

Fifty Years of Labor History Preservation and Progress: The Evolution of the Walter P. Reuther Library

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abstract: The Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs is part of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. An innovative and ground-breaking institution, the Reuther is the largest labor archive in North America. It is home to the official archives of Wayne State University (WSU), several major labor unions including the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW), and Detroit-based organizations and leaders. Collections contain stories of social, political, and economic reform movements in the United States, supporting a diverse range of scholarship and creative projects. Philip P. Mason, who became university archivist in 1958, was largely responsible for its formation. In addition to caring for the collections, archival staff engage in dynamic programming; creative projects; and collaborations with WSU communities, within the labor movement, and in metro Detroit. In 1975, the archives moved into a dedicated building thanks to funds from the UAW. In celebration of the facility's 50-year anniversary, this article looks back at how the archives came to be and describes some of the current activities that extend the legacy of this important institution.

Introduction

"Good, you're wearing old clothes," was how historian Fred Thompson greeted archivist Philip Mason upon his arrival in Chicago in January of 1966. Then he handed Mason a sledgehammer. They descended a set of stairs to the basement, where Thompson pointed to the wall of bricks behind a furnace. The wall had to come down.¹

Mason, pictured in Figure 1, had made a grueling, late night, 8-hour drive through a snowstorm because Thompson had called him with urgency. The building in which Thompson's organization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), operated was marked for demolition. He needed Mason to help rescue the documents within.

Mason first met Thompson four years earlier, when he began courting the IWW to deposit their official records with his fledgling archives program. In time, Thompson came to trust the archivist, which would soon become important. The IWW is a general union that was formed in 1905 by socialist-leaning workers who were unhappy with the state of the American labor movement. Its members are known as “wobblies.” Notable early wobblies included folk songwriter and organizer Joe Hill, whose execution in Utah made him into a martyr; socialist Eugene Debs; activist Mother Jones; and William “Big Bill” Haywood, an IWW president who was convicted of espionage in 1917. The union’s fiery history meant its enemies, notably the United States government, had made attempts to confiscate any documentation that could be used against its members. During raids in the late 1910s, for example, the US attorney general confiscated IWW documents, which Mason said were later destroyed.² As the IWW’s historian, Thompson wanted to ensure that would not happen again. The precious historical records were hidden behind cemented walls, safe from future raids, but not demolition. After two hours swinging the sledgehammer, the wall gave way. Behind it were three dust-covered trunks containing documentation of some of the IWW’s most important chapters, including trial records for Bill Haywood.³



Figure 1. Dr. Philip Mason, founding director of the Reuther Library.



By that day in 1966, Mason had established himself as one of the nation's top archivists and had been awarded the prestigious Society of American Archivists (SAA) Fellow designation. In the years to come, he would become SAA president, serve on numerous boards, establish an archival education program, and accumulate many more accomplishments. But before all that, according to a former chair of the Wayne State University History Department, Mason "almost single-handedly created the most important labor history archive in the world."⁴

Today, that archive is known as the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, part of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. The largest labor archive in North America, the Reuther, as it is often called, attracts visitors from around the world to learn about the history of labor and social and political movements through the words and work of prominent leaders as well as less-known individuals. It contains endless stories of the people who have influenced those movements and shaped our society. The year 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the building's opening.

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Early Archives Activities

The archive was not named the Walter P. Reuther Library when it was established. First came the university archives. Wayne State University (WSU) dates to 1868 with the establishment of the Detroit Medical College in Midtown Detroit. In 1934, the Medical College and five nearby schools united under the purview of the Detroit Board of Education to form Wayne University, taking its name from the county in which Detroit sits. In 1956, the school came under the authority of the State of Michigan, establishing Wayne State University. Today, WSU has 24,000 students and offers 375 degree programs in 13 schools, administered by 8,600 employees.

