Some Changes in the Handling of Business Records at Baker Library

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Baker Library

FROM attendance at several meetings of library and archival associations I have noticed that their programs are often devoted to testimonials of the "we do this in this manner" variety. Although it might be possible to poke fun at these in the mass, their popularity reflects both the experimental nature of many procedures in this field and a real desire on the part of members to learn how others are meeting problems which, in one form or another, are also theirs. At the risk of adding another to these testimonials, I should like to tell of a few developments which time and necessity seem to have led us into at Baker Library. Thus the following notes modify the procedures described by Professor Cole in his "Business Manuscripts: Collection, Handling, and Cataloging," which appeared in the *Library Quarterly* in 1938.

The July 1952 *American Archivist* carried my article, "The Appraisal of Older Business Records," in the course of which I described briefly the holdings of Baker Library in this field. For those who may not have seen this account, or have forgotten it, I would restate a few points here. The Baker Library has been collecting the original records of business firms since the mid-twenties, and its Manuscript Division now holds the equivalent of some 60,000 volumes, with special emphasis on the fields of New England textiles, shipping, and railroads. The rate of collecting has slowed down of late (partly for reasons of space), and we are now devoting more time to arranging and consolidating what we have. There is plenty of work ahead, for some of the unbound materials accompanying the collections received in the late twenties and thirties are still stored in crates. Lately we have attempted to dispose of one or two collections, a subject which I shall consider later in this paper. We are still actively interested, however, when a collection that promises to be useful for research is called to our attention. In

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1954, for instance, we added the records of the Faulkner & Colony Manufacturing Co., a family concern that has been making flannels in Keene, N. H., since 1815.

But time and necessity do have a way of bringing about changes. Since ours is largely a one-man operation (of late years I have had only a student assistant), some shortcuts are in order. Some of these may interest others faced with handling large amounts of material with a minimum of help. For instance, we no longer attempt to put a bookplate in each volume or to record information as to the donor on the bottom of the first page. These were carryovers from library practice and are not really necessary to the operation of a closed collection of manuscripts. Like many manuscript depositories, we rely on a descriptive inventory, which is kept on sheets in the case of our large collections and on cards for the smaller ones. This is given to a prospective user, who notes down the volume numbers he needs. Thus a simple label, recording, for our larger collections, only the name of the firm (often abbreviated) and the volume number, is enough. The same information is placed on the back of the first page, in case the label should fall off the cover.

If a person is doing extensive research on a large collection, we may allow him to visit the shelves. But even here the descriptive inventory provides an adequate guide. We still group our materials in such broad divisions as general administrative records (journals, ledgers, cash books), purchases (including inventories and invoices), production (including labor), sales, and correspondence. The arrangement under each of these headings is by series, and of course the order within a series is generally chronological. If no additions to a collection are expected, there is no reason why a consecutive numbering scheme cannot be adopted. But if it is likely that more material will be discovered, and even perhaps for the sake of logic, the use of letters as well as numbers is helpful. Thus the primary series of journals in a given collection might be numbered AB 1 — AB 10, a secondary series AC 1 — AC 5, the primary series of ledgers BA 1 — BA 6, and so on. It is usual to list each volume in a series separately; but, if the series is complete, a general entry might be enough. Such an entry might be: AB 1 — AB 10, Journals, 1812-1848. It is true that this would make it more difficult to find a journal of a particular date; but, because the volumes are arranged on the shelves by date to begin with, the task would not be great. And since some collections may be used but once in 10 or 20 years, a more detailed listing is perhaps not justified.

Most manuscript custodians have long since given up the separate listing of letters unless the importance of the material justifies such a calendaring. It is generally desirable to unfold letters; occasionally in business records, however, one finds a great mass of such letters docket-filed, or folded lengthwise, with a notation as to the sender and the date at the top of the fold. If the paper is in good condition, I see no reason why these cannot be left as is for the time being. In fact, by unfolding, one loses the convenience for reference of the notation so carefully inscribed by the clerk. I think of one such collection where a dozen boxes or small trunks were cleverly constructed by the company to hold a double row of these docket-filed letters apiece. They are neatly arranged and are separated and labeled by months, and I see nothing to be gained by rearranging them.

Mention of these boxes reminds me that the cardboard containers developed by the National Records Management Council and used by Leahy and Co., among others, make the shelving of unbound materials much easier. One of these will hold up to about a third of a file drawer of both standard-size and legal-size folders. They are sturdy, yet not so heavy when filled but that a man (I do not say a woman) can lift them from a shelf without much difficulty.

I now come to a procedure which is, in some sense at least, a shortcut to acquiring space. Baker Library has in the past few years turned over two collections to institutions that we thought could make better use of them, and has returned two others to institutions that lent them to us. We feel that, if a collection relates wholly to another region, if it has not been used in our library, and if there is an institution in the other region ready to make use of it, we should send it there. This does not mean that we are becoming provincial; each case has to be decided on its merits. Where donor restrictions exist, such a transfer may well be out of the question. But we like to think that the records of the Grahamton Cotton Mill will be more useful at the University of Kentucky than here, and that those of the Albert Dibblee enterprises in midnineteenth-century California will be in more demand at the Bancroft than at the Baker Library.

The return of a loan is, of course, a different matter, even though, when the transfer was made, there seemed little likelihood it would ever be recalled. Often at the time of the loan the transferring institution did not have room for, or much interest in, business records; the recall of such material therefore indicates an increased interest in business history, for which we may all be grateful. We now have a card form, which we like to have donors sign, stating that, if there has been no claim for the return of material after 20 years, it becomes the property of the library. This seems only fair, since the receiving institution has often gone to considerable expense to organize, box, and shelve the records; and for this reason too it is customary for the institution newly receiving the material to pay the cost of transportation and perhaps a part of the packing costs. In two cases in which we returned records (the Briggs-Stabler papers to the Maryland Historical Society and the Shaw papers to the Missouri Botanical Garden) the material had not been with us 20 years, and we were glad to learn that plans are on foot at both places to make the papers more immediately useful than they had been with us.

