Institutional Report: the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

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Archives are repositories for recorded information. Depending on their mission and archival category, archival repositories may have the goal of seeking to identify and preserve records of historical value. They may also strive to make these records available to the public. There are archives on the federal, state, and local levels. Archival collections can vary. Some archives collect material on a specific subject area, while others may place an emphasis on collecting material based on geographic location or topic. In this paper, we will examine the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a private archive in the state of Pennsylvania. Through the use of observation and interview we will determine how this institution seeks to accomplish its mission of becoming a center of history and learning by educating and enriching the lives of its patrons through the historical record.

Per the Info 780 assignment, an archive, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania [HSP], was selected. This archive is a privately funded institution, located in Philadelphia, PA. In order to properly analyze the HSP, the following eight aspects were examined: (1) mission, (2) collection scope, (3) information access, (4) public service, (5) preservation, (6) security, (7) outreach, and (8) general observations. In addition, an interview was conducted with Mr. Lee Arnold, HSP Library Director.

First, we will look at a brief history of the HSP. The HSP was founded back in 1824 (Griffith, 2001, p.7). Originally both a library as well as a museum, the HSP, due to fiscal limitations, began the process of divesting itself of its museum function in 1998 (Griffith, 2001, p. 462). The divesture was completed in 2002 with the transfer of artifacts to the Atwater Kent Museum (HSP, 2004, p. 12). The library then began to institute a new strategic planning process (HSP, 2004, p. 12).

(1) Mission: The HSP, per its website, (http://www.hsp.org), has the following published mission statement: “The Historical Society of Pennsylvania collects and shares stories of the peoples of Pennsylvania, and their contributions to American history. Conserving and disseminating knowledge spanning the 17th century to the 21st, HSP opens minds” (HSP, 2006, par 1).
The HSP 2004 Annual Report, provided more detail of the HSP mission statement: “The HSP works to expand American history’s documentation, accessibility, and use. The HSP serves as a vital gateway to historical resources” (HSP, 2004, p. 5). “Preserving and providing access to our materials is central to HSP’s mission as a research library and educational institution that links scholars and citizens… in their efforts to uncover the past in order to share it with others” (HSP, 2004, p. 6). The HSP mission statement appears to be specific to this archive as, per the HSP website, this institution places an emphasis on historical records pertaining to American history (HSP, 2008a).

(2) Scope: The HSP collecting policy is directly related to the Institution’s geographic location in Philadelphia. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s collection contains a wide variety of archival material related to the history of Pennsylvania and the greater Philadelphia region. The Society’s collections cover material on eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and parts of Delaware and Maryland. The HSP collection also include a wealth of materials on the eastern United States, the founding of the United States, and the diversity of ethnic experiences across the United States.

Per my interview with Mr. Arnold, I understand that the HSP has an unwritten policy of accepting materials beyond what is stated on their website. The HSP website states that the HSP has an interest in donations for two key areas: manuscript collections dealing with 18th and 19th century America, and records which document Philadelphia region’s changing diversity (HSP, 2008a). However, Mr. Arnold advised me that on some occasions, donations are made in bulk, such as a defunct organizational records or historical estate papers, that the HSP then determines which items to retain (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009).

The HSP collection is primarily a physical collection. It mainly consist of manuscripts, textual records, and microfilm. The HSP currently houses over 21 million manuscript and graphic items, including over 600,000 printed items (HSP, 2008b, par 5). The HSP does not accept audio visual material, digital material, confidential material, or graphics.
The HSP has, through its history, obtained the majority of its holdings thru donations. A recent example of sizable donations would be the collection from the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, received in January 2002 (HSP, 2004, p. 5). Typically, HSP staff members will work with the donating party to identify which materials are most appropriate to donate.

(3) Information access: The majority of the HSP collection is in the form of textual and microfilm material. Due to this format, on-site physical access is the primary method for research. Mail is the alternative method of access. The HSP provides on-site access as well as electronic access to its finding aids. Based on the collection, finding aids may be in paper and/or electronic format. Per the HSP website, HSP maintains a list of currently available electronic finding aids. In addition, the website advises patrons that efforts are ongoing to add to the existing list of online finding aids (HSP, 2008c, par 1). I was not able to determine what percentage of the collection is available online as this statistic was not available at the time of my interview with Mr. Arnold.

