

The Anatomy of a Collection: The Rhees Papers

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LONG before I decided to write a biography of Alexander Dallas Bache (1806-67), the first president of the National Academy of Sciences and for many years the head of the Coast Survey, I knew of the William Jones Rhees collection at the Huntington Library. Its nearly 5,000 documents include several thousand items of Bache and Joseph Henry, his close associate, as well as other intriguing segments. Through the generosity of the American Philosophical Society I was able to visit San Marino last year to examine this very rich and peculiar body of manuscripts. I propose to report on my findings as an illustration of work in progress. Although my conclusions are tentative, the Rhees collection, I believe, is an interesting exemplification of several problems of archival policy and procedure.

In 1922 Romenia F. Rhees, the widow of our chief character, sold a collection of documents to Henry Huntington, then at the height of his acquisition mania. Huntington undoubtedly did not know what he was getting into. William Jones Rhees (1830-1907) was best known as a bibliographer of Smithsonian Institution publications and as the editor of several still useful documentary histories of that organization. These were prepared in the course of his 52 years of service with the Institution, notably as Chief Clerk under the first two Secretaries, Joseph Henry and Spencer Fullerton Baird (and briefly under S. P. Langley, the third Secretary). Rhees had ranked third in the Institution's hierarchy. When he grew too old for the rigors of administration, he became Archivist of the Smithsonian Institution, retaining that post almost until his death. But this brief biographical account does not do justice to the full range of Rhees' connections and interests, each of which added a lit-

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tle something to the collection besides the major source, the despoliation of the Smithsonian's archives and of the collections in its care. Unconventional collections require unconventional techniques; therefore, I shall analyze the Rhees collection using the flashback technique of the movies. First, I shall give a description of the collection as it is on the shelves in San Marino at this very moment. Next, I shall figuratively reconstruct the collection as it looked a few years after its purchase. Following these exercises in gross archival anatomy I shall discuss briefly some of the histological details of the gross parts in order to deduce their origins.

The Huntington Library assigns symbols to its collections—*RH* in this case—and numbers the items in each. Chronological arrangement is, apparently, the most common scheme in the Huntington. Where this occurs, the numerical and chronological order coincide. This is not literally true of the Rhees collection, I soon discovered. Of the two public card catalogs, the first, a conventional name and subject catalog, is a model of its kind. The second catalog is arranged by collection and for each gives a chronological array of the contents by item number, except for the Rhees collection. Since the item numbers in the Rhees collection are not in chronological order, this second catalog does not serve as a shelf list for this group. Nor is it complete. Several choice items are lacking: for example, there is no card for a December 1777 letter of von Steuben to John Hancock. All of this was rather surprising to me because the Huntington is a very well-organized institution.¹

Except for certain unboxed items, the Rhees collection is in 64 document containers. Unlike most collections with which I am familiar, it starts with its miscellaneous letters in the first two boxes, arranged alphabetically and ranging in time from 1744 to the post-Civil War period. Next is a box relating to "Indian Affairs," 1796-1858; like all subsequent boxes through box 62, its contents are arranged chronologically. So-called "Pension Bureau" records, 1817-85, are in box 4. From the entry furnished to the National Catalog of Manuscript Collections I was prepared for the two boxes (nos. 5 and 6) of the papers, 1815-74, of Henry R. Schoolcraft, but I was somewhat surprised by what occupied boxes 7-11. The 316 items,

¹ In a private letter about this paper to the author, Herbert C. Schulz, Curator of Manuscripts at the Huntington Library, commented "that the second catalogue was an afterthought, a kind of supplement to the main catalogue, in which some collections are completely missing, and has never received the careful attention paid to the entries in our main catalogue." Mr. Schulz also pointed out that some collections in this second catalog are not arranged by item number. This "afterthought" is very useful and is in better shape than the main catalogs of some leading libraries.

1816-58, are described in the National Catalog as being records of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, a group that unsuccessfully attempted to establish a working relationship between science and the Government before the Civil War.

At last I came to the Bache documents. Packed in boxes 12-35 are 1,898 items, 1827-67—a biographer's delight. Here was my man manipulating Congress, dreaming big dreams, plugging his way through the minutiae of everyday life, soothing the nerves of prima donnas, fighting off his enemies, and importing Rhenish for the entertainment of friends. But as I gloatingly took notes, I wondered about the Bache materials back East. They had looked so complete; how much else was dispersed or lost?

Although the Bache records seemed to be a reasonable unit, the 1,624 "records" of the Smithsonian Institution, 1831-1906, in boxes 36-55 just did not hang together. Rhees' correspondence, 1822-1904, is in boxes 56-59. In the remaining boxes, nos. 60-64, is a depressing array of receipts for Smithsonian publications, miscellaneous printed forms, fragments, and a pile of autographs cut from irretrievably lost documents. Not boxed is a 1-volume catalog, undated, of Rhees' autograph collection. And on the top shelf, above all the boxes of treasures, is a yard of Woodruff files containing more receipts for Smithsonian publications, ca. 1870-75, but mercifully not bearing *RH* numbers.

