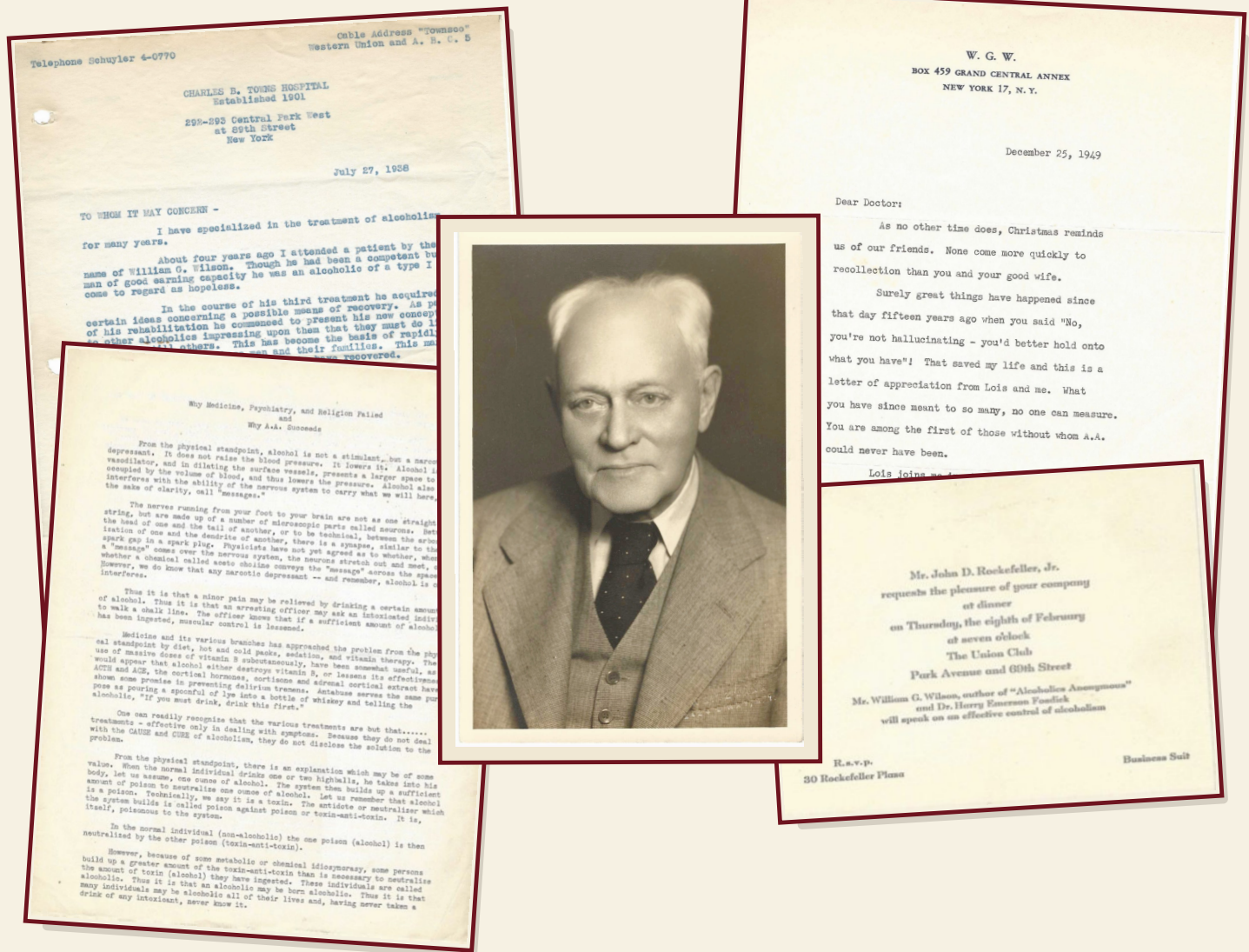


The William D. Silkworth Collection

The Personal Archive of the Physician Behind “The Doctor’s Opinion”



57 documented items spanning a life, a medical career, and a legacy

Original manuscripts • correspondence • photographs • medical records • A.A. history

OFFERED AS ONE COLLECTION

September 2026

THE COLLECTION

The Archive Behind “The Doctor’s Opinion”

A physician. An archive. A remarkable place in recovery history.

William Duncan Silkworth occupies a singular place in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. As the physician who treated Bill Wilson at Towns Hospital and whose medical perspective became “The Doctor’s Opinion,” Silkworth helped give the emerging fellowship a language for understanding alcoholism that differed sharply from the moral explanations common in his era.

The William D. Silkworth Collection preserves far more than that celebrated contribution. It brings together original medical writings, speeches and manuscripts; professional records; correspondence from patients; photographs and family material; early Alcoholics Anonymous documents; and the personal records through which Silkworth’s life and influence can be followed across generations.

According to collection documentation, the archive comprises 57 original documents, manuscripts, photographs and pieces of correspondence. Its distinction lies in the whole: the physician, the family man, the medical thinker, the doctor remembered by his patients, and the figure later honored by Alcoholics Anonymous are preserved together rather than represented by a single autograph or famous document.

