

Jacob A. Riis Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress

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Revised and expanded by Lia Apodaca and
Patrick Kerwin



Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

2007

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Collection Summary

Title: Jacob A. Riis Papers

Span Dates: 1870-1990

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1887-1913)

ID No.: MSS37903

Creator: Riis, Jacob A. (Jacob August), 1849-1914

Extent: 3,000 items; 18 containers; 8.4 linear feet; 8 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English, with some Danish

Repository: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Abstract: Journalist, author, and humanitarian. Correspondence, drafts and printed copies of articles, speeches and lectures, and other material relating chiefly to Riis's work as a journalist and author.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Adler, Felix, 1851-1933--Correspondence.

Carnegie, Andrew, 1835-1919--Correspondence.

Lowell, Josephine Shaw, 1843-1905--Correspondence.

Moore, Martha Riis--Correspondence.

Owre, J. Riis--Correspondence.

Riis family.

Riis, Elisabeth D. Nielson, d. 1905--Correspondence.

Riis, Jacob A. (Jacob August), 1849-1914.

Riis, John--Correspondence.

Riis, Kate--Correspondence.

Riis, Mary Phillips--Correspondence.

Riis, Roger William, b. 1894--Correspondence.

Roosevelt, Theodore, 1858-1919--Correspondence.

Saint-Gaudens, Augustus, 1848-1907--Correspondence.

Organizations

Council of Confederated Good Government Clubs.

Small Parks Committee (New York, N.Y.)

Subjects

Civic improvement--New York (State)--New York.

Humanitarianism.

Journalism--New York (State)--New York.

Reformers.

Slums--New York (State)--New York.

Social history.

Social problems.

Places

New York (N.Y.)--Social conditions.

Occupations

Authors.

Journalists.

Philanthropists.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Jacob A. Riis, journalist, author, and humanitarian, were given to the Library of Congress by his widow, Mary Phillips Riis, in 1952. Additions to the papers were received by gift and purchase between 1958 and 1991.

Processing History

The papers of Jacob A. Riis were arranged and described in 1976. The finding aid was revised in 2007.

Transfers

Photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Jacob A. Riis is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Jacob A. Riis are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Microfilm

A microfilm edition of part of these papers is available on eight reels. Consult a reference librarian in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, Jacob A. Riis Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1849, May 3	Born, Ribe, Denmark
1860s	Educated in private Latin schools, Ribe, Denmark
1870	Emigrated to America
1874	Began work for the <i>South Brooklyn News</i> , a weekly newspaper operated by the local Democratic Party
1876	Married Elisabeth D. Nielsen (died 1905)
1877-1888	Police reporter, <i>New York Tribune</i>
1888-1899	Police reporter, <i>New York Evening Sun</i> ; began lecturing on life in the slums

1890	Published <i>How the Other Half Lives</i> . New York: Charles Scribner's sons
1892	Published <i>The Children of the Poor</i> . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons
1897	Secretary, New York Small Parks Commission
1901	Published <i>The Making of an American</i> . New York: Macmillan Co.
1902	Published <i>The Battle with the Slum</i> . New York: Macmillan Co.
1903	Published <i>Children of the Tenements</i> . New York: Macmillan Co.
1904	Published <i>Theodore Roosevelt, The Citizen</i> . New York: Outlook Co.
1907	Married Mary Phillips
1910	Published <i>Hero Tales of the Far North</i> . New York: Macmillan Co.
1914, May 26	Died, Barre, Mass.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Jacob August Riis (1849-1914) span the years 1870-1990, but are concentrated in the period 1887-1913. They consist of correspondence, drafts and printed copies of articles, outlines of lectures, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, appointment books, financial records, deeds, indentures, radio scripts, and miscellaneous material. The papers document Riis's career as a journalist and illustrate his concern for the poor, his belief in the humanity of the slum dweller, and his devotion to family. The collection is arranged in six series: [Family Correspondence](#), [General Correspondence](#), [Speeches and Writings File](#), [Scrapbooks](#), [Miscellany](#), and [Addition](#). Some material is in Danish.

The papers focus on the period after Riis's emigration from Denmark to the United States in 1870 and his later success as a police reporter in which he witnessed the abuses of slum life. His effort to improve conditions in tenements began shortly after he became editor of the South Brooklyn News, a Democratic newspaper, in 1874. His interest in the abuses of poverty is revealed briefly in the [General Correspondence](#) and more fully in the [Scrapbooks](#) series and the [Speeches and Writings File](#). Many drafts in the [Speeches and Writings File](#) are outlines and lists of thoughts rather than complete texts.

