
Special Collections Outside the Ivory Tower

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ABSTRACT

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS MATERIALS are not only to be found in academic libraries; they can be found in museum, public and national, and independent research libraries as well. The focus of this paper is on independent research libraries, especially those who are members of the Independent Research Library Association (IRLA).

IRLA members are eighteen private, nonprofit research and education institutions. Their focused collections are developed to support research rather than an academic curriculum. They serve scholars and researchers internationally with their eminent collections. They provide access on-site and increasingly online. They will be challenged in the future by the need for increased financial support, changes in scholarship and scholarly communications, and the need for increased visibility.

WHERE CAN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS BE FOUND OUTSIDE OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?

It is a mistake to assume that special collections of rare materials are only to be found on college or university campuses in the United States. Some of our richest sources of rare books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, prints, and other rare materials are to be found in at least three other types of libraries: museum libraries, public and national libraries, and independent research libraries. Museum libraries such as the Frick Art Reference Library and the library of the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Art Library in Washington, D.C., house and make accessible, among other materials, rare books, extensive photo study collections of art objects, rare art exhibition catalogs, rare photographic col-

lections, and important institutional archives relating to museum collecting since the nineteenth century. Some American public libraries are world famous for their extraordinary special collections. For example, the New York Public Library (NYPL) collections are as extensive as those of many national libraries. The Boston Public Library has many rare collections and is known for its Americana imprints, early children's books, and *Frankliniana*, to name three. The Detroit Public Library holds the Burton Historical Collection of material on the Northwest Territory. The San Francisco Public Library has called its Special Collections Department "The City's Museum of the Book."¹ There one can find collections on printing, binding, typography, and papermaking.

Our national libraries house significant rare materials as well. The Library of Congress has separate divisions for rare books and special collections, geography and maps, manuscripts, music, films and recorded sound, and prints and photographs. All of these divisions hold rare materials. The Smithsonian Institution Libraries' collections include 40,000 rare books and 1,800 manuscript groups. Even the National Library of Medicine has special collections of manuscripts and oral histories.

Independent research libraries as a category and as a group of North American special collections libraries are often less well known and less understood than special collections in academic libraries, museum libraries, and public and national libraries. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will be devoted to removing the "bushel," so to speak, from these libraries so that their "light" may shine for all to see. To do this, I will address the following five questions: 1. What and who are independent research libraries? 2. How is collection development different in independent research libraries? 3. Whom do these collections serve? 4. How have these libraries approached access, especially digital access? 5. What new risks do independent research libraries and their special collections face?

WHAT AND WHO ARE INDEPENDENT RESEARCH LIBRARIES?

Independent research libraries are just that: independent. They have no ties to federal or state governments. They are not a part of a state educational system. They are not a part of any college or university. They are private and independent and have their own charter or act of incorporation. In the eyes of the I.R.S. they are designated not-for-profit institutions. Gifts they receive are tax deductible. They derive major financial support from endowments and often must seek addition funds and gifts-in-kind to survive and prosper. They are governed by boards of trustees, and their chief executive officers report directly to these boards.

Their collections are of national or international significance and are not merely local or regional in character. They are "research collections of such depth and breadth as to be capable of supporting sustained research in a variety of interrelated subjects and fields" (IRLA, 1987, p. 2). They have

collections of the quality necessary to attract scholars and researchers from all over the world. They are committed to making these resources available to this extramural community even if they have an internal community to serve as well. All qualified readers will be served with “the kinds and amounts of service expected of major [academic] research libraries” (IRLA, 1987, p. 2). In general terms one would say independent research libraries are “organized research and education” institutions (IRLA, n.d., p. 1). Scholars are served not only by collections. They are also “served through fellowships, seminars, conferences, and institutes, as well as through such publications as catalogs, guides, monographs, journals, and books.”

In 1972, fifteen libraries that at the time saw themselves as fitting the profile described above founded the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA). They were all research libraries; they were all independent; and they were all supported through private funds. These fifteen were: the American Antiquarian Society, the American Philosophical Society, the John Crerar Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Linda Hall Library, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Huntington Library, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Newberry Library, the New York Academy of Medicine, the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library,² and the Virginia Historical Society.