57 ITEMS

Documents · manuscripts · letters · photographs

A LIFE IN DOCUMENTS

Family · medicine · alcoholism treatment · A.A.

ONE PRESERVED ARCHIVE

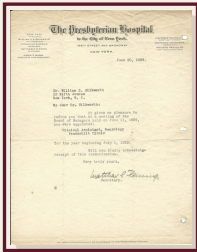
Family custody · published provenance · offered intact

PORTFOLIO INDEX

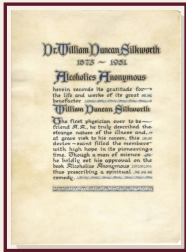
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William D. Silkworth, 1896



Clinical appointment, 1929

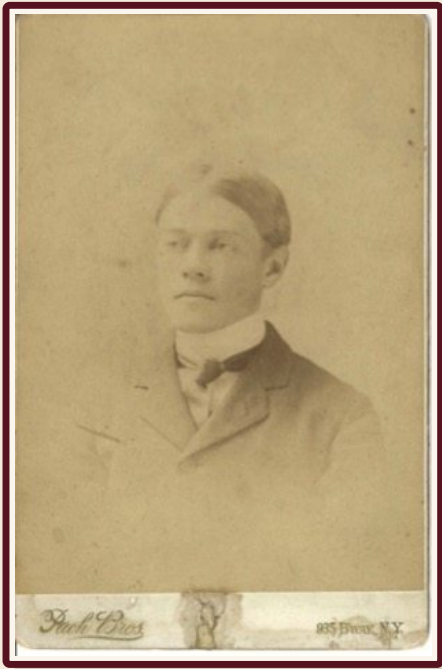


A.A. proclamation, 1951

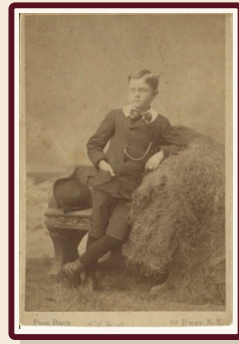
01 / THE EARLY YEARS

William D. Silkworth: Before A.A.

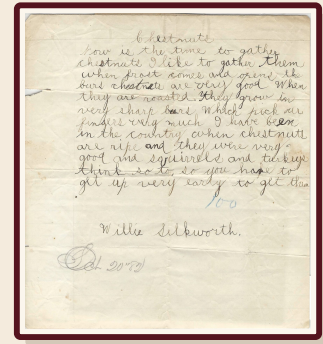
Family, education, and the life behind the physician



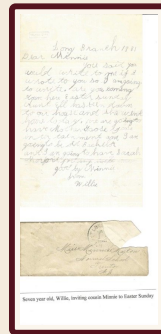
William D. Silkworth, 1896



Childhood portrait



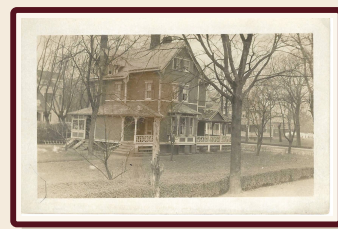
"Chestnuts," written at age nine



Childhood note to Aunt Minnie



Silkworth family, Christmas 1896



Silkworth family home, Long Branch, New Jersey

SELECTED EARLY MATERIAL FROM THE SILKWORTH FAMILY ARCHIVE

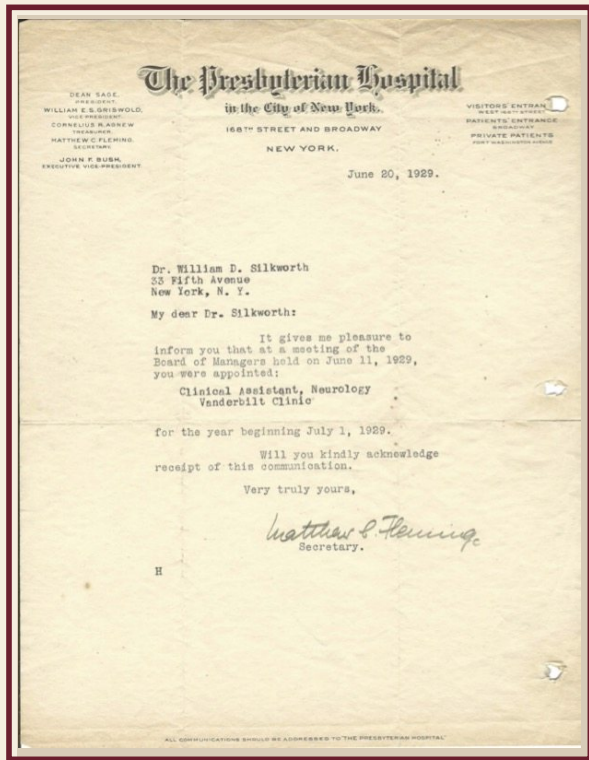
William Duncan Silkworth was born in Brooklyn in 1873 and came of age in a family whose photographs, correspondence, and personal records remain represented throughout this archive. Long before his name became associated with alcoholism treatment or Alcoholics Anonymous, these materials preserve a more private life: childhood writing, family photographs, early portraits, and documents from the years in which his education and medical career were taking shape.

