

Record Group ArMs 1977.324 and 1993.008

**THE CIVITAS CLUB COLLECTION
1893-1993 (Bulk Dates: 1893-1960)**

GUIDE TO THE CIVITAS CLUB COLLECTION

3.0 cubic feet

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Introduction

The Civitas Club Collection traces the history of the Civitas Club of Brooklyn, New York. The club was founded in 1893 in Brooklyn Heights as a women's social group dedicated to "awaken an interest in matters pertaining to municipal welfare, and to foster all movements within the circle of its influence that have for their end the improvement of any phase of civic life."¹ The Civitas Club and its members were politically and socially active throughout its century of existence. Members were encouraged to present papers, make their voices heard within the community, and gain knowledge of timely issues through the lectures and debates sponsored by the club. The collection traces these activities, the organization of the club, and the more social ventures of Civitas, illustrating the functions of a women's club and the development of women's political voice through the twentieth century.

Note on Brooklyn History:

When the Civitas Club was founded in 1893, the city of Brooklyn was the fourth largest industrial city in the United States. Since its incorporation as a city in 1834, Brooklyn had gained prominence as a major port of trade, with docks and storage facilities lining the East River shore. The city's economic prosperity, coupled with a growing population, led to the development of the city's commercial and residential center, Brooklyn Heights, located on the rising bluffs overlooking the East River. Many of Brooklyn's middle and upper-class families lived in the Heights, having molded the neighborhood into a cultural center, complete with The Long Island Historical Society, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the headquarters of numerous clubs, societies, and lodges.

Brooklyn continued to grow economically and physically, encompassing all of Kings County by 1896, and consolidated with New York City in 1898. As the Borough entered the twentieth century its demographics altered dramatically. Many of the middle and upper class residents of Brooklyn Heights began to move away from the commercial center of the borough. By the 1920s, many of the once grand homes of Brooklyn's elite families had been converted into apartment houses and housed a population of clerks and secretaries who worked across the river in the Manhattan financial district. The Great Depression and development projects, such as the creation of the Brooklyn-Queens expressway (1950s), led much of old Brooklyn Heights to fall into neglect until the early 1950s, when urban pioneers began to redevelop the neighborhood and promote its preservation. Such efforts proved successful and Brooklyn Heights was designated the first Historic District in New York City in 1966.

Brooklyn has continued to experience changes in population, politics, and economics, and in 2000 is the most populous borough of New York City. Markers of old Brooklyn, including The Long Island Historical Society (now The Brooklyn Historical Society), the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, continue to thrive as major cultural institutions of the borough of Brooklyn, New York City, and the United States.

¹ Civitas Club, *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Civitas Club*, (Brooklyn: The Tremlett Press, 1895), 1.

Volume: The Civitas Club Collection occupies 3.0 linear feet (6 document boxes).

Provenance: The Civitas Club Collection was donated to The Brooklyn Historical Society in two separate accessions. The Long Island Historical Society (known as The Brooklyn Historical Society since 1985) accepted a donation of minutes, record books, and other materials from the Civitas Club on March 4, 1969 with the invitation to bring any further materials to the Historical Society's attention. In 1993, upon the dissolution of the club, additional materials (dating through 1993) were given to The Brooklyn Historical Society to be combined with the first accession to complete the Civitas Club Collection.

Restrictions: There are no restrictions on the use of this collection.

Photocopies may be made for research purposes only. Permission to publish material in the collection must be requested of the Director of The Brooklyn Historical Society. Citations of manuscript material should take the following form:

Identification of item, date (if known); Civitas Club Collection; Library; The Brooklyn Historical Society.