To make sense of this array, to go from *RH* 1 through *RH* 4594 within one month, I sorely needed some overall rationale of the collection. From experience I knew that no catalog of manuscripts, however good, really gives adequate subject control or good information about the interconnections of documents and groups of documents. I also noted that the dictionary catalog, like others, was more thorough on names of authors of letters and documents than on names of recipients. But, above all, the loss and dispersal of the original Bache and Henry papers made it imperative that I understand the nature of each surviving fragment of these collections, especially if these could yield clues to further manuscripts.

After the first day at San Marino, I came to the rather obvious conclusion that the order of *RH* numbers was significant. Reasoning that the Huntington Library, a model institution in most respects, would not number its documents in random order but only after having arranged a collection, I guessed that this numerical order might convey useful information. Upon inquiry, I discovered that in the stacks there was a third card file—arranged numerically—for all collections. This file is used to record documents sent to the reading

room and to the photographic laboratory. Because the public chronological catalog for the Rhees collection did not coincide with the numerical order, I obtained permission to use the numerically-arranged card file and in it I found the answers to many of my questions.

When I went north to Berkeley afterwards, I spoke about the Rhees collection with Julia Macleod, then in charge of the manuscripts at the Bancroft Library. About 30 years before she had cataloged the Rhees documents. Although she could not give precise answers to the many minute questions troubling me, her replies accorded well with my general findings.

From the catalog of Rhees' autograph collection I concluded that Rhees had attempted to arrange his manuscripts in alphabetical order by author. At the end of the volume he recorded his inventory as "3575—not counting duplicates," and the entry for Bache specifically indicates that most Bache items were not recorded. Mrs. Macleod remembers that the Bache materials came in separate bundles while the remainder was simply a large array partly in alphabetical order. I would guess that Rhees never got around to dismantling the big Bache block and possibly a few smaller files. What the Huntington (that is, Mrs. Macleod) did with this pile of letters was to attempt to sort them according to what we would characterize as roughly their provenance. Within each group in the sort, the arrangement of documents was alphabetical, with some exceptions. Frustrating the attempt at restoring *fonds* was the presence of so many odd items gathered by Rhees. The original numerical order was as follows:

RH 1-RH 14. In general the earliest documents, 1763-91, arranged chronologically, including six letters received by Hancock and some items of the Shippen family of Pennsylvania.

RH 15-RH 56. The "Indian Affairs" documents, 1796-1858, in alphabetical order. (Now comprise box 3.)

RH 57-RH 126. Letters to the Commissioner of Pensions or to his predecessors, 1826-60, chronologically arranged.

RH 127-RH 150. Letters received by the Secretaries of War and of the Navy relating to pensions and referred to the Commissioner of Pensions or to his predecessors, arranged chronologically, 1817-85. (Actually ends in 1866, as the one 1885 letter is an item referred to Rhees. *RH 57* to *RH 150* now constitute box 4.)

RH 151. An 1818 letter of Secretary of War Calhoun on pensions.

RH 152-RH 280. The Schoolcraft documents, 1815-74, arranged alphabetically. (Now in boxes 5 and 6.)

RH 281-RH 596. The National Institute collection, 1816-58, arranged alphabetically. (Now in boxes 7-11.)

RH 597-RH 606. A group of letters received by the botanist John Torrey.

RH 607. An extract of a 1782 letter.

RH 608-RH 715. Alphabetically arranged miscellany.

RH 716. The earliest item in the collection, a letter of Tench Francis dated October 1744.

RH 717-RH 2613. The Bache documents in alphabetical order. The documents written by Bache are *RH 808* to *RH 865*.

RH 2614-RH 4150. The Smithsonian documents in alphabetical order.

RH 4151-RH 4198. Alphabetically arranged letters and documents received by Joseph Henry as president of the National Academy of Sciences, 1865-83. (The few items dated after 1878, when Henry died, were received in the Smithsonian and relate to the Academy.)

RH 4199-RH 4230. Letters received by Henry relating to his membership on the Light-House Board, ca. 1865-78, arranged alphabetically.

RH 4231-RH 4239. Letters received by Henry and miscellaneous items. (*RH 2614* to *RH 4239* constitute boxes 36-55, the Smithsonian "records.")

RH 4240-RH 4486. Rhees' letters received, 1822-1904, in alphabetical order. (Only 3 items before 1850.)

RH 4487-RH 4588. Letters received by Rhees as Registrar of the District of Columbia chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, ca. 1891-1903, arranged alphabetically.

