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Anne Kristen Hunter
*University of West Georgia, ahunter@westga.edu*

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A Circulation Worker Visits Special Collections

By Anne Kristen Hunter

In spring 2019, I started an internship in the Special Collections department in Ingram Library at the University of West Georgia (UWG). I worked with Dr. Michael Camp and learned the basics of archival processing while working with two collections of documents donated by Congressman Mac Collins (R-GA, 1993–2005).

When I started the internship, I had already worked for more than a year in the Circulation department at Ingram. The internship was, for me, a bit of professional cross-training, as well as a requirement for the post-baccalaureate Certificate in Museum Studies offered by the Public History program within UWG’s History department.

I started working with miscellaneous documents and artifacts that were transferred by Congressman Collins when he left office, and later moved back in time to process documents from his final term in office. The first set of documents and photographs I worked with were part of a larger series of Collins’s Washington, DC office files. Then I processed, from beginning to end, a complete series of awards and certificates. Finally, I processed a series of invitations received during the 108th Congress, 2003–2005.

My initial mental image of archiving was wrong in two major ways. I should add that I know from experience that initial impressions of academic disciplines are nearly always wrong.

Students think that learning criminology, for example, will be like watching Law & Order or CSI; they expect that studying psychology will primarily be about the hunt for serial killers. My own mistaken images of archiving probably come from television as well, and notably, from social media. The two images I had in mind were, first, of the sort of dusty backrooms of file cabinets that our heroes break into to find the villain’s personnel file, and second, of viral video montages of people in white gloves painstakingly restoring badly-preserved Renaissance oil paintings before showing off a dramatic before-and-after reveal of the repaired and revarnished art. Unsurprisingly, both these mental images missed the mark.

First, I quickly learned that archives are primarily for people rather than being for the materials they house. The purpose of an archive is not simply to store old documents, it is to provide access to those documents to people who want to see them. While I was working at my internship, I saw professors and graduate students gathering data for their research, a radio journalist preparing for a series of broadcasts about the university’s history, community members looking up genealogical records and examples of their ancestors’ appearances in the local news of the day, and even undergraduate students wanting to view primary documents as part of a class project. It was not just that I was wrong in thinking that
the archive was un-used; I was wrong in thinking that its purpose was anything other than to be used. The archive, I learned, was not for preservation-for-preservation’s-sake, it was for people to be able to access the materials that were being preserved.

Second, I learned that the vast majority of documents in the archives were far from being delicate and unique in the manner of 500-year-old oil paintings. Many of the documents I was working with were not even 15 years old yet, and most of them were far more ordinary than I had imagined. As archivists have realized at least since the 1980s, contemporary collections consist in large part of very routine documents that have essentially no intrinsic value as objects; they are only valuable for the historical information they contain (Ham, 1984). I saw office manuals, Republican Party conference schedules, countless scheduling emails, and all sorts of payment and reimbursement vouchers, all printed on ordinary white office paper, exactly the same kind we use for our own routine office business upstairs in the Circulation department.

My supervisor, Dr. Michael Camp, started introducing me to the internship by giving me a tour of the facilities. He also assigned me some reading about what he considered to be the most important issues in archiving today, and explained his perspective. Special Collections at the University of West Georgia includes faculty offices, a reading room for people to view documents, the main archive, and a special “off-site” storage facility in another campus building across the street. Special Collections also controls a temporary exhibition space and a permanent display of objects from the office of Georgia Representative and Speaker of the Georgia House Tom Murphy. The main archive inside Ingram Library houses the majority of the processed papers, while the off-site facility houses the rare books and almost all unprocessed papers. Our first trip off-site was to retrieve the first batch of papers for me to process; we returned a couple more times during the semester for the same purpose.

My reading started with Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner’s (2005) “More Progress, Less Process,” which Michael said he considered to be the most important article currently guiding archival practice. Michael also showed me how documents were organized within the archive. Collections contain series (and occasionally sub-series); series are made up of folders. Folders in turn are housed in numbered boxes, which are housed on numbered shelves. I think one of my biggest surprises, early on, was realizing that there is no complete inventory of every item in every folder. That is simply not how archival records are kept. Michael also showed me the finding aids that act as the archive’s catalog. I saw how scope and content notes described the collection, and how container lists tracked the folders in each box. Michael explained that he views archiving as an art, rather than a science. There are some norms, precedents, and traditions to follow, but both the final organization of a collection, and especially the specific steps taken to arrive at it, are necessarily particular to the individual archivist.

