

Access Policies on Native American Missions Records (March 2023)

The Mennonite Library and Archives has records that originate from General Conference Mennonite Church mission and service work with Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Hopi communities. These records include organizational records, such as files generated by the mission boards, and personal papers of mission and service workers.

These records are open for research use, with certain exceptions described below. In allowing open access, including making some materials available on the web, we are following the example of many other archival institutions, some of them Native-led, such as the National Museum of the American Indian, National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, National Archives, Library of Congress, and many state and university archives.

To the best of our knowledge, with the exception of the H. R. Voth papers, these records do not contain material related to non-public, traditionally secret ceremonial matters or traditional knowledge.

Copyright: Many of the records are old enough that copyright has expired. Ownership of the records of the former General Conference Mennonite Church was transferred to Bethel College and this ownership included the right to make the records available for archival research and publication. Some of the personal papers of the mission and service workers could be considered “works for hire” produced as part of their employment with the General Conference and thus would fall under the same ownership consideration. Because personal papers of mission and service workers were willingly transferred to the archives, this transfer included, explicitly or implicitly, the authority to make the papers available for archival research and publication.

Web publishing: We have made a significant portion of these records available on the web, including photos and textual materials. We will add more of these records to the web as staff time and resources permit. The reason for web access is to make materials available to persons who do not have the capability or willingness to travel to the MLA in person. Refusing to make records available on the web would have the effect of discriminating against persons, some of them in the local Native communities, who cannot easily travel to the archives. The recent pandemic has also highlighted the need and desirability of web access for situations where travel is not possible.

Terminology warning: Records may contain terminology that would be considered derogatory or inappropriate. We will not censor such records and we do not endorse such terminology.

H. R. Voth papers: The Voth photos and ethnographic field notes contain much material about Hopi ceremonies and traditional knowledge. These materials can be viewed in person in the MLA, but publication and more intensive research require consultation with the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office before proceeding. Other parts of the Voth papers are open for research. This has been our policy for the Voth papers since approximately 1996.

Additional restrictions and web removals: If we discover additional records in our holdings that contain detailed information on non-public, traditionally secret ceremonial matters or traditional knowledge, similar to the Voth materials, we will not make those web-accessible or will strongly consider removing them from web access if they are already available. We will give serious consideration to other removal requests from Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPO). We are reluctant to consider removal requests from individuals or private groups because it would be difficult for us to know how such a private request could be balanced against the interests of persons who might wish to have the materials remain accessible. A THPO request gives us some assurance that this balance has been considered. We will also comply with removal requests from parties who can clearly demonstrate that they are the copyright owners of the item to be removed.