

The Fiorello H. La Guardia Papers 1917-1945



Guide to the Scholarly Resources Microfilm Edition

From the Holdings of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, Center for the Humanities, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

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Wilmington, Delaware

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Acknowledgments

The publisher wishes to thank Mary B. Bowling, Karen Van Westering, Lisa Browan, and Duane Watson at The New York Public Library for their ideas, help, and effort in compiling the microfilm for this collection.

ISBN 0-8420-4160-5

Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 1996

Distributed on microfilm by:

Scholarly Resources Inc.
104 Greenhill Avenue
Wilmington, DE 19805-1897

Distributed outside the USA

in Japan by:

Far Eastern Booksellers
P.O. Box 72
Kanda, Tokyo 101-91, JAPAN

in Taiwan by:

Transmission Books & Microforms Company Ltd.
P.O. Box 96-337
Taipei, TAIWAN, R.O.C.

Also available from Scholarly Resources: *The Correspondence Series and Speeches Series of the Personal Papers of John Foster Dulles (1888–1959)*; *The John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection*; and *The Victor Berger Papers*.

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Introduction

Fiorello H. La Guardia was born in New York City on December 11, 1882, to Italian immigrant parents. When his father, a musician by profession, joined the U.S. Army as a bandmaster in 1885, the family left New York and moved west. After moving several times to various army posts, the La Guardia family finally arrived at Whipple Barracks, Arizona Territory in 1892. Here, Fiorello spent the longest period of his childhood.

In 1898 when Fiorello's father was discharged from the army because of ill health, the family moved to Italy and settled in Trieste. However, in 1900 the young Fiorello left home for Budapest, Hungary, where he became employed as a clerk at the U.S. consulate. In 1904 he moved to Fiume to become the U.S. consular agent.

A young man with ambition, La Guardia resigned his post in Fiume in 1906 and returned to the United States. The next year he took a job as an Ellis Island interpreter, while he attended New York University Law School as an evening student. When he received his law degree in 1910, La Guardia resigned his position with the Immigration Service and became a practicing attorney.

La Guardia was appointed deputy attorney of the state of New York in 1915. The next year he ran for Congress and became the first Republican since the Civil War to be elected from the Lower East Side. In 1917, La Guardia took a leave of absence from the House of Representatives to serve as a pilot bombardier in World War I. Upon his return, he was reelected to Congress but resigned to run for president of the New York City Board of Alderman. In 1921 he returned to Congress to represent an East Harlem district that was to send him to Washington for five consecutive terms until 1932.

Although nominally a Republican, La Guardia was one of the nation's most progressive congressmen. He campaigned for a graduated income tax, enlisted in the crusade against monopoly, and was consistently pro-labor in outlook. Nevertheless, in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt's Democratic landslide swept La Guardia out of office.

Undaunted, in 1933, La Guardia ran for mayor of New York City and was elected on an anti-Tammany fusion slate. During the next twelve years of the Depression and war, La Guardia labored tirelessly to raise the quality of urban life. Although he was not a Democrat, he worked closely with President Roosevelt. He convinced Washington to finance many ambitious employment and public works programs in New York City. Under La Guardia's leadership, the New York City subway system was unified and brought under public ownership, and public housing programs were begun. During the depths of the Depression, with the city's treasury stretched to the breaking point, he managed to reform the welfare system and make it one of the nation's most progressive. In addition, La Guardia opened New York's first major airport in northern Queens (later named La Guardia Airport), and in 1942 ground was broken for Idlewild in southern Queens (later JFK International Airport).

In 1945, Fiorello La Guardia, sixty-two years old and exhausted, left City Hall. Still, he was unwilling to retire and became director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation program. La Guardia died on September 20, 1947.

The microfilm of *The Fiorello H. La Guardia Papers* was prepared by The New York Public Library under the sponsorship of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. La Guardia gave his papers to The New York Public Library during the period be-

tween 1939 and 1947. In addition, there are La Guardia papers housed in the Municipal Archives of New York City.

On-line bibliographic access to *The Fiorello H. La Guardia Papers* is available through RLIN. The RLIN record ID is NYPW92-A214.

Scope and Content

This microfilm collection documents La Guardia's career as a congressman from New York City, 1917–1921 and 1921–1933; president of New York's Board of Aldermen, 1919–1921; and three-term mayor of New York, 1933–1945. The two largest portions of the papers are the congressional and mayoral correspondence files. Included are letters received and carbon copies of responses written either by La Guardia, or by his secretary on his behalf. Clippings, greeting cards, printed House bills, invitations, photographs, memorandums, notes, press releases, printed material, and telegrams are included among the correspondence.

Series I, **Congressional Correspondence (1919–1933)**, is divided into two parts. First, the General Correspondence is organized chronologically, with the letters filed alphabetically within each year. Correspondence from La Guardia's period as president of the Board of Aldermen is included on roll 1. Second, the Subjects Correspondence is filed alphabetically by subject, and chronologically within each subject. These files consist primarily of letters received from constituents requesting help with employment, naturalization, and other problems, and from citizens around the country offering their opinions on La Guardia's stands on issues before Congress. Prohibition is a major topic.

Series II, **Mayoral Correspondence (1933–1945)**, is arranged chronologically, with the letters filed alphabetically within each year. This series consists largely of correspondence with members of the public who wrote requesting help with education, employment, immigration, prison terms, and other problems; suggesting appointments for various city offices; and offering appreciation, birthday greetings, congratulations, get well messages, ideas, and opinions. Very little appears to document the daily operations of city business.

Series III consists of **Press Releases, Speeches, and Writings**. Series IV, **Miscellaneous Papers**, encompasses various topics and is organized alphabetically by subject.

Series V, **Printed Material**, is also arranged alphabetically by subject, and Series VI contains two **Scrapbooks** of clippings on various topics for the year 1920.

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