I began processing by simply viewing already-processed papers from Collins’s DC office files. I
processed a handful of miscellaneous folders holding constituent letters, invitations, and research Collins’s staff conducted to help inform his legislative decisions. Once I had a handle on the basics, Michael moved me on to my first real project, processing a portion of the office files related to Collins’s participation in the Congressional Art Caucus’s annual art show.

Each year, Collins’s staff helped organize an art competition among Georgia high school students living in his district, a viewing and reception for the competition winners in Georgia, and then transportation to Washington DC for the winners to participate in “An Artistic Discovery,” the Art Caucus’s annual show. Collins’s staff had already created a separate folder for each year, and following current best practices, I simply refoldered these into acid-free folders (Greene & Meissner, 2005). Collins’s staff had also produced a pair of photo albums that spanned multiple years. For these, I really did wear gloves, to avoid getting fingerprints on the photographs, as I disassembled the albums and put each year’s images into their own folders. Seeing how badly the album pages under the photographs had degraded, even just since the 1990s, really drove home to me how important it is that archival storage be acid-free.

After completing my work on the art shows, Michael gave me an entire archival series to complete from start to finish. We pulled all the boxes that contained awards and certificates Collins had received over the years, and I was given responsibility for unboxing all the objects, organizing them, disassembling bulky picture frames when possible, then reboxing the artifacts in an order of my choosing, and writing scope and content notes and container lists for the eventual finding aid. Even the awards were more ordinary than I originally expected. Collins had dozens of wooden plaques celebrating him as “taxpayer hero” or a “small business champion,” given to him again and again by the same few organizations over the years. There were surprises as well. We found a signed, numbered art print from American outsider artist Rev. Howard Finster. We also found an original copy of a newspaper political cartoon. It appeared to have been given to Collins as a gift by the cartoonist, although I was never sure why, since the content of the cartoon didn’t seem to have anything to do with him. But those two stand out in my mind because they were unusual. As I’m sure most archivists and most historians already know, most of what we collect is usual. The few
extraordinary items stand out because most items are ordinary.

The tail end of the Miscellany collection, the collection of all the things Collins’s staff boxed up when he left the House in 2005, held a few more surprises. I found a couple of oversized binders with photocopies of press clippings. For over a decade, it had been someone’s job to find every time Collins showed up in a newspaper and to make a photocopy, and all those copies ended up boxed with his awards. I also found an incredibly curious letter. It was unsigned, but purported to be from Fidel Castro, and was addressed to a Democratic Congressperson, explaining why he, Castro, was declining to attend the 1999 World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, Washington. According to the envelope I found it in, it had been mailed to Collins by the Swiss ambassador to Uruguay, but there was no other accompanying information. I imagine there must be a really fascinating story behind that letter, and the circuitous path it took to land on Collins’s desk, but I have no idea what that story might be. I have no idea if the letter itself is genuine, or if its supposed provenance is authentic, but even as a possible forgery or hoax, it seems fascinating.

My final archival project was to process all the invitations Collins received during his final term in office, the 108th Congress from 2003 to 2005. These were perhaps the most ordinary documents I worked with all semester. Collins accepted invitations to attend mandatory GOP conference meetings and members’ only briefings about the Iraq War. He rejected invitations to events held in Georgia while he was in DC, or vice versa; he rejected events that posed scheduling conflicts because they were at the same time as other events. A close historical reading might uncover other patterns in his acceptance and refusal of his various invitations, but as Michael pointed out to me, interpreting the artifacts is a job for historians. Our job as archivists was to make the documents available so that historians could actually access them.

While processing the invitations, I really struggled with Greene and Meissner’s directive to engage in “less process” (Greene & Meissner, 2005) to avoid paying too much attention to the individual items in each folder, and to avoid repeated re-handling of the same folders and items. Partly, I struggled because I was still learning. I didn’t want to remove staples gratuitously, for example, but each time I went back through a folder, I felt like I saw another batch that needed to be removed. Initially I only pulled a certain style of staple that was already causing rust damage. Then I pulled excess staples from documents where Collins’s staff had used a half-dozen staples to hold together a dozen pages. Finally, I also removed staples from instances where a heavy cardstock invitation was affixed to an ordinary page of office paper, because I realized that the ordinary paper couldn’t really support the weight of the pairing without damage, and I wanted to prevent that damage as much as possible. As a second example, I also took several tries to put all the papers in their folders staple-side up, successfully alternating folders with wide corners on the right and left. It’s a simple technique to maximize how many
folders fit in a box, but it still took me about half the semester to apply it consistently.