In the mid- to late 1960s, a number of these libraries were “deemed ineligible for federal funding under the Higher Education Act of 1966 (HEA) and then threatened with classification as ‘private foundations’ after the tax reforms of 1969” (Bergman et al., 1996, p. 52). This meant that, even though they benefited from NEH funding, other federal funds for libraries under the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA, now LSTA) and the HEA were not available to them. In response to these troubles, IRLA was born. A lobbying effort led by Lawrence W. (Bill) Towner, Librarian of the Newberry Library, brought about the reversal of these interpretations. This effort was followed by congressional testimony made by Towner on behalf of independent research libraries and in support of the expansion of the appropriation for the NEH. “In this testimony by Towner before a congressional committee in 1973, the Independent Research Libraries Association made its first national public appearance” (Towner, 1993, p. 253). In his prepared statement, Towner spoke compellingly of the important special collections materials held by independent research libraries. He said,

We have placed on the table a package of materials—statistics and brief statements—from our individual libraries that we hope you will examine at your leisure. But, let me observe in summary, that we hold in our collections more than twenty million volumes, a large percentage of them rare and costly, and more than forty million unique manuscripts dealing with the history and literature of Western Civilization. These library materials represent a priceless asset of the American people,

gathered together through private efforts, and preserved and made available to scholars, whether academic or lay, throughout the nation . . . Finally, because our collections reach beyond the bounds of a single city, state, or region, and because our readers come from every state in the union, as well as from abroad, we are truly national libraries, serving a national clientele, and a national purpose. (Towner, 1993, pp. 256–257)

In 1976 when William S. Budington's article, "To Enlarge the Sphere of Human Knowledge': The Role of the Independent Research Library," appeared in *College & Research Libraries* there were still fifteen IRLA members. Today there are eighteen. Fourteen of the founding institutions remain members. The more recent additions to the group are the Hagley Museum and Library, the Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library, the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

The taxonomy of the origins of independent research libraries that Budington presents is useful to understand the diverse nature of the collections represented by IRLA members. The Library Company of Philadelphia came to be as a subscription library "at a time when the college libraries were unaccessible [*sic*] and unsuitable to general usage and public libraries were as yet undeveloped" (Budington, 1976, p. 302). IRLA libraries taking their roots in scientific societies are the American Philosophical Society, founded in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin, and the New York Academy of Medicine. Historical societies include the American Antiquarian Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New York Historical Society, and the Virginia Historical Society. The NYPL Research Libraries is the one example of a "free public service" (IRLA, n.d., p. 15) library although it is actually now a private, tax-exempt corporation. Libraries founded by collectors include the Huntington, the Morgan, and the Folger libraries. In 1887 a bequest of Walter Loomis Newberry brought the Newberry Library into being. Other bequests in the twentieth century made possible the Hagley Museum and Library, the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute, the Linda Hall Library, and the Winterthur.

HOW IS COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENT IN INDEPENDENT RESEARCH LIBRARIES?

Understanding the varied origins of independent research libraries is key to beginning to understand how the collections of these institutions were first developed, and how they continue to develop in the twenty-first century. Historically, the two scientific societies supported certain disciplines of study, namely the history of science, evolution, genetics, biochemistry, modern physics, and medicine. In the beginning the historical society libraries had a specific region's history to collect; however, now all five are national in scope. Those libraries founded by collectors had certain core collection

strengths that were formed by the interests and tastes of their founders. For example, the American Antiquarian Society, founded by the printer and collector Isaiah Thomas as a historical society, quickly became national in its scope due to the important Colonial American newspaper collections and imprints collected by Thomas and then given by him to the Society. Henry E. Huntington was an avid collector of British and American history and literature. When he built a library building for his book and manuscript collections on his estate in San Marino, California, and invited researchers to visit, it is not surprising that scholars in English and history were the first to arrive. Those institutions founded by benefactors generally had given areas of collecting established very early on in their histories. It is important to note that none of the independent research libraries formed their collections to support a degree-granting academic program of any kind.

Academic research libraries, including their special collections, develop their collections to support a curriculum and the specific research interests of their faculties and student bodies. Independent research libraries have no such constraints on their collecting interests. They do not have to sway to the changing winds of academic interests and curricular fads. They do not have to serve up what the public demands, as do public libraries. This is both a wonderful freedom and a risky venture. As noted above, in most cases the ways in which the independent research libraries were founded had an immense initial impact on how they developed their collections. For example, the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute began in 1983 as a small curatorial library of 20,000 volumes in support of the curatorial staff and specific collection strengths of the J. Paul Getty Museum. Set free from this agenda, and required to support research more generally in the history of world art, architecture, and archaeology, it has broadened its collecting and grown to more than 800,000 volumes, including significant holdings of rare and unique materials.

