Frank Emerson Andrews, the author of the Report of the Princeton Conference on the History of Philanthropy in the United States, described the conference as a “stray thread”—an incident in his life that was “related to philanthropy but not a part of the main stream.”\(^1\) Perhaps he was too close to the event to see the larger scenario that unfolded. My purpose is to draw together the threads of this gathering and those that hang loosely from it—to look briefly at its roots, its direct products and, perhaps most importantly, its place in a brief but vigorous interlude of research in the field we now call philanthropic studies. The most important characters in the story are the Russell Sage Foundation, the Ford Foundation, F. Emerson Andrews, and Merle Curti.

If there was a single trigger for this wave of interest in studying philanthropy, it was the climate for foundations created by the Cox and Reese Commissions between 1952 and 1955. Edward E. Cox, Representative from Georgia, formed the Commission on Foundations and Private Philanthropy in 1952 to investigate allegations that charitable foundations were pushing a socialist agenda. The Commission looked for actual funding of communist causes but also looked more broadly for abuse of tax-exempt status. Other than a few questionable grants, Cox uncovered no crimes, conspiracies, or even concerns. One member of the Commission—B. Carroll Reese, Representative from Tennessee—was not convinced of the findings and was able to have the hearings reopened in 1954. Although no legislations resulted from the hearings, Reese’s recommendations called for stronger IRS oversight and sought to prohibit political funding by foundations.\(^2\)
The Ford Foundation came under particular scrutiny by Reese for allegedly using the tax-exempt structure to protect the family fortune.\(^3\) Although the foundation emerged both legally and in the eyes of the public probably no better or worse than before the investigations, there was internal cost. In addition to the $325,000 that Ford spent on staff time, consultants, legal counsel, public relations, special studies, and allocated overhead to prepare for testimony, the foundation endured twelve months of “negative and defensive activity” that overall “created an atmosphere of intimidation” within the Ford Foundation.\(^4\)

In the aftermath of these investigations, the call for educating the public—and Congress—about the history of foundations and their role in American life was voiced by both the Ford and Russell Sage Foundations. H. Rowan Gaither, president of the Ford Foundation stated that lack of understanding was hampering the good that foundation funding could do in all areas of American life. The effect of the recent investigations was “that timidity had begun to limit the scope of the research and education supported by private funds, even though the gravity and complexity of contemporary issues called for broader and bolder efforts.”\(^5\) Donald Young, who came to the presidency of Russell Sage after a decade as executive director of the Social Science Research Council took a stance beyond merely educating the public and favored an approach that encouraged objective and informed philanthropy:

“If the level of giving in America, now annually in excess of five billions of dollars, is to be maintained, understanding must support emotion, and in part replace it. More knowledge is needed of the role voluntary philanthropy has played in the past, and what should be its place in the future.”\(^6\)

The drive for a more informed public would result in a partnership between Ford and Russell Sage that would bear much fruit.
In July of 1955, Carl Spaeth, Dean of the Stanford Law School and special advisor to the Ford Foundation met with representatives from Russell Sage to devise a strategy for research on philanthropy. During the post war era, Russell Sage was both an operating and a grant-making foundation. One of its major research areas was the systematic gathering of data on philanthropy. Young was committed to objective social science and, along with Andrews, had a keen interest in the study of philanthropy. By 1956, Andrews had already published several compilations on philanthropy, including *Philanthropic Giving* (1950), *Corporation Giving* (1952), and *Attitudes toward Giving* (1953) under the Russell Sage Foundation imprint.

During the spring of 1954, Gaither had discussed the possibility of a study with both Spaeth and Stanley Surrey of the Harvard Law School. Their consensus was that something encompassing a wider definition of philanthropy, of which foundations were one part, would be of value both to the public and to the Ford Foundation itself. This ambitious study—which was to be both ‘scholarly’ and ‘comprehensive’ focused upon two principle aims. It would delineate the role of philanthropy in the US and contribute to foundations’ ability to understand their role within the realm of philanthropy in society. Nine areas of study were to include classification of ‘entities’ and ‘activities’ related to philanthropy; compilation of a comprehensive bibliography; preparation of comprehensive histories of both English and US philanthropy by ‘outstandingly qualified historians’; a minimum of one study showing the relationship and interaction of government, business, and philanthropy; a study of public relations in nonprofit organizations; research on the problem of ‘obsolescence’ and legal doctrines—presumably with regard to charitable purposes; corporate giving—its importance and
trends; research contrasting charitable funding of research with research funding by
government or business sources; the funding of controversial projects. The time allotted
for this work was a scanty two years, with a budget of $150,000.8