Silkworth graduated from Princeton University in 1896 and received his medical degree from Bellevue Medical College in 1899. The surviving family material gives unusual depth to that chronology. Rather than beginning with the doctor at Towns Hospital, the archive begins with the person himself - a child, son, student, husband, and physician whose later influence emerged from a much longer personal and professional story.

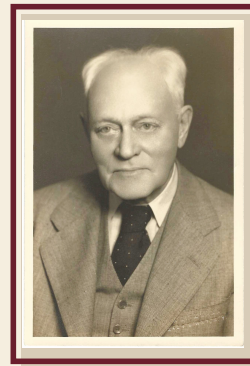
02 / MEDICINE & ALCOHOLISM

A Physician Searching for a Different Explanation

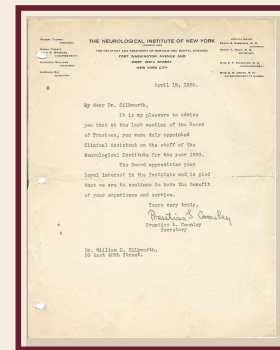
Medical practice, alcoholism treatment, and the development of Silkworth's thinking



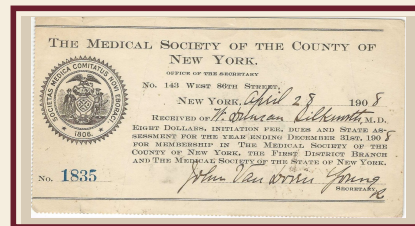
Clinical appointment, Presbyterian Hospital, 1929



Dr. William D. Silkworth



Neurological Institute appointment, 1930



Medical Society of the County of New York, 1930

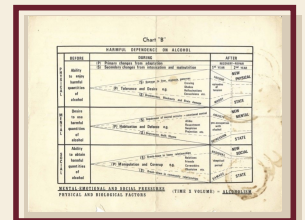


Chart B: Harmful Dependence on Alcohol

FROM MORAL FAILURE TO MEDICAL CONDITION

Silkworth's medical career placed him within established New York medicine before his name became associated with Alcoholics Anonymous. The collection preserves professional records and appointment documents that help trace that career alongside the writings through which his thinking about alcoholism developed.

His work at Charles B. Towns Hospital brought him into sustained contact with people suffering from chronic alcoholism. Collection documentation describes him as treating a very large number of alcoholic patients during his years there, giving him an unusual clinical perspective on repeated relapse and the limitations of conventional approaches.

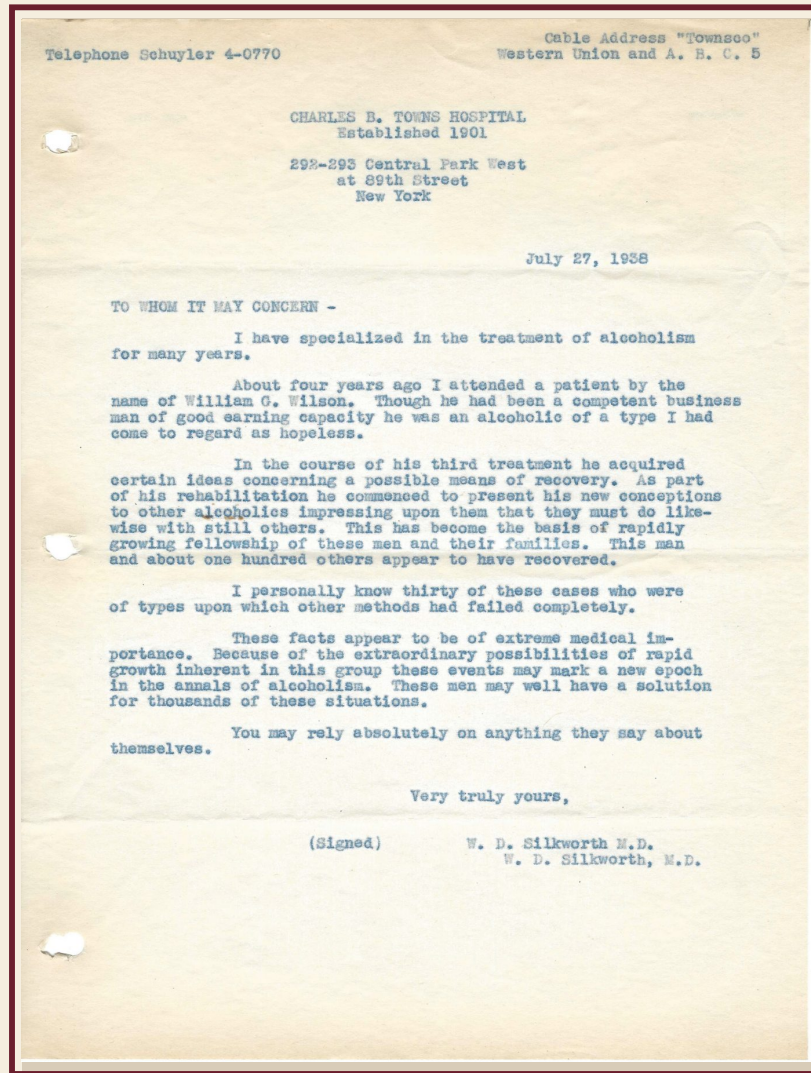
Silkworth increasingly described alcoholism as something more complicated than moral weakness. His formulation combined a compelling mental drive to drink with a physical response to alcohol. He used the language of an "allergy," a term that belongs to the medical context of his period rather than modern diagnostic terminology.

