

## THE COLLECTING OF ARCHIVAL MATERIALS AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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Cornell University was among the pioneers in the development of a university archives and a regional history collection. The physical results of that endeavor are at times so annoyingly apparent in expanding stacks and worrisome storage places as to obscure the research values of the bulky records that cause the trouble. In contrast, the books and articles which have been wholly or partially based on these materials take little room, although a surprisingly large number of them are scattered through any major library.

The pioneering days have ended. During the past decade, a fair number of universities have established archives, and, occasionally, related manuscript divisions. National, state, and city agencies, universities, historical societies, and other institutions have issued guides to their holdings. The Library of Congress maintains a union list of manuscripts. Despite the pains of growth and their attendant problems, these agencies and institutions are cooperating with enthusiasm to make primary sources better and more widely available to serious researchers. Never have scholars had such a wealth of resources within their easy reach.

At a university like Cornell, where the archival and regional history department is within the library system and housed in a great research library, the scholar oriented to the primary source has the additional good fortune of having the published primary and secondary sources at hand. Such a situation can be ideal, particularly if the primary source is not sacrificed in the interests of the secondary source.

It is impossible to consider the collecting of archival materials at Cornell as a distinct and separate activity. Regional History and the University Archives are two co-equal units constituting one department. At the present time, they are so closely knit that a divorce might prove disastrous for both, as well as for the cause of research. That the University Archives had, in a way, its beginnings in Regional History and that the single purpose of collecting became a dual purpose have deeply influenced the character of each.

The Collection of Regional History was established in October of 1942 with the aid of a Rockefeller Foundation grant. It was thought

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that grass-roots collecting of manuscripts and ephemera relating to the common man of the region might reveal through research certain regional differences and a pattern. But the fragmentary evidence collected showed no particular pattern and few correlations. The many account books then garnered may never be of much use except as objects of curiosity a thousand years hence. Sets of family papers, small or large, remain undisturbed in the stacks, waiting for the touch of research to realize their potential value.

Despite the talk in those early days about the historical value of the regional sources, no scholar took so much as a nibble at them. Whitney Cross, a former Cornell curator, satisfied some of his frustrations of being a collector without a researching clientele by acquiring the papers of Edward Eggleston which had attached to them the biographer who continued to use them. The Hoosier Schoolmaster certainly represented the common man if not the region.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, in 1945, when I became head of the makeshift cubbyhole quarters with a door to which there were 240 keys on the lower campus, I was still a graduate student, with Professor Paul W. Gates as my chairman. The most active individual behind the creation of almost any American manuscript division in a university is an historian in search of primary sources for himself and/or his graduate students. Professor Gates had played that role in the creation of Regional History. After 1945, and for some years, the emphasis in collecting was on records generally originating in the region and relating to agriculture, land policies, railroads, the lumber industry, and similar topics. A number of Professor Gates' students used some of these papers for theses, a goodly share of which were published.

A pioneering spirit held the professor, the students, and the curator in an enthusiastic, highly advantageous association. One result was that the curator came to identify collecting aims so closely with real or potential research needs that one could not be thought of without the other. This identification helped to make for a definition of a university archives which is broader and richer for the research content than is generally accepted in the archival world.

The definition of the university archives as a depository not only for the historical documents and official records of the institution but also for the private papers of those who created the documents and records was inherent in the founding and continuing existence of Cornell University. The founding was an intimate personal experience for two very different men. Some months before opening day, President Andrew D. White wrote, "Night & day I have worked for this University—I am willing to give my life & all I have for it."<sup>2</sup> A few months after that bright October day, Ezra Cornell wrote to his wife that the establishment of Cornell University was the

culmination of all his successes, which were reached through grievous toil and suffering.<sup>3</sup> The backgrounds, experiences, and philosophies of these two men formed the mold in which the plan of the university was cast. Both men knew this.

