



# Policies Regarding the Use of Manuscripts

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USE OF UNIQUE, irreplaceable, and fragile materials unavoidably entails particular problems for a curator. Manuscripts cannot be administered in the same manner as are printed books. This is apparent in the processing of them, it is obvious in the physical storing of them, and it becomes clear in the servicing of them. Small wonder that some librarians throw up their hands and either leave them uncataloged in cartons (secretly hoping they will disappear or not be called for) or treat them over-solicitiously, like a subnormal child.

Manuscripts, like taxes, are here to stay, and the quantity available to research workers seems to increase as private collections pass into libraries and each state tends to its burgeoning archives. There is a rising demand for use of manuscripts among the increasing number of graduate students and established scholars. Moreover, libraries themselves are growing more interdependent, until the recommendation of the 1956 meeting of the American Library Association was that the resources of the strongest should be available to all.

But if manuscripts are distinctive as library material, so are the users of manuscripts. They are not run-of-the-mill library patrons. As Henry Edmunds, director of the Ford Motor Company archives, perceptively summarized: "Libraries exist for readers; archives, for writers." No one drifts into an archive looking for something with which to entertain himself. The manuscript user is seeking information for something he is writing. Hence, the clientel  is small, informed in the field of research, and above average in education. Nevertheless, manuscripts are not thrown open to use by the public in the same free manner that printed books are; they are protected by certain regulations.

Restrictions on the use of manuscripts arise from (1) their fragile and unique nature, (2) the conditions imposed by donors, (3) the content itself, or (4) the policies imposed by the library or archive.

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Few institutions experience difficulty in cautioning readers to handle manuscripts with care. The need is self-evident, and the users are mature. Getting files of loose papers out of order is a more likely hazard. Ink is usually banned from fear of accidents or absent minded doodling. The fact that these same papers must remain in a condition for future generations also to use must be emphasized to all readers. Such regulations are often put in printed form and handed to new patrons.

As for restrictions imposed on the use of certain manuscripts by donors, the reader should remember that the librarian also objects to those limitations. Gifts with "strings" attached are not favored by any curator, but sometimes he is faced with the alternatives of not getting a valuable collection, or accepting it under certain conditions. Discretion being the better part of valor here, it would seem wiser to accept the collection under restrictions—which time usually will remove—than to lose it altogether.

Once in a while manuscript material of a scandalous or obscene content requires special handling by a repository. Direct quotation is discouraged. A due concern for the library's good name and a sense of responsibility must govern the use of such material. At times library policy must be dictated by law. Under the common law, the writer of an unpublished letter or other manuscript has the sole right to publish the contents thereof, unless he alienates that right by direct act. Moreover, this right descends to his legal heirs regardless of who may own the manuscript in question. To avoid trouble in this area, the Library of Congress does not make photoreproductions of manuscripts written during the past fifty years unless the owner of the literary rights gives specific permission or has assigned his rights to the public.

Lastly, the policies invoked by a library or archive are the heart of the matter of regulation. Why does a repository have any restrictions on who uses manuscripts or what for? Why not throw open the doors—"first come, first served"—so long as the material is handled with adequate care? It is ridiculous to think of any stampede developing.

The problem is not as simple as that. Ownership implies an obligation to preserve, not merely against rough handling as mentioned, but against theft or mutilation or misuse. Obviously, kleptomaniacs or known thieves should not be allowed in, nor persons known to be given to clipping or underscoring while they read. This prohibition means that the prospective reader must be able to identify himself.

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Many librarians and archivists go further: they prefer or insist that the user of manuscripts be a competent scholar. Their logic is that since manuscripts are non-expendable, they should be handled by as few readers as possible, and certainly the competent scholar should have priority over the idly curious, the unprepared, or the reader with a trivial purpose. Even so, there is some objection in our wide democracy to the idea that anyone in a custodial capacity shall presume to judge another person's competence to do what he wants to do. Stiff examinations for the licensing of motorcar drivers are resisted with the same attitude. Yet the duty of a librarian or archivist to conserve the material in his care cannot be avoided or lightly dismissed. He holds it in trust for all the people and for the generations not yet born.