(4) Public Services: The HSP provides both in-person research and research-by-mail, reference services. They also offer copies of prints via their Rights and Reproductions service. As previously mentioned, the majority of the HSP collection is in the form of textual and microfilm material. Due to this format, most researchers access the collections via on-site physical access. Research inquiries by mail are the alternate methods of access. There is a general reference phone number which goes to an answering machine. Patrons are then contacted and asked to either email or mail in their reference request. Research by mail involves a fee for limited research by HSP staff. This fee also includes up to 20 pages of photocopied material. Research fees are charged on an hourly basis, starting at $30 for HSP members, and $45 for non-members (HSP, 2008d, par 2).

David Haugaard is in charge of reference services. He handles most of the email and written reference requests. Per Mr. Arnold, there is a service called “advanced paging.” This service is only available for those having a paid HSP membership. It allows HSP members to request up to three
reference items to be pulled in advance of a visit to the library, and ready for use upon arrival (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009).

(5) Preservation: The HSP primarily preserves books and other textual materials. Mr. Arnold advised me that as new collections are processed, they are checked for preservation needs, such as non-acidic folders and tray boxes (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009). With regard to the building’s environmental controls, I understand that the HSP has been seeking funds to help pay for overdue repairs to the building (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009). In 2008, HSP received two capital grants from the William Penn Foundation and the City of Philadelphia to pay for replacement of HSP’s aging air handling system (HSP, 2008, p. 5).

According to Sally Griffith’s book, the HSP board has had disagreements over funding, and institutional objectives, going back to the late 1990’s (Griffith, 2001, p. 441). These disagreements have also included the allocation of sufficient funds for preservation needs (Griffith, 2001, p. 441). Unfortunately, the HSP is apparently still in need of funds for preservation equipment. A timely example would be the recent website request, for a new ultrasonic welder (HSP, 2008e, par 2).

(6) Security: Per Pugh, there are two aspects of security worth noting: protection of materials while in use and secure storage (Pugh, 2005, p. 180). In regard to materials usage, researchers use the reading rooms to access all HSP materials. These materials include books, magazines, loose textual material, and microfilm. The main floor of the HSP consists of two large reading rooms. There is a textual reading room and a microfilm reading room. HSP does not have any obvious security for the material held in the either of the reading rooms. There are no electronic tags or security strips on the books, nor is there an entrance mechanism for detecting such tags. The textual reading room does have large tables which offer visual surveillance, but the staff on duty did not appear to be looking at the patrons.

With regard to secure storage, there is no access available by the public to storage or work areas as an elevator key is required. One must key in the elevator to reach the 2nd and third floors, where
employee work areas are located. Mr. Arnold expressed hope that funds would be available in the near future, possibly via a grant, for the purchase of a book tag security detection system (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009). But, I did not see any visible evidence of security systems or staff enforced procedures to prevent the theft of loose textual material, or other HSP records.

(7) Outreach: The HSP does outreach in the form of guest lectures and on-site sponsored events. The HSP identifies its principle audience as including educators, scholars, historians and genealogists, and historical organizations (HSP, 2008, p 1). Based on my interview with Mr. Arnold, I understand that the HSP is in the process of reassessing its identity in relationship to the local Philadelphia community (L. Arnold, personal communication, May 13 2009). Based on an internal HSP document entitled," Partnership Hedgehog," the HSP is apparently seeking to transform itself into a center of history and learning. In conjunction with this goal, the HSP has been creating relationships with local communities and organizations (Squire, 2008, p.15). This outreach work includes such educational events such as National History Day, teacher workshops, and guest lecturing.

(8) General observations: As part of the class assignment, I conducted an on-site review on this repository. Per my research, the HSP has approximately 247 separate collections which measure approximately 26,500 linear feet (PACSCL, 2007). There is a staff of 17 for administration duties and 17 for reference duties. There are also 12 part-time staff who work on grant projects. During my on-site visit, it appeared that there was sufficient space for researchers and patrons in the two reading rooms. There also appeared to be sufficient staff coverage for patron needs.