Riis gathered information from health department and police records, conversations with officials, and trips through the slums with health department inspectors. His stories about tenement dwellers and their struggle for survival appear in the scrapbooks. Among the clippings is the capsulized version published in *Scribner's Magazine* of his first book, *How the Other Half Lives*. Other articles exploring slum conditions and police work in New York City appeared without his byline in the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Sun*. Additional writings by Riis in the scrapbooks are reports of the Council of Confederate Good Government Clubs and the Small Parks Committee. Riis also wrote articles for the Danish newspaper *Nationaltitende* in which he reported on the social conditions and job opportunities in New York for prospective immigrants.

The [Miscellany](#) series includes personal expense records, biographical information, and radio scripts based on Riis's life.

Family Correspondence consists largely of letters to and from Riis's wives, Elisabeth D. Nielson Riis and Mary Phillips Riis, his daughter Kate Riis, and his sons, John Riis and Roger Riis. Riis's warm and lasting friendship with Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) is documented by letters from Roosevelt during the years 1894-1913. Other prominent correspondents include Felix Adler, Andrew Carnegie, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

The Addition spans the years 1898-1990. The bulk of the material is made up of family correspondence to John Riis, son of Jacob A. Riis, from his mother, Elisabeth, and letters from Jacob Riis's grandson, J. Riis Owre, to his cousin, Martha Riis Moore. The general correspondence consists of two letters from Riis, one to Sara Guy and Mrs. J. A. Maddur, the other to George M. Martin. The addition also contains notes and genealogical material relating to Riis's descendants.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in six series:

- Family Correspondence, 1873-1952.
- General Correspondence, 1870-1918
- Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959
- Scrapbooks, 1881-1900
- Miscellany
- Addition, 1898-1990

Description of Series

Container

BOX 1-3
REEL 1-2

Series

Family Correspondence, 1873-1952

Letters sent and received within the Riis family and a few letters from others.
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 4
REEL 3

General Correspondence, 1870-1918

Letters received and a few letters sent.
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 5-9
REEL 3-5

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

Handwritten drafts and typescripts of speeches, lectures, and articles, and outlines, printed articles, poetry, and notes.
Arranged by type of material and alphabetically by name of speech or article.

BOX 10-12
REEL 5-6

Scrapbooks, 1881-1900

Scrapbooks containing articles and serializations of books by Riis, newspaper clippings, book reviews, lecture reviews, letters to Riis concerning his lectures, and reports he drafted while serving on the Council of Confederated Good Government Clubs and the Small Parks Committee.

BOX 13-17
REEL 6-8

Miscellany

Appointment books, financial records, a master's thesis and other biographical information on Riis, a genealogy, deeds, indentures, printed matter, radio scripts, minutes of meetings, tributes, and newspaper clippings. Containers 16-17 are comprised of newspaper clippings that were not filmed.
Arranged by type of material.

BOX 18
not filmed

Addition, 1898-1990

Family and general correspondence, notes, clippings, wedding invitations, and other material.
Arranged by type of material and therein chronologically.

Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 16,815

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1-3 REEL 1-2	Family Correspondence, 1873-1952 Letters sent and received within the Riis family and a few letters from others. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 1 REEL 1	1873-1908 (10 folders)
BOX 2 REEL 1-2	1909-1920 (12 folders)
BOX 3 REEL 2	1921-1952, undated (8 folders)
BOX 4 REEL 3	General Correspondence, 1870-1918 Letters received and a few letters sent. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 4 REEL 3	1870-1918, undated (10 folders)
BOX 5-9 REEL 3-5	Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959 Handwritten drafts and typescripts of speeches, lectures, and articles, and outlines, printed articles, poetry, and notes. Arranged by type of material and alphabetically by name of speech or article.
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Speeches and lectures
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"The Bad Boy," 1911
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Battle with [the] Slum," undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Being a good neighbor, 1907
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	The Big Brother movement, 1908, undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	The Boy Scout movement, 1910
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Changing the slum, 1890, undated

