

# The Manuscript Department in the Duke University Library

By MATTIE RUSSELL\*

*Manuscript Department  
Duke University Library*

THE DEVELOPMENT of a manuscript department at Duke University is an outgrowth of the intellectual awakening of 1887 at Trinity College in rural Randolph County, North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> In that year John Franklin Crowell, a Yale graduate, was inaugurated president of the struggling school. In his first report to the North Carolina Methodist Conference Crowell said that a "Seminary of History" would be created for advanced students, and this, he predicted, would lead to sound historical scholarship at Trinity. A few years later, after the college had been moved to Durham, he established a separate department of history and political science and appointed Stephen B. Weeks as its chairman. Weeks had recently received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University; and at that university, through the influence of Prof. Herbert Baxter Adams, he had caught the spirit of the German school of scientific historians. At Trinity he started from scratch. His first move was to appeal in the college paper for the donation to the library of books on history and especially of the raw materials of history. A writer and a diligent collector himself, particularly of North Caroliniana, he successfully aroused in others an interest in history. In his first year he organized the Trinity College Historical Society, to collect books and other printed matter, manuscripts, works of art, and relics illustrating the history of North Carolina and the South.

\*The author is Curator of Manuscripts in the Duke University Library, Durham, N.C. Her paper is an adaptation of one read by her before the Society of American Archivists at Chapel Hill, N.C., on Oct. 4, 1963, as part of a session on private manuscripts. The session was a part of the program of the Society's 27th annual meeting, headquarters for which was at Raleigh, N.C. An earlier version of this paper has been published in *North Carolina Libraries*, vol. 19, no. 2:21-27 (Winter 1961).

<sup>1</sup>In tracing the background and early development of the manuscript department in the Duke University Library, the author has borrowed heavily from Nannie M. Tilley, *The Trinity College Historical Society, 1892-1941* (Durham, 1941), and from Miss Tilley's preface to the *Guide to the Manuscript Collections in the Duke University Library* (Durham, 1947), which she and Noma Lee Goodwin compiled.

Weeks remained at Trinity only 2 years, but he left behind a vigorous historical society, which is still a going organization. (I might add that when he left he took his collection of source materials with him, and years later much of it was purchased by the University of North Carolina.) It was his successor John Spencer Bassett who more nearly succeeded in carrying out the aims of the society. Let it be said of Weeks, however, that he, along with President Crowell, laid the groundwork for the scholarly approach to history at Trinity.

Bassett, who had returned to his alma mater, also after studying with Adams at Hopkins, was burning with ambition to eradicate the misconceptions of southern history in North and South alike. He knew, as every historian does, that one cannot write history without source materials; therefore he not only continued the collecting of such materials (this time for the college) but also set up a museum to house historical relics and launched the publication of the *Historical Papers*.

When Bassett moved on to Smith College in 1906 his successor at Trinity was William Kenneth Boyd, whom Bassett and William A. Dunning at Columbia University had stimulated to concentrate on the history of the South. Boyd's ideal of teaching, so he says in "Memoirs of a Book Hunter,"<sup>2</sup> was the same as Bassett's, that is, to coordinate classroom instruction with the gathering of historical materials and with research and writing. From the following story Boyd tells in his "Memoirs" one can glimpse something of his energy and enthusiasm for preserving the record.

Every now and then I would have the itch to go into the field and personally pluck a few books and documents. Of the many journeys made, one stands out preeminently. Sometime in the academic year 1920-21, Miss Susie Shipp, while calling at my home, ragged me about my collecting instinct, but added that we might have the library of her father, Dr. A. M. Shipp, former President of Wofford College, if I would go to South Carolina to get it. In due time I made the journey and found in the upper room of a plantation house, then occupied by tenants, not only several hundred Southern books and pamphlets, but also files of English periodicals and numerous works of Anglican theology in the eighteenth century. Thus the Shipp collection was added to the Trinity Library. On my return to North Carolina I stopped over between trains at Raleigh. In the hotel lobby I discovered William Henry Hoyt, author of the best book on the Mecklenburg Declaration, at that time a bond attorney in New York. He asked me if I was writing. I sheepishly replied, "No." He then inquired what I was doing in Raleigh. I told him I was just back from

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished manuscript in the William Kenneth Boyd papers in the manuscript department, Duke University Library.

South Carolina getting an important collection of books. His face brightened and he informed me that the library of Marmaduke Hawkins, who had died sometime before, might be bought and referred me to the executor. I promptly looked up the executor, and in May, 1921, visited the Hawkins homestead at Ridgeway, North Carolina. Never before or since have I seen such a vast amount of political literature in private hands. Several rooms in the mansion were filled, an office in the yard was knee deep in newspapers, and valuable pamphlets were discovered in the shelving of a milk house over which squirrels had built their nests. Hawkins not only kept newspapers and pamphlets himself, but he was the heir of Weldon N. Edwards, President of the Secession Convention of North Carolina, and Edwards had been the heir of Nathaniel Macon. Thus at one stroke I secured materials which had been accumulated over a period of a century. It required five days to sort and pack, and we sent to Durham 2,500 pounds by freight and carried with us an automobile load.

