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## **Guide to the James Nelson Papers, 1915-1984 (bulk 1934-1955)**

Accession number: 2005-0148H  
University Libraries  
The Pennsylvania State University  
Special Collections Library  
Historical Collections and Labor Archives

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# Table of Contents

<b>1 Descriptive Summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Administrative Information .....</b>	<b>1</b>
2.1 Access .....	1
2.2 Preferred Citation .....	1
<b>3 Arrangement .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>4 Biographical Note .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>5 Scope and Content .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>6 Index Terms .....</b>	<b>3</b>
6.1 Personal Name Subjects .....	3
6.2 Corporate Subjects .....	3
6.3 Topical Subjects .....	3
6.4 Form/Genre Terms .....	4
<b>7 Container List .....</b>	<b>4</b>
7.1 Manuscript Materials Series .....	4
7.1.1 John Brophy Manuscript Subseries .....	5
7.1.2 District 50 Manuscript Subseries .....	6
7.2 Correspondence Series .....	7
7.3 Reference Materials Series .....	8
7.4 Memorabilia Series .....	10
7.5 Photographs Series .....	10

## **Descriptive Summary**

- Creator:** Nelson, James, 1903-
- Title:** James Nelson Papers, 1915-1984 (bulk 1934-1955)
- Accession:** 2005-0148H
- Provenance:** The collection was created by James Nelson and donated by his daughter, Pamela Nelson Myrus, in 2005.
- Extent:** 3 cubic feet + 5 photographs
- Repository:** Pennsylvania State University, University Libraries, Special Collections Library

## **Administrative Information**

### **Access**

Unrestricted access.

### **Preferred Citation**

James Nelson Papers, 1915-1984 (bulk 1934-1955) , 2005-0148H, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.

### **Arrangement**

The collection is arranged in five series: Series I: Manuscript materials; Series II: Correspondence; Series III: Reference materials; Series IV: Memorabilia; and Series V: Photographs. Series I: Manuscript materials, is in the original order as arranged by the creator. Series II: Correspondence is arranged chronologically. Series III: Reference material is arranged by subject and organization source. Series IV: Memorabilia is arranged by format.

### **Biographical Note**

James Nelson, labor leader and author, was born in Liverpool, England in 1903 and immigrated to the United States with his family as a child. After receiving a degree in mechanical engineering from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, Nelson made his home in Wakefield, Massachusetts. Nelson began work in the Melrose and Malden Gas Light Company, where he was involved in the formative stages of organizing local utility workers. In the autumn of 1933, these efforts culminated in the creation of the Massachusetts Council of Utility Workers, which elected Nelson temporary chairman. After membership expanded from Massachusetts to include members of locals from neighboring states, the regional council became the New England Council of Utility Workers (1934), naming Nelson secretary-treasurer. In 1935 the council expanded further in scope to become the National Council of Gas and By-Product Coke Workers. This council named Nelson executive secretary/chairman, a position that allowed him to play a key role in the push to create District 50, an industrial union intended to represent workers from all sectors of the chemical, utility, coke, and by-product coke industries. Nelson's presence and role throughout these transitions afforded him the opportunity to interact and correspond with members and leaders of the labor movement at both local and national levels. When the United Mine Workers formally established and absorbed District 50 in 1936, the district appointed Nelson as president, a position he held for three years until 1939. After resigning the presidency of District 50, Nelson accepted a position with the Department of Labor as Deputy Regional Director of the Wage and Hour Public Contracts Division, Region One, New England. Nelson held this position for thirty years until his retirement in 1969. In 1955, prior to his retirement, Nelson wrote and published a book about the history of District 50 titled *The Mine Workers District 50*. Nelson remained a resident of Wakefield, Massachusetts until his death in 1984.

## **Scope and Content**

The James Nelson Papers date from 1915 to 1984 (bulk 1934-1955) and measure three cubic feet. The collection includes manuscripts and subject files for a book on the formation of District 50 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) in the early 1930s and an unpublished manuscript devoted to the union career of labor leader John Brophy. Brophy was a progressive union leader and administrator who served as president of District 2 of the UMW and challenged John L. Lewis for the presidency of the UMW in the late 1920s and 1930s. This collection contains significant correspondence between Nelson and various leaders in the labor movement from 1932 to 1964 that documents the history of District 50 from its origin in the Massachusetts Council of Utility Workers in 1933. Correspondence and other materials gathered for the history indicate that employees from the Everett Coke-Oven Plant received a charter to start a federal union in 1933. Membership initially originated from multiple gas, chemical, and electrical locals in Massachusetts, and soon expanded to include union locals from neighboring New England states. The regional council became the New England Council of Utility Workers in 1934, and later the National Council of Gas and By-Product Coke Workers in 1935. Nelson corresponded with officers of District 50, and leaders of the national labor movement including John L. Lewis (President of the UMW and the Congress of Industrial Unions), William Green (President of the American

Federation of Labor (AFL)), John Brophy, and Frank Morrison (Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL). The correspondence relates to union matters, and does not contain material of a personal nature.

