connecting to the past using archives

colby college special collections & archives | summer 2013
Who we are

★ Special Collections & Archives is part of the Colby Libraries, located on the first floor of Miller Library

★ Our collections are housed separately from the rest of the collections in the library because we have different types of materials that require special care & handling

★ We're also home to the Colby College archives (Colbiana) – the history of the college from its origins to the present

★ We are here to support your research and your curiosity about the past!
Mary Low, Colby class of 1875, first woman graduate
What does “special collections” mean?

*Special Collections* have characteristics that set them apart from other types of collections in libraries:

- **rare and/or unique stuff:** does not exist elsewhere
- **multi-format:** photos, A/V, letters, diaries, artifacts, scrapbooks, etc. that need special care & handling
- **comprehensive:** materials that collectively form an important resource because of their relevance to a particular topic or individual
- **research (plus exhibits & education):** are the primary uses of the materials

Adapted from University of Maryland, “Research Using Primary Sources” LibGuide
http://www.lib.umd.edu/special/research/define/special.html
Student “torture chamber” – final exams
What exactly is an “archives”?  

- Archives refer to unpublished material that documents the activities of a person or organization.

- Archives are kept and preserved because:
  - The information contained in them has historical and research value.
  - Because they provide evidence of the past.

- Archives also refers to the entity responsible for caring for & maintaining access to these materials.
Janice Pearson, Colby 1951, founded the Colbyettes
What makes archives different?

1. The types of materials found in archives
   - unique, rare, non-replaceable - requires a commitment to security and preservation

   - manuscripts, letters, diaries, scrapbooks, objects, artwork, photographs in all formats, rare or early printed books, maps, audio and video materials, electronic records...

   - holdings may be particularly strong in local history, thematic topics, the papers of specific people, specific types of formats, or materials that support the college curriculum or complement the library collection
1930s white mule
What makes archives different?

2. How the materials are organized, accessed, handled, and evaluated

- Materials in archives are organized into collections.
- Collections are usually organized by the creator of the records, not by topic or subject.
- Tools used to find & describe collections may vary.
- Collections may not be complete.
- Collections have a documented *provenance*, or story, of *how* and *why* they came to the archives.
1909 varsity football team
How do we get stuff in Special Collections?

- From the college itself (departments, events, programs, etc.)
- Donated by alumni, faculty, staff, others
- Actively collected (and sometimes purchased) collections of literary and historical value
- Place for formats other than books to be well-cared for and properly housed
- Grew out of the remnants of the “old library” created during the founding years of the college, or out of personal collections of students & faculty, or the libraries of literary and fraternal societies, etc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archives</th>
<th>Library</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unpublished collections</td>
<td>Primarily published materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique or rare materials</td>
<td>Not unique, many copies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many different formats of materials beyond just books</td>
<td>Primarily text-based – books, journals, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of collections tends to be subjective in nature</td>
<td>Content has been interpreted and analyzed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized by person who created the collection</td>
<td>Organized by a classification system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires use of different tools to find, use, and locate collections</td>
<td>Primarily find items via the online catalog or online databases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-circulating (can’t check out)</td>
<td>Circulating (can check out)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1974 women’s varsity ice hockey team
So, why should I care about these things?

- We have really neat stuff, and some of it is very old!
- Our reading room is lovely, quiet, and encourages contemplation
- You can learn a lot about those who came to Colby before you, and about the history of the College
- Working with unique archival materials gives you a different kind of connection to the past, and helps develop close reading, critical thinking, & analysis skills
- Working with primary sources can be challenging, but will help prepare you for different types of research you will likely encounter in your academic career
What is archival research?

★ The archival research process begins with a historical question that you would like to investigate: analysis and interpretation of archival materials will help support your argument (or not)

★ Requires close & careful reading and critical evaluation

★ Involves discerning the most credible or relevant information from the archival materials

★ The research process helps inform your own interpretation of the past & the question(s) you are investigating

★ You may want to start by researching secondary sources to help formulate a question and gather contextual & background information on the topic
**Tips for the research question**

★ Start with a question that can be investigated in multiple ways

★ Make sure the question is specific enough so you are not overwhelmed, but not so specific that you won’t know what documents will be useful and valuable to you

★ Be flexible: don’t be afraid to alter your focus depending on what you do or do not find as you look at documents

★ Approach historic documents with an open mind; consider multiple perspectives

★ The relationship between the documents and your investigation of them should be reciprocal – they may inform your question

★ If the materials are leading you in a direction that is different from your original question but is just as compelling, consider following that lead
Tips for analyzing archival materials

1. Observe
   ★ identify and note details about the item, including physical evaluation (paper, ink, image, handwriting, ...)