Cornell and White were more than founders who established a university similar more or less to other institutions of higher learning. They created a new university which Allan Nevins designated as “. . . the most remarkable phenomenon in higher education during the postwar decade.”<sup>4</sup>

The nature of that phenomenon is concisely and best described in The History of Cornell by Morris Bishop:

The Cornell Idea was a compound of two ideas: the Ezra Cornell Idea and the Andrew D. White Idea. The Ezra Cornell Idea was expressed in his famous motto. It was an appeal for education to meet recognized needs and lacks in American life. It insisted on the test by utility, on the practical applications of studies. The Andrew D. White Idea was the motivation by the desire to learn, in place of disciplinary education. It transferred the power of choice from the teacher to the student. It insisted on the individual's rights in full confidence that the free individual, with kindly guidance, will find his way to wisdom and virtue.<sup>5</sup>

Neither Cornell, nor White, nor their contemporaries explained or defined the Cornell Idea although everybody talked about it. Professor Bishop wrote that he had difficulty in defining it. No great light is shed on the problem by the official records: the Charter, REGISTER, the various announcements, the letters by Cornell, White, and others which were kept as exhibits or official letters in the Trustees' Minutes, the lecture notes, the outlines of courses, and the other documents and records.

There are, of course, choice bits about early activities tucked away in the official records. One daybook, kept by the business manager, gives a running account for the first year in Cascadilla Hall, a former water-cure sanatorium, a barracks of a place which had class rooms and laboratories, and housed the faculty and their families as well as the students. Professors demanded new equipment and scolded about students throwing slops from the upper windows. A great hubbub over coal ended in coal tickets for all. A student from Harvard, refusing to eat with the hoi polloi, had his meals in his room. The laboratory of Professor Burt G. Wilder, the first anatomist, stank so terribly that everyone felt ill. Ezra Cornell sent the night soil from the privies to fertilize the university vegetable gardens. Founder's Day, Ezra Cornell's birthday, was celebrated with dancing, a sinful pleasure in the eyes of Ithacans. President White

turned the place upside down in preparation for the eminent Goldwin Smith, the British political economist. He even installed a bell so Smith would not have to yell for service. But with all this, and White's plans for the faculty, Cornell's reports on construction, the trustees' deliberations, and the constant display of pioneering enthusiasm and discomfort, there is nothing which defines the great innovation of the Cornell Idea.

Professor Bishop produced his definition after many hours spent in reading the private papers of Cornell and White. In terms of his own perspective and knowledge, he recreated their backgrounds and experiences, understood their philosophies, and gave meaning to the aims which were so concrete in practice, yet so nebulously expressed in theory. And given the warm human nature of his sources, he was able to produce a warm human book, the most delightful, well-written, and scholarly university history yet published.

Just as the combination of the private Cornell and White papers with the official records of the day are needed to understand the new university, so are needed the same combination of private and official records for any study of later developments at Cornell, be it a college, a department, or even a position. Each development is deep-rooted in the private interests and personalities of one or more individuals. And this is as true of Regional History and the University Archives as of any other department.

What happened to the official records and the private papers down through the years at Cornell is more or less typical of what happened elsewhere. Official records of the university were saved, sometimes less carefully than they should have been, but on the whole very well indeed, and not necessarily for business or legal reasons.

The University Library held a few private papers but had no interest in them. There was no demand for them. Only the papers of great men were saved by institutions. The private papers of more ordinary men were saved in the attics of the big houses of the day. But the Library carefully saved its official papers, and the Cornell University Archives has a beautiful set of them. On the other hand, the private papers of Daniel Willard Fiske, the first librarian, papers Professor Bishop found most useful, were thrown in the library tower and allowed to dry rot and almost disintegrate.

Andrew D. White considered his papers important, partly because of the letters famous men had written to him. His literary executor kept the files intact in the library. Like his cofounder, Ezra Cornell wanted his papers saved for posterity. Information expressed in them about the development of the telegraph, as well as about the founding of the University warranted preservation. But his papers became divided among members of the family. Many of them are scattered about the country.

The Library may have ignored, even mistreated, the contemporary private papers for whose care it was neither trained, equipped, nor supported, and for which the demand was infinitesimal, but it did very well by *Cornelliana*—the pamphlets, stunt books, scrap books, and other ephemera, and the official and unofficial publications, all of which are vital as supplements to manuscripts, and in themselves. In fact, the numerous items are so well cataloged and shelved that the process of getting them into the Archives where they belong is taking forever.

An acceleration of developments, changes, and events during the 1940's precipitated the establishment of the official archives in 1951 and determined its nature and position. Of course, the tremendous increase of scholarly research in primary sources was and is the growing and powerful force for preservation. Otherwise, the great paper war would be quickly solved by total destruction, except for a few choice captives.

