

# The Genesis of Cornell University's Collection of Regional History

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Cornell University  
Collection of Regional History

IF Cornell University is considered as an integral part of the surrounding region, and its development as a part of the history of that region, then its collecting of regional material began with its inception. At that time, its founders and trustees placed the minutes of their first meetings to one side for preservation. Although these men had no thought of the regional value of the minutes, letters, petitions, memoranda, and odd scraps which were tied neatly in packets with legal tape, they did think that the papers represented an unusual and possibly great event which was taking place in and would benefit the people, particularly the common people, of central New York. None of them felt more strongly about this than did Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White. The former considered his role in the founding of Cornell University as one of the greatest honors ever bestowed upon a man, the culmination of all his successes which were reached through grievous toil and suffering.<sup>1</sup> President 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> Both were building and sacrificing with tremendous enjoyment for posterity, and both felt themselves to be rather unusual men, but both also had a sober respect for the judgment of posterity. White even wrote a history of himself to prove to his friends and to those who would follow him that all his life he had "sought to fight the good fight."<sup>3</sup> But beyond the reach of their words were the official papers which revealed in brief outline their particular ambitions and acts to do good for society and posterity.

Neither Cornell nor White cared to be remembered merely as an "Honored Founder," as one large statue facing another across the width of a campus, as the author or co-author or the presiding chairman over the writing of official documents. These did not re-

<sup>1</sup> Cornell to Mary Ann Cornell, Jan. 17, 1869, *People's College Papers*, Collection of Regional History.

<sup>2</sup> White to Joseph Harris, Feb. 24, 1868, *Trustees' Minutes*, C.R.H.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (New York, 1905), Vol. 2, p. 509.

veal the whole story — the genesis of the University in the People's College movement; the yearning of one man to do some social good with a fortune he thought his family did not need; the long pondered dream of another man to erect a modern university in central New York; the deep influence of the European educational system on his thought; the contacts with Europe and England which enriched the faculty and the library; the daily struggles and triumphs over the problems of finance; the acquisition and disposal of the University's western lands; the expressions of emotion by the founders, the faculty, the students, the people of the region, and all those who supported or attacked the "Cornell idea"; and many other factors, some of them barely perceptible at the time, which helped to mold the University. And then, there were other things; the telegraph or the diplomatic career, for instance. Cornell thought he had made history in his work with the telegraph, and while White was not "a maker of kings," he did think he had contributed something toward making peace between nations. Official documents could not reveal the complexities of their lives, the uniqueness they felt in themselves. So, like other mechanics, farmers, school teachers, politicians, and diplomats of the region, they assiduously saved their papers, not altogether because of professional or business necessity, or the desire to save treasures for the grandchildren, as White said,<sup>4</sup> but because they were also reaching out for the posterity of which the grandchildren were a part.

Ezra Cornell died in 1874. His papers, like those of many other men of the region, were saved by his family and divided among his descendants. Many still remain in private hands. After White's death in 1918, his former student and devoted friend, Professor George Lincoln Burr of the Cornell history department, placed White's collected papers in the anteroom of the library vault, arranged some of them alphabetically, and left the others in their original small file boxes. Although Professor Charles E. Hull grew quite agitated over the waste of his colleague's abilities in the sorting of cancelled checks,<sup>5</sup> he, too, caught the contagion, brought together Ezra Cornell papers, and spent years in making itineraries and detailed notes in the smallest of handwritings and the smallest of notebooks. Having become interested in local historical materials, Hull went even farther, and made pleas in the Ithaca newspa-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Bainton, Roland H., *George Lincoln Burr His Life and Selections From His Writings*, edited by Lois Oliphant Gibbons (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1943), p. 88.

per for their preservation and their donation to the Cornell University Library.