Mason joined WSU in 1958 as its first university archivist, with a joint appointment as a professor in the history department. With its origin in six separate schools, no central record-keeping practices, and 90 years of history, the establishment of the archives was no small task. Mason's first mission was to impose order on the records he found sprawled across campus, spilling out of cabinets, and overtaking rooms. Without professional guidance, many document creators and handlers did not know what to keep and what to discard. Mason disposed of a large volume of nonhistorical and duplicative material from some departments. Other departments threw out unique and informative materials, prompting Mason to enlist janitorial staff for help retrieving them from dumpsters.⁵

Meanwhile, across the US, archivists and historians' concern about the long-term preservation and availability of labor records was increasing. Many national unions were old enough by then that they had amassed significant documentation of their activities. Paper records in general had increased with the advent of copy machines and other tech-



nologies, along with an increased emphasis on communication resulting in more publications. Labor unions found themselves in similar situations to WSU—overwhelmed by documents with little direction about what to keep and what to discard.⁶ Few institutions focused on labor records and none of the archives were solely dedicated to the subject matter, but the 1953 establishment of what would become the journal *Labor History* and a 1959 American Federation of Labor convention resolution in favor of archives signified changing trends.⁷ In the same decade, US Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communism campaign died down, and the unions he had targeted became less weary of public access to their records. As part of Mason's employment agreement, once the university records were organized, he could "establish a research collection devoted to the American labor movement and related social, political and economic reform movements."⁸ By 1960, he was able to begin work on the Labor History Archives.

As Mason built the collections and staff, the first researchers started visiting. WSU's Purdy Library served as the archives' first home. The reading room, called the Wayne Room, was located on the first floor and connected to storage in the basement. The allotted areas held 6,500 linear feet of records. After a few short years, the rapidly growing collections demonstrated an urgent need for more space.⁹

The Reuther's Collections

The archives' holdings fall under at least one of three categories: Labor, Urban Affairs, and Wayne State University. Many collections overlap among two or all three subject areas. Detroit's rich labor history made WSU a natural home for those collections. Wayne State's urban campus and programs, which reach into the surrounding communities, made urban affairs a natural fit as well. Documents come from offices or departments of unions, community groups, university schools and departments, and other organizations or collectives, as well as personal papers of associated individuals. Types of documents collected include correspondence, reports, notes, newsletters, pamphlets, posters, diaries, photographs, video and audio recordings, and a small number of three-dimensional artifacts. More recent collections have naturally included digital files. In all, the archives contain over 75,000 linear feet of physical material, including more than 10,000 sound recordings, 5,000 moving images, and two million photographs.

Labor as a Reflection of Society

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aspects of life relevant to a broad audience, including pay and racial inequities, impacts of technological advances in the workplace, the effect of industry on surrounding communities and environments, health care, safety, public policy and politics, and the industries in which the unions operate such as automotive,

engineering, public health, law enforcement, journalism, education, and so on. All these topics can be found within the records at the Reuther Library.

The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) was the first major union to partner with the archives and eventually became the source of its name. Walter Philip Reuther served as UAW international president from 1946-1970. Before taking that role, Reuther led UAW Local 174. With his brothers, Victor and Alan, he staged sit-down strikes across the region, including at automotive supplier Kelsey Hayes in 1936, which resulted in the local's first major contract. Shortly after, the infamous 1936-1937 Flint sit-down strike against General Motors led to that company's first union agreement with the UAW. Reuther's influence on the 20th century American labor movement is hard to overstate. During negotiations, he insisted that women receive equal pay. He supported the Civil Rights Movement and was a close ally of Martin Luther King, Jr., marching alongside him in Selma in 1965. He was an environmentalist who advocated for the establishment of Earth Day. He was active in the US Democratic Party and instrumental in the establishment of the Peace Corps. However, Reuther had enemies both outside and inside the union. He endured a beating in the infamous Battle of the Overpass and survived two assassination attempts.¹⁰ He was accused of being a communist by some, while others within the UAW found his anti-communist stance went too far.¹ In the 1960s, several dissident organizations within the UAW united as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Black autoworkers filled the lowest paying and most dangerous jobs at the time, and the League was unsatisfied with Reuther's and the UAW's efforts, as well as a lack of Black leaders within the organization.² Still, under Reuther's leadership, the UAW became a more progressive union.

With Reuther's support, delegates at the UAW's 1962 convention officially approved the placement of the UAW archives at Wayne State University. In the following decades, other unions followed, including the IWW, American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Air-line Pilots Association (ALPA), Newspaper Guild (NG), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), United Farm Workers (UFW), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and a professional organization, the Society of Women Engineers (SWE). These records were placed on deposit, meaning the organizations retained ownership but agreed to open their collections to public researchers after an embargo period, usually 10 years.

