

The Southern Historical Collection

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THE Southern Historical Collection is the major body of manuscripts in the University of North Carolina Library and is an important center for the history of North Carolina, the South, and the Nation. Consisting of over 3,600,000 items, organized in more than 3,600 groups, it has material relating to every Southern State and to every period of southern history. It is widely acclaimed by scholars for the breadth, excellence, and availability of its holdings.

The Southern Historical Collection was built on a nucleus of material acquired by the former North Carolina Historical Society, under the leadership of David L. Swain, president of the university in the pre-Civil War years, and of Kemp P. Battle, president and professor of history in the post-Reconstruction years. The society's collections consisted exclusively of North Carolina materials. Although they were extremely valuable for the history of the State, they were inadequate as source materials for the program of teaching and research in the history of the South that was inaugurated at the university in the early 20th century by J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton. In the 1920's, while head of the department of history, Dr. Hamilton began an active program of collecting from the entire South, with the twofold object of preserving the priceless but then neglected sources of southern history and of supplying essential research materials for graduate instruction in State and southern history. His vigorous and persuasive solicitation of manuscripts was so successful that in 1930 the Southern Historical Collection was established as part of the university library by action of the board of trustees. Since then there has been constant growth in the number of manuscripts; and much progress has been made in the never-ending task of organizing, describing, and cataloging. Dr. Hamilton's successor, James W. Patton, continues to acquire

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notable additions, often in quantity alarming both to the staff members who must process them and to the library administrators who must find space for them.

As a result of the broadening of the university's manuscript policy the Southern Historical Collection, although still especially rich in materials on the history of North Carolina, is now truly regional in scope. In fact, since Southerners have been a traveling and a migrating people, the papers of those who stayed at home frequently include letters and other materials from relatives and friends in most States and many foreign countries. At times the experiences of Southerners result in the acquisition of manuscripts quite unexpected for a depository called the Southern Historical Collection. One woman from the South, temporarily residing in Boston as a schoolteacher, became a close friend of the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. Later she gave her family and personal papers to Dr. Hamilton, and thus the Southern Historical Collection acquired what is probably the largest and most revealing body of material pertaining to the life and work of Gibran, generally considered to be the leading 20th-century writer in the Arabic language.

The Southern Historical Collection is also broad in time coverage, with a relatively small number of documents from the 16th and 17th centuries, a larger number for the 18th century, a heavy concentration in the 19th century, and a constantly increasing volume of 20th-century papers. The size of the individual groups also varies widely, from one item to many thousands.

The Southern Historical Collection is a manuscript collection; it does not include printed or published historical materials. When these are received with manuscripts, they are transferred to the appropriate division of the university library unless they are small items closely related to and best utilized with manuscripts or unless they are received with a group that is on loan. Published materials related to North Carolina are in the North Carolina Collection of the library, and historical materials pertaining to the other Southern States are in the general stacks. As a result of the emphasis on the study of State and regional history at the university, the holdings of the library in these fields are extensive and provide valuable aids to the scholar who is working with manuscript sources.

The papers in the Southern Historical Collection are private as distinguished from public records; they are usually acquired as a unit comprising the papers of an individual, a family, an institution, or a business. The unit is given the name of its creator and is filed

as a separate group within the Collection. Examples are the Robert L. Doughton papers, the Cameron family papers, the Globe Church records, and the Speculation Land Co. papers. Occasionally a group may be an artificial collection, not acquired by an individual in the course of his regular activity but collected by him because of his interest in content or autographs. An example of this is the Preston Davie collection, a group of manuscripts relating to the colonial and Revolutionary periods of North Carolina and South Carolina, which in the short time since its acquisition has proved to be of great interest to a number of historians and writers.

