

PACSCL/CLIR "Hidden Collections" Project

Temple University Barnes Club

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Lindsay invited us to speak to you today about our project -- the PACSCL Hidden Collections Processing Project -- who we are, what we are doing, and most important, what it means to you. Let me start off by saying that our project is little difficult to explain. It has a lot of different components to it - most of which are would be more significant to a room full of archivists. I have tried to break it down here as best I can, and to focus more on aspects of the project that I felt a roomful of historians would be most interested in.

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We are conducting our project under the auspices of PACSCL, which is the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries.

Since I started to work on this project, I have come to realize that few people know what PACSCL is. I think it's important to start by telling you a little bit about that organization.

To put it in the most basic terms, PACSCL, is a cooperative group of special collections libraries with shared goals for their special collections. (And by special collections, I mean manuscripts, archives, rare books, photographs, that sort of thing). PACSCL was founded in 1985, with 16 member libraries. Today, there are 35 member libraries, including Temple University, Drexel University, University of Pennsylvania, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, The Library Company of Philadelphia, Independence Seaport Museum and many others. Collectively, the 35 repositories house approximately four million rare books, two hundred sixty thousand linear feet of manuscripts and archival materials, and nine million photographs, maps and works of art on paper. So, this is all to say that there is A LOT of archival stuff here in Philadelphia!

I want to clarify that PACSCL is not a repository in and of itself, and it does not own any collections. Since 1985, representatives from each of its member libraries have come together and developed numerous projects to promote their individual collections and make them more accessible to the public. The idea is by working together and, at times, sharing resources, the repositories are stronger and better able to accomplish their goals than they would be alone.

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The Hidden Collections Processing Project is the most recent PACSCL developed initiative. PACSCL

received \$500,000 from the Council on Library and Information Resources Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Initiative (That's a mouthful, so I'll refer to this initiative as CLIR, C-L-I-R, from now on). We received the money to process and make accessible for research approximately 200 HIDDEN COLLECTIONS of manuscripts and archives in 23 PACSCL repositories.

We have 27 months to finish the work, if you know anything about archives, you know this is no small task, and we plan to wrap up next August.

Just as an aside, you may be interested to know that the CLIR Hidden Collections initiative is a nationwide program and we are just one of dozens of projects being conducted all over the United States to expose hidden special collections. You can find out more about other hidden collections projects by visiting CLIR's website, which I will show you again at the end of the presentation.

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Since I assume you are not archivists, you may be asking yourself right now: "what are hidden collections?" Hidden collections are unprocessed or under-processed collections, in our case, of archival materials -- basically, they are NOT considered to be research ready.

Because they are considered not research ready, archivists usually do not advertise these collections to the researching public, which is why they are considered hidden.

Hidden collections are not unique to Philadelphia, there are 1000s of hidden collections across the United States, and probably around the world.

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Collections are considered NOT research ready for a lot of really good reasons.

One of the main reasons is because frequently hidden collections are not in good intellectual or physical shape to be used by researchers. What I mean by intellectual is that there is no way for a researcher to learn what is in a collection. By physical, I mean that the actual papers are either too messy and difficult to navigate or are too fragile to be handled in their current state.

Another reason is that often the archivists themselves do not know what exactly is in the collection. It's important to note here that some of these collections have been accessioned for decades. In fact, in more than one instance we found collections that were accessioned well over 100 years ago. Often, there isn't a lot of information regarding what, how or why materials were collected.

The bottom line is, if the current archivists do not know what is in the collection, they do not know what

to promote about a collection.

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Now you may be asking yourself, “why can’t the archivist just go and find out what is in a collection?”

Traditionally, making a collection research ready, or processing a collection, is a very time consuming, labor intensive process, which involves careful review and arrangement of materials, rehousing collections in acid free folders and boxes, painstakingly removing staples, paper clips and other damaging metal fasteners, and creating a fairly detailed inventory, or finding aid, of the collection.

As a result of this process, as well as many archivists’ tendency to acquire, rather than see papers potentially thrown away in the garbage, repositories collect faster than they can process, and end up with what we call a processing back log. And this is where the hidden collections are. Back logs in most repositories are massive and overwhelming, and archivists do their best to chip away at them, frequently with limited staff and financial resources.

