The Harvard University Archives: Goal and function

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The Harvard University Archives: 
Goal and Function

A POPULAR definition of the word 'archive' would probably be something like this: 'A collection of old things, to which the adjectives "dusty" or "musty" are always applied.' Indeed the term is in danger of becoming synonymous with the word 'collection,' particularly with a miscellaneous collection of manuscripts. There is a natural tendency on the part of universities to combine their archives with their general manuscript collections because the material with which the two deal is largely of the same physical kind, although the purposes and use of the two are entirely different, and no curators trained in both fields are yet available. There is one institution which refers to itself as an 'Archive of Photographs.' Any good archive will indeed contain photographs, and the archive of a photograph company might consist largely of them, but not any collection of old pictures, manuscripts, or printed matter is an archive. From a professional point of view, an archive is the records of the activity of an organization. An archive is the shadow of an organization and owes its being to it. When the archivist acquires material relating to an institution other than his own, he regards it as an unpleasant intrusion and is in haste to be rid of it.

An archive closely resembles a library in that it consists of printed matter, film, photographs, and manuscripts, and for purpose of convenience is commonly connected with a library. The Librarian of Harvard College has usually been the University Archivist, and today the University Archives functions happily as a branch of the Harvard College Library. However, a library is a collection, or series of collections, of material from diverse sources relating to particular subjects. As long as the material relates to his subject, the librarian does not care what its origin. The archivist, however, is a rigid legitimist; to him his material acquires its importance from the fact of its origin, although not necessarily its immediate origin, for it may through ignorance, carelessness, or theft have passed from the hands of the parent institution to those of another institution or of a private individual. Indeed, origin ordinarily dictates even the arrangement of material on the archive.

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shelves, with the papers of subordinate bureaus and departments dutifully following in the order of their relation, one to the other. This type of arrangement is no mere whim of the archivist, for by reflecting the structure of the institution it presents information often important to the user of the records.

The archive, therefore, consists primarily of the official records of the parent institution. At Harvard the Archives long consisted of the minutes of the Corporation, the Overseers, and the Faculty, with selected miscellaneous papers. The growth of the University, with the resulting delegation of functions to departmental offices, has now reached the point at which the record-accumulating agencies are numbered in the hundreds. From time to time over the past century and a half the various administrative bodies of the University have directed that one or another class of archival material be preserved in the College Library, and on 6 February 1939 the Corporation provided for the preservation, or for the destruction after certain specified formalities, of all archival material, including minutes, correspondence, business records, and all printed or otherwise duplicated material prepared for official use. These provisions cover the records of divisions, departments, museums, laboratories, and every other official agency of the University, including the administrative functions of members of the teaching staff. No comparable institution has such a broad rule as this, which has been necessitated by the loose and irregular structure of the University. It has, for example, been found on occasion that the University is apparently bound by agreements the only records of which have disappeared with the correspondence file of the temporary head of some academic department. Of course it is by no means possible or desirable to keep all of the records of such an institution as this, so certain classes of business records which have legal but no historical value are, after arrangements between department heads and the Archives, destroyed when six years old.

An archivist is an historian in a very special sense. The reason for his existence is not the advancement of human knowledge, but the performance of a useful service for the institution which employs him. The institution does not pay him to preserve records because of their historical value to miscellaneous posterity, but because the records will be useful to the institution itself in the future. Consequently most universities lock their records in the vaults of the administrative offices, and some even refuse access to them to the graduate secretary who
bears the title of ‘archivist.’ Harvard, recognizing that it possesses a
storehouse of material for the history of education unrivalled even
among its older sisters of Europe, has taken a more generous attitude.
The Corporation, by a vote passed on 7 March 1938, ruled that those
portions of the strictly archival material more than fifty years old
shall be opened to qualified scholars for good reasons. Each applica-
tion for use must be approved by the Director of the University Library
or by the officer directly in charge of the Archives, and permission to
quote or publish must be obtained from or through one of these officers.
In general the purely archival material cannot be used for mere prac-
tice research. However, these restrictions apply only to the purely
archival material in the Harvard Archives, and not to the supplementary
collections, discussed later, which represent the chief interest of the
ordinary visitor.

Quite as important for some purposes as the official records of the
University are those of college classes, regional Harvard clubs, and
student organizations. The classes are treated for all purposes as official
agencies of the University. The cuts used in the senior albums are
stored in the Archives until needed for the twenty-fifth anniversary
report, and the correspondence of the secretaries is carefully preserved.
In so far as possible, the student clubs and societies are induced to
accept similar services by the University Archives. The larger organiza-
tions, such as the Crimson, have taken full advantage of these facilities.
Of course the purpose of the Archives is selfish — such records have
great historical value, particularly to biographers. The use of the rec-
ords of active organizations is under the same restrictions as are applied
to the official archives of the University, but with a few exceptions
the records of extinct organizations are open for public use.

