



# Historical Manuscripts, Including Personal Papers

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BY WAY OF PREFACE, let it be perfectly understood that what follows is written by an individual in an individual's capacity. It is, in other words, not to be construed in any way as an official or corporate statement, or as a reflection of an institutional viewpoint.

Because of the implications of eternity, it is an awesome act when a public repository formally takes unto itself a collection of manuscripts. Certainly the contract "is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God." It is the more solemn for the reason that the troth is arranged and plighted by proxies who do not consult the parties of the first and second part. A momentary custodian (either individually or corporately) acts for one and a very mortal owner or donor represents the other, but the life-expectancy of institutions and their holdings is far longer than that allowed to those who commit them. Who then shall say that the union, being, as it is, extremely personal, will, in a long future, prove felicitous? The projected shadows of posterities look down upon the scene; sometimes they seem so hatefully to glower, at others to be shaken with unpleasant laughter.

Even Benjamin Franklin confined his advice to the formation of a transient liaison. To prescribe for permanent preservation what manuscripts to choose and what to eschew is presumptuous, foolish, and insolent: an invasion of the precincts of privacy, a restraint upon the exercise of taste and fancy, a violation of privileges condoned by experience, an affront to jealous license. Worse, it is completely supererogatory.

At the same time, it may be possible to avoid abuse, ridicule and shame (1) by excluding all consideration of the imperious vagaries

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of private collectors and confining the precepts to the conduct of public or quasi-public repositories, (2) by offering an assortment of tempered generalities, and (3) by gently reporting the state of the art as it is understood presently to be practiced by the votaries. So circumscribed, the result can be, for the informed, only a series of reflections on the obvious.

In a well-ordered world *sic*, a manuscript collection is not capriciously instituted. There must be a purpose for its founding which is to meet a need neglected altogether or (for whatever reason) inadequately, unsatisfactorily, and inconveniently served elsewhere. This presupposes the existence and continuity of patrons who will find it steadily or recurrently useful.

The field of interest should be narrowly defined and, in accordance with the terms, should consistently receive strictest adherence. This is important if the collection is gradually and logically to increase and develop to that depth where it will constitute a sound basis for research. As a corollary, the temptation to receive "peripheral materials," often enchanting in themselves, should be firmly resisted lest distraction set in and fixed emphasis be forever lost.

The scope of the collection should be distinguishable. To that end it should be closely differentiated, precisely stated, and widely publicized. Even so, it is too much to hope that the bounds staked out for it will be generally acknowledged or that intruders will be found (by the guild-at-large) guilty of any trespass. Free enterprise is healthy, stimulating, and good for the cause. Inevitably, in the hot pursuit of acquisitions, the initiative of one repository will impinge upon the aspirations of another, but not always upon the same repository or for the same reason. Competition may be ineradicable but activities purely duplicative should be carefully, conscientiously eliminated and persistent, acrimonious, extravagant rivalries should be abjured.

Fortunately, most collecting institutions recognize a responsibility, if not to their counterparts, then certainly to the promotion of scholarship, for the considered, purposeful, proper allocation of manuscripts. Related materials can be effectively utilized only when concentrated in one place. They enhance, expound, and explain one another. They give to one another a third dimension. They contrast, confirm, or contradict one another. They quicken one another. They are elements in a Great Experiment.

The converse is true; when related materials are scattered, their research value is likewise dissipated, their substance is diminished,

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their significance languishes, they are unseen by, and unknown to, the very persons whom they best might serve. Moreover, scholars are rarely endowed with affluence; despite grants-in-aid and subsidies of one sort or another, traipsing from pillar to post is expensive to the point of being prohibitive. Large scale single-copy photoduplication is comparably costly.

Now if this holds good—as it is believed to hold—for manuscript collections generally, it is especially good in the case of historical manuscript collections. Yet there are some who dissent. The distinguished librarian of a great university blandly writes: “We assume that any collection of papers outside a well-established repository is vulnerable and in danger of destruction so we accept anything desirable that is available to us.”<sup>1</sup> Let the honest fellow go blithely on his way until spatial constrictions reform him.