A practice that set the Reuther apart from other institutions in the early days was an approach Mason called "vertical collecting." While national-level union records were important and highly sought after by archives, Mason saw local and regional affiliate records as equally valuable.¹³ Mason and his staff pursued collections from local union leaders and even dissidents. The voices and experiences of the so-called rank-and-file told an important part of the union's history, as did local actions and events. Where paper records could not be located, oral history interviews filled the gaps. In an oral history, an interviewee

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shares their thoughts and feelings about their experiences, events they participated in or witnessed, or their everyday life, providing nuance and diverse opinions which may not be present in other evidentiary formats. The vertical collecting approach ensured “that researchers [would] be able to understand fully all aspects of the union and its program as well as the contributions of its members and workers.”¹⁴

The principles behind vertical collecting remain embedded in the Reuther’s current day management. The lofty goal of collecting diverse perspectives makes clear, however, that the scope of any one international union such as the UAW is too large to live in a single archival institution. With hundreds of local affiliates and millions of members, the total volume of historically relevant records would not be sustainable. Therefore, staff of the Reuther aim to collect a representative sample. Aspects considered include geography; type of industry; job types, such as skilled and “unskilled” trades, blue collar, and white collar; and association with historically significant events. Archivists also consider whether another repository would be a more appropriate home for a particular set of records. Since the Reuther’s establishment, several other labor-focused archives have come into being, including the Robert F. Wagner Archives at New York University, Labor Archives of Washington at the University of Washington, Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, Labor Archives and Research Center at San Francisco State University, and the AFL-CIO Archive at the University of Maryland.

In addition to ongoing deposits from partner unions, the Reuther also receives one-time donations from local affiliates of various unions, especially those in Michigan. The labor collection is rounded out by records from unaffiliated organizations advocating for workers, like the Workers Defense League and National Share Croppers Fund; dissident organizations within the unions; and the personal papers of labor leaders such as Walter Reuther, his brothers Victor and Roy, Leonard Woodcock, and Horace Sheffield of UAW; Dolores Huerta of UFW; Albert Shanker and Sandra Feldman of AFT; Jerry Wurf of AFSCME; Thompson of IWW; and many others.

A Focus on Urban Affairs

Not long after its establishment, the name “Labor History Archives” began to feel restrictive. In a memo to University President William Keast, Mason requested changing the name, writing, “Not only did the records of the UAW and other industrial unions reflect such themes as urbanization, civil rights, public housing, civil liberties, industrialization, use of leisure time, immigration, ethnic groups, and politics, but the papers of other donors have been equally relevant to urban America.”¹⁵ The other donors he cited included United States Senator Patrick McNamara, Judge George C. Edwards, Jr., and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh. He also mentioned collections from the Michigan and Detroit Chapters of the ACLU, the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP, the Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, and the Michigan Commission on Displaced Persons. Thus, in 1970 “Urban Affairs” was added to the archives’ name. The collection’s scope officially encompassed urban America, with an emphasis on Detroit and Southeast Michigan.

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women and the LGBTQ community, public health, environmental justice, and other causes. Donations after 1970 have included records from Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, activists James and Grace Lee Boggs, Ron Williams (founder of the alternative weekly newspaper *Detroit Metro Times*), and the Detroit Fair Housing Committee, among many others.

The University Archives

Dr. Leslie Hanawalt of WSU's English department laid the groundwork for the University Archives in preparation for the school's centennial. As chair of the "Campus Committee for Wayne History Project," he put together chronologies of the different schools, interviewed retired faculty, and reviewed some of the documents. He saw first-hand the massive number of records across campus. At its February 1957 meeting, the committee agreed "to recommend to the President that the university engage, as soon as possible, an archivist to build up and maintain the archives of the university."¹⁶ Before the end of 1958, the WSU Board of Governors approved the official establishment of the university archives. Hanawalt personally reached out to Mason for help finding a suitable archivist and later encouraged Mason himself to take the job.¹⁷ By WSU's centennial in 1968, a successful exhibit opened at the Detroit Historical Museum, located near campus, called "The Achievements of a Century." The program stated, "The University's destiny has always been intimately connected with the cultural aspirations, the finances, and the politics of a metropolis; ... it has played an important role in the educational system of the state."¹⁸ Mason, Hannawalt, and their colleagues' work to bring order to the disparate schools' records enabled the University to tell its story and express its importance to the history of Detroit and beyond.