Each group is of course different from all others, but a typical group of papers accumulated by a North Carolina family of the 19th century will probably include many of the following types of material: land grants or deeds to property, business letters and financial papers varying in nature according to the business or profession of the man of the family, correspondence between the man and his wife before and during marriage, letters from friends and relatives, correspondence with children of the family away at school and letters and reports from their teachers, letters from older children living in their own homes, letters from sons or friends in military service during a war, letters reflecting the political interests or activities of the men of the family, and papers relating to the settlement of the estate of the head of the family. If the group continues beyond these last items, it will probably include a similar assortment of papers for the next generation, usually those accumulated by the son or daughter who continued to live in the family home. Besides letters and other detached papers, there may also be a variety of records kept in blank books. These manuscript books are usually diaries, plantation journals, or account books, but they may also contain school notes, recipes and household remedies, reminiscences, literary efforts, miscellaneous memoranda and random jottings, or copies of letters sent.

Many groups of manuscripts in the Southern Historical Collection are not so complete as this, while others may be even richer. Most groups of an earlier day include correspondence among members of the family and letters received from persons outside the family, but only rarely are there copies of letters sent to friends or to business or political associates. In contrast, groups that cover the period after the coming of the typewriter and carbon paper frequently contain copies of letters sent and thus show both sides of a correspondence. The typewriter has also greatly increased the quantity of papers and somewhat changed their nature. A modern

politician's papers are voluminous, but they generally differ from older papers by including only office files and not personal and family correspondence.

Individuals whose papers are in the Southern Historical Collection represent all sorts of businesses and professions. Included are national officials and diplomats, Senators and Congressmen, jurists of State and Nation, Governors, military and naval officers, educators, religious leaders, physicians, lawyers, writers and editors, railroad builders, industrialists, merchants, and bankers. The Collection is not devoted exclusively to the papers of prominent men, for historians frequently find the papers of ordinary persons to be equally valuable. Anyone who left records of his thoughts and opinions, his joys and sorrows, even of his commonplace daily activities, may contribute to the historian's knowledge of the past.

The Southern Historical Collection is administered by the library's manuscripts department, which has a staff of four full-time members and several part-time assistants. This department has full responsibility for servicing manuscripts, performing the library functions of acquisition, processing, reference, and circulation. The manuscripts department also services the archives of the University of North Carolina—a body of manuscripts smaller than the Southern Historical Collection but nevertheless extremely valuable and important. The university archives include trustees' minutes, faculty journals, university papers (a large body of loose papers accumulated by the secretary and treasurer of the board of trustees and by administrative officers), student records, records of the literary and debating societies and other student organizations, and records of several academic departments. These papers date from the beginning of the university and are invaluable for those interested in university or educational history.

The manuscripts department also administers most of the general and literary manuscripts acquired by the library; these at present are not extensive. There are also a number of manuscripts in the custody of other departments of the library. In the Rare Book Room are manuscripts of the 13th through the 18th centuries, not personal papers like those previously described but handwritten copies of books. In the North Carolina Collection, which consists chiefly of printed materials related to North Carolina, there are also the Thomas Wolfe papers, a number of manuscripts in the Bruce Cotten collection, and manuscripts of published books written by North Carolina authors.

As important as the collecting of manuscripts is their processing.

THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

Any reader of the *American Archivist* is well aware that in years past the methods of processing private or nonarchival manuscripts have been described many times in its pages. There seems to be little new to say on the subject and certainly there is no need today for any theoretical or philosophical exhortation. Yet there are still two reasons why a simple description of processing techniques adopted by any given manuscript depository may be useful. One is the fact that in many depositories progress in processing lags far behind available knowledge. This lag is generally caused by inadequacy of staff, with members either too poorly trained or too few in number—or both—to accomplish the task assigned to them. This deficiency all of us share to some extent, for probably no manuscript depository in the country has as many well-trained staff members as it could use to advantage. Yet if I can trust my informants—the critical researchers who comment to our staff members after visiting other depositories in the Nation—there are some places where the defects are especially glaring and the manuscripts so poorly processed as to be almost useless. The second reason why a further description of techniques may be useful is that in spite of all advances made in our knowledge of methodology, there is as yet little standardization in our practices. As an illustration: the two collections at Duke University and the University of North Carolina, located only 12 miles apart, both concentrating in the same general field of southern history, both developed for approximately the same period of time under the direction of trained historians closely connected with the archival profession, friendly rivals who engage freely in an exchange of information, have nevertheless unquestionable and interesting variations in methods of processing.