On the other hand, it is heartening to report that increasingly administrators adopt rules of abstinence, critically and with saffron eyes ponder proffered gifts, and make alternative suggestions looking to “the right material in the right place.” From Yale comes word of “a general policy that there are many items which will be more useful elsewhere, and we do not compete in the market when we feel this to be the case.”<sup>2</sup> The University of Virginia has reached “informal understandings with most of the other repositories in Virginia, Washington, D. C., the southeastern states, and in a few instances with institutions farther afield, in accordance with which we frequently refer a would-be donor, depositor, or seller of manuscripts to the institution in which we feel his manuscripts ‘belong.’ We are convinced that this attitude (it is that informal) pays off very handsomely, not simply because the generous reciprocity of other area institutions adds richly and *appropriately* to our holdings, but because we thus avoid accumulating inappropriate materials.”<sup>3</sup>

And the Alderman’s curator adds: “It seems wasteful, outmoded, and a bit silly to collect items that appear more suitable for (a) the *archives* of another institution, or (b) the strictly local regional history of an area where another repository is located, or (c) actually form an integral part of a collection already existing in another repository, or (d) has close relationships to a collection or collections existing elsewhere.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Minnesota Historical Society works “closely with the Archives of the University of Minnesota, the State Archives Commission of Minnesota, the Norwegian-American Historical Association, and the county historical societies;” and has “received materials from

or sent materials to the Montana Historical Society, the North Dakota Historical Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the New York Historical Society.”<sup>5</sup>

Rapprochement extends to the cities. Writes the Chicago Historical Society: “We have turned over to the Newberry . . . some ms genealogies, and have recommended that donors give such material to that library. We are not interested in competing with a fine collection that is seven blocks down the street.”<sup>6</sup> In Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania yields Dr. Franklin to the American Philosophical Society in return for proprietorship of the (literary) remains of William Penn. Meanwhile, in metropolitan Boston the Houghton Library concedes to the Massachusetts Historical Society manuscripts connected with New England history while reserving literary manuscripts for itself; the Massachusetts Historical Society surrenders genealogical manuscripts to the New England Historic Genealogical Society; and the Boston Public Library forswears manuscripts relating to early Boston business history in favor of the Baker Library. Clearly, there are enough papers to go around.

What manuscripts should be collected? An excellent essay introductory to the subject, “Manuscript Collecting for Historical Societies,” by R. F. Metzdorf, appeared in the Spring 1956 *Bulletin* of the Connecticut League of Historical Societies.<sup>7</sup> It is well always for the uninitiated to keep in mind the fact that manuscripts are assembled not because they are physical objects composed of paper and ink, not even because they are autographs, but because they are historical evidence! It is as original sources for the reconstruction of the past, for the interpretation of parallel experience, for the impeachment of false or mistaken or perverted testimony, for the clarification of blurred report, for the detection, identification, and dismissal of fable, and the recovery of reality that they are sought and brought together.

They should be, in the highest degree, authoritative. They should be written contemporaneously by active participants in, or by keen, shrewd, trustworthy, explicit observers of, events and transactions, measures and movements, disputes and consequences, miserable failures, and pervading achievements. The roles, humors, origins, motives, prejudices, slants, and quirks of the writers should be self-evident or readily ascertainable. The more idiomatic, intimate, outspoken, and spontaneous the tone, the more reliable will be the record. Truth has a terrible and an articulate intensity.

History is collective biography and foremost among its sources are

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the personal papers of persons conspicuous in community, state, regional, and national affairs, together with the complementing papers of their close associates and more prominent adversaries. These are composed preponderantly of correspondence (both letters received and retained copies of letters sent); not infrequently they include, in addition, discarded drafts, memoranda, notebooks, orderly books, diaries, accounts, logs, ciphers, scrapbooks, press clippings, and such ephemera as pamphlets, circulars, leaflets, or broadsides.

Preferably, a collection of personal papers should be extensive. It should cover a lifetime and fully relate its incidents. Indeed, content should be so varied as to be important not only to the study of a career but perhaps more important to the study of a series of subjects as well. This places it beyond the peril of exhaustion through the exploitation of a single approach. It must be preserved, in any event, for the benefit of those "revisionists" produced by every generation.

