Business Archives and Museum Development

By WALTER J. HEACOCK

Eleutherian Mills–Hagley Foundation

I SUPPOSE there are members of the Society of American Archivists whose interests in manuscripts are satisfied when the records of a business organization are cataloged and filed away in a destruction-proof, air-conditioned, and hermetically sealed vault, just as there are librarians who glory in orderly rows of books, unbroken by the disruptive intrusion of readers. But these are rare birds, as are their counterparts in the museum world whose devotion to artifacts of the past extends no further than the acquisition of objects and their safe storage. For most of us collecting is not an end in itself. We assume, I believe, that the things we collect—whether books, manuscripts, art, or artifacts—have value and that they can and should make some contribution to man's well-being, his enlightenment, inspiration, or esthetic pleasure.

I have been asked to comment on the contributions that business archives can make and have made to the development of museums. I doubt that this possible use of such records has bulked very large in the thinking of archivists, but perhaps they will be pleased to know that ledgers, journals, and business correspondence have proved to be prime source materials for the preservation and restoration of industrial sites, for the design and construction of dioramas and models, and especially for the interpretation of business and industrial history through signs and labels, trained docents, and publications.

Just over 10 years ago I became involved in the development of a historic site and industrial museum on the banks of the Brandywine in Delaware. Our experience and our dependence upon the type of records in which this group is interested may be of some general interest; and so most of my comments will be based upon the Hagley Museum, with some examples thrown in from other institutions of which I have some knowledge.

The Eleutherian Mills–Hagley Foundation came into being as a result of the 150th anniversary celebration of E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Co. With 185 acres of land on which stood—in various stages of repair—some two dozen structures related to

This paper was read on Oct. 6, 1964, at a session of the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Austin, Tex.

powder manufacture, and with an operating endowment a small staff started to work—first to develop a plan for the appropriate use of the resources entrusted to the foundation and then to put that plan into operation. The plan embraced the Brandywine Valley and the industrial history of an area that at the end of the 18th century could boast more mills and a greater diversity of products than any other community in America. The story of our corporate sponsor's growth would be told in historical context.

In addition to owning the birthplace of the Du Pont Co. and the remains of its early operations, we were given custody of the company's voluminous archives for its first hundred years of operation, plus smaller collections from more recent periods. A few items of these archives were suitable as display material—early drawings of the mills, the Act of Association establishing the powder business, a letter from Mr. Jefferson ordering blasting powder for Monticello. But hidden away in the numerous volumes and file boxes were the facts we needed—waiting to be extracted by the skilled researcher.

Although our project cannot in its entirety be called a restoration, a considerable amount of time, effort, and money have been expended in the authentic rehabilitation of some of our buildings. How have the company archives helped in this work? I should like to suggest only a few of the direct contributions that those records have made to our work with stone and mortar, with bricks and timbers and hardware:

1. *E. I. du Pont's Prospectus for a Powder Mill:* Drawn up before the construction of the powder manufactory, this document summarizes the expected construction costs, operating expenses, potential market, and expected profits. The prospectus provided a wealth of detail about the buildings and equipment, as well as a valuable insight into the personality and business acumen of the founder. As a forecast it also supplied an interesting comparison with the actual costs, which turned out to be higher, and the actual profits, which were less than anticipated.

2. *E. I. du Pont's Mill Drawings:* Having worked under Lavoisier in the French powder works, young du Pont had considerable background for the new business that he established in 1802. The company records include a number of detailed drawings of buildings and equipment used in powder-making. His letters refer to various contemporary sources of information, and we have also a bibliography, prepared for him, of all the articles on powder-making in the transactions of the British Royal Society from 1665 through the 18th century. The drawings have answered questions both for full-scale preservation and restoration and for the construction of working models.

3. *Bills and Account Books:* These records produced considerable wheat

as well as a lot of chaff. We know the type of nails and hardware bought for the mills and for the family dwelling, which is still standing on the museum property, and also the sources and the prices of these items. We know the kinds of wood required for various purposes and the colors of the paints used. The records show the regular purchase of candles and of whale oil—and so we know the appropriate lighting fixtures. And we know when the change was made to kerosene or coal oil.

The record of bills and accounts sometimes disproves long-held traditions. For example, adjacent to the du Pont family residence is a small stone office building believed to have been built by the founder and used by him in conducting the business. The records show conclusively that E. I. du Pont conducted the business from the residence, and that the office was not built until 3 years after his death. Not a world-shaking discovery, but perhaps any victory for truth and authenticity is worth recording.

The museum exhibits include a number of dioramas, working models, talking maps, and other audiovisual devices. Each exhibit is supported by a research report, and these reports in turn are based on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including miscellaneous business records. In the actual construction of models additional information is always necessary. Questions from our exhibits staff go to the research staff, to determine from the records if a particular building was constructed of wood or stone, if its equipment was powered by water wheel or turbine, or exactly how the inside of a powder dryhouse should be detailed. Here are some examples:

1. *Flour Mill Models:* Flour milling is one of the industries with which we are concerned. For background information we have turned to the business records and family papers of the Quaker millers who turned the lower Brandywine into the largest flour-producing center in America. The records were scattered. For example, we learned that Henry Seidel Canby, a direct descendant of one of the first Brandywine millers, had turned his ancestor's milling records over to the Yale University Library. He kindly withdrew them temporarily for our use. From these and other records we were able to build models and prepare texts that we believe to be correct.

