

# The Stevens Mill Records — Triumph Over Chaos

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A CERTAIN amount of sorting is expected in handling any collection of historical material, but a gigantic job was involved in bringing order into approximately a thousand cubic feet of business records acquired by the newly established Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, North Andover, Mass. One of the oldest enterprises in the town is the woolen mill (founded in 1813) that developed into the J. P. Stevens Co., Inc., now one of the largest textile firms in the United States. Some early bound records of the company, used by Horace Stevens in writing a history of the business, had been retained by interested members of the Stevens family for donation to the projected museum, which intends to specialize in the history of the woolen industry in North America.

The mass of the Stevens Mill records, however, had been stored for many years in a building on the company's premises at North Andover. Within recent years vandals had broken into the building, removed books and papers from the shelves, and scattered them on the floor to a depth of two or three feet, in utter confusion. In the fall of 1959 Bruce Sinclair, director of the new Merrimack Valley Textile Museum,<sup>1</sup> was informed that the building was to be cleared out and used for other purposes, and he was asked if he would be interested in taking custody of the material. Since it was impossible at that time to be selective or to do any sorting, Mr. Sinclair simply had everything gathered up, shoveled into wooden boxes, and transferred to temporary storage until the museum, then only in the planning stage, was built. In July 1961 the collection was gradually brought to the museum workroom to be organized into some usable form.

\*The author is a teacher of history and business in the high schools of Ontario. Her article is derived from a project she developed in the summer of 1961 at the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, North Andover, Mass. In the work she describes Miss Edwards had the benefit of the advice of Robert W. Lovett, a member of the museum's advisory committee.

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Sinclair's article, "Museum Artifacts in Company Archives," in *American Archivist*, 24: 337-338 (July 1961).

Special difficulties in the physical handling arose from the vandalism to which the material had been subjected. Besides the normal accumulation of dust, pieces of glass and debris had been unavoidably shoveled into the storage boxes. Elastic bands had been used to bundle some documents, and fragments of perished rubber had to be shaken out. Silverfish and other insects had begun to infest the collection, and care had to be taken to guard against any more such damage.

The most serious problem, however, was that the original order of the records had been almost completely destroyed. In fact, it was as if a giant mixmaster had been at work, stirring together letters, canceled checks, timecards, pay vouchers, spinning and weaving tickets, and innumerable other kinds of small documents. The sorting of bound records was seen as comparatively simple, but it was at first doubtful that the work involved in handling the unbound material would be worth the effort. A superficial examination, however, showed letters dating back to the 1820's, interesting old shipping manifests, and many other items that indicated treasures too valuable to discard.

Most of this material was in hinged-top wooden boxes measuring 18 by 18 by 24 inches. The papers in six boxes were examined thoroughly, and a tentative method was devised for sifting treasure from trash. The material was divided into the following main groups:

1. Items for disposal—for example, timeclock cards, pay vouchers, spinning and weaving tickets, and shipping and consignment slips. Normally the information shown on most of these documents would have been duplicated in the regular office records in summary form. Even if that had not been done, many of the forms lacked dates and could not have been sorted chronologically. In any event, the extremely large number of small forms of this type made prohibitive the time and effort required to restore them to their original order, even if any useful purpose had been served thereby.

2. Canceled checks. These were easily recognizable and until other records were examined could not safely be disposed of.

3. Docket-folded items—for example, letters, paid bills, and receipts. As the practice of docket-folding was common until about 1880, it was felt that setting up a group for such items would result in a preliminary separation of documents preceding and following that year. These items were also easily recognizable.

4. Items not docket-folded.

As it was obvious that a sort of blitz was needed, six high school girls were hired to do the sorting. They worked singly or in pairs and sorted the documents in each box into four smaller boxes,

one for each kind of record. At first a typed summary of the four classes was thumbtacked to the lid of the storage container that each girl was examining, and samples of papers for disposal were also thumbtacked to the box lids so that these items could be easily recognized. As they progressed, however, the girls became familiar with the procedure and the summaries and samples were no longer necessary. All boxes of items for disposal were rechecked to insure, as far as possible, that other material had not been inadvertently included.

After the unbound material had been sorted into the four main types, the docket-folded items were re-sorted into groups of letters, bills and receipts, and miscellaneous documents. The items not docket-folded were then re-sorted and the letters were segregated. Further sorting of correspondence by year is being done by regular museum staff, but the work of these untrained high school girls was fairly satisfactory in making a mass attack on the unbound material, even though supervision and rechecking was essential.

From the standpoint of organizing a collection of business records, there were a few problems that may be of interest. In the first place, the parent organization bore five names during the period from 1813 to 1901. In addition, mills acquired by the parent organization and changes made in the names of mills resulted in a total of 23 mill names from 1865 to 1934. The history of the enterprise, written by Mr. Stevens, was summarized to provide a frame of reference to the operations and growth of the organization, and this was very useful.

The order of arrangement recommended by Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, was used as a guide for the temporary listing and arrangement of the collection. Records were listed within groups according to the date of acquisition of the various mills.

The size of the collection and the age of the records should make it of considerable interest to students of business and economic history. The following list of some of the main accounting records of the parent organization alone suggests the comprehensive nature of the material:

Day books	1812-29; 1850-1908 (fairly complete)
Journals	1850-89 (fairly complete)
Cash books	1850-1921 (fairly complete)
Bill books <sup>2</sup>	1850-81

<sup>2</sup> A form of purchase journal.

Ledgers	1811-98
Trial balances	1850-64; 1900-19
Time books	1837-77
Payroll books	1857-86
Payroll recapitulations <sup>3</sup>	1886-1908
Purchase orders	1887-1905
Inventories	1850-98

There are also approximately 60 cubic feet of packaged unbound records of more recent date, and there are letter books of outgoing correspondence for 1830-37 and 1851-1908. Later correspondence had been shaken out of box files by the vandals and is being sorted by the museum staff following the preliminary sorting. As intimated, the incoming correspondence dates back at least to the 1820's; and, as there is approximately 34 cubic feet of it, a solid body of material should be available when the sorting is completed.

<sup>3</sup> For all mills.

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### *Transactions With The Indians*

New York, *March 11. 1789*

. . . I have received your favour of the 15 Jan<sup>y</sup> together with your official communications containing copies of the laws acts & public records from the 9 July 1788 to 31 December inclusive. I presume you consider the transactions with the Indians as not being a part of "the public records of the district" or "of the proceedings of the Governor in his executive department" and therefore have omitted sending them. But as by the resolution of the 3 Oct 1787, from and after the 14 Aug<sup>st</sup> last the powers duties and emoluments of the superintendant of Indian affairs are united with those of the governor, and by the resolution of the 5 of the same month Oct. 1787 in consequence of his office of Governor he was directed to hold a treaty with the Indians within the limits of the United States inhabiting the country north west of the Ohio; and as the transactions with the Indians will be an important part of his duty, I submit it to his and your consideration whether it will not be proper for the future to make them a part of the Records of the district. . . . The new Congress is not yet formed, the badness of the roads having prevented the attendance of the Southern Members. As soon as they are in capacity to proceed to the execution of Business the laws which you have transmitted to me shall be laid before them.

— CHARLES THOMPSON, Secretary of Congress, to Winthrop Sargent, Secretary of the Northwest Territory. Printed in Clarence E. Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States*, 2:189 (1934), from original letter in the Sargent papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.