College Archives and Academic Research

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Harvard University Archives

TO A GOVERNMENT ARCHIVIST, our college field appears to be chaotic. There are colleges with well-organized archives, and there are universities in which the administrative officers have never thought of the word "archives" in connection with their own institutions. Among the good college archives, there are entirely different concepts of functions and responsibility.

This diversity is due largely to the fact that, relatively speaking, our branch of the profession is still young and confused. True, we have had in Cambridge for over 200 years a collection of neatly bound official manuscripts designated as the "Harvard College Archives," but in the late 1920's, when we reviewed our historical records with the approaching tercentenary in mind, we realized that the collection and the additions by Sparks, Quincy, and their successors had been made and organized in entire ignorance of archival science as our European friends practiced it. So we surveyed the scene, hoping to profit by the experience of others, and failed to find a single American or European university with anything that could honestly be called a university archive. In Milan, for example, where there are incredibly extensive hospital archives from late medieval times, the university has only a collection of manuscript curiosities.

In this country, 30 years ago, most colleges had collections of memorabilia, consisting of all kinds of curious things, including pieces of wood alleged to be fragments of goalposts captured on certain days. Our collection included a box of bricks that A. Lawrence Lowell had retrieved from various ditches in the Harvard Yard, a collection that I preserved in spite of the frowns of space-minded people until a museum of architecture received it with great joy.

We decided that the way to justify the existence of the Harvard University Archives (and to obtain a good appropriation) was to

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furnish records management service. This was a great success. Once when President James Conant said, "We must economize; starting alphabetically, 'Archives,'" several department heads whom I had never met spoke up and said, "You can't cut the Archives; it would cost us more to do the work they are doing for us."

I have told this story to a number of college presidents on whom I have been "sicked" by professors of history who wanted to see archives established in their institutions—sometimes with the not altogether happy result that there have been set up records management centers where the student wishing to do research gets no encouragement. In this implied criticism I am quite aware of the problems involved in making an archive a research center. Over 200 years ago the Harvard faculty, ruling that its records were strictly for its own use, declined to open them to the agents of a town seeking information on a student whom they proposed to hire. In recent years the Harvard Corporation has resolved that its archives are not maintained for the use of eager-thumbed Jack Horners writing doctoral dissertations.

On the other hand, no true historian can glance at the treasures being held in the cold, chaste hands of tight-lipped records management people without having his ΦBK key throb painfully. I must plead guilty of having built up, under the guise of records management, whole sections of the Harvard University Archives simply to prevent the historians of another generation from committing the mistakes of a Parrington or a Charles Beard. Any college archive is, in proportion to its size, as rich a source for history as a State archive; and there, in truth, is half its justification of being.

College administrators can often be persuaded on this point if there is in view the writing of a college history. These works need not be parochial. Margery Foster's *Economic History of Harvard College, 1636-1712*, is an example of local history of wide significance. When the statistics for this work were being compiled, we had in our quarters a number of bright young men and women briskly poking adding machines. Once I observed one of them come to a sudden halt and stare at his document in distress. To my query he replied by asking, "How do you add to a column of figures 'One old cow which soon died'?" This was the commodity with which one Puritan had paid his term bill. Surely the institution that denies the use of its archives to scholars seeking to further human knowledge misunderstands its own purpose in life. College archives are mines of historical treasure that can be exploited without interfering

with the bread-and-butter functions of records management. I decided recently to find out what this public research service entailed for the Harvard University Archives and what the researchers were looking for.

Most people coming to our reading room to do research ask for printed material or for manuscript material such as doctoral dissertations, for the use of which the ground rules are clear and simple. Making this material available is a library function, of which the only record we have is a charge slip that tells us nothing about the purpose of the use.

Of course there is a great deal of simple research done in answer to mail and telephone queries. Some of this is important and involves a great deal of staff work, but it would not be easy to make a significant statistical report on such calls. More useful for statistics are the hundred or so people who come each year asking to do research in types of archival material that can be used only if I give official approval. There are some people, of course, who would search fragile documents for information that we know they do not contain, or seek information too trivial to justify the wear and tear; those we must turn away. And of course there are sensitive areas in which no academic research can be done for some time.

In order to show the goals and materials of the academic research that we encourage, I have digested the "use applications" of the last 18 months. Many such applications, a little over 30 percent, were from visitors doing biographical research. In most cases the subject of the research was a distinguished man who had been in some way connected with the university, but a few subjects were foreigners who had been briefly in Cambridge.

The material most frequently used by these biographers was the obvious official records of the university—minutes, correspondence, and reports. Less frequently used source material was our collection of personal papers of individuals known chiefly for their connection with the university. Periodically we write to all officers who hold permanent appointments and ask them to place clauses in their wills making the university their literary executor and leaving all their manuscripts to the University Archives, where we agree to treat them like official records. As these papers come in—sometimes hundreds of boxes of them—our regular staff cannot take the time to winnow out the printed and obviously duplicate material or those segments that are really part of the archives of other institutions. What we like to do is to leave such a collection of personal papers unsorted until a competent and authorized biographer comes

along to winnow and put it in order for us. The next most useful segment of the Archives for the biographers who come to us is the biography collection, which contains data on men known chiefly for their Harvard connection—not, for example, Presidents of the United States.