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Charities and Correction," undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Chautauqua lectures, 1908
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Children and the future of society, undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Children of the tenements, 1908
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Children's Aid Society," 1903
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Commencement address, Barre, Mass., high school, 1913
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Commencement address, Trinity College, Durham, N.C., 1911
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Duties of Citizenship," 1908
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	George Washington's birthday, 1912
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Gustav Vasa – 5 Great Women," 1910
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Harlan, Iowa, speech, 1907
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Illness in the tenement district (incomplete), undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"Jesus My Savior and Redeemer," undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Josephine Shaw Lowell, 1911
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Lecture for church parties, undated
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	Lowell lecture course, 1909
BOX 5 REEL 3-4	"My Early School Experience," 1911-1913
BOX 6 REEL 4	"My Neighbor," undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	On Jews, 1911
BOX 6 REEL 4	On kindergartens, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	On the mission of the city, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	On the need for settlement houses (incomplete), undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	On religion, 1901-1906
BOX 6 REEL 4	Progressivism and the city of Chicago, Ill., 1913
BOX 6 REEL 4	"The Proposed Plan for a Young Man's Club," undated

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 6 REEL 4	St. Louis, Mo., Civic League dinner, 1908, Jan. 23
BOX 6 REEL 4	Speech at Ribe, Denmark, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	Talk to Brooklyn Clerical Union, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1908
BOX 6 REEL 4	Theodore Roosevelt's presidential campaign, 1912
BOX 6 REEL 4	"To Settlement Workers," 1908, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"Tony Throws Stones," 1908, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"True Americans," 1908, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	Articles
BOX 6 REEL 4	Drafts
BOX 6 REEL 4	On anarchists, 1897
BOX 6 REEL 4	"The Battle with the Slum," undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"The Boy is Bad" [?], undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	Charity, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	Christianity, undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"Dragons in the Road," undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"God Made the Country – Man Made the City," undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"The Heart of New York," undated
BOX 6 REEL 4	"His Trials with Octavia," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"The Hogs Head and the Pig," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"How to Help the Other Fellow," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"The Iron Crown," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"Our Happy Valley," 1959, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On Riis's farm in Barre, Mass., undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On rules for living, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On schools serving as community centers, undated

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

Container

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BOX 7 REEL 4	On scouting, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On tenement life, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On Theodore Roosevelt, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On Tom Crogan, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	On women in the field of social work, undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"Stand by the Ship," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"The Story of Hamlet," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"A Tragedy in Our Garden," undated
BOX 7 REEL 4	"What Shall I Do with My Life?" 1912
BOX 7 REEL 4	"What Shall We Do with the Boy?" undated
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BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Battle for the Slums," 1905
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Battle with the Slum," 1901
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Boy Scouts," 1913
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Children of the Danish Heath," 1912
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BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Children of the People," 1903
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Children's Plea," 1906
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Chips from the Maelstrom," 1909
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Christian Manliness of Roosevelt," 1901
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"City Farms and Harvest Dances," 1909
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Cooperation in Denmark: Educating the Farmers to Rule the Nation," 1913
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Crowded Pews in Many Lands," 1910
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Experiences of a Popular Lecturer," 1908

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

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BOX 8	"Hamlet's Castle," undated
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BOX 8	"Hans Egede, the Apostle of Greenland," 1909
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BOX 8	"Has Reform Made Good?" 1903
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BOX 8	"Has Roosevelt Made Good?" 1908
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BOX 8	"The Kid Hangs up His Stocking," 1901
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BOX 8	"King Frederik at Home," 1906
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BOX 8	"Last Chance Gulch To-Day," 1907
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BOX 8	Letter to <i>South Brooklyn News</i> , 1877
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BOX 8	"Making a Way out of the Slum," 1900
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BOX 8	"The Man Who Is an Immigrant," letter to Survey, 1911
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BOX 8	"The Methodist Spirit: A Tribute," undated
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BOX 8	"Mrs. Roosevelt and Her Children," 1902
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BOX 8	"My Boyhood's Black Friend," 1907
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BOX 8	"My Old Man of the Mountain," 1908
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BOX 8	"Neighbors Needed," 1909
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Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

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BOX 8 REEL 4-5	On Christmas, short articles, 1907-1910
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	On the New York City election, 1903
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"One Thing the Sage Foundation Can Do for New York," 1907
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Our Happy Valley," undated
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Our Latest Bird Immigrant," 1912
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Our Roof Garden among the Tenements," 1908
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The People's Institute of New York," 1910
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Preaching and Practice," 1909
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Report to the Council of Confederated Good Government Clubs," 1896
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BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Roosevelt: The First Citizen of America," 1910
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Sentiment as an Asset," 1909
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"'Slippers,' the White House Cat," 1908
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"A Story of Bleecker Street," 1901
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Story of Theodore Roosevelt's Life," part 4, 1902
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"The Story of the Peat-Bog Told," 1911
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Tammany the People's Enemy," 1901
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"True Neighborliness," 1911
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Wearing Our Way," 1909
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"What a Dandelion Did for City Children," 1907
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"What Ails Our Boys?" 1911
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"What Bad Housing Means to the Community," 1911
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"What My Faith Means to Me," fragment, 1910