Its historical importance lies in the shift it represented: alcoholism could be described as a condition requiring understanding and treatment rather than simply as a failure of character.

03 / A FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENT

The Doctor's Opinion

July 27, 1938 | Charles B. Towns Hospital | New York



THE OBJECT

The Silkworth Collection identifies this July 27, 1938 letter as the original document that became "The Doctor's Opinion," the medical statement published with Alcoholics Anonymous.

In the document, Silkworth describes alcoholism in terms of both physical and mental compulsion and reports the apparent transformation of men he had previously considered nearly hopeless.

When incorporated into the Big Book, his medical perspective gave the emerging fellowship something unusually important: the endorsement of a physician who had treated alcoholics firsthand.

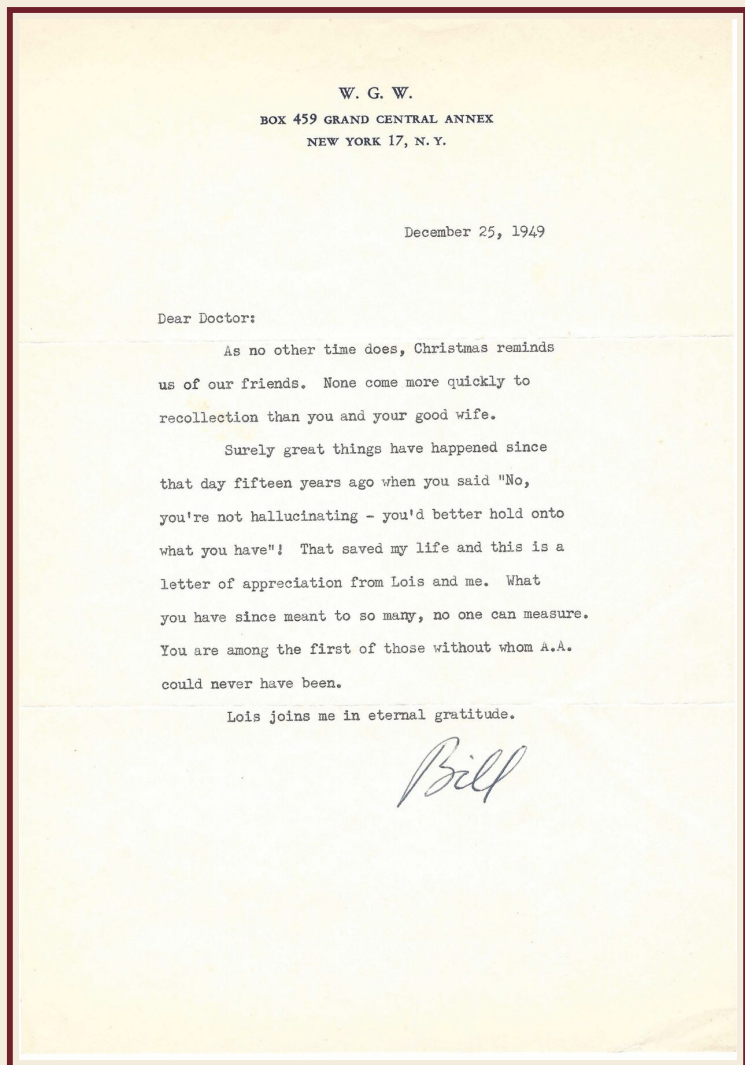
"The Doctor's Opinion" has remained part of Alcoholics Anonymous through successive editions, making this document one of the collection's most direct links between Silkworth's clinical work and the published foundation of A.A.

DOCUMENTATION Collection documentation identifies this as the unsigned copy used for "The Doctor's Opinion." That attribution is presented as a collection-source assertion and remains subject to independent object-level verification.

04 / FOUNDER CORRESPONDENCE

Bill Wilson to Dr. Silkworth

December 25, 1949 | New York



Typed letter signed "Bill," December 25, 1949

"You are among the first of those without whom A.A. could never have been."

