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New Religious Movements Collections: Development and Access Issues

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When Tragedy Informs History: the Challenges of Administering the Peoples Temple Collection at the California Historical Society

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The Peoples Temple was formed by the Reverend Jim Jones in the mid-1950s in Indianapolis, Indiana, and by 1960 became affiliated with the Christian denomination, Disciples of Christ. Together with his wife, Marceline, and a few parishioners, Jones led his church in an attempt to bring about racial integration and social change by extensive programs of outreach to the poor and disadvantaged through food and nursing care programs. In 1965, one hundred members of the Peoples Temple moved, with Jones and his family that also included their adopted children, to Redwood Valley, just outside a small town in rural northern California. There, Jones believed, they would be safe in the event of a nuclear attack on North America, and the members of Peoples Temple could continue to expand and practice what has been termed “apostolic socialism.”

In 1970, Peoples Temple began to recruit members, especially in African American communities during weekend bus trips to San Francisco and Los Angeles, where Jones would preach. They soon purchased buildings in both cities in which to hold church services, and by 1973, their membership had grown to more than 2500. In 1976, Temple headquarters was officially moved to San Francisco, where its leaders became active in local politics, and its members were involved in managing home care facilities for youth and seniors, along with real estate and other business enterprises.

From 1974, when Temple members first moved to Guyana and began to clear land in the jungle to establish an agricultural mission, their hope was to create a more ideal society than they could find in America. In 1977, large numbers of members migrated and set about building a self-sustaining community that they called Jonestown; they constructed farm buildings, a day-care center, medical facility, a communal kitchen, and housing. On the afternoon and evening of November 18, 1978, their collective dreams turned to the nightmare that ended with the deaths of 918 men, women, and children.

Despite countless investigations, reports, and at least fifty books and hundreds of articles analyzing and attempting to explain the story of Peoples Temple and that event, there is still only one point on which everyone agrees: this was a terrible tragedy. How we as archivists have approached the official records and personal papers that document the organization and that tragedy is the theme of my presentation today. As is so clearly stated on the web-site, “Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,” established in 1995 by The Jonestown Institute and sponsored by the Department of Religion at California’s San Diego State University:

“Jonestown is a word with several meanings. First, it refers to an agricultural project established by the Peoples Temple, a religious group based in California which moved to Guyana in the late 1970s to establish a religious utopia. Second, it refers to the events of November 18, 1978 in which a U.S. Congressman was assassinated, along with four other individuals, at a jungle airstrip; these tragic killings were followed by the mass suicides/murders of 900 men, women, and children by ingesting potassium cyanide mixed into a vat of punch and tranquilizers. Third, the word "Jonestown" has been used to describe any New Religious Movement which may or may not have the potential for violence, as in "Heaven's Gate was another Jonestown."¹

In February 1979, the California Superior Court in San Francisco appointed Robert A. Fabian as receiver to assume the responsibility of settling the estate of the Peoples Temple. This involved overseeing dissolution of the organization, locating and distributing its accumulated assets, and responding to an immense number of claims filed against the estate by the governments of Guyana and the United States, the families of those who died or were injured, and people who had turned over their property to the Temple. Fabian took possession of the Temple records that had been removed from their San Francisco headquarters at 1859 Geary Street to the offices of their attorney, Charles Garry, in the summer of 1978. He hired a commercial photographer to create a photographic inventory of the condition and contents of the Temple’s San Francisco headquarters, and a lawyer to examine all papers and to deliver “anything that had any information or intelligence on it that might possibly be useful in either a historical standpoint or in connection with the dissolution of the Temple.”²

¹ <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>

² Peoples Temple Records, 1941-1983 (MS 3800), Box 124, folder 2375: Deposition of Robert H. Fabian, March 17, 18, 19, 1981, United States of America vs. Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ, a California corporation, p.16.

The Peoples Temple was formally dissolved as a corporation in Federal Court in San Francisco, California on November 8, 1983. It took Fabian nearly five years to complete this work and by the time he was done, his files contained:

“records, papers, ephemera, and realia from the basement of the law offices of Peoples Temple attorney Charles R. Garry, from the Peoples Temple headquarters in San Francisco, from the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office that had obtained records and realia from real estate offices and member’s homes in Los Angeles, from places of business and members homes in Mendocino County, [California], and from the Government of Guyana, the United States State Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and from banks around the world. [Fabian] produced documents related to lawsuits and claims against the Peoples Temple, records of his efforts to identify and bury those who had died in Jonestown, and the expense and court records that documented his [efforts].”³

In March 1983, following nine months of discussions, the California Historical Society accepted responsibility for the approximately 375 linear feet of files, records and other materials collected by Fabian. By June, the court formally approved the assignment of the Peoples Temple and Fabian’s receivership documents to the California Historical Society (CHS), and allocated a modest sum “to help defray the cost of sorting, indexing, and otherwise making the materials suitable for use by scholars and other interested persons.”⁴ Over the course of that summer, Fabian delivered 40 full file cabinets and cartons of documents as well as the furniture from his office to CHS.