The HSP is presently unable to accept large collections due to a lack of storage space (L. Arnold, personal communication, 2009). To alleviate this problem, a grant request has been submitted to request funds for a movable stack area (L. Arnold, personal communication, 2009). With regard to financial resources, my interview and research revealed that this institution has a multitude of pending budgetary needs. It is my understanding that the HSP expense needs include high priority items such
as building renovations and upgrades, funding for additional staff, as well as computer upgrades.

Based on the HSP website and annual reports, it would appear that this institution is actively engaged in building its various collections, as well as processing, preserving, and providing access to them. Based on my interview, as well as review of the HSP website, the information I have collected would appear to substantiate this institution’s claim that it is actively engaged in an ongoing effort to identify and retain records of enduring value.

Per my interview with Mr. Arnold, I understand that all members of the HSP reference staff have MLS or history degrees (L. Arnold, personal communication, 2009). In addition, all of them have engaged in processing and cataloging projects. The authors O’Toole and Cox noted the importance of archives engaging in a dual function: “…to preserve historical records while ensuring that patrons and the public can be used” (O’Toole & Cox, 2006, p. 110). Based on my archive observations and it would appear that this archive has staff who are actively engaged towards meeting this goal.

Archival processing is a subject which has been discussed in class. Still, I was a bit surprised when the issue repeatedly came up during my research on the HSP. During my interview, I learned of HSP’s processing backlog. Apparently the HSP has an ongoing problem with the timely processing of donated materials. Funds are needed to pay the salaries for processing staff. This issue has been discussed at length by authors such as Timothy Ericson, Leonard Rapport, and Theodore Schellenberg.

Matthew Lyons, HSP technology manager, in an internal HSP email, referred to the 2005 article by Green and Meissner entitled, ”More product, less process: revamping traditional archival processing,” in his emphasis on the need for the HSP to modify and accelerate its accessioning efforts (M. Lyons, personal communication, 2008). Lyons’ email referenced a 2002 Mellon survey of HSP’s unprocessed collections. The Mellon survey found that based on the current rate of processing, it would take the HSP over 120 staff years to process all of its archival collections (M. Lyons, personal
communication, 2008). Based on Mr. Lyons communication, it would appear that the HSP staff and management are cognizant of the processing backlog and are working to address this problem.

Reflection: Susan Stitt was the HSP president in the early 1990’s. She presided during a period of fierce boardroom fights. Stitt once stated, “We must begin to grapple with the challenges of fitting user interests and collection-related needs into the unforgiving realities of bricks, mortar, and dollars. The HSP is a treasure chest. The key to that treasure chest will be our clarity of purpose in addressing its key priorities” (Greyser, 1997). Remarkably, even though Stitt’s remarks were made over twelve years ago, I think they still hold value today. In my opinion, archives like the HSP need to be more pragmatic in their expenditures as well as more expedient in their collection processing.

Based on my research, it would appear that in the years since Stitt’s passionate appeal, this archive has continued to make progress in its ongoing effort to be both a historical research library as well as an educational institution. Such progress includes locating new financial resources, developing an online OPAC catalog, sponsoring new collections for patron financed accessioning, as well as enabling the sponsorship of various academic internships. These steps, along with the more recent efforts at community outreach, appear to have increased HSP’s visibility and professional identity while reinvigorating its relationship with the local community.

Randall Jimerson, in his article,” American Archivists and the Search for Professional Identity,” stressed the need of archivists to develop external initiatives in order to increase public awareness of archival resources, as well as to help obtain increased funding. (Jimerson, 2000, p 3). Based on my interview and HSP institutional research, it appears to me that this institution is actively engaged in a renewed effort to provide access to its collections. This, along with management’s emphasis on updating the online catalog, as well as the continued development of the collection finding aids, will undoubtedly serve to create a closer bond between this institution and its patrons. Thus, I feel this institution is working hard in a continuing effort to achieve its mission of redefining itself as a center of history and learning, by educating and enriching the lives of its patrons through the historical record.
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