Over time, independent research libraries, especially those founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often driven by fiscal constraint have needed to do the opposite. They have sharpened their collecting focus to establish substantial expertise and identity in limited, specialized subject areas. For example, "The American Antiquarian Society, by 1900 discontinued its interest in anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, and ethnography. . . . The Newberry stopped trying to be a general reference library. . ." (Budington, 1976, p. 313). In another case, "the Library Company of Philadelphia, in the 1930s and 1940s was uncertain of its mission, . . . from 1943 to 1955 it was, in fact, operated by the Free Library of Philadelphia. Affiliation was considered with the University of Pennsylvania, the American Philosophical Society, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A new location next to the last-named institution was decided upon in 1960; in a cooperative mode, the society now houses the manuscript holdings of

both libraries, while the Library Company cares for the two rare book collections. A new role as a fully research-oriented library was finally arrived at by the company" (Budington, 1976, p. 313).

Each institution has its own unique way of making decisions regarding collection development. There is no one decision-making model of best practice or organizational structure across IRLA institutions, as one might find in academic libraries. Budgets do vary, but all seek appropriate gifts-in-kind to build on collection strengths and perhaps to begin new areas of collecting. Generally, collecting rare materials is primary to IRLA institutions. Collecting these rare materials is often opportunistic (just as it is for special collections departments in academic libraries). Adding supporting and reference materials is often secondary.

WHOM DO THESE COLLECTIONS SERVE?

By focusing on rare materials in specific areas and by building eminent, noncirculating collections, an IRLA institution "supplements" the special collections in academic libraries in a meaningful way. "In a very real sense, the collection thus shapes its readership, which tends to be not exclusively local but regional, national, international, and of high scholarly repute" (Budington, 1976, p. 300). Each institution has its own definition of "qualified reader," and its own specific requirements for gaining entrance. In some cases, that may include the general public, genealogists, and local history buffs. In general, scholars, scientists, and graduate students affiliated with academic and cultural institutions around the world and independent scholars with appropriate credentials may gain entrance. One or two official IDs are often required. This may seem a bit elitist, but in defense of the image in his prepared Congressional committee testimony, Lawrence W. Towner pointed out that IRLA libraries as a composite "hold some 13–15 million volumes and provide, annually, nearly one million research days free of charge" (Towner, 1993, p. 266).

New constituencies sought by some IRLA institutions and actively served by all their Web sites are secondary teachers and students, undergraduate students, journalists, writers, artists, and families. All exhibitions sponsored by IRLA libraries are open to the public. Many are free. For years the Newberry Library through its Research and Education Program has collaborated with a consortium of liberal arts colleges in the Midwest to bring undergraduates to the Newberry as a part of a seminar for which each student receives degree credit at his or her home institution. The American Antiquarian Society has established a special fellowship program for creative and performing artists and writers, including filmmakers, "whose goals are to produce imaginative, non-formulaic works dealing with pre-twentieth-century American history. Successful applicants are those whose work is for the general public rather than for academic or educational audiences."³

HOW HAVE THESE LIBRARIES APPROACHED ACCESS, INCLUDING DIGITAL ACCESS?

The American Antiquarian Society's innovative fellowship program for creative and performing artists and writers is but one example of how independent research libraries have attracted readers to their collections and made them accessible to those at a distance lacking funds for travel. Many IRLA libraries have offered research fellowships (both pre- and post-doctorate) supported by grant funds received from NEH, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, other foundations, and private donors. This support is seen as crucial for the health and vigorous use of these noncirculating libraries. If researchers who need to use the materials in the collections cannot come for economic reasons, the libraries' natural constituencies do not have access, and they are not served. The Folger, American Antiquarian Society, Huntington, and Newberry libraries (the subgroup of IRLA known as "FAHN") have led the way in establishing extensive fellowship and educational programs to bring readers to their reading rooms. Print publications have also been an important way in which IRLA libraries have provided access to their collections.

In regard to digital access, now all IRLA libraries have Web sites that may be used by their constituencies and the general public. The IRLA organization also has a Web site that hot links to all member Web sites. Nearly all have library catalogs available on the Web, and those who do not are working on it. IRLA libraries have been slower than academic libraries to automate their catalogs. This has been due to limited financial resources and to a lack of technical infrastructure, in some cases. However, as a result, they have not suffered any negative consequences of being on the "bleeding edge" of information technology. As they have developed their online catalogs, most have contributed catalog records to RLIN to make their resources better known. (Fifteen of eighteen members of IRLA are members of RLG.) Six contribute finding aids for manuscript and archival collections marked up in Encoded Archival Description (EAD) to the RLG Archival Resources database. And in California, the Getty and the Huntington have contributed these finding aids to the Online Archive of California, a database within the California Digital Library.