In the screening of readers, preparation and purpose may be legitimately questioned. The student or the hobbyist may have tremendous enthusiasm and high motives, yet be unable to assess the significance of the manuscripts laid before him. A familiarity with secondary material, as found in texts or monographs, is therefore desirable. The newspaper feature writer may want some dramatic or sensational account to arrest the eye of the Sunday reader, especially in a new acquisition. It is hardly fair to allow such persons to pluck the bloom off a collection, leaving scholars to hoe and weed later in order to gain a true appraisal of the material. University manuscript collections are sometimes held inviolate for faculty members of the owner institution first to use. This policy may have some justification at times, but certainly a time limit and a short one should be enforced. If a local professor does not make use of a new manuscript collection within six months, or perhaps three months, after its arrival on the campus, then it ought to be open to scholars outside that campus. Occasionally a local faculty member has been able to tie up a manuscript collection for years and produce nothing, simply keeping his rivals at bay. This is a species of fraud.

On the positive side a library or archive should be able to help a reader make full use of its material. The curator should inform him of other relevant collections in his library or elsewhere. He should suggest other types of sources, such as books, maps, newspapers, broadsides, and prints, which may contain relevant data. He should inform the reader of other persons who are working in the same field, a most important matter to the Ph.D. candidate. And finally he should allow the filming or photostating of material which the reader lacks

time to take notes on or 'which he wishes to study over later or even reproduce.

Mention of the camera raises other questions of use. The microfilm is a remarkable development. It makes possible the reproduction of any kind of material at low cost and in compact format. It is probably the only practical way of preserving newspapers which are going to disintegrate anyway. The cheapness of the method has encouraged libraries to collect and catalog film copies instead of originals. It enables scholars to remain in their studies and consult materials abroad. Most libraries permit microfilming of manuscripts wanted by readers. Such requests are of two origins. In one case a reader works through the manuscripts and instead of taking notes or copying whole documents, jots down directions for filming what he wants. His visit to the repository is thus shortened and his travel expense diminished. After he leaves, the curator sees that his microfilm order is filled. The scholar then makes use of the film at his leisure.

In the other case, a reader may write to the library or archive and ask for a film of all the letters and documents signed by a certain person, received by him, or that relate to him, or to some event. He may ask that an entire collection be filmed. Such requests are generally regarded as stretching library and archival courtesy. Aside from the extra burden imposed on the staff, the feeling prevails that such scholars are leaning too heavily on another person's judgment. They are not sharpening their own judgment in selecting what is important. They are missing the thrill of discovery. And they are failing to perceive the tangential relations that are often illuminated by a chance remark buried in an inconsequential paper. It may be argued that such scholars are pursuing research without catching up to it.

Not all readers or users of manuscripts are individuals; other libraries frequently ask to make use of such material by copying.

Institutional requests for microfilms are another matter and a thorny problem. In this situation, another library wants a film of usually a whole collection, not for any immediate and special purpose, but simply to have on hand as an added resource in history or science or literature. What obligations does the institution owning the original manuscripts have in accommodating such requests?

One of the important services a repository renders to a scholar is to inform him if manuscripts of interest to him are being used by others. Obviously, it can no longer perform this service when another library has photocopies of its material. Moreover, the manuscript material in a library is augmented by printed books, maps, broad-

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sides, newspapers, and prints, relating to the same area and period. The scholar who uses a microfilm of only a manuscript collection in another institution is being short changed. Wholesale microfilming is a form of publication and consequently invokes decisions on that kind of enterprise, including such questions as what method of publication may be preferred, absence or presence of editorial notes in a film, effect of film copying on future printing, and the doctrine of literary property rights already mentioned. Finally, there is an ethical problem involved: should one institution ask another for a film of its unique material? Consider the following actual situation:

A few years ago a dealer turned up an almost complete file of a rare New Orleans newspaper. No library had anything approaching a complete file. The dealer naturally put a high price on the newspaper and offered it to three institutions in succession. Institutions A and B declined the purchase, but institution C put forth some effort and scraped up the money with which to buy it. It might even be argued that C recognized the value of this source material more clearly than A or B. As soon as the announcement of C's achievement was made, institutions A and B wrote and requested a microfilm of the paper! There is such a thing, it would seem, as a right of exclusive possession as a reward for diligence, enterprise, imagination, and self-sacrifice. Institutions A and B would defend themselves on the ground that they were only trying to save scholars in their locality the cost of traveling to C. But such scholars and such libraries are overlooking the primary fact that C performed a signal service to all scholarship by bringing the newspaper out of private hands, where no one could see it, and making it available in one place. Scholars have small right to object because it is not available in three or five places.