Working with me at Ridgeway for two days was the Librarian, Mr. Breedlove. He was then supplanted by Dr. Randolph G. Adams, Assistant Professor of History. Temperamental as an opera singer, born with a bibliophile taste, and an indefatigable worker, I have never known his superior. . . . I shall never forget him as he walked into a room piled with newspapers and books. After a prolonged glance he took off his coat, removed collar and cravat, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and went to work with all the ardor of an inspired magi. In contrast, the grandson of Hawkins came in one day on a visit to the old homestead. He had a good cigar between his lips, wore well-pressed clothes, and had a nice red tie. He looked with disdain on those mighty college professors, dirty, hot, and tired. He not only did not offer assistance, but when Adams inquired if he would not like to keep a book or two as a souvenir, the reply was, "No, no, I was about to burn up the whole mess." Here was a wonderful example of the contrast between the inquisitive Yankee Adams and the unimaginative scion of an old Southern family; also the contrast between the attitude of those who wish to preserve the records of the past and those who care nothing for them.

Trinity was indeed fortunate to have a man like Boyd on its faculty, especially in light of the fact that in a later day provision would be made for transforming the college into a major university. To this new institution, Duke University, which opened its doors in September 1930, came scholars and graduate students for whom adequate library resources meant the difference between academic life and death. As might be expected the prime mover, though by no means the only one, in converting the library from that of a small college into that of a larger research institution was Boyd. These were stirring times that called for boldness, courage, and vision. Boyd was appointed Director of Libraries, and this post he assumed in addition to that of head of the department of history. He continued in this dual role for over 3 years. Although library

funds were greatly increased, they were inadequate—and they still are.

Within a year after the university opened, the library acquired an “angel” in the person of William Washington Flowers, a Trinity alumnus, a native of Durham, and an executive of the Liggett and Myers Tobacco Co. During the depression years, when aid counted most, this understanding businessman gave generously to the library, and upon his death in 1941 he left an endowment fund to be used for adding materials to the collection of Southern Americana. Other members of the Flowers family have since added to the fund.

Usually a sizable percentage of the income from the Flowers Fund has gone each year for manuscripts. Other funds are drawn upon occasionally to purchase papers not concerned with the South. Gifts constitute a large part of our holdings, especially those of the 20th century. The total number of manuscripts is now estimated at approximately 3½ million items, but this number does not include the contents of the volumes, which probably number as many as 10 thousand. By far the greater part of this material is of the George Washington Flowers Memorial Collection of Southern Americana, a name almost as cumbersome as that of some of the recently renamed institutions of higher learning.

There are other collections of manuscripts at Duke outside the manuscript department. The Walt Whitman papers constitute a special collection of some 600 items in the rare book department, and there are medieval manuscripts (largely of the Gospels) and a few miscellaneous ones there, too. The Josiah Charles Trent collection in the history of medicine contains manuscripts as well as printed works. This collection is housed in the library of the Duke Medical Center. Our department does the manuscript cataloging of the collection and keeps a duplicate set of cards. We have also a record of the manuscripts kept in the rare book department. Consequently we are able to answer inquiries about manuscripts at Duke, wherever they are.

Here I should like to make further reference to the Whitman papers and the Josiah Charles Trent collection. These collections were built up by Dr. Trent, a young professor of surgery at Duke who met an untimely death. He was a different kind of friend from Mr. Flowers in that he did the collecting himself. Institutions need both types.

Responsibility for acquiring manuscripts by either purchase or gift has rested principally with the director of the Flowers Collection, but there are other channels through which the library obtains

manuscripts. Some come without solicitation, others are solicited by professors or outside friends, and some are purchased out of regular library funds upon the recommendation of professors. We wish that more of the faculty would show an interest in scouting for manuscripts and in recommending their purchase from dealers' catalogs. It is largely because of the efforts of a few earlier professors of English at Duke that we have such a large quantity of papers of American and British literary figures. To William B. Hamilton, professor of British history, is due practically all the credit for the sizable lot of British political, diplomatic, and military papers that the library has acquired in recent years.

In collecting manuscripts the emphasis at Duke has always been on the acquisition of those that have research rather than autograph value. Yet along with the wheat comes the chaff, and we have been very cautious—too much so, I believe—in discarding papers. I well remember Allan Nevins' complaint during a visit to Duke about the amount of worthless material he had found in large family collections in another library and his opinion that we did not have so much. I had to confess that we had a considerable quantity of it. I suspect that the explanation for his misconception lay in the fact that our papers are cataloged in such a way that we could pinpoint the material he was interested in and thereby save him from having to plow through masses of papers that did not concern him.

Our first curator of manuscripts was Ruth Ketring (later Ruth K. Nuermberger), a graduate student in history at Duke. She and one assistant, armed with a few ideas from the Huntington Library, tackled the mass of manuscripts that had accumulated for over 30 years.<sup>3</sup> Because of a systematic policy of collecting manuscripts and because of the depression, which forced many families to trade off anything that would bring in cash, the holdings of the manuscript department expanded rather rapidly. During the early years of the department Mrs. Nuermberger and her staff devised such a sound method of arranging and cataloging manuscripts that few changes have had to be made in their system.