In addition to documents and correspondence originating during the formation and early operation of District 50 (1932-1939), there is also a large amount of manuscript material relating to a work Nelson wrote and published in 1955 titled *The Mine Workers' District 50*, a book which recounts the history of the gas, coke, and chemical unions and their eventual development into District 50. Portions of an unpublished manuscript with the working title, "The Lincoln of the Labor Movement, the Miners' John Brophy," arrived with minimal organization and was subsequently grouped to reflect the outline of the manuscript the author intended. This work looks specifically at the role John Brophy played in the development of District 50, in addition to his overall contributions to the labor movement. A variety of reference material comprised of newspapers, convention proceedings, union agreements, and other publications also form part of the collection. This material was most likely collected and retained by Nelson as a result of his presidency in District 50, and it is likely that Nelson consulted this material for reference while drafting his two manuscripts.

The collection also includes five photographs dating from 1934 to 1939. While the photographs do not provide the names of individuals in the photographs, they include notable labor figures such as John L. Lewis and John Brophy. Memorabilia contained in the collection includes several ribbons, buttons, and nametags from union conventions and events, as well as a gavel.

## **Index Terms**

These materials are indexed under the following headings in the catalog of the Pennsylvania State University. Researchers wishing to find related materials should search the catalog under these index terms.

### **Personal Name Subjects**

Nelson, James, 1903- -- Archives

Brophy, John, 1883-1963

### **Corporate Subjects**

United Mine Workers of America. District 50 -- History

### **Topical Subjects**

Chemical workers -- United States -- Labor unions

Coke industry -- United States -- Employees

Gas industry -- Employees -- Labor unions -- United States

Labor unions -- Organizing

## **Form/Genre Terms**

Correspondence

Manuscripts for publication

Organization records

Photographs

## **Container List**

### **Manuscript Materials Series**

Manuscript Materials, 1930-1984.

The Manuscript Materials series dates from 1930 to 1984 and contains text and reference materials relating to two manuscripts that James Nelson wrote. The John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources subseries (1934-1984) contains manuscript materials and reference documents relating to an unpublished manuscript about John Brophy titled "The Lincoln of the Labor Movement: The Miners' John Brophy." The manuscript describes Brophy's role in the formation of District 50, as well as his role in the labor movement in general. Nelson elaborated on Brophy's philosophies concerning industrial and craft unions, as well as his personal character and ethics as a labor leader. This subseries contains portions of the manuscript, as well as materials used as reference--including excerpts from books and articles, notes, outlines, and District 50 union documents. Apparently Nelson had not completed this manuscript at the time of his death in 1984, thus these materials are not organized in any discernible order. Moreover, there is significant duplication and overlap of material among sections of manuscript and excerpts from reference sources. The District 50 Manuscript subseries dates from 1930 to 1983 (bulk 1934-1955) and contains manuscript and reference materials relating to the early formation and operation of District 50, an industrial union which represented workers from the gas, chemical, and by-product coal industries. It includes sections of manuscript text and the outlines and notes relating specifically to the manuscript preparation in the early 1950s. Reference materials for this manuscript include minutes of union meetings, wage scales, pay rates, District 50 financial information, text excerpts from books and newspaper articles, and union agreements with employers. In addition to touching upon information contained in the reference documents, the manuscript materials also deal with other issues including, but not limited to, unemployment, organizing workers, collective bargaining,

the New Deal, the 1922 coal strike, and UMW union elections involving John Brophy and John L. Lewis. The Editorial Correspondence subseries dates from 1951 to 1955, with additional items from 1978 and 1983. It contains correspondence covering the John Brophy and District 50 manuscripts. While the majority of the correspondence pertaining to the District 50 manuscript involves congratulatory letters for the publication of his book, *The Mine Workers' District 50*, the material relating to the John Brophy manuscript mainly includes correspondence pertaining to the editing of the manuscript.

## **John Brophy Manuscript Subseries**

John Brophy Manuscript, 1934-1984.

