

Miriam Usher Chrisman Papers

1878-2008 (*Bulk:* 1938-1995)

6 boxes (3 linear ft.)

Call no.: FS 128

Read collection overview [Collection overview](#)

A noted scholar of the social impact of the German Reformation, Miriam Usher Chrisman was born in Ithaca, New York, on May 20, 1920. With degrees from Smith College, American University, and Yale, she served for over thirty years on the faculty of the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, becoming a well-loved professor and treasured mentor to a generation of students.

A faithful and colorful correspondent, the bulk of Miriam Chrisman's papers consist of letters written to family and friends stretching from her college days at Smith through the year before her death. The bulk of the correspondence is with her husband, Donald Chrisman, an orthopedic surgeon who was enrolled at Harvard Medical School during their courtship. Soon after the Chrismans married in November 1943, Donald left for active duty in the Navy on the U.S.S. *Baldwin*. The couple's war correspondence is unusually rich, offering insight on everything from the social responsibilities of married couples to their opinions on the progression of the war. Of particular note is a lengthy letter written by Donald during and immediately after D-Day in which he provides Miriam a real-time description of the events and his reactions as they unfold. Later letters document Miriam's extensive travels including a trip around the world.

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Background on Miriam Usher Chrisman

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From birth, Chrisman seemed destined for a career in academia.

Chrisman's roots in the intellectual elite of Massachusetts ran deep -- an ancestor Hezekiah Usher, imported the press and type with which John Eliot's Indian Bible was printed -- and her

father, Abbott Payson Usher, was a distinguished economic historian at Cornell and later Harvard. Graduating magna cum laude with an A.B. from Smith College (1941) shortly before the onset of the Second World War, Chrisman's plans for an academic career were delayed. After marrying Don Chrisman, a medical student at Harvard, on November 29, 1943, Miriam took a series of jobs with the federal government in Washington, D.C., while Don served on active duty with the Navy aboard the Gleaves-class destroyer, U.S.S. *Baldwin* in the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

At the end of the war, the Chrismans returned home to Massachusetts and settled in Northampton, where Donald began a practice in orthopedics at Cooley Dickinson Hospital while Miriam resumed her studies. After earning graduate degrees in education (Smith College, 1948) and economics (American University), she studied history at Yale (MA, 1959, and PhD, 1962), completing her dissertation, "Church and city in Strasbourg, 1480-1548: A study of the stages of the Reformation," in 1962, just prior to joining the History Department at UMass Amherst.

During her long career, Chrisman became a leading authority on the social history of the German Reformation, the city of Strasbourg forming the intellectual locus of much of her work. The first of her seven books, *Strasbourg and the Reform* (1967), was quickly recognized as a landmark in its field, balancing an understanding of both high and low culture with an appreciation for the impact of the Reformation on the lives of the non-elite. In later works such as *Lay Culture, Learned*

Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599 (1982) and *Conflicting Visions of Reform: German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets, 1519-30* (1996), Chrisman explored the impact of print culture in German cities during the early Reformation, again with an eye on social movements and the common people. An avid world traveler, her several research trips to Strasbourg influenced her life in other ways: her experiences there and in other locations abroad led her husband, Donald, to embark on a second career in archaeology upon his retirement from medicine.

Widely recognized for her scholarship, Chrisman was awarded the Prix d'honneur by the Societe des Amis de Vieux Strasbourg, the Wilbur Cross Medal from Yale University, and received an honorary doctor of humane letters from Valparaiso University. She was twice awarded the UMass Chancellor's Medal, first as a Distinguished Faculty Lecturer in 1985 and again in 2000 for her support of the Du Bois Library. In her honor, the Society for Reformation Research established the Miriam U. Chrisman Travel Fellowship, which provides grants of \$1500 every other year to support advanced graduate students in conducting research abroad. Chrisman formally retired in 1985, but continued to teach for almost a decade more.

Donald Chrisman died in 2002, with Miriam following on November 17, 2008. They are survived by two sons, Nicholas Ramsey Chrisman and David Abbott Chrisman.

Scope of collection

The Chrisman collection details the life of an affluent, well-educated, New England woman, Miriam Usher Chrisman. Beginning in the late 1930s while Chrisman was in her late teens, the collection contains extensive personal and (to a lesser degree) professional correspondence throughout her life. Of particular note are a dense series of courtship letters written during the Second World War mixing a budding romance with information from the front lines in Europe. A series of meticulous continuous account books, beginning in 1944 and stretching through the 1990s, outline the daily aspects of wartime life, along with the complexities facing a new bride in arranging the domestic sphere of her new life.