In time the papers of a number of men who had played significant roles in the development of the University slowly gravitated toward the anteroom of the vault. There they remained, much in the condition of their arrival, since the University Library was neither equipped nor supported to handle such special collections of manuscripts. Meanwhile the administration continued to preserve its official records. Broad academic policies guaranteed the preservation of all these papers in their entirety, although they remained unprocessed, unpublicized, scattered about the campus in various depositories, and almost inaccessible to the world of scholars. As elsewhere, a decided research interest had to assert itself before a demand could be made, or warranted, for a large scale program of processing and making available a mass of source material which was already housed and was open to discovery by a really determined and imaginative scholar. The same held true for the formulation and promotion of an active and systematic collecting program. Thus, although certain members of the Cornell family as well as relatives of some of Ezra Cornell's closest friends, business associates, and notable contemporaries resided in Ithaca, there was no official attempt to attract or secure their family papers. Since there was no official program for collecting, preservation or use, people had little incentive to give their papers to the University. Fortunately, the local historical society, which at the time seemed the logical agent to gather and preserve such material, counted among its membership Professor Hull and other local citizens and scholars of sound historical appreciation. Even then there were interims where for the lack of space and qualified judges papers of the greatest research value were refused or overlooked and consequently destroyed.

As the young and vigorous University expanded, its agricultural economists, scholars, scientists, cultural leaders, extension workers, and other faculty and staff members functioned in an ever widening sphere of regional influence. Research interest, particularly as it concerned the role of the common man, began to focus on specialized aspects of the region's history. Professor Alexander M. Drummond developed a State-wide program of play writing around local legends, while Professor Harold Thompson gathered and wrote about folklore. Local dialects, Indian cultures, folk music and the collecting of secondary sources for the region attracted the attention of still other professors. But the emphasis on the gathering

of any quantity of manuscript evidence centered largely in the department of agricultural economics where, during the early thirties, various professors collected farm records for their own research. Although highly specialized, temporary, and without official recognition in the matter of funds, these latter projects indicated the growing awareness of the potential research value of the average citizen's old records and of the need to hunt them out of their attic habitats if that value were ever to be realized. This awareness was further stimulated by the surveys, guides, and catalogs made of little known historical records by workers in NYA and WPA projects.

In 1936, Professor Paul Wallace Gates became a member of the history department. Long interested in the history of the disposal of the Public Domain, he soon began a particular study of Cornell University's Wisconsin pine lands. In searching out material for this study, Professor Gates discovered long files of correspondence and other rich source materials which had long been buried among the University archives, forgotten in a vault which was located in the sub-basement of a girls' dormitory. Since there were no facilities for their use by scholars, he had perforce to work on the papers at a makeshift table in the dark, airless vault, and to climb over and around icy or hot pipes as he poked into high, concealed corners for additional, dust-covered pieces.

In following his various leads, Professor Gates hunted for other collections, principally in the Midwest, which related to the activities of men from this region who had been involved in the handling of the Wisconsin pine lands and in the investment of regional capital in the land and lumbering business. A number of these highly valuable collections, along with supplementary newspapers, were acquired by him for the University. It was the first time that an attempt had been made to locate manuscript materials which dealt with the history of both the University and the region. This was the kind of positive manuscript hunting which President White and Professor Burr had engaged in many years before in Europe, and it carried on the liberal spirit in which White had established the history department and the library.

Shortly thereafter, Professor Gates proposed to President Edmund Ezra Day that a research center in the history of up-State New York and the region it influenced be created at Cornell. He pointed out that although Cornell University had the chief graduate school of the region and was doing more graduate work in regional problems than ever before, a student concerned with the

region's historical past had to search for his manuscript sources in Albany, New York, or Washington. The University needed a collector, some money for the purchase of "out-of-the-way" manuscripts, and a special room to serve as a depository; with these "Cornell could go far in establishing itself as a great research center in the history of New York."

Such an idea appealed to those members of the administration and faculty who were interested in regional relationships or history. Still wider interest was aroused when Dr. Lester J. Cappon, fresh from the triumph of having built the already well-known regional collection at the University of Virginia, gave a Goldwin Smith lecture on historical records and university archival administration. A faculty committee with Professor George H. Sabine, Dean of the Graduate School, as its chairman began to formulate a program for the creation of a special collection of original historical and cultural New York State source material. A Rockefeller grant for \$18,000 was obtained to finance the project in part and with the understanding that the University would assume full responsibility at the end of five years or thereabouts. During those years the University appropriated funds to supplement the grant and to cover operating expenses, shelving, fluorescent lighting, boxes, the printing of reports, an electrocopy machine, and other items. On July 1, 1948, the University accepted the responsibility for the now flourishing Collection of Regional History and incorporated it as a department of the University Library.

