The papers of R. J. (Rolland Jay) Thomas were placed in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in August of 1964, November of 1967 and December of 1972. Each part of this collection was opened for research one year after it was deposited. The finding aid was rewritten in June, 1980.

Roland J. Thomas was born in East Palestine, Ohio on June 9, 1900. He grew up in eastern Ohio and attended Wooster College for two years. The need to help support his family caused him to leave college and go to work. In 1923 he moved to Detroit, where he worked in a number of automobile plants.

He became active in efforts to organize the automobile industry and was the president of Chrysler Local 7 when it affiliated with the UAW in 1936. He was a leader of the 1937 Chrysler sit-down strike and that same year was elected a vice president of the UAW. He assumed the presidency in 1938 after the president, Homer Martin, was ousted.

He was president until 1946 and during this period, the UAW developed into a dynamic, stable union. He lost the presidency to Walter Reuther in 1946, but was elected first vice president. However, he lost that office in the election the following year. In 1947 he was named assistant to CIO president, Philip Murray, and with the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, he served under George Meany until his retirement in 1964 due to ill health.

He was married to Mildred Wettergren on August 7, 1937 and they had one child, Frank. R. J. Thomas died in Muskegon, Michigan on April 18, 1967.

These papers mainly concern his work as president and vice president of the UAW and his activities as part of the war effort.

Important subjects covered in the collection are:

Anti-Communism
Fair employment practices
Housing
Labor legislation
Organizing
Postwar reconversion
Strikes: Allis-Chalmers (1947)
        Chrysler sit-down (1937)
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Correspondence, reports, clippings, and other papers relating to his work as president and vice president of the UAW. For other similar material, see Series III and IV. The scrapbooks contain newspaper clippings on the UAW and Thomas.

Part II

Series III, R.J. Thomas Office Files, 1942-1946; Boxes 15-27:
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Part III

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Non-manuscript material:
Photographs, awards, badges, gavels, flag, plaque, original sketch of R. J. Thomas, cartoons and other items have been transferred to the Archives Audiovisual Collections.
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