BUT, despite all this - the question we as a profession have started to ask ourselves is, if no one knows these collections exist, they do not get used, and if they are not able to be used by anyone, **what’s the point in keeping them?**

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So, I think the answer to that question is that we keep the materials because we know they are valuable - informationally speaking.

And over the past 5 years or so, PACSCL has worked to help repositories deal with their backlogs of hidden collections, with the ultimate goal being to un-hide hidden collections and make them accessible to the researching public.

From 2006 to 2008, PACSCL conducted a survey of some 2000 hidden collections in 22 PACSCL repositories, which provided a brief description of the contents of each of the hidden collections and ranked them for their research value. The survey records are available publicly, and I will share that website with you at the end of the presentation.

In the Hidden Collections Processing project, as I said earlier, we are processing and making fully accessible 200 of the highest ranking collections from the survey project.

To clarify, processing is the act of arranging an archival collection, providing archival quality housing for

the collection and describing the collection, or writing a finding aid. A finding aid is a catalog of the collection that communicates to users what is in the collection and how to locate specific materials in the collection quickly and easily.

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Like I said earlier, 200 collections in 27 months is no small task – it's near impossible, in fact.

In order to complete the project we are experimenting in a few ways.

For the first experiment, we are testing the limits and effectiveness of a less intensive type of archival processing introduced by two archivists, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, back in 2005. "More Product, Less Process," or MPLP, as their method has been named, argues that providing access to collections is most important and that many of the time intensive tasks thought to be essential in archival processing are, in fact, not necessary at all, at least not initially. Greene and Meissner recommended their method for business records that were created during the 20th century, but we are testing its effectiveness on collections of all types, dating from the 17th to the 20th centuries. In doing so, we are able to process collections in a fraction of the time ordinarily thought necessary.

The second experiment is that we are training graduate students to conduct a majority of the processing work.

And, we are using the Archivist's Toolkit, which is a newly developed, open source database software that has been designed especially for archival collections.

Hopefully, all of this work will result in a methodology or approach that archivists can use directly, or adapt to suit their unique needs, to help eliminate archival backlog in their repositories.

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So, the gist of it all is that we are making archival collections research ready...

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...And easier to find.

The final component of our project is a central finding aid web site, in which finding aids from all 23 repositories will be made available.

Our finding aid site was developed and hosted by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, and we are eternally grateful to that development team, because they did a fantastic job!

Currently, finding aids from 8 repositories are available on the site, but we are adding to it all the time!

I want to clarify that we are not digitizing collections, and that there are NO digital surrogates of records available here... at least for the time being. Digitization is a possibility for the future, but probably not for many years.

We are very excited about the site for a couple of reasons. The obvious reason being that it enables searching in multiple repositories at the same time -- and after processing archives across Philadelphia over the past year, the value of this capability has only become more apparent.

The main reason is that we have found related collections all over the city. The Wister family, which is an old Philadelphia Quaker family, is the most obvious and best example of this. Just in case you do not know who the Wisters are, the family patriarch Casper Wister, who lived from 1761 to 1818, was a Philadelphia physician and the author of the first American anatomy text book. Another famous Wister, Issac Jones Wister, was a civil war colonel and vice president of Pennsylvania Rail Road, and he founded the Wistar Institute, which is a scientific research center here in Philadelphia. As you can imagine, the Wister family amassed quite a fortune and Casper's and Isacc's descendants have been prominent and involved members of Philadelphia society and culture over the past 200 hundred years.

Papers created by and about members of their extensive family have been found in practically every repository in the city, dating from the 1700s to 1900s.

Another reason is that we have found hidden collections in unexpected locations. Like World War II photographs uncovered at the Academy of Natural Sciences.

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This is what the home page of the site looks like!

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And what it can do, as I said a minute ago, it enables cross-repository searching. Or, you can limit your search to a single repository, if you like.

There is a keyword searching capabilities and faceted searching capabilities.

Is everyone here familiar with faceted searching? Well, basically, you can select as many or as few

facets as you need in order to expand or limit your search results. On our site, you can use the facets to search for specific time periods, subjects, names, within specific repositories, etc. What's nice about the faceted searching, is that the facet categories are pulled directly from the finding aids. This means, as finding aids are added to the site, the facet categories are automatically updated, and that you will never, not get search results.