The catalog consists of a main entry file and autograph, subject, bound volume, and geographic files.

The main entry file carries a title card for each collection, followed by a sketch, also on cards, of the contents of that collection. The older manuscripts we describe in considerable detail, and we hope that we can continue to do so. We realize that it will be impossible for us ever to catalog so thoroughly most of the larger

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Nuermberger to the author, Nov. 3, 1963.

20th-century collections. I confess that we have a rather large backlog of uncataloged and partly cataloged collections (some of them not of first quality), but through our accession records we have some control over them. Often our memories serve us in good stead on these collections, too. Fortunately the researchers who have worked thus far in 20th-century history have been young and vigorous and appeared able, at least physically, to cope with the quantity of paper confronting them. We now have a dual policy relative to volumes. We no longer label and place on a shelf every volume regardless of size. The smaller ones, if they come with a collection of unbound papers, are kept with those papers and are mentioned only in the sketch of that collection in the main entry file.

The autograph file lists all the letters, postcards, telegrams, military orders, literary works, and the like written or signed by prominent people who appear in the collections, which have been cataloged otherwise in our usual way. This file we consider invaluable. So many of the inquiries we receive are phrased in this manner: Do you have any letters of So-and-So? If you do, will you please send me photographic copies of them? How familiar this must sound to some of you! By consulting the autograph file we can find immediately all the letters, say, of Nathanael Greene, no matter in whose collections they may appear. We know well that this is a slow, tedious, and expensive system of cataloging; but we also know that if we started through our collections a second time to ferret out individual letters of Greene for a correspondent, this might take as long as or longer than it did to list them in the first place.

In the subject file are listed all persons, organizations, institutions, events, places, and just *things*, such as ships, which are mentioned in significant detail.

The geographic file is a listing of collections according to the geographic locations to which they are related, with cross-references. If, for instance, the papers of a man from Greensboro, Ala. (which would be entered in the geographic file under "Alabama. Hale County"), carried an interesting description of Natchez, Mississippi, this fact would not only be mentioned in the descriptive sketch of the collection but would also be registered in the subject file.

So much for the catalog except to say that although to some it may seem antediluvian we like it and so do our patrons.

A guide to our holdings was published in 1947. This, although

still in print, is obviously quite out of date. Our holdings are also reported in the following more recent guides: *American Literary Manuscripts*, Philip M. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*, and *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*.

When Duke University Library began to collect manuscripts in a systematic way, much of the earlier historical material either had found its way into libraries or had had a handsome price tag put on it. Despite these handicaps, however, we do have some significant collections and many scattered papers of the colonial, Revolutionary, and early national periods. Among these papers are letters of a number of Founding Fathers and Revolutionary generals and records of the War of 1812. From about 1820 to the outbreak of the Civil War the manuscripts are much more voluminous and cover almost every aspect of life in the United States, particularly in the South. The more than a hundred volumes of original manuscript census returns for Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee between 1850 and 1880 constitute the best source of statistical information we have on those States.

The Confederate and Civil War material is vast in quantity and scattered through numerous collections. In fact it seems to run on *ad infinitum*, and at times I feel I have reasons neither moral nor humane for wishing the war had never been fought.

The different phases of Reconstruction are well documented, as are countless other historical events and personalities from the end of the Civil War to the present day. Among our large 20th-century collections the one most often used is that constituting the archives of the Socialist Party of America. These records have attracted researchers from as far away as the Soviet Union and India.

Mention has already been made of our literary holdings.

The Trent collection, also mentioned earlier, comprises a group of widely varied papers of outstanding physicians and scientists of Europe and this country—dating back to 1435.

Within what we regard as reasonable limits, we do everything we can to make the manuscripts available to researchers. No materials are permitted to circulate; but microfilm, photostats, or Xerox copies are furnished upon request—at a price, of course. Like others, since the appearance of nationally oriented guides we have had an increase in letter inquiries. Moreover the numbers of graduate students and ambitious young instructors and assistant professors are multiplying rapidly.

As a consequence of our giving more time to correspondence and



photographic orders, we have less time for processing and cataloging. How shall the problem be resolved? Some of you have heard that question before. We wish researchers either would travel more or could afford to. If they did, the time that we custodians of manuscripts devote to them would be greatly reduced. It takes much less time to service papers within a department than by correspondence; and, as has already been said, it is more satisfactory from the standpoint of scholarship.

One answer naturally is to increase the staff, but at our house we need both more money and more room. Some of you may be thinking that we might well give less time to cataloging so as to leave more time for these other things. Yet if the material is not well cataloged, how can one be of much assistance to correspondents? I shall continue to wish for a happy solution—without expecting it. I predict that at Duke we shall continue to struggle along, torn between what we feel we should or perhaps should not do; and that we shall continue to evaluate each request in the light of circumstances, but not always with a clear conscience.

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