



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3024

Southwark Soup Society
Records

1855-1949

1 box, 1 folder, 4 vols., 1.3 lin. feet

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Related Collections at Union Benevolent Association Records,

HSP: Collection 1784

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Abstract

Founded in 1805, the Southwark Soup Society was the first soup society established in Philadelphia. The society provided soup and bread to needy citizens of the Southwark section of the city during the winter months. In 1949 the society merged with the Union Benevolent Association. This collection contains records of the society from 1855 until the 1949 merger and includes minutes, a ledger, a copy of the charter and bylaws, and a 1949 annual report.

Background note

The Southwark Soup Society was founded in 1805 and was the first of many such charities in Philadelphia. James Ronaldson, a Scotsman who settled in Philadelphia in 1794, was the primary founder of the society. Ronaldson, one of Southwark's most active residents, teamed with Archibald Binny to establish one of America's first type foundries in 1796, and in 1825 he became the first president of the Franklin Institute.

The Southwark Soup Society's mission was to provide aid to the "deserving poor." The soup house only operated during the winter months, but society members occasionally met in the summer or fall to discuss business. During the winter the society distributed thousands of gallons of soup and thousands of loaves of bread to Southwark's needy. The soup house was located at 833 S. Hancock Street (formerly known as Sutherland Street). In 1949 the society merged with the Union Benevolent Association.

Scope & content

Records of the Southwark Soup Society include minutes describing their basic operations from 1855 until 1949. Although the records, which are primarily minutes, provide information about nearly 100 years of the society's charity work, they do not include any information pertaining to the society's first fifty years of existence. Minutes contain information about donations, purchases, wages paid, and the maintenance of the soup house. Elections and appointments of officers and members were also recorded. The society seems to have been comprised entirely of men.

Donations were made to the society in the form of money and goods, which often included coal, as well as vegetables and other ingredients for soup. The society also purchased ingredients like beef, barley, and vegetables, and minutes mention payments to various butchers, grocers, and merchants. Cooks' wages were recorded, as were wages paid to bakers. Large purchases of flour for making bread were also noted. There are also indications that the society may have attempted to undertake relief programs beyond massive soup distribution; in March 1880 the society gave its consent for a group of members to consider the practicality of constructing a bathhouse.

In addition to donations of money, food, and coal, the society also solicited subscriptions. Minutes include a reference to putting an advertisement in Philadelphia newspapers warning citizens of imposters who posed as subscription solicitors. Another means of meeting operating expenses was through rents and interest received on a number of Philadelphia properties, which appear to have been treated purely as investments. Twentieth-century minutes include information about taxes, repairs, tenants, ground rents, and mortgages on these properties.

The soup house was open for lunch only during the winter months, usually January through March. Representatives of the society would distribute tickets to the needy, and the tickets were then redeemable at the soup house. Minutes note how many tickets were distributed and sometimes state how many families, adults, or children were aided. These numbers range from dozens to hundreds. Soup provided to church programs is also mentioned at times. Minutes also make note of repairs to the society's soup house, also called the soup hall. The soup house appears to have been maintained by caretakers, usually women, who were responsible for opening it during the winter and ensuring the smooth distribution of food.

Minutes include a number of flyers advertising the society's services; these flyers were pasted or tipped in by the society's secretary. Minutes from the 1930s and 1940s include treasurer's reports that were pasted into the minute book.

The treasurer's ledger provides the name of the person or committee to whom funds were allocated, as well as the order number and the amount of the order. Miscellaneous papers include a copy of the constitution and bylaws, printed in 1893, a 1949 annual report, and a list of tasks to be completed by the society's officers.

During a November 1948 meeting, the board resolved that the society merge with the Union Benevolent Association. The Southwark Soup Society held its last meeting in March 1949.

Related materials

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania:

Northern Soup Society Records, Am. 3355

Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity Records, Collection 1961

Spring Garden Soup Society Records, Collection 1834

Union Benevolent Association Records, Collection 1784

Other Institutions:

Central Soup Society Records, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College

Grandom Institution Records, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College

Richmond Soup Society Records, Urban Archives of Temple University

References

Jackson, Joseph. *Encyclopedia of Philadelphia*. Harrisburg, Pa.: The National Historical Association, 1933.

Subjects

Charities – Pennsylvania.

Food relief

Pennsylvania—Economic conditions

Poverty – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia.

Soup kitchens – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia.

Southwark (Philadelphia, Pa.) – Economic conditions.

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of the Union Benevolent Association, 1958.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

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Processing note

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Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Minutes	1855-1879	Vol. 1	
Minutes	1879-1897	Vol. 2	
Minutes	1897-1849	Vol. 3	
Treasurer's Ledger	1887-1949	Vol. 4	
Miscellaneous	1948-1949, n.d.		1
Seal		1	