There are many arguments for "library cooperation" and "democracy in letters". It is also alleged that film copies do not affect the value, scholarly or financially, of the originals (although they do). The controversy is similar to that over natural resources between the "have" and "have not" nations. But there remains one necessary premise in the argument that libraries should share with others: some few libraries have got to pay out large sums of money to get the originals. Suppose they grow tired of footing the bill for other libraries to benefit and decide they too will collect by means of films? Then the film traffic comes to a halt. The author has heard of one institution that purchased a manuscript collection for \$20,000. When another library asked for a film copy, the owner acquiesced but added

that since the collection would now exist in duplicate it seemed only fair that the second library should bear half the cost, or \$10,000.

A recent development in this age of specialization is the self-appointed center for research on some particular subject or area. Thus a library will send circular letters to other libraries announcing that it is going to become the headquarters for all source material "on the administration of President Zilphus Q. Titmouse, 1846-50," and therefore "will you please film all of the Titmouse letters and all the correspondence of his cabinet officials that you own." The clinching argument is usually: "We shall be glad to pay the cost of filming." If the inquiring library happens to own the Titmouse papers, plus those of several of his cabinet secretaries, the scheme for completion has some merit. But it does seem a little absurd for a library with less than, say, fifty or sixty per cent of the available source material to project such a plan. The mere announcement of a desire to become a research center on some particular topic hardly confers an obligation on other libraries to help the one library achieve its goal. A much more genuine service to scholarship would be for the ambitious library to seek out and purchase the source materials on its favorite subject that are still in private hands, instead of maintaining a soporific satisfaction with film copies of material that is already available to scholars.

The wholesale filming of manuscripts for interlibrary exchange is perhaps an aspect of a more fundamental problem: institutional cooperation in collecting. This is not a plan, but only a thought that libraries ought somehow to divide the field of manuscript collecting both to avoid competition and to insure coverage. Possible subject fields have not been defined, and few libraries have announced the boundaries of their collecting beyond which they will not stray—especially in accepting a proffered gift.

The Farmington Plan, under which each member library agrees to collect the books published in a given field, is not fully effective, and in manuscripts the difficulties would multiply. It is easy enough to state that each library should collect manuscript material on its own locality or region. So it should. But may it not do anything more? Does the American Revolution belong solely to the thirteen states that existed when it was fought and among which it is local history? Or the Civil War to 35 states? What about scientific libraries where geographical boundaries are meaningless? Could libraries always afford to carry out the responsibilities they wish to assume? The Westward Movement or Gold Rush logically should be the concern

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of a few libraries west of the Mississippi. But it so happens that manuscript material on this episode is alarmingly expensive, and only one library in the West could afford to buy it. The wish and the capacity will not always coincide.

It cannot help but be irritating for Southern libraries to find good Confederate collections being formed in the North. Westerners may wish that Yale's Coe collection had been deposited in the West. The Astor Fur Company papers, so valuable to the history of the Northwest, are in the New-York Historical Society; yet it must be remembered that Astor was a New Yorker.\* It is no simple matter to say where some manuscript collections genuinely "belong," and even if all the collections in institutions were made available for redistribution, there would still be dissatisfaction, preceded by much quarreling.

Obviously nothing can be done about manuscripts already in library custody. And a library with only a desire to collect in a given field and lacking sufficient funds can hardly expect to be taken seriously or deferred to by other libraries. On top of this, the desire of a donor to give some manuscripts to the "wrong" institution for sentimental reasons is difficult to resist or deflect. Finally, even though libraries should reach agreement on fields of specialization for the future, they could not count on a drop in prices because of the absence of institutional competition; no agreement of this kind will affect the activity of private collectors, who for the most part are responsible for today's price levels.

However, there is a fringe area in which many libraries now act with unselfish discrimination. Institution A may be offered some letters of General X, the bulk of whose papers are already in institution B. A will ordinarily refer the prospective donor or the dealer to B, where the additional items obviously should go. This sending of the right manuscript to the right place is a practice to be encouraged by enlightened curators. Librarians have not yet met together to consider limiting their collecting to mutually agreed upon areas, and as equal sovereigns agreement may be as remote as world government, but the Library of Congress Manuscript Division has indicated an interest in the problem.

Over a period of the last century, libraries and archives have certainly grown more liberal in permitting use of their manuscripts.

\* Realizing the special interest of western scholars in the Astor collection, the New-York Historical Society has allowed eight libraries in the Northwest to secure microfilms of this entire collection with no restrictions as to its use by competent scholars. These 15,000 letters and documents and 100 letter books were purchased in 1863 for \$80, a fraction of the cost of a microfilm copy.—Ed. note.

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The regulations necessary for protection are generally sensible and deserve the respect of all readers. Microfilming has solved one problem and created another. The desire to serve scholars has succeeded mere acquiescence and is at the root of the self-analysis and discussion among research institutions today.