Speeches and Writings File, circa 1877-1959

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"What Settlements Stand For," fragment, 1908
BOX 8 REEL 4-5	"Will It Last?" 1900
BOX 9 REEL 5	Outline, <i>The Making of an American</i>
BOX 9 REEL 5	Poetry
BOX 9 REEL 5	Notes
BOX 9 REEL 5	Autobiographical
BOX 9 REEL 5	"The Chants of the Poor"
BOX 9 REEL 5	Concerning children
BOX 9 REEL 5	On the Children's Aid Society
BOX 9 REEL 5	On Theodore Roosevelt
BOX 9 REEL 5	Unorganized notes and fragments
	(7 folders)
BOX 10-12 REEL 5-6	Scrapbooks, 1881-1900
	Scrapbooks containing articles and serializations of books by Riis, newspaper clippings, book reviews, lecture reviews, letters to Riis concerning his lectures, and reports he drafted while serving on the Council of Confederated Good Government Clubs and the Small Parks Committee.
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BOX 10 REEL 5	Reviews of lectures
BOX 10 REEL 5	Serialization of <i>How the Other Half Lives</i>
BOX 10 REEL 5	Articles for <i>Century Magazine</i> and <i>The Churchman</i>
BOX 10 REEL 5	Newspaper articles
BOX 11 REEL 6	circa 1889-1900
BOX 11 REEL 6	Articles for <i>Scribner's Magazine</i> , <i>American Monthly Magazine</i> , <i>Review of Reviews</i> , <i>Century Magazine</i> , and other publications
BOX 11 REEL 6	Reports on small parks

Scrapbooks, 1881-1900

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 11 REEL 6	1883-1891, articles in Danish published <i>Nationaltitende</i>
BOX 12 REEL 6	1888, letters and comments concerning Riis's lecture, "How the Other Half Lives"
BOX 12 REEL 6	1881-1892
BOX 12 REEL 6	Newspaper articles for <i>New York Tribune</i> and <i>New York Sun</i>
BOX 12 REEL 6	Serialization of <i>How the Other Half Lives</i>
BOX 13-17 REEL 6-8	Miscellany Appointment books, financial records, a master's thesis and other biographical information on Riis, a genealogy, deeds, indentures, printed matter, radio scripts, minutes of meetings, tributes, and newspaper clippings. Containers 16-17 are comprised of newspaper clippings that were not filmed. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 13 REEL 6-7	Appointment books, 1902-1914
BOX 13 REEL 6-7	Bank account books, 1902-1904
BOX 13 REEL 6-7	Biographical material
BOX 13 REEL 6-7	Master's thesis by George Buell, 1952
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	General (5 folders) Bills
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BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Expense books, 1895-1900 (3 folders)
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Fragments
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Miscellany

Container

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BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Interview with Mrs. Oscar Owre, daughter of Jacob Riis
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Invitations
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	List of family members
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Material concerning Denmark
BOX 14 REEL 7-8	Narration of Riis's life, radio scripts
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BOX 15 REEL 8	Printed matter
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BOX 15 REEL 8	Receipt book
BOX 15 REEL 8	Receipts
BOX 15 REEL 8	Reviews
BOX 15 REEL 8	Small Parks Committee, minutes and reports, 1897-1908
BOX 15 REEL 8	Smith, Alfred Emanuel and the 1928 presidential election, press releases from Roger William Riis
BOX 15 REEL 8	Tributes
BOX 15 REEL 8	Writings by others
BOX 16 not filmed	Newspaper clippings
	(8 folders)
BOX 17 not filmed	(5 folders)
BOX 18 not filmed	Addition, 1898-1990
	Family and general correspondence, notes, clippings, wedding invitations, and other material.
	Arranged by type of material and therein chronologically.
BOX 18 not filmed	Correspondence

Addition, 1898-1990

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
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BOX 18	General, 1898-1900
BOX 18	Miscellany, 1942-1943, 1980, 1988, undated
BOX 18	Notes by Martha Riis Moore, undated
BOX 18	Wedding invitations from Riis descendants, 1940-1990