2. *Powder Mill Models:* In a separate building on the museum property is a series of working models detailing every step in the production of black powder. I think anyone unfamiliar with the preparation of good museum exhibits would be quite surprised by the meticulous concern with authenticity, and in achieving this the company archives have been very helpful.

Two of the three ingredients of black powder were imported—saltpeter from India and sulfur from Sicily. From the account books and from the file of correspondence with agents and importers we have gleaned details for our immediate use as well as information about international trade in the early

19th century. The third ingredient was willow charcoal, and our records indicate that the gathered willow branches were a regular spring "crop" for the farmers in the region. The records tell us, of course, a great deal more than we need to know, but they enable us to document the information we give our visitors in three-dimensional exhibits and in text panels.

3. *The Conditions of Labor:* For an exhibit dealing with the workingman in 19th-century America secondary sources can supply most of the general information, but from Du Pont Co. petty ledgers, rent books, and letters and those of other companies in the area we get a well-documented picture of local working conditions, hours and wages, early safety regulations, and incipient plans for employee benefits. One interesting discovery was a detailed time-and-motion study of the powder operations, made by Lammot du Pont years before Frederick W. Taylor introduced scientific industrial management to American business.

As I have indicated earlier, a museum is more than a storehouse of relics, a cultural deep freeze. The collection must be exhibited and interpreted. In museological parlance "interpretation" means relating objects and exhibits to something within the experience of the visitor or translating the museum's story into meaningful terms. This is achieved, or at least attempted, through carefully designed exhibits, through text panels and labels, through trained guides or docents, through publications, and by radio and television. It is especially through publications, radio, and television that a museum increases its audience beyond the confines of its building. The role of research in planning and constructing exhibits has been described, but the research reports have a second life. Dozens of articles based in part on these reports by the museum staff have appeared in learned journals, and a series of booklets on Brandywine industries is now being planned. In the past 10 years more than 40 percent of the articles appearing in the biannual magazine *Delaware History* have been written by museum staff members and Hagley Fellows.

In conjunction with the University of Delaware, the Hagley Museum sponsors a 2-year Master's program, and a number of the theses that have resulted have been outstanding. Most of these monographs have dealt with aspects of the business and industries of the mid-Atlantic region. The business archives in our foundation library have been the principal collection used in this research, but other similar collections were consulted. A random selection of theses by Hagley Fellows includes: "The Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad, 1831–1840," "A Wilmington Merchant, 1770–1810," "The Irish in Industrial Wilmington, 1800–1845," and "The Brandywine Mills: A Chronicle of an Industry, 1762–1816."

That business archives have proved valuable to an industrial museum is, after all, not really very surprising. But other museums have turned to such collections for aid. A few miles distant from the Hagley Museum is the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, a fabulous collection of American decorative art. Sometime ago I asked the curator, John Sweeney, if Winterthur had found business records useful in any way, and he immediately gave me more examples than I can cite here. But these few will suggest the records' usefulness in reconstructing and decorating period rooms:

1. *The Dominy Family Papers:* Several years ago the Winterthur Museum acquired the tools and shop equipment of a family of East Hampton cabinetmakers that flourished from 1765 to 1868. The family accounts and business records were also received, and these were used in reconstructing the shop in the museum. The accounts provided the names of customers, making it possible to trace objects made by the Dominy family. The accounts, together with the collection of tools, provided the base for interpreting the reconstructed shop and also for a publication now in preparation.

2. *The Wister Family Papers:* These include the order books, accounts, and correspondence of a prominent Philadelphia merchant active in the second half of the 18th century. The quantities of textiles ordered from English and Continental sources enabled the museum staff to verify the type of materials that should be used for upholstery, curtains, and costumes in the period rooms.

3. *The Thomas and John Banister Papers:* This collection, owned by the Newport Historical Society, includes the personal and business records of John Banister, from whose country house two rooms and a facade have been removed to the museum. The accounts contain references to the materials used in the construction of the house, payments to craftsmen, and furniture acquired for the interior. As Banister was an importer, his business records include numerous references to furnishings acquired for 18th-century American houses.

My remarks have demonstrated, if nothing else, the dependence of museums on library and archival collections. The Winterthur Museum, to which I have just referred, has become a center for the study of decorative arts; and its outstanding collections of furniture, silver, fabrics, and china are matched by an outstanding library containing the records of early craftsmen and merchants.

The Merrimac Valley Textile Museum has an important collection of woolen industry records. Finding such materials essential in planning their exhibits, the museum staff made a concerted effort to ferret out from attics and basements, barns and storerooms, all over New England, the business records of the numerous woolen mills of the region. They now expect their archival materials to draw scholars as their exhibits attract the general public.

Museologist, librarian, archivist—we all have a common interest in the preservation of the past. Some books, manuscripts, and artifacts are of such obvious value that no one questions their importance. But account books, business ledgers, and the correspondence of a miller or a merchant are not always so highly esteemed. These business archives, however, often provide the essential documentation not only for the economic historian but also for the museum director.

Preservation—and Conservation

The skeleton dimensions [of a whale] I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what untattooed parts might remain—I did not trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter into a congenial admeasurement of the whale.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale*, ch. CII.