

Hidden Collections — Asbury University, Archives & Special Collections

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Hidden collections usually refer to un-cataloged or un-processed items that are temporarily inaccessible for researchers due to a variety of reasons. This columnist visits with personnel from different special collections, archives, or museums across the United States of America to gain insights into the challenges and issues of processing unique materials.

For this *Against the Grain* issue, I was able to speak with **Suzanne Gehring**, the Head of Archives & Special Collections from **Asbury University** in Wilmore, Kentucky. **Asbury University** is a four-year, multi-denominational institution and a liberal arts university that is located 20 miles southwest of Lexington, Kentucky. More information about **Asbury University** can be found at <http://www.asbury.edu>. The Asbury Archives & Special Collections reveal the motto “Preserving the Past for the Future,” on the archives Web pages. The photo of **Suzanne Gehring** is courtesy of the **Asbury University** and **Gehring**.

I met **Suzanne Gehring** and **Ruth Slagle** at the **Kentucky Library Association / Kentucky SLA Chapter Joint 2014 Spring Conference** on April 10, 2014 in Carrollton, KY. **Gehring** and **Slagle** provided interesting information during their conference presentation about a hidden collection that was also known as the Sleeper Collection, which had been stored in a departmental basement for over 70 years. No one knew much about the contents of the Sleeper Collection until the Archives & Special Collections were able to obtain the items and begin processing some surprising materials. The Sleeper Collection materials revealed a link between the Sleeper family and the **John Wilkes Booth** family. The correspondence of the Sleeper family also showed the impact of the tragic assassination of the U.S. President **Abraham Lincoln**. This great find, that is still being processed and not yet available for interested researchers, has remained undisturbed for over 70 years, because the Sleeper Collection has only recently been discovered to highlight its Civil War treasures in the near future. The title of their **KLA** conference presentation was “Bringing Hidden Treasures into the Light: Discovering Civil War Letters in an Archives Backlog.” I quickly realized from the wording of this presentation title that **Gehring** was also interested in the subject of hidden collections. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit with both **Gehring** and her undergraduate intern, **Ruth Slagle**, at the **KLA Joint 2014 Spring Conference** in person and



Suzanne Gehring,
Asbury University

later via phone / email conversations about topics surrounding un-processed or un-cataloged collections.

Hidden Collections

Discussions with **Gehring** about hidden collections in general for most institutions revealed similar issues regarding un-processed collections for accessibility issues, preservation / conservation concerns, and limited budget or staffing levels. **Gehring** reminds us that in regards to hidden collections, it's important to be conscientious about protecting the collection, while still re-

sponding to research requests as a service-oriented profession. Multiple researcher requests, urgent projects, or new events can interrupt or delay processing and cataloging efforts of some collections to create a backlog. Promoting where things can be found so that people can discover more information online about an archival or special collection are all important tasks that personnel should continually strive to achieve for researcher access. Although, as **Gehring** stated, “There are so many things to do!” **Gehring** shared the openness and opportunities to schedule talks, plan conferences, or promote new exhibits / displays as great ways in which to invite more visitors into the library, archives, or museum.

The first two questions about hidden collections, “Are you familiar with what could be referred to as a ‘hidden collection’ (un-processed / un-cataloged items that are temporarily unavailable to researchers.)? Do you have any comments or thoughts about the use of the term ‘hidden collections’?” brought the following responses from **Gehring**...

“Although there is a heightened interest in historical papers today, unprocessed and uncataloged collections are nothing new. Throughout American history, top political figures have protected the disclosure of their records for a reasonable period of time, going back to **George Washington** who packed up papers related to his presidency after his second term.

The phrase ‘hidden collections’ has gained more attention in museum or library literature for the last 15 years, however, as it relates to a backlog in



*Photo courtesy of Asbury University,
Archives & Special Collections.*

processing and cataloguing materials that are held by institutions but not available for research. The phrase is descriptive, in that it correctly indicates there *are* materials that cannot be discovered by researchers if those materials are not described and finding aids are not available online in some way. But the word ‘hidden’ can also be perceived as collections that are intentionally restricted and cannot be accessed.

Sometimes, as in our case, the ‘hidden’ part refers to *unprocessed* materials we owned, but that even *we* did not know what we had in the way of content.”

For the succeeding inquiries, “What are some types of collections that you think might be considered as ‘hidden collections’? Would you like to provide some examples of different types of backlogs?” **Gehring** explained...

“Generally speaking a private institution’s organizational records might be considered ‘hidden’ or unavailable for public viewing because they contain restricted information. In the same way, personal papers detailing experiences with issues that might be classified as sensitive, but that have historical interest, might be ‘hidden’ or kept closed for a specific period of time.