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To date, we have processed 74 collections in 13 repositories. As you can see from the list here, the repositories really run the gamut in terms of the subject matter you would expect them to collect.

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We have roughly 70 collections to go in 7 additional repositories.

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So, what exactly are we un-hiding for you all? Well, our collections cover dozens of topics that fit into the broader categories listed here. We have worked with institutional and business records, personal and family papers, and government records. There are diaries, letters, financial records, meeting minutes, photographs, architectural drawings and countless other record formats.

Since we are only dealing with collections that received high research value marks during the survey, we've got good and useful papers that pertain to notable and important people or events in United States history!

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Some of our favorite finds include:

One of the first collections we processed was the **American Women's Hospital Service photographs**, which is housed at the Drexel University College of Medicine Archives and Special Collections.

The American Women's Hospitals organization was developed during the First World War, by a group of women doctors who travelled to war ravaged and impoverished areas of Europe and set up medical clinics. They eventually set up clinics in the rural United States, initially to help with general health and nutrition as well as the pellagra epidemic which plagued the southern United States around the 1930s. We processed an amazing collection of photographs that documented their work. What's really great

about this collection is the companion collection of organizational records, also housed at the Drexel College of Medicine.

Lubin Manufacturing Company records is housed at the Free Library of Philadelphia Rare Book and Special Collections department. The Lubin Manufacturing Company was a leading film production company during the silent film era, and was headquartered right here in Philadelphia.

The Samuel George Morton papers is housed at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Morton, who lived from 1799 to 1851, was a physician and natural scientist in Philadelphia whose work focused on the craniometric studies of humans with conclusions regarding the relative intellectual capacities of the “five races.”

Samuel X Radbill papers, housed at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia Historical Medical Library, is a large collection of medical pamphlets and texts that date back to the 1600s. What was truly remarkable about this collection was actually one letter that we found during processing. In 1938, a Jewish, woman physician in Vienna, named Rita Smrcka, wrote to Radbill requesting his help in getting her out of Vienna. Finding this letter prompted some subsequent research, as we were all wondering, hoping, that Radbill did rescue this woman. Apparently, he did try, unfortunately, unsuccessfully, and she was sent to Auschwitz. We did find out that she survived and returned to Vienna after the war. She is written about in a book by a Temple professor named Harriet Pass Freidenreich in 2002.

The **Vaux family** papers at Haverford College contain information on the United States Board of Indian Commissioners during the early nineteenth century. George Vaux, Jr. and his sister Marry Morris Vaux Wolcott were both appointed to the Board of Indian Commissioners, travelling to Native American villages and documenting their visits for over 20 years.

What was proved particularly exciting about this collection was its contemporary relevance. Within the collection, the processors found records related to the U.S. government settlements with the Blackfeet tribe, which were involved in last year’s landmark restitution case that granted Native Americans \$3.4 billion dollars.

Some amazing and noteworthy upcoming collections include the William Penn family papers and the Cox Transportation collection, which contains the records of Philadelphia’s Rapid Transit Company, and both of those collections are housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Ballet records are housed right here at Temple in the Special Collections department. We will also be processing some amazing papers of Presbyterian missionaries, which are located at the Presbyterian Historical Society.

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If you want to learn more about the work we are doing, you will have to visit our website.

In addition to the finding aid site, if you visit our project website, we have a couple of other ways for you to discover what's in the collections we are processing. First, we have an active blog, where our processors share information about the collections as they are being processed. What's been fun about the blog is that the processors are able to be more casual in their approach to describing collections and they often showcase particular aspects of the collection that they liked the best.

In addition, Holly has created a "Collections by Topic" page, where she has grouped collections according to the subjects they cover. From here, you are able to go directly to the blog post about the collection and if the finding aid has been approved and made public, you can go directly to the finding aid for that collection as well.

Below the project website listed at the top of the slide there, is a direct link to our finding aid site. Next is the PACSCL survey website, where you can obtain collection level records for all the collections that were surveyed in 2006-2008. Then I included PACSCL's general website and the CLIR hidden collections project website, in case you are interested in learning more about hidden collections outside of Philadelphia.