

Alfred E. Smith papers, 1886-1945  
3 boxes (1.25 linear feet)



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Prepared by Karis Raeburn, archival intern,  
edited by Lindsay Turley, Manuscripts and Reference Archivist.  
Description is in English.

**Descriptive Summary**

**Creators:** Alfred E. Smith (1873-1944) and the family of Alfred E. Smith.

**Title:** Alfred E. Smith papers

**Dates:** 1886-1945

**Abstract:** Alfred E. Smith served as governor of New York State four times between 1919 and 1928, and was the Democratic US Presidential candidate in 1928. Smith's papers include documents and photographs related to early childhood forays into amateur theater, his time in political office, and his work in business up until his death in 1944. The collection also contains examples of various honors and memorials dedicated to Smith.

**Extent:** Three boxes (1.25 linear feet)

**MCNY numbers:** Activity # 07638; Accession 45.117; two documents with archive status

**Language:** English

## Biographical Note

Alfred E. Smith was born in New York City in 1873 and grew up on the Lower East Side. His political career began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued through the Progressive Era, a period of social activism, the women's suffrage movement, political reform, and a desire to eliminate political corruption. Though from a multi-ethnic background – representing the general polyglot nature of immigration to New York City during the era of industrialization – Smith aligned himself with his Irish ancestry and with the working-class of the city's Fourth Ward. Politically, he represented the populist wing of the Democratic Party, meaning he aimed to serve the interests of the working man rather than socioeconomic elite.

Smith allied himself with the Tammany Hall machine and received his first appointment as a Commissioner of Jurors clerk in 1895. By 1903, Tammany had sent him to the New York State Assembly. Depending on the fate of the Democratic Party in state-wide elections, Smith served at different times as minority leader as well as Speaker of the Assembly. Though rhetorically a populist, he built his career around progressive issues, which could easily be divisive, such as his openly anti-prohibition stance. He was associated with Tammany Hall, yet he crusaded against political corruption and fought to reform city and state government at the turn of the century. After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, which claimed the lives of 146 people, predominantly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women garment workers, the Assembly appointed Smith as Vice Chairman of the committee that investigated the tragedy. He used the position as a springboard to campaign for specific workplace safety laws and labor law reform in general.

In 1915, Smith left the Assembly to serve in New York City government as Sheriff of New York County and later president of the New York City Board of Aldermen, a position he held until he was elected governor in 1918. Though he lost his immediate bid for re-election after his first term, largely because of his criticism of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, he was elected for an additional three consecutive terms, beginning in 1922. While governor, he nurtured the career of Robert Moses, who he appointed Secretary of State in 1927. Moses was an urban planner who was responsible for shaping New York City in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; he favored highways over public transportation and is often credited for contributing to the development of the modern suburbs of the city.

In 1924, Smith made a bid for the Democratic nominee for President. Smith was one of two frontrunners and tied his campaign to the anti-lynching movement. A Catholic, Smith saw the Ku Klux Klan as the spirit behind southern lynching and an enemy of democracy. The anti-Catholic Klan worked behind the scenes at the Democratic National Convention to deny Smith the nomination. Smith's contender, William Gibbs McAdoo, a former Secretary of Treasury, had the support of the Klan delegates. Smith and McAdoo withdrew after trading slim majorities for over 100 nominating ballots. Finally, on the 103rd ballot, dark horse candidate, John W. Davis won the nomination.

Four years later Smith ran again, this time receiving the nomination. He was the first Catholic to be nominated by a major party. He ran his campaign on the issues of government reform and efficiency, attempting, as did his opponent Hoover, to incorporate the spirit of Progressive party candidates into the major parties. Ultimately, Smith's religion proved to be an impediment. Though

he clearly carried the Catholic vote and most major urban areas, he lost in rural and suburban districts, where mainstream Protestant voters feared he would be susceptible to the “popish slavery,” answering not to the United States Constitution but to the Bishop of Rome. Additionally, it seems his affiliation with New York City and Tammany Hall also hurt his chances, as most American's associated him both with big-city corruption and machine politics.

Smith's political life is emblematic of the Populist/Progressive era. He straddles the transition of New York City from being the quintessential 19<sup>th</sup> century city – ruled by machine politics, political graft, extra-political social elites, and informal governmental structures – to a modern city that managed by government officials who believe that democracy is best served by civil service reform and a professional class of civil servants, free from patronage and political spoils.

### **Scope and Content**

The papers of Alfred E. Smith contain a mix of memorabilia from the time before Smith was a major political force, his childhood involvement in amateur dramatics at St James' School, as well as printed ephemera and manuscripts from his time as governor of New York. There are invitations to all four of Smith's inaugurations as governor. There is also a scrapbook, which contains a number of programs and playbills, as well as newspaper clippings related to New York City politics.