Subject Headings:

Brooklyn Heights (New York, N.Y.)
Clubs- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)
Lectures and lecturing- United States
Long Island Historical Society (Brooklyn, New York, N.Y.)
Political clubs
Social group work
United States- Politics and government
Women- Societies and clubs
Women in charitable work

Historical Note

The Civitas Club of Brooklyn, New York was founded in 1893 by Katherine Louise Maltby (d. 1948), an 1875 graduate of Vassar College and founder and director of Miss Katherine L. Maltby's School for Girls in Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn was home to two other women's clubs at the time, The Women's Club and Sorosis, both geared to more mature, often married women. Unlike these two clubs, Civitas was developed as a forum for the young women of the city. Miss Maltby, later Mrs. Darwin J. Meserole, founded the club "to awaken an interest in matters pertaining to municipal welfare, and to foster all movements within the circle of its influence that have for their end the improvement of any phase of civic life."² This interest in civic matters was coupled with philanthropic support of social reform and a desire to make women's voices heard in political and social realms. Civitas, derived from the Latin for "citizenship," dedicated itself to the education and transformation of local women into active citizens of the city of Brooklyn and the nation, until the club's dissolution in 1993.

Founded by and for the upper-middle class social elite of Brooklyn Heights, the club was an important and influential institution. The 178 members of its inaugural year included such prominent Brooklynites as Mildred W. (b.1870) and Elizabeth H. Packard (b.1872), Caroline Bergen, wife of property developer Tunis G. Bergen, and suffragist Jeannie S. Dike Williams (1838-1920). Many early members of the Civitas Club were listed in the *Brooklyn Blue Book*, the city's social register, and the club's roster was included in the *Brooklyn Blue Book* from its first publication in 1896. The club grew to its maximum membership of 200 in 1902 and introduced a waiting list for membership. By 1933, Civitas had increased its maximum membership to 275. Members included many influential women, including Democratic National Committee Person Alice Campbell, City Councilperson Genevieve Beavers Earle (1883-1956), and community advocate Rachel Higgins Everson (1902-1993).

During its early years, the club supported numerous ventures modeled to address concerns of the period, such as education and public health. The club organized and ran a free kindergarten, vacation school, and social club for working girls, all of which were developed within a year of the club's founding. Civitas opened the School for Incapable Children in 1894. Members hired a teacher to instruct sixty children and volunteered their own time at the school.

Over the course of its existence, the club donated time and money to city beautification, The Red Cross, The Brooklyn Museum of Art, and The Long Island Historical Society. The club maintained memberships with the United Nations Association; the Brooklyn Council of Social Planning, a coordinating body of health and welfare agencies; the Citizen's Union of the City of New York; and the League of Women Voters. Members also supported and worked for the establishment of a public library in Brooklyn, public transportation, and court reform. Civitas supported the Women's Overseas Hospital during World War I; concentrated on a program of education regarding issues concerning the war during World War II; and as environmental issues came to the forefront of politics in the 1970s and 1980s, members expressed vocal support of the Clean Air Act of 1977.

² *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Civitas Club*, 1.

The Civitas Club also concerned itself with the education of its members. The club concentrated on the disbursement of knowledge and information through its bi-weekly meetings, which centered around debates and lectures by noted thinkers and members of the community. Jane Adams, W.E.B. DuBois, Emma Goldman, Alex Haley, Margaret Mead, Frances Perkins, and Upton Sinclair all spoke before the club. Civitas also sponsored debates centered around topics ranging from war, race relations, education, and the consolidation of Brooklyn and New York City.

The Civitas Club was organized into four committees, established in 1894, “representing [the Club’s] different lines of work”:

- Government and Social Science
- Education
- Philanthropy
- Art and City Improvement

Each committee was charged with visiting the various local institutions falling under its jurisdiction, such as courts, libraries, charities, and parks. Committee members then reported back to the club with suggestions on improvement, including ways in which the Civitas Club could further educate on a particular subject or aid a particular cause.³ By 1993, ten committees had replaced and augmented the original four, including a Program Committee, a Budget Committee, and a Legislative Committee. The sole purpose of the Legislative Committee was to follow impending national, state, and local legislation so the club could educate members as to its significance and relevance to their community, and garner support for or against particular legislation.

