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Hidden Collections: Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind

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Hidden Collections — Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind

Column Editor: **Allison Day** (Kentucky Librarian / Assistant Professor, Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University) <allison.day@wku.edu>

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

In this *Against the Grain* issue, we were able to speak with **Micheal Hudson**, Director of the **Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind** in Louisville, Kentucky. The mission of the **Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind** is “dedicated to preserving and presenting the fascinating educational history of blind people and the historic contributions of the **American Printing House for the Blind** for the benefit of the visually impaired, educators of the visually impaired, and the broader community.” Additional information can be found about the **American Printing House for the Blind (APH)** at <http://www.aph.org/index.html> and the museum of **APH** at <http://www.aph.org/museum/about.html>.

Below is a picture of the Hall Braillewriter that was introduced in 1892 by school principal **Frank Hall**. This braille typewriter is housed in the **Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind** and it was the first successful mechanical braille typewriter in the world.



**Image courtesy of the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind*

This column showcases hidden collection challenges that reveal general obstacles that result from working with rare materials in special collections and museum environments. There can be delays between the acceptance of donated items and the time it takes to access and process the new materials. Delays can create a temporary hidden collection until the items are fully accessible to library or archive researchers and museum visitors.

Hudson responded to the question: “Are you familiar with what could be referred to as a hidden collection? (unprocessed/uncataloged items that are temporarily unavailable to researchers)” with the following answer...

“I don’t know that I’ve ever used that term exactly to describe that kind of collection, but I get the concept. Most places have a backlog and it takes time to process new collections. Although the term probably has different meanings to different archives, depending on how comfortable the collections manager is in granting access to a researcher to unprocessed collections. I can imagine institutions where a trusted researcher might get access to collections before they are processed, and others where no one gets access until the collection has passed through the entire procedure, by the book.”

A different question for **Hudson**: “What are some types of collections that you think might be considered as hidden collections?” returned this response...

“Well, anytime that a collection does not have a finding aid, is not listed in the catalog in any form, or has a restriction on it that prevents access, it could be called hidden. It wouldn’t really depend on size, just a lack of any intellectual control that would allow a researcher to find it without direct intervention from a librarian or archivist.”

Access Issues

Access issues commonly occur because of processing concerns with the donated or purchased item that delays accession or cataloging the materials. Newly donated items may require additional cataloging or processing, preservation needs, special resources, different equipment, and more staff time before the materials can be fully accessible.

To these access issues and my questions: “Do you have hidden collections within your facility that are not currently accessible to in-house or outside researchers?” and “Would you like to briefly describe or share something about these collections?” **Hudson** answered...

“We do, I guess. We received a large archival collection from the **American Foundation for the Blind** a few years ago. One component of that collection, the *John Milton Society Papers*, has not

been processed and is currently unavailable to researchers. The fact that we have the collection is not hidden, its scope is described in the overall scope of that collection, but it will not be available until we have created a finding aid, evaluated its condition, and rehoused it in archival materials. We are negotiating with an institution to acquire another important collection, about 40 cubic feet, which is a large collection for our repository. It is currently stored in poor circumstances and will require a great deal of work to get it organized, rehoused, evaluated, and described before it will be available to researchers.”

Two additional access questions: “What do you think would help uncover hidden collections or make them more accessible?” and “Would you like to share your ideas or techniques?” elicited this response from **Hudson**...

“We don’t have any magic bullets. Just roll up your sleeves every day and get to work. We are a young institution, founded in 1994, so this is not a big issue for us. We actually know what we have to do, and how much time it is going to require. There are institutions where staff changeovers and years of inadequate budgets have created a situation where they don’t really know what they have. That’s not us. I think an important consideration is to work with your catalogers to avoid over cataloging. Catalog collections at the box level rather than the folder level if the backlog has become critical.”

To the query: “What are some reasons or issues that might prevent or delay a collection from being processed or ready for researcher access?” **Hudson** responded...

“For us, the most significant issue is staff time. It takes time to process collections, and if I’ve been active collecting in a particular year, our collections manager will not be able to process collections as fast as I bring them in.

A second reason would be the condition of the collection when it arrives. As I mentioned above, a collection I’m cultivating has been moved three to four times in the last year, suffers from significant mold and water damage issues, and is stored in damaged and acidic folders. That adds to the time and the financial resources needed to get it ready for access.”

