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## The Margaret Chase Smith Library: A Unique Collection Fostered by a History of Collaboration

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# The Margaret Chase Smith Library:

## *A Unique Collection Fostered by a History of Collaboration*

By David Richards

The Margaret Chase Smith Library was born of collaboration. A long-serving U.S. senator such as Margaret Chase Smith accumulates an abundance of records. In Sen. Smith's case, the tally included more than 300,000 documents, 4,600 photographs, 2,700 books, 800 audio- and videotapes, 500 scrapbooks, 150 volumes of front office notes, and 40 volumes of statements and speeches. Fortunately for posterity, Sen. Smith had a strong sense of her historical legacy as one of the first and most prominent women in Congress from 1940 to 1973, years that spanned from World War II to the Vietnam War, encompassed the Cold War and space race, and witnessed the civil rights and women's rights movements. She also possessed the wisdom and skill to collaborate with partners to build and maintain a library to house her collection and to initiate library programs to share lessons from her long political career.

### ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

As she left Washington after more than 30 years in Congress, Margaret Chase Smith was encouraged to establish a library by two people, General William Lewis, her chief of staff, and James Webb, a former administrator of NASA. Many other distinguished friends and advisors came together to turn the idea into

a reality. This group incorporated the Margaret Chase Smith Library in 1973. At that point, the library was still only a dream, not a repository. Sen. Smith's papers were packed into an unheated attic over the garage at her Skowhegan home. Her steadfast reluctance to solicit funds stifled plans to build a dedicated library structure.

The logjam holding up construction of a library was unblocked by a new collaboration with Arthur Turner, head of Northwood Institute, a new business school in Midland, Michigan. Turner and cofounder Gary Stauffer agreed in 1979 to raise the necessary funds to build a library as an addition to Margaret Chase Smith's home. In return, her house, papers, and property were transferred to Northwood. The newly constituted Margaret Chase Smith Library opened in August 1982 with James MacCampbell, the former head of the Fogler Library at the University of Maine, as the director.

Many of the people who had initially encouraged her to set up a library formed the Friends of the Margaret Chase Smith Library to help with fund-raising. In 1983, the Margaret Chase Smith Foundation was established to oversee the resulting endowment. Among its largest contributions was a pair of congressional appropriations shepherded through the Senate by Majority Leader George Mitchell in 1990 and 1991. Upon her death, Sen. Smith's estate added significantly to the corpus. Income from these assets has covered the operational expenses of the library from its opening to the present day.

For nearly three decades, the collaboration with Northwood worked to mutual benefit. Gradually, the bonds frayed as the foundational friendship of Margaret Chase Smith, Gary Stauffer, and Arthur Turner dissolved with their respective deaths in 1995, 1996, and 2002. By 2006, Northwood University had a far-flung worldwide presence. The Margaret Chase Smith Library no longer fit the mission of new leadership. Foreseeing that the relationship with the school might not endure, Sen. Smith had made arrangements for such an eventuality. Should Northwood no longer want to operate the library, its ownership would revert to the Margaret Chase Smith Foundation based in Portland, Maine, and the university would be compensated for the money it had expended building the facility. When the Northwood board decided in 2011 to relinquish

control of the library, plans were set in motion for an amicable separation and smooth transition.

Not set up to operate a library, the Margaret Chase Smith Foundation looked for a new partner with whom to collaborate. The first offer went to the University of Maine, which enthusiastically accepted the terms of the proposal. On January 1, 2012, the foundation officially became the new owner of the Margaret Chase Smith Library, including the collections, house, and property. At the same time, library administration was turned over to the University of Maine; oversight of the facility was placed under the university's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, with whom the library had a long-term relationship.

### PROGRAMMATIC COLLABORATIONS

As fundamental as the organizational collaborations have been to the establishment and maintenance of the library, the programmatic collaborations have been equally important. The Margaret Chase Smith Library has four functions: archives, museum, education, and public policy. In each area, collaborations have been vital to carrying out the the organization's mission.

The library has been at the forefront of handling a relatively new type of archival collection—congressional papers. In 1994, the library organized and hosted a Congressional Papers Conference in Portland that attracted participants from all over the country. The library has also been involved in attempts to promote collaboration among other Maine congressional collections, bringing together caretakers of Sen. Smith's papers with colleagues overseeing those of Senator Edmund Muskie at Bates College, Senator George Mitchell at Bowdoin College, and Senator William Cohen at the University of Maine into the Maine Political Papers Network. That initiative has become subsumed by a much more ambitious plan to create a central online database for archival collections in the state under the banner of MACON, Maine Archives Online.

