3-14-2018

Nora Evelyn Cordingley

Keith J. Muchowski
CUNY New York City College of Technology

---

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs

Part of the Archival Science Commons, Cataloging and Metadata Commons, Collection Development and Management Commons, Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

---

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/307

---

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the New York City College of Technology at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Nora Evelyn Cordingley
(http://womenoflibraryhistory.tumblr.com/post/171864192652/nora-evelyn-cordingley)

This post was written by Keith Muchowski, who is an Instruction/Reference Librarian at the Ursula C. Schwerin Library, New York City College of Technology (CUNY), in Brooklyn, NY. He blogs at thestrawfoot.com (https://tumblr.com/redirect?q=http%3A%2F%2Fthestrawfoot.com&t=ZWU1Mzc0YTthmZTUxNWM4NmNkMWRhNGJIOGY4OGMzNGFhMGNiOGMwMyxvVjBOZFRSV%3D%3D&b=t%3AmbBWSKl-DvfQkqR8zDOi2w&p=http%3A%2F%2Fwomenoflibraryhistory.tumblr.com%2Fpost%2F171864192652%2Fnora-evelyn-cordingley&m=0). Keith also provided the image above of Nora E. Cordingley’s 1931 naturalization card.

Nora E. Cordingley died on March 14, 1951. The name may not be familiar, but Ms. Cordingley was active for three decades in one of the most significant projects in presidential librarianship: the collection, preservation and dissemination of the letters,
papers, and hundreds of thousands of other items related to the short, strenuous life of Theodore Roosevelt. When the twenty-sixth president died on January 6, 1919, his family, friends, and close associates formed the Roosevelt Memorial and Woman’s Roosevelt Memorial Associations. One of the first moves of the RMA and WRMA was purchasing the East 20th Street site upon which Theodore Roosevelt was born in 1858, and where he lived until his early teens. The groups also bought the neighboring lot where young Theodore’s uncle, Robert B. Roosevelt, resided. Roosevelt House, as it was originally called, opened to great fanfare on October 27, 1923, what would have been Theodore Roosevelt’s sixty-fifth birthday. The institution had two missions: to be a museum & library and to serve as something of a center for American Studies. Ironically however one of Roosevelt House’s most important players in these years was not American, but Canadian: Nora Evelyn Cordingley.

Ms. Cordingley was born in Brockville, Ontario on January 23, 1888. She came to New York City to attend Queens College, from which she seems to have graduated around 1910. Cordingley was a student in the first class of the Library School of The New York Public Library in 1911. The NYPL’s new initiative was not a library program as we know it today, but more a vehicle to train para-professionals who would go on to work in various support services. (The New York Public Library program lasted fifteen years. It was merged along with the New York State School at Albany to become part of Columbia University’s new School of Library Service.) Somewhere in these years—the chronological record is unclear—Cordingley, her parents, and her sister settled in Tuckahoe just north of New York City in Westchester County. Cordingley worked as an assistant in the library of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. The work was probably unrewarding, but in all likelihood it was through this position that she got her break, for it happened to be at the Metropolitan Life Tower at 1 Madison Avenue and 23rd Street that the Roosevelt Memorial Association opened its headquarters in 1919. It was there in 1921 that the RMA offered Ms. Cordingley a job as a cataloger with the Bureau of Roosevelt Research and Information.

Memorial officials had been collecting material even in these years before the House opened in 1923. By 1921, the year she hired on, the RMA had gathered nearly 15,000 individual items. The items were as disparate as the life they represented and included many of the over 100,000 letters that Roosevelt penned, various editions of the nearly three dozen books he authored, positive and negative political cartoons that captured his unique physical bearing and caricaturist’s dream of a visage, scrapbooks, political
campaign ephemera, speeches, a vast film archive, and much more. One must remember that this was something of a new and original enterprise; presidential libraries did not exist at that time and would not for another two decades when another Roosevelt, Franklin D., created the first one at his home in Hyde Park. The Theodore Roosevelt Collection only grew after the opening of the house in 1923. Assessing the RMA’s work in 1929, a decade after its founding, Director Hermann Hagedorn told an audience at the American Library Association conference in Washington D.C. that a New York Public Library official had informed him that Bureau of Roosevelt Research and Information was the largest library dedicated to one individual in the United States. The work continued into the 1930s. Meanwhile, Ms. Cordingly became a naturalized American in 1931. In 1933-34 she served as chairperson of Museums, Arts & Humanities Division of the Special Libraries Association.

After twenty years on East 20th Street the Roosevelt Collection moved to Harvard’s Widener Library in 1943. When the collection relocated, so did Ms. Cordingly. She moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts and continued her work. She gave an address on the rarities within the collection at the Bibliographical Society of America conference in January 1945. One of her many projects in these years included assisting with the organization and eventual publication of Roosevelt’s correspondence. Starting in 1948, the Harvard Library, Roosevelt Memorial Association and Massachusetts Institute of Technology began a project to edit and annotate Theodore Roosevelt’s 150,000 letters. Harvard University Press published volumes one and two of The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt in April 1951. These were the first installments of what would eventually be an eight volume undertaking. About 10% of Roosevelt’s total output—nearly 15,000 some odd letters—were eventually published in the set over the next several years. Sadly, Nora was not there to see any of it. Nora Evelyn Cordingly died of a heart attack in her office in Harvard’s Widener Library on March 14, 1951.

Bibliography:


