Going, Going, Gone: Case Studies in Library Deaccessioning

SAMUEL STREIT

Although a relatively common practice in the world of Special Collections, deaccession is perhaps the one premeditated activity that is most conducive to controversy. Why is this the case? Among the reasons, I think, are the following: research libraries generally, and Special Collections particularly, have been perceived traditionally in terms of permanence and in correlative terms of the imperative to accumulate, to gather in and preserve forever the product of human intellectual endeavor; deaccession erodes this perception of permanence. Special Collections, virtually without exception, build their collections to a considerable extent through a network of associations with donor/collectors whose collections arrive in the library already developed according to the donor's taste and intellectual construct; therefore, deaccession, no matter how carefully undertaken, can give the appearance of bad faith between the library and its collection of donors.

There is sometimes a mysterious quality surrounding deaccession which dealer or auction catalogs often do little or nothing to clarify, thereby leaving the public to speculate upon the whys, wherefores, hows, whethers, ifs, ands, and buts of a library's decision to deaccession. This atmosphere of apparent secrecy may be inadvertent or it may be deliberate, and the public then is left to speculate which it is. Then, of course, there are the celebrated cases of deaccession that make the media, either because these cases are misguided conceptually or mishandled procedurally so that they generate bad publicity, or because they generate a great deal of money which in turn generates comment as to motive, method, and the proper use of funds gained through deaccession. In short, deaccession gives everyone from the local newshound, to the local crank, to our very own professional community an occasion to conjecture, to opinionize, and to gossip, and to do so, more often than not, from the high and mighty fortress of moral rectitude.

The Brown University Library and the John Carter Brown Library more or less simultaneously engaged in a rather sizable program of deaccession some fifteen years ago. Because, quite frankly, we wished to offset negative publicity as much as possible, we decided at that time to host jointly an invitational conference on the subject, and ever since, for my sins, I have been branded in some quarters with the epithet "deaccession expert." This is probably too flattering. In the post-deaccession

Samuel Streit is Head of Special Collections at The John Hay Library, Brown University. E-mail: samuel_streit@brown.edu
conference years, Brown has deaccessioned very little and then only duplicates, a term we define quite narrowly, and with the proceeds going back into the collection or subject from which the duplicates came. Still, I do have a continuing interest in the phenomenon, and I should like to provide some recent history on the subject, interspersed with a few home truths that may prove to be of assistance for others who may be faced with deaccessioning items from their collections.

Given the nature and history of deaccession, I expect that any discernible patterns were established fairly early on, although literature on the subject is scarce unless one burrows through dealer and auction catalogs. Motivations probably have not changed much and, I expect, always have included the sale of duplicates, upgrading copy, supplementing acquisitions and/or operational budgets, weeding out-of-scope materials, and the creation of space. Patterns of disposal have not changed much either; auction, sale or trade to dealers, direct sale to the public, particularly of lower-end material, have been common for a long time. I shall concentrate here, though necessarily briefly, upon a handful of case histories, spanning the past fifteen years. There are many instances to choose from and they may resonate with varying degrees of familiarity: the Franklin Institute, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, the General Theological Seminary, the John Rylands Library, the New York Historical Society, and on and on. However, I have chosen a few that to me best illustrate some of the patterns of deaccession and provide a few practical lessons as well.

Not surprisingly, I shall begin with Brown University. In the late 1970s, it was decided to renovate and restore the John Hay Library into a facility made more suitable for Special Collections. Initial funding was provided through an NEH challenge grant with the burden of raising the 3 to 1 matching funds falling, of course, to Brown. Since this was a period of rampant inflation, it quickly became apparent that the grant and the match would not be sufficient between them to complete the project adequately. More money was needed. This being the case, the university president at the time, in general a supporter of libraries but a naïf insofar as rare books and special collections were concerned, simply decreed that a portion of the match would have to be raised through deaccession. Fortunately, the president left it to the library to determine what would be sold. Further, he did not specify an amount to be raised through deaccession, though he made it clear that he wanted it to be a substantial amount.

At about the same time, the John Carter Brown Library was experiencing some of the same pressures to raise money as was the John Hay, but for a different purpose. For decades, the JCB had deaccessioned duplicates to supplement its acquisitions budget, but this was a different situation. For several years, the JCB’s operating expenses had outstripped its endowment income with the result that it increasingly was forced to rely upon support from the University. Both the JCB and the University administration wished to rectify this situation through strengthening the JCB endowment. More or less simultaneously with this mutual decision to build the endowment, the JCB constituted an outside committee charged with looking into all aspects of the library, from its mission, to ways of
increasing scholarly use, to budgetary concerns. After due deliberation, the committee, the library, and the university administration, and with the agreement of the Brown family, decided that the financial concerns of the library could in large measure be addressed through a carefully crafted program of deaccession.

Deciding what to sell was a relatively easy matter for JCB, given its refined focus upon Americana. A total of only 19 items were identified for sale, all of them medieval and renaissance manuscripts, and most of them bought by the widow of John Carter Brown during a brief flurry of collecting enthusiasm following the death of her husband; the remainder had been a gift from another source who had specified that the manuscripts could be sold. No Americana was deaccessioned. As Laurance Witten stated in *Bookman's Weekly* just after the sale:

A lengthy preface (in the Sotheby's catalog) by Thomas R. Adams, Librarian, detailed the undeniable need to raise a capital fund for JCBL, and the possibly controversial decisions that led to the consignment to public auction of this small (and rather lost) vein of treasure from a great mine devoted primarily to Americana. Those responsible for the decision, the Management and Evaluating Committees, were all named in the catalog.