The American historian Spaeth wanted for the project was Merle Curti, the
Pulitzer Prize winning historian from the University of Wisconsin. In 1955, Merle Curti
was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford.
With Gaither’s approval, Spaeth approached Curti about writing a comprehensive history
of philanthropy in the US. Curti responded that he did not think that existing sources
would be sufficient to do an adequate synthesis.9 Spaeth and Gaither regrouped and the
idea for the Princeton conference was born. Andrews and Young flew out to Stanford in
December of 1955, asked Curti if he would chair the meeting of historians, and he
agreed.10

Why was Curti willing to get involved with this new venture? In writing *The
Growth of American Thought*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944, Curti had not
ignored the importance of the rise of corporate wealth and the subsequent establishment
of the big foundations or of the problems these foundations had faced in terms of public
opinion.11 Philanthropy was also not out of line with his long standing interest in the
American view of human nature but it was tangential. His presence at the Center
followed his presidential year of the American Historical Association. Friends and
colleagues viewed Curti as having reached the zenith of his career and were urging him
to slow down.12

Where the Reece Commission was concerned, Curti’s sympathies were with the
foundations. Early in 1955 he commented that the Commission report “severely
criticized the philanthropic foundations, especially the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford, for allegedly having supported “radical” scholars and for having failed to give adequate support to others.”\textsuperscript{13} The appendix to the report of the Reece Commission consisted of a long and detailed list of intellectuals who had been cited by the House Committee on Un-American Activities “for associations and affiliations of a questionable character.”\textsuperscript{14} Although Curti was not named, two friends and former colleagues from Teachers College were—Henry Steele Commager and George S. Counts.

Many years earlier during a sabbatical leave from Smith College in 1932-33, Curti had researched and written \textit{The Social Ideas of American Educators}, which was commissioned by the American Historical Association Commission on the Social Studies in the Schools. During that time, his association with George Counts, Charles Beard, and John Dewey earned him a reputation as a liberal progressive. He was listed among the “agitators for Socialist and Communist social reconstruction” who comprised the editorial board for the \textit{Social Frontier}, a journal of progressive education. Other members of what one skeptic referred to as a “Brain Trust of prima donnas” included Counts, Beard, Dewey, Sidney Hook, George Coe, and Lewis Mumford.\textsuperscript{15}

The intervening years had not moderated Curti’s stand. His presidential address to the American Historical Association in December of 1954 indicted McCarthyism as a virulent form of anti-intellectualism that ranked blind faith and intuition above academic criticism and experimentation.\textsuperscript{16} He and his wife Margaret collected signatures for the Joe-Must-Go campaign to recall Senator McCarthy.\textsuperscript{17} The combination of his empathy for others who were presumed anti-American and his long standing interest in American
social and intellectual history did make him, as Spaeth contended, the right man for the job.

Despite heavy snow, the meeting convened at the Princeton Inn on February 3, 1956. Aside from the representatives from Ford and Russell Sage—Carl Spaeth, Donald Young, F. Emerson Andrews, and Ruth Chance—the other participants were historians. The meeting discussion notes and the subsequent Report provided a detailed outline for possible areas of historical research but included few details about issues such as available sources, which would become critical in the coming years.

The Otto bibliography that appends the Report, which was supposed to have been enlarged between the conference and the publication date, does not reflect a couple of key details that appear in the conference notes. Two areas that were not addressed were the need for a list of primary source collections—particularly institutional records—that would be available and a question about whether the Foundation Library Center might be a collection and lending point for resources.  

The Foundation Library Center was incorporated in May of 1956 with funding from Carnegie and Ford, under the direction of F. Emerson Andrews. Starting with an initial infusion of foundation related materials and a small book collection from Russell Sage, the collection was enlarged with foundation reports, additional books about foundations, news clippings, and copies of Form 990. The Hanover Bank Philanthropic Library, consisting of books, pamphlets, clippings, and wills was turned over to the collection in 1959. Although the library accepted gift collections of books from time to time, its focus was then and continues to be foundations and not the wider realm of
philanthropy. It would not become the resource library for the study of the history of philanthropy referred to in the conference notes.

