

**Historical Programs on a Private Estate:  
Viewpoints on the Symbiosis of Archives,  
Historic Preservation, and Professional Education\***  
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In 2006 I entered into discussions with the "Educational Trust," which administers the buildings, grounds, and fortune left by Mrs. W. (née Binney), who lived on a 21-acre estate in a semi-rural section of a prosperous suburb near Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. W., heiress, landscape architect, and active advocate for environmental causes, died in 2004 at age ninety after years of decline. The Trust hired me on a consulting basis in 2007 to conduct a survey of manuscripts, books, periodicals, and other paper-based materials scattered throughout the estate's many buildings and provide advice about how best to take care of them. The papers I found on the estate were

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article (to protect the privacy of individuals and the security of collections) I have substituted pseudonyms for the actual names of people and organizations involved with the activities of the estate.

varied, voluminous, and thoroughly disorganized. Many, including eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century documents, were endangered by poor storage conditions. Only a small percentage had been kept in ways that enabled adequate access to the information they contained.

I have worked periodically over fifteen years as a consulting archivist in addition to regular positions as an archivist at universities and hospitals in the northeastern United States. This has often required six or more days per week, but the extra income was welcome, especially during the impecunious years following graduate school. Moonlighting is well suited to my disposition in that it provides incentive and justification for reading a great deal about a wide variety of subjects. I absorbed, for example, plenty of information about Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis before and during my stint as archives advisor at a psychoanalytic society. I learned a lot about stocks, bonds, and mutual funds before assuming my responsibilities as archives consultant at an investment management firm.

Mrs. W.'s will stipulated that she wanted her property (buildings and grounds as well as liquid assets) to be used for educational purposes. The exact terms were vaguely defined, but she did indicate that she wanted gardens and an arboretum to be maintained. Major buildings include a sprawling Federal/Georgian style mansion house (ca. 1794), a farmhouse (ca. 1707), and a carriage barn (ca. 1866) used for many years for books and papers as well as horses, carriages, assorted livestock, and motor vehicles. Smaller buildings include an eighteenth-century carpenter's workshop, and early twentieth-century structures such as the "Red Cottage," sheep shed, henhouse,

gazebo, staff cottage, root cellar, and mist house (for protecting the roots of horticultural specimens before planting). Distinct horticultural areas include lawns, terraces, pasture, meadows, a rose garden, an apple orchard, and a dogwood grove in addition to woodlands punctuated by groves of black walnut, beech, hemlock, and red cedar. There are two ponds, a number of paths, some old rock walls, and other interesting landscape features. Deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, hawks, and other animals are frequent visitors.

The mission statement I drafted for the Archives has not yet been formally approved, but is, I believe, a good reflection of Mrs. W.'s intentions: "The mission of the Educational Trust Archives is to serve the purposes of the Trust in accordance with the provisions of Mrs.W.'s will. The Trust, created in memory of her family, aims to preserve the houses and grounds of the estate for the education and appreciation of members of the public who are interested in the historical and horticultural significance of the property. The specific goal of the Archives is to document the history of the estate and the people who were a part of that history through identifying, collecting, and preserving historically significant papers and records. The Archives will serve and promote the interests of the Trust by appraising, collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing physical and intellectual access to documents in a responsible manner according to established guidelines. The Archives will promote the educational purposes of the Trust, strive for good public relations, and foster social and environmental responsibility by means of publications, exhibits, tours, and other appropriate educational measures."

The Trust, which attempts to limit its expenditures to interest and dividend income so that capital is preserved, has funded several worthwhile historical programs in addition to the Archives Project. The Preservation Studies Program at a nearby university brings Ph.D. candidates to study buildings on the estate. Students submit research reports for the advancement of historical knowledge as well as their own educational experience. The Department of Archaeology at a local university has similarly undertaken studies of the grounds. It seems likely that a prehistoric site exists somewhere on the property because of its proximity to a river, the availability of many lithic resources, and the fact that there are well-documented Native American trails nearby. Paleo-Indian (ca. 12,000 years ago) and Archaic (ca. 10,000 to 3,000 years ago) sites have been discovered in neighboring areas. The Trust also hired a landscape historian to study and work with gardens, trees, ponds, stonewalls, and other outdoor features. One of the main objectives of the landscape education initiative is to restore plantings or other landscape features created by Mrs. W. but since overgrown or otherwise neglected. Students from local high schools have been enlisted for trimming, weeding, and gardening in summer, earning money while they learn about horticulture.

