

Nelson A. Rockefeller: A Twentieth Century Life

By Darlene Rivas

Professor of History, Humanities Division
Pepperdine University
Malibu, California

Darlene.Rivas@pepperdine.edu

© 2011 by Darlene Rivas

In Summer 2011, I conducted research for a biography of Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) supported by a Grant-in-Aid from the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). The biography builds on years of archival and secondary research that started in the 1990s, much of it in the RAC, which holds the personal papers of Nelson A. Rockefeller. The Rockefeller Family Collection of the RAC is the most important repository of documents related to Rockefeller's life. His papers are particularly extensive due to his administrative and political career in appointed positions in the Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Nixon administrations, and because of his long tenure as Governor of New York and as Vice President under Gerald R. Ford. His business, philanthropic, and arts interests are also well documented. Indeed, the material is too voluminous for use on any one topic such as a biography, and some materials related to his activities do not necessarily reflect his personal involvement. They require an examination by scholars working on monographs on a variety of topics, including U.S. foreign relations, particularly U.S.-Latin American relations and international economic development, Republican politics, New York State's political culture, modern art, and philanthropy, just to name a few.

Since I had examined some of NAR's papers on previous occasions, including and especially papers of two organizations he created, the American International Association and International Basic Economy Corporation, and his service in the Roosevelt and Truman

administrations, I focused this summer on personal correspondence from his early years and on papers related to his activities during the Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ford administrations, and on his political activities as Governor and candidate for the presidency. I also looked at some materials related to his post-presidency and his art and business interests.

The papers in Record Group 4, Series H, Family and Friends, are particularly helpful in revealing a young NAR's formative years and relationships. These materials offer a great deal of rich material to explain NAR's early life, formative experiences, family relationships, and early career and interests, while also providing a very strong sense of how these form his worldview, interests, personality, and character. The family's voluminous correspondence, the byproduct of much travel and leisure apart from each other (a common privilege of wealth, with the letters a perhaps uncommon expression of family commitment among the extremely affluent) is a treasure, particularly for the early years. While these papers helped my understanding of NAR's early development and relationships with family members, they could also be useful for scholars interested in topics such as youth and college life in the early twentieth century. For example, NAR's correspondence during his Dartmouth years illuminated the elite world of Eastern colleges, and offer insights into attitudes toward gender and social relations among young people and their parents during that time as well.

RG 4, Series O, documents NAR's many Washington, D.C. activities. While I had analyzed some of these earlier, some materials, particularly regarding the 1950s, when he served as Special Assistant to President Eisenhower, were declassified fairly recently and I found these most useful, particularly in understanding NAR's priorities during the 1950s and the development of new relationships (such as with Henry Kissinger) that would continue to be important.

RG 4, Series P, Ann Whitman Politics, was useful in giving an overview of NAR's varied activities during his years as Governor. Correspondents include fellow Republicans such as Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, William Scranton, and George Romney. Additional correspondents include New York state officials, petitioners for jobs and favors, and friends from the art world. Other correspondents in this series, despite the files reference to politics, include NAR's brothers and other family members, which provide a narrow, yet significant glimpse into the nature of those relationships during adulthood. An additional benefit from the files during this period is the penciled in notes between Whitman and NAR that give some insight into which issues and people NAR was more interested in, and those he was not as much concerned with.

RG 4, Series Q, the Hugh Morrow Interviews, provide perspectives of Rockefeller associates and importantly, NAR himself. His associates offer anecdotes about their experiences with him, and provide their analyses of his leadership style, character, achievements and failures. Morrow, a speechwriter and press advisor conducted these interviews with NAR's participation. While Morrow interviewed individuals from Rockefeller's early years in Washington, the vast majority of the interviews focus on his career as Governor of New York and on his campaigns for the presidency, reflecting Morrow's own involvement and interests. While the questions often reveal Morrow's preoccupations (such as why NAR failed to win the Republican nomination for the presidency and who was to blame for this), the interviews provide fairly frank perspectives on NAR.

RG 4 has several other series that I found useful, such as Series A, Activities, which included some of his post-presidential activities, such as his interest in promoting a new Middle East initiative. Again, other activities and interests are also well documented in RG. 4.

Throughout, but particularly in RG 15, Gubernatorial and RG 26 Vice Presidential Papers would prove very helpful for researchers interested in particular topics or issues regarding New York State or national affairs, but they are not always evidence of close NAR involvement. In general, there is both pitfall and promise in examining these voluminous papers. For example, there is certainly something to be gained by examining multiple versions of documents compiled by individuals and groups brought together by NAR on special projects. While these may be useful for individual topics—as diverse as race relations, strategic planning, or environmental policy—it is important in my case to sort through what NAR actually knew about these issues and assess the level of his involvement. In addition, his gubernatorial and vice presidential papers are materials that do shed light on the man. In Record Group 26, for example, series 10, the New York Office Files, included some helpful items, such as materials collected to prepare NAR for his Vice Presidential hearings. Having a staff and a developing family archive not only served NAR at that time, but later researchers will benefit from the summaries of his activities and statements on various issues over time.

Another example is found in RG 26, Series 19, Foreign Affairs and National Security, mixed in with less revealing files, some of which provide detailed accounts of NAR's interactions with foreign dignitaries. In addition, NAR's continued interest in government organization and foreign intelligence is documented in the sections on the Murphy and CIA Commissions. Here, his level of interest is sometimes revealed through his interaction (as seen through personal notations and editorial comments on documents) with the person responsible for maintaining the files, his assistant for national security affairs, Jonathan T. Howe.

While at the RAC this summer, I also viewed videos from the audio-visual collection, an underutilized resource. While there are films created by the Office of Coordinator of Inter-

American Affairs, I focused on videos showing NAR, such as his appearances at various events as Governor or on television news shows or while campaigning for the presidency. While transcripts of some shows are available, the videos offer an opportunity for visual analysis of NAR's speech and gestures, and are also a record of the way many Americans outside New York experienced his political skills.

Clearly, any researcher interested in the life of Nelson A. Rockefeller must consult his papers at the RAC. More than that, the Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers are a rich collection that shed light on diverse topics in the political, economic, and cultural history of the twentieth century and should yield a rich harvest of scholarship in the future.

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.