In the early days of the development of the Southern Historical Collection, Dr. Hamilton was so busy gathering the manuscripts—often quite literally running a race with rats, insects, flames, and trash collectors to preserve them from destruction—that there was little opportunity to consider the problem of processing, and in the depression years it seems to have been impossible to employ the necessary staff. The depression fortunately brought some advantages along with its well-known disadvantages, and for the Southern Historical Collection the great advantage was the North Carolina Historical Records Survey Project of the Works Progress Administration. Financed by the WPA, a temporary staff of about 10 persons began work on the Collection in the fall of 1936 and processed and described all accessions received through June 1939.

The result was the publication in 1941 of the *Guide to the Manuscripts in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina*, describing 809 groups of manuscripts. Now much out of date, as illustrated by the fact that there are currently more than 3,600 groups, the *Guide* has been and still is an invaluable aid both to readers in their use of the Collection and to staff members in their administration of it.

After the enormous assistance given by the WPA in processing the large body of manuscripts on hand in the 1930's, the regular staff was challenged by the task of attempting to keep up with new accessions, constantly received through the efforts first of Dr. Hamilton and then of Dr. Patton. Many improvements in processing and the methods currently used in organizing and describing the Southern Historical Collection are the contribution of one staff member, Anna Brooke Allan, who joined the staff in 1943. Miss Allan was a member of the first institute of archival administration conducted at the American University by Ernst Posner, and the Southern Historical Collection has benefited greatly from her imaginative and constructive application of the principles taught there. It is Miss Allan who handles the initial processing of materials in the Southern Historical Collection, and she and other staff members conduct the later stages of processing as their more pressing duties permit.

The first phase of processing is the immediate recording of the new acquisition in four control records. One is the accession book, a looseleaf notebook in which each acquisition receives a permanent name and number or is designated as an addition to a group previously accessioned. Second is the source file, a 3" x 5" card file containing a card for each acquisition; the cards are arranged alphabetically by the name of the donor or, less frequently, by the name of the dealer from whom the material was acquired. This is a very important record for a depository that receives as much material by gift as does the Southern Historical Collection, for it is often necessary that the staff be able to identify promptly for donors or for members of donors' families the specific groups of manuscripts received from them. The third control record, the accession file, is kept in ordinary letter-size filing cabinets. It contains an accession record for each acquisition, recording the date, source, circumstances, and terms of acquisition; brief biographical or historical information about the creators; and a preliminary description of contents, including if possible the general nature of the papers, the time coverage, the geographical areas concerned, and the approxi-

mate size of the accession. If the group is small and cohesive the later stages of processing are completed immediately and the accession record includes a full description of the group. The accession record is maintained as a permanent record on which the progress report of the group is made and to which all further information about the group is added as it accumulates. The accession record is so vital to the administration of the Collection that a former staff member dubbed it the "eyeball," and eyeball it remains in informal staff jargon. The fourth control record consists of marginal notes in the accession book, giving the size and location of each group, and separate shelf lists for all materials too large or irregular in shape to fit physically into the regular series.

The second phase of processing is the physical preparation and arranging of the new acquisition. The material may require fumigating, unfolding, cleaning, and flattening. Badly torn or very fragile items are set aside for lamination if the value of the material appears to justify the expenditure. Useless material and printed items to be transferred to other departments of the library are removed, and the rest of the accession is divided according to the physical handling required.

In general loose papers of each group are arranged in chronological order, with the undated material filed alphabetically by name of writer at the end. Large groups containing a variety of different types of materials may be divided into several chronological series. The papers are placed in acid-free folders and filed horizontally in boxes 4½ inches deep. Manuscript volumes are numbered chronologically and placed in the boxes following the folders. The few materials too large for the boxes are filed on separate shelves or in map cases. Staff members have found through the years that one of the greatest conveniences and timesavers in their system is the method of uniform boxing and continuous filing by accession number. Unfortunately in recent years the pressure for space has made it necessary to remove some of the less used groups of manuscripts to more distant storage areas, which require greater time to service.

