson), 1881-1968

Extent:

4.8 Linear Feet
3,600 Items

Physical Location:

For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Library's online catalog.

Language:

English

Language:

English.

Collection ID:

RL.00261

Permalink:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/cowper/>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], The Papers of Mary Octavine (Thompson) Cowper, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Background

Scope and Content

The papers of Mary Octavine (Thompson) Cowper span the years 1895-1969, although the bulk of the material begins in 1938 when Mrs. Cowper became Executive Director of the Durham Nursery School Association, Inc., a post

which she held until 1962. Included in the collection are five series: personal correspondence; writings; topical series; miscellany; and photographs.

Mrs. Cowper's personal life is best documented in the personal correspondence. Letters are primarily to Mrs. Cowper from family and friends but chiefly from her husband, Dr. Frederick Cowper. Most of his correspondence dates from 1918 when he was Director of French at the U.S. Army Y.M.C.A. camp at Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois, and during 1952-1960 when he was visiting France, England, and other parts of Europe. There are a few letters from Mrs. Cowper to her husband, and several to her mother, written while Mrs. Cowper was in Europe, Feb. to Sept., 1928.

The writings series includes a biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine, which Mrs. Cowper attempted unsuccessfully to have published in 1936, plus several other writings and an undated travel journal.

The topical series is divided into three subseries: the Durham Nursery School Association, Inc., 1938-1966; Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation, 1910-1968; and the Durham Milk Delivery Controversy, 1948-1949.

The Durham Nursery School Association section forms the largest group of papers in the collection. The organization's formation came about as an outgrowth of Mrs. Cowper's work with the Durham branch of the American Association of University Women Social Studies Committee. A study conducted by this group in the Durham area indicated a great need for a nursery school for children of working mothers. The result was the establishment of the Durham Nursery School in May, 1938. This section of the collection provides insight into the organization's operations and activities through correspondence, bylaws and reports, minutes, financial data, case studies, public relations papers, newsclippings and other papers. This subseries also furnishes information about Mrs. Cowper's work as chairman of the Child Welfare Division of the Office of Civilian Defense in Durham (1939-1945), which was instrumental in getting federal funds for the Emergency Child Care Center that operated several nursery schools in Durham during the Second World War. Although several of them closed after the war, one which remained, the Southside Child Care Center, was renamed the Mary O. Cowper Child Care Center in her honor in 1958.

The Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation section, 1910-1968, provides information about Cowper's efforts on behalf of a number of social causes. Her work for women's suffrage and better working conditions in textile mills and her advocacy for labor legislation for women and children are reflected in this section's correspondence, writings, and newsclippings. Her involvement with different organizations, including the American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters is also represented. Included are separate folders for the American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters, containing bylaws, membership lists and bulletins, reports, and information about conferences and meetings. Because

the Durham Nursery School Association was begun as an outgrowth of the American Association of University Women Social Studies Committee, there is also some correspondence in this section relating to nursery schools. Although Mrs. Cowper worked to establish a juvenile court for youths in Durham, there is very little documentation for this in the papers. Correspondents include Gertrude Weil, President of the N.C. League of Women voters, Belle Sherwin, first vice-president of the National League of Women Voters, and other officers at the local, state, and national level of organization. There are also some letters from Howard Odum, Director of the School of Public Welfare at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Angus W. McLean, Governor of North Carolina. The bulk of the correspondence in this section dates from 1924-1926, when Mrs. Cowper was executive secretary of the North Carolina League of Women Voters.

The Durham Milk Delivery Controversy series, 1948-1949, centers around the controversy created when Durham milk companies changed home milk deliveries from every other day to three times a week, with milkmen not beginning their route service until 7:00 a.m. Citizens protested that many people did not have enough space in their iceboxes for a three day supply of milk and further that the delivery of milk to homes after 7:00 a.m. meant that some people's milk would spoil because it would arrive after customers had already left for work. Mrs. Cowper was co-chairman of a citizen's committee that investigated the problem and suggested solutions. This section includes correspondence, minutes of the citizen's group meetings, newsclippings, and other papers.

The two remaining series are miscellany and photographs. The miscellany section primarily contains reports of Mrs. Cowper's grades and information about the Thompson family. Photographs are chiefly of Mrs. Cowper and members of her family, including her parents, and her brother Herbert, and his family.