We have already seen how the emphasis at Cornell on regional history made for a broad definition of a university archives. The very aims of regional history demanded the establishment of an archives. A curator could not collect the records of small educational institutions on the basis of their values for research without coming to have strong feelings about the records of one of the great universities of the country.

The research interest of a number of historians suddenly turned toward Cornell as a subject for investigation with the use of archival records presupposed. Walter P. Rogers analyzed Andrew D. White's influence on the development of the modern university in terms of what he found in the private papers.<sup>6</sup> And Paul W. Gates focused attention on the potential research values of Cornell's business records through his extensive use of the Western Lands papers for his study of Cornell's Wisconsin pine lands, a study important for Wisconsin history as well as Cornell's history as a land grant college.<sup>7</sup> A nostalgic appreciation for the university's beginnings was subtly engendered by Carl Becker in his preliminary lectures and his published *Cornell University: Founders and Founding*.<sup>8</sup> This appreciation was not dissipated but strengthened by the death of that illustrious historian in 1945, two years after the publication of his book. The research interest of these three historians had made use of the non-current official records as well as the private papers.

Whitney R. Cross, having his hands full in organizing and building a new collection and also thinking that regional and Cornell archival materials were not compatible in a regional collection, refused to round up usable archival sources on campus, and accepted those sources only when necessary. But this speaker could not resist gathering university records and papers which might be of

quick interest to scholars. The papers of Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White were begged from the Library and along with other sources from the campus, most of them private papers, were brought to the archives. After the publication of The Second Report of the Curator, 1945-1946, CORNELL UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES was never again used as one of the entries in the report of Regional History. It had become clear that there would have to be a separation between records of the region and those of the university, if Cornell were ever to have an archives of its recorded history.

There was the nagging worry about records and papers disappearing. It was Professor George Healey, now Curator as well of Rare Books and Manuscripts, who asked one day, "And what ever happened to the Charles Kendall Adams' papers?" The question was tossed back and forth and all around the campus until it was discovered that the papers of Cornell's second president had been sacrificed to a scrap paper drive during the war. However, Professor Healey's question continues to be echoed in the hope that someone salvaged them, and that they will be returned to Cornell.

And then there happened a threat to Cornell's non-current records which could have been a catastrophe. One June evening, a flash flood and a broken storm sewer poured water into a vault located in the sub-basement of a girls' dormitory, the vault used by the Treasurer's Office and various administrative officers to store a large quantity of non-current records. Most of these records, except for an excess of vouchers, were worth permanent preservation.

From time to time, administrative officers, who were most cooperative, had allowed the removal of sets of records to be added to Regional History's holdings. Although the quarters given over to Regional History were far from ideal, they were certainly an improvement on the sub-basement. But the records still in this vault were now faced with destruction.

The flood water rose to a height of two feet and remained there until discovered. In a sense, the event was not without an advantage. During the rest of the week, the endless ironing of legal documents and the twenty-four hour-a-day drying by hot air of the other records demonstrated in a way words could not that the sub-basement of a girls' dormitory was no proper place for Cornell's historical records.

In the meantime, Regional History had become an administrative unit of the University Library, the Rockefeller grant having ended. This change determined the organizational place the Archives would have. Stephen A. McCarthy, recently appointed Director of the Library, was well disposed toward university archives. His taste leaned toward the preservation of the private papers of Cornell's notables, a taste he shared with a number of faculty members. Even the patron historian of Regional History, despite his wide experience

with state and national archives, despite his scholarly grubbing among non-current records in campus catchalls, distrusted any proposal which would allow a retirement of records program to threaten the collecting of historical sources. In any case, if he wanted to research in Cornell's old business records, which no one else cared to do at that time, he had only to ask the Treasurer's Office for a key.

Cornell's centennial was then a few short years away, and there was concern among those who had a deep affection for the past about having sources available for the historian to use once he was appointed. Not much connection was seen between the papers to be brought together and Regional History, the campus center for collecting contemporary sources. An affiliation was regularly discouraged by the sight of the curator always returning to campus with a truckload of soot-covered records and dumping them in the middle of a respectable Cornell University building.

It was disturbing to realize that the choicest private papers were to be brought together and designated the University Archives. It appeared wrong to have the University Archives include only the non-current official record and the historical document, although that is the acceptable form in archival circles. Too many institutions had the most precious private papers in the Library, and, ingloriously off to one side, the official files and records in a Records Center. In the gap between them there fell to destruction all the sources judged without value in a perspectiveless present. It appeared that the role of the historian was being confused with that of the archivist, his loyal servant. The ghosts of the grand old historians of the past century who gathered their own sources were walking on our campus.

