

Business Archives in a University Setting: Status and Prospect

Several surveys over the past twenty-five years have documented the failure of modern businesses systematically to preserve their historically significant records. If such records are to be preserved, therefore, it may fall to universities to become more aggressively involved in collecting. This article summarizes results of a survey designed to determine which universities are collecting business records, how they began, and what problems they have encountered. After assessing the experience of these institutions, it suggests an acquisitions strategy to overcome the problems associated with collecting business records.

BUSINESS HISTORY as an academic discipline is relatively new; so too are business archives. N. S. B. Gras introduced business history to Harvard University in 1927, where he pioneered the case-study approach in his graduate courses. Business archives in the United States are an even more recent development, beginning with the appointment of William Overman as archivist for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in 1943.

Both developments were a belated recognition of the increasing importance of understanding business history in order to understand American history. Archivists, whose responsibility it is to document human activity, are properly concerned that business activity be documented, but the record of performance over the last two decades indicates that not enough is being done. Problems apparently continue to out-run solutions.¹

Several surveys, conducted between 1955 and 1976 by individual researchers and the Business Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists, indicate the dimensions of the problem of documenting busi-

ness activity. Historically significant business records are usually kept either by businesses themselves or by independent archival repositories, such as historical societies or universities. Businesses apparently think so little of their historical records that most large corporations neither employ an archivist nor have even an elemental archival program.

Even using a generous definition of what constitutes a business archives, there were fewer than 200 business archives in the United States and Canada in 1975. While business archives have grown significantly in the past two decades, the actual number is not impressive compared with the number of businesses.²

If businesses themselves are unwilling to establish company archives, then it may fall to colleges and universities to preserve the necessary records. Because of their size, number, influence, variety, and their broad cultural and educational role, colleges and universities may, in fact, be the most logical repositories for business records. They are widely dispersed geographically, making possible regional collections. They have the faculty and staff expertise necessary for developing an acquisitions strategy and for appraising technical records. They have the monographic literature, scholarly journals, and government documents to complement archival sources. They have the business,

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economics, and history graduate programs that provide research topics. They have library, archival, and historical agency courses in which students can be trained in archival work using the records as a learning laboratory. They have offices of extramural support to assist in formulating grant proposals to acquire and process these collections.

Even with problems of declining enrollments and revenues, universities may, nevertheless, be the most realistic repositories for documenting American business in the present century.

Most major universities have at least some business records, but the quality, volume, and completeness of those collections vary tremendously. This is true particularly for twentieth-century records of the modern business corporation. Modern business records are dated somewhat arbitrarily from about 1890 or the late nineteenth century, when the size of businesses increased rapidly, when accounting practices became more elaborate, when new office machines contributed to the increased volume of records, when the communication and transportation network stretched across vast areas to make regional and national markets possible, and when the role of government in regulating businesses became substantial. It is particularly the records dating from these changes that document the transformation of business as well as of the larger society.³

SURVEY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Past efforts to assess holdings of business records have focused on archival repositories generally or on businesses themselves. In an attempt to learn what colleges and universities specifically are doing to secure modern business records, sixty-five such institutions in the United States and Canada were queried in 1978.

Institutions were selected from the *Society of American Archivists Directory of Individual Members* (1978) and were chosen from public and private institutions from all geographic areas, although large universities represent the greatest percentage of those surveyed and also the greatest percentage of those responding.

While questionnaires were sent to university archivists, the cover page noted that the purpose of the survey was to assess the efforts by universities to collect business records, as part of either their university archives, their special collections, or some other unit of the university, such as the business school or history department.*

More than half the respondents indicated that their universities had some business records. The remaining twenty universities had none, and it is worth noting why. The reason cited by most was that they had never seriously considered collecting business records. The second most frequently cited reason was they were not charged with the responsibility for developing collections other than university records. Fewer than half noted that they would accept business records of importance, if offered, but they have not actively sought such records. Surprisingly, in light of the volume of records generated by businesses and, therefore, the possibilities of developing collections, few mentioned that they would be interested in collecting business records if they had adequate staff and facilities.

The remainder of the questionnaire was completed by the thirty institutions that held business records. The information they provide sheds light on three general questions: (1) What kinds of business holdings are currently found in colleges and universities? (2) How and when have institutions begun collecting business records? and (3) What problems have they encountered in acquiring, processing, and making the records available? (See appendix B for the definition for business records and papers used.)