Biographical/Historical

Chronology

Date	Description
1881, May 20	Born Shelbyville, Bedford County, Tennessee.
1904	Bachelor of Letters, Drury College, Springfield, Missouri.

Date	Description
1907	M.A., Drury College, English as major, French as minor.
1909, April 17	Married Frederick Augustus Grant Cowper, Asst. Professor, Modern Language Dept., Drury College.
1911	Elected Chairman, Douglas Co., Kansas Woman Suffrage Association.
1914	M.A., sociology, University of Kansas.
1914-1916	Completed course work for Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Chicago.
1918	Moved to Durham with her husband who taught French at Trinity College (now Duke University).
1920	Helped organize the North Carolina Chapter of the League of Women Voters.
1923-1931	Edited the N.C. League of Women Voters Monthly Bulletin.
1924-1925	Awarded a writing fellowship at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she wrote a study of cotton mill villages.
1925	Became Regional Director for the National League of Women Voters.
1934	American Association of University Women representative

Date	Description
	on the Citizens Council of Durham.
1937	Chair of the Durham branch, American Association of University Women Social Studies Committee.
1938-1962	Executive Director, Durham Nursery School Association.
1939-1945	Chair of the Durham office of Civilian Defense - Child Welfare Division.
1944	Instrumental in founding Southside Child Care Center.
1958	Southside Child Care Center, Durham, N.C., renamed the Mary O. Cowper Child Care Center
1968, Oct. 26	Died Durham, N.C.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Researchers must register and agree to copyright and privacy laws before using this collection.

All or portions of this collection may be housed off-site in Duke University's Library Service Center. The library may require up to 48 hours to retrieve these materials for research use.

Please contact Research Services staff before visiting the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library to use this collection.

Use Restrictions

The status of the copyright interests in the papers of Mary O. T. Cowper is unknown. For further information, see the section on copyright in the Regulations and Procedures of the Rubenstein Library.

Acquisition Information

The papers of Mary O. T. Cowper, social activist and Executive Director of the Durham Nursery School Association, Durham, N.C., were acquired by the Rubenstein Library between 1968 and 1978 by gift and through transfer from the Duke University Archives. An small addition (2 folders) to the collection was received from Anne Scott in December, 2003 (2003-0271), and interfiled in the collection.

Processing Information

Processed by: Janie C. Morris

Completed July 29, 1987

Encoded by Stephen Douglas Miller

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Names and Subjects

- North Carolina -- Durham County -- Durham
- Milk trade -- North Carolina -- Durham
- Women school administrators

- Textile industry
- Textile workers -- Social conditions
- Nursery schools -- North Carolina -- Durham
- Women -- Suffrage
- Child welfare -- North Carolina
- McLean, Angus Wilton, 1870-1935
- League of Women Voters of North Carolina
- Durham Nursery School Association
- Cowper, Mary Octavine (Thompson), 1881-1968
- American Association of University Women. Durham Branch (N.C.)
- Cowper, Mary Octavine (Thompson), 1881-1968
- Cowper, Frederick Augustus Grant, 1883-1978
- Weil, Gertrude
- Thompson family
- Sherwin, Belle, 1868-1955
- Odum, Howard Washington, 1884-1954

Collection Inventory

Personal correspondence, 1900-1969 and undated

Physical Description: 6 folders

Scope and Contents note

Chiefly letters to Cowper from her husband, Dr. Frederick Cowper, but also including letters from other relatives and friends.

Correspondence

Box 1

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Writings:

Scope and Contents note

Consists of Mrs. Cowper's writings, including a biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1936), several short stories, and a travel journal.

"Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess and Queen,"
1936

Box 2

"Queen of Two Realms: Eleanor of Aquitaine,"
1936

Box 2

"Social Life of Women in France in the Middle Ages," undated	Box 2
Short Stories, Journal, undated	Box 2

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Topical Series:

Scope and Contents note

This series is divided into three subseries: the Durham Nursery School Association; Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation; and the Durham Milk Delivery Controversy. Each subseries is further subdivided into subgroups either by topic or type of material, including correspondence, minutes, financial and legal papers, committee reports, organizations, writings and notes, newsclippings, printed material, photographs, and miscellany. Arrangement within the subgroups is primarily chronological.

