



## Collecting Manuscripts: By Libraries

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TECHNICALLY, THE WORD "manuscript" applies to every piece of writing prior to Gutenberg. The production of manuscripts did not cease, of course, with the invention of printing. In the present day, the amount of manuscript records being created exceeds by many times the material appearing in printed form.

Library collecting interests are not restricted to any period of history, any form of writing, any language, or subject. The vast scope of the manuscript field, however, coupled with the uniqueness of most handwritten records, has forced a considerable degree of specialization upon individual institutions.

Insofar as manuscripts for foreign history and literature are concerned, the most important American library acquisitions have come through the activities of such private collectors as those described by Richard Maas in the preceding article. Any ambitious program in this area is handicapped by the fact that the great mass of such documents are owned by institutions abroad, and are unlikely ever to appear on the market. Fortunately, a great deal has been accomplished to bring reproductions to this country. Millions of pages have been copied, by microfilm, photostat, and other devices, from European, Asiatic, and Latin American manuscript and archival depositories for libraries in the United States. Examples are: the 5,000,000 pages of historical, scientific, and literary manuscripts filmed in England and Wales during the war years; 2,000,000 pages of Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs records, 1868-1945; German Foreign Ministry Archives, 1867-1920; diplomatic correspondence between the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Mexican Legation in Washington, 1853-1898; 42,000 Vatican Library manuscripts; the 700,000 pages of Mount Sinai manuscripts; and the 100,000 unpublished manuscripts of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz.

For obtaining original manuscripts, the chief opportunity for American libraries is in the American field. These records fall chiefly  
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in literature and history. For every period of American literature there exists a large body of manuscript material which must be investigated before an adequate history of the developments of that era can be written. Included are not only the masterpieces of fiction, poetry, and drama, but manuscripts of unpublished works, letters, notebooks, diaries, lecture notes, travel accounts, and other raw data for literary productions. The field of history is equally broad.

An intelligent acquisition policy for manuscript collections presupposes a definite plan, i.e., what is to be collected. For present purposes, consideration will be confined to manuscripts for historical research—the type with which libraries are principally concerned. In this area, it has been suggested, there are two classes of material that should nearly always be preserved. The first is strictly personal papers and the second is the records of clubs and other organizations. A third class is so extensive that it is not feasible to preserve more than a selected or representative sample: these are the business records of retail stores, industries, factories, and other business establishments.

Concerning the first group, the bulk of most personal papers is composed of letters, and even in the case of unimportant people, collections of letters may contain interesting and valuable data. Historians are no longer interested solely in the personal papers of great statesmen, political leaders, and similar prominent personages. The records left by obscure and unknown persons frequently shed much light on historical events. For example, some of the most important records of the pioneer days in America are contained in the letters, diaries, and autobiographies left by first settlers, explorers, adventurers, farmers, trappers, travelers, and miners—a majority of them relatively unknown figures in national history. The papers they left, however, are primary sources for history, giving a first-hand, day-to-day chronicle of historical developments, which can be gained in no other way.<sup>1</sup>

The second category of manuscripts which should be saved are the records of clubs, churches, schools, fraternal orders, labor unions, and other organizations. The archives of a club or church, to illustrate, are seldom voluminous, but they may have a good deal of social significance for the community.

The third classification, business records, presents greater difficulties, because of its bulk. The impracticability of keeping all the voluminous records produced by the business and industrial establishments in a large community is obvious. It is probably desirable,

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though, to preserve a collection which will be representative of various kinds of business and covering different periods. If files can be maintained for a selected department store, a furniture store, a clothing store, a grocery store, and a similar cross-section of other business interests, the ordinary demands of the research worker can be adequately met.

With few exceptions, no matter how much they may vary in interest and importance, manuscripts which libraries receive classify in one of these three groups: personal, organization, and business records.

The acquisition of manuscripts must be approached quite differently from book acquisitions. Books bought by a library are ordinarily procured with the aid of catalogs or lists issued by publishers and dealers. Comparatively few manuscripts are listed in catalogs and only occasionally are manuscripts purchased by institutions. The great preponderance of them are gifts. In the case of historical manuscripts, the vast majority are in the hands of private individuals. Frequently these persons can be persuaded to deposit their papers in a library, where they will be permanently preserved, safe from such destructive elements as fire, rats, insects, and housewives, and where the materials are available to scholars and students.

It is a form of subtle flattery perhaps to suggest to a person that his papers are of sufficient importance to be worth saving for posterity. Nevertheless, it is often an effective method in persuading him to deposit the papers in a public institution, and in making him feel that the library is doing a favor both to him and to coming generations. This plan of acquisition has resulted in the development of a considerable number of large manuscript collections throughout the country, and at relatively low cost. Few of these institutions have had sufficient funds for extensive buying of manuscripts.

There is also the fact that it is difficult to determine the monetary value of manuscripts—far more so, for instance, than books, which can be compared one copy against another. Any large-scale program for buying manuscripts involves the expenditure of substantial sums of money, competitive bidding among libraries and other agencies collecting such records, and a scattering of collections among numerous institutions. The library can be said to have done its part if it saves from destruction valuable documents shedding light upon the nation's history. Many of these records would be lost except for the efforts of interested institutions.