Chrisman was unusually well-traveled, as illustrated in a copious series of notes, itineraries, and receipts from both professional and personal trips. The three major research trips to Strasbourg are particularly well documented, augmented

by extensive personal correspondence during that trip with her two sons. In its most recent years, the collection focuses on Chrisman's personal life, with ample correspondence demonstrating a rich, cherished relationship with her grandchildren. Overall, Chrisman comes across as a highly organized, detail-oriented person who spent significant time planning and organizing her life.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Correspondence

1878-2008 73
folders
(1.5
linear
feet)

Series 1 contains extensive correspondence between Chrisman and the people she held close throughout her lifetime. Beginning with a letter from Donald Chrisman's mother in 1878, this series spans Miriam Chrisman's entire life, beginning during Chrisman's college years at Smith (roughly 1937 to 1941) and ending with several letters from a niece in 2008. The earliest letters detail Chrisman's daily experiences in college and her involvement with the American Friends Service Committee in Northampton.

Of particular note are the courtship, engagement, and newlywed letters between Miriam and her husband, Donald Chrisman. Not only do these letters reveal the couple's feelings for one another, they offer a glimpse into the conventions of courtship and marriage in World War Two-era America, even to the details of how they planned to arrange the furniture in their new home. Their letters after the wedding are equally interesting, written while Donald was deployed on the destroyer, U.S.S. *Baldwin*, off the European coast. This extensive correspondence hints at the feelings of thousands of wartime couples, and offers a perspective on censorship issues of the day -- many of Donald's letters were modified by the United States government to ensure they revealed nothing sensitive -- all while providing insight into the experiences of husband in the theatre of conflict and wife on the home front. Of special note is a **Donald's long and unusually detailed letter** written by Donald regarding his experiences on D-Day, outlined hour-by-hour, and a letter reflecting on Donald's experiences at Yalta.

After the war, the focus of Chrisman's correspondence returns to her educational pursuits, from discussing her fears at writing her first thesis to letters to her publisher for her second book. There is extensive correspondence with her two sons, Abbott and Nick, from their childhood days at boarding school and camp to their collegiate years and early adulthood. Also of note is Chrisman's correspondence home during three research trips to Strasbourg: rather remarkably, each trip resulted in a new book on the German Reformation. Finally, this series contains some correspondence between Don and his parents in his earlier years, including his acceptance into Harvard Medical School.

Series 2. Travel

1938-2001 23
folders

A rambling record of Chrisman's world travels, series two begins with detailed notes of museum trips around the Mediterranean in 1952, and continues for almost five decades, including a round-the-world trip in 1972, an early visit to the newly opened Peoples Republic of China in 1982, travel to Russia in 1985, and the Spice Route in 1985. The series also contains a wonderfully detailed diary of a summer-long trip to France.

The series is arranged chronologically.

Series 3. Family

1930-2008 20
folders

Series three is a somewhat scattered collection of family memorabilia from the Chrismans' lives. Several folders of postcards and Christmas cards, mostly undated, join a small number of professional and community honors, such as an award for volunteer service from the University of Massachusetts Library and newspaper clippings of Don Chrisman's achievements. The series includes an autobiography written by Don in 1935 as well as an **audio cassette** of Don's father's memories of post-Civil War politics in Missouri. A large portion of the series consists of home publications and artwork made by her grandchildren. One of the most fascinating items in this series is a folder of Christmas Lists, with corresponding receipts, from 1991 through 2000.

Series 4. Account books

1944-1995 43
folders

Series four consists of a continuous set of household account books from 1944 through 1985 kept by Miriam Chrisman and her husband, Don. Beginning in 1944, these accounts detail annual household budgets, rent or mortgage payments, taxes including some years' W2 forms, food, clothing, entertainment, travel, and education expenses among others. In addition to tracking daily costs, Ms. Chrisman detailed the items needed to set up a household after their marriage in extensive, meticulous lists within many of the earlier account books. She also kept detailed size, item, and cost information for both her and her husband's clothing for many years. There is limited information as well on the costs associated with operating her husband's medical practice.

As with nearly every aspect of this collection, Chrisman proves herself once again to be a highly organized, meticulous individual through the consistency and detail of these account books. As their professional lives advance, their movement into the upper middle class can be tracked by extensive line item details regarding luxury expenditures, charitable giving, and professional development costs.