For an institution that could more easily relate to the diaries and letters documenting travel to the Pacific Coast or first-hand accounts of those who ventured westward for the California gold rush or citizens displaced by the 1906 earthquake and fire, the records of Peoples Temple presented many unique challenges. Although the Society’s library had by then acquired materials from or relating to somewhat controversial individuals, labor unions and early utopian communities, as well as the records of the Northern California Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, the court receiver’s files were by far the largest single, complex collection the Society had ever handled. Besides an acute awareness of the sensitive nature of the archive, the most immediate challenge facing the library was the size, complexity, and disarray of the files. Much of the collection had been stored in unfavorable conditions; it included a wide variety of formats and kinds of paper; and the files had already passed through so many hands that original order was elusive if not impossible to detect. According to one analysis:

“...they saved everything. There are the business records of Peoples Temple as a corporation, including receipts, tax records, bank accounts, and internal memoranda. There are the trappings of the Temple as a church, ranging from Jim Jones’ robes to donation envelopes, from prayer requests to testimonials of Jones’ healing powers. There are the ephemera from the community at large, such as copies of *Peoples Forum*, the Temple’s newspaper, membership and passport photos, handwritten requests for extraordinary purchases, and of course, more receipts. There are individual writings, such as the private journals of at least one Temple member, confidential memos to Jim Jones and other Temple leaders, papers with signed confessions... There are flyers for political demonstrations protesting the treatment of minorities in capitalist America, and brochures heralding a new life in Jonestown.”⁵

By October 1983, an archivist was hired to process the collection, and within one year she had completed work on an estimated 300 linear feet of material. The collection was given the title, “Peoples Temple Records, 1941-1983,” and was filed into 2445 folders and housed in 130 cartons. It was described in a 127-page guide, including several indices, that was typed by a volunteer. Although the archivist had alphabetized thousands of address cards and photographs within the collection, she did not finish arranging and housing these or the newspaper clippings also found in the collection. This group of materials still forms the largest component of the collections that now comprise the Peoples Temple Collection at CHS.

³ Denice A. Stephenson and Tanya M. Hollis, “Before and After Jonestown: The Peoples Temple Collection at the California Historical Society,” in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Volume 7, Issue 2, p. 86-91.

⁴ Judge Ira Brown, Jr., “Order approving receivership’s seventeenth narrative report...and instructing receiver regarding the disposition of residual assets of the receivership,” No. 746-571, Superior Court of the State of California, City and County of San Francisco, March 22, 1983.

⁵ Fielding M. McGehee III, “Attempting to Document the Peoples Temple Story: The Existence and Disappearance of Government Records,” The Jonestown Institute. Presented at a conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Norfolk, VA, October 25, 2003.

Eventually another nine cartons containing the FBI's copies of papers recovered in Guyana by the U.S. Government and the Government of Guyana, and delivered to Fabian in December 1979, were turned over to CHS. These are significant because a fire in Guyana's Ministry of National Development in July 1979 had destroyed the originals and copies of the Peoples Temple records, along with a report that included an inventory that Guyanese officials had prepared. The FBI materials were sealed until September 1988, when Fabian's opening of the files, widely reported in the local and national press, revealed that the FBI had numbered each and every page in the collection. The FBI also produced a document called the Guyana Index, which provided an outline of the categories they used to group and identify the documents, as well as an incomplete descriptive inventory that had been included with the receivers' records.

In addition to holding official records of the investigation of the deaths in Jonestown and settlement of the organization's estate, the California Historical Society began to serve as the chief repository for individual collections of documents and personal papers relating to Peoples Temple. The first to contact CHS in late 1986 was sociologist and historian, John R. Hall, whose files documented research, some of which he had conducted at CHS, for his book, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History*. Dr. Hall's papers were received the following February, but were not made available until after publication of his book in July 1987. Along with his research papers, Dr. Hall provided a coded, detailed inventory listing each document in the carton.⁶

Correspondence between the California Historical Society and the Reverend John and Barbara Moore and family began in December 1988, following the 10th anniversary of the Jonestown tragedy in which they lost three family members. Over the course of several months in 1989, they delivered to the CHS Library the bulk of their collection⁷, which documents the involvement of family members with the Peoples Temple from 1968 to 1988. Although letters written from Jonestown by daughters Carolyn and Ann form a significant part of the family correspondence, the bulk of the papers were generated by the family from 1978 to 1988, and focus on their efforts to investigate and publicize the circumstances that led to the deaths of their relatives and 916 other adults and children in Guyana. For several years, a survey of the folders, based on the Moore's own subject headings and alphabetical order, was all that existed to serve as an in-house guide to the collection.