Today's Wayne State University archives include yearbooks, class catalogs, commencement programs, Board of Governors proceedings, records and papers of university presidents, deans, professors, student organizations, and the student newspaper. A variety of unexpected gems can be found under the university category, as well. The Folklore Archive, created by two WSU professors, consists of student-conducted oral histories and other research into urban folklore traditions of Detroit ethnic and cultural groups. Interviewees shared their beliefs and customs from Greece, Ireland, Italy, Ukraine, India, Appalachia, the American South, and many other places. The collection illustrates the rich diversity created by Detroit's development and the rise of the automotive industry. Another interesting collection is from the 36th General Hospital, an army medical facility sponsored by WSU which moved with its regiment through France and Italy during World War II. The collection includes the commanding officer's logbook, US Army bulletins, Surgeon-General correspondence, information on personnel, and plans for a 1955 reunion.

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The Work of the Reuther Library Archivists

Today, the Reuther's staff includes 14 full-time and two part-time archivists, two technicians, a building coordinator, and several student pages, all reporting to a director. Roles include a reference archivist, archivists for digital resources and digital curation and preservation, two audiovisual archivists, a field archivist who locates new collections and works with donors, an outreach and education archivist, and seven collections archivists. "Collections archivist" refers to the university archivist, labor and urban affairs archivist, and five positions funded through partner organizations which have designated the Reuther as their official archives. In this unique arrangement, AFT, AFSCME, SEIU, SWE, and the UAW fund full-time archivists and ALPA funds a part-time archivist. These archivists are responsible for managing the collections from their donors, including accessioning and processing, providing reference service, collaborating on special projects like exhibits and oral histories, and in some cases providing records management consultation. They maintain the Reuther's strong ties with its donors and often work closely with different stakeholders within the organizations. They straddle a line between the academic world of WSU and the often-business-like culture within large organizations, balancing the needs and goals of both. All archivists on staff contribute to the overall functioning of the Reuther by covering general reference shifts, fielding questions from the public, and serving on various Reuther and WSU committees.

Research at the Reuther

About 1,000 researchers make on-site visits to the reading room each year. The two-story open space has large windows overlooking the city and on one wall, a WPA-era mural by Walter Speck and Barbara Wilson (see Figure 2). The mural originated at the union hall of UAW Local 174, Walter Reuther's local, which donated it to the archives in 2015. The mural underwent restoration and was rehung behind the reference desk. It depicts scenes from the UAW's early years, including the Flint Sit-Down Strike, the Battle of the Overpass, and the local's first contract. Speck and Wilson recreated scenes from pictures of the various events.¹⁹ The multi-media piece has actual union buttons pinned to the shirts of some of the subjects. At the center of the painting stand two larger-than-life people in work clothes holding hands: a male figure holding a mallet and a female figure holding a flag with the letters CIO for Congress of Industrial Organizations, of which the UAW was affiliated. The mural requires visitors to stand back to take it all in but also invites them in close to see the fine details.

In addition to assisting reading room visitors, archivists answer about 1,500 remote reference requests every year. Short, easy questions are answered by phone or email; more complicated queries may require scans of collection material for a fee. In some cases, patrons hire local researchers, typically WSU graduate students.

Whether in person or remote, the Reuther Library's archivists support researchers from around the world. During the registration process, patrons self-identify as students (high school and all levels of higher education, WSU and elsewhere), faculty, WSU alumni, union members, journalists, producers, genealogists, and independent researchers. While patron nationality is not tracked, recent patron-affiliated institutions have been located



Figure 2. A view of the Walter Speck mural, "Untitled." The mural, painted in 1937 for UAW Local 174, depicts scenes from the union's history. The mural was donated to Wayne State University in 2015 and is on display in the Reuther Library's Reading Room.

across the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Asia, and throughout Europe. The diversity of its patrons signifies the Reuther Library's reputation both locally and globally.