RH 4589-RH 4594. Miscellaneous Rhees items. (*RH 4240-RH 4594* are now in boxes 56-59.)

After preliminary arrangement and numbering, the Huntington Library combined the parts to simplify the structure of the Rhees collection and then arranged the documents in chronological order, with the exception of the miscellaneous letters. To illustrate: the letters in the *RH 608-RH 715* group were combined with the very earliest group of Hancock and Shippen items (*RH 1-RH 14*), the ten Torrey letters, and a few stray items to form the miscellaneous correspondence of boxes 1 and 2. Only in a few instances in the second sorting was a document shifted to a completely different group. For example, a document of the American Philosophical Society originally placed in error with the National Institute papers as *RH 421* was shifted into the miscellaneous group.

Although I disagree with particular decisions about the provenance of documents and with many of the underlying premises in the cataloging of the Rhees collection, I have nothing but admiration for the skill and industry of the Huntington Library staff. Given the wild array of documents, the library deserves considerable credit for its success in making the collection usable.

Can we deduce the sources of the collection from a minute exam-

ination of its parts? I do not have any reliable evidence of how Rhees acquired the Hancock, Shippen, and Torrey documents or some other singular items. Presumably they could have come into his possession by any means open to an autograph collector or dealer. Some documents were derived from his personal activities. Rhees served two terms as a trustee of the District of Columbia public schools; he was an official of the Y.M.C.A. and active in philanthropic work in the Civil War; and for many years he managed a lecture bureau. Letters about these activities appear in the papers, as does correspondence with his relatives and friends. Even before Rhees became Chief Clerk of the Smithsonian in 1852, documents were sticking to his fingers. When he first came to Washington, he worked for J. C. G. Kennedy on the social statistics of the Seventh Census and subsequently as secretary to the Central Executive Committee for American Participation in the London World's Fair of 1851. A few documents never got back to Kennedy.

I am at a loss to account for the Pension Bureau and the "Indian Affairs" records. Each of these is in two parts. From internal evidence I suspect that Rhees acquired these from less than four sources—perhaps no more than two. The course of the Schoolcraft documents is obvious. Mary Howard Schoolcraft, widow of the ethnologist, was on good terms with both Henry and Rhees. The Schoolcraft personal papers in the Library of Congress came to the Manuscript Division from the Smithsonian Institution. (There are also Schoolcraft letters in the papers of George P. Merrill, historian of American geology, in the Manuscript Division. Merrill was at the Smithsonian for many years; did he and Rhees pick over collections together?)

The National Institute papers upon examination turn out to have two different sources. There are letters and other documents of the secretaries of the Institute as well as papers they received from an earlier body, the Columbian Institute. The documents are clearly estrays from records now divided between the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian. Presumably all the documents were once in Rhees' care. Unique in my experience is the source of the second group, the papers of John Varden. After 16 years of running his own Washington Museum of Natural Curiosities, Varden was briefly employed by the National Institute to work with the collections it was acquiring, notably the specimens of the Wilkes Expedition. After the collection was housed in the Patent Office, Varden became Superintendent of its National Gallery. Eventually the holdings of the gallery, together with the Varden letters, came into the

hands of the Smithsonian, where some of the letters still remain. And Rhees acquired a nice run of letters of James Dwight Dana.

During his long service at the Smithsonian, William Jones Rhees had one continuing function, that of having charge of the Institution's publications. Correspondence relating to this activity is about the only recurring theme in the Smithsonian portion of the collection. Besides receipts in the Woodruff files, there are letters commenting on the first publications of the Institution that are quite valuable for what they convey about American attitudes towards learning in the period they cover. Letters from authors about manuscripts and thank-you notes from distinguished recipients of publications were just what an autograph collector or dealer would relish. Particular files entrusted to his special care, like the National Academy and Light-House Board letters, ended up in Rhees' possession as did stray letters and documents that interested him for one reason or another. These were over and above his own files as Chief Clerk. Since most of the Smithsonian Institution archives were destroyed by fire in 1865, the early items in the Rhees collection are of special interest—an interest only slightly diminished by the fact that the more I look, the more pre-1865 Smithsonian records I find.

No fire has reduced the number of Bache documents awaiting a biographer, but the scatter and fragmentation of the manuscripts is a serious obstacle to research. In the National Archives are 305 volumes of Bache's general correspondence as Superintendent of the Coast Survey, including 19 volumes of private correspondence, 1844-65. The 19 volumes were bound and the documents in them were marked as part of the set of official records. Identical markings appear on practically all other Bache documents, whether official or personal, that I have examined (provided that they were received by him or were retained copies of his outgoing letters). The Bache collection of private letters in the Library of Congress was originally bound in the same style and still has the distinctive markings found on his official records; these letters are mainly for the period 1855-60 and were a gift of Caroline Henry, a daughter of Joseph Henry. Not surprisingly, the Smithsonian by 1869 or 1870 had a large number of Henry's letters to Bache and other letters received by Bache.