The original collection of the "Peoples Temple Records" was made available as soon as it was processed, but a severe shortage of staff to service the collection and manage the issues of privacy as well as the media frenzies that occurred around each subsequent "anniversary" increased the level of institutional discomfort with the collections. Such concerns could be easily justified, since the records do contain personal information relating to people whom we now know were still living. Other than the many articles, books, and films produced in the years after the records were first opened for research, there is little documentation of how early research in the collection was conducted or requests were handled other than attempts to weed out the "sensationalists."

Fortunately, in December 1988, the Society sought legal advice concerning CHS ownership of and providing access to Peoples Temple records. The attorney's opinion was reassuring: "CHS is the lawful custodian of the Peoples Temple documents delivered and assigned to CHS and may deal with them just as it deals with all its documents. We further conclude that the likelihood is remote that CHS would be held liable for publications by third parties who use Peoples Temple materials at CHS as a resource."⁸

Still, CHS was not prepared when in 1991 it was served with a subpoena from the San Francisco Public Defender's to produce records from Peoples Temple in case of *People v. Briggs*. Because the library had failed to complete full processing of the original collection, the Public Defender's Office itself surveyed and inventoried the large quantity of photographs that were associated with the court receivers' records⁹, along with the contents of the FBI files¹⁰, and the Moore Family Papers. A few months later, CHS received a copy of the Public Defender's Office inventory that included members' photographs,

⁶ John R. Hall Papers, MS 3803.

⁷ Moore Family Papers, MS 3802.

⁸ Memorandum, Catherine P. Rosen of Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe to Nancy Maushardt, December 2, 1988, p. 1.

⁹ MSP 3800.

¹⁰ MS 3801.

photographs in envelopes, hundreds of proofs, and alphabetized bundles of photographs. Over the next decade, this inventory served as the only guide, even for internal use, to those collections.

Attention to the Peoples Temple Collection at CHS resumed in July 1999 when the widow of Ross E. Case, an associate minister who had served in the Peoples Temple from 1961 to 1963, contacted CHS about donating her husband's materials related to the Peoples Temple. His collection¹¹ included two cassette tapes, a commemorative plate, photographs, and an assortment of mainstream periodicals covering the initial reporting of the Jonestown deaths. Also during 1999, Stephan Jones, son of Jim and Marceline Jones, began identifying the approximately 1200 candid and publicity photographs related to Peoples Temple and his family in the collection¹² that he had previously loaned to CHS, then withdrew and later returned. Recently, in collaboration with CHS, he has allowed the use of images of deceased members in several media projects including the scanning of passport images for a web-based archive.

In 1999, CHS submitted its first update detailing work accomplished on the Peoples Temple Collection to *The Jonestown Report*, the annual report of the Jonestown Institute, and during the following year, loaned ephemera from the Collection to an exhibit on utopias at the New York Public Library.¹³ The efforts of my predecessor, Tanya Hollis, who was among the first to fully embrace and advocate for institutional support of the Peoples Temple Collection, initiated our recent project to finally complete all processing necessary to provide full access to all of our Peoples Temple related materials.

In February 2001, under Ms. Hollis' direction, the library began working with volunteers on "The 25th Anniversary of Jonestown Project," which included thoroughly reviewing the entire collection, developing procedures and completing the arrangement and description for all unprocessed components of the collection,¹⁴ and finally, revising the original 1985 finding aid for the core collection, "Peoples Temple Records, 1941-1983." Descriptive records for all six collections that currently form the Peoples Temple Collection have been completed and now appear in our online catalog¹⁵; finding aids will continue to be submitted to the Online Archive of California as they are completed. Librarians also completed cataloging all secondary sources related to Peoples Temple and continued to offer full public access to the collection during the project, while researchers from several on-going documentary film, media, and scholarly projects connected to the 25th anniversary of Jonestown in November 2003 used the files extensively.

Culmination of these efforts resulted in our partnering with the San Francisco Public Library for an exhibit, "25 years later: November 1978 in San Francisco" to commemorate the 25th anniversary of that month which forever changed The City. The murders of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk had occurred just nine days after Jonestown. Four of the six cases in the exhibit were devoted materials from the CHS collections to tell the story of Peoples Temple and the people who lived and died there. Over the course of 10 weeks, more than 3000 visitors stopped to read the text of our carefully worded captions. They saw the colorful documents and artifacts assembled, and quietly viewed the names of all who had died listed on panels displayed above the profusion of photographs of the smiling faces of the members of Peoples Temple. A panel discussion one evening at the library was attended by nearly 300 people, including the general public and the press. Finally, during the week of November 18 when the annual memorial service was held, we opened the library of the California Historical Society one day exclusively for families and friends and survivors, and turned away the press who inevitably showed up at the front door. There was one thing about which everyone present agreed: it was about time.