The third phase of processing is the preparation of reference aids. If the accession record is inadequate, a descriptive survey is prepared. The survey describes and analyzes the group in as much detail as the nature of the manuscripts requires. It is generally not size but homogeneity or variety that determines the length and amount of detail necessary to a survey. The size and physical characteristics of the group are described; the person, family, or

institution that accumulated the papers is identified, with a brief biographical sketch or history; the geographical setting and the general nature of the papers are described; and a chronological analysis shows the more important individuals, places, and activities on which the manuscripts give information. An effort is made to point out any unusual items that the reader would not normally expect to find within the group. The undated and miscellaneous papers at the end of the group are described, and the manuscript volumes are listed.

Three typewritten copies of the survey or the accession record are prepared, two for the use of readers. The ribbon copies are filed alphabetically in a series of spring-back binders on an open shelf to aid the scholar as he prepares his bibliography and determines which papers he will examine. A carbon copy is filed with the papers for the use of the scholar as he reads the manuscripts. A second carbon is placed in the accession file for the use of the staff.

From the staff copy of the survey or the accession record briefer finding aids are prepared. The survey is the basis for the condensed description prepared for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and also for a catalog containing several series of card files. The master catalog has a card for each group in the Collection, recording the basic data about the group. A geographical file, arranged by State, indexes the Collection according to geographical areas, while a chronological file, divided into eight periods, does the same for time coverage. An index of proper names, supplementing the index of the *Guide*, lists places, persons, and institutions mentioned in the surveys. A subject file indexes the group according to a relatively small number of selected subject headings. Other files list special types of material—manuscript books, maps, pictures, and broadsides.

Staff members of the Southern Historical Collection are far from self-satisfied about their processing. For several years now they have given any time that could be spared from reference services and regular processing to the compiling of reports to the Library of Congress for the preparation of entries in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. When that project is brought up to date, attention can be turned to the needed resurvey of many of the groups described years ago, especially some of those described in the *Guide*. Each year, as time permits, a few of these older groups are resurveyed more thoroughly and in accordance with recent standards. In manuscript depositories, however, there is never enough time to approach the ideal, and probably

we shall always have an accumulated backlog of work. The staff is increasingly aware, too, that some of the subject headings are so broad that the number of cards filed under them has become unwieldy. Subdividing of headings and more precise content descriptions will probably be undertaken whenever feasible, and these should result in a more useful subject index. Finally, if everything else is achieved, there still hangs over our heads the fact that we have not as yet equaled the WPA in publishing a guide.

In spite of these recognized deficiencies, staff members do feel that they have met with reasonable adequacy their obligation to make the manuscripts of the Collection available for use. The card catalog is extremely useful both to readers in search of material and to staff members in replying to the increasing number of letters requesting information. Through the years the value of the surveys has increased as the staff members have become better informed and more experienced in their preparation. Today the survey is the reference aid most used and most appreciated by careful scholars and is the feature of the processing of the Collection that is most often singled out for approval. Numbers of satisfied and complimentary readers confirm our belief that the descriptive survey, with a chronological analysis, is the most useful product of the processing of private manuscripts.

Dire predictions have been made that continued growth of the Southern Historical Collection will be impossible because of depletion of the supply of manuscripts remaining in private hands and competition from an increasing number of excellent depositories throughout the South. It is true that Dr. Patton cannot today bring in 18th- and 19th-century manuscripts equal in number to the rich harvest of Dr. Hamilton's early collecting years, yet enough significant groups are added each year to belie the prophecies of stagnation. If a regional depository like the Southern Historical Collection is no longer necessary to insure the preservation of papers of persons associated entirely with other Southern States, there still remain genuine services that the Collection can render to the region. The acquisition in recent years of such regional groups as the papers of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen illustrates one such area of service. The fact that these groups are 20th-century materials indicates that in the future our efforts may be devoted largely to winnowing and preserving the most valuable of the quantity of papers produced in our own day. Twentieth-century manuscripts, though perhaps not so familiar and so interesting to a curator as

the earlier manuscripts, are nevertheless in great demand by an increasing number of serious scholars, and the gloomiest of prophets can hardly foresee that the supply of these will be exhausted. The future growth of depositories of private manuscripts need be limited only by the energy and enterprise of collectors, facilities for proper storage, and ability to make the materials available by competent processing.



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