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Documenting a Movement: Creating and Sustaining the Occupy Boston Community Archive

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Flyers and other Occupy Boston documents posted in the A to Z Library and archive. *Courtesy of Meghan Bailey.*

DOCUMENTING A MOVEMENT

Creating and Sustaining the Occupy Boston Community Archive

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A wave of dissatisfaction swept the country in fall 2011. This uneasiness manifested itself in numerous Occupy movements, featuring throngs of protestors speaking out against income inequality and the corruption in our financial sector. Inspired by Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Boston took root on the Rose Kennedy Greenway at Dewey Square in Boston's financial district during mid-October 2011. Thriving in the shadow of the Federal Reserve Bank, Occupy Boston was a vibrant and diverse community of individuals, from students to the working class, from professionals to the unemployed.

The importance of preserving the Occupy movement quickly became clear. It's been decades since America has seen such

widespread civil dissent. As archivists, not only are we responsible for preserving the past; we also have to consider preserving history as it occurs.

Emergence of the Library and Archive

At the start of the movement, books of all subjects were donated and haphazardly stacked in a corner of a tent, which soon proved to be too small to house the growing library and nearly flooded due to weather conditions. Boston Radical Reference Collective and the Simmons College Progressive Librarians Guild teamed up with Metacomet Books to create a leaderless, collective library



to meet the information needs of the participants and visitors at Occupy Boston. It was dubbed the Audre Lorde to Howard Zinn Library—A to Z Library—in honor of these social activists. The piles of books were transferred to a better home: a sturdy army tent was donated, along with two hundred additional books for the collection, by Metacomet Books. The books were then weeded by professional librarians and library students to turn the focus of the library to political activism, racism, anarchism, and feminism and authors like Lorde, Zinn, and Noam Chomsky, to name a few.

The collection in the library quickly grew beyond books to include organizational documents, newspapers, original zines, pamphlets, flyers, posters, legal documents, and other ephemera. The archive emerged in response to this large (and sometimes overwhelming) amount of material that had been and continues to be generated by Occupy Boston. Volunteer archivists within the library were inspired by proactive activist archives like the American Radicalism collection at Michigan State University, which offers a range of

viewpoints on issues and materials produced by various movements in the United States. The need to accurately document the history of the Occupy Boston movement was further necessitated by the mainstream media, which were—and still are—providing a negative spin on the movement and its activities.

The A to Z Library hosted regular meetings in the tent that were attended by a diverse group, including professional archivists and librarians, volunteers, and students. Pressing issues, goals, and ideas were discussed and formed by general consensus, which is the heart of the Occupy movement. At these meetings, the archive's mission was fleshed out: "The archive attempts to appraise, arrange, describe, preserve and make available the permanent records of Occupy Boston." To focus our collecting activities, the group determined that our collection strategy would be to identify milestone moments along with organizational and legal documents relevant to Occupy Boston.

My Involvement in the Archive and Its Use

I joined the library at Occupy Boston just as the movement was getting started in October 2011. I heard through the Simmons College Progressive Librarians Guild listserv that the library needed volunteers. I started my volunteer work by helping to move the library into the new, larger tent after the first nearly flooded.

During my second day volunteering, the concept of the archive, guided by volunteers, was already taking shape. I arranged use copies by date in a large three-ring binder. The contents consisted of working

groups' organizational records, such as meeting notes and proposals, printed from the Occupy Boston Wiki (http://wiki.occupyboston.org/wiki/Main_Page). One use copy was created for the binder and another archival copy was placed in a large plastic bin. The binder soon grew to include founding documents, workshop notes, articles, and legal documents. The binder served as an essential reference tool for the Occupiers; members of various working groups would often visit the tent to recall the wording of a proposal from the night before.

Occupiers frequently referred to copies of legal documents after a series of events that began with approximately one hundred arrests after Occupiers tried to expand the camp on the Rose Kennedy Greenway. A month later, a restraining order was placed on the city of Boston at the request of the attorneys from the National Lawyers Guild and the American Civil Liberties Union, barring the city from evicting the Occupiers on the grounds of potential violation of the First Amendment. Lasting about a month, the restraining order was then removed and appealed by Occupy Boston's attorneys.

Our volunteer pool fluctuates between 15 and 20 people; about half are archivists. Two to three volunteers usually were present in the tent on most days and always on weekends and evenings. My volunteer time was typically spent locating new documents for the binder and archival bin and library reference. The time spent volunteering passed swiftly because I was never at a loss for something to do or someone to help.

Communication and the Collecting Process

Building the collection for the Occupy Boston archives is a collective process that involves volunteers within the library and archives group. Materials are added to the collection based on milestone moments, from documents and articles culminating from the arrests on the Greenway to pamphlets and flyers for events held on Dewey Square. This method is unusual for an archive. Typically a collection is donated, or less often purchased, by the existing archive. It is an ongoing challenge for the Occupy Boston archive—or any archive with such limited resources—to take on a large project. However, with the assistance of technology, much has been accomplished.

From the beginning of the occupation to the present, the listserv and Google Docs is an essential means of communication and a way to continue to make decisions, share information, plan meetings, and work remotely as a group. We are fortunate to have a solid base of several continuously active volunteers who act as the glue that holds the entire group together. This allows other busy volunteers the ability to pop in and out of the group as their schedule permits. The listserv keeps all members up to date even if they have not attended a meeting in a while.

