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The Improvement of Library Security

Practical and low-cost measures to improve security within libraries and archives, particularly for special collections and archival materials, are offered; and services of the recently instituted Archival Security Program of the Society of American Archivists are described.

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY TO BEGIN a discussion of library security is to summarize a theft that took place at a major state library. The case is instructive because it illustrates a number of important aspects of the problems of library security. By all reasonable standards this particular state library had a good security system. At the time of the theft there was one large archives reference room with public access through a single entrance, and an archivist was on duty in the room at all times during the day. Two stack attendants were also assigned to the area so that the professional staff did not have to leave the room. Patrons were asked to complete a registration card and provide identification; on subsequent days returning visitors were asked to sign in before beginning their day's work. Access to the stacks was not permitted to visitors.

Yet despite these measures one man, acting alone, apparently stole at least 115 documents valued at $20,000. One interesting facet of the case concerns the contraband itself. Even though the stolen documents were letters from such historic figures as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, the letters were taken for the rarity and clarity of their postmarks rather than for their signatures or historical content.

The state library first learned of the theft when a local collector became suspicious that the franked envelopes he was purchasing were state documents. After a search, the state archivist could find no evidence that these items belonged to his institution. Unfortunately, there was some confusion over the dates on the documents, a fact that was not discovered until two months later. When it was determined that a major theft had taken place, a meeting was arranged between the state librarian, legal authorities, the collector, and the dealers who were selling the stolen material. The dealers identified the same man as the source of their items. A search of the registration cards and the visitor's register revealed that the suspect had made eleven visits and used sixty-five boxes of state papers in the previous three months. A visit to the suspect's home revealed that he was in possession of a large number of state documents.

Proving that the suspect had taken the documents was difficult. Not only did the prosecution need to prove that the documents were indeed state property and that the suspect had used the letters, but also that he had been the *last* person to use them before they were discovered missing! Fortunately for the state, the jury needed to be convinced

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that only one of the documents had been stolen by the defendant to return a guilty verdict. State ownership was proved by obtaining copies of the stolen documents sent to previous patrons; the defendant's use of the documents was proved by call slips; and, fortunately, a combination of the two proved the defendant had been the last person to use one of the documents. He was convicted and fined $1,000 plus court costs.

The case highlights a number of important points. First, no matter how good a security system seems to be, it can usually be penetrated. Second, documents and books may be valuable for reasons other than signatures or historical content. Third, it is important to keep a good record of photocopies and call slips to prove use and ownership. Fourth, it shows how far we must go to convince the courts that a $20,000 manuscript theft is indeed grand larceny. Fifth, it emphasizes the critical role of collectors and dealers in the apprehension process. Only through perseverance and vigilance did this state library recover its documents; most institutions would not have been so lucky.

Security Procedures

The theft discussed above raises the question of what security procedures are necessary to provide adequate protection for special library and archival collections. Certainly the answer to this question differs with the size and resources of each institution. Yet, regardless of differences, each library and archives must become more security conscious. Except for a few major institutions, like the North Carolina Division of Archives and History and the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, security systems for special collections are almost totally lacking.

Only recently have some institutions begun to use registration forms and require positive identification of researchers. Only a handful of libraries and archives employ closed circuit television or other monitoring devices. According to an informal survey of a number of institutions conducted by the Society of American Archivists, practically no library or archives has a "plan of action" to deal with situations in which a researcher is suspected of or observed stealing library property. In fact, several individuals admitted witnessing thefts but had not taken decisive action because of lack of knowledge about proper procedures for apprehending suspected thieves.

A review of various "shoplifting" laws in different states reveals the complexity of the legal problem, the need for a carefully planned procedure, and the indoctrination of those in charge of reading rooms. Clearly we have a long way to go.

Yet libraries and archives *can* implement a number of practical security procedures which cost little or nothing and offer a definite improvement. The North Carolina Division of Archives and History has instituted stringent reference room procedures, and this example is worthy of note. Briefcases, attaché cases, coats, notebooks, envelopes, and pad folders are not permitted; lockers and coat racks are provided outside the search room for such items. Admission is by photo-identification card only; identification cards are obtained from a security officer in the lobby of the search room after the patron has presented suitable identification. The card is surrendered at the reference desk and remains with the call slips completed by the user. Although a patron may *request* more than one box or volume of material at a time, only one unit is allowed in use at one time. When a user has finished with one box or volume, he or she may exchange it for another at the reference desk. All manuscripts or volumes are to be flat on the tables or reading stands;

they are not to be tilted on the edge of the table. In addition, users are allowed to have only *one* folder opened at one time. Upon returning the materials, the patron receives his or her identification card which must be shown to the security officer upon leaving. Not all of these procedures apply to every institution, but they all merit serious consideration.