2. Reflect
   ★ generate and test hypotheses about the item
   ★ think about what you already know about this person or time period in history
   ★ are there any clues to the point of view of the creator?

3. Ask questions

From Library of Congress, Primary Source Analysis Tool
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/
Student anti-slavery society petition, 1833
Ask questions about the material

Establish the context of the author, time, & place

- **Who** created the source? are they well situated to observe or record the events? what is their place in society? can you trust them?

- **What** is the topic/event/activity/argument discussed in the source? what is the larger historical context? what is at stake for the creator in this source?
Black student strike, students speaking at Chapel takeover, 1970
Ask even more questions about the material

★ **When** was this source created? can you confirm the date of the source?

★ **Where** was the source created?

★ **Why** was this source created? what was the intent? who was it created for?

★ **How** do the ideas and values in the source differ from those of today? from your own values? does this influence how we understand the source? what assumptions do we bring to the source as researchers?
DKE fraternity members on steps, 1889
Read and interpret the content of the source

- Can you identify any biases and prejudices?
- Is the creator reliable and credible?
- Can you verify or evaluate the facts/argument?
- Is the information inconsistent or contradictory?
- Can the source stand alone?
- Does it need corroboration from other sources so that the information is not taken out of context?
- Does this source support or contradict information from other resources?
- How easy is it to tell historical fact from the creator’s personal opinions/beliefs/experiences?

Is this source valuable to your research?

- How does this source help me to answer my research question or address my topic?
- What other sources might help?
- Are there connections mentioned in the source that I can follow?
- What else do I need to know in order to understand the evidence presented in this source?
- What questions does this source raise? What do I know/not know about it?
Colby baseball team pictured with John W. “Colby Jack” Coombs
Some observations on archival research (1)

Archival research is a lot like **detective work:**

- There will be more questions than answers
- There is no one answer or one story
- Requires you to be open to discovery and surprises – or to coming up with nothing at all
- Finding information may not be straightforward
- There are often holes and gaps in the story
- You may only get one side of the story
- You will often have to consider different historical narratives and multiple perspectives
In the Trenches, Somewhere in France
Oct 13, 1915

Dear Capt,

Will just add a few lines to my letter of Sept 29 which I haven't had a chance to send yet. Have been in the trenches ever since but expect to go out for a rest in a few days. Have been under all sorts of fire, rifle, machine gun, hand grenades, trench mortars, shrapnel, shells and high explosives and have seen what real war is like. My chum a Yankee from New York got one through the arm yesterday and another Yankee fellow from Pratt got a trench mortar, they haven't found him yet, but that is war. Have seen several Germans at a distance but only for an instant so was unable to drag them. Last night there was a terrific bombardment ten or fifteen miles from here, it sounded like continuous peals of thunder, don't know what became of it but am quite sure they were our guns.
Some observations on archival research (2)

★ You can’t take documents at face value
★ Archival materials are products of a specific place and time
★ They reflect the mores and culture of a particular place and time
★ Approach items in archives with an open mind, but also think critically and actively evaluate your sources
★ You will be challenged to evaluate sources without imposing present-day values
Some observations on archival research (3)

- Archival collections can be messy – you may have to go through a lot of material to find what you are looking for.

- What you want to find may be very different from what you actually find!

- Be flexible - you may not find anything to support your research – and may have to try a different angle.
Some observations on archival research (4)

★ Be prepared to confront handwriting – sometimes indecipherable handwriting!

★ It takes a lot longer to analyze unpublished materials, especially older, handwritten materials

★ Different time periods have different language and/or writing conventions
Some observations on archival research (5)

★ You may find yourself going down different rabbit holes that you didn’t expect during your research

★ Involves making connections between sources that may not be immediately apparent

★ Pay attention to what documents are pointing you to explore next
Archival research takes time, longer than you think.

- Budget enough time for it
- Locating materials may be time-consuming
- You may have to look through a lot of materials
- Archives may have limited access hours

Take good notes, and write down where things came from so that you can cite them properly

Be flexible and open-minded about your research

- Use available sources to help shape and explore your topic
- Talk to your archivists and librarians!
Stop in and visit us!

We are happy to help you with any questions you might have, assist you in finding relevant materials for your research, or give you a tour!

We are open
Monday – Friday
10 – 12 and 1 – 4:30

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