The results of all those visits and remote inquiries are as varied as the researchers themselves. Tangible products include books, theses, dissertations, academic and news articles, feature films, documentaries, podcasts, and even an American Doll named Melody, a character who lives in 1964 Detroit, enjoys listening to Motown music, and finds the courage to stand up against racism.²⁰ Some of the typical uses by the Reuther's union partners are current-day organizing campaigns, newsletters, flyers, social media posts, commemoration of important anniversaries, or to inform the creation or interpretation of current-day bargaining agreements.

Digital Archive

The Reuther's digital collections make up a growing share of new acquisitions which range from obsolete formats such as floppy and zip disks to born-digital word processing and image files. It has made major strides in recent years toward stabilizing these formats and making them accessible. The Wayne State University Libraries Digital Collections platform recently launched with the digital asset management system ContentDM, which united disparate digitized collections into a single public user interface.³ Virtual Motor City, for example, was a project begun in 2002 to digitize photographs from the Detroit News collection, documenting life in metro Detroit between 1900 and 1980. Another journalism-related collection, the Toni Swanger papers, were digitized and placed in a custom platform in the late 2010s. Swanger was a host for Detroit's public radio station, WDET, and a columnist for the *Detroit Metro Times*. A more recently digitized collection is the Minoru Yamasaki papers. Yamasaki, 1912-1986, was best known as the architect of New York's World Trade Center, but also designed four buildings on the



WSU campus, including the award-winning McGregor Memorial Conference Center. The new ContentDM platform allows users to search across all collections or within specific categories. A team of archivists and librarians are working to add new items to the digital collections on an ongoing basis.

Student Engagement

Reuther staff members regularly work with faculty to provide research experiences for students, at both graduate and undergraduate levels. Archivists provide tours of the facilities and an introduction to the archival research process from registration to checkout. The archivists can recommend specific collections that will relate to a particular class's emphasis and, in some cases, collaborate on custom research projects. Students engage in the hands-on work of archival research in a real-world setting.

In a recent, multi-year grant-funded project, Reuther archivists worked with WSU College of Education faculty and students on using archives in K-12 classrooms. State education standards call for primary source education and this project helped provide tools for meeting those standards. Participants learned about the Reuther and its collections,

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used archival materials to create lesson plans, and developed their primary source instruction skills. Part of the project used collections documenting Detroit's once-thriving Black Bottom neighborhood, which was primarily home to Black residents and demolished

in the 1960s in the name of urban renewal. Connecting educators and, by extension, their students, with primary sources from local community history elevated the impact of the project. Participants connected to their own histories in profound and unexpected ways.⁴

The next generation of archivists regularly visit the Reuther as well. In collaboration with the WSU School of Information Sciences and other nearby programs, the Reuther offers opportunities for graduate student assistants, "Alternative Spring Break" projects, and practicum work. Students engage with professional archivists to process physical collections, digitize documents or photographs, describe materials in the collections management database, and other short-term projects. The hands-on experience and mentoring opportunity are invaluable for newer archivists, who end their term with a completed project for their portfolio and are well-prepared for full-time jobs. Many current and former staff members began their careers on student projects at the Reuther.

Podcasting as Outreach

All archivists on staff collaborate to bring a variety of projects to life. One such project is the *Tales from the Reuther Library* podcast.²³ The podcast team has released new episodes on all major listening platforms every three weeks since 2018. Episodes feature interviews with stakeholders from across the labor, urban affairs, and WSU subject areas, and most guests have used the archives in some way. The final questions at the end of each



episode are, “What collections did you find most helpful at the Reuther?” and “What other archives did you use?” Guests share a unique glimpse into the research process, the ways in which collections are used, and how the Reuther’s collections relate to those in other institutions. Notable episodes have covered Detroit’s gambling history, the Wayne State Anthropology Department’s archeological work within the city, Detroit as a setting for DC Comics’ Amazing-Man and All-Star Squadron characters, the Worthy Wages movement for childcare workers, and President Jimmy Carter’s impact on gay rights in the United States. The broad subject matter of the podcast is another illustration of the variety of materials located within the Reuther’s collections.