Sizes and Kinds of Collections

In general, business collections comprise less than a quarter of the volume of the holdings of universities that have business records. Although the percentage of busi-

*This survey was conducted in conjunction with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to the University Archives and Area Research Center of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Colleges and universities to which questionnaires were sent are listed in appendix A.

ness records varied significantly from institution to institution, only two indicated that more than 50 percent of their holdings are of business. The number of different collections at each institution varies as widely as the percentage of total holdings devoted to business, from a low of 1 to a high of more than 1,400.

Overall it appears that nearly half of those universities with business collections have thirty or more separate business collections.

Most major types of businesses are included, and some, such as the lumber, textile, and railroad businesses, are heavily represented in university collections. Less well represented are the records of commercial banks, department stores, and retail and wholesale grocers. Sizes of these collections vary considerably, but several are, indeed, large in volume, representing companies whose records extend into the twentieth century. Most, however, indicated that their records reflected small companies—those with fewer than 100 employees. Slightly more reported that most of their records were of privately held companies, as opposed to publicly held, defined as firms issuing publicly traded stock. The business records of nearly half the institutions centered on family papers of company founders or influential citizens in the community.

In summary, then, current college and university business collections comprise a relatively small portion of total holdings but represent a wide range of business enterprises. Even so, individual business collections tend to be significantly larger than other types of collections, such as those of social organizations, labor unions, or individuals.

Nearly all the institutions began their collections of business records when a collection was offered, rather than after first developing a specific policy on acquiring business records. Most also noted their records were primarily of firms no longer in business.

This suggests that it is easier to acquire records when a firm is defunct or going out of business than while it is still in operation. In fact, one university got its records through an estate lawyer.

For a substantial majority of institutions, business collections were of companies in

the same geographic area as the repository. Further, a quarter noted that the records reflected businesses in which the university had strong research or educational programs.

Finally, the same percentage indicated that their initial business collections related to the university, either through its faculty, graduates, board of trustees, or other university contacts. The connection was not always clear, however. In some cases collections reflected the research interests of certain faculty, the business firms of members of the board of trustees, or graduates, or the contacts of chief university administrators with businesses.

Establishing the Collection

Thus, answers to how and when colleges and universities began to build business collections suggest little planning. The first university systematically to collect business records was Harvard University. In 1916, on behalf of the Harvard Business School, Professor Arthur H. Cole secured the Slater Company records, dating from the colonial period. The Universities of Washington, California at Los Angeles, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Virginia, and Cornell were also relatively early collectors of sizable business records.⁴ Most of the remainder of the universities collecting business records did not begin until the 1950s or later, and they were the most likely to have begun collecting without plans.

Finally, what problems have colleges and universities met in acquiring, processing, and making available business records? The reason many institutions do not acquire business records is their huge volume and their low research use. One archivist with more than twenty-five years of experience at three different repositories felt that "business records are the lowest grade ore mined by collectors."

The first obstacle to acquiring business records is either the firm's unwillingness to deposit records in a repository open to the public or the firm's lack of understanding about the potential value of its records. Typical reaction indicated that "businesses are reluctant to cooperate with archival institutions because of their suspicions that their records in an archives might be 'too avail-

able' or result in releasing confidential information."

Problems related to appraisal were raised by some archivists who felt they did not have the technical expertise to evaluate the records. Difficulties in persuading businesses to donate their records suggest that firms already involved in their own records management programs might be more susceptible to successful solicitation. Yet, almost none of the firms whose records were acquired by universities had had records management programs.

In nearly all cases archivists handled most of the negotiations for acquisition. However, in more than half of the cases, at least some work was done by someone else within the university. Professors of history, economics, and business were the most obvious contacts, although administrators such as development officers, librarians, and attorneys were also involved at some stage of negotiations.

Those who had experience using faculty or administrators generally found them useful, especially for establishing entree and opening negotiations. A significant minority, however, found the third-party contacts troublesome, primarily because such contacts did not understand archival procedures and had not sufficiently coordinated arrangements in advance with the archives.

Where archivists did not actually acquire the business records they had solicited, some were successful in persuading firms to establish a rudimentary company archives. Few had any influence on the development of a records management system, however.

For universities housing records of ongoing firms, the arrangements for transfer of records from the company to the repository vary. In most instances the archives receives records when they are designated as noncurrent, either because some basic records management schedule has been established or because of some change in the company organization, such as merger, relocation, or the discontinuation of a product line.

