

Shorter Features

CHRISTOPHER BEAM, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NLT), Washington, DC 20408.

The American Brass Company: A Case Study of the Disposition of Business Records

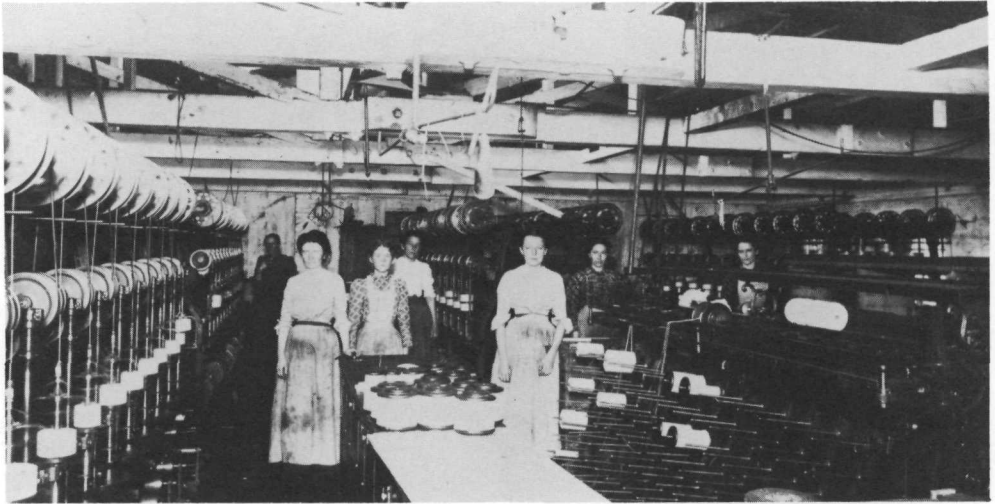
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A MAJOR PROBLEM FOR THE ARCHIVIST of a large corporation is the disposition of the historically valuable records of a subsidiary. The subsidiary may predate the parent organization by many decades, and its operations and records may be located at some distance from corporate headquarters. The requirements of preservation and availability to researchers may justify

consolidation of these materials with the records of the larger enterprise. Such a merger, however, often places the corporate archivist in the unenviable position of removing the last vestige of a local industry that had touched the lives of many generations of residents in the region.

The archivists of Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) faced this sensitive

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Interior of the wire mills, Ansonia Brass & Copper Company, part of American Brass, 1899. Corporate Archives, Atlantic Richfield Company.

problem in the spring of 1981. The former American Brass Company had been headquartered in the Naugatuck River Valley of Connecticut, an important center of brass manufacturing for almost one and a half centuries. Beginning with buttons and expanding to kettles, wire, pins, cartridge metal, clock works, hoop skirts, keys, utensils, and metal parts for daguerreotypes, the brass industry in Connecticut produced more than 70 percent of all brass and copper products in the United States in the three decades before World War I.

American Brass became a unit of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in the early 1920s. When Atlantic Richfield acquired Anaconda in 1977, American Brass was renamed the Anaconda Industries division of The Anaconda Company, which is now an operating division of ARCO itself. In 1981 ARCO decided to close the former American Brass offices in Waterbury, Connecticut, and move all current records to ARCO offices in Chicago. The closing of the headquarters of American Brass as well as of other brass manufacturers in central Connecticut in the last two years

marked the end of an era of brass production that had begun just after the American Revolution.

The archives of ARCO were established in 1979 in Los Angeles as part of the company's public affairs division. Stacks, work space, offices, and a reading room with an exhibition area cover 5,600 square feet, 2,600 of which are stack areas with temperature and humidity control. The staff of two professional archivists with the aid of outside consultants works with an advisory committee of members from the corporation's legal, public affairs, and administrative services offices. A company-wide records management program, begun in 1970, is supervised by the administrative services division. Modern equipment includes a vacudyne fumigator and multimedia research and duplication facilities.

The ARCO archives received a request in spring 1981 to help dispose of approximately 500 square feet of the noncurrent records of American Brass. Within a month two consultants for the archives visited the Waterbury offices. A preliminary list of the noncurrent

records had been made. These included a librarian's ephemeral file, discarded boxes of printed material from the research and development building, and stacks of framed pictures in the basement. The vault on the main floor contained important records and photographs of all types, including daguerreotypes, albumens, and silver prints that had survived periods of economic depression and natural disaster. The archivists also used histories of the brass industry and the company, written by retirees Clark S. Judd and Russell H. Pope, that referred to specific records. In almost every case the volume or document was found. Photographic images of officials and workers, fabrication methods and machinery, and office and mill sites supplemented written descriptions of the company's operations.

Appraisal took almost a week and reduced the material of historical importance to 58 packing boxes including 22 from the library ephemeral file. Oversize volumes and photographs were crated separately. The material selected as having historical value consisted of:

Minutes of meetings	Personnel files and directories
Financial journals	Patent files
Stockholder records	Trademark materials
Annual reports	Blueprints
Organization charts	Scrapbooks of newspaper clippings
Photographs	Collections of letterheads
Price catalogs	Stock certificates
Price lists	Sample products of the brass industry.

Unfortunately, little administrative correspondence had been preserved. The

earliest book was a ledger kept from 1823 to 1829 by Aaron Benedict, an early manufacturer of buttons. The records after 1850 were fairly complete and included those of the American Brass Company and other brass manufacturers in Connecticut and other states. The material had been collected primarily by the company librarians and administrative secretaries and detailed the formation of the first trade association in the United States, as well as labor relations, business transactions, and employee regulations. An excerpt from the minute book of the American Brass Company for 15 July, 1903, for instance, describes the reduction of Saturday work hours and provides a glimpse into early labor relations:

[The work week will be] 55 hours per wk., ten hours each Monday to Friday inclusive and five hours on Saturday. The rate of pay will be the same for 55 hours full service rendered as it is now for the present number of hours per week [60 hours]. No time will be allowed unless full 55 hours of service is rendered. We hope that this action on the part of the Company for the comfort and wellbeing of its employees will be appreciated and their service will be such as to warrant this change of hours.

The consulting archivists then conducted a search for a suitable repository for the material. Priority was given to finding an archives in a nearby geographical area based upon the following criteria:

- A well organized repository whose future operation was assured.
- A logical place where researchers would look for the material.
- Ample storage space for a collection of this size.
- Environmental control system and adequate security.
- A trained staff familiar with estab-

lished archival principles.

- A reading room with regular hours for researchers and appropriate finding aids.
- Resources to process the collection within a year.

The local museum had good exhibition space but a small storage and work area and had no archivist on the staff. The local public library did not collect primary sources. The nearby private university with an outstanding archives no longer collected nineteenth-century business records. The special collections department of the state university had a trained archivist and ample storage space but lacked a temperature and humidity control system and an adequate staff for processing.

The archivists decided that the materials could best be preserved and made available for research at the ARCO archives in California. In reaching this conclusion they recognized that

employees of the American Brass Company, residents of the Naugatuck River Valley, and archivists at local repositories had a strong and legitimate desire to keep the industry's records in the region. The consulting archivists addressed these concerns in a number of ways. Local ephemera and duplicate copies of printed material and photographs were given to the museum in Waterbury. Copies of the records inventory were promised to the local historical and archival repositories within a year. In addition, the consulting archivists proposed that a microform copy of the collection be donated to a repository in Connecticut. The archivists of Atlantic Richfield Company believe this program for the disposition of the records of the American Brass Company will satisfy both the need for adequate preservation and access and the demands of local history as well.