In September 1942, Whitney R. Cross, then a graduate student in American history at Harvard and with a research interest in the region, was appointed curator. Three years later, having established an administrative set-up which combined his own ideas with the best he could find elsewhere, having made wide contacts in the field, and having collected materials that were more than significant and sufficient enough to merit the publication of the first published report of the curator, Dr. Cross left for a teaching position. The writer, who had been an assistant in history to Professor Gates and had had table space just outside Regional History's door, became the acting curator with mingled feelings of trepidation, determined expectations, and an enthusiasm which could be daunted by spiders.

An unexpected call took Dr. Cross away while I was returning from the manuscript division at Albany. His capable secretary, upon whom I was depending for advice and solace, had obtained a long awaited permit to return to her home in Honolulu, and was frantically packing. Unaware of these developments and viewing a

blurred world because of the drops put in my eyes the hour before, I strolled in at ten o'clock the next morning. Two weeks previously, the Collection had been in the neatest of order with the latest acquisition just disappearing into manuscript boxes. Now the Collection was deserted and apparently the scene of recent violence. Half-hidden in piles of crumpled old newspapers, the boots of what promised to be a corpse protruded from beneath the long work table. Near by lay an old felt hat, badly crushed by some blunt instrument, several antiquated bird cages, rusted skirt hoops, and a knife — a paper knife, I later discovered. Packets of letters and all sorts of odd scraps spilled from numerous sagging hampers, cartons, and wooden boxes. Dr. Cross's latest acquisition had arrived as he was departing and had to be processed. The cages and other props were for the drama department. Almost immediately several thousand copies of Dr. Cross's *First Annual Report of the Curator* arrived to be prepared for the mail, and then came a great deluge of local weekly newspapers from the upper campus. At the same time, there came over me an irresistible desire to go out and try my hand at the collecting game.

During the following years, the atmosphere of my introduction to the Collection of Regional History remained a continuing reality. In an expanding manuscript division where office, work, and reading rooms are only sections separated by low partitions, and where the staff is inadequate in number, the incoming collections and those under processing spread in all directions, with visiting research workers fitting into odd corners and with neatness as a rare manifestation that seems a delusion of grandeur.

I cannot write of Dr. Cross's experiences during the first three years of Regional History's development, although they seemed to resemble mine. Gas-rationing did confine his collecting trips to trains and buses, and proved a serious handicap where prospective donors in isolated areas were involved. After almost two years on the job, I acquired an old Ford which the graduate students nicknamed the "Rabbit," and which transported a good many tons of historical loot before its bulging doors began to fall off. Although trucks must be hired to carry large acquisitions, a car is indispensable for any one engaged in the profession of collecting manuscripts. Funds spent for work in the field bring many more times the quantity of material than funds spent for purchases. A small fund is necessary, however, for purchase in special cases and in order to acquire those fragments of units already gathered which at some time in the past went to dealers.



In October 1942, Regional History opened in quarters fitted out in a departmental library in Boardman Hall. A substantial number of the account books gathered by the professors of agricultural economics and several manuscript collections from the University Library and various departments broke the bareness of the shelves. Three-quarters of this departmental library was reserved for graduate students in history and government. Regional History soon filled its own section, then two of the remaining three, then an attic space as large again as the library, and then any vacant or near vacant space it could wangle. Succeeding waves of graduate students eyed its very removable door with apprehension and declaimed vociferously that they would not budge an inch even while they enthusiastically participated in building its accessions and demonstrated a possessive pride in its growth.

More disturbing, in a way, than the problem of space is that of weight. With the arrival of the first collection to be measured in terms of tons, the architect warned of dangers of weight distribution and additional weight on a floor which was supported by slender iron pillars. Below is a large lecture hall. Seemingly solid floor is conducive to a feeling of "*That* can't happen to us," and it is the professors with classes beneath who inquire at the beginning of each term as to our immediate prospects of acquiring tonnage. The problems of space and weight will be solved during 1952 — the latest figure — with the removal of Regional History into spacious and proper quarters in the New York State College of Agriculture and Home Economics Library, which is now under construction.

