

Industrial Manuscript Collections at The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History: A Case Study of Archival Practice

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This paper will examine the issues and challenges associated with collecting manuscript archival material documenting industrial business enterprises. The specific research explores a case study of the development of archival collections within the National Museum of American History (NMAH) at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. This paper will examine this program's success at preserving unique elements of cultural heritage and consider how its experience can inform policy-making, decision-making, and best practices in documenting American industrial history.

As heavy industry and manufacturing have declined, scholars and the general public have increasingly embraced industrial history as an important and valuable aspect of our shared heritage. Heritage preservation at former industrial sites is evolving in practice through work at former garment mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, steel towns in Pennsylvania, and amongst collaborative initiatives such as the "Motor Cities Heritage Corridor" near Detroit. In addition to the preservation and adaptive reuse of physical sites—the former industrial buildings, the worker housing and the cultural landscape—industrial history is also documented through historical research materials preserved in archives and records centers.

In many cases, these company records, design blueprints, photographs and other documents are the only surviving evidence of specific industrial enterprises; the factories or manufacturing facilities they document have been removed from the landscape. Archival records are a critical means through which historians and the public may explore and understand our shared industrial past.

Although many small repositories have captured documents from local industrial enterprises, several larger archival collections have deliberately gathered significant holdings of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century manufacturing concerns. Agencies such as the Hagley Museum and Library, the Baker Library at the Harvard Business School, and The Henry Ford hold thousands of cubic feet of industrial and manufacturing records. In addition, other organizations hold significantly large single industrial collections, such as the McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Colorado Fuel and Iron records in Pueblo, and the new archives of the Homestake Mining Company under development in Deadwood, South Dakota.

Unfortunately, little has been documented about appraisal and acquisition practice in connection to records of industrial business enterprises. This paper will explore the specific archival collecting practices at NMAH, documenting how this museum institution came to hold significant manuscripts of industry and technology, and the curators, committees, and initiatives that informed archival policy within the museum.

The Smithsonian Institution began acquiring objects and archival material pertaining to industrial and technological history as early as 1876 with the acquisition of exhibits and other records from the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. A more significant period of collecting is associated with the founding of the Museum for History and Technology in 1957 and the opening of exhibit halls in its new museum building in 1964. Curators in this “golden age” at the museum, including Robert Vogel, Barney Finn, and Jack White, helped to amass a significant collection of archival records from mining companies, steam engine manufacturers, railroad locomotive works, and other machinery manufacturers. Through the late 1960s and 1970s, the museum struggled with the administration and use of these collections and, in 1982, finally established its “Archives Center” with professionally-trained archivists and a formal archival program within the museum.

Research methodology for this project includes historical research into institutional records held by the Smithsonian Institution Archives and other administrative records available at NMAH. In addition, ethnographic interviews with curators and archivists document the decision-making process concerning the appraisal and selection of industrial archival records and the impact these collections have had on their research and interpretive programs.

This paper reveals that NMAH did not enter into archival collecting deliberately or with any clear plan for the administration of archival material. As a museum agency, manuscript items were initially considered as “reference material” in support of object collections, exhibits and interpretation. Yet, because the material remains of industrial history (e.g., machines, equipment, buildings, sites) were often too large for the museum to acquire and curate, archival records were increasingly acquired as acceptable surrogates and some curators began to recognize a need to more proactively collect records of American industrial history. These manuscript collections also presented particular problems to NMAH, including aspects of volume (and, as a result, decisions to sample some record sets), specialized record types requiring unusual housing (such as blueprints and other wide format material), the need for specialized arrangement, indexing, and description, and some unusual preservation concerns (such as dirt and grime from being stored in industrial settings).

In addition, a variety of individuals and stakeholder groups affected the evolution of archival policy within NMAH. Although some curators associated with acquiring archival material held advanced degrees in history or engineering, few had any formal curatorial training and none had any archival training. Archival collecting policy was clearly influenced by larger structural and workplace issues including the job expectations of curators, the command-and-control structures between sub-departments and centralized administrative offices, and the relationships between individual curators, curators associations, and upper administration of the museum. Finally, the museum also responded to increasing requests by external researchers for access to these nationally significant manuscript holdings.

The case study review of this institution’s activity provides a compelling historical example of the challenges inherent in collecting industrial records and will inform current collecting in these evolving topical areas.