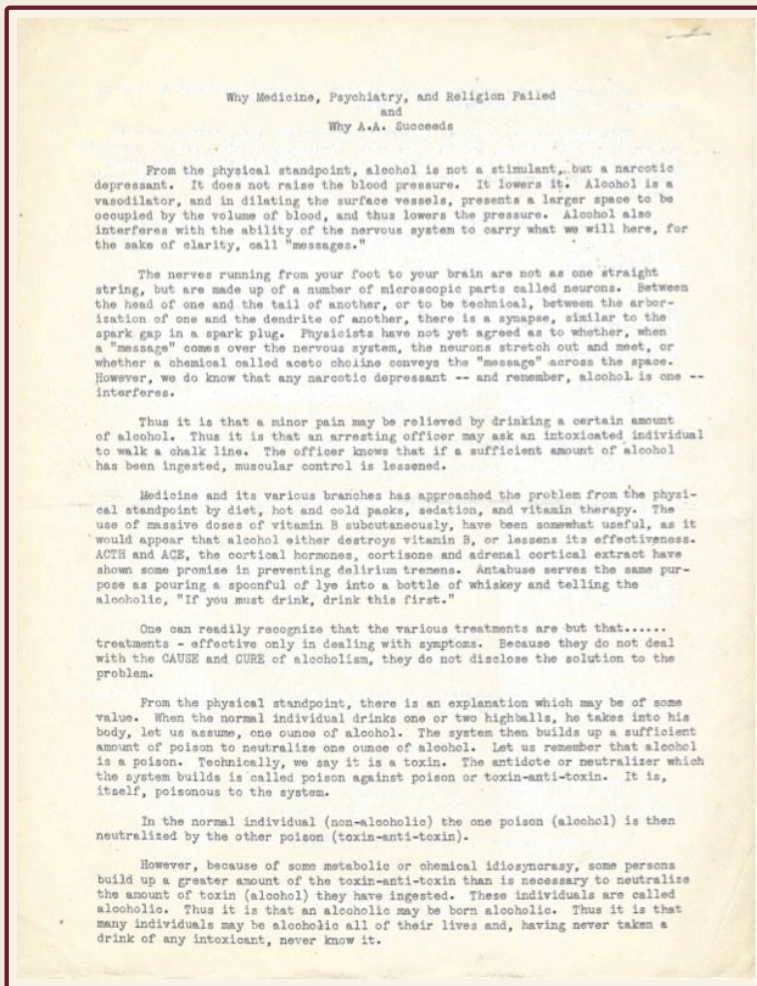
THE LETTER

On Christmas Day 1949, Bill Wilson wrote personally to Dr. William D. Silkworth. The letter is brief, but its historical significance is substantial. Wilson reflects on the remarkable changes that had taken place since the early years and expresses direct gratitude to the physician whose treatment, reassurance, and medical understanding had shaped his own recovery experience.

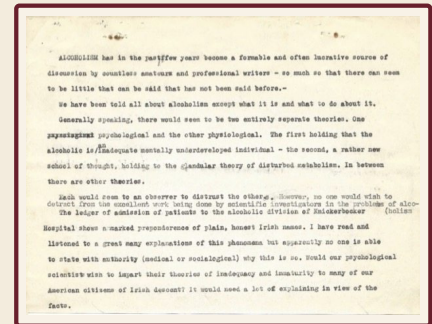
More than a later tribute, the letter preserves Wilson's own acknowledgment during Silkworth's lifetime of the doctor's place in the emergence of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the letter, Wilson recalls Silkworth's reassurance during his treatment, states that it saved his life, and places the doctor among those without whom A.A. could never have been.

The Doctor in His Own Words

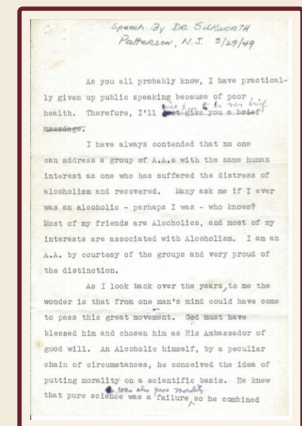
Original writings on medicine, psychiatry, religion, and Alcoholics Anonymous



"Why Medicine, Psychiatry, and Religion Failed — and Why A.A. Succeeds"



“Two Different Theories” — corrected text



Paterson, New Jersey address — 1949

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS — THE THINKING BEYOND “THE DOCTOR’S OPINION”

Among the most significant materials in the William D. Silkworth Collection are the doctor's own manuscripts and speech texts concerning alcoholism, medicine, psychiatry, religion, and the developing influence of Alcoholics Anonymous.

These documents extend beyond the familiar language of “The Doctor’s Opinion.” They preserve Silkworth working through questions that occupied much of his professional life: why established approaches so often failed, why certain alcoholics appeared unable to remain abstinent, and why the emerging A.A. fellowship seemed capable of reaching some patients whom other interventions had not.

