An Overview of the Seamen’s Church Institute Archives for Researchers, Cultural Institutions, and Educators

The Seamen’s Church Institute cares for the personal, professional, and spiritual needs of mariners around the world. Founded in 1834, it is the largest, most comprehensive mariners’ service agency in North America.

SCI’s records consist of approximately 300 linear feet of correspondence, photographs, minutes, printed material, scrapbooks, journals, registers, reports, and ephemera related to the day-to-day operation of the Institute, as well as the working waterfront of New York City. The collections are particularly strong in the areas of maritime ministry, waterfront labor and New York City history, specifically the development of Lower Manhattan from shipping hub to financial center.

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http://www.seamenschurch.org/archives

Historical Strengths and Focuses

Maritime Ministry

SCI has been providing pastoral ministry to sailors in the Port of New York since 1843 when the Institute built its first of three floating chapels along Manhattan’s waterfront (pictured above). Chaplain’s journals, correspondence, and photographs document the daily battle between the
church and the waterfront crimps and boarding house keepers with whom SCI was competing for the sailor’s patronage.

**Waterfront Labor**

Before the White Act of 1898, corporal punishment was permitted onboard ships, and the “Fugitive Sailor Law” provided for the arrest of maritime deserters. Since 1898 and beyond, SCI has advocated for reform within the maritime profession. Additionally, SCI staff actively collected records and ephemera related to the leftist waterfront union movements of the 1910s-1950s. Rare pamphlets, handbills, and posters created by waterfront activist groups are included in the collection’s folders and scrapbooks.

**The Merchant Marine**

Since its inception, the U.S. Merchant Marine has maintained the maritime shipping industry, an essential factor in the historical growth of the nation. During World War II the Merchant Marine suffered a higher proportional casualty rate than any branch of the U.S. Military. Records in the SCI archives document the history and development of the Merchant Marine from the 1830s to present day.

**Lower Manhattan**

Known as “Sailortown” in the 19th century, Lower Manhattan was once the heart of the nation’s maritime shipping industry, with thousands of sailors in port at any given time. Around this population there grew a neighborhood filled with saloons, brothels, and boardinghouses, all there to cash in on the sailor’s paycheck. As Lower Manhattan developed from Sailortown to Financial District, the port moved to more spacious New Jersey. SCI’s operations mirror this timeline, and its records document the transition from a variety of perspectives.

**Maritime Education**

SCI has operated a maritime education school for seamen since 1916, providing training to thousands of sailors who went to sea during both World Wars, and thousands more during peacetime. What began with sail-powered vessels evolved to steam and diesel, and finally computers over the course of SCI’s history. Photographs and educational guides document the history of maritime training at SCI.

**Other**

Other highlight areas include Franklin D. Roosevelt, who served on SCI’s Board of Managers from 1907 until his death; the *Titanic*, which sank one day before SCI dedicated its first centralized headquarters, and whose crew SCI provided with clothing and toiletries after the disaster; and the Christmas at Sea knitting program, which originated during the Spanish-American War.
Digital Archives

The SCI Digital Archives consist of thousands of digital photographs and documents from SCI’s archives. Accessible content includes Board of Managers minutes dating back to 1834, Annual Reports, Chaplain’s Journals, Photo Scrapbooks, and issues of The Lookout, SCI’s institutional publication dating back to 1910.

Collaborative Models

Course Curriculum

The variety of subject matter and formats in the SCI archives make it a good match for many different academic disciplines and course topics. Classes in the past have had students who have written papers on New York maritime history, waterfront labor reform, and maritime World War II. More recently, high school classes and students have expressed interest in working with the SCI archives. If you would like to schedule a class visit or a one-on-one consultation to discuss projects and ideas, please contact us.

Internships and Fellowships

We encourage institutions and individuals from high school through graduate school to contact us regarding opportunities for internships.

Fellowships with the SCI archives are arranged through the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies. We consider applicants who are enrolled as graduate students who have taken the perquisite archives courses within the program. Contact us for more information.

Digital Projects

The SCI Digital Archives provides a flexible format for the creation and publication of curated digital exhibits. Institutions with similar collecting interests are encouraged to contact us regarding digital projects that could potentially combine multiple collections in a way that (re)presents content to public users.

Find Us Online

Finding Aid

http://tinyurl.com/cu3pqjr

Digital Archives

http://qcarchives.com/sci/