Since then, we've seen increasing numbers of former members, survivors, and friends and family of those who died visit our library to conduct research in the collections. Most are looking for pictures of themselves or their friends; some are hoping to find images of children they hardly knew; many are seeking closure, while others find around the library's tables the sense of community that drew them to the Peoples Temple in the first place. In April 2005, a remarkable new play,

¹¹ MS 4062.

¹² CHS has assigned the collection number MSP 3800 to these photographs as well as to the passport photographs, contact sheets and negatives that were part of the original receivers files.

¹³ *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, New York Public Library, October 14, 2000-January 27, 2001.

¹⁴ MSP 3800, MS 3801, MS 3802, MS 3803, and MS 4062.

¹⁵ CHS Library holdings are described in the University of California's online catalog, <<http://MELVYL.cdlib.org>>

“Stories from Jonestown and Peoples Temple” about the events that forever link California and Jonestown will premiere at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Meanwhile, our work on the Peoples Temple Collection at CHS continues with renewed energy and determination. Just recently, Dr. Hall turned over to the library the remainder of his Peoples Temple research materials. While portions of these files must, according to his wishes, remain sealed or restricted¹⁶ for many years, there are other collections we are just now beginning to acquire and process.

Among the challenges we have confronted is the predictable need to determine rights of individual privacy in files that include information about people both living and dead, along with quantities of medical records, and death and birth certificates. We have endeavored to make the Peoples Temple Collection accessible and approachable by all who are interested in learning from the collections, whether scholar or family member. Mostly we have tried to bring an unusual degree of sensitivity to the language and terminology we use to describe the collection. While some have labeled the Peoples Temple a cult, many knew the group as a socialist community or simply, “my church.”

Although Manuscripts Curator, Waverly Lowell, confirmed in 1983 that the Peoples Temple materials fit with the Society’s extensive collection on other Utopian communities and were important for a study of black religion in California, the records and papers relating to those other communities did not approach the magnitude of scale or detail in documenting such a disturbing ending. To borrow the words of Fielding McGehee:

“Indeed, there is so much information about Peoples Temple that, whatever your point of view is of the Temple and its power and internal workings and leadership, you’ll find evidence to support it. ... Rather than answer questions about the Temple, the totality of the group’s own documents serves only to raise more and more questions.”¹⁷

It is obvious to us now that the human need to establish the existence of every single individual through the evidence presented in these files must have played a determining factor in the initial appraisal process. Virtually nothing was discarded during processing. No paper that held a person’s handwriting, whether identified or not, was determined to be inconsequential or lack enduring value. Not only would this collection serve to document the church as an institution, and perhaps provide clues to what led up to the tragic events in Guyana, it has gradually, perhaps inevitably, become a memorial to the people who lived it.

Would there be a Peoples Temple Collection if the tragic events at Jonestown had never occurred? --quite possibly not. Would there be any evidence of internal controversy and personal stories among the organizational records of Peoples Temple (or any other institution for that matter) if Jonestown had thrived in Guyana and the mission had been successful? --of course. The challenges that the California Historical Society faced when it accepted responsibility for administering these collections and which we continue to manage today are at the same time both extraordinary and yet the most basic to our work as archivists. We acquire materials that present the many perspectives of an issue, we preserve the collections in our care, we work to describe them in ways that open rather than close possible avenues of research, and we protect the privacy of individuals who had no say in the disposition of information about them. Above all, we strive to remain impartial in providing access.

Finally, I’d like to give credit where credit is due for much of the work that has been done on the Peoples Temple Collection at the California Historical Society in recent years. Honorary archivist, Denise Stephenson, who reviewed this presentation for accuracy, brought as a researcher new insights to the problems of description and provenance in the collections. For the past several years, she has worked tirelessly to make these collections more accessible, and she continues to provide guidance to those who are approaching the collections for the first time.

I’d like to close now with some images and an excerpt from a note I recently received from a family member who had just done research in the collection for the first-time: “I would also like to thank [you] for handling all of the Peoples Temple pictures, documents and all the other items in its care with such respect and decency. I am sure it is a monumental task.”

¹⁶ Additions to MS 3803 will remain closed except to the individuals concerned for 90 years or until 2045, while other portions, including his personal scholarship, will be available only to researchers with Ph.D.’s or Ph.D candidates in academic disciplines in the humanities, history, and social sciences until these are opened in 2025.

¹⁷ Fielding M. McGehee, III, *Ibid.*