Unprocessed collections at our institution are mainly professors’ teaching materials or research work and departmental records about projects and activities.”

Another question probed, “Can you describe any challenges, problems, or frustrations that you have contended with or that you feel most special collections, archives, or museums deal with...in regards to un-processed or un-cataloged materials that are sometimes ‘hidden’ or inaccessible?” **Gehring** offered these detailed responses...

continued on page 84

Hidden Collections from page 83

“Perhaps the greatest challenge in addressing a backlog of materials in an archive, is the fact that many institutions focus on the need to collect, organize, describe, and give access to materials that are current acquisitions. That feels more like we are ‘keeping up’ with what we’ve received. I inherited a backlog of boxed collections that I had no history with. It was easy to think that those represented someone else’s failure to process; if I could keep up with what came in under ‘my watch’ then I would be doing what was expected of me.

We have a small staff and limited funding. We can’t do it all, so we have to prioritize what gets attention. We have several very nice collections of personal papers that are related to our institutional history or to contributions of well-known alumni, and those drive a lot of research interest. We are faithful in managing those and focus on promoting what we know we have.

Our experience with the Sleeper Papers has shown us the value of reviewing older donations and evaluating the potential interest those may have for a new audience. The Sleeper Papers have special interest to our undergraduate students because of their historical perspective and because of the focus on the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War right now.”



Ruth Slagle, Asbury University Archives & Special Collections undergraduate intern, looking through some of the Sleeper Collection materials. Photo courtesy of Asbury University, Archives & Special Collections.

Access Issues

Gehring pointed out that the purpose and professional training of the researcher may allow for opportunities at times for some researchers to access parts of an un-processed collection. Some areas of an un-cataloged collection may have been identified and accessioned to a certain point that could be accessed by an experienced researcher that inspires some level of trust, while other areas of an un-processed collection still

need careful examination and initial description to be documented for the institution before any research access could be allowed.

For questions about access, “Do you have ‘hidden collections’ within your facility that are not currently accessible to researchers?” and “Would you like to describe the collection / materials or share something about any problems or successful outcomes?” Gehring shared...

“We do have some collections that have been minimally processed, some more than others if they were relatively small and could be completed in a matter of weeks. Since we constantly have current projects and events we are responsible for in the library, the time we can devote to processing is limited. We have recently set some strategic goals for addressing backlog.”

Additional questions about access like, “What do you think would help uncover un-processed/ un-cataloged materials or make them more accessible? Would you like to share some helpful ideas or techniques?” inspired Gehring to further explain more ways to access as...

“We need to post finding aids online and to create catalog records for unique collections, manuscripts, and artifacts so that we market all these to interested researchers. Because there is a more sophisticated and knowledgeable Web audience out there interested in primary source materials, making these collections visible would increase interest in and use of our treasures.”

Processing Collections

Questions about processing collections, “What are some reasons or issues that you think might prevent or delay a collection from being processed or ready for researcher access?” helped Gehring to return this answer...

“The biggest factor affecting processing is really a matter of time and staff. We have embraced the concept of ‘more with less’ promoted by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner and are doing a preliminary review of unprocessed collections to determine content, potential interest by researchers, and estimated processing time. Then the materials that we have identified as backlog are ranked for future projects.”

More processing queries of, “Do preservation issues affect decisions on how, when, where, or the way some materials are processed? How much researcher accessibility (limited/none) is allowed and at what points?” brought these insightful responses from Gehring...

“Yes, to some extent, preservation issues do impact decisions about processing. The collection of Civil War letters and manuscripts that we own have some damage to the edges of fragile paper. We protect these in acid-free sleeves as we are processing them so that they can be handled safely by others. Because we have a more open philosophy

about access — i.e., we believe that the materials are a source of learning and we do want people to handle and use them, so taking steps to protect as we process is important. At this point, we only allow access to the items that have been processed. In the Sleeper Collection this amounts to about 20% so far. While we make presentations and exhibits with items of interest from the Sleeper Collection, we limit full access to work in helping process, to serious history undergrad students. When they realize that they have access at a level that others don’t, they are more particular and responsible, I feel.”

Digitization

Digitization questions like, “Do you think digitization, better technology or technical support, and special equipment might aid processing/accessioning of collections to eliminate or slow down backlogs?” gave Gehring the opportunity to expound...

“First and foremost, a library or institutional archive needs to do preliminary review and evaluation of materials in their backlog.

Definitely digitization of some resources is the way to go. We partnered with a local company offering scanning services and have digitized our student newspaper from 1925 to 1940. This project now makes that publication available full-text online for research. Articles reveal a rich portion of our institutional history. Before now, anyone interested in reading that material had to come to our archives and use a microfilm reader to access these stories.