The second largest group of people doing academic research in our Archives, a little fewer than 30 percent, are concerned with the history of education. They work chiefly in three segments of our collections—the official records, private manuscripts, and curriculum material. This last collection we began in desperation 30 years ago when it became apparent that the theories of the historians of colonial education were entirely wrong. Our material is arranged chronologically, and the numbering provides under each year a space for "outside comment," official announcements, the professor's notes, student notes, examination papers, sample blue books, and theses for each course. Applying the Cutter numbering system to subjects and authors in the different parts of this collection makes access easy. We began the collection by sending a circular letter to all "old grads" of a certain seniority asking for student notes and diaries, and we still profit from that first mailing as the circulars turn up in grandfathers' papers. The attics and cellars of the university were also a rich source. This collection is now a vast record of the state of human knowledge on practically every subject, skimpy for our first two centuries but full for the last one.

The third largest group of visitors doing academic research in our Archives, about 10 percent of the whole, are concerned with the history of science. They call most frequently for our private papers, chiefly those of early scientists, like Prof. John Winthrop, but there is a concerted drive underway to obtain the papers of living scientists—the Project on the History of Recent Physics in the United States, being developed by the American Institute of Physics.[1] Our scientific visitors' next interests, in order, are official records and the curriculum collection. Thereafter their interests spread over printed documents, prize papers, library shelf lists, and charging lists. The last, of course, show the books available to the students of past generations and those used.

The next largest group of our researchers, a little more than 5 percent, are writing on the history of literature. Their requests are quite evenly spread over the curriculum collection, commencement parts, and the broadside lists of commencement topics. The first

[1] See the article on this project by W. James King in *American Archivist*, 27: 237-243 (Apr. 1964).—ED.

surviving writings of many famous authors are in these collections, few of them published. For such authors also the library charging records reveal useful information.

A little fewer than 5 percent of our visitors are doing research in the history of medicine. They use chiefly the official records, the university's health records (which now go back a respectable distance), and the class records. The Harvard classes have had a strong feeling of unity since about 1798, and their correspondence is often rich, apparently particularly so for physicians. To this group should be added the visitors doing their research in the separate Medical School Archive.

Similar in size is the group doing research in philosophy. They use chiefly our curriculum collection, the private manuscripts, the biography collection, and the collection relating to student life. The last consists chiefly of student diaries and correspondence, arranged chronologically. The philosophers are interested in this because of its evidence on student reading.

A similar group comes to do research in the history of religion, using primarily our official records, the curriculum collection, and the club records. Since 1721 student clubs and societies have flourished, and their records are treated as if they were official. Besides the clubs that are of primary interest to theologians, there are social clubs and others devoted to almost every conceivable subject.

About 2 percent of our visitors are working in geography or local history, and their chief concern is with the private papers. An equal number are concerned with architecture, and they use the private papers, the official records, and the historical collection, which is concerned largely with buildings. A similar number, involved in research in economics, use chiefly the private papers and the official records.

A little under 2 percent of our visitors are concerned with bibliography and library history, and their chief sources are also private papers and official records. About the same number are interested in anthropology, and they use about equally the private papers, the official records, and the curriculum collection. A few more than 2 percent are concerned with genealogy and family curiosity; they call for the official records, the curriculum collection, and the class records. The other day one of the "use applications" read, "The author was my great grandfather, and I am anxious to know what he was up to."

The smallest identifiable group is concerned with political history. More than any other group these searchers use the Eliot and Lowell

manuscripts in our collection of presidential papers. At Cambridge it has not been feasible to distinguish between the private and official papers of the college presidents, but most of the requests to use them come from students interested in their nonofficial activities.

There are several puzzling things about the record of the use of the Harvard University Archives for academic research, such as the small number of political historians who come our way, but even they have found in the Harvard Archives material not available elsewhere—usually unpublished correspondence. One thing that has discouraged the political historians is that their requests to use the Eliot and Lowell (not to mention the Conant) papers have to be approved by the Harvard Corporation. That body has never yet refused a reasonable request, but the red tape discourages some questioners.

To some college archivists it appears that records management is a sterile and mechanical occupation—necessary, but nothing to stir one's scholarly instincts. When the college archivist goes beyond his duty to preserve the history of his own institution, he becomes the custodian of source materials covering the entire spectrum of human knowledge. He is faced with the exciting problem of deciding which materials should be preserved for the use of historians yet unborn, working in fields strange to him and perhaps still uncultivated. It may not be the duty of the college archivist to assume this responsibility toward the future, but it is a lot of fun, and I recommend it.

The Accused

A manner his, direct and frank,
A posture, cultured, open, straight.
His eyes appraising, jaw was set,
He seemed to bear professor's rank.

"I am accused, accused," he said,
"Of giving to a foreign rule
That which from laboratories mixed,
A formula, to friend, misled."

"What brings you here?" came the reply,
"For in these Archives, records few,
Of what your country shows the past."
"You were," he said, "our strong ally."

"I seek to prove my innocence,
And from your horde, a page of truth
That may reveal within its lines
A theft or gift: the difference."

Ensued a search of that rare kind
That prompts conjecture: spy, arrest,
The case, the court, the lie, the law,
The home, the jail, what juries find.

Then unbelieving: "Here, it's here!"
And unrestraining came the rule:
"Withhold not from this man his right
To evidence; the court will hear."

Assembled, sorted, filmed and tied
The statements, letters, memos, charts,
Dispatched to that judicial throne
Where law to circumstance applied.

We knew not, could not these equate,
In ignorance the weeks were passed,
And then from cubicle he thanked,
As model prisoner of the state.

Almon R. Wright