Six general types of source materials were to be collected, processed, and made available to research workers and scholars: files of newspapers and magazines printed in up-State New York and adjacent areas; business and industrial records; family papers; those relating to the development of settlement and political units; those relating to the development of education and religion; and memorabilia of cultural history, including broadsides, programs, folk music, and other regional ephemera. Any changes in broad policies were to be considered by an advisory committee which, then as now, consisted of scholars in a number of fields and the Director of the University Library. In the best tradition of the University and as a challenge to creative ability, the curator was given a freedom of action to build the Collection.

The solution of the problem of how to acquire these materials lay largely in the advantageous situation of the newly-created man-

uscript division. As a department of Cornell University, it could appeal to faculty and staff members, to a large and active group of extension workers, and to a wide regional circle of alumni and students for advice and aid in making contact with potential donors. In the matters of determining what periods and aspects of regional history needed attention and of judging the relative research values of primary materials, the curator could seek the advice of eminent scholars on the faculty. This kind of assistance is rendered so modestly that I, for one, tend to take for granted its generosity and importance.

Newspaper notices, publicity through university publications and over the radio, and circulars were used to attract attention to the new project. An occasional exhibition of manuscripts or a tea was held, and talks by the curator were given before historical societies and other groups. Wide newspaper publicity has an unfortunate immediate effect of inviting argumentative letters from astrologers or of stimulating gifts of old-fashioned nursing bottles. Appeals to the public at large throw the initiative of taking the first step in the donation process upon the possessor of worthwhile papers and are not successful on a large scale. But sooner or later, attics and storerooms do become problems, and occasionally a stranger walks into our quarters with a carton of old manuscripts and handing us a clipping or circular printed some years before says, "That is what brought me here."

Field work by the curator is, of course, the necessity which steadily brings in the source material. Beyond that, and of great importance, is the interest of that group known as "Friends of the Collection." Farmers, doctors, secretaries, genealogists, business men, lawyers, mechanics, politicians, clerks, engineers, housewives, collectors, salesmen, alumni, graduate students, undergraduates, professors, staff and administrative members — they are everywhere and not always residents of the region. In general, they form the prototype with whose papers and historical past the Collection is concerned.

Their leads and suggestions may not prove immediately fruitful, but in casual or purposeful conversations they pass along their conceptions of our activities and make them seem living, promising, useful in one way or another, sometimes valuable to the causes of American self-understanding and democracy, sometimes amusing and very odd, and, first and last, real. Strengthened perhaps by a natural instinct to collect, this interest often leads our friends to



surprising lengths. It led one genteel business woman in broad daylight into purloining trash from her neighbor's ashcan. On leaving her home one morning, our unnamed heroine, secretary to a Cornell administrator, noticed a small, old-fashioned, red leather valise in an ashcan. Looking more closely, she saw the nameplate engraving — *Ezra Cornell*. It contained ten diaries and a considerable number of letters concerning one of his business ventures. The scholar who had acquired those valuable Cornell items had died, and no one knew of their existence. This same interest, alert to research needs and professionally expressed, brings us regional material from distant parts. Such was the case recently when Miss Charlotte Erickson, a graduate student in American history on a fellowship in England, took the time to gather for us an excellent collection of immigrant letters.

Almost every one — a casual seat companion on a long bus ride, for instance, be it housewife, business man, or a young sailor on leave — responds with quick curiosity to the idea of the Collection. This response is so unaffected and common as to make this particular curator hope altruistically, if sacrilegiously, for the sake of future collectors and research workers that none of these kind people take to keeping diaries and hoarding scraps of "anything that was written about what is happening for it might contain some information for the research worker." These contacts offer, as do our friends, some good definite leads and many suggestions of hodgepodge value. To track down the latter would require investigations by troops of collectors in endless time while larger collections of immediately useful material stoked sacrificial bonfires. When one arrives too late to salvage more than a part of a major collection, little consolation is to be found in the fact that no institution could ever find room for all the fine material as yet undiscovered. Those papers 1810-1853 which produced good pulp in the mill, and those letters A-K which were cleaned out of the old pigeonholed file are the ghosts that haunt collectors, mouthing secrets about the past that never can be heard.

Particular emphasis is given to the building of substantial units of research material. Searches are made for families who have lived and been active for many generations in one community. Their papers often suggest provocative patterns of historical development, and become the nucleus for such a unit. One unit from the Utica area contains the collections of a number of related families who during the nineteenth century were active in business, agricultural, political, and social life on local, regional, and national planes. In-

teresting and significant conclusions as to local and national relationships should result from studies based on these papers. Other units concern specific subjects; canals, education, railroads, temperance and so on.

