

## REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON THE RCA ARCHIVES

### **A Transformative Vision of the Archives: Informed about the Past, Transforming the Future**

Generally, the role of archives is to preserve the legal, financial, historical, and administrative records of a corporate body. The Archives also serve a spiritual purpose in the life of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Our records tell a compelling story: how the Reformed faith is lived in the world.

The current vision for the Archives emerges from the Belhar Confession and continues with denominational progress toward the goals of justice, righteousness, and siblinghood in Christ. This report outlines specific ways that the Archives can contribute to the ever-transforming RCA and how current initiatives in the RCA Archives align with its transformative vision, which is detailed in full at [www.rca.org/archives](http://www.rca.org/archives).

### **Examples of Recent Research in the RCA Archives**

The RCA Archives holds materials that serve diverse research interests within and outside of the RCA. We have provided archival materials to the following categories of researchers:

- Rutgers University professors, such as Dr. Edwin Bryant (Religion) and Dr. Haruko Wakabayashi (co-director of Global Asias program, whose class in Japanese culture visited the Archives to do primary research on Ferris Seminary). Dr. Wakabayashi is hosting a conference (March 8) on Rutgers and the Japan Mission.
- Mission researchers, such as Dr. John Hubers, for his biography of Samuel M. Zwemer (founder of the Arabian mission), and Rev. Doug Leonard, former head of the interfaith Al Amana Centre in Oman, researching Arabian Mission co-founder James Cantine, for his PhD thesis
- RCA-adjacent fellows and researchers, such as Dirk Mouw, fellow, scholar of New Netherlands history; Professor Bill Rhoads, professor of architecture at SUNY New Paltz; Rev. Harry Tysen; and Sander Roijakkers, a graduate student in economic history
- University-affiliated researchers, such as Dr. Karine Walther of Georgetown University
- Independent researchers, such as John Daniel, whose published work documents how his ancestor, Cornelius Vermeule of Somerset, New Jersey, along with his sons, fought in the Revolutionary War. Many such contributions to American history reside in the Archives.
- Many congregants of churches in the Reformed Church in America seek their baptism records. Others, like the descendants of the Vermeule family, research and write about their ancestors.

## **Historical Materials and Digital Initiatives**

As the oldest corporation in the country, we need to digitize the earliest documents of our four-century history, the Collegiate Church record books. The Archives has just applied for a grant to digitize these records.

Because it documents the history of marginalized individuals and communities, the Collegiate Collection serves the goal of social justice as well as researchers of New Netherlands, colonial, and early American history. In December 2022, the RCA Archives inherited the Collegiate Church record books *Libers A - Z* (books of baptisms, marriages, deaths); ministers, elders, and deacons minutes; ledgers (1730-1942); New York Real Estate documents; and records of the RCA's four-century history.

How does the digitization grant relate to the above-mentioned transformative vision for the Archives? Since the records list enslaved (and freed) persons, this collection fits into the Archives' social justice aims as well as the denominational antiracism initiative. This cultural moment necessitates a clear view of the historical past in order to right its wrongs—and to pursue the denominational goals of justice and righteousness.

## **Other Historical Digitization Initiatives**

*NEH Grant (2024-2025).* The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) offers an annual Preservation Assessment Grant to support the recovery, repair, and preservation of archival materials, following a rigorous assessment. The NEH confirmed our eligibility for this grant, which we will pursue this year.

## **State of the Archives**

*Physical storage.* Our vulnerable records are in a climate-controlled storage room in Sage Library. Other records are stored in the basement alcoves, where dehumidifiers eliminate excess humidity. Some materials are stored at off-site storage facilities in Michigan and New Jersey.

*Digital storage* will be increased to accommodate the volume of digitized materials. Informed by best practices, the Archives will continue to advocate for digitization and digital storage needs.

*Additional personnel needs.* The archivist desires the addition of one person, at least 5 hours a week, and a summer intern for 15 hours a week.

*Equipment and building.* A dumbwaiter (elevator to transfer materials between floors) will be repaired this June. This repair project will facilitate archival processing.

*Digitizing the Church Herald.* The archivist has just initiated the digitization of all issues of the *Church Herald*, the RCA periodical published from 1945 to 2009. The audience for this sociological resource includes theology students, faculty, pastors,

and independent researchers. The next step is to secure hosting by library organizations, to make this journal (and others) available. We are exploring the low-cost hosting provided by a theological library association.

In conclusion, this report details various initiatives that align the witness-bearing history of the Archives with the goal of a just, righteous, and ever-transforming denomination. Onward toward these goals!