But the other challenge of trying not to overprocess the invitations came because of the same problems Steven Gentry (2014) wrote about in his attempts to apply Greene and Meissner’s ideas to a collection of a college president’s office papers. In addition to needing to pull staples for the purpose of document preservation, I also needed to find and photocopy every sticky note Collins’s staff stuck on one of his invites. The sticky notes all needed to be removed, for the same reason I had to disassemble the photo albums, to prevent degradation over time. (And as an aside, let me add that Congressional staff members, or Collins’s staff at least, are very fond of repositionable sticky notes!) But finding all those notes in the first place required item-level attention to detail, and photocopying and removing them required me to go back again through folders I had already processed, while item-level attention and multiple pass-throughs are both practices that Greene and Meissner discourage.

There was also a need to help protect the privacy of Collins’s constituents and his staff members, as well as a need to avoid retaining historically worthless records like Collins paying his office phone bill every month, or purchasing bottled water, printer ink, and copier toner. I found a few instances of people’s Social Security Numbers (SSNs) written on documents. Some I caught the very first time through, because there were several SSNs on the same page, or because they were displayed fairly prominently. But some I didn’t notice until my second or third pass through the same folder, because the SSNs were jotted down as a handwritten note that I hadn’t looked closely enough at the first time. Item-level attention and multiple pass-throughs were the only thing that let me save those people’s privacy. As for the billing records, I mostly passed those on to Michael, so he could evaluate what part of them, if any, needed to be retained for the sake of any future historians interested in Congressman Collins.

As I said, I struggled with Greene and Meissner’s advice, because I wanted to follow it, but I also wanted to do my internship work correctly. And in one sense, doing my work correctly meant following their advice so that I was not wasting Michael’s time or my own. But in another sense trying to follow their advice conflicted with doing all the tasks my work required. I talked to Michael a few times about managing this conflict. He encouraged me to focus more on the quality of my work than on my speed, to be sure I was doing things correctly, keeping appropriate records to add to the scope and content notes, and making accurate container lists of my boxes. And together, Michael, his graduate assistant, and I worked fast enough to
finish processing one partially-completed collection and to process a second from start to finish, all in one semester.

My internship taught me the basics of archival processing, enough that I could now probably take a small collection, process it, organize it, file it away, and write an appropriate finding aid to provide researchers access to it. My internship also gave me a glimpse into the larger responsibilities Michael and the other archivists undertake. I saw Michael scheduling oral history interviews, corresponding with potential donors—not financial donors, but rather donors of documents and artifacts—and I saw him bring in newly acquired collections that his solicitations had secured. I helped Michael install an exhibition of archival materials about immigration, and attended a reception for the opening of the exhibit, Borders Real and Imagined: Georgia Immigration Politics in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, Thomas B. Murphy Reading Room, Ingram Library, UWG, January 24 to May 10, 2019, curated by W. Michael Camp with Lalah Manly and Anne Hunter. I saw the other archivists supervising their own interns, student workers, and volunteers. And I saw all the work that goes into helping people access the archive—pulling boxes, finding folders, answering questions. Special collections is a different world than circulation, where I’ve been until now, and I appreciated the opportunity to participate in that world.

To search the finding aids for the Mac Collins papers, 108th Congress, see [http://uwg.galileo.usg.edu/uwg/view?docId=ead/POL-0002-08-ead.xml](http://uwg.galileo.usg.edu/uwg/view?docId=ead/POL-0002-08-ead.xml), and for the Mac Collins papers, Miscellany, see [http://uwg.galileo.usg.edu/uwg/view?docId=ead/POL-0022-07-ead.xml](http://uwg.galileo.usg.edu/uwg/view?docId=ead/POL-0022-07-ead.xml).

Anne Kristen Hunter is Library Paraprofessional I at University of West Georgia

References