Finally, there are a number of documents relating to Smith's bid for President in 1928. These include notes for campaign speeches, as well as demonstrations of support by New York residents, including a signed petition from the voters in his home district promising him their vote in the 1928 election.

### **Arrangement**

The collection consists of five series. Series I: Political Life contains documents pertaining to Smith's political career. Series II: Scrapbook and Theatre, covers Smith's early life. Series III: Business Life (1928-1944) contains documents relating to Smith's life after he retired from politics. Series IV: Honors and Memorial has items such as an honorary degree commemorating his achievements. This series also contains some items created after Smith's death. Series V: Photographs is split into two sub-series, Sub-Series A: Work, and Sub-Series B: Leisure. The photographs span Smith's adult life and also include some photographs from his childhood. Within each series, items are arranged chronologically (excluding Series 5: Photographs; see series description).

Series I: Political Life (1919-1928)

Series II: Scrapbook and Theatre (1886-1896)

Series III: Business Life (1928-1944)

Series IV: Honors and Memorial (1916-1945)

Series V: Photographs (1877-1845)

Sub-Series A: Work

Sub-Series B: Leisure

### **Series Descriptions**

Series I: Political Life

This series contains invitations to Smith's four inaugurations as governor of New York State and speeches from Smith's presidential campaign. There is also a book of signatures of support for Smith's presidential campaign from residents of his home neighborhood in New York City, and a facsimile of an editorial in *The Brooklyn Standard Union* entitled "Welcome Home, Governor Smith" which was designed to be displayed. Lastly, there is a pamphlet entitled, "Smith - A Mighty Man is He!" written in praise of Smith. Some material related to politics also falls under Series II: Scrapbook and Theater, due to its inclusion in scrapbook predominantly dedicated to Smith's amateur theater career.

#### Series II: Scrapbook and Theatre

This series focuses on Smith's early life and contains playbills from productions he was involved with during his schooldays. His scrapbook, which is split into four folders due to its deteriorated binding, primarily contains various playbills and invitations to events, but also newspaper clippings related to New York City politics. In order to maintain the provenance of the scrapbook, materials related to politics that would logically fall under the arrangement of Series I: Political Life, remain in this series.

#### Series III: Business Life (1928-1944)

Series III contains letters written between 1936 and 1942 by Smith in his capacity as president of Empire State Inc., the corporation that built and operated the Empire State building. The series also contains notebooks and a memorandum pad with examples of Smith's handwriting, a copy of *New York Life* magazine from June 1944, and an article written in praise of Smith on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday which focuses on Smith's business career.

#### Series IV: Honors and Memorial

Series IV contains objects created to honor Smith's achievements. The first of these is an illuminated booklet given to Smith by the order of the Knights of Columbus (a Catholic fraternal service organization of which Smith was a member) in 1916 to celebrate his election as Sheriff of New York County. The Motion Picture Theatre Owners of America also presented an illuminated booklet to Smith in recognition of his support of their industry, and a certificate and photographs were presented to Smith by one of his former teachers in 1928. A holograph copy of "Sidewalks of New York," Smith's presidential campaign song, was given to Smith by the composer and commemorates his continuing political achievements. In 1933, the University of the State of New York awarded Smith an honorary doctorate, the presentation booklet is part of this series. The series also contains a letter and speech by then Archbishop Francis Spellman given at the ceremonies of Smith's memorial, as well as a memorial stamp issued in 1945.

#### Series V: Photographs

The collection includes one box of photographs which are split into Sub-Series A: Work, and Sub-Series B: Leisure. The Leisure sub-series includes photographs of Smith and his family, both when he was a child and an adult. In one, taken in 1935, he is surrounded by all of his children and grandchildren. There is also a photograph of Smith's mother taken by him. Work related photographs include an image of Smith with Waldorf Astor, taken in 1930 and signed by Astor, and a photograph of Smith voting the first time he ran for governor of New York in 1918. The photographs are arranged within the box according to size in order to best house the objects.

**Language of Materials**

Materials are in English.

**Access and Use**

The Museum of the City of New York collections must be examined on site. Appointments to examine materials must be made in advance by contacting the Archivist through e-mail at [research@mcny.org](mailto:research@mcny.org).

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**Administrative Information****Preferred Citation**

[Item name, date]. Alfred E. Smith papers, 1886-1945. Museum of the City of New York.  
Accession#.

**Custodial History**

All items were collected by Alfred E. Smith or his immediate family. The collection has been in the custody of the Museum of the City of New York since it was donated. There are two letters written from Alfred E. Smith in the collection which do not have accession numbers and are likely to have come from a separate donation.

**Acquisition Information**

The collection was donated to the Museum of the City of New York in June 1945 by the family of Governor Alfred E. Smith, by way of Mrs. John Warner, Alfred E. Smith's daughter.