Other reasons cited for transfer of records include retirement of a chief executive or the fact that available storage space within the company is exhausted. In more than 50 percent of the cases where records of an

ongoing firm have been deposited with a university, all significant records prior to a given date have been transferred. In some instances companies lent certain records, such as incorporation documents, board of directors' minutes, or employee personnel records to the university to microfilm, after which the original documents were returned to the company.

Processing the Collection

Besides problems of acquisition, difficulties of processing are also enormous. Processing large collections is time-consuming and expensive; yet almost none of the companies whose records were being deposited with a university helped provide funds for processing and arranging the collection.

Part of this, of course, can be accounted for by the fact that some of the records were of companies no longer in business and without assets to fund the processing of their records. Of those universities that did receive assistance, the amount was usually small, and probably in no case did it cover the actual cost of processing the entire collection.

While some institutions mentioned that they planned to seek such assistance, the experience of those who have tried is not encouraging. If companies are unwilling to establish their own archives, they are also apparently unwilling to pay another institution to do the job for them.

Making the Collection Available for Use

It appears, however, that once problems of acquisition and processing have been resolved, procedures for making the records available for research have been fairly routine. Nearly all the records on deposit in universities have few or no restrictions on access, and few require company approval to publish research based on business collections.

This is true apparently because most of the records are of firms no longer in business and many are of late nineteenth century businesses with few who were associated with the firm still living. Those universities indicating that some restrictions are imposed usually permit access to records at least twenty-five years old. The problems, then, focus on acquisition, processing, and

storage, not physical access by researchers.

Summary

It appears from this survey, then, that a majority of large universities with significant archival and manuscript holdings do collect business records, broadly defined. Particularly, they collect records of relatively small, privately held firms, frequently centered on the personal papers of an individual important in the company, such as its founder or president.

Most of the business collections are of defunct companies that conducted business in the same city or geographic area as the university that accepted their records. Most archives or special collections began collecting business records, not after first developing a collecting policy, but rather after they had accepted a business collection, some time after 1950. Few of these collections have restrictions on research access, and, taken together, business records comprise less than 10 percent of the holdings of university repositories.

Nearly all such collections are processed and have finding aids. Further, most business records are for the period prior to 1920. Few firms have helped provide even minimal funding to process their collections. Most negotiations for the acquisition of these records have been conducted by the archives or manuscripts staff. Of the collections acquired, almost none of the companies donating the records had either archival or records management programs, nor were many established as a result of dealing with archivists.

Those universities without business collections generally were not charged with the responsibility for developing collections other than university records; nor had they ever seriously considered collecting business records.

STRATEGY FOR ACQUIRING BUSINESS ARCHIVES

If this general summary represents the status of business records in college and university repositories, what are the prospects for development of business holdings? What special problems and likely solutions does this information suggest?

The most obvious problem is that modern

business records are voluminous. Particularly for this reason, some rational collecting policy and acquisitions strategy are necessary. Recent attention has focused on large political collections of persons whose careers spanned a number of years and who held significant state or national elective offices.⁵

At the presidential level, presidential libraries, built with private funds but maintained and staffed by the National Archives, have emerged as a solution for the problems of size and staffing. Proposed federal legislation may sharply increase the number of papers of public officials being transferred to archival repositories.*

No such solution is being discussed for the records of business. Although Oliver Wendell Holmes and Richard Berner have argued for increased governmental initiative in this area, their proposals, provocative and imaginative as they are, will not soon be realized.⁶

In the immediate future, therefore, archivists must find some way to deal systematically with business records. Not to do so is to risk losing records fundamental to an understanding of our economic development. To many historians the business culture of American society characterizes the United States as much as its political democracy. The records of business are too significant to dismiss in the present because of inadequate space to house them or insufficient use to justify their retention.

These problems make it imperative that business records be selected with extreme care. A well-planned acquisitions strategy, undertaken singly by a university in a relatively small urban area or cooperatively by several institutions in a larger urban or geographic area, should begin with a survey of available records. Knowing what records

*The report of the National Study Commission on the Records and Documents of Federal Officials recommended that the papers of the presidents and vice-presidents be administered by the National Archives. Members of Congress as well as federal judges, however, would be permitted to deposit their papers in a repository that met statutorily defined minimum standards. The commission further recommended that Congress consider a one-time allocation of funds to nonfederal repositories that received public papers (SAA Newsletter May 1977, p.1, 3).

exist is essential to developing a policy for coordinated acquisition.

