

A Day in the Life, or, What do Archivists do Anyway?

The following recollection of one of my work days is dedicated to (1) anyone who's ever asked me "So what do you do at HSP?" or (2) anyone curious to know what an archivist might actually do on any given a day. This "day in the life" represents my own experiences and does not speak for archivists working in the field generally. Even other archivists who work at HSP have completely different chores and take on many other challenges.

Date: the recent past

Time: the standard work day, 8:30-5:00 with ½ hour lunch

Place: the corner of 13th and Locust streets

Morning

Around 8:30am, I log into computer network, get settled, and write out today's to-do list. Because I'm not scheduled for public service (helping patrons in the library), I know I have some flexibility in setting my priorities for the day. So I decide to try to deal with quick things in the morning and leave more extensive tasks to the afternoon.

First on the list is dealing with a request regarding the Glen Mills School collection.

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[1]

This school, once known as the House of Refuge, is a residential and reformatory school for boys. Its large collection of records at HSP is closed to the public and people must apply through the school to gain access to students' records. Once Glen Mills [2] approves and notifies us of a research request, we go through the many volumes hoping to find the student(s) in question, make photocopies of the records we do find, and mail them off to the person who requested them. Since I had already located the record books for this particular request, all I had to do was make copies – no easy task since some of the volumes are up to 6 inches thick! I haul the two extra-large volumes down to our book scanner and make, well, the best copies that can be made. On at least one page, much of the text is illegible, so that means transcription. Sigh. I certainly respect that it's part of the job and that it's what some archivists love to do and make a living at, but it's low on my personal list of fun archival activities. Nevertheless, once I get the copies and volumes back to my desk, I set up the volume from which I need to transcribe and begin. Luckily, the handwriting is easy to read and I'm able to use a previous transcription as a template. This doesn't always have to happen – some volumes from the collection photocopy just fine, and all I need to do is drop the copies in the mail with a cover letter. But for now, I continue reading and typing. This task does not turn out to be quick at all.

About an hour and a half later, I re-shelve several prints that were digitized. A few weeks ago we had a George Washington document display for which I pulled a bunch of large prints

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[3]

These prints were then sent to R&R [4] to be digitized for an online exhibit. (I'll post a link here once the display is online.) The other day I learned that some of the prints were ready to be put away, I offered to take care of them since I pulled them in the first place. Whenever we remove something from a collection, standard procedure calls for a call slip to be left in its place so we know where to put it back and to alert others that something is been pulled. Internally, we use bright orange "staff call slips." Thanks to all the little orange slips I left behind, this task goes quickly and smoothly. George Washington, at least some of him, is back in his place.

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[5]

Moving on, I tackle new accessions. I regularly help out with new donations as they come in and with accessions a few times a year. For new donations that come in, I enter information about them into our database, create deeds of gift, and place the donations on holding shelves. Every few months, the collections committee of our board meets to approve new donations. One of these meetings just happened, and now it's time to place accession numbers (which are assigned by our library director, Lee Arnold) on collections and in the database. I also have to shelve new accessions with the general collections and enter their new locations into the database.

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[6]

Each new accession has its own collection folder and the lot of folders goes to our director of archives, Matthew Lyons, to file. Now it's time to wait for more new collections to roll in. (In fact, there's one in queue now – I see it from my desk waiting oh so patiently. Will get to it tomorrow.)

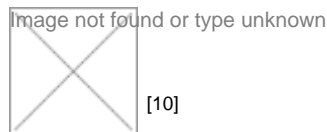
Needing a break from the moving and lifting, I return to my desk to consider what to do for the next question of the week [7]. They are prepared two weeks in advance, so the question I create this week will appear mid-October. Sometimes the questions are date specific. But lately it's been harder and harder to find unique topics by date that relate directly to our collections, so I've been doing more general questions, and they've gone over well. This time round I decide to focus on the Cope family [8]. I come up with a suitable question and leave writing the answer for another day.

Afternoon

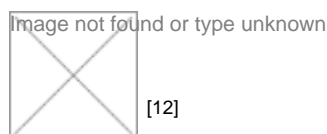
After taking a real break and running an errand, it's back to work. A new finding aid [9] is ready to be posted to our site. It's an easy enough task – a little file transferring, CMS stuff, typing, and linking. Then wait a couple days till the site gets updated, and BAM! New finding aid ready to go public.

Now it's on to my big task for the day and one that takes up the rest of the day: inventorying of

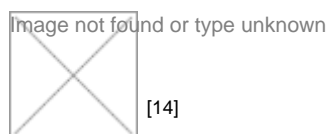
the Jane Campbell papers (#3203). This is an ongoing project at which I chip away a little each day. There's no timeline for the project except for the one that I self impose – try to get through at least four boxes a day. (Some days though, it's an event to just get through one.) There are 42 cartons in the collection and I'm at box 17.