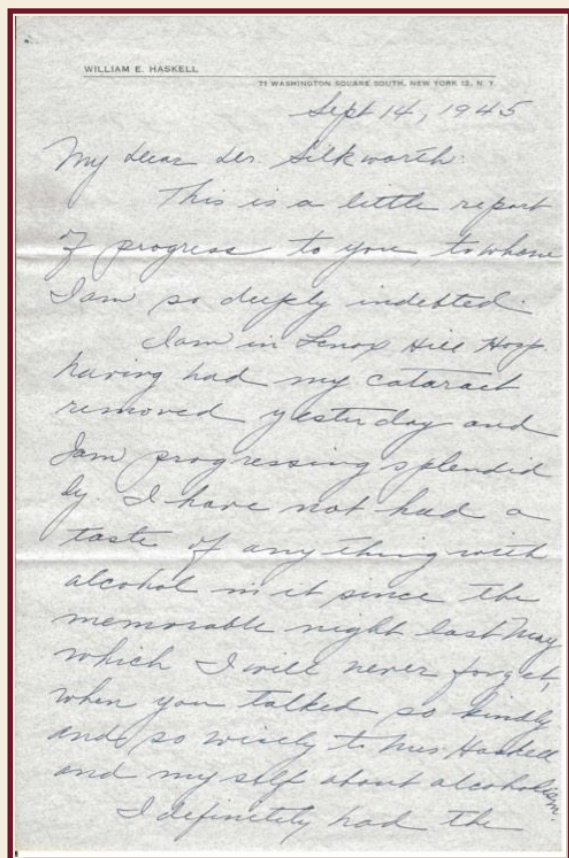
At the center of this material is the manuscript identified within the collection as “Why Medicine, Psychiatry, and Religion Failed — and Why A.A. Succeeds.” Collection documentation describes it as an original statement of Silkworth’s view of why A.A. succeeded where other interventions had failed.

Together with surviving speeches and working texts, these manuscripts preserve Silkworth's ideas in his own words rather than through later summaries of his contribution.

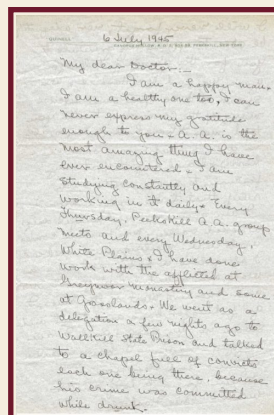
06 / PATIENT CORRESPONDENCE

The People He Treated

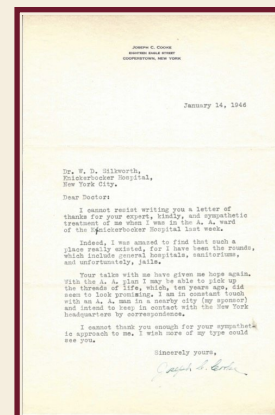
Letters of gratitude from the patients who knew Silkworth as their doctor



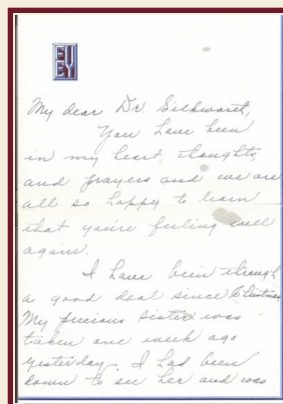
Patient appreciation letter, 1945



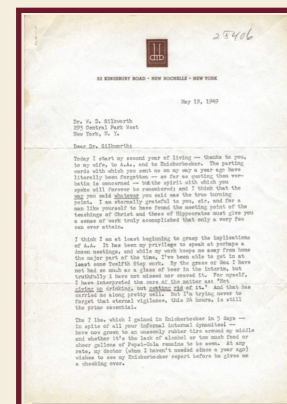
Patient correspondence, July 1945



Patient appreciation letter, 1946



Patient appreciation letter, 1947



Patient appreciation letter, 1949

TREATMENT REMEMBERED IN THE WORDS OF THE PATIENTS THEMSELVES

Silkworth's historical importance is often described through institutions, publications, and the later recollections of Alcoholics Anonymous. The correspondence preserved in this archive offers another perspective: the voices of people who encountered him directly as a physician.

Surviving letters from the 1940s thank Silkworth for his treatment, encouragement, patience, and concern. Some are substantial multi-page communications rather than simple notes of appreciation. Together they preserve the personal consequences of a medical approach remembered not only for diagnosis, but for sympathy and hope.

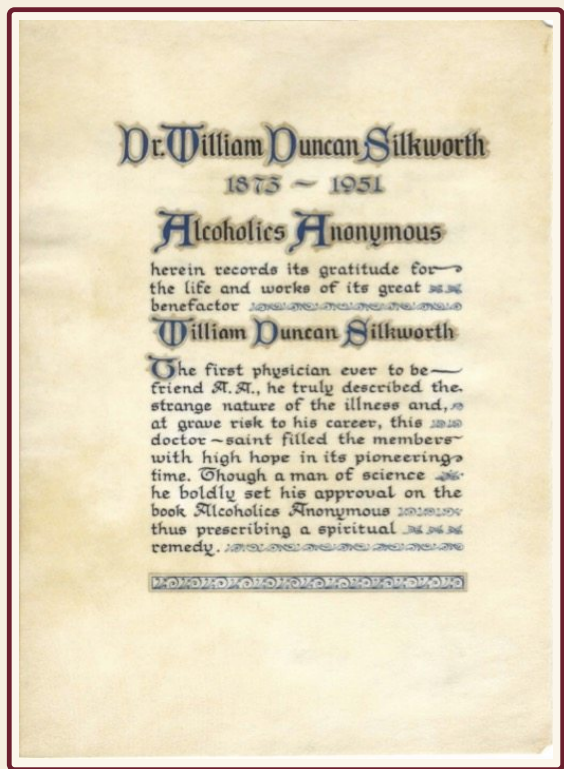
Collection documentation describes patient correspondence thanking Silkworth for offering hope, treating patients sympathetically in the hospital, and helping some reconnect with Alcoholics Anonymous.