The Harvard periodicals, both official and unofficial, form a group
which squarely straddles the gap between library and archive. One file
of each publication is kept as the official set which is a part of the
archive of the issuing agency, while a second file is available for public
use in the Archives reading room.

Another marginal type of material is the papers of the teaching and
administrative officers of the University. Clearly the office correspond-
ence of a dean or a department head is part of the archive of his office,
but in the files of most officials there is a mixture of University archives,
of archival material of other institutions, and of purely personal papers.
Some State archives when faced with this problem have ruled that the
individual who accumulated the file, or his administrative successor, must make the decision as to what is to be kept in the archive. The experience of the Harvard Archives indicates that no worse practice, short of the destruction of all such files, could be followed. Periodically a communication is addressed to all officers of administration or instruction who have Corporation appointments without limit of time, asking them to send to the Archives the segments of their files which they would ordinarily destroy, and in their wills to instruct their executors to turn over the remainder of their papers. The sections of their papers relating to their administrative duties are placed in the sections reserved for the archives of their offices, those relating to other institutions are, with the permission of the executors, offered to those institutions, and the personal material is placed in a collection of the manuscripts of Harvard officers. Here they are, under the Corporation vote of 7 March 1938, rather safer from consultation and misuse by unauthorized persons than they would be in private hands, for the family rarely has the means to judge the people who ask permission to consult such papers. In general, they are considered as sealed for fifty years, but they may properly be used for certain purposes, for example to enable a colleague to take up the thread of correspondence with some foreign scholar. Families are permitted to lay any reasonable restrictions upon such papers, which are in any event covered by the very severe public law regarding literary rights. Commonly it is found convenient for the family to designate someone as official biographer or literary executor.

The importance of such papers for historical research, after the passage of a generation or two has made it possible to open them to scholars, can hardly be exaggerated. Indeed, the families of Harvard officers who died years ago frequently turn over the remains of their papers because of the importunities of scholars who would consult them. The use of the papers of Harvard officers of a century or more ago is frequent, but they, like the modern manuscripts, are under regulations calculated to protect literary rights and personal susceptibilities and to screen out individuals engaged in practice research. The official policy of the University is to discourage the non-essential use of these personal papers, as indeed of all archival manuscripts, but there is sufficient official use and really important scholarly demand for them to keep them busy.

Personal papers, like office records, are more useful if sent to the
Archives without rearrangement. The retired professor and the well-meaning executor by their changes in the original filing system frequently destroy useful historical evidence, and indeed sometimes ruin collections entirely. Frequently the kindly University officer draws from his file ‘interesting’ papers and sends them to the Archives, a practice to be discouraged because the members of the Archives staff, observing the general fifty-year rule on the consultation and use of manuscripts, can only shelve such papers to await the eventual arrival of the remainder of the file, when they are restored to the original position, if it can be determined. Quite different is the highly desirable practice of transferring an active file a segment at a time to the Archives, where it is progressively restored to its original form.

At this point, more than at any time in archival administration, two principles come in conflict. In general, the archivist, knowing the fallibility of human judgment, avoids so far as possible the painful necessity of deciding what to reject. The experience of the past makes him want to keep every record. However, the past, with its relatively few forms of record keeping, is not to be compared with the present, with its voluminous documentation. Even if he were not driven by problems of space to select and reject, the archivist would be brought to do so in order to winnow down his accumulations to the point where they are usable. The keeping of useless material is wrong because it wastes the time of historians and sometimes entirely discourages their efforts.

Although the archivist does not dare to sanction the sorting from a correspondence file of letters which may seem unimportant to him, he knows that he must for practical reasons exclude certain kinds of material which are encountered in personal files. Most printed matter, for example, will be found duplicated in the archive of the issuing agent. Again, in the Harvard Archives the manuscripts of unfinished works and research notes are a serious problem. In many cases, the progress of knowledge renders the life of the utility of these materials too short to justify their retention, while in others the intrinsic quality may represent a decline from the earlier work of their authors. A usual solution is to send such research material to the libraries of the departments which can best judge their immediate value. The prices which collectors pay for the manuscripts of the great of the literary world often tempt librarians to accept the manuscripts of the printed works of the great scholars of their generation, but this sort of speculation in literary values, or sentimental accumulation of objects of purely asso-
ciational value, has no place in the well-ordered archive. On the other hand, more strictly biographical material is of great importance, for it is to the Archives that the biographers of Harvard men turn first. In connection with this, the archivist laments the passing of the custom of keeping diaries, which are the most generally useful private manuscripts in his keeping.

Frequently the Archives Department is offered the manuscripts of graduates who were not officers of the University. Unless these papers relate to the institution in some way, they cannot be accepted. Student notes or correspondence may be of great utility, but the moment the man graduates, his letters, in general, cease to have archival value. Letters of John Adams during his presidency would be rejected, while the record of the Cambridge impressions of the lowliest freshman would be welcomed. The appropriate place for important non-Harvard manuscripts is the Houghton Library.