Graduate students who are deep in their dissertations have a gratifying and stimulating habit of wondering out loud about collections which might exist and which, if acquired by Regional History, might solve their most frustrating research problems. Interested in the farm credit problem in the Midwest, Mr. Allan Bogue quietly persisted in wondering about papers of the Davenport family of Bath, New York. Before long, we acquired them.

One afternoon at an American Historical Association meeting, Dr. Neil McNall, a former graduate student in American history, started little queries in a booming voice about papers relating to the activities of the Farmers Loan and Trust Company in the last century. In turn, I made queries and contacts, and finally located what remained of the company's records in a bank in New York City. After making a detailed inventory of the records, I was permitted to bring them back to Cornell. McNall then used them for his shortly to be published *An Agricultural History of the Genesee Valley, 1790-1860*. The company records are a part of another and larger unit relating to investments over a longer period in and beyond the region.

The Davenport Collection, Mr. Bogue's research on certain aspects of its contents, and anticipated interpretations of it and related collections illustrate rather well some of the end products, the long term results, to be expected from Regional History's activities — of its role to gather and make available to research workers the papers of families and individuals from up-State New York and adjacent areas so that the contributions of these people to local and national life may be analyzed and evaluated. The Davenports invested millions of dollars in farm mortgages in the Midwest and exerted considerable political and social influence there. As residents of Bath, they were substantially involved in local business, and were pillars of support for social and cultural causes. Their interests in industrial developments spread from New York through Pennsylvania to the Midwest. One member of the family ran for the governorship of New York and was a United States senator. Like other Americans of up-State New York who helped to build it and the country, but did not take spectacularly to politics, a way of life, temperance, or any social cause, or innovation, or invention, or business, and become so to speak headline

material, the Davenports were until recently overlooked by historians. Historical interpretations and evaluations of the activities of these Americans are still waiting on their papers which are buried in attics, barns, and the quiet offices which carry on the slow business of unsettled estates.

The Davenport Collection illustrates another fact common to a greater or lesser degree of the majority of the collections and sets of papers held by Regional History. The papers are those of individuals, families, or institutions — Cornell University, for instance — whose activities were integral parts of regional life. Yet our analyses of them show that these people and groups often played large and vital roles in the development and life of other regions. Consequently, the word "regional" becomes more and more descriptive of the collecting range rather than of what is collected.

When Regional History was first established, it was suggested that a course in regional and New York history be offered in conjunction with the activities of the new department. Given by an instructor who might devote considerable time to the study of regional problems, such a course was considered as one step toward the creation of an Institute of Regional Research.

This past year the history department invited me to give a course in New York history during the summer session. Despite the handicaps of no textbooks, of the lack of continuity between the published articles and monographs available for readings, and my own concern over a new course and interpretations, the experiment proved most interesting. The small group of advanced students, who as a majority intended to teach New York history through social studies, took enthusiastically to the idea of interpreting history through contemporary sources, of learning the techniques of using primary sources, and of using them for term papers. Having the class or seminar in Regional History's quarters gave an added fillip which made the group a self-conscious unit with an entity beyond the class. Their rather frequent expressions of surprise over many aspects and periods in the history of New York showed a common leap in knowledge from national history and recent local government to the traditional plane of grist mills, first settlers, and the always present Indian with very little between. The students were the more surprised because New York seemed so intimate and well-known, and its history their special heritage.

Without considering this recent experiment, the most significant service rendered so far by the Collection has been its part in stimu-

lating regional studies by advanced students. Here, again, its position as a university manuscript division is the determining factor in its success. It brings the research worker and his manuscripts to interpretive terms through the guidance given by the faculty and through the aid offered by the rich resources of a progressive library.

In 1948, the Collection became a department of the Cornell University Library under its director, Dr. Stephen A. McCarthy. The cooperation resulting from Dr. McCarthy's appreciation for its aims as a collecting agency and an expanding research center, and his understanding of its always present problems as to needed space, staff, and equipment has been of enormous aid in furthering those aims and in answering the current problems. In the final analysis, the inception, existence, and growth of the Collection of Regional History are products of the liberal tradition fostered by the University and expressed through the interests of its library and faculty.