

The ACLU Card Index (1917–1946)

History of the Index

In 1978 the Princeton University Library received a Higher Education Act Title II-C grant to index the bound volumes of ACLU material for the thirty-year period from 1917 to 1946. The bound nature of these archival materials had always been problematic in terms of use and copying: the paper copies were turning to dust, and researchers complained bitterly over the years about the inability to find relevant materials in these volumes.

Over a two-year period an index team created hundreds of subject categories, some used only for a single year and others stretching over the entire thirty-year time span. In addition, major or frequent correspondents or authors were indexed under the category “People.” By the end of the grant, 57,500 cards (40 file drawers) had been filed to index the 1,886 volumes. Four additional cartons of loose materials from the pre-1947 period were also indexed as Appendixes 1–4. Appendixes 1–3 were newly filmed for this microform collection (Reels 280–288). Appendix 4 had previously been filmed as Volumes 1–7 of the 1946 correspondence (Reel 238).

The Nature of the Index

The index is first organized chronologically by year or set of years, which generally follows the manner in which the volumes themselves are organized. For each chronological division, the cards are then arranged under specific subjects. Use the list of subjects (pp. 19–43) and the list of names (pp. 45–48), which may be found under the subject heading “People,” to identify relevant index terms and the years they appear.

The cards always provide volume numbers and pages for volumes that are numbered. The reel numbers (often indicated on the card as r:) for Reels 1–69 (Volumes 1–380) are generally listed on the cards. Thereafter the cards usually read “No Film.” This only indicates that Princeton did not own a copy of the film when the index was prepared. Use the reel contents list (pp. 59–111) to determine the appropriate reel for the volume you want to use.

Limitations of the Index

The index requires the researcher to determine the relevant subject which is not always easy. Any number of relatively broad topics might well, and often do, encompass the proposed area of research. In addition, the index does not provide the view of the organization of the records that the reel and series lists provide.

Most legal cases are listed under a subject; therefore, there is no centralized access to the cases by name, except for certain periods (for example, conscientious objector cases during World War I), or for certain well-known cases (for instance, *Scopes*). Remember that legal cases are often filed under the clippings and correspondence for an individual state from which it initiated. Again, the reel contents and series lists should not be overlooked as other means to find relevant material.

There are also limits to name access to correspondence. The indexing team included more names in the early years and fewer as the project progressed. In addition, not all names or every appearance of that name in a given year is indexed, especially for individuals active in ACLU affairs. Researchers should certainly look at reel contents and series lists to find other avenues of access.

Finally, *the index does not include some of the loose material for 1946 (Volumes 8–18 found on reels 238–239 for which the originals seem to have been lost), or any of the materials for 1947 to 1950 (Volumes 19–189, Reels 240–274).* The originals of these loose materials, except for the clippings, were recently reorganized as part of an ACLU processing project for the post-1946 unbound ACLU records. Thus, to gain access to these materials, one must use the reel contents and series lists.