Durham Nursery School Association

Correspondence, 1927-1942	Box 2
Physical Description: 3 folders	
Correspondence, 1943-1966, and undated	Box 3
Physical Description: 6 folders	
Bylaws, Reports, 1938-1962, and undated	Box 4
Physical Description: 5 folders	
Minutes, 1939-1962, and undated	Box 4
Minutes, Volumes	Box 5
Physical Description: 2 folders	
Financial and Legal Papers, 1938-1960	Box 5
Physical Description: 6 folders	
Financial and Legal Papers, 1961-1965 and undated	Box 6
Financial and Legal Papers (Volumes) 1960-1961	Box 6
Financial and Legal Papers: Salaries, (Volumes) 1955-1959	Box 6

Financial and Legal Papers: Donations, 1938-1950 and undated	Box 6
Physical Description: 2 folders	
Financial and Legal Papers: Donations, (Volumes) 1938-1959	Box 6
Physical Description: 2 folders	
Financial and Legal Papers: Rebecca Sprinkle Memorial Fund, 1954-1960, and undated	Box 6
History, 1937-1956 and undated	Box 7
Operational Procedures and Personnel, 1944-1961 and undated	Box 7
Public Relations, 1938-1963 and undated	Box 7
School Programs, 1940-1962 and undated	Box 7
Physical Description: 2 folders	
School Programs (Volumes) undated	Box 7
Radio Broadcast Programs, 1939-1951	Box 7
Committee Lists, 1937-1967 and undated	Box 7
Committee Lists, Volumes and undated	Box 8
Enrollment Lists, 1953-1961 and undated	Box 8
Case Studies and Parents' Comments	Box 8
Mother's Club, 1941-1957 and undated	Box 8
Mother's Club (Volumes) 1953-1962	Box 8
Testimonial Dinner, 1963, Jan. 11	Box 8
Testimonial Dinner, 1963, Jan. 11, Photographs	Box 8
Clippings, 1938-1969 and undated	Box 8
Physical Description: 3 folders	
Photographs	Box 8
Physical Description: 2 folders	

Miscellany, 1941-1972 and undated	Box 8
Miscellany, Volumes, 1947	Box 9
Suffrage, Industrial Labor Concerns, Social Legislation:	
Correspondence, 1913-1967 and undated	Box 9
Physical Description: 12 folders	
Writings and Notes: "Cotton Cloth," 1925	Box 10
Writings and Notes: "The Heritage of Cotton," undated	Box 10
Writings and Notes: "A History of Woman Suffrage in Kansas," 1914	Box 10
Writings and Notes: Interviews with textile workers, undated	Box 10
Writings and Notes: "Our Tariff vs. Elizabethan Monopolies," ca. 1930	Box 10
Writings and Notes: "A Plea for Logic in Prohibition Law Discussions," undated	Box 10
Writings and Notes: Social Science, undated	Box 10
Writings and Notes: "What Are These Cotton Mill Operatives?," 1929	Box 10
Printed Material, 1910-1933 and undated	Box 10
Physical Description: 2 folders	
American Association of University Women, 1943-1968 and undated	Box 10
League of Women Voters, 1922-1930 and undated	Box 11
League of Women Voters: Memberships, 1923-1931	Box 11
League of Women Voters: Monthly News: Bulletin of the North Carolina League of Women Voters, 1923-1931	Box 11

Clippings	Box 11
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Physical Description: 2 folders

Miscellany, 1913-1953 and undated	Box 11
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Miscellany (Volumes), 1936-1945	Box 11
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Physical Description: 3 folders

Miscellany (Volumes), 1948 and undated	Box 12
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Physical Description: 2 folders

Photographs	Box 12
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Durham Milk Delivery Controversy

Correspondence, 1948-1949	Box 12
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Clippings, 1948-1949 and undated	Box 12
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Minutes, Miscellany, 1948 and undated	Box 12
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[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Miscellany:

Scope and Contents note

Includes papers relating to Mrs. Cowper; among them reports of her school grades, legal papers, information about her family, the Thompsons, her obituary, and other material.

1902-1968 and undated	Box 12
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Clippings	Box 12
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[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Photographs:

Scope and Contents note

Primarily photographs of Mrs. Cowper and members of her family, including her father, Rev. John Thompson, and her brother Herbert, and his family.

1895-1953 and undated	Box 12
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Physical Description: 2 folders

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Oversize Materials

Physical Description: 1 box

Durham Nursery School Association scrapbook,
undated

Box 13

[Return to Table of Contents](#)