Many of the smaller colleges collect not only the manuscripts of their graduates but their printed works. For a small institution this practice is justifiable, but for a university like Harvard such a practice is unreasonable as well as physically impossible of achievement. As a common denominator, Harvard authorship is meaningless. It would be about as significant to make a collection of books in red bindings. And as no collection should be made unless the criterion of inclusion is reasonable, so no collection should be begun unless there is reasonable chance of making it complete enough, or representative enough, to be useful. Years ago Harvard did begin a collection of the printed works of all its graduates. A half century ago the goal had become so unobtainable that the collection was restricted to the works of Harvard professors. Even this was abandoned, and the collection broken up a few years ago because it had become a meaningless and expensive duplication of material which existed elsewhere in the Library. In a limited exception to the rule against collecting the printed works of Harvard officers, such officers are periodically reminded to send to the Archives two copies of all reprints or offprints of their articles which appear in periodicals. These are not kept permanently, but after the author's death are sent in the general collection, where they are usually bound and shelved by subject.

Personal manuscripts are not the only ones to compel the university archivist to make exception to the general rules regarding the arrangement of his material according to its source. At Harvard, curriculum
material has been arranged primarily according to year and subject. The system of numbering provides space under each year for the official announcement regarding each subject or course, for the teachers’ lecture notes used in that course, for sets of students’ notes, and for outside comment relating to the teaching of that subject or course. Numbering makes it possible to segregate quickly material relating to any particular subject. In practice, teaching notes are often so illegible as not to be worth keeping, yet good student notebooks are numerous. With these are kept occasional samples of themes, term papers, and examination blue books. In the Archives are also the official files of prize papers, honors theses, Commencement parts, and doctoral dissertations, which provide a large part of the reading room use.

Any archive will find invaluable a historical collection relating to the parent institution. Indeed, most university archives correspond more nearly to the Harvard Archives’ collection of books relating to Harvard than to a true, functioning archive. Here in the Harvardiana collection is the obvious place for every kind of material, regardless of source, relating to the past of the University. This collection makes it possible to answer the letters which pour in every conceivable question about the past of the University and about its graduates, collective and individual. The staff of the Archives endeavor to answer every reasonable question of this sort, and most departments of the University make a practice of shunting to the Archives all such inquiries. Both University officials and others frequently express surprise that the staff are willing to undertake to answer questions of this sort, but it is obvious that from the point of view of both University administration and public relations there should be such a clearing house for information, and it is equally obvious that the Archives Department is the section of the University best situated to afford this service.

In many universities the archives and the alumni offices are united. At Harvard the active alumni records are kept by the Alumni Directory Office and those of a historical nature are kept by the Archives. Thus the records of individual service in the Second World War which are being compiled under the direction of the Alumni Directory Office will be placed in the Archives with similar records of other wars when they are completed. The University at one period tried to have all notices relating to Harvard men clipped from the current newspapers, but the duplication which was unavoidable made the practice uneconomical. The Archives maintains a clipping file with a folder for each
Harvard man, and is very glad to have for it any ephemeral material relating to ordinarily obscure men, but distinctly does not want material relating to prominent graduates whose sphere of activity is not the University.

In general the Archives Department does not want association material unless it has exhibition value. It does not, for example, want pieces of goal posts, but it does find useful an occasional ancient round football or leather football uniform. An example of the dubious material which must be kept until there is a museum of Harvard history is the undershirt worn by President Dunster when an infant.

It has been urged by some offices that the Archives Department suggest standard methods of record keeping for at least the minor departments of the University. There is this to be said for the suggestion, that systems in use in the University vary from the most wonderfully efficient and mechanical to medieval ones or none at all. With the help of the Printing Office and the Purchasing Agent, the Archives Department approved standards for the paper used in making carbon copies of letters, but the optional use of this paper is as far as the University has gone in the standardization of record keeping. The Archives Department keeps an inventory of most files of current records in University offices, which serves to some degree as a substitute for standardization. The Medical School and the Graduate School of Business Administration have expressed a desire to set up their own archives, so they have not as yet been incorporated into the system which now covers the rest of the University. As long as the material is preserved and is serviced so that information can be obtained from it, there is no practical objection to a diversity of systems.

The Harvard University Archives exists not simply to preserve, but to serve. It assures the preservation of the records of the University and performs the function of finding data in them, a very specialized task. It serves as a library for all kinds of material relating to Harvard, for doctoral dissertations, prize papers, official and student publications, and examination papers. For both Harvard itself and for the general public it performs a general information service relating to the past of the University and its graduates. As wide as is its aim, it comes very near to accomplishing it. In the second issue of the Bulletin there will be an account of the material which comprises the University Archives and its supplementary collections.

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