After some reflection along these lines, I suggested to McCarthy that I try writing a proposal for a proper University Archives. He thought it a good idea. Eventually, after considerable thought and work, I gave the results to him. The Library Board recommended the establishment to the Faculty, which approved and in turn made a recommendation to the Trustees that the University Archives be established under the jurisdiction of the University Library and that the development and management of the University Archives be made the responsibility of the University Archivist under the delegated authority from the Director of the Library. The University Archives was to be one of two co-equal units in the same quarters under a Curator of Regional History and University Archivist. There was also to be an Advisory Council. An orderly retirement program for the entire University was to be established.

The Trustees began their resolution with a statement that a University Archives be established to insure the preservation of the significant records of the University and their organization for use in historical studies and research. The significant records were (1) non-current records of permanent value, and (2) records relating to

the history of the University and to the persons connected with it. The records could be manuscript, printed, photographic, or of other forms.

Within a short time after the establishment of the University Archives, non-current records began to be retired from the New York State College of Agriculture, the most significant for us at that time being the files of former deans, and records relating to extension work. These records showed Cornell's role as an integral part of rural New York. There were many and marked correlations between these records and those in Regional History relating to the farmer, cooperatives, farm organizations, and other agricultural manifestations in this region.

The relationship between Regional History and the University Archives began to change rapidly. The change was inherent in the appointment of the Curator as the Curator and University Archivist. The University Archives is now the dominant partner in the "two coequal units" relationship, except in the field of political papers. With few exceptions, the collecting for Regional History is now within Cornell's sphere of interest as it is represented by holdings in the Archives. The results are excellent for the research interest in and of a few colleges, notably the New York State College of Agriculture. The research interests, real or potential, of other colleges, departments, and offices have been neglected only in the sense that the University Archivist has had the entire burden of retiring and collecting records in addition to many administrative and professional duties and has generally answered the strongest demands first.

Agriculture, engineering, and architecture illustrate the different levels of strength in primary sources that are encountered. Agriculture is an example of a subject area having rich resources. Its records and papers constitute more than a quarter of the bulk of the department's entire holdings, the giant share being in Archives. Both administrators and faculty members of The New York State College of Agriculture have been and are most cooperative in retiring or giving their non-current records and private papers and those of their predecessors to the Archives. Research interest in these holdings is broad and varied and comes from the campus and beyond campus. This interest was largely responsible for the creation of Regional History. Scholarly use has been stimulated by grants and aids, one of which recently supported an Oral History Project which in its turn produced more records.

On the other hand, engineering is slightly represented. Regional History early acquired a few sets of choice professional papers. There are scattered records and papers relating to the development and administration of the various engineering colleges. The Cornell Society of Engineers is retiring its records to the Archives. There

are three reasons for the paucity of records. A former dean has been using records to write a history. There has been no demand for research material in this area to stimulate collecting. The University Archivist has not exerted enough pressure for a retirement program. In contrast, the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory at Buffalo has cooperated in working out a retirement program.

Regional collecting on a small scale and the retirement of archival records in the field of architecture supported a research project of great cultural value. The primary sources had been used to some extent but not extensively by students and others before Professor Kermit C. Parsons began work on an architectural history of Cornell. He had the aid of a graduate student in history who combed through archival and regional records looking for letters, drawings, photographs, and other sources for over two years.

The faculty of the College of Architecture is highly cooperative in the retirement of its records and the giving of private papers. At present, a plan is being worked out for collecting regional records within Cornell's sphere of interest in answer to the need of research materials for a project in city planning and urban renewal.

The same statement can be made about other fields of interest as represented by colleges, departments, and offices on campus. Certainly, the disciplines at Cornell and the ever-increasing emphasis on original research indicate a strong future in well-rounded collections of manuscript and other primary sources in many fields.

The acquisition of primary sources through retirement or collecting of records more often than not begins with prolonged menial labor. It has none of the dignity of purchase from a dealer. The sight of the collector struggling in storerooms on campus or elsewhere with dusty and sometimes mice-ridden files and always maintaining that special high level of enthusiasm may earn the epithet "junk-collector" and the job-description "All that is needed is an open hand." But it is this acquisition which brings pleasure to the archivist and creates a truly useful archives.

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