The Princeton Conference delegated overall planning for the studies of philanthropy to Russell Sage. The Ford Foundation was willing to make grants for specific projects. After ten months of negotiations, Ford agreed to provide $100,000 to the University of Wisconsin for a five year project to pursue American historical studies. The grant was a third of what Curti had originally hoped for, necessitating that he and his co-director, Irvin G. Wyllie, pare back their grand scheme—which included directors’ salaries, travel, funds for research grants, leaves for senior scholars, and conference support, among other things—to something manageable. They decided to use the grant for graduate assistants, travel, secretarial help and a post-doctoral fellow, if someone could be found. Curti wanted to focus on a cluster of major studies in the field—economic history, ideology, overseas philanthropy, social relief, and the impact of philanthropy on the arts, sciences, and education. Robert Bremner, who Curti had in mind to write the history on social relief, was offered a one year fellowship and moved to Madison in 1958. He was already working on American Philanthropy for University of Chicago Press.

In 1976, Merle Curti commented that “the project on the whole paid off, though one always looks back and thinks somehow we ought to have done a little bit more than we did do.” For posterity, a list of publications, gleaned from the project records, is appended to this introduction. Curti’s reservations about how much was accomplished may have been a reflection of the obstacles that he, Wyllie, and the students encountered, particularly locating records and then getting full access to them.
By twenty-first century standards, compiling lists of background materials and locating primary source collections was time consuming. The quickest route to a complete list of monographs was ordering bibliography cards from the Library of Congress. Undergraduates were assigned the task of compiling bibliographies on topics such as philanthropic support for museums and the stewardship of wealth. Curti wrote to companies and nonprofit organizations including Eastman Kodak and Cooper Union to get permission for students to use their records. In November of 1958 he mounted a letter writing campaign to state libraries, historical societies, and academic libraries asking for help in identifying philanthropists and any materials that were available about them. Curti commented both during the project and after the fact that access to foundation records was particularly difficult to get. There is no record of who refused to open their files.

Censorship also came from other quarters. For example, Wyllie was worried about publishing a masters essay that had utilized the records of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching because it made the trustees look biased toward Ivy League schools. In another case, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, who had sole discretion over use of the McCormick family papers, wanted a member of the McCormick family to review Charles Burgess’ masters essay on Nettie Fowler McCormick before they would approve publication.

In addition to the publications, philanthropy became a presentation topic at a variety of conferences. The first was the American Historical Association meeting in December 1957. The session on “The Historian and the Research Foundations” was chaired by Waldo Gifford Leland of the American Council of Learned Societies. Two
papers were presented on philanthropy topics. The first by James F. Mathias of the Guggenheim Foundation spoke to the issue of how historians get grants from foundations. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. discussed the particular funding practices of Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller as well as more generally addressing the propensity of foundations to fund the social sciences but not historical research.27

The following year, Robert Bremner presided over the American Historical Society session on the history of philanthropy. David Owen—whose research was being funded by Ford through Russell Sage—spoke on “The Uses of Philanthropy in Victorian Society.” Irvin Wyllie presented “The Problem of Motive in American Philanthropy.” The third paper, presented by Thomas H. Greer of Michigan State University, commented on Franklin Roosevelt’s attitude toward philanthropy.28

Other conferences did not focus on historical research but are included because they reflect the wider spectrum of research that Russell Sage and Ford were pursuing. Russell Sage trustees had voted to continue research on philanthropy for at least five more years, including conferences on the legal, economic, and social aspects of philanthropy. Ford provided $200,000 toward the effort.29 Curti and Andrews were participants at all of these meetings. Exposure to the wider arena of research going on in philanthropy may also have contributed to Curti’s reservations about the outcome of the history project.