These letters bring the archive back to the individual encounter: doctor and patient, at a time when the available medical answers for alcoholism were limited and repeated relapse was common.

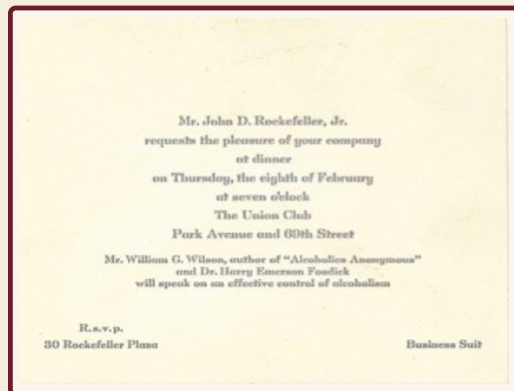
07 / RECOGNITION & LEGACY

Alcoholics Anonymous Remembers Dr. Silkworth

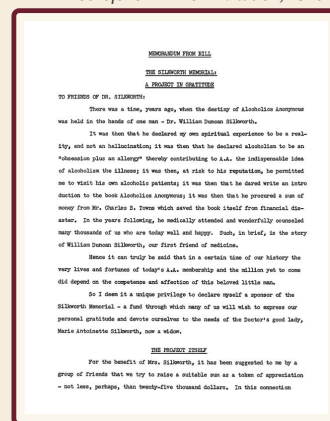
Recognition from the fellowship he helped influence



A.A. proclamation to Mrs. Silkworth, 1951



Rockefeller Dinner invitation, 1940



"The Silkworth Memorial - A Project in Gratitude"



1947

FROM EARLY ASSOCIATION TO FORMAL RECOGNITION

The archive preserves both Silkworth's participation in A.A.'s early development and the fellowship's later gratitude for his contribution.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Silkworth's place in Alcoholics Anonymous history was no longer merely implicit. The surviving material in this archive records increasingly direct acknowledgment of the doctor's contribution by Bill Wilson, A.A. members, and the developing service structure of the fellowship.

The archive includes the invitation associated with the 1940 Rockefeller dinner, linking Silkworth to one of the important moments in A.A.'s early public emergence.

It also preserves later material that reflects the fellowship's gratitude after Silkworth's death, including the formal proclamation presented to his widow and correspondence surrounding the proposed Silkworth Memorial.

Together, these pieces trace a progression: from a physician working with alcoholics in New York, to a trusted medical voice in early A.A., to a figure formally remembered by the movement after his death.

08 / PROVENANCE

A Life Preserved as an Archive

From the Silkworth family to a published historical record

The strength of the William D. Silkworth Collection lies not only in individual documents, but in the survival of the archive as a connected body of material. Collection documentation traces that continuity from Silkworth's lifetime, through family preservation, to the archive's later use as a principal source for the 2002 Hazelden biography of his life.

PROVENANCE TIMELINE

1873-1951

DR. WILLIAM D. SILKWORTH

Personal, family, medical, and A.A.-related records accumulated across his lifetime.

1951-2001

ADELAIDE SILKWORTH

Collection documentation states that Silkworth's niece preserved the archive for decades after his death.

2001

DALE McPHERSON

The collection was acquired from Adelaide Silkworth in January 2001.

2002

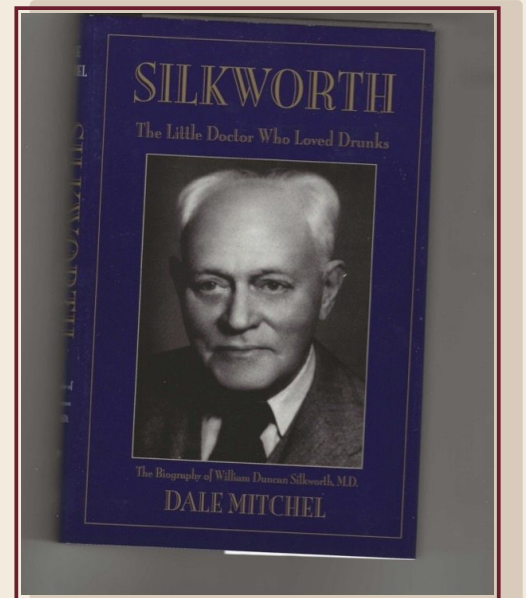
SILKWORTH: THE LITTLE DOCTOR WHO LOVED DRUNKS

The archive became a principal source for the Hazelden biography published under the name Dale Mitchel.