Events and Exhibits

Since its opening, the Reuther has hosted hundreds of events and exhibits. One example was a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibit called “I Am A Man” which told the story of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike.²⁴ The strike, by members of AFSCME Local 1733, followed years in which the Black workforce attempted to negotiate working conditions and pay with the city. A faulty truck compactor caused the death of two of the men, igniting the strike in February 1968. The workers demanded not only monetary raises, but to be shown respect and dignity. The slogan on their placards read “I AM A MAN,” a phrase still invoked in modern day struggles. Martin Luther King, Jr., supported the striking workers and spoke to them the night before he was murdered outside his Memphis hotel room. Eventually, the city settled with the union and agreed to negotiate, leading to better working conditions. Panelists at the Reuther’s 2003 event included AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer William Lucy, AFSCME representative Jesse Epps, Local 1733 president Taylor Rogers, and the Rev. James Lawson, who spoke of their experiences and the profound impact of the strike and King’s death on AFSCME and the nation. The exhibit was later repurposed for online audiences.²⁵ The Reuther’s collections have helped to build exhibits such as I AM A MAN. But the continued connections with donor unions, various WSU departments and schools, and the broader Detroit community allow for dynamic collaborations and impactful events. In 2025, a series of events and other activities will take place to celebrate a half century of the Reuther’s building, which opened in 1975.

The Reuther Library Building

In the mid-1960s, as the inadequacy of the Purdy Library basement became increasingly obvious, Mason and his colleagues searched for a funding source for a dedicated building. They found it in the UAW. Walter Reuther and a UAW vice-president, Leonard Woodcock (who was also on WSU’s Board of Governors), were early supporters who helped Mason bring the issue to the UAW’s executive board, but the union’s members had the final say. At the 1966 UAW convention, delegates approved funds for the building, to be named for Walter Reuther, then in his 20th year as UAW president.²⁶ A grant from the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare rounded out the financial needs for the building.

Reuther himself expressed reservations about having the word “archives” in the building’s title. He felt, according to a memo Mason wrote to his staff, “the term held the connotation of something ‘old and dusty’ rather than dynamic and meaningful. He expressed a preference for ‘Library.’”²⁷ The archives’ name needed to appeal to a broad audience and welcome scholars and non-scholars alike. Eventually, all parties agreed on the name: Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs.

Archivists and architects clashed on the building’s specifics. Archives require a climate-controlled environment for preservation, closed stacks and open lines of sight in the reading room for security, and, after years spent in the Purdy Library basement, a pleasant working environment for staff. As Mason expressed, “From my own personal experience, I believed that the staff working six to eight hours a day processing collections should have [a] well-lighted area.”²⁸ Architects Odell, Hewlett and Luckenbach, of Birmingham, Michigan proposed a design that satisfied those needs (see Figure #3).

The result was a four-story brutalist structure in which two L-shaped components encase an atrium that extends to the building’s full height, illuminated by skylights. One L section contains storage areas for the collections on each floor. The other consists of working and public spaces. Located on the second floor are a conference room and offices; on the third floor, the reading room, offices, and audiovisual rooms; and on the fourth floor, a staff lounge and processing areas. Glass exterior walls provide staff and