The Trust places a heavy emphasis on education, and I have accordingly integrated graduate students (interns in training to be archivists) into as many aspects of the Archives Project as feasible, including planning as well as hands-on surveying and processing. A graduate student (he was, fortunately, fearless and determined) from Simmons Library School in Boston helped me complete an initial survey of paper-based materials in the spring of 2007 by tireless

digging and systematic note taking in cluttered crawl spaces, attics, basements, storage rooms, closets, cupboards, drawers, desks, boxes, baskets, and trunks. Rubber gloves and facemasks were indispensable at times. Our excavations into the disorganized documentary record took us through a great deal of dust and often required us to brush away mouse droppings or handle containers where rodents had nested. We assigned numbers to each container, shelf, or pile of books, papers, or periodicals. The numbers ran from 1 to 350. Each numbered survey entry included the name of the room in which the materials were found (e.g., "Mansion – Sewing Room – Box 199," or "Farmhouse – Pantry – Shelf 302"), a summary of contents, and the estimated quantity.

I used the resulting survey list to select priority categories for inclusion in the initial phases of an ambitious processing campaign, starting with materials documenting buildings and grounds and the biography and genealogy of families who had lived on the estate or had been affiliated with them. To that end I reviewed the survey list to select boxes (etc.) containing relevant documents and asked the estate's caretaker to have the boxes moved to a designated processing workspace in the farmhouse. I next removed targeted documents from their containers so interns could more carefully identify items, re-house them in acid-neutral folders and boxes, and arrange, list, and describe them. Since the completion of the survey, two library school students per semester have been processing collections one or two days per week under my guidance. The interns, known as "Fellows," receive a monthly paycheck from the Trust, and so do I.

"Original order" was not a significant factor in existing storage because typical piles or containers jumbled nineteenth-century family correspondence with late-twentieth-century color photographs, paperback books, cancelled checks, modern horticultural notes, and newspaper clippings about topics ranging from animal welfare to knitting. We were nevertheless careful to insert removal slips into each container, indicating what had been extracted, and recorded (in pencil at the bottom of each newly-created folder) the number of the container from which the papers had come. We protected existing order wherever we found evidence of systematic organization by Mrs. W. or her predecessors. For example, we did not separate the contents of folders or envelopes, out of consideration for the possibility that the association of materials may have been meaningful to the creator or compiler. I made exceptions, however, for artifacts that seemed to have been squirreled away with documents unrelated to them because both happened to be old and important. A remnant of Martha Washington's embroidered ball gown, for example, was extracted from the envelope in which it was found and transferred (with the old handwritten note identifying it) to the caretaker, who is working on a catalogue of artifacts. Martha was the wife of the first American president. Paper money from the eighteenth-century American colonies and other interesting objects were similarly treated.

The Archives Project complements the other educational initiatives of the "Educational Trust" in that it aims to improve intellectual access to and make available an assortment of materials documenting changes to the estate over hundreds or years. Architectural documents that we have found and made accessible through

processing include records of contractors detailing work done, as well as plans, blueprints, drawings, elevations, photographs, bills, and estimates relating to the buildings and grounds and how they have changed. Horticultural documents discovered and processed include lists of plantings over the years, photographs of gardens, aerial photographs, memoranda and correspondence relating to seeds exchanged with other enthusiasts, applications for dogwood patents, and other informative and potentially useful materials. Preserving and improving access to relevant biographical and genealogical documents has also been an important component of the work. Of less immediate interest are materials pertaining to Mrs. W.'s work with garden clubs, horticultural societies, environmental groups, and the Colonial Dames of America (an organization whose aims include genealogical documentation of America's oldest families and providing a forum for their social interaction).

Exterior and interior views of buildings (photographs, drawings, etc.) if undated can often be positioned in time by comparison with other documents. Photographs and diagrams showing the configuration of gardens or other landscape features can likewise be dated, often by juxtaposition of other images, or guessing the ages of known individuals, or analyzing styles of clothing. Aerial photographs can reveal patterns of planting or disturbances in the soil's surface or other topographical features of considerable interest to archaeologists and landscape historians. The input of subject specialists has been invaluable for the Archives Project, just as the archival resources have proved essential to the work of the specialists.

The Archives Project has been unusually gratifying because of the opportunity to bring together, preserve, and improve access to documents that are likely to be used quickly and efficiently for a variety of important purposes. Several students who have participated in the project have announced that because of its multifaceted tasks and responsibilities it has been the most valuable practical experience of their archival training. The hands-on exposure to various materials from several centuries and the opportunity to interact meaningfully with scholars from a range of disciplines seems to be especially heuristic. Moreover, the insights gained into the laughter and grief of historical human experience, including love, fear, conflict, birth, death, and other emotions and events, are quite riveting. The students and I have grown closer to some of the people documented in the collections, especially when faceless names in the record can be paired with photographic portraits, and vice versa.