The first meeting was a follow-up session at the Princeton Inn during January of 1958. In addition to Curti, Shryock, Andrews, and Young who had participated in the 1956 conference, the attendance list included Theodore Geiger, Willard Hurst, John A. Pollard, Albert M. Sacks, T. K. Thompson, and Walter M. Upchurch. They represented a
more diverse set of interests including economics, law, education, and religion. The discussion centered on the need for studies in economics and law. Economics would be handled by the National Bureau of Economic Research.\textsuperscript{30}

The Ford Foundation sponsored a six week seminar on philanthropy and the law during the summer of 1958. It was held at the University of Wisconsin under direction of Richard W. Effland of the Law School with participation by Curti and Wyllie. Andrews provided some instruction during the final week, covering materials available at the Foundation Library Center, the congressional hearings, an overview of the history of foundation philanthropy, and corporate giving.\textsuperscript{31} One direct outcome of the meeting was an issue of the \textit{Virginia Law Review} in 1960 devoted to “Law and Philanthropy.”\textsuperscript{32}

The fall meeting of the American Philosophical Society in 1960 hosted papers given by Henry Allen Moe—“Notes on the origin of philanthropy in Christendom”, W. K. Jordan—“The development of philanthropy in England in the early modern era”, Merle Curti—“Tradition and innovation in American philanthropy”, F. Emerson Andrews—“Growth and present status of American foundations”, and Solomon Fabricant—“An economist’s view of philanthropy.”\textsuperscript{33} Of the papers noted, only Henry Allen Moe was not funded through the Ford/Russell Sage partnership. Jordan’s three volume history of English charity was published by Russell Sage.\textsuperscript{34}

The Johnson Foundation planned to hold the first Wingspread Conference during the spring of 1961. Leslie Paffrath visited Wyllie in Madison in September of 1960 to discuss the upcoming event. His plan was to invite Curti, Wyllie, Andrews, and foundation luminaries who could speak to the future of philanthropy. Wyllie, who was under the impression that this was to be a history conference, insisted that both planners
and participants should be limited to historians. Whether it was over this misunderstanding or for other reasons, the conference was cancelled.\textsuperscript{35}

The last conference was held at the Merrill Center for Economics in Southampton, Long Island during the summer of 1961. The eighteen discussions broadly encompassed the question of which sector or combination of sectors—government, business, or philanthropy—was most effective in meeting human needs. The papers that were sent to the participants for preparatory reading were published in 1962 as \textit{Philanthropy and Public Policy}, edited by Frank G. Dickinson.\textsuperscript{36}

The publication program of the Foundation Library Center also continued to grow, with support from Russell Sage and Ford. In addition to the $300,000 Ford committed in 1957 for four years of operating support, additional grants were made for publications including \textit{Legal instruments of foundations}, published by Russell Sage in 1958, the first and second editions of the \textit{Foundation Directory} and the launch of \textit{Foundation News} in September of 1960.\textsuperscript{37}

During this time there were a few miscellaneous publications on philanthropy either funded by grants-in-aid from Russell Sage or published under their imprint. Austin W. Scott of Harvard authored “A legal study of the problem of obsolescence of dispositions for charitable purposes,” which Russell Sage agreed to make available on a limited basis. Frank M. Andrews researched and wrote “A study of company-sponsored foundations,” published by Russell Sage in 1960. Research on philanthropy in Western Europe, which was to be done by Thomas K. Thompson of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA does not appear to have been published. In a grant separate from the history project at the University of Wisconsin, Russell Sage awarded a
dissertation grant to Walter Trattner for his research on Homer Folks. Studies on the public accountability of foundations, under the direction of Eleanor K. Taylor and Marion R. Fremont-Smith are noted in the Russell Sage annual report for 1961-62.  

An interesting and unique grant was made to the Florence Heller Graduate School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare at Brandeis to start a seminar course that would “provide an overview of problems, issues, and current research in American philanthropy and to explore the possible content of a training program for work in philanthropic agencies.” The year long seminar was directed by David G. French of Brandeis and Arthur J. Vidich of the New School for Social Research. The students considered a wide range of topics including conceptual definitions of philanthropy, motivations for giving, corporate philanthropy, sector roles in the provision of public welfare, and “the role of the University in training for careers in philanthropic administration and research.” At the close of the first year, plans were announced to endow a Chair in American Philanthropy at Brandeis, to insure that teaching and research would be ongoing. The Maurice B. Hexter Chair in American Philanthropy was established in 1961. Hexter, who was in a visiting capacity at the Heller School there as well as being Vice President of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, is presumed to be the first occupant of the chair.  