A collection of personal papers should not be divided between two or more repositories. With this principle there is general agreement, but many are the administrators who have sustained the noble anguish which is caused by self-sacrificial "respect for integrity."

The stimulus given by the Historical Manuscripts Commission at the turn of the century and the ensuing spread of repositories throughout the land has probably had the effect of bringing into public institutions most of the collections of the personal papers of earlier outstanding Americans. A few, to be sure, remain in private hands, but the number dwindles daily. Meanwhile historians are conscious of a changing perspective.

In his presidential address, "What's Right with the History Profession," read before the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association in December 1955, J. D. Hicks, of the University of California, noted: <sup>8</sup>

We take for granted what someone wisely called the continuity of history. Thus history becomes an endless procession of human experience marching toward the present and the future. But the only way this procession can reach the current scene is through our recent past. The years just fading from our memories constitute, in a sense, the bridge over which the contributions of earlier ages must pass to make contact with the world of today and tomorrow. One of the things that's right about the history profession is its present determination to keep this bridge in order. Time was when historians regarded the recent past and those who dabbled in it with ill-concealed contempt. To the more conservative writers, history left off at least a hundred years before their time, and they crossed off as current events

what transpired later. The more daring might seek to bring the narrative down to their own birth-dates, but what respectable historian could regard the events of his own lifetime as history? Everyone knew that many of the most valuable documents were concealed, that too recent events were distorted by their nearness and cast too deep shadows, that one might perhaps hope to divest himself of his prejudices when writing of the distant past, but never when the events he described touched him personally and directly. So good historians, determined to keep their perspective right and their vision clear, just skipped the recent past. The result was that the darkest age, historically speaking, was likely to be the age just gone by. Stand at the end of the nineteenth century in American history, for example, and who do we see? McMaster under full sail heading majestically toward the Civil War; Rhodes in volume after volume fighting the battles of the war, both political and military; and Turner wrapped in contemplation on the significance of the frontier. None of these, nor any others with similar competence, had focussed primarily on the recent economic transformations within the United States, changes that were revolutionary in themselves and at the same time made well-nigh inevitable the greater involvement of the United States in world affairs. It is not too much to say that the United States entered the twentieth century historically unprepared.

Recent history has now come into its own. . . .

Indeed it has and the impact upon the procurators of material has been sudden, and severe. There are clamors which cannot be unheeded, demands which cannot airily be waved aside. Fifty years or so ago a bibliothecary of Herbert Putnam's stature might say with assured impunity that his library "accumulates without reference to present interest, and it considers future rather than present use." Perhaps then—but no longer. The searchers after yesterday are impatient and impassioned. They will not be denied.

But personal papers of recent origin are a phenomenon consorting with a quandry. They are not comfortably, familiarly holographic; instead they are the wonderfully legible emanations of the typewriter or proliferating machine. They are formidably voluminous. It is not unusual for a single collection to be composed of hundreds of thousands of pieces, and there are some which are reckoned in the millions. They can be accommodated only where shelves are empty or aisles are wide.

When received, they are sometimes found to include such memorabilia as Panama hats, overshoes, unlaundered shirts, old razor blades, revolvers, and empty bottles formerly hidden and forgotten (or overlooked) in a filing cabinet. One shipment actually contained

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an untenanted dog house. How it got there has never been satisfactorily explained. Of course, it is easy to segregate and destroy these outré paraphernalia, but, unhappily, there is no common practice for winnowing the papers themselves. Extra carbons, however, may be safely discarded and, with a due regard for philatelic sensibilities, envelopes may be confidently pulped. There is little argument to support the indefinite conservation of canceled checks or routine household bills and receipts. Again, it is entirely possible that only single copies of form and stereotype letters sent need be retained for the ages. The same consideration may govern advertising matter, publicity literature, autographed menus, or theater programs, picture post cards, and idle doodlings on scratch pads. In the case of political figures, patronage files comprised of applications for minor offices may be carefully screened and radically reduced.