The club found that its membership dwindled as more women entered the work force in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Daytime meetings were less attractive to working women and program attendance dropped significantly during the 1980s. Making efforts to boost membership, the club allowed men to join in 1976, began to hold occasional evening meetings, and often held joint meetings with groups such as the Brooklyn Junior League. In 1993, recognizing that “the dissemination of information by television, the growing political influence of women... and the ready availability of accessible civic action [had] made [their] identification and mission as a women’s group no longer necessary,” and “impossible to sustain,” the club was disbanded.⁴

³ *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Civitas Club*, 3-4.

⁴ Draft of letter from Civitas Club Anniversary Committee to Civitas Club Members, 1993; Civitas Club Collection; Library; The Brooklyn Historical Society.

Sources:

Brooklyn Blue Book. Brooklyn: S.L. Bliss, Publisher, 1896-1898.

Brooklyn Blue Book and Long Island Social Register. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Blue Book Co., 1899.

Brooklyn Blue Book and Long Island Society Register. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Blue Book Co., 1900-1903.

Civitas Club. *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Civitas Club.* Brooklyn: The Tremlett Press, 1895.

Club List of Brooklyn: complete list of officers and members of the leading social clubs. Brooklyn, 1896.

Scope and Content

The Civitas Club Collection tracks the activities and organization of a women's club over a period of one hundred years, from 1893 to 1993. The bulk of the collection concerns the first two decades of the twentieth century and the decade immediately preceding the club's 75th anniversary (celebrated in 1968), at which point the members made their first donation of materials to the Long Island Historical Society. Included in the collection are minutes, meeting and program announcements, financial records, and memorabilia.

The collection consists of materials donated to The Brooklyn Historical Society by the Civitas Club in two separate accessions. Materials were first donated to The Long Island Historical Society (now The Brooklyn Historical Society) in 1969 (Accession Number: 1977.324), so as to ensure their preservation and "so that their value as the history of one of the first women's clubs in the United States and as critical insights and reports of lectures, readings and attitudes of Brooklyn society...be made available to students and historians."⁵ The second accession (Accession Number: 1993.008) was donated to The Brooklyn Historical Society in 1993 upon the dissolution of the club. Both accessions have been merged into the one collection and arranged functionally according to three pre-existing series:

- I. Records
- II. Yearbooks
- III. Program and Meeting Announcements

A fourth series, "History and Memorabilia," has been created to contain the remaining materials.

The most complete collection of materials is Series I, which consists of many of the records of the Civitas Club. This series has been arranged into three additional *sub-series* reflective of the original arrangement of the records: "Minutes," "Financial/Membership Records," and "Committees." Although not complete, this series contains records dating from 1893 through the club's dissolution in 1993.

The Civitas Club minutes, taken either on leaves of paper or in notebooks, detail the proceedings of the meetings and programs of the club, note membership, and mark the election of new officers. The minute books documenting the period of 1894 to 1919 are of special note as they describe the monthly programs/ meetings in addition to the meetings of the Directors and Annual Meetings. Detailed here is the business of the club, including formal lectures given by such noted figures as Upton Sinclair and Jane Addams. The minute books also note informal speakers, such as representatives of the Lady's Shirt Waist Strikers, who were asked to tell "their own tale of the strike" of December, 1909.

Minute books detail the club's involvement in the war effort of World War I, which included the creation of a Motor Corps to transport soldiers from hospital to convalescent home. Minutes also document motions passed by Civitas members, such

⁵ Board of Director's Minutes, February 4, 1969; Civitas Club Collection; Library; The Brooklyn Historical Society.

as that carried on November 13, 1901 requesting of the School Board that at least two members of each School District Board be women.

No minutes exist for the years 1921 through 1939, 1948 and 1949, and those dating after 1990 are extremely brief in their record. Minutes from 1940 on focus more on the business aspects of the organization, only recording the proceedings of the Director's Meetings and Annual Meetings. Treasurers' monthly reports, annual committee reports, and logistical details regarding the organization of the club are included within the minutes.

