

Printed Ephemera

What is Ephemera?

At the Newberry Library, we use the general definition of ephemera offered by Maurice Rickards, namely the “minor transient documents of everyday life,” mostly printed and mostly on paper. The use of the word “transient” implies that once these items had served their intended purpose they were generally expected to be discarded. Paper is by far the most common medium but fabric, metal, wood, plastic, and other materials make up many ephemera. Some examples, moreover, are not printed but written out, stenciled, drawn, or painted.

Ephemera at the Newberry may constitute stand-alone collections by subject (e.g., funeral industry, magic, railroads, temperance, radical movements) or by genre (e.g., letterheads, chapbooks, trade cards, postcards), or by some specialized combination of subject and genre (type or paper specimens, German-American baptismal certificates). They may also appear within personal papers or corporate archives, either in separate files labeled by type or subject, or else in sequences of ephemera as assembled by the creator of a larger collection. Certain corporate archival sequences may be particularly rich in ephemera (notably advertising or design departments).

Wing Collection Ephemera

The Newberry’s John M. Wing Collection on the History of Printing includes many examples of printed ephemera of all periods from the fifteenth century to today. Separately cataloged items may be found through the online catalog. Small collections were often classed under the call number ZC, for “small printing.” Larger collections are treated by subject (political pamphlets) or by genre (theater programs). Work by individual designers or collected by them can be accessed through the [finding aids](#) for each manuscript collection. The largest single concentration of printed ephemera, nearly 24,000 pieces and growing, is the [John M. Wing Foundation Printing Ephemera Collection](#) containing files of printing-industry related ephemera maintained by the Wing Collection curator.

In April 2008, the Newberry produced an [exhibit](#) on ephemeral printing.

In April 2015, the Newberry held an [exhibition](#) featuring examples of printed ephemera discovered during processing the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) funded project to process nearly 30,000 items. A [digital version](#) of the exhibition is also available.

Searching the Online Catalog

A good idea of the kinds of materials considered to be ephemera can be had by browsing the Newberry [online catalog](#) under the subject heading, “Printed ephemera.” Some more specific kinds of ephemera may be located using other subject headings in the catalog. The following search terms will lead you to books about these kinds of printed items, to individually cataloged specimens, and to groups of ephemera that occur in modern manuscript collections:

- Advertising cards

- Baseball cards
- Greeting cards
- Paper money
- Advertisements
- Invitations
- Posters
- Bookplates
- Menus
- Programs
- Broadsides
- Pamphlets
- Prospectuses
- Business cards
- Tickets
- Trade catalogs
- Zines

No such general searches, however, will embrace all of the examples in the Newberry collections. Many additional specimens can be found by using subject searches for “Albums” and “Scrapbooks.” Keyword searching using a subject that interests you plus a generic word like “card” or “pamphlet” may turn up additional examples.

Searching the Manuscripts and Ephemera Collections Abstracts

[Manuscripts and ephemera web abstracts](#) provide the following information for ephemera collections: collection creator, title, extent information, call number, a brief summary of content, and links to online catalog records and more detailed inventories. Printed guides may also be noted.

Abstracts for all collections containing significant ephemera content are grouped together under the general topic, “[Ephemera](#).” They may also be included under other Newberry-specific local subject categories, e.g., “[Printing History and Book Arts](#).”

Other Online Resources

There are literally hundreds of web sites devoted to the special forms of printed ephemera popular with collectors. Some more general sites are these:

[Ephemera Society of America](#)

[The Library of Congress “American Time Capsule”](#)

[Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection](#)