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Archives In University Libraries

Robert B. Downs

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View of Lockport, New York, drawn about 1840 by W. Wilson.
Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

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Archives In University Libraries

by Robert B. Downs

Dr. Downs is Dean of Library Administration and Professor of Library Science at the University of Illinois, recipient of the Syracuse University Centennial Medal in 1970, and author of "University Library Problems and Trends" which appeared in the Fall 1970 issue of The Courier.

In relation to Dr. Downs' article, it will be of interest to readers to note that Syracuse University Archives, located in the Library Annex, is an active and integral department of the George Arents Research Library and has been serving the University as its "corporate memory" unofficially for thirty to forty years and officially for more than a decade.

The idea which once prevailed that library collections should be limited to printed materials—principally books and journals— is passé and outdated. The modern research library has broadened its scope to include manuscripts and archives, maps, all types of microforms, documentary films, sound recordings in disc and tape form, prints, and slides. A major new development is data banks on magnetic tape. It could be properly asserted that informational resources in virtually any form belong in a university or other large general research library.

In the case of an archival agency in a university, there are admittedly several different possible methods of organization and administration, any one of which can be operated effectively. Occasionally, the archives are attached to the president's office. If too closely identified with the president, however, departments may be reluctant to deposit confidential files and are likely to screen the records drastically before making any transfers.

A similar objection may be raised concerning another fairly common arrangement, the location of university archives in the office of the academic or administrative vice president. This plan is in effect at about one-half of the principal midwestern universities. The chief advantage is that the archivist gains direct, campus-wide contacts through an office with major administrative responsibilities.

But if we think of archives as simply another type of research materials and the library as the one agency on the campus primarily engaged in providing access to informational sources, it is difficult to question the logic of locating archives in the university library. Also the library is neutral ground. Physically, with its rare book collections, manuscripts, maps, broadsides, photographs, microfilms, and other special collections, the library provides a complex of research materials to which archival resources belong on the basis of form and use. Certainly the convenience of researchers is best served by centralization rather than by the scattering of research resources. Anyone who has had to struggle with the problems of numerous departmental libraries spread over a large campus would doubtless concede that point. On a broader scale we are witnessing the manifold inconveniences to which historians and other researchers are being subjected by the egocentric tendencies of American presidents to scatter their libraries all over the country. A microcosm of that situation is the university campus.

In maintaining that archives should be a unit of the library system, however, one must recognize that the successful development of an archives division in a university library organization requires strong support from the library administration. The director of the library must appreciate the importance of archives, sympathize with and understand the special problems of archival records, allocate adequate financial support, space, and staff to the program, and be ready to delegate authority and responsibility to a professional archivist.

Obviously, a specialist is needed if archives are to be suitably organized and administered. Specialization on a university library staff is, of course, nothing new, with its many experts in languages, subject fields and types of material. In the case of archivists, training in archival methods and techniques is more essential than a degree in library science. Advanced study in history is also a desirable foundation for a good archivist.

Who uses archives? The answer to that question has an important bearing on the matter of location. The recorded users of the University of Illinois Archives last year may be representative. By percentages, 43 per cent were graduate students, 25 per cent were faculty members at Illinois or from elsewhere, 12 per cent were researchers for administrative purposes, and the remainder were research assistants, undergraduates, and the public. About three-fourths of the total use was for dissertations, historical research for publication, and student course papers. The centennial history of the University, the first volume of which has been published, is based mainly on the Archives. Often, persons drawing upon archives complement and supplement them with materials in other divisions of the Library—another strong argument against separation.

Finally, a few comments on the nature of university archives. First, I would suggest that there should be no separation between archives and manuscripts. They are too closely related in form and function to justify

separate administration, except perhaps in the case of valuable literary manuscripts which may properly be preserved in the rare book division. This point is especially valid if there is no separate manuscript department. Second, university archives should go beyond official records. The preservation of the records of the institution itself I would consider a definite obligation of the library and one that should not be neglected. Otherwise, much ephemeral material will disappear and files will be discarded to save space. In the development of such a collection, three types of material ought to be included. First, there are the publications and official records of the university, comprising, in addition to strictly archival documents, the papers of faculty members, alumni, and others who may have been associated with the institution; catalogs, annual reports, study series, university press imprints, periodicals, newspapers, student yearbooks, and other publications more or less sponsored by the university. Second, materials about the university, such as published histories and biographies, the histories of individual departments, separate periodical articles and newspaper clippings. A third possible division consists of books, offprints, and other publications by members of the faculty, alumni, and students—material otherwise unrelated to the institution. If, for example, the university has distinguished authors among its alumni, it would be appropriate to collect first editions and other writings by and about those individuals.

I am willing to concede that some of these materials are not archival in the traditional sense, but a generous interpretation of what constitutes archives will unquestionably expedite and facilitate the work of patrons of the collection. In that connection, the matter of form is largely irrelevant. Certainly the collection should not be restricted to paper. Perhaps of equal or greater importance in some instances are collections of historical photographs, taped interviews and other sound recordings, and documentary films. All are needed to provide a well-rounded picture of the university. A modern, well-managed university library is set up to deal efficiently with all such types of material.

Looking back on the history of university archives in this country, one can not doubt that in a great majority of institutions they have been treated with neglect. There has been a general lack of concern for such records, with a few notable exceptions, until recent years. As a result, the early history of most American universities and colleges is exceedingly difficult to reconstruct. The negligence can be accounted for in various ways—lack of funds, lack of interest, lack of space, and failure to recognize the significance of archives. But in the period since World War II, university archives have shared in the higher education boom, with full-fledged organizations springing up on many campuses. In part, the movement is a reflection of the coming of age of numerous universities, as they have prepared to celebrate centennials, sesquicentennials and similar events, and have become history-conscious. Certainly, the excellent institutional histories which have come off the press

during the last twenty-five years could not have been written without solid archival foundations.

The ultimate purpose of all archival activity is service to the university itself, to administrators, to historians, and to a variety of other users. I am convinced that these services can be most effectively and economically performed when the work of the university library and the archival agency is closely coordinated.