The first step in surveying is to define a geographic area large enough to be an identifiable region but small enough realistically to survey, such as a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area devised by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, a greater metropolitan area of a city, or a cluster of counties.

The next step is to develop an economic profile of the area from a historical perspective, using available published information. This material might be found in histories of the city or geographic area. More often, however, it will require some work in recent census data, visits to local chambers of commerce or manufacturers' and employers' associations, or trips to local libraries and historical societies to obtain adequate data for identifying the major economic characteristics of the area.*

The archivist should then work with faculty whose research interests are in business, business or economic history, or economics, to decide which types of businesses best typify the area and which have been most significant in the development of the community. This group of firms will form the survey population.

Before beginning the survey, however, it is important to enlist the support of the business community. This might be done by first seeking the cooperation of the local business associations or forming a select advisory committee of business leaders favorable to the project who are willing to be publicly identified with it. This is a time-consuming step, but it is an essential one if the subsequent survey is to be successful.

The survey of businesses can be conducted in a variety of ways, but a mail questionnaire is probably the easiest. Businesses, as previous general surveys by the Business Archives Committee have shown, are no more inclined than other institutions to provide detailed answers to questionnaires. It is therefore important for the questionnaire to include a cover letter, pre-

ferably individually typed, indicating the intent of the survey, the support of key business individuals or organizations for the project, and the general theme that business' story cannot be accurately told without preservation of, and access to, historically significant business records.

The letter should be addressed to the chief executive or chief operating officer of the company, asking that he or she forward the questionnaire to someone in the firm familiar with its noncurrent records, such as the corporate secretary, vice-president for administration, or controller. Avoid, if possible, public relations officers, who will probably not be in a position to provide complete information. The questionnaire itself should be carefully drawn to elicit the maximum amount of relevant information with the least amount of effort from the respondents. Determine what records are of greatest use to potential researchers and ask only for that information.

After developing a fairly detailed picture of the existence and availability of business records from completed questionnaires, the archivist should discuss a possible acquisitions strategy with faculty, local historical societies, and libraries. Ideally that decision should be made with the advice and assistance of the state historical society and the state historical records board. Acquisitions need not occur immediately, nor do selected firms all need to be approached at the same time.

The data from the survey, plus the analysis of faculty and historical and library agencies, will provide the general framework for a practical policy—one that is not likely to change radically over several years.

The framework gives the archivist the information needed to decide which companies should be cultivated and how likely their records are to be otherwise destroyed.

It establishes a contact that can be maintained and a channel for receiving regular mailings of company literature and reports.

It means that as the opportunity presents itself—company merger, retirement of a chief executive, the move of a company to a new location—the archivist is in a position to act.

It means that as funds become available,

*The procedure here described is substantially the one followed by the author in a records survey of manufacturing firms in Racine and Kenosha, Wisconsin, funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

from whatever source, the archivist has the ability to move relatively quickly to acquire collections or to process those already acquired.

Above all, it means that archivists take

the initiative in developing a rational policy for documenting one of the most important and protean activities of American society—business.