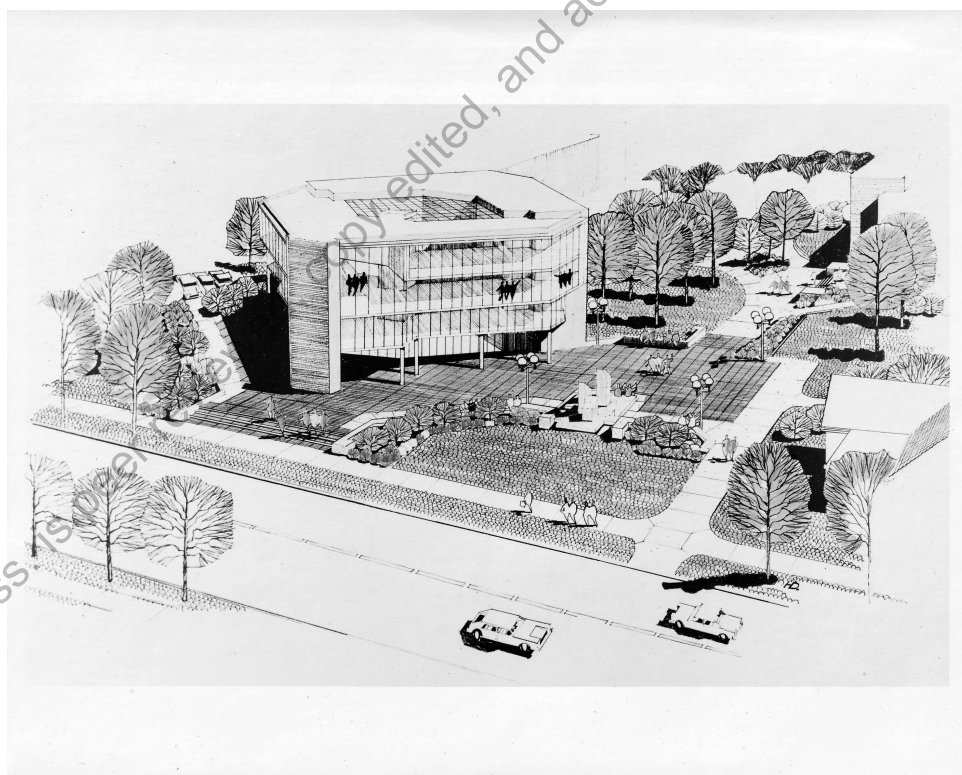


Figure 3. Architectural rendering of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.



Figure 4. Exterior view of the newly completed Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in 1975.

patrons floor-to-ceiling panoramic views of Detroit, including the downtown skyline to the south. Windows are rare in archives because the sun's UV rays can speed deterioration of many materials, so shades can be used when collections are out. Outside the building, the front patio is laid with bricks which match the ones inside on the ground floor, creating continuity as one arrives or leaves. The final building, as shown in Figure 4, is composed of brick, concrete, and glass, and sits on Cass Avenue at Kirby Street on Wayne State's main campus.

Walter Reuther never saw the monument built in his honor. He and his wife, May, and four others died in a plane crash in 1970. The building's dedication was held May 23, 1975. Hubert Humphrey, US Senator and former Vice President, gave the keynote speech at the dedication, which attracted 1,000 attendees. He said of Reuther, "He saw labor's history not as a sentimental journey into the past, but rather as a source of insight toward a better America for our working people in the future."²⁹

In time, even the new building neared capacity. In 1991, an addition to the south side expanded storage space, bringing total capacity to 75,000 linear feet. The new wing enhanced audiovisual facilities with additional research areas, including separate listening and viewing rooms for moving images and sound. It also added a conservation lab and cold storage for materials vulnerable to higher temperatures. The addition was named to honor Leonard Woodcock, the early champion of the archives who became president of the UAW after Reuther's passing and served until he retired in 1977.



Celebrating the Past and Looking to the Future

Throughout 2025, the Reuther is celebrating 50 years in its physical home, 65 years of labor archives, and 67 years of university archives. The records within the Reuther walls inform its own story, which is being shared through public programming, special podcast episodes, blog posts, and exhibits, all of which reflect different aspects of the institution's history and importance to the WSU, Detroit, and labor communities. In line

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with its history, the communities themselves are vital to the archives' celebration.

The establishment of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs was "Perhaps the signal event that launched a widespread effort to locate and collect American union records."³⁰ Its founder, Phil Mason, was a visionary whose ability to see historical value in

overlooked records and whose skill in building relationships ensured the preservation of those histories. He traveled far and wide when called, and he wielded a sledgehammer when necessary. He also taught and mentored countless archivists. Mason enjoyed a long retirement beginning in 1992 before he passed away in 2021. His establishment of the Reuther is itself a great accomplishment, but Mason's legacy extends far beyond the archive's walls, rippling out through all those who have benefited from something found or learned from the collections within.

The subject matter included in the archives—civil rights, social welfare, health care, education, and so much more—continue to be relevant to today's societal struggles. These are not niche topics only relevant to labor history buffs. They impact the entire nation. If, as Humphrey said in his keynote, history is "a source of insight toward a better America ... in the future," then we must always be looking back for the sake of that future. The establishment and continued life of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, ensures the past's preservation and offers a better world for generations to come.

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Notes

1. Philip P. Mason, *Oral History of Philip P. Mason*, interview by Louis E. Jones, 2007-2021, transcript, 123, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.
2. Ibid, 122.
3. Ibid, 123.
4. Don Bowerman, "WSU picks Reuther archivist for faculty award," *The Detroit News*, April 25, 1985, 30, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/apps/news/>

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