Preservation concerns can delay public access to some collections, while special collections, archival, and museum personnel determine the conservation needs for each item. Some common preservation issues that may require a detailed assessment or quick response

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include mold or insect problems, fragile or brittle condition issues, and specific archival storage methods to preserve the materials or protect the existing collections.

Concerning these preservation issues and the question: “Do preservation issues affect your decisions on when, how, where, or the way you process the materials?” **Hudson** answered...

“Yes. Again in the example above, we are considering sending the collection to a service agency before bringing it into the building, for some mold remediation. We are going to want to replace all of the original folders with archival folders. All of the original staples and paper clips are rusting and will need to be removed, etc., etc.”

Processing Collections

General physical processing involves the receipt, labeling, and removal of duplicate or harmful materials, followed by filing, storage, or shelving.

When asked: “Can you describe the challenges, problems, or frustrations when dealing with hidden collections?” **Hudson** addressed this issue...

“I think you have to keep your eyes on the big picture and avoid getting weighed down by the sheer volume of material you are trying to make available. I sometimes see our staff get demoralized when it seems like their efforts are not ‘moving the pile,’ to use a sports analogy.”

A different question posed: “Do you think there is enough technical or financial support available to help process and uncover hidden collections in today’s libraries, archives, or museums?” brought forth a familiar refrain that many special collection libraries, archives, or museums are dealing with in various ways. **Hudson** explained...

“No, but I don’t see this getting better anytime soon. We are in a political climate right now where public support for museums and libraries is waning. There are, however, a lot of dedicated professionals out there who are just a phone call away, and I’ve found our colleagues are always a valuable source of technical advice.”

Digitization

Utilizing current digitization methods, many special collection libraries, archives, and museums create online or digital records and finding aids to provide access to their unique materials.

I was interested in learning **Hudson’s** thoughts about current technologies with the following question: “Do you think digitization or special equipment like overhead scanning stations might speed up the processing/accessioning of collections to eliminate or slow down backlogs?” **Hudson** explained,

“Hmmm. I think it is still going to require a human to organize a finding aid, but maybe if OCR technology was combined with artificial intelligence. But I think we’re still a ways off from that. But certainly the modern ease of searching massive piles of data quickly certainly makes recall easier.”

Conclusion

Special collection libraries, archives, and museums diligently work to promote public engagement with unique collections, rare materials, special

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form. The reason I bring up **Bob** right now is that he said he has “re-fueled” and wants to write for **ATG** again! **Bob** is guest editing the print issue of **ATG** (Dec/Jan 2015) on library publishing and university presses. <bob.nardini@ingramcontent.com> www.ingramcontent.com

Heard from **Posie Aagaard** (Assistant Dean for Collections & Curriculum Support, **University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries**) who is our moderator in the Colonial Room at the Francis Marion during the **Charleston Conference**. **Posie** has worked with **Hazel Woodward** and **Helen Henderson (Information Power)** as moderators. Unfortunately, **Hazel** and **Helen** will not be in Charleston this year. (boo hoo) Anyway,

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events, and valuable displays. Special collection libraries, archives, and museums also strive to get rare and unique materials quickly accessible for researchers, while preserving the integrity of the item. As **Hudson** points out in our final question below, a good collection policy can help libraries, archives, and museums to develop strong strategic plans. Collection policies and paperwork assist with initial evaluations of materials and the expectations or communications with potential donors.

Lastly, **Hudson** responded to this final question: “Do you have any suggestions for ways to prevent hidden collections from happening?” with...

“It is hard. First I would advise every institution to write a collecting plan and include collecting in your strategic plans. Carefully consider your resources as you evaluate potential gifts. However, it is hard to turn down an important collection that is headed for the dumpster if you do not intervene.”

This columnist looks forward to speaking with another special collection library, archive, or museum about the topic of hidden collections in future **ATG** issues. 🌱

Posie is expecting a baby girl sometime in the month of August. She hopes to be able to travel again by November! Here’s hoping!

And the awesome **Liz Chapman (London School of Economics)** is for sure moderating in the Colonial Room during the **Conference!**

And speaking of baby girls, **Leah Hinds’** sister, **Caroline Goldsmith** who works during the **Conference** and has also transcribed many of the talks will not be in Charleston this year either because she is due to have a baby girl in October!

On the baby front, my daughter, **Ileana** is expecting and her baby is due — gasp — November 3!

It is hot, hot, hot in Charleston but the weather will be nice in November. Have you registered for the **Charleston Conference** yet? www.katina.info/conference Happy Summer! 🌱

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