The last, and possibly new, procedure that I shall describe relates to a problem frequently avoided but one which many manuscript custodians must face. I refer to the question of philatelic values in records, not so much stamps as stampless covers. The problem was called to my attention partly because, as I mentioned above, we have some unbound materials still in crates, stored in a tunnel that is used as a passageway. From time to time I would notice that crates had been broken open, and I could only surmise that persons unknown were hoping to find stamps. It would appear that, unless custodians of large masses of correspondence meet this problem with some sort of plan, unauthorized persons will solve it their own way, with considerable damage to record values in the process.

We were assisted toward a solution by the presence in the neighborhood of a retired gentleman who had become interested in dealing in stamps and other types of collections. We knew him to be a thoroughly reliable person, one who could be trusted to respect record values. He had acquired a considerable knowledge of philately, had contacts with dealers, and was willing to devote many hours of labor in return for a reasonable commission. Unless such a person can be found I would not recommend that the job be attempted.

So keen and so long-continued has been the interest in postage stamps that few of them are to be found on letters by the time they reach libraries. Envelopes came into general use in the early eighteen-fifties, only a few years after the introduction of stamps, and envelopes are generally discarded. In the period between 1847 — when stamps were first used in this country — and the adoption of envelopes, the address continued to be placed on the back of the letter sheet itself. Occasionally stamps are to be found here, but the procedure for handling them would be the same as that for the stampless covers, described below. Incidentally, the value of early postage stamps is usually higher if they are still affixed to the envelopes or letter sheets. Revenue stamps are more often found than postage stamps; the lower denominations have little value, but higher ones sometimes do; and they can usually be detached without injury to the document, if done by a qualified person. As I have indicated, however, the common situation is for the manuscript custodian to find that all stamps have been removed, sometimes forcibly, with injury to both the stamp and the document. Occasionally donors will ask for the return of any stamps that may have escaped their notice. Sometimes the library itself may have been given stamp collections and may wish to add to them. But, where the library does not wish to keep stamps, and where there are no restrictions on the handling of a given collection, I do not see why it cannot dispose of them to its benefit.[2]

Of late there has been considerable interest in stampless covers, and these are more likely to be found in the collections in the Baker Library. I need hardly recall that these are the address sides of the folded letter sheets that were in general use before envelopes were introduced. Nor do I need to go into the history of the various types of covers, for there are books devoted to this.[3] Enough to say that manuscript cancellations appeared in the late eighteenth century and were later followed by the stamped town name, at first between two straight lines, then in ovals and circles. Of course rarity determines value here, and the very early ones (for the larger cities) are the more valuable, or ones for post offices no longer in existence, or Territorial (as opposed to State) cancellations.[4] A figure indicating the amount of postage paid usually appears in the upper right corner; this too was at first hand-written and later affixed by means of a stamp and pad. Additional notations, such as "Free," "Paid," "Ship," and "Single" (indicating sheet), or the postmaster's name, also add to the value.

One peculiarity of stampless covers, which makes the problem of realizing values simpler, is that the back of the address sheet is often blank. It can therefore in most cases be removed from the letter without damaging the record value. It should be noted that

[2] The editor realizes that the subject of disposal of stamps and stampless covers is controversial; he will welcome further discussion of the question in this magazine.

[3] Harry M. Konwiser, ed., *U. S. Stampless Cover Catalog* (Van Dahl Publications, Inc., Albany, Oreg., 1952).

[4] E. N. Sampson, *U. S. Territorial Postmark Catalog* (Lynnfield Center, Mass., 1950).

in our library these covers are found in the records of business firms no longer in existence; that the addressee is known; and that the date and name of the sender invariably appear on the letter itself. Furthermore, these are in many cases very extensive files of a rather routine nature. One often finds that the address sheets have been removed already, perhaps to reduce the bulk, or because of the scarcity of paper. The custom which business firms developed of noting the sender and date on the top of the address sheet (the docket file method, described above) preserves the philatelic value of the detached sheet.

In actual practice only a small proportion of the stampless covers have sufficient value to justify removal; thus plenty of examples of this form of address are sure to remain in the collections. Furthermore, we have found that 98 percent of the sheets that might be removed for their philatelic interest are blank on the reverse. This leaves only a small number for which the record value needs to be considered. If the value of the cover is large (say more than 15 dollars), we photostat the letter side for preservation, unless the importance of the original document is so great as to overshadow any possible philatelic value. Since, as I have indicated, these are mostly routine business communications they rarely have great value. If further notations appear on the address side itself (such as "answered" and the date), that side might be photostated too. It would be well to keep a record of what has been done, or at least a list of what collections have been handled in this manner.

We feel that it is better to have the job done under careful supervision, so that record values are preserved, than to have it done surreptitiously or carelessly at some later date. And — although this is perhaps a minor point — items of philatelic interest are being released to philatelists, rather than kept shut away for completely different purposes. Finally, what library could not use a sum, possibly a thousand dollars or more, realized in so painless a fashion? The creation of new values by the passage of time presents a practical problem, which the library is justified in meeting in a practical fashion. This procedure might not work for the literary-historical type of collection, but it has seemed to fit our rather special case.

Personal testimony may be useful, in a psychiatric sense, for its therapeutic value. But I hope that some of these suggestions may be of value to others than the writer, especially to those who may also be struggling with masses of nineteenth-century business records.