Some of the female interns, for example, took a special interest in the epistolary romance of a young Civil War doctor (John McLean Hayward, or "Mac") and his fiancée (Katharine Cobb, or "Kitty"). I was more drawn to Mac's letters detailing army camp life. On March 8, 1862, he wrote that: "[W]e went to Harpers Ferry and encamped about two miles beyond the town without tents or anything to eat. The men were put into some old houses that had been deserted and I found when I had got through the duty of looking after the sick that there was no place for me...All the places that were not filled by the men were taken up by the officers...[S]elfishness is the order...I thought I would go sleep with my horse Billy who would keep my back warm at least...and gave him part of my supper which was only some hard bread..."

I especially sympathized with Mrs. W.'s ancestor, John Binney, who received several extortionate letters in December 1824, which must have been more than slightly alarming: "Tomorrow evening you will be called upon between 7 & 9 of clk. by a person with an order (signed by me as Secretary) for 1,250\$ which pay without hesitation or you will not live to see 1825...I will tell you what we are - There are ten of us...bound by powerfull ties & strong oaths...We have agreed that a contribution be taken from certain rich men in Boston and that he who refuses his portion shall die..."

I was less in sympathy with staid Dr. Amos Binney, who visited Martin Van Buren's White House on a Saturday night in 1838 and complained that the President had chosen "to keep open house to exhibit himself...to every comer who can produce the passport of a decent coat and discuss for their benefit matters of great national importance in the style of a bar room politician..."

I thought I had explored every reasonable location for historical papers when one day, six months into the project, the caretaker asked me if I had seen the steamer trunks in the hen house. As I soon discovered, these trunks from the 1930s were full of women's clothes, now mildewed, and bundles of moldy letters from the same era, once belonging to Mrs. W.'s deceased husband's first wife. Mrs. W. was constitutionally incapable of throwing anything away. I infer, however, that she asked her servants to sequester the first wife's trunks in the chicken coop at some indeterminate time after Mr.W.'s death.

A well-considered Archives Program includes processing, as well as carefully planned space, preservation activities, and a person trained in archival methods to devise and administer policies, answer reference questions, and oversee other essential activities.

I drafted guidelines and recommendations for establishing an on-going program, which the Trustees are currently considering. My report indicates that the several rooms of farmhouse space currently being used as processing and storage areas are adequate for present purposes, but advises that the Trust should seek improved, permanent space, hire a part-time, professional archivist to oversee the work of archivists in training, and maintain well-appointed facilities for providing reference services and accommodating on-site research.

Climate controls, accessibility, lighting, security, and ventilation are all factors that need to be considered when choosing or designing archival facilities. Planting such facilities in historic buildings is a task complicated by intrinsic difficulty. The nature of old farmhouses and other venerable buildings makes it important to consider how much weight their creaking floors can sustain. It is necessary to achieve a balance between the need for efficient use of floor space, the need that students of historic preservation have for access to walls, and the load capacity of joists. Too much weight in the middle of a room could lead to structural damage or even collapse. Shelves placed too close to exterior walls may expose boxes to unacceptable levels of dampness. My report recommends that the Trustees consider rented options off-site, such as a suite of rooms near Harvard Square in Cambridge or Kenmore Square in Boston, locations near major

universities, attractive for student workers, and convenient for potential researchers.

It would be advantageous for the Trust to enter into a formal, ongoing, cooperative relationship with one or both of the Boston-based training programs for archivists, and I have recommended that it do so. Simmons Library School offers an M.S. in Library and Information Science, which can be combined in a joint program with an M.A. in History. The University of Massachusetts at Boston has a Master of Arts in History and Archival Methods track.

Because of the current downturn in the American (and world) economy it seems unlikely (as of Winter, 2008) that the Trustees will be willing to spend any significant amounts toward expansion of the Archives Project until the Trust's stock-based revenues increase. The Board's membership includes Mrs. W.'s former accountant, attorney, and investment advisor, all of whom are predisposed to take a conservative approach to the preservation of financial assets. But the exemplary work that my students and I have accomplished to date (punctuated by my persistent advocacy) has, I hope, planted the seeds of an ongoing, expanded program, which I expect to grow productively as seasons change and financial climates improve.

Archivists bring with them a multiplicity of concerns, priorities, and perceptions that are not always shared by others. The vocabulary we use does not translate well to non-archivists without careful explanation. State-of-the-art archival practices and the amount of money that managers are willing to spend are frequently at variance. But such circumstances present a consulting archivist with excellent

opportunities to educate trustees and directors about what we do and why. Being an archivist on a private estate calls for flexibility and degrees of situational adjustment. More often than not, however, the archivist's efforts are rewarded by cooperation, accomplishment, and the satisfaction of shaping historical insight.