Box 1

Folder 01

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1939 and circa 1950-1955

Box 1

Folder 02

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, undated

Box 1

Folder 03

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1936-1939, 1979

Box 1

Folder 04

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, circa 1978-1983

Box 1

Folder 05

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1934, 1978, 1984

Box 1

Folder 06

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1982, 1984

Box 1

Folder 07

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1934, 1939, 1945

Box 1

Folder 08

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1937

Box 1

Folder 09

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, circa 1950-1955 and undated

Box 1

Folder 10

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1939, 1982

Box 1

Folder 11

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1935-1937

Box 1

Folder 12

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1937

Box 1

Folder 13

John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1935-1950  
Box 1  
Folder 14  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1936, 1963, 1978, 1982  
Box 1  
Folder 15  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, undated  
Box 1  
Folder 16  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, circa 1975, 1982-1983  
Box 1  
Folder 17  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1950, 1978  
Box 1  
Folder 18  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1938, 1960-1963  
Box 1  
Folder 19  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, 1934, 1939, 1950, 1982  
Box 1  
Folder 20  
John Brophy Manuscript and Reference Resources, circa 1978-1983 and undated

### **District 50 Manuscript Subseries**

District 50 Manuscript, 1930-1983 (bulk 1934-1955).  
Box 2  
Folder 01  
District 50 Union agreements and meeting minutes, 1930, 1934-1935, 1939  
Box 2  
Folder 02  
District 50 Financial statement of AFL, Senate report, 1934-1935  
Box 2  
Folder 03  
District 50 charter, first UAW agreement, writings, 1935-1938, 1946, 1963, 1965  
Box 2  
Folder 04  
District 50 rough manuscript draft with editorial comments, circa 1950-1955 and undated  
Box 2  
Folder 05  
District 50 rough manuscript draft, circa 1950-1955  
Box 2  
Folder 06  
District 50 financial information and wage scale, 1934-1935, 1937, 1939, 1955, 1966, 1969  
Box 2  
Folder 07  
District 50, New England Council of Utility Workers, 1934-1936, 1939

Box 2  
Folder 08  
District 50 portion of manuscript and various writings, 1936, circa 1950-1955  
Box 2  
Folder 09  
District 50 writings on unemployment, 1936, 1950-1951  
Box 2  
Folder 10  
District 50 meeting minutes, 1930, 1934-1936  
Box 2  
Folder 11  
District 50 pay rates, 1934  
Box 2  
Folder 12  
District 50 manuscript outline and acknowledgements, 1947, circa 1950-1955  
Box 2  
Folder 13  
District 50 edited portion of manuscript, circa 1950-1955 and undated  
Box 2  
Folder 14  
District 50 writings on organization, 1950-1951  
Box 2  
Folder 15  
District 50 handwritten notes, circa 1950-1955 and undated  
Box 2  
Folder 16  
District 50 Nelson's expenses, text excerpts from reference materials, 1934  
Box 2  
Folder 17  
District 50 writings on the New Deal, 1922 Coal Strike, Brophy challenging Lewis,  
1934-1936 and undated  
Box 2  
Folder 18  
District 50 writings on collective bargaining, forming of District 50, 1935, 1939, circa  
1950-1955  
Box 2  
Folder 19  
District 50 writings, 1934, 1937, 1978-1983  
Box 2  
Folder 20  
Editorial Correspondence, District 50, 1951-1955  
Box 2  
Folder 21  
Editorial Correspondence, John Brophy, 1978-1983

## **Correspondence Series**

Correspondence, 1932-1964 (bulk 1934-1935).  
The Correspondence series dates from 1932 to 1964 (bulk 1934-1935) and contains

correspondence between James Nelson and numerous members of the labor movement. Much of the correspondence between Nelson and his own local and neighboring locals pertains to efforts to create an industrial union serving workers involved in the gas, chemical, by-product coal, and electrical industries. In addition, a fair amount pertains to general union operations such as payment of union dues and the organization of union conventions and socials. A small percentage of the total correspondence deals with grievances. In addition to corresponding with local labor leaders, Nelson, as the elected official of the New England Council of Utility Workers and the National Council of By-Product Coke Workers, also corresponded with significant national labor leaders, including John L. Lewis, John Brophy, William Green, and Frank Morrison. This correspondence reflects Nelson's pivotal role in pursuing a national union affiliation through the United Mine Workers. Later correspondence includes letters documenting Nelson's administrative activities as president of District 50 (1934-1936). The series contains signed original letters received by Nelson in addition to carbon copies of letters he sent. The bulk of correspondence deals with events surrounding the initial formation of District 50 and its early years of operation and is not personal in nature.

