UIC Library Invited to Participate in Florence Nightingale Digitization Conference

By Kevin O’Brien

Preserving and disseminating the papers of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), widely acknowledged as the founder of the modern profession of nursing, will be the focus of a conference to take place at the Wellcome Trust in London on May 12. Sponsored by the Florence Nightingale Museum and Boston University’s Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, “Digitizing Nightingale” will feature presentations by representatives of various libraries, museums, and universities on aspects of electronic means of preservation of the archival record of Nightingale’s life and work.

The Florence Nightingale Museum has been involved in a large-scale effort to digitize, transcribe, and make publicly available on the web the extensive collection of Nightingale’s correspondence held by the Museum and the London Metropolitan Archives.

This 1863 letter from Florence Nightingale to Queen Victoria conveys Nightingale’s advocacy for the appointment of a leader to Britain’s cabinet who would continue to implement her reforms in military nursing care. Courtesy of UIC Library Special Collections and Archives Department.
Over 800 documents are currently available online, many with transcriptions of the text. The Gotlieb Archival Research Center also holds a large number of Nightingale letters and one topic on the program of the conference is a project to increase cross-institutional awareness of the many Nightingale collections dispersed throughout the world.

The UIC Special Collections and Archives Department was invited to participate in the conference on the merits of the small but interesting collection of Nightingale material it holds on behalf of the UIC College of Nursing’s Midwest Nursing History Research Center (MNHRC). In addition to storing the letters, the Library cooperates with the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries of Illinois to make them available on the web as a digital collection (http://bit.ly/1I2mNV1). Users may freely view high-resolution images of the letters as well as search the transcribed text.

While small, this collection conveys a sense of the many achievements of Nightingale’s long career. It includes a letter from the period in which she was responsible for nursing care of the British army during the Crimean War (1853-1856), an 1866 letter concerning her advocacy for high standards for nursing care offered to residents of Britain’s workhouses, and a long letter written in 1880 to a member of parliament regarding reform of Britain’s colonial rule in India.

Digital manuscript resources such as the UIC Library’s Nightingale letters collection offer researchers new levels of access and usability to rare and archival materials. Cooperative plans to increase the size and awareness of these collections will further augment their accessibility. The upcoming Digitizing Nightingale conference promises to be a unique opportunity to participate in an international discussion on these and other important topics.

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