



Special Collections: The Heart of the Matter

Colby College Special Collections houses the College's manuscripts and rare books as well as the College Archives. In preserving and adding to holdings of unique materials, it actively supports the educational program of the campus, promoting awareness of the value of primary sources.

It is fitting that Special Collections is located in Miller Library, which is the heart of Colby in many ways. To reach Special Collections, you must first climb the steps of Miller Library. From atop those majestic steps, you might pause to take in the beauty of campus before entering the building. When you find yourself at the circulation desk, take a right and wend your way through a small area of stacks until you emerge in the Wormser Reading Room—a quiet, study space, appointed with tables and overstuffed leather chairs. There, you will also find the entrance to Special Collections.

Special Collections at Colby inhabits a small suite of rooms, including the Edward Arlington Robinson Treasure Room. While Director of Libraries Clem Guthro oversees all areas of Colby's library system, the day-to-day team in Special Collections is led by Assistant Director for Special Collections Pat Burdick. An engineer by training, Burdick found her way to the archives as a second career. After receiving a master's degree in English and American literature from Harvard University, she went on to obtain a degree from the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, where she studied with noted archivist Megan Sniffin-Marinoff. At Colby, Burdick's colleagues include Assistant Director for Digital Collections Marty Kelly, Digital Production Coordinator Larry Brown, Visual Resources Curator Maggie Libby, Colbiana and Finding Aid Coordinator Jim Merrick, and Archives Education Coordinator Erin Rhodes.

Why Special Collections?

Colby's Special Collections began with Carl Weber, a professor of English who first came to Colby in 1919. Although Colby's campus was in downtown Waterville for most of Weber's tenure at Colby, he was able to preside over the Treasure Room as the curator of rare books and manuscripts when the room in Miller Library was finally completed in 1947. Weber's collecting began at a time when liberal arts colleges felt having a rare book collection would raise the profile of the institution. Weber's efforts did raise Colby's profile, and the first two collections that brought attention to Mayflower Hill were the collected works of the American Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Edwin Arlington Robinson and the collected works of Victorian-era novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. Other collections followed, including a vast collection of the personal correspondence of British writer Violet Paget (who wrote under the pseudonym Vernon Lee) and a collection of Irish work brought together by collector James A. Healy.

Relationship With the Classroom

As the role of special collections at liberal arts colleges has changed, it is natural to ask what role they play in the current curriculum. It is helpful to understand the traditional progression of academic mastery as it relates to source material. Common wisdom holds that undergraduates learn to use and understand secondary sources, graduate students master primary sources, and doctoral students develop their own, original scholarship. At Colby the Special Collections team "encourages precocious academic experiences," which translates into an effort by Burdick and her colleagues to rigorously connect the archival collections to the curriculum so Colby students work with primary sources as undergraduates (ahead of many of their peers).

This is no small task, as the Special Collections holdings are vast and complex. Finding ways to make connections with current courses takes brainstorming and time. However, a recent reorganization of the library staff allows each team member to use his or her scholarly focus to help make those connections more quickly. In addition, the abundance of digital media over the past decade means younger faculty arrive at Colby already familiar with using archives and special collections.

Burdick conducts tours for students, faculty, and staff on a periodic basis. When students come face to face with a manuscript that may be hundreds of years old, often they are thrilled with the chance to handle a part of the collection. Interacting with primary sources invites a conversation about the history of ownership that many students have not considered. Noting the human need to hold things, the Special Collections team observes that the tactile experience for students reinvigorates something they did not know they missed. When Burdick and Archives Education Coordinator Erin Rhodes host a group of students during a class visit, they spend time preparing them for the experience. This includes a conversation about the relevance of archival research to academic pursuits. Students then undertake guided analysis of selected materials and report back to the group. Burdick notes that she and Rhodes are often fascinated by what grabs a student's attention.

The Bicentennial

With the College's bicentennial underway, Special Collections has enjoyed the genuine interest in College history that this occasion has inspired. The bicentennial has also allowed Special Collections to tie scholarship into its mission by working with student research assistants over the summer on material that was highlighted in the fall 2012 *Colby* magazine. Other bicentennial projects for Special Collections include working with the team of documentarians who produced the feature length film *In Their Footsteps*, curating a display of Colby memorabilia for the weekend of the bicentennial launch, serving on the Bicentennial Planning Committee, incorporating Colbiana materials into class visits, providing in-depth reference service to students doing research in the College archives and responding to many other requests from faculty and students. Hopefully, the bicentennial will serve as a starting place for investigation and interest in Colby's history.

The Future of the Past

The future of the past is digital. Colby, like other institutions, is working to digitize its collections to expand access to these rich resources. Assistant Director for Digital Collections Marty Kelly heads this effort at Colby. DigitalCommons@Colby is a publically available archive of Colby material that gets high rankings in Google. Having Colby appear in the first page of a search engine's results is important in attracting attention to Colby's collections. Having a large portion of Special Collections digitized expands Colby's reach and may serve to attract students and faculty who want the opportunity to work with our primary sources. Kelly notes that as more collections are digitized, an institution's profile will be raised by the electronic availability of its unique items.

Unlike Carl Weber, whose aggressive collecting helped Colby distinguish itself in an emerging field, Burdick can be more selective about how she builds Colby's collections. The acquisition of Maine poet Wes McNair's papers in 2006, for example, marked an addition to the collection that reinforced an area of interest (American poets), brought attention to Colby, and was relevant to the curriculum.

How do Colby's Special Collections compare to others? Burdick said that Colby has "a fabulous collection for our size... including some things even the Library of Congress

doesn't have." While Colby's Special Collections are impressive, Burdick acknowledged more resources are always needed. Colby's unrestricted endowment helps support the College across many programs, and Special Collections is one of the beneficiaries. While gracious and grateful of that fact, Burdick and Kelly look forward to the opening of the storage building that will be completed this year close to campus. This extra space will allow the library to move some of its resources to the new building and provide some limited temperature-controlled environments needed for proper storage.

What does Pat Burdick see as the future of Special Collections? Her goals as she curates Colby's collections are to digitize as much of the holdings as possible, to choose wisely when it comes to acquisition, and to enhance the role of Special Collections in the life of the College. As Colby begins its third century, it seems clear there will be more to collect, document, reflect on, and remember in the years to come.

For more information, visit <http://libguides.colby.edu/specialcollections> or contact Patricia Burdick at paburdic@colby.edu or by phone at 207-859-5150.