From the point of view of the scholar, it is preferable not to have manuscripts too widely distributed among libraries, but to have the

major collections concentrated in a few large research institutions. Since manuscripts must nearly always be used with such printed works as encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, and other reference books, government publications, newspapers, and periodicals, the lack of strong library resources close at hand places the user at a disadvantage. Over against the argument for concentration of collections, however, is the strong feeling of local pride in some states and regions—an attitude that causes them to resent removal of local records to any distant point. And, of course, it is far better to preserve all records locally than not to have them saved at all.

A noteworthy example of what can be accomplished in this field is the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. Since about 1930, the director of the collection, first J. G. de R. Hamilton and later J. W. Patton, both of whom are trained historians, has spent practically the year around in field work, traveling through the southern states and elsewhere, locating desirable materials, and wherever possible acquiring them. A major portion of several million manuscripts brought together by this project classify as diaries, unpublished reminiscences or other autobiographical writings, letters of every description, plantation records, and the ledgers and other records of industrial and business undertakings. Not only papers and letters of prominent individuals and families are included, but all kinds of records which reveal the life and thought of the masses of the people. That is, the collection presents a comprehensive picture of southern culture and civilization from early colonial days to modern times. It could hardly have been assembled in any way except by field collectors.

The idea of traveling collectors is, of course, not new. As early as 1854, L. C. Draper was journeying through Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and other parts of the South, gathering primary source materials. The Draper collection now forms the foundation for the Wisconsin State Historical Society holdings, helping to make it one of the outstanding organizations of the kind in the United States. A similar function was performed for the Far West by H. H. Bancroft in the 1850's and 1860's, when he accumulated the famous Bancroft collection which eventually reached the University of California at Berkeley. Additional examples could easily be cited.

Where and how would one begin a search for worthwhile manuscript materials? Sources are varied. The systematic collector prepares an index file of prospects, and explores them as opportunity offers. On his list would probably appear such names as these:

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1. Political leaders, national, state, and local, past, and present.
2. Businessmen and industrialists, especially those whose careers cover a wide span of years.
3. Legal lights, i.e., prominent jurists in courts at all levels, national and state, famous criminal lawyers, and the like.
4. Authors: novelists, poets, dramatists, non-fiction writers, including both those who have achieved wide reputation and those of only local fame.
5. Educators, e.g., college and university presidents, state superintendents of schools, outstanding scholars and teachers, historians, and biographers.
6. Journalists: newspaper and magazine editors, columnists, publishers, etc.
7. Labor leaders, again inclusive of both local and national figures.
8. Farmers, particularly for large farms, where records have been maintained methodically over long periods.
9. Physicians, especially pioneers in communities.
10. Clergymen and other church leaders, of all denominations and creeds.

There are certain psychological moments for approaches to these prospects. In general, an individual is more likely to be interested in placing his papers in a public institution shortly after retirement from active service, and also is apt at this stage to have the time to assemble, sort out, and organize the materials for deposit. Another possibility is to get in touch with the widow or other relatives of an individual, with whose papers one is concerned. This step should be taken as promptly as good taste will permit after the death of the person with whom the collection deals; otherwise, it may be found that valuable records have been destroyed in housecleaning operations. There is the point, too, that during this period a family is usually most receptive to the idea of presenting papers for preservation to a public institution.

A problem frequently encountered in a library's manuscript department is loan collections. These range from minor to major annoyances. Not infrequently, a family or individual is happy and willing to place papers in safe custody, but hesitates to sign any final release or to make an outright gift. Family pride enters here. Parents feel they should save such personal records, eventually to be handed down to their children, though with rare exceptions the children are quite indifferent.

To meet these situations and at the same time to insure the preserva-

tion of valuable manuscripts, it is occasionally necessary to accept collections on loan, subject to recall by the owner. There is, of course, a considerable degree of responsibility for the custodian in such an arrangement and it is troublesome to withdraw the papers after they have been filed for use. Fortunately, few loan collections are ever withdrawn after deposits have been made.

Two reasonably satisfactory ways to meet the loan problem are open. One is to borrow the material long enough for some form of photographic reproduction, after which the originals are returned to the owner. An alternative is to make copies for the owner and to keep the originals. The second plan is, naturally, to be preferred by libraries, but in either case the records are retained permanently in one form or another.

For all collections except those on loan, an institution should make certain that it has clear title, including, if possible, publication rights. Lacking such legal title, it may at some time find itself involved in embarrassing and costly lawsuits, and forced to give up prize items in its collections.

A prominent university librarian recently described rare book collecting as "the greatest game of all."<sup>2</sup> He offers cogent arguments to support this thesis, but in some respects manuscript collecting is an even more exciting sport. One's quarry may be hiding anywhere: in offices, warehouses, homes, attics or basements, barns and garages—in fact, wherever human beings have lived or worked. In the hunt, there are the disappointments of finding the game lost or destroyed when one reaches its former habitat, but in many other instances one has the satisfaction of discovering riches far beyond one's expectations. To cite a single notable example, it is easy to imagine the thrill experienced by Colonel Ralph Isham as the treasure troves of James Boswell papers were uncovered at Malahide Castle over a period of several years. Such finds hardly come once in a generation, though to the diligent manuscript hunter it is not too much to hope that sometime during his career he will be the proud discoverer of at least a Washington Irving *Alhambra*<sup>3</sup> or a Samuel E. Chamberlain diary.<sup>4</sup> Such are the goals which urge on the avid collector as he ransacks dusty attics and basements, searches through old trunks and chests, explores rat-ridden warehouses, and travels hundreds of miles to investigate promising leads.

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### *References*

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