Writing Finding Aids in Flint:
A Capstone Project at the Sloan Museum of Discovery Archives

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Three small manuscript collections were processed and described in abbreviated, “one page” finding aids. This hands-on archival project provided practical, professional experience, increased institutional knowledge, and completed course requirements.

At the Sloan Museum, priorities are changing to include more personal stories of regular people, not just Genesee County’s rich automotive history and Flint’s elite families. Curator of Collections Geoffrey Woodcox says, “the finding aids and new way of processing archival collections are an important part of that shift. We are shifting from just talking about the objects to focusing on personal stories, and having more context for our archival collections helps us to fulfill that goal.”

Archival collections at the Sloan had traditionally been described using museum standards. Increasing description is a step toward better serving researchers. The Society of American Archivists publication, “Putting Descriptive Standards to Work,” says finding aids, and easy access to them, will “enable researchers, who live primarily in an online world, to better understand and access collections,” (2017, p. 3). Creating finding aids is a big step towards making them available on the Sloan website.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Sloan Museum of Discovery, founded in 1962, shares Flint Michigan’s social and industrial history. The museum building, in the heart of the Flint Cultural Center, is currently undergoing renovations. Around the corner, the museum’s Buick Gallery and Research Center holds approximately 600 linear feet of archival material.

It’s a mix of corporate, manuscript and news records, documenting life and industry in Flint and Genesee County. Researchers often request automotive records and materials from the Flint Journal clippings files, photo files and microfilm.

PROCESSING

The three collections had very different arranging needs, so time spent organizing and folding materials varied from one collection to another.

Even trying to adapt Greene and Meissner’s “More Product, Less Process” principles, the Johnson Family correspondence collection (seen in different stages in the three photographs) required the most physical arrangement. 1900s-1940s correspondence was un-bundled into series based on type of materials, then based on creator (or in some cases, by recipient) and then in calendar order by postmark. Interpretations, and ability to implement, MPLP vary widely from institution to institution! For now, the Johnson Family letters will remain in their original envelopes to conserve folders and dividing papers. Even with leaving the letters this way, the processing took up the majority of time with this collection.

DESCRIPTION

An abbreviated finding aid format was designed by archivist Hilary Sevryn to provide basic description, with guidance from Describing Archives: A Content Guide (DACS) and the new Society of American Archivists publication, “Putting Descriptive Standards to Work.”

The DACS standards most pertinent to this description work are in Part II: Describing Creators. The eighth item of the DACS Statement of Principles states “The creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described,” but for two collections there was little information preserved about the creators. Museum accession files were slim and relationships between donor and creators were undocumented. Research was required.

Even with much-abbreviated fields designed for speed of creation, only one of three documents fit on a single page Completing the description portion of the process during Michigan’s COVID-19 shutdown was an exercise in remote work, in communication and flexibility.

One last descriptive challenge worth noting: The Goyette Mechanical collection was recently accessioned. It has under twenty pieces of paper, but these document the removal of Flint’s residential water pipes during the water crisis and accompany two museum objects: lengths of pipe removed from residential areas. This required accuracy in description, to describe both the mechanical process and the historical context for future researchers.

RESEARCH

Some research was conducted, especially to complete the biographical note of finding aids, with a variety of tools:

- Hard copy accession files, when extant
- The museum’s PastPerfect records
- Family history tools like Ancestry.com, especially National Archives census records
- Maps and city guides
- Informal fact-finding with collections staff, other museum professionals, my capstone classmates, and a talk with Flint journalist Ron Fonger, who won awards for his work on the Flint water crisis.*

Fonger recalled how Sloan Museum and Flint Public Library staff saved the archives of the Flint Journal from Dumpsters in the 1990s.

It’s fascinating, the successes and failures we’ve had at preserving news materials that were made for profit and often retain copyright, yet hold so much of our history and engage researchers.

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An earlier version of this poster was completed for the UMIS course Mastery in Librarianship and Archival Practice taught by Prof. Ricky Punzalan, and was shown at UMIS’s virtual Spring Expo in 2020.

*My spouse was the editor at the Flint Journal at the time of this project. I pursued this project for the hands-on experience with collections, but also thinking my unique position might help fortify relations between the museum’s reference desk and the news.