Now some digital content is coming out of IRLA libraries and being made available as a part of RLG Cultural Materials, a database of digital images and text to which any library may subscribe. The American Antiquarian Society, the Huntington Library, the Linda Hall Library, and the New York Academy of Medicine are all RLG Cultural Materials Alliance participants, and their collections are represented in the RLG Cultural Materials database by some digital material.

It has been difficult for IRLA libraries to keep up with academic libraries in making digital products available commercially to their readers. These products include online indexing and abstracting services as well as full-text

journals and e-books. The readers that come to IRLA libraries on a sabbatical or research leave from the academic community are accustomed to accessing these resources in the libraries in their home institutions. They are disappointed when they find they will not have the same level of access during their leave. Hopefully, this will prove to be a temporary problem as IRLA libraries analyze their budgets and find ways to make available the digital products basic to the disciplines they collect and required by the scholars who use their collections.

WHAT FUTURE CHALLENGES DO INDEPENDENT RESEARCH LIBRARIES FACE?

The greatest strength of the independent research library is its freedom to be creative in its programming. It answers to no one but itself. Towner spoke of this in his 1973 testimony: "our independence and our freedom from the constraints of parental institutions allow us a greater flexibility and opportunity to innovate, within the limits of our means, than otherwise would be the case" (Towner, 1993, p. 257). This strength is also the independent research library's greatest challenge. Since it is free, it has no one to take care of it in hard times. It must be self-reliant and resourceful in finding ways to fund everything innovative it may wish to do. In the current economic downturn, endowments of all nonprofits have declined, and as a consequence, hard choices must be made about what may or may not be accomplished. Since digital projects are expensive, some may be placed on hold. Furthermore, while the stock market and endowments have declined, the prices of rare materials have not. This will surely have a negative impact on acquisition of new materials. IRLA libraries will need to depend to an even greater extent on donors of both monetary gifts and gifts-in-kind to sustain and build their collections and programs. The economic decline is likely to follow a four- to six-year cycle, during which time IRLA libraries should not be tempted to spend a larger portion of their endowment income than they currently do. A large dip into endowments would only lead to serious financial troubles down the road. Furthermore, if the current economic difficulties lead to cuts of special collections departments in academic libraries, the role of IRLA libraries in the production of new knowledge from primary source materials will become even more critical.

Following on money, the second most serious external challenge facing independent research libraries may be changes in the way scholarship in the humanities is done and reported. Certain kinds of scholarship have come in and out of fashion, but, heretofore, collections at independent research libraries have been flexible and allowed for new uses. For example, as bibliography and textual analysis went out of fashion in English departments across the country, the history of the book and the study of publishing history came in. New uses were found for the same old rare books and manuscripts. If scholars come to rely on digital collections for their research

and if older collections of rare materials are seen as lacking the necessary diversity to accurately reflect what or who is being studied, then the use of these older collections may finally become irrelevant and go out of fashion. The need for originals may never actually go away completely, but the group of those who need them may just get smaller and smaller. If the scholarly monograph ceases to exist as we currently know it, or if scholarly communication changes radically and begins to have an impact on promotion and tenure policies at major universities, then the motivation for scholars to write books may go away. Faced with this scenario, the mission of the independent research library may be forced to change.

There is one more challenge: invisibility. Even though some IRLA libraries have been around for a long time, their names are not exactly household words, perhaps with the exception of the New York Public Library. In order to attract scholars and donors to their doors, these libraries will need to do even more to get the message of what they do out in the world more generally. They will need to find ways to achieve levels of name recognition that are consistent with the international stature of their collections. Whether this is done as a group or singly, all will benefit from a public and academic world (including academic librarians) that is more knowledgeable about who they are and what they do. Establishing Web sites is merely a beginning.

Finally, presuming there will always be scholars who wish to create new knowledge from the hands-on study of unique materials, and presuming they will want to "publish" this new knowledge in some format or other, independent research libraries should be able to thrive. Through the development of dynamic collections and innovative programs; the cultivation and conscientious stewardship of adequate financial support; and increased, positive visibility; independent research libraries may claim the mission of "research and education." They need not become merely museums of the book.

NOTES

1. See *The City's Museum of the Book* (1985).
2. The New York Public Library is both a public library and an independent research library as the NYPL Research Libraries are privately endowed.
3. American Antiquarian Society Web site. Retrieved December 14, 2002, from <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/artistfellowship.htm>, 1.

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