A "How-To" Google Doc was created for collection building so that anyone could jump in and work remotely. An accompanying spreadsheet was also created in Google Docs, listing documents needed to add to the collection from the Occupy Boston Wiki.

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Two copies of the required document are printed: the use copy and the copy for the archive. The document is then checked off on the Google Docs list in the appropriate column, indicating that a copy resides in the binder, archive, and/or hard drive. The advantage of the spreadsheet is that anyone can add to it, and it can double as a basic finding aid. Additionally, an official finding aid was created for physical materials, such as posters, flyers, and other ephemera generated and collected during the encampment and posted on Google Docs.

Emergency Plan and Eviction

A traditional archive does not need to worry about eviction from its space. But only two weeks into the existence of the A to Z Library and archive, an emergency evacuation plan was established. It was not hard for librarians, archivists, and volunteers to come to this decision. Occupy Wall Street was seeing a lot of pushback from the police, and we had to consider worst-case scenarios that already had occurred at Occupy encampments elsewhere. Occupy Wall Street's

books and archives were literally thrown into the trash; more than half suffered water damage or were lost due to a surprise raid. I think our sense of duty and immediacy to preserve the materials produced by the movement attests to the level of professionalism in the group.

The plan was hashed out over the course of several meetings. One volunteer expressed concern for the "other information-capturing aspects of the collection," such as the many posters, photos, and other ephemera displayed on the tent walls and tables. The archive, including the books, was already secured in bins or displayed in milk crates. Extra bins were acquired to contain the display materials to assist in a quick and easy breakdown. The official finding aid on Google Docs would serve as a record of the collection if it were lost in a raid.

An emergency evacuation team was established. These volunteers were listed on an emergency phone tree posted in the tent and in Google Docs. A Twitter emergency list also was created to aid rapid response. These volunteers were prepared to arrive at Boston's Dewey Square in a moment's notice.

The Legal Working Group asked the city of Boston for 24-hour notice of an eviction. At 5 a.m. on December 10, 2011, Dewey



A sticky-note board was a way to record Occupier's favorite resources for information regarding activism, racism, democracy, and anarchism. Resources included oral histories, the Community Change Library in Boston, and democracysquare.org. Courtesy of Kristin Parker.

Square was raided. Thanks to our emergency plan and warning notice by the Boston Police, the A to Z Library and archive was removed in a matter of hours. Our emergency planning paid off, and we did not lose a single document.

Challenged by Limited Resources

Eight hours after the raid, we kept a previously scheduled meeting to discuss a post–Occupy Boston plan. Many more have followed. To keep our goals clear, we referred back to our vision statement and discussed our approaches to getting the most out of our resources. Many of the working groups have expressed interest in archiving their documents. To stretch our resources, we created best practices for archiving for the working groups that we can't assist directly. But unanswered questions remain:

- How do we allow for centralized access to our collection?
- What are our opportunities for storage space?
- How do we archive a fluid and evolving movement that is still very much alive today?

Changes within the working groups and organizational documentation on the wiki occur frequently. Checking wiki pages for updates manually is not an efficient use of our time. Without any physical space to occupy, the movement now lives online across multiple social media sites that serve to sustain and unite the Occupy movement's thought processes. As a result, we are considering utilizing free software like HTTrack, which captures webpages while preserving the links.

Lastly—and most importantly—we are discussing what will happen to the collection and who should manage it. During our post-raid meeting, we discussed the importance of not being co-opted and having our story told incorrectly by someone other than us. There is a desire to capitalize on and control the history of the movement, as evidenced by the content the media has put out about the movement. For example, the vast majority of occupiers remained non-violent. But on November 17, 2011, Fox News jumped to connect an individual who fired shots at the White House to the Occupy movement, when in fact he had no connection.

If we allow others ownership, curation could be another way to alter the perception of the movement. This would undermine the archive's mission to tell our history as it happened. For example, the Smithsonian and the New York Historical Society collected signs from the Occupy Wall Street movement, thus splitting up the collection from the original archive started at the encampment. Because Occupy Wall Street doesn't have control over these parts of its collection, there is a danger that it will be misrepresented.



Volunteers working on donated laptops in the A to Z Library and archive. *Courtesy of Kristin Parker.*

Worldwide Movements

In a global context, the Occupy movement has taken place alongside other social movements, protests, and demonstrations: the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and North Africa; the Spanish Revolution targeting mass unemployment and government corruption; a half million Israelis marching last September to protest the rising cost of living and an increasingly distant government; violent demonstrations in Greece and the U.K. against austerity measures; and, closer to home, thousands gathering a year ago in the Wisconsin State Capitol to denounce the governor's plan to change state workers' union rights.

Museums and academic universities in Massachusetts are showing exhibits, teaching classes, and hosting scholarly lectures and panel discussions on these movements. In addition, books like *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made it*, edited by Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle, was published in 2011. We, as archivists, are responsible for preserving the past, but we also have to consider preserving history as it occurs.

Your Feedback Wanted . . .

How can archivists best provide researchers with primary-source material that exists in the abstract, such as social media, wikis, and websites? Social media contains an ephemeral yet rich source of information, putting communities in social context as they exist in the world of the Internet.

The question remains: How does an archive with limited resources preserve and document a fluid and evolving movement that utilizes social media to disseminate information? I would like to hear from you. Please share your thoughts, experiences, and/or resource ideas. Email library@lists.occupyboston.org. ■