Collaborations have likewise aided the library's museum work. In the local community, the Skowhegan Free Public Library has been a valued partner. The two organizations have worked together on summer reading programs, a community read, book discussions, and fall



*Students from AP U.S. History class, Maranacook Community High School, Readfield, Maine, conducting research at the library.*

festivals. On a regional level, the Margaret Chase Smith Library helped form the Central Kennebec Heritage Council in 2000. Today, this collaboration of cultural organizations binds communities along the Kennebec River from Bingham to Sidney. The library has also undertaken one-time collaborative projects with other museums, for example, *The Legacy of Leadership* conference cosponsored with Norlands Living History Center in 2002. Currently, the library is collaborating with the U.S. General Services Administration on an exhibit about the Margaret Chase Smith Federal Building in Bangor.

Education has been a central function of the Margaret Chase Smith Library from the outset. In conjunction with Northwood, the library offered elder hostel courses for many years. In addition, the library served Northwood students through two programs: week-long research visits by the school's adult-degree students and the Margaret Chase Smith Fellowship, a semester-long term in Skowhegan for undergraduates.

In the state of Maine, the Maine Humanities Council (MHC) has been a major partner. The library has sponsored, hosted, or facilitated the council's *New Books, New Readers* adult literacy, *Let's Talk About It*, and *Literature & Medicine* discussion programs in Skowhegan, and at numerous locations in central and western Maine. The two organizations have also

collaborated to offer three Margaret Chase Smith History Camps for high school students between 2006 and 2010 and a Margaret Chase Smith symposium for the public in 2011. At present, the MHC and library are working together to develop a new program, *Let's Talk Local*, to foster community conversations on issues of local concern.

From the opening of the library, the University of Maine has been an important partner for fulfilling one of Sen. Smith's main objectives for the library—providing forums for the public to discuss policy issues, especially in collaboration with the university's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center. Formed in 1989, the center was named in honor of Sen. Smith the following year. For several election cycles beginning in 1996 and running through 2002, the library and policy center collaborated with the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, Maine, to sponsor the Maine Code of Election Ethics, an attempt “to encourage substantive issue-oriented electoral campaigns.” Since 2009, the Margaret Chase Smith Foundation and Margaret Chase Smith Library have been pleased to support the policy center's NEW Leadership program, which provides college women from throughout Maine with multi-day training in areas such as public speaking and networking. The foundation has also been a major funder and the library a co-publisher of the policy center's journal, *Maine Policy Review*, since 1997.

## CONCLUSION

While vital to the work of the Margaret Chase Smith Library, collaboration is only a means to ends. What drives the four functions of the library is the mission of promoting aspirations, civics, civility, and service. The archives exists not only to preserve the historical record of Sen. Smith's work in Congress, but also to show how she led with a sense of conscience and comity as well as commitment to the commonweal. The museum and educational programs seek to inspire aspirations and service among young people, the nation's future citizens and leaders. The public policy programs provide forums for the public to exercise their civic skills in civil settings.

Most of the challenges the library faces are not unique. Keeping pace with changes in education and

technology with limited funds confronts most collecting institutions these days. One special challenge faced by this collection is maintaining relevance. Margaret Chase Smith died 18 years ago. Today's students increasingly will not know anything about her. As her presence inevitably fades from historical memory, the library will work to supplant legend with legacy. What Sen. Smith stood for—governing with conscience, equality of opportunity for women, and service to others—are timeless values and will become the hooks for introducing future generations to her enduring historical significance and, thereby, the relevance of the library named in her honor.

Collaborations will continue to be essential to leveraging limited resources to make the greatest impact and cast the broadest message as the library moves forward. The affiliation with the University of Maine has opened up many new possibilities to expand the library's reach throughout the state. In addition, partnerships with local institutions, regional groups, and statewide organizations have become vital to carrying out its roles as archive, museum, educational facility, and public policy center. It seems fitting that a library named for a woman who built an impressive political career on the basis of personal relationships throughout Maine is sustained today by so many institutional partnerships in Maine. 🐟



**David Richards** began working at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in 1996 and has served as director since 2012. He has been a gubernatorial appointee to the Maine Humanities Council board of directors since 2010.