Presumably Mrs. Bache gave Joseph Henry, her husband's close friend, the documents now at San Marino and Washington. As yet the story is not too clear. In the papers (now at the American Philosophical Society) of still another close friend, Prof. John Fries Frazer of the University of Pennsylvania, is a letter of April 16,

1867, to Mr. Frazer from Mrs. Bache. Tipped off by Frazer of the existence of the Bache letters, Henry had inquired about them. Mrs. Bache wrote: "I replied to him they were private C.S. papers, and I did not want them to be sent to the office until I was then to attend the disposal of them." Ten days later she wrote Professor Frazer that Henry was very helpful in the disposal of the Bache library. Since she did not want to turn the boxes of confidential papers over to the Coast Survey, it is not unreasonable to suppose that she later entrusted them to Henry's care for weeding. That is, to William Jones Rhees.

As far as provenance is concerned, the Bache part of the Rhees collection falls into three groups. Some documents are probably not part of any natural Bache collection, either official or personal. The rest are either estrays from the official records or private correspondence. The documents of 1855, for example, divide as follows: 11 private, 28 official, 9 other. Most of the Huntington's Bache collection is for the Civil War period—a fact that serves to explain why the annual set of official records for the same period in the National Archives is half or less than half as extensive as the records for the immediately preceding years.

There is evidence that as early as 1855 Bache maintained four different files of private letters. Assuming that one of these is the National Archives' 19 volumes and that it is substantially complete, I should guess that the Library of Congress' collection represents another one of these files whose post-1860 part and one additional private file are now divided between the Huntington Library and the Smithsonian. To sum up, the Bache materials that came into the Smithsonian consisted of two files of private letters, perhaps a majority of the Coast Survey's official correspondence of the Civil War period, a small number of earlier official records, and a few miscellaneous letters and other documents.

Although I cannot assert that there were no more than four private files, I am fairly confident that one of the four never came to the Smithsonian. At the same time that he wrote to Joseph Henry about the Bache records, Frazer must have written to Benjamin Peirce, the new Superintendent of the Coast Survey. Two days after Mrs. Bache wrote to Frazer, Peirce replied to Frazer enclosing a letter of W. W. Cooper, who had been Bache's confidential assistant in the Coast Survey. On two occasions during the war, Cooper reported, Bache had forwarded records to Philadelphia, once a box with private letters and triplicates of observations and on another occasion three parcels of private letters. Although the official rec-

ords were prepared for shipment by sea to Philadelphia when Lee advanced northward in 1863, they were never moved. Apparently responding to a query of Frazer, Peirce specifically ruled that the documents sent to Philadelphia in 1862 and 1863 and placed in the University of Pennsylvania were not official records. (Many of Peirce's letters to Bache are among the Benjamin Peirce papers at the Harvard University archives. I cannot say whether these came back to Peirce through Rhees or whether they were found in the Coast Survey office during Peirce's superintendency.) What were these documents Bache considered so much more sensitive than the many official and private letters that he left behind in Washington? Those letters must have been full of information his enemies would have relished. Unfortunately, no such Bache records are now in the University of Pennsylvania. And, to my regret, they were never added to the autograph collection of William Jones Rhees, Archivist of the Smithsonian Institution.

Not that Rhees saved everything that ever came into his hands. A number of items in his catalog bear prices or other indications of sale. An Israel Putnam letter (to John Hancock?) of September 13, 1777, went for \$47. A letter of Michael Faraday (to Joseph Henry?) of September 18, 1840, described as "very valuable," is no longer in the collection. And so it goes. But the largest part of Rhees' holdings pertained to the sciences. Since the demand for such manuscripts was not great during his lifetime, most of the collection was preserved intact. Ironically, this lack of interest in manuscript sources for the history of the sciences was responsible for the atmosphere that made depredations by a Rhees possible and that permitted the destruction or dispersal of many other bodies of archives and personal papers.

A Matter of Priority

The conservation of Federal, State and Settlement Public Records was under consideration by the Government before the second World War, but no action was taken to formulate any systematic process. After the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, the Government was obliged to concentrate its attention on many pressing problems connected with rehabilitation and later with the Emergency situation. The widespread destruction of official documents all over Malaya during the Japanese occupation helped to create an impression that the problem was of low priority.

—FEDERATION OF MALAYA, *Report on the Public Records Office and National Archives (1958-1962)*, by Haji Abdul Mubin Sheppard, p. 1 (Kuala Lumpur [1963?]).