



BHC-MSS 0026
Guide to the Papers of the Read Family
By Meghan Rinn

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Muriel Read, other members of the Read Family

Title: Papers of the Read Family

Dates: 1800-1956 [bulk 1880-1930]

Quantity: 3 manuscript boxes, 3 oversize boxes

Abstract: D.M. Read Company, later Read's Department Store, was a major purveyor of fine goods in Bridgeport, with a company history starting in 1857. The papers of the Read family offer an intimate look at family photographs and manuscripts during the store's hey-day, with a particular focus on Muriel Read and her parents, Charles B. and Eleanor.

Collection No.: BHC-MS 0026

Language: English

Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Biographical History

The Reads

The Read family was an active family in Bridgeport's business and social communities in the mid-to-late 1800s. Their rise to prominence began with David M. Read. He began by founding a dry goods company in 1857, which grew into the D.M. Read company in 1884. This company grew into a major department store in the city. David M. married Helen A. Barnum (a half-sister of P.T. Barnum), and the couple had three children: Charles B., David F. and May. They later played roles in expanding the Read businesses. David M. died in 1893.

Charles B. Read (-July 5, 1912) worked as a board member of the D.M. Read Company. He was born in the city of Bridgeport, and he wed Eleanor L. Atkinson in 1890. The Akinsons were of a similar social standing, and together the couple had a child named Muriel in 1904. Charles died a sudden death in July of 1912. A fire broke out at the Read estate, and two servants were trapped. He attempted a rescue, but he, along with Mr. and Mrs. Ruhl died in the fire. The sudden death of Read, along with the heroism of his rescue attempt, provoked mourning throughout the city, seeing stores shuttered and resolutions in his memory declared. Eleanor died many years later in 1948 at age 78.

Muriel A. Leeds nee Read (1906-1988) led a very active life. She attended the Yale Fine Arts school, and married S. Gail Landon in 1928. It is unclear when she remarried, but with her second husband with Arthur she had one daughter, Ellen Read (July 19, 1939-). The family lived at the estate Restmore, originally owned by Dr. Ira DeVer Warner. Muriel died on May 25, 1988, in Southport, Connecticut, at the age of 82.

The Muriel Read Leeds and Ellen Leeds Sturges '53 Art and Horticulture Reference Library at the Unqowa School in Fairfield, CT was dedicated in Muriel's memory out of respect for the mother-daughter team's devotion to gardening and art education at the school.

D.M. Read Company

D.M. Read was began in 1857 as a dry good company, and then renamed D.M. Read Company in 1884. It became one of the premier places to shop in Bridgeport thanks to it's high quality goods. It boasted not only departments for typical clothing, hats, and the like, but included special rest rooms for shoppers as well. Business was exceedingly excellent into the 1920s, causing the store to move to a new building in 1926 at Broad and John Streets to support its business and offer even more amenities.

Read's fell under the jurisdiction of Allied Stores in 1954, and soon Read's became a chain. This was successful for a time, but in 1981, Read's flagship store at John and Broad closed down, moving it into a space at Lafayette Plaza Mall instead. Sadly, the name Reads was done away with in 1987 when another merger saw it change to the name of Jordan Marsh. That flagship building still stands, now the home of Artspace as of 2004, an area for artists to live and work. The ground floor features commercial space.

Bankruptcy by Allied Stores in 1991 saw the closing of most remaining stores, and more and more mergers saw an eventual takeover and being folded into Macy's. Read stores no longer exist.

Scope and Content Note

Photographs make up the bulk of the collection, with an emphasis on Muriel A. Read as a baby and up until teenager-hood, and her mother Eleanor A. Read. Manuscript material is dominated by Muriel's correspondence with Frederick W. Blum, a British soldier serving in France in World War One.

Some earlier manuscript material does exist, having come from a bound red wallet. These items range from 1800 to 1840, and while not always signed, indicate the origin of D.M. Read's as a dry goods and then department store. Receipts belonging to Nathaniel Wheeler and his business dealings with Read's are also present.

A small amount of material relates to Read's department store itself, and includes interior photographs of the department store in the late 1880s/early 1890s.

Arrangement note

These papers are arranged with manuscript material placed first, then photographs, then secondary works, and it is rounded out by a small series related to the Read's family business. In the case of manuscript and photograph series, the most prolific creator was Muriel A. Read, and is thus given prominence. The accession also included multiple boxes of family silver and like items. Due to the extent of items and collecting policy, the Bridgeport History Center declined retention of the items.

Administrative information

Provenance: Donated to the Bridgeport History Center in 2017 from St. John's Church, where the Read family had worshipped for many years. The Reads left material to the church.

Preferred Citation

Papers of the Read Family (BHC-MSS 0026), Bridgeport History Center.

