



The New York Public Library
New York Public Library Archives

Guide to the

Fort Washington Branch records

1914-1999

Summary

Creator: New York Public Library. Fort Washington Branch.

Title: Fort Washington Branch records

Date: 1914-1999

Size: 2 linear feet (5 boxes)

Source: Transferred from Fort Washington Branch Library.

Abstract: Reports, administrative records and publicity material documenting the operations of the Fort Washington Branch of The New York Public Library.

Preferred citation: Fort Washington Branch Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Compiled Jim Moske; machine readable finding aid created by FAKER.

Creator History

In the words of Winifred Gambrill Carruthers, the Branch Librarian of the Fort Washington Branch from 1947-1966: "The history of a Branch library vividly reflects the exciting kaleidoscope quality of New York itself, a great colorful ever shifting city of interlocking and overlapping communities of many sorts. What is a slick fashionable we-buy-our-own books neighborhood today becomes a haven for the ambitious struggling foreign born tomorrow, religious or racial groups expand and spill over into outlying Bronx or upper west side sections, blocks of little business establishments gradually become completely residential, and so on all over the city there is this constant flux which can be read too in the changing character of our Branches." (Fort Washington Branch, Five Year Report, July 1, 1951.)

The Fort Washington Branch Library, located on West 179th Street in Upper Manhattan, two blocks from the George Washington Bridge, opened to the public on April 14, 1914, seventeen years before the George Washington Bridge was erected. The branch is named after the Revolutionary War fort that stood at the highest elevation in Manhattan and fell to British and Hessian troops in November 1776.

The site itself cost \$20,000, and the building was designed by Walter Cook and Winthrop A. Welch, and constructed by the William L. Crow Construction Company, at a cost of approximately \$115,000, all paid for with funds donated by Andrew Carnegie.

The three story, five bay Classical Revival style library has a graceful limestone façade with a rusticated ground floor and a granite base. An interior balcony offers more shelf space for reading material as well as a panoramic view of the main floor. For years, a working fireplace in the children's room provided an inviting setting to enjoy books. The branch also has exhibition space for local artists and art groups.

In 1936 a theater was built in the basement under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. For several years thereafter the branch had a resident theater troupe called the Fort Washington Players. After that group disbanded in 1942, other acting groups performed in the theater, including the Equity Library Theater. The theater was dismantled in 1949, and the space then became the Reference Room, moved from the third floor. The Reference Room houses the largest collection of reference materials in northern Manhattan.

At the 75th Anniversary celebration of the branch in 1989, several prominent luminaries, including statesman Henry Kissinger, playwright William Gibson and journalist/author Edwin Newman, recounted their fond memories of their time spent at the branch in their younger years. Among other notable personalities the branch has served over the years are baseball legend Lou Gehrig, opera diva Maria Callas, author Ralph Ellison, poet Marianne Moore and United States Senator Jacob Javits.

Norma D. Liss, a Children's Librarian at the Fort Washington Branch in the 1980's, described the neighborhood that the branch serves as "a multi-ethnic section of Manhattan with a mix that includes Orthodox Jews from the 'old days', a variety of Hispanic cultures, some Blacks, Greeks, Russian émigrés, and the most recent arrivals, a sizeable Asian community. There are times, at least in the Children's Room when Fort Washington seems to be a kind of idealized U.N." (Fort Washington Branch, Annual Report, 1985.)

In 1994, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the branch, Congressman Charles B. Rangel described the Fort Washington branch in the Congressional Record this way: "Throughout the years many thousands of people the world over and from all walks of life have availed themselves of the services of this branch . . . In the 1920's and 1930's immigrants came mostly from Europe-Ireland, Germany, Poland, et cetera, and settled in the Washington Heights-Inwood area. Now, the majority of the immigrants are coming from the Caribbean, particularly the Dominican Republic, as well as from the Soviet Union. The Fort Washington Branch is performing the same functions now as it has done in the past-namely, to reach out into the community by providing much needed services. They have books and cassettes to learn English . . . They also have books in diverse languages for those who wish to read in their native tongue. . . . [The branch] is usually filled up with wall-to-wall people of all ages-students doing homework, people reading Standard and Poors and the Wall Street Journal, as well as magazines on physical fitness, sports, and a broad range of topics. . . . The library is available to all and has been for the past 80 years. They are looking forward to another 80 years playing an important role in their ever changing and vital community."

Scope and Content Note

Fort Washington Branch records span the years 1914-1999 and include reports, memoranda, correspondence, newspapers clippings and printed ephemera. This material illuminates operations of the branch, the social history of this Manhattan neighborhood, and the role of a public library in supporting public education.

Key Terms

Names

New York Public Library. Fort Washington Branch.

Container List

Series 1. General Files 1914-1999

Series 1 contains a wide assortment of documents relating to the life of the branch, including correspondence, internal memoranda as well as memoranda directed to the branch, circulation charts, branch brochures, newsletters, newspaper clippings and materials relating to the theatrical companies and productions using the branch theater in the 1930's and 1940's. There are also documents concerning the anniversary celebrations of the branch in 1989, 1994 and 1999, which include correspondence from branch patrons William Gibson, Henry Kissinger and Edwin Newman, as well as New York politicians Edward Koch, Henry Stern and Charles Rangel.

- b. 1 f. 1 Branch Brochures ca. 1975, 1989, 1993-1994
- b. 1 f. 2 Branch Council Visit n.d.
- b. 1 f. 3-5 Circulation Charts - Children's Room 1920-1954
- b. 1 f. 6 Citation 1950
- b. 1 f. 7 City Expense Budget, 1976/77
- b. 1 f. 8 Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center Neighborhood Fund Awards 1991
- b. 1 f. 9 Correspondence re: proposed redesignation of Branch Reference Room 1995
- b. 1 f. 10 80th Anniversary 1994
- b. 1 f. 11 85th Anniversary 1999
- b. 1 f. 12 Fort Tryon News 1929-1930
- b. 1 f. 13-21 Memoranda to Branch Libraries 1928-1940, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 22 News Clippings re: budget cutbacks 1974, 1991
- b. 1 f. 23 Opening 1914
- b. 1 f. 24 Play Brochures - Children's Room 1939, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 25 Program Flyers 1967-1973
- b. 1 f. 26 Programs 1938
- b. 1 f. 27 Readers' Association - General ca. 1940-1941
- b. 1 f. 28 Readers' Association - Members/Potential Members n.d.
- b. 1 f. 29 75th Anniversary 1989
- b. 1 f. 30 Reopening 1984, 1985
- b. 1 f. 31 Riverside Civic Council 1938-1939
- b. 1 f. 32 Support Group - Newsletter 1990-1992
- b. 1 f. 33 Support Group - Reader Survey 1989-1990
- b. 2 f. 1 Theater Presentations - Bernard Kay 1943
- b. 2 f. 2 Theater Presentations - Center Players Guild 1941
- b. 2 f. 3 Theater Presentations - Clare Freeman Players n.d.
- b. 2 f. 4 Theater Presentations - Equity Library Theater n.d.
- b. 2 f. 5 Theater Presentations - Fort Washington Players 1938-1940
- b. 2 f. 6 Theater Presentations - Little Theater n.d.
- b. 2 f. 7 Theater Presentations - Modern Playwrights Company 1941-1942
- b. 2 f. 8 Theater Presentations - The Rolling Players n.d.
- b. 2 f. 9 Theater Presentations - Trolley Players n.d.
- b. 2 f. 10 Washington Heights Defense Council 1943

Series 1. General Files (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 11 Washington Heights - Inwood Town Meeting Correspondence 1938
- b. 2 f. 12 Work Schedule n.d.

Series 2. Reports 1914-1994

Series 2 assembles the annual reports for the branch for the period 1941-1994, and the informal and annual reports for the Children's Room of the branch for the period 1914-1967. These reports provide a detailed record of the operations of the branch over the years, and a vivid picture of the history of the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. The individual Children's Room reports, in particular, written on a monthly basis for decades, set forth compelling descriptions of the branch patrons and contain reflections on various local, national and world events - like the erection of the George Washington Bridge, the economic depression in the 1930's, World War II, changes in the housing stock and the steady flow of immigrants into the neighborhood.

- b. 3 f. 1-45 Annual Reports - General 1941-1994
- b. 3 f. 46-54 Informal and Annual Reports - Children's Room, 1914-1919, 1926-1932
- b. 4 f. 1-27 Informal and Annual Reports - Children's Room 1933-1967

Series 3. Edna Dixon 1937-1946

Series 3 collects the files of Edna Dixon, the Branch Librarian from 1924-1946, and consists of correspondence and memoranda.

- b. 5 f. 1 Community Activities 1939-1942, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 2 Correspondence 1938-1940
- b. 5 f. 3 George Washington Birthday Celebration 1940
- b. 5 f. 4 Parents Associations 1939
- b. 5 f. 5-7 Riverside Civic Council 1938-1946, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 8 Town Meeting 1938
- b. 5 f. 9 Works Progress Administration - General 1937-1938
- b. 5 f. 10 Works Progress Administration - Adult Classes 1938