**Processing Information**

The collection has been housed at the Museum of the City of New York since it was donated in 1945, but was not processed at the time. Archival intern Karis Raeburn processed the collection in July 2013, and has arranged it into series and written the corresponding finding aid with series and sub-series descriptions. The scrapbook is in fragile condition and requires care when handling. The spine has deteriorated and the text block has been re-housed in four separate folders to provide additional support to the pages. The photographs in the collection have not been re-housed or rearranged; this is in order to ensure that they continue to fit within the larger photographic collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

## **Related Material**

### Museum of the City of New York

The Museum also holds objects related to Governor Smith's time in office, such a gavel, his desk and desk chair, drawings from his wall, and a sculpture. Inquire with archivist for more information.

### Collections in Other Repositories

#### New York State Archives

New York State Governor Alfred E. Smith Central Subject and Correspondence Files, (101 cubic feet), 1919-1920, 1923-1928

<http://iarchives.nysed.gov/xtf/view?docId=13682-53A.xml>

#### Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society

Alfred E. Smith Papers, (no volume provided), 1924-1926: Copies of letters and reports concerning the State Reservation at Niagara; most from Ansley Wilcox, Commissioner and Acting President of the State Reservation concerning park lands, budgets, and other matters. Other correspondents include Robert Moses and Paul A. Schoellkopf.

#### University of St. Thomas, St. Paul MN

Anti-Catholic Campaign Material, (1 box), 1928, 1950-1960:

<http://archon.stthomas.edu/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=4&q=-%09Anti-Catholic+Campaign+Material>

#### Manhattan College

Alfred E. Smith Memorabilia and photographs collection, (4.5 cubic feet) 1919-1970: Memorabilia concerning New York Governor and Democratic presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith, including photographs, documents, and ephemera pertaining to Smith and his involvement with Manhattan College events; brochure for Smith memorial in Al Smith Houses on Lower East Side, 1945; and catalog and correspondence, including exchange with Nelson Rockefeller, concerning exhibit about Smith, 1970.

## **Access Points**

### Personal names:

Smith, Alfred E. 1873-1944

### Corporate names:

Empire State, Inc.

Knights of Columbus

St. James Church (New York, N.Y.)

University of the State of New York

### Topical subjects:

Amateur theatricals

Inauguration

Knights of Columbus

Letters

New York (State). Governor

Photographs  
 Presidential Campaigns  
 Presidential Candidates

Geographic subjects:

Albany (N.Y.)  
 Lower East Side (New York, N.Y.)  
 New York (N.Y.)

**Container List**

Series	Box #	Folder #	Folder Title	Date
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 1	Smith Inauguration, January 1, 1919	1919
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 2	Smith Inauguration, January 1, 1923	1923
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 3	Smith Inauguration, January 1, 1925	1925
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 4	Smith Inauguration, January 1, 1927	1927
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 5	Voters of Home District	1928
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 6	Campaign Speech, Oklahoma City, Okla. September 20, 1928	1928
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 7	Campaign Speech, St. Paul, Minn. September 27, 1928	1928
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 8	"Welcome Home, Governor Smith"	1928
Series 1	Box 1	Folder 9	"Smith - A Mighty Man is He!"	1928
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 10	St. James' School, June 25, 1886	1886
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 11	St. James' Union, January 29, 1897	1897
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 12	St. James' Union, January 29, 1897	1897
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 13	St. James' Union, June 11, 1897	1897
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 14	St. James' Union, November 23, 1897	1897
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 15	St. James' Union, January 31, 1898	1898
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 16	St. James' Union, November 4, 1898	1898
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 17	Scrapbook (Part 1)	1896
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 18	Scrapbook (Part 2)	1896
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 19	Scrapbook (Part 3)	1896
Series 2	Box 1	Folder 20	Scrapbook (Part 4)	1896
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 1	Letter to Abel I. Smith, March 19, 1936	1936
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 2	Letter to Joseph A. Kreha, April 28, 1937	1937
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 3	Letter to Abel I. Smith, May 2, 1942	1942
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 4	Calendar Notebook	1943
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 5	Seventieth Birthday, December 30, 1943	1943
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 6	New York Life, June 13, 1944	1944
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 7	Calendar Notebook	1944
Series 3	Box 2	Folder 8	Memorandum Pad	1944
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 9	Knights of Columbus, February 16, 1916	1916

Series 4	Box 2	Folder 10	Motion Picture Theatre Owners of America, June 10, 1920	1920
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 11	Brother Baldwin, August 22, 1928	1928
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 12	Sidewalks of New York, January 24, 1933	1933
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 13	The University of the State of New York, October 12, 1933	1933
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 14	Archbishop Francis J. Spellman, January 16, 1945	1945
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 15	Archbishop Francis J. Spellman, January 17 1945	1945
Series 4	Box 2	Folder 16	Smith Stamp, November 26, 1945	1945
Series 5	Box 3	(see series description)	Photographs	1877-1945