REFERENCES

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2. For detailed results of previous surveys, see Robert W. Lovett, "Business Records in Libraries," *American Archivist* 20:253-61 (July 1957); William D. Overman, "The Pendulum Swings," *American Archivist* 22:3-10 (Jan. 1959); Earl L. Bailey and G. Clark Thompson, "The Company Looks Backward," *Business Record* 16:95-99 (Feb. 1959); Arthur M. Johnson and Barry E. Supple, "The Businessman Speaks to Historians," *Business History Review* 34:241-47 (Summer 1960); Helen L. Davidson, "A Tentative Survey of Business Archives," *American Archivist* 24:323-29 (July 1961); Robert W. Lovett, "The Librarian, the Historian and Business Archives," *Records Management Quarterly* 2:9-11 (April 1968); Helen L. Davidson, "Selling Management on Business Archives," *Records Management Quarterly* 3:15 (July 1969); Robert W. Lovett, "The Status of Business Archives," *American Archivist* 32:247-50 (July 1969); Gary D. Saretzky, "North American Business Archives: Results of a Survey," *American Archivist* 40:413-19 (Oct. 1977).
3. Arthur H. Cole, "Principles for the Selection of Material for Preservation in Collections of Business Records," in American Library Association, Committee on Public Documents, *Public Documents* (Chicago: The Association, 1938), p.349-56.
4. Arthur H. Cole, "Business Manuscripts: Collection, Handling and Cataloging," *Library Quarterly* 8:93 (Jan. 1938); Robert W. Lovett, "Business Manuscripts at Baker Library, Harvard School of Business Administration," *Business History Review* 34:345-47 (Autumn 1960).
5. Three interesting articles, each dealing in different ways with the problems of large political collections, are Lydia Lucas, "Managing Congressional Papers: A Repository View," p.275-80; Eleanor McKay, "Random Sampling Techniques: A Method of Reducing Large, Homogeneous Series in Congressional Papers," p.281-89; and Richard A. Baker, "Managing Congressional Papers: A View of the Senate," p.291-96, all in *American Archivist* 41 (July 1978). See also Frank H. Mackaman, "A Case for Preserving Congressional Manuscript Collections," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers* (forthcoming).
6. Oliver W. Holmes, "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives," *American Archivist* 1:171-85 (Oct. 1938); Richard C. Berner, "Business Archives in Perspective," *Journal of Forest History* 18:32-34 (April 1974).

APPENDIX A

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO WHICH
QUESTIONNAIRES WERE SENT

Arizona State University
Ball State University
Barnard College
Berea College
Bowling Green State University
Brigham Young University
California Polytechnic State University
Case Western Reserve University
Colby College
College of William and Mary
Columbia University
Cornell University
DePauw University

Eastern Michigan University
Georgetown University
Harvard University
Howard University
Iowa State University
Marquette University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Memphis State University
Michigan State University
Northeastern University
Northern Illinois University
Northwestern University
Oberlin College
Queen's University at Kingston
Rutgers University
Sangamon State University
Southern Illinois University

Stanford University
 State University of New York at Buffalo
 State University of New York at Stony Brook
 Temple University
 University of Alaska-Fairbanks
 University of Arkansas
 University of California, Berkeley
 University of California, Los Angeles
 University of Cincinnati
 University of Delaware
 University of Illinois at Chicago Circle
 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
 University of Kentucky
 University of Louisville
 University of Maryland
 University of Massachusetts
 University of Michigan
 University of Minnesota

University of Missouri-Columbia
 University of Nebraska-Lincoln
 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
 University of Toronto
 University of Vermont
 University of Virginia
 University of Washington
 University of Western Ontario
 University of Wisconsin-Madison
 Washington State University
 Wayne State University
 West Virginia University
 Winthrop College
 Wright State University
 Xavier University
 Yale University
 York University

APPENDIX B DEFINITION OF TERMS

The definition for *business records/papers* used in this article and in the original questionnaire is that found in Edwin A. Thompson, "A Glossary of American Historical and Literary Manuscript Terms" (Washington, D.C., 1965), p.21-22: "Records normally growing out of a commercial or industrial enterprise, and may include (among others) such items as accounts, account books, accounts current, accounts rendered, accounts stated, annual reports, annual statements, articles of association/incorporation, audits, balance sheets, bank letters, bank notes, bank statements, bankbooks, bills, bills of exchange, bills of lading, bills of sale, billbooks, blotters, bonds, business cards, canceled checks, cash accounts, cashbooks, cash-disbursement journals, certificates of incorporation, checks, checkbooks, corporation records, daybooks, deeds, deed polls, disbursement

books, drafts, drawing accounts, estate papers/ records, estimates evaluations, expense accounts, expense books, freight bills, household account books/records, indentures, invoices, invoice books, journals, justifications, land script, land warrants, leases, ledgers, letters of credit, licenses, manifests, market letters, memorandum books, mortgage notes, organization charts, partnership records, patents, payrolls, payroll records, personal accounts, prices current, private ledgers, profit and loss statements, promissory notes, purchase journals, purchase ledgers, purchase orders, purchase records, receipts, receipt books, records, regulations, rent rolls, reports, requisitions, sales journals, sales ledgers, sales notes, sales records, schedules, script, specifications, statements, stocks, stock certificates, stock ledgers, stores ledgers, tables, tallies, tally sheets/cards, tax certificates, time books, time sheets, trial balances, vouchers, voucher checks, warehouse receipts, waste books, and waybills."