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## Outlier Recoveries at the University of Portland Archives and Museum

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# Outlier Recoveries at the University of Portland Archives and Museum

Rev. J. A. Schneibel, CSC, University Archivist, Archives & Artifacts

Our institution is a private, Catholic residential University. Founded in 1901. Enrollment in 1927 when Howard Hall was constructed was 314 high school and collegiate students; today 4000+ undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled.

## Outlier Recoveries

The theme of this article is in praise of data-bases and the art of description. With fulsome gratitude to the compilers of indices. These warm sentiments come out of a case-study problem addressed by the University Archives and Museum in 2019. We received no answer via key-word or thesaurus-based searches through the pages of the primary sources held by our Museum and Archives. The information that anchors the positive solution was discovered in subject-lines of the data-bases compiled by cataloguers, the 'secondary-tools' of research.



Foundation outline, 3<sup>rd</sup> fl. Stairwell, administration bldg.

The University of Portland is a century-old, private, regional Catholic university. Originally we were a 71-acre campus, which was enough for classrooms, administration, transportation, utilities, and even a farm to service the resident community when the school was founded in 1901. In 2017, healthy and growing, we retired a ninety-year old gymnasium and auditorium that had long survived its used-by date, having served through several generations of students.

A new academic center now occupies this prime campus space and former gymnasium site. During the course of site-remediation (re: demolition), the experts suggested, based on their professional experience, that a 1927 public building must surely contain a time-capsule. The inquiry, relayed to our office, is the first hint any of us (okay, the two of us) have had of that interesting possibility. Key-word searches through all electronic files arrive at a blank however. But a transverse search of campus publications discovers an Alumni-Appeal reporting on and extolling the Homecoming Game cornerstone dedication, including the promising mention of a 'treasure box of papers and relics' sealed therein.

At the demolition site, diamond-saws cut into the cornerstone recovering a corroded metal box containing a newspaper of the day, the Registrar's enrollment list of 300 students, and the pulped remains of the 1927 Homecoming Souvenir Program. Brilliant.

The terms *time-capsule* and *treasure box* correlate, but the discovery comes by way of only one of the three contemporaneous notices about the opening of the New Gymnasium. None of which focus on a time-

capsule or memory file. The time-capsule itself appears to have been hastily arranged and most inadequately sealed. The alumni report of a 'treasure box of relics' exaggerating, perhaps, the character of the contents. In fact, the descriptions of the events of that rainy day are dominated by the magnificence of the visiting Archbishop installing and blessing the cornerstone (the featured Homecoming football game ended in defeat for the home team). Finding reference to the time-capsule is itself a treasure hunt.

Second Puzzle, same Site. Completing the landscaping surrounding the new academic building, the grounds crew discovered an obstacle while placing irrigation tubes and filters. There is a stone and mortar outline-foundation at rest just below the surface of the lawn. Where, to all local knowledge, no building has ever stood.

Questions are once more directed to the Archives & University Museum. The story is recovered from building lists, oral histories, publications and photos in the Archives. (The lists have several names of early buildings that did not survive into the historical record.) In 2019, the excavators have found the Bath House, built in 1906 as an auxiliary out-building for the track & field facility; the structure was more lavatory than locker room, later converted into a work-shop, and at the end a storage shed; removed in 1936.

Now in the first puzzle, the leap from time-capsule to treasure-box is not much of a challenge. However, the second puzzle, comprised of grandiose titles and modest ruins, needed the group legacy of a series of archivists to solve two unanswered questions. The discovery of the physical traces was the sole prompt to repair the historical gap around an unidentified building name. 'Bath House' signifies differently today, but even in 1906 it was a generous appellation for a stone lavatory; a mask dividing form and function, cloaking the humble utilitarian structure. Though at the center of campus, the underground footprint of the Bath House somehow dodged all subsequent campus improvements and installations (from steam-lines and modern plumbing, to coaxial internet cable), enduring undisturbed and forgotten. The building was never listed on campus maps, is unlabeled on photos, and earned no feature articles in the alumni newsletter.

And so, wearing a name that is frank misdirection, geography and a stray data-point reference—diligently catalogued, described, recorded— connects-the-dots between an unknown early structure and the stone foundation impeding today's landscapers.

The archives triangulation::

The caution here is that when name and form do not align, a key-word search engine is an inadequate tool. In these two examples, the step from time-capsule to treasure-box is a small intuition, mapping a thesaurus-level language shift; but to unmask the Bath House and arrive at a lavatory-shed asks us to recognize and see through a smiling euphemism masking the genteel modesty of adolescent athletes of an earlier generation. Thanks to hard-nosed data-base descriptions!

Also, we shamelessly converted these questions into self-publicity, putting together photos and text and story for our monthly digital outreach educational Museum posts:



Time-Capsule, 1927-2017

<https://sites.up.edu/museum/campus-archaeology-on-the-shoulders-of-giants/>

<https://sites.up.edu/museum/durable-goods-and-bigger-dreams/>