Box 2

Folder 22

Correspondence, 1932

Box 2

Folder 23

Correspondence, 1933

Box 2

Folder 24

Correspondence, January-July 1934

Box 2

Folder 25

Correspondence, August-December 1934

Box 2

Folder 26

Correspondence, January-July 1935

Box 2

Folder 27

Correspondence, August-December 1935

Box 2

Folder 28

Correspondence, 1936

Box 2

Folder 29

Correspondence, 1939

Box 2

Folder 30

Correspondence, 1964

Box 2

Folder 31

Correspondence, undated

## **Reference Materials Series**

Reference materials, 1915-1983 (bulk 1934-1939).

The Reference Materials series dates from 1915 to 1983 (bulk 1934-1939) and contains union publications such as convention proceedings of the AFL-CIO and District 50, and other union newspapers and periodicals. Union agreement booklets and constitutions of the New England Council of Utility Workers, the Massachusetts Federation of Labor, and affiliated locals are also included. Booklets on labor history are also part of the series, including "A Brief History of the United Mine Workers," as well as "History of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor." Non-union materials include "The Documentary History of Insurance, 1000 BC to 1875 AD," and a publication titled, "After Forty Years: Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pius XI." These reference materials constitute useful resources for documenting events leading to District 50's institutional development. Among the contents are union agreements, constitutions, and convention proceedings that provide important details concerning the administrative operation of District 50. Also, the newspapers and periodicals contained therein provide or offer a glimpse into the events surrounding the formation of District 50. Nelson may have used these materials as reference resources for his manuscripts. The Reference Materials series may provide general information which is helpful to a researcher looking into ancillary work-related issues such as health insurance and employee-employer relations.

Box 2

Folder 32

AFL-CIO/Federation, Massachusetts Federation of Labor, 1928, 1935-1936, 1939

Box 2

Folder 33

AFL-CIO/Federation, constitutions and booklets for District 50, CIO, UMW, 1915, 1933, 1936-1938

Box 3

Folder 01

AFL-CIO/Federation, Proceedings of the 34th Constitutional Convention of the UMW, Vol. 3 and 4, 1936

Box 3

Folder 02

District 50 constitutions, agreements and publications of District 50, 1937, 1939, 1961

Box 3

Folder 03

District 50 Convention Proceedings, 1938, 1940, 1970

Box 3

Folder 04

District 50 Convention Proceedings, 1961, 1965

Box 3

Folder 05

District 50 union-published newspapers, 1934-1936, 1938, 1940, 1946, 1969-1971

Box 3

Folder 06

District 50 various newspaper and magazine articles, 1974, 1979, 1981, 1983

Box 3

Folder 07

District 50 union-published periodicals including *Powermen*, *Technical America*, 1934, 1938

Box 3  
Folder 08  
District 50 *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 48 No. 4, 1939  
Box 3  
Folder 09  
District 50 *American Federationist*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 3 and 10, 1934  
Box 3  
Folder 10  
District 50 *American Federationist*, Vol. 42, No. 9 and Vol. 43, No. 8 and 9, 1935-1936  
Box 3  
Folder 11  
Various non-union publications, 1915, 1931-1932, 1934-1935, 1939, 1951

## **Memorabilia Series**

Memorabilia, 1934-1942.

The Memorabilia series dates from 1934 to 1942 and contains three convention ribbons as well as nametags and buttons from union conventions and a pin and keychain ornament. Ribbons with nametags are from the First Annual Convention of the New England Council of Utility Workers in Pelham, New Hampshire in 1934, the First Convention of the Gas, By-Product and Chemical Workers, the District 50 of the United Mine Workers Convention in Washington, D.C. from January 24-26, 1938, and the Thirty-eighth Annual Convention of the Maine State Federation of Labor in Waterville, Maine on June 9, 1942. A commemorative gavel made by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America and presented to District 50 is one of the featured items of the series. The series also contains a CIO pin and a keychain ornament from District 5 (Pittsburgh, PA) of the United Mine Workers of America, dated 1937.

Box 3  
Folder 12  
Union nametags, buttons and ribbons, 1934, 1937-1938, 1942  
Box 3  
Folder 13  
Gavel, undated

## **Photographs Series**

Photographs, 1934-1939.

The Photograph series dates from 1934 to 1939 and includes five photographs of attendees at various union functions. Four panoramic images show officers and delegates at the National Executive Board of the CIO, the First Convention of the Gas and By-Product Coke Workers, the Manufactured Gas Code Hearing, and the Golden Jubilee Convention of the Massachusetts Federation of Labor. While the photographs do not list the names of individuals, it is possible to identify notable labor figures such as John L. Lewis and John Brophy in some of the images.

Map Case  
Drawer 101  
Photographs, 1934-1939