Russell Sage continued to provide program support for the study of philanthropy into the early 1970s—but not for historical research. Within the panorama of studies on philanthropy that went on during these years, support for American historical research was a small slice of the pie. With regard to the Wisconsin project, there is no sense that momentum gathered—that something happened next. The graduate students finished up at Wisconsin and moved on. Irvin Wyllie went on sabbatical and returned to Wisconsin
in an administrative capacity. Merle Curti, whose wife Margaret had died of complications following cancer surgery in September 1961 was trying to pick up the pieces of his own life. He had “had enough of philanthropy.”

Conditions are better now for historical research on philanthropy than they were when Curti and Wyllie were toiling in the field. The availability of organizational records and resources has improved. Online catalogs, organization web sites, digitized historical collections, and archival finding aids have made it easier to locate materials to support historical research. Dedicated collections such as the Rockefeller Archives, the philanthropic studies collections at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, and the specialists that staff them facilitate the work of both seasoned and fledgling historians.

The effect of the Report and the Wisconsin project has been like a pebble dropped into a pool of water, sending ripples that created a network of interest and tolerance for a new area of history. Historians have made progress in the volume and breadth of histories that have been published as well as the number of new researchers who are working in this area. Rather than deciding upon the key figures that should be named, I will take the librarian’s license to fill in some areas of the outline created during those cold February days in 1956 by adding an additional bibliography of recent work to this introduction. I hope Margaret Otto is not offended. In constructing this addendum, I used as an outline the topics listed in Appendix A of the Report. Although some studies would fall within more than one area and there are clearly some areas of neglect—such as the economic aspect in history—the outline remains solid and encompassing as a guide for students and scholars looking for new areas of historical inquiry.
Research and Publication
History of American Philanthropy Project
University of Wisconsin, 1957-1961

Books


Journal articles


Master’s essays (Unpublished):


Wilson, Raymond J. *American Relief to Cuba in 1898*. University of Wisconsin, 1959.

**Doctoral dissertations**


**Research and Publication**

**History of American Philanthropy, 1990-2006**

**Institutional and Agency Studies**

Works about specific organizations and individuals have been listed under the area where they sought to have the most influence, i.e. health, education, the arts.
Area Studies (comparative)


Religion and Philanthropy


Philanthropy and Health Services


Cueto, Marcos. *Missionaries of Science: the Rockefeller Foundation and Latin America*


**Philanthropy and the Arts**


**Business and Philanthropy**


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*Philanthropy in Social Contexts*


**Government and Philanthropy**


**Economic Aspects of Philanthropy**


**Overseas Giving**


*Philanthropy and Education*


*Law and Philanthropy*


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4 Waldemar Nielsen to H. Rowan Gaither, August 18, 1954. Nielsen, Waldemar A, *Papers.* (Indianapolis: Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, University Library, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis), Preliminary inventory, Box 8.


9 Draft letter from Carl B. Spaeth to Dyke Brown, Ford Foundation, 1956. In later correspondence between Curti and Dyke Brown, Curti is adamant that five years is the minimum to accomplish anything in the field. (find cite). Merle E. Curti, *Papers, 1917-1968* (Madison: University of Wisconsin), Box 31.


18 Princeton conference notes, Curti, *Papers,* Box 32.


20 According to Andrews, the clippings file from the Hanover Bank collection went to the University of Wisconsin at Merle Curti’s request. Andrews, *Foundation Watcher,* 175-194.


22 Curti to Carl Spaeth, August 13, 1956, Curti, *Papers,* Box 32.

23 Discussion of details of project taken from Irvin Wyllie to Merle Curti, September 18, 1956; Wyllie to Curti, October 8, 1956; Wyllie to Curti, January 12, 1957; Wyllie to Curti, February 5, 1957; Wyllie to Curti, February 17, 1957; Wyllie to Curti, March 19, 1957; Wyllie to Curti, March 28, 1957, Curti, *Papers,* Box 46.

24 Merle Curti to Robert Bremner, March 26, 1957; Curti to Bremner, April 13, 1957; Curti to Bremner, March 25, 1958, Curti, *Papers,* Box 30.


Karen Adler Abramson, Brandeis archivist, email to author on July 14, 2006.
