

Margaret Chase Smith Library: Supporting Primary Source Research the Archive

by Nicole Potter

The Margaret Chase Smith Library is an archive, museum, educational facility, and public policy center devoted to preserving the legacy of Senator Margaret Chase Smith, promoting inquiry into American political history, advancing the ideals of public service, and exploring issues of civic engagement. A fuller description of the library and its history may be found in a 2013 *Maine Policy Review* article by David Richards, “The Margaret Chase Smith Library: A Unique Collection Fostered by a History of Collaboration” (Richards 2013).

In pursuit of the library’s mission, the staff regularly works with students—ranging from kindergarten through college and beyond—who are interested in delving into the library’s archival collections. These collections are composed of roughly 300,000 documents, 4,600 photographs, 2,700 books, 800 audiovisual materials, 500 scrapbooks, 150 volumes of front office notes, and 40 volumes of statements and speeches. These resources provide a wealth of primary and secondary sources of information for students to explore and equip the staff of the library with ample opportunities to encourage and support student engagement.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIMARY SOURCE RESEARCH

Teaching with primary sources presents its own unique set of challenges, the first hurdle being connecting teachers and students with this type of material, which is commonly held

in libraries, archives, and museums (Yaco et al. 2016). The Margaret Chase Smith Library has worked for over 40 years to match curriculum expectations with the library’s archival collections. Library staff also work to balance guidance with exploration. Increased freedom and less direction in instruction comes with both age and experience. Older grade levels typically can develop analysis and research questions in relation to a primary source with less prompting than elementary students. However, they will still need help if they are unfamiliar with subject matter, lack historical context, or have limited exposure to researching at a library, archive, or special collection.

WORKING WITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Most students who visit the Margaret Chase Smith Library are third- and fourth-graders from Maine public schools. Maine Department of Education’s social studies standards for these grades emphasize the importance of students’ ability to generate inquiries that can be answered through exploration of primary sources.¹ Standard field trips to the library for this age group are constructed in six parts: an introduction to Senator Smith and the library; an exploration of the library’s museum exhibitions (in particular the timeline exhibit of Senator Smith’s life); a guided tour of the senator’s historic house, which adjoins the library; a visit to the library’s research room and exposure to the archival collections; a participatory

activity that reinforces aspects of Senator Smith’s life and career; and a closing question-and-answer period between students and staff. This format allows students to view a wide variety of primary and secondary sources and to come in close contact with materials from the library’s archival collections.

When showing elementary school students primary archival material, it is important to emphasize items that are either relatable to their age group or those that have a high visual appeal to capture their attention. Library materials that fit these criteria include letters written to Senator Smith by third-grade students in 1964 when she was a presidential nominee and a portrait of the senator painted in 1955 by Maine artist Emily Muir. Both of these items generate an initial fascination, which can be necessary to get students of any age interested at the start. While it is important to capture and hold student’s attention during a lesson, allure is not a learning objective (Tanaka 2021). The goal is to move students past this surface level assessment of an item and encourage them to analyze it instead.

When working with younger students, analysis often needs to be prompted. This typically starts out in a question-and-answer format such as asking students what they see, how information makes them feel, or whether they agree or disagree with what’s being presented to them. These opinion-based questions push students to dive into deeper analysis. With third- and fourth-grade students, they will remember information they acquired earlier in the field trip, or back in the classroom, and connect it to what is being presented to them. These connections lead the students to generate further questions and independently locate the answers within the items shared from the archival

collections. This type of engagement with archival material is the desired aim when engaging younger students in primary source inquiry in a setting like the library.

WORKING WITH HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

High school and college student field trips to the library can take a variety of forms due to the range of topics the classes are interested in exploring. With elementary school visits the focus is on Senator Smith's role and importance within the history of the state of Maine. With older students, topics range from Cold War politics to historic Maine environmental legislation to Senator Smith's 1954–1955 world trip. While the goal is for these students to experience the library in full, the main focus of the trip is on the archival collections in the research room so most of the visit is spent there.

The library has a large collection of political cartoons featuring Senator Smith, there are over 375, and they are excellent primary sources for perspective into how Senator Smith was perceived. In a spring 2024 visit by an AP World History class, the students, who had previously learned about the cultural relevance and historic significance of this art form, had a chance to explore this form of political satire with the cartoons of Senator Smith. To encourage students to engage with these materials, library staff employed an analysis method called OCIQ—observation, context, inference, and question (USM n.d.).

Staff gave all the students the same political cartoon and then asked them to share an observation—a piece of factual information they could acquire from the image in front of them. For example, if the cartoonist included a name tag for Senator Smith, then the students are

able to identify her within the cartoon. Next, they were asked to share any contextual information they could provide about the cartoon. For example, if the year 1964 was included on the cartoon, a student could share that this was the year Senator Smith ran in the Republican presidential primary. This context helps students develop an inference, the third part of this activity. An inference is a guess that may or may not be factual and can be an opinion. For example, if Senator Smith is drawn standing behind a podium, then students may infer that the cartoon was published immediately following her delivery of an important speech. Finally, students were then asked to form their own questions about the cartoon. This final stage moves students past analysis and into the realm of research.

CONCLUSION

Bringing students into close contact with the primary source materials held by the Margaret Chase Smith Library can help them think more deeply about history and prompt deeper curiosity. Library staff have developed a variety of learning opportunities that prepare students with contextual information, enable them to observe and respond to archival materials, and promote the importance of them developing their own lines of inquiry and speculation. The end goal when facilitating a reference interview, research appointment, or field trip with students is always to strengthen their information literacy skills and critical thinking abilities, which are crucial for all students as they become engaged citizens. This educational engagement is vital to the continued work and mission of the Margaret Chase Smith Library.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content/socialstudies/standards>

REFERENCES

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