Vigilant reference room surveillance is the nucleus of an effective library security program, but it is only one of a number of low-cost security measures. Another important step is a regular program of stamping manuscripts and rare books with an indelible property mark. Such a procedure often creates a dilemma for librarians and archivists. On the one hand, marking is a proven deterrent to theft and good legal proof of ownership. On the other hand, marking tends to disfigure and damage the document or volume. As thefts have increased, however, marking of special items has become more and more popular.

Librarians and archivists can choose from a number of techniques of marking. Items can be embossed, perforated, or stamped with ink. Of the three, stamping with ink is the most efficient and popular means of marking. The Library of Congress has led the way in this area and is soon to publish a pamphlet on procedures for marking manuscripts as part of its preservation leaflet series. The office of the assistant director for preservation serves as a source of information on inks and provides free bottles of the library's secret-formula ink to all who request them.

Marking is practical only on a selective basis, however. Most libraries and archives have far too many items to mark each and every one. More than ten years ago, the archivist of the United States estimated that it would take 5,000 man years and cost 20 million dollars to mark the holdings of the National Archives. Although there are no libraries with as many items as the National Archives, the cost for any institution would be astronomical. Thus careful planning must precede the implementation of a selective stamping program. Collections should be evaluated from the viewpoint of the thief. Is the item worth a significant sum of money? Is there a market for such a volume or manuscript? If the answers to these questions are "yes," then the item should be marked. Institutions must necessarily start with their most valuable collections and work toward selectively stamping items in all their collections.

There are a number of other measures which also offer promise. Libraries and archives should consider the bonding of employees who are in sensitive positions. This helps to insure that only an individual of high quality would be considered for employment. Such institutions should also require researchers to sign a consent-to-search form before granting them access to special collections. In order to avoid confrontation or embarrassment, a discreet sign should be placed in the reference room reminding patrons that their belongings are subject to search. Good legal practice suggests that institutions should make every effort to verify the presence of particularly valuable items at least once every three years. Such inventories are excellent proof of ownership. Contact with the crime prevention unit of the local law enforcement agency is also recommended; this communication will minimize the confusion and misunderstanding when the police are needed to investigate a loss.

Librarians and archivists must also become more aggressive in prosecuting thieves. Until the courts are educated as to the seriousness of the crime, library thieves will continue to receive light sentences for crimes that amount to grand larceny. All of the above measures cost little or nothing to imple-

ment, but they do require substantial time, energy, and commitment on the part of professional staff members.

The SAA Archival Security Program

In addition to the low-cost security measures that can be implemented by individual libraries and archives, there is also a national effort to promote better library and archival security. The Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Archival Security Program was established in 1975 with the assistance of the National Endowment for the Humanities and serves as a clearinghouse for information on theft and security in libraries and archives.

One of the most important facets of the program is the recently established register of lost or stolen archival materials to facilitate the recovery of missing manuscripts and other unique textual materials. Printed materials such as rare books can be listed if they have markings which make them unique and distinguishable from other extant copies. Items such as general circulation volumes, photographs, microfilms, maps, and artifacts will not be listed unless the SAA is certain that such items are identifiable. Moreover, since there is little chance of recovering items that have been missing for more than twenty years, the register includes only manuscripts that were discovered missing after 1955. There is no charge for listing missing items nor is it restricted to SAA members. Forms for the registration of missing items are available from the society (Box 8198, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, Chicago, IL 60680).

The value of the register is in the location, identification, and recovery of missing items. Equally important are better security systems *within* institutions, and it is precisely in this area that librarians and archivists need the most assistance. It is essential that libraries and archives have competent experts to advise them on security systems, internal procedures, and the apprehension of suspected thieves. In response to this need, the Society of American Archivists has established a consultant service as part of its security program. Institutions wishing to use the service will be asked to fill out an application identifying their security needs and to select an individual from an approved list of consultants. Once an individual has been agreed upon, the program staff will contact the consultant and arrange for a two-day visit. Libraries and archives will be expected to share in the cost of the consultant service.

The final facet of the SAA program will be the preparation and publication of a manual on security for special collections and archives. The manual will include chapters on planning a security program, security procedures in staff areas, security procedures in the reference room, legal ramifications of library security, and a summary and checklist. The manual will be available in 1977.

Even though the SAA Archival Security Program and the previously mentioned security measures promise to improve matters, good library security cannot stop there. Clearly, the protection of valuable manuscripts and rare books is the responsibility of everyone working in a library or archive. All professionals will have to ask themselves tough questions about their security procedures. What type of identification should be required of patrons? What kind of information should be included on call slips? What should patrons be allowed to bring into the reading room? Should valuable items be stamped and/or separated from archival collections? The answers to these and other security questions are not easily found. Yet, as the present archivist of the United States noted nearly ten years ago, "through our collective efforts we can make real progress toward convincing the document thief that he has made a tragic error in his choice of a career."