

Industrial Business Collections: A Retrospective on Acquisitions Practice

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Abstract: This project seeks to understand the particular challenges which have affected institutions, archivists, and museum curators in the acquisition, selection, and storage of records which document aspects of industry and factory work in the United States.

As heavy industry has declined, scholars and the general public have begun to embrace industrial history as an important and valuable aspect of our shared heritage. Heritage preservation and interpretation of former industrial sites is evolving in practice at former textile mills, steel towns, and along the numerous “heritage corridors” around the country.

Sites are also documented through historical research materials preserved in archives and records centers. In many cases, company records, design blueprints, photographs, and other documents are the only surviving evidence of specific industrial enterprises. Archival records are an important means by which historians and the public may explore and understand our shared industrial past.

Although many small repositories have captured aspects of local industrial enterprise, several larger archival collections, including the Smithsonian Institution, the Hagley Museum and Library, and The Henry Ford, hold thousands of cubic feet of material relating to mining companies, engine manufacturers, railroad locomotive works, and other machinery manufacture.

This project utilizes a case study approach, reviewing specific institutions and sample industrial collections, examining their institutional histories, decision to collect/accept such collections and the impact these acquisitions have had on their programs. In addition to examination of institutional records (including correspondence, committee minutes, and collecting policies), oral interviews with curators and archivists provide further perspective on their experiences and intentions in locating and preserving these types of collections.

This presentation serves as a report on research in a very early stage of development. It is intended to attract input and suggestions.

About the author:

Erik Nordberg has been employed as an archivist at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan, since 1994, including an initial project archivist position, a term as acting library director, and currently as university archivist. The Michigan Tech archives serves as a regional manuscript repository documenting the history of the Keweenaw Peninsula and its historic copper mining industry. Previous to his employment at Michigan Tech, Nordberg served as special collections archivist at Indiana University South Bend. He holds an MSLS and a graduate archival

certificate from Wayne State University and is currently pursuing coursework in the doctoral program in industrial heritage and archaeology at Michigan Technological University. His dissertation project seeks to explore the parameters within which records of industrial enterprises have been preserved by archives in the United States.

Other research interests include the history of copper mining in Michigan's Western Upper Peninsula, salt production in Michigan, and agricultural industries in northern climates. He is also co-investigator in a current project to assess the role that tenure and academic rank have in college and university archival settings. Nordberg has served as project director on grant awards from the National Historical Records and Publications Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Michigan Humanities Council.

Professional service includes the Michigan Archival Association, the Michigan State Historical Records Advisory Board, the Midwest Archives Conference, and the Mining History Association. Nordberg was selected to participate in the 2008 Archives Leadership Institute sponsored by NHPRC and was one of four from Michigan invited to participate in the 2007 Connecting to Collections national conservation summit sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.