But beyond these simple measures a harassed curator, allaying veneration for the *fonds*, must act upon his own sense of the outlandish and the irrelevant, and cautiously proceed to pare. It is well, however, that donors should understand and formally accept his discretionary authority. Some instruments of gift contain clauses to the effect that materials judged inappropriate for permanent preservation will be destroyed, alienated, or returned. A form of deed devised for the William L. Clements Library goes further, specifying "The said gift to be without any conditions whatsoever and the donee shall have absolute discretion to retain the property herewith conveyed or to sell or to exchange the same or make such other disposition of said property that shall seem wise and prudent to the Director of the said Library."

Papers of recent origin are rarely secured by purchase. More often they are acquired as the gifts of families and heirs who (disinclined to examine them) are inclined to look upon them with suspicion and alarm, supposing them to contain documents which may conceivably libel the living, slander the lately dead, or prove in some way offensive to the feelings of innocent and excellent friends and relatives. Taste, kindness, and apprehension make owners reluctant to relinquish control. There is, too, in rare instances, a fear that the papers may divulge improprieties, lapses, or dalliance which would bring vicarious discredit to themselves. If the papers pass into public hands, journalists from the sensational press may patiently pore over them and produce outrageous stories.

These anxieties are not unnatural; on the contrary, compounded as they are of loyalties, sensibilities, and uneasiness, they are at once

decorous, dignified, and intelligible. Their consequence, however, is that in making a gift of recent papers to a public repository the donor is likely to impose conditions. So long as the conditions are reasonable and temporary, they may be accepted, despite the fact that the burden of administration is made more ponderous. Frequently a donor will reserve the right to pass upon applications for access to the collection for a specified number of years, after the expiration of which period it is fully opened to the public. This condition is intolerably onerous only when the time-span of limited access is unduly long or when the donor passes to survivors and descendants his power to grant or withhold permission to examine the collection.

Whenever practicable, instruments of gift should include, insofar as they reside in the donor, a dedication of literary property rights, and blanket authority for making photoduplicates. Such waivers assure the widest potential usefulness of a collection.

Papers are sometimes received on deposit when there is a reasonable expectation that their status will ultimately be converted to gift. The more definite and precise this expectation the better. But as a protection to itself and its constituency the repository should lay down the stipulations that (1) the deposit will not be revoked for a specified period of years, (2) meanwhile the collection may be made freely available to investigators, and (3) in the event of withdrawal the repository may make, retain and service such reproductions of the collection as it pleases.

Prospective donors, as a rule, are not unmindful of, or indifferent to, their taxes. Occasionally one will simultaneously dangle a collection before the bright eyes of several curators and will award the prize to the institution which "outbids" the others in its appraisal. Certainly a donor is eminently entitled to claim a warranted deduction for his gift, but under no circumstances should repositories allow themselves to be placed in a position, undignified at best, at worst reprehensible, where their agents' actions can arouse the misgivings of revenueurs.

So much for collected papers. Turning now to separate letters: these should be acquired only when they "build to strength," that is to say only when they can be and should be intercalated with collections already existing. As waifs and strays they hold no interest for research. Even as monumenta they can serve only as exhibits or as examples of ostentation and discriminating connoisseurship.

As to diaries: when they are writ "clearly and full upon any gallant subject," when the entries are consistently made by an eager and competent reporter, and when they flash vivid light on circumstance,



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then they hold a distinguished place as "contemporary evidence." But when they are the dreary recountings of dreary lives, when they are confined to recording the weather or the physical condition of a hypochondriac, when the significance of the world about him is lost to the diarist, then their value is nuisance value only. Good diaries get published; bad diaries encumber shelves. A lively tractate on their dispiriting powers is Margaret Scrivens' "They'd None of 'em be Miss'd," published in the winter 1955 issue of *Manuscripts*.<sup>9</sup> Here again, as always, content is the only basis for selection.

Subject collections are tantalizing: they are generous purveyors of information; they may be, they often are, the product of persistent, diligent gathering; they sometimes drop a clue or point in a direction; but because they can rarely be exhaustive, and still more rarely attain absolute completeness and finality, they are not ends in themselves but must be used in conjunction with other historical sources.

Manuscript collecting is not for manuals. It is not a technique, not a science; it is an art—perhaps one of the creative arts. It has brought its masters to discouragement and despair, its apprentice-aspirants to grief and folly and sudden exhilaration, but as long as the quest of the past may continue, so too will its fascination and shimmering reward.

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