Based on priorities that Matthew and I set earlier in the year, this collection was flagged because it received low survey ratings [11] but came from a very important figure in Philadelphia women's history: writer, historian, and suffragist Jane Campbell (1844-1928). When the collection was originally surveyed, surveyors noted "The documentation quality of the collection is difficult to determine as it is entirely unprocessed." Indeed, it is very unprocessed, and messy, and dirty.



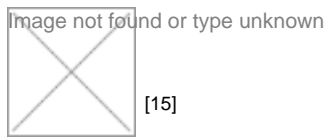
Earlier this year, a researcher looking for stuff on Campbell paged the collection, and she valiantly waded through box upon box of unorganized chaos, but the mess proved too much. Based on the fact that the collection was getting some use and Campbell's historical importance, it became a priority to inventory the boxes. On to my to-do list it went, and I'm now on my eighth day with the collection. Putting it lightly, it is a beast, a beast that's covered in soot and crumbly paper. I start this session with Campbell by doing a little genealogical work because during yesterday's work I came across some papers from other Campbell family members. Using a few notes I found in the collection and internet research, I manage to come up with a small family tree that helps me discern the Johns and Williams from different generations. (You can view the genealogy report [13] as a pdf.) I also learn that the family originated in Ireland. This would explain the items I'm finding from the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Hibernian Society.



After about half an hour of computer work, I start in with Box 17. While the actual papers, letters, pamphlets, etc., that are in the collection are in really good shape, most are bundled in envelopes, homemade folders, and cardboard enclosures that are simply falling apart. Some paper is so brittle that more pieces remain at the bottom of the box than intact. Thing is, almost all these horrible enclosures were labeled by Campbell, so they can't just be chucked. Neither photocopying nor re-housing is part of my work right now; I'm just supposed to write down the contents of each box and move on. It seems simple enough, but when trying to both figure out what something is, as well as "preserve" crumbly bits of paper, the task becomes a chore. Plus, since there's no organization, it's hard to figure out just how to descriptively summarize the contents of each box – "miscellaneous writings, pamphlets, and scrapbooks" only goes so far. I spend at least 45 minute or more with each box, carefully moving bundles of writings, scrapbook pages, booklets, pamphlets and clippings out to identify them, and then moving them back into the box trying not to do further damage. Despite the soot and dust,

each box does bring new discoveries.

On this day, in Box 17, I find a homemade folder titled only "Leaf with bird":



This lovely little painting of a bird on a treated leaf was crammed in between two scrapbooks, neither of which had anything to do with leaves or birds or related subjects. The leaf itself is clear and real – you can see the woody veins on the back – and was covered with something to make it opalescent (which you can't see in this scan, sadly). On top of the finish is the painted bird, colorful, delicate, and done in astounding detail. It's the strangest find in a collection that has so far consisted of anything but artwork, and I've no idea why it's in the collection or who made it. I can only guess that maybe it was given to Campbell or one of her family members, and that it was somehow scooped up with the piles of papers that came to HSP. It's unfortunate that, for now, it's an anomaly in the collection. But I've still got 25 more boxes to go through, so there may be more treasures in the wings.

During these afternoon hours I also field usual compliment of emails, phone calls, and questions that come with each day. Sometimes the interruptions provide welcome relief from the occasional boredom associated with long-term projects; other times, they are just that, interruptions. Today's calls and emails, though plentiful, aren't too disruptive, so I still manage to reach my 4 box quota - yay!

With my final Campbell box packed up, it's day's end and time to start winding down. I flag some emails that need answering, write down a few items to place on tomorrow's to do list, and ponder a few more tasks that need attention in the coming days. 5:00pm hits and it's time to log off and go home.

Links

- [1] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/glen-mills.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.glenmillsschool.org/>
- [3] http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/6038
- [4] <http://www.hsp.org/node/2032>
- [5] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/call-slips.jpg>
- [6] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/new-accessions.jpg>
- [7] <https://hsp.org/blogs/question-of-the-week>
- [8] http://173.203.96.155/sites/173.203.96.155/files/docs/manuscripts/finding_aid_1486_cope.pdf
- [9] <https://hsp.org/collections/catalogs-research-tools/finding-aids>
- [10] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/campbell-on-shelves-e1317316670752.jpg>
- [11] <http://processandpreserve.wordpress.com/2011/09/22/assessing-collections-with-the-hsp-survey-method/>
- [12] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/campbell-out-of-box.jpg>
- [13] <http://processandpreserve.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/genealogy-report.pdf>
- [14] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/campbell-box.jpg>
- [15] http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/6311