Better technology and special equipment will unlock more possibilities for sharing materials. Perhaps the greatest need is for technical support so that staff can be trained in the use of new and emerging technologies.”

The open-ended question of, “Is there anything else you would like to comment or discuss in regards to hidden collection issues that were not mentioned or covered in any of the previous questions?” allowed Gehring to share these final insights...

“One of the most helpful finds for me personally, connected to understanding the scope of hidden collections, was the OCLC report and the survey conducted in 1998, fifteen years ago to uncover and identify materials in selected archives around the country. But, when I consider the backlog, and the uncovering of our library collection from the Sleeper Family, I realize how difficult it is to find all the repositories that have unique materials. You never know where random collections from little known sources end up. And it is impossible to determine who might have something of value to the public. But, that will always be true. Even beyond the library archives lie many private col-

continued on page 85

Hidden Collections
from page 84

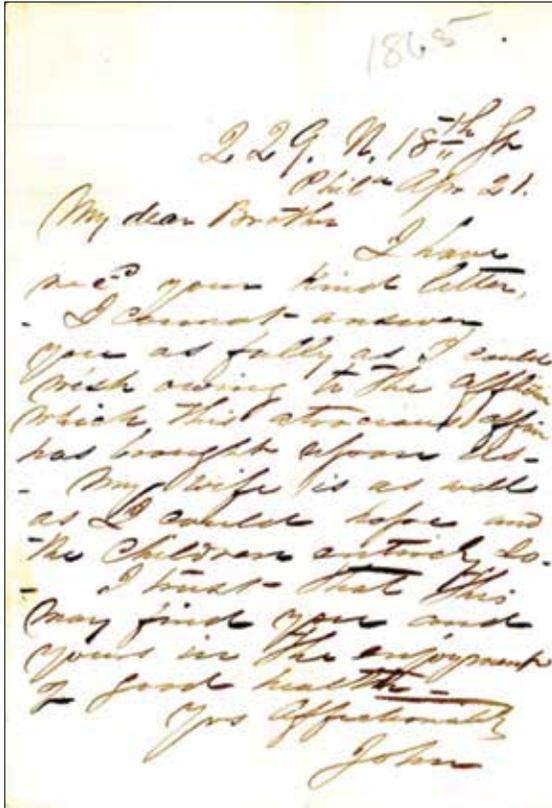
lections of letters and memorabilia that have family significance, but

have never been identified or shared with the public. As a growing culture of technology users opens the pathway for materials to be shared, and as the public demand for access develops, then I believe more and more individuals will be interested in sharing treasures that they hold.”

Special thanks to Suzanne Gehring for sharing her interest in hidden collections with this columnist. There are so many aspects that surround the varied issues of un-processed and un-cataloged materials.

We look forward to visiting with another special collection library, archive, or museum about the topic of hidden collections in future ATG issues. — AD

Below is a transcribed letter from the Sleeper Collection provided by Asbury University, Archives & Special Collections.



Sleeper Family Collection — KLA 2014 Joint Spring Conference — Session: “Bringing Hidden Treasures into the Light: Discovering Civil War Letters in an Archives Backlog.” Presenter: **Ruth Slagle**, Class of 2014, History Major, **Asbury University** — Letter 1 April 21 (image owned by Asbury University Archives).

Transcription of Letter

229. N, 18th St

Phila Apr 21.

My dear Brother

I have recd (received) your kind letter, I cannot answer you as fully as I could wish owing to the affliction which this atrocious affair has brought upon us – My wife is as well as I could hope and the children entirely so. I trust that this may find you and yours in the enjoyment of good health –

Yours affectionately

John

Ruth Slagle explains: This letter holds significance because it was written to **George W. Sleeper** from his brother, **John S. Clarke**, a week after **Lincoln** had been shot. **John Wilkes Booth** was **John S. Clarke's** brother-in-law. This letter shows that **John S. Clarke** wanted to let **George** know that his family was doing relatively well following the circumstances, telling him that the children were fine as well. **Asia**, his wife and **Wilkes'** sister, was doing as well as he could expect following the shock **Asia** had just experienced since she was 6-7 months pregnant. Such a shock could have easily induced labor. To me the letter shows that family connections are stronger especially in times of dire straits. **John S. Clarke** wrote this on the same day that **John Wilkes Booth's** letter to the nation was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I hold **Asia** in high esteem because of her tenacious courage in facing life. She wrote the memoir *The Unlocked Book* about her brother **John Wilkes Booth** completely in secret. 🌱