Names and Subject Tracings

Personal Names

Read, Charles Barnum.
Read, Muriel Atkinson.

Corporate Names

D.M. Read Company

Subjects

Bridgeport, Conn.

Series I, Read family papers

Box 1

1. Letters, to Muriel Read from F.W. Blum, 1918
2. Letters, to Muriel Read from F.W. Blum, 1919
3. Letters, to Muriel Read from F.W. Blum and family, undated
4. Letters, to Muriel Read from others
5. Calling card or book plate for Muriel Read, undated
6. Letter, to Eleanor Read from Charles Read, August 17, 1904
7. Other manuscript material for Charles B. Read, c. 1860s
8. Obituary for Charles B. Read, December 1893
9. Image used for Charles b. Read in the National Cyclopedia of American Biography, undated
10. Memorial book for Charles B. Read, December 1893
11. In Memoriam book for Charles B. Read (clipping scrapbook) c. 1893
12. Envelope addressed to Eleanor Read, dance book belonging to Eleanor Read, 1890
13. Collection of receipts from red wallet belonging to Read ancestors, 1800-1840s, 1 of 3
14. Collection of receipts from red wallet belonging to Read ancestors, 1800-1840s, 2 of 3
15. Collection of receipts from red wallet belonging to Read ancestors, 1800-1840s, 3 of 3
16. Estate of Charles A. Read, 1896
17. Printing plates for calling cards for Ellen Read Leads, Mrs. Arthur Fuller Leeds, and Mr. and Mrs. A. Leeds

Series II - Photographs

18. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a newborn, 1 of 2
19. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a newborn, 2 of 2
20. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a baby, 1 of 3

Box 2

1. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a baby, 2 of 3
2. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a baby, 3 of 3
3. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a young girl
4. Photographs, Muriel Reed as a teenager
5. Photographs, May Louise Read
6. Photographs, Eleanor A. Read
7. Photographs, Charles B. Read, 1860s-
8. Photographs, Gabriel F. Read
9. Photographs, Gabriel M. Read
10. Photographs, John Atkinson
11. Photographs, other members of the Atkinson family
12. Photo wallet, Charles and Eleanor Read
13. Photo wallet, featuring a dog

14. Photographs, group photos
15. Photographs, houses and grounds
16. Photographs, unidentified

Box 3

1. Gabriel f. Read Lake House photographs
2. Dridgeport Life magazine, Vol. VIII no. 13, December 21-27, 1918
3. Photographs, Events at St. John's Church c.1930s
4. Diploma awarded to Muriel Rea, June 11, 1920
5. Home interiors, oversized, undated
6. Photographs of Muriel Read, oversize
7. Photographs of the Read family members, oversize
8. Atkinson family album, c. 1860s-1870d
9. Photo album, Muriel Read at Marina Part, c. 1900s
10. Photo album, Eleanor Read, 1910s-1920s
11. Canister of film
12. Ambro or Daguerreotype, unidentified
13. Oval photograph, unidentified
14. Photo frame featuring Muriel Read as a baby.

Series III Secondary works

Box 4

1. Thoughts--Treasures greek authors
2. Card case or book cover for Muriel A. Read
3. Fragments in Prose and Verse
4. Young's Night Thoughts
5. Set of Book of Common Prayer and the Bible
6. Book of Common Prayer, 4 copies
7. Book of Evening Prayer
8. The Bible

Series IV Objects

Box 5

1. Dog statue, large, with painted eyes
2. Dog statue, small, with faux-gem eyes
3. Combs, likely made of ivory
4. Small wooden spinning wheels (2)
5. Red hat or beanie with the word "pyramid" on it
6. Set of two unknown hook like items
7. 3 sealers used for sealing wax
8. Unknown personal care product, likely make up related
9. Hair tie with silver decoration on it
10. Souvenir of France handkerchief, 1918
11. Unidentified hanging object, likely souvenir
12. Small ivory pin
13. Small buckle
14. Small coin, likely for a card game
15. Small container featuring a turtle, likely ivory

Series V D.M. Read Store

Box 6

1. Petition for closure for improved rest and break over winter (fragile), 1849
2. Bills and receipts for Nathaniel Wheeler, 1869
3. Bills and receipts for Nathaniel Wheeler, April-August, 1888
4. Other bills and receipts, 1880s
5. Office of David M. Read stationary, 1880s
6. Booklets celebrating D.M. Read Company, 1907, 1915
7. Advertisements for D.M. Read Company, undated
8. General correspondence, 1937, 1956
9. Clippings, Read store advertisements, 1800s-1930s
10. Clippings, other, 1800s-1930s
11. Clippings, new Read store, 1923-1927
12. Clippings, new Read store opening, 1926 (special edition paper)
13. Photographs, interior of Read's department store, 1888-1890