Collection inventory

Series 1. Correspondence	1878-2008	1.5 linear feet
Correspondence: Miriam Chrisman notes	1878	Box 1: 1
Correspondence: Travels in France and Spain	1927	Box 1: 2
Correspondence: Father to Miriam and Eunice	1929	Box 1: 3
Correspondence: Don Chrisman	1932	Box 1: 4
Correspondence: To Miriam	1935	Box 1: 5
Correspondence	1936	Box 1: 6
Correspondence	1937	Box 1: 7
Correspondence: Miriam to her family; AFSE	1938	Box 1: 8
Correspondence: College: Miriam and Family	1939	Box 1: 9
Correspondence	1940	Box 1: 10
Correspondence: College: Miriam and Family; Courtship	1941	Box 1: 11
Correspondence: Courtship	1942	Box 1: 12
Correspondence: Engagement	1943 January	Box 1: 13
Correspondence	1943 February	Box 1: 14
Correspondence	1943 March-April	Box 1: 15
Correspondence	1943 May-July	Box 1: 16
Correspondence: Charleston Naval Yard, Casablanca I [August-September 25], Casablanca II [October 15-November 24]	1943 August-October	Box 1: 17
Correspondence: The Wedding	1943 November- December	Box 1: 18
Correspondence	1944 January-March	Box 1: 19
Correspondence: Lead up to D-day	1944 April-May	Box 1: 20
Correspondence: D-day	1944 June	Box 1: 21
Read a transcript of Donald's letter describing D-day		
Correspondence	1944 June-July	Box 1: 22
Correspondence	1944 August	Box 1: 23

Correspondence	1944 September	Box 1: 24
Correspondence	1944 October-December	Box 1: 25
Correspondence: Yalta, Washington	1945-1946	Box 1: 26
Correspondence	1948	Box 1: 27
Correspondence	1949	Box 1: 28
Correspondence	1950	Box 1: 29
Correspondence	1951-1955	Box 1: 30
Correspondence: From Father; Miriam Chrisman's professional/academic advancements	1956-1960	Box 1: 31
Correspondence	1961	Box 1: 32
Correspondence	1962	Box 1: 33
Correspondence: Abbott, Cottonwood Gulch, Pasquany, photos	1963	Box 2: 1
Correspondence: Strasbourg	1964 May-August	Box 2: 2
Correspondence	1964 September-December	Box 2: 3
Correspondence: Choate	1965	Box 2: 4
Correspondence	1966	Box 2: 5
Correspondence	1967	Box 2: 6
Correspondence	1968	Box 2: 7
Correspondence: Strasbourg	1969	Box 2: 8
Correspondence	1970 January-February	Box 2: 9
Correspondence	1970 March	Box 2: 10
Correspondence	1970 April-May	Box 2: 11
Correspondence	1970 June-August	Box 2: 12
Correspondence	1970 September-December	Box 2: 13
Correspondence	1971 January-August	Box 2: 14
Correspondence	1971 September	Box 2: 15
Correspondence	1971 October	Box 2: 16
Correspondence	1971 November-December	Box 2: 17
Correspondence	1972	Box 2: 18
Correspondence: Strasbourg	1973	Box 2: 19
Correspondence: Strasbourg	1975	Box 2: 20

Correspondence	1976	Box 2: 21
Correspondence	1977	Box 2: 22
Correspondence	1978	Box 2: 23
Correspondence	1979	Box 2: 24
Correspondence	1980	Box 2: 25
Correspondence	1981	Box 2: 26
Correspondence: Strasbourg	1983 February	Box 2: 27
Correspondence: Grandchildren	1988-1990	Box 2: 28
Correspondence	1992	Box 2: 29
Correspondence	1993	Box 2: 30
Correspondence: Abbott	1994	Box 3: 1
Correspondence	1995	Box 3: 2
Correspondence	1996	Box 3: 3
Correspondence	1997	Box 3: 4
Correspondence	1998	Box 3: 5
Correspondence	2004	Box 3: 6
Correspondence: Arlene	2005	Box 3: 7
Correspondence	2006	Box 3: 8
Correspondence	2007	Box 3: 9
Correspondence	2008	Box 3: 10

Series 2. Travel	1938-2001	23 folders
Correspondence: Don Chrisman	1938-1954	Box 3: 11
Travel: Turkey, Crete, Greece, Palermo, Naples, Paris	1952	Box 3: 12
Travel: Three Mile	1955-1958	Box 3: 13
Travel: World tour preparations	1971	Box 3: 14
Travel: World tour, part 1	1972	Box 3: 15
Travel: World tour, part 2	1972	Box 3: 16
Travel: World tour, part 3	1972	Box 4: 1
Travel: China, part 1	1982	Box 4: 2
Travel: China, part 2	1982	Box 4: 3
Travel: Russia	1985	Box 4: 4

Travel: Indonesia	1986	Box 4: 5
Travel: Spice Route	1986	Box 4: 6
Travel: Spain	1987	Box 4: 7
Travel: Pacific Northwest	1989	Box 4: 8
Travel: Strasbourg	1990	Box 4: 9
Travel: Florence	1997	Box 4: 10
Travel: Southwest	1998	Box 4: 11
Travel: Saint Barths	2000	Box 4: 12
Travel: Tucson	2001	Box 4: 13
Travel Diary: Scotland, London, Brussels, Italy		Box 4: 14
Travel Diary: France		Box 4: 15
Travel: Notes on the British Museum		Box 4: 16
Travel: Passports	1964	Box 4: 17

Series 3. Family	1930-2008	20 folders
Family: Alfred Mainzer Postcards	2006-2008	Box 5: 1
Family: Christmas Lists	1972-2000	Box 5: 2
Family: Christmas and other Cards		Box 5: 3
Family: The Chronicles of Simon De Montfort		Box 5: 4
Family: Don Chrisman in the News	1991-1996	Box 5: 5
Family: Don Chrisman's Autobiography	1935	Box 5: 6
Family: Don Chrisman's Official Matters	1942-1943	Box 5: 7
Family: Ellen Thompson Weiss: Memories of Growing up at Brushwood	1930-1937	Box 5: 8
Family: Gocky Newsletter and Letters from Lindsey		Box 5: 9
Family: Gramps Chrisman Oral History [Listen]		Box 5: 10
Family: Grandchildren, Part 1		Box 5: 11
Family: Grandchildren, Part 2		Box 5: 12
Family: Library Award 2000		Box 5: 13
Family: Nick's School in France		Box 5: 14
Family: Notes on Archiving Papers		Box 5: 15
Family: Notes for Career Day		Box 5: 16
Family: Obituary of Miriam's Father	1947	Box 5: 17

Family: The Peasant's Alphabet		Box 5: 18
Family: Photograph Cards		Box 5: 19
Family: St. John's Church Bulletin	1992	Box 5: 20

Series 4. Account books

1944-1995

43
folders

Accounts	1944	Box 6
Accounts	1945-1946	Box 6
Accounts	1947	Box 6
Accounts	1948	Box 6
Accounts	1949	Box 6
Office	1949	Box 6
Accounts	1950	Box 6
Accounts	1951	Box 6
Accounts	1952	Box 6
Accounts	1953	Box 6
Accounts	1954	Box 6
Accounts	1955	Box 6
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Accounts	1980	Box 6
Accounts	1981	Box 6
Accounts	1982	Box 6
Accounts	1983	Box 6
Accounts	1984	Box 6
Accounts	1985	Box 6
Account Books	1993-1995	Box 6

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Chrisman, 1999.

Processing Information

Processed by Rusty Annis, Yolanda Clarke, and Catherine Sebastian, December 2010.

Bibliography

Related Material

In addition to the papers of several of Chrisman's colleagues in the History Department at UMass Amherst, SCUA holds the papers of **Children's Aid and Family Service (MS 008)**, of which Chrisman was President in the mid-1950s.

Language:

English

Copyright and Use ([More information](#))

Cite as: Miriam Usher Chrisman Papers (FS 128). Special

Chrisman's major published works (all housed in the Du Bois Library) include:

- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Strasbourg and the Reform: A Study in the Process of Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. **Call no.:** BR848.S7 C45
- Miriam Usher Chrisman (editor, with Otto Grundler). *Social Groups and Religious Ideas in the Sixteenth Century*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1978. **Call no.:** CB367.C66
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Bibliography of Strasbourg Imprints, 1480-1599*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. **Call no.:** Z2184.S83 C47
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. **Call no.:** DC801.S77 C47
- Miriam U. Chrisman, "Printing and the Evolution of Lay Culture in Strasbourg, 1480-1599," *The German People and the Reformation*, Edited by R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cornell University Press, 1988).
- Phillip N. Bebb and Sherrin Marshall, eds. *The Process of Change in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of Miriam Usher Chrisman*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988. (Festschrift for Chrisman). **Call no.:** D231.P74 1988
- Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Conflicting Visions of Reform: German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets, 1519-1530*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996. **Call no.:** BR355.P36 C47 1996

Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Search terms

Subjects

- China--Description and travel.
- Courtship.
- Europe--Description and travel.
- France--Description and travel.
- Historians--Massachusetts.
- World War, 1939-1945.
- World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--France--Normandy.

Names

- Chrisman, Donald.
- Chrisman, Miriam Usher.
- Smith College--Students.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst. Department of History.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst--Faculty.

Genre terms

- Photographs.
- Watercolor painting.

Link to similar SCUA collections

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