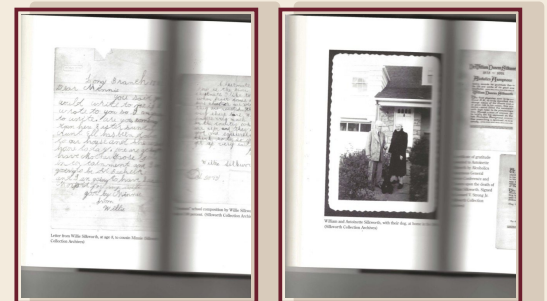
TODAY

THE WILLIAM D. SILKWORTH COLLECTION

The connected archive is preserved and offered as one collection.



Dale Mitchel biography, Hazelden, 2002



Archive material reproduced in the biography; Silkworth family material in print

PUBLISHED PROVENANCE

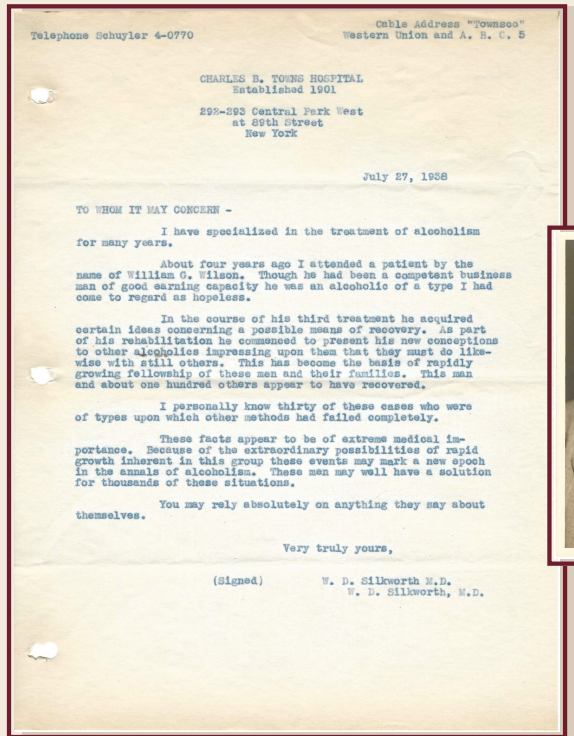
According to collection documentation, Adelaide Silkworth - described as the doctor's niece and last surviving immediate family member - preserved the archive after his death. In January 2001, Dale McPherson acquired the collection from Adelaide and later drew on it while writing under the name Dale Mitchel.

The resulting biography, *Silkworth: The Little Doctor Who Loved Drunks*, was published by Hazelden in 2002. Collection documentation states that items from the archive were photographed and cited there as the "Silkworth Collection Archives," creating a published bridge between family custody, scholarship, and the collection offered today.

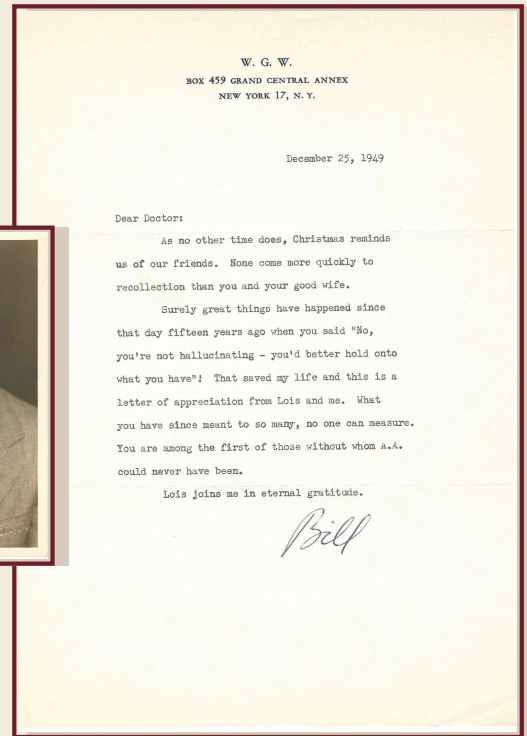
THE COLLECTION

One Physician. One Archive. A Singular Place in Recovery History.

Original medicine, personal correspondence, A.A. history, and a life preserved together.



The Doctor's Opinion - July 27, 1938



Bill Wilson to Dr. Silkworth - December 25, 1949

THE OPPORTUNITY

A single William D. Silkworth manuscript, letter, or piece of early Alcoholics Anonymous history can stand as a significant historical object. This collection offers something substantially broader: a documentary record of the physician, the medical thinker, the people he treated, and the fellowship that later honored his contribution.

At its center are the July 27, 1938 document identified within the archive as the source for "The Doctor's Opinion" and Bill Wilson's Christmas Day 1949 letter acknowledging Silkworth as one of the people without whom A.A. could never have been. Their significance is strengthened by the family, professional, manuscript, patient, and A.A.-related material preserved around them.

Offered as One Collection

57 DOCUMENTED ITEMS

Price Upon Request

Detailed photography, collection documentation, and additional information available upon request.

Tim Fitzpatrick

Recovery Collectibles | tim@recoverycollectibles.com | RecoveryCollectibles.com