The activities and growth of the club can also be traced through the financial/ membership and committee records found in Series I. Financial ledgers dating from 1893-1902 contain membership rosters that include records of dues paid, resignations from the club, and occasionally, the death of members. Annual Treasurer's Reports and expenditures for lecturers and charities are recorded here. Of special note are those materials relating to the Program Committee, including a Meeting Book (1947-1957) which details the expenditures associated with each meeting, the guest speaker, location, and attendance of the event.

The Yearbooks of Series II and the Announcements of Series III provide documentation of the club's history. The Yearbooks were printed annually and consist of a roster of members, a list of officers, and the Constitution and By-laws of Civitas. The announcements publicize upcoming programs and include speakers, date, time, location, and often the subject or title of the lecture to be given.

The fourth series, "History and Memorabilia," contains a variety of materials collected throughout the club's history. Items include: stock certificates purchased by the club in the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the City Federation Hotel, the club's Brooklyn Savings Bank passbook, membership cards, and a receipt for payment of dues dated 1900. Also held in this series is a history of the Civitas Club written in 1968 by member and Program Director Rachel Higgins Everson, and newspaper clippings regarding the activities of the club and its members.

Civitas Club Collection Container List

Series I: Records

Sub-Series 1: Minutes

Box	Folder	Contents	Dates
1	1	Minute Book	1894-1900
	2	Minute Book- Directors' Meetings	1895-1901
	3	Minute Book	1901-1912
	4	Minute Book	1912-1920
2	1	Minutes and Reports	1940-1947
	2	Minutes and Reports	1950-1953
	3	Minutes and Reports	1954-1957
	4	Minutes and Reports	1957-1958
	5	Minutes and Reports	1959-1960
	6	Minutes and Reports	1960-1962
	7	Minutes and Reports	1963-1964
	8	Minutes and Reports	1964-1965
	9	Minutes and Reports	1965-1967
	10	Minutes and Reports	1967-1969
3	1	Minutes and Reports	1969-1971
	2	Minutes and Reports	1972-1975
	3	Minutes and Reports	1976
	4	Minutes and Reports	1977
	5	Minutes and Reports	1978
	6	Minutes and Reports	1979
	7	Minutes and Reports	1980
	8	Minutes and Reports	1981
	9	Minutes and Reports	1982-1984
	10	Minutes and Reports	1985-1991
	11	Minute Book: includes loose notes	1988-1993
	12	Letter announcing dissolution of Civitas Club: draft	1993

Sub- Series 2: Financial/ Membership Records

4	1	Membership Ledger	1893-1897
	2	Membership/ Financial Ledger	1896-1902
	3	Financial Ledger	1933-1946
	4	Meeting Book	1947-1957

**Sub-Series 3:
Committees**

Box	Folder	Contents	Dates
4	5	Legislative Committee	1954-1962
	6	Membership Committee	c.1950-1963
	7	Program Committee	1953-1963
	8	War Committee	c. 1918

Series II: Yearbooks

5	1	Yearbook	1894-1895
	2	Yearbook	1896-1897
	3	Yearbook	1899-1900
	4	Yearbook	1902-1903
	5	Yearbooks	1910, 1933, 1943-1949, 1955-1959
	6	Yearbooks	1961-1975, 1980, 1982

Series III: Program and Meeting Announcements

5	7	Meeting Announcement	1926
	8	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1936-1938
	9	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1939-1945
	10	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1951-1964
	11	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1965-1969
6	1	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1970-1974
	2	Meeting/ Program Announcements	1975-1990

Series IV: History and Memorabilia

6	3	Anna May Mason- Dues Reciept	1900
	4	Newspaper Clippings	1903-1917, 1992
	5	Stock Certificates and Bank Book	1905-1924
	6	Skit	1933
	7	Ballots	1945-1969
	8	Correspondence	1945-1966
	9	History of Civtas	1968
	10	History of Civtas- 75 th Anniversary	1968
	11	"Civitas Here and There Through 100 Years"	1992
	12	Letterhead	n.d.
	13	Miscellaneous by-laws and amendments	n.d.