While the John Hay and the JCB were aware of each other’s deaccessioning plans, and indeed discussed strategies with one another, each library proceeded independently and both chose auction as their deaccession vehicle. As I have noted, choosing what to sell was to some degree not a difficult matter for the JCB, given its refined collection focus. The choice was a good deal more difficult for the John Hay, which in terms of its collections is quite diverse and in terms of its mission, which is obligated to the broad spectrum of the University’s research and teaching. Being a large and old library, the John Hay was fortunate in that in addition to books, manuscripts, and all the other sorts of material that constitute a research library, it also contained a sizable quantity of paintings and objets d'art, and the like. Because our purpose and mission are those of a research library rather than those of an art museum, we chose to dispose of a series of paintings, mostly American portraits, and a group of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century golden and bejeweled snuff boxes.

We had the portraits appraised by Christie’s with the understanding that we would first offer those which depicted Rhode Island worthies to the state historical society. This we did, giving the society time to raise the funds necessary to purchase those portraits in which they had an interest. This was a happy solution, in fact, because the portraits are now exhibited in a more logical venue. The snuff boxes were a part of a larger Napoleonica collection which the library had been given in the 1920s, but they had nothing to do with Napoleon, except that some of them were made during his reign. Not only were they out of scope for the collection, but their obvious monetary value made us nervous about ever putting them on display. The boxes did sell at auction, fortuitously at the time of rampant gold speculation in 1979, and fetched enough that our president was satisfied that he had seen a sufficiency of our blood.
As I mentioned, the John Hay and the John Carter Brown decided to address inevitable gossip and speculation by hosting an invitational conference on deaccession, this in June 1981. Some ninety people attended and heard papers delivered from institutional perspectives, the legal perspective, and the perspectives of donor/collector relations and the trade. Later I shall summarize a few of the more salient points made during the conference.

***

At about the same time as the Brown deaccessions, Lehigh University was considering the deaccession of its entire special collections department. A technologically oriented institution, Lehigh nonetheless has a commitment to the humanities including advanced degree programs. Special Collections included a strong Darwin collection, good English and American literature holdings, and strong history of science holdings given by Robert Honeyman. In short, Lehigh was no slouch when it came to special collections, particularly if included in the total were rare books transferred out of the general stacks and from a remote storage facility.

But, as sometimes happens, special collections at Lehigh existed in something of a state of somnolence. Further, the University had need of a new library building and it was clear that selling off special collections in their entirety would assist in meeting a $3.5 million shortfall required for the $11.5 million facility. Called in to assist in assessing the overall situation relative to special collections, including the possibility of deaccession, was Daniel Traister, then Assistant Curator of Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania. As he wrote at the time, Lehigh’s special collections were “under-accessed, under-used, under-publicized, and cared for on a part-time basis in a physical environment that leaves much to be desired.” The university clearly found itself in a situation where doing nothing was untenable; special collections, if it was to be retained, would require financial resources that it had never enjoyed before, resources that were needed for other priorities, including the new building.

In contemplating the sale of Special Collections, he estimated their value to be between $10 and $12 million retail, though when wholesale prices were figured into the equation along with consignor premiums, the less-than-collector condition of some of the books, and the hidden costs of altering library catalogs, packing, shipping, and the like, the real sum likely to be realized fell to about $3.5 million. This was enough to finish the building, but a very high price indeed in terms of realized price versus retail price, not to mention the loss of significant research potential that could support several of Lehigh’s academic departments.

Complicating a decision to sell would be the public relations fallout. At a university with a strong academic reputation, entering into a substantial program of deaccession was viewed as potentially damaging to Lehigh’s reputation among its peers, possibly arousing faculty anger and opposition, and alienating potential
donors to all sorts of university fundraising initiatives. In the final analysis, Lehigh looked at the question, not only in terms of short-term gains, but also in terms of long-term institutional goals.

In pondering these issues, and doing so openly to its credit, Lehigh discovered "a reservoir of respect for books and manuscripts that survives to be tapped by an aggressive library . . . [indicating] a potential of support even as the University administration becomes increasingly conscious of their importance."

The end of the story is a happy one, regardless of one's views on deaccession. The administration of the University and the library decided that Special Collections were sufficiently strong to have a future at Lehigh if there was adequate support. Fortunately, the will was found to establish support. A full-time permanent curator was hired, funds from other sources were found for the new building, and Lehigh's Special Collections has been a going concern ever since. This was an example of deaccession being considered seriously and being rejected in favor of a better solution.

* * *

A different sort of deaccession scenario played itself out over nearly a ten-year period in Kansas City. This notorious case involved the decision of the Kansas City Public Library to deaccession most of its rare book collection. The essay that Daniel Bradbury, the KCPL Director, published on this affair raises a few essential points that are worth repeating here because the Kansas City case is a useful counterpoint to cases of deaccession in academic institutions. As Bradbury reported, Kansas City Public Library's rare books collection consisted of about 3,000 titles covering a wide range of formats and subjects, the core of which had been purchased as a single collection in 1953 by a former director who believed that "every great library should have a rare book collection." Although a few additional gift items had been added to the collection over the years, nothing had been purchased for the rare book collection in over twenty years. The collection had no dedicated staff and was housed in the director's office, a conference room, and a walk-in safe. Further, "it was an unusual year when more than two or three requests to view any item were received."

The library undertook a planning program in the mid-1980s, a component of which was a Collection Development Plan which, among other things, looked at the library's retrospective holdings and attempted to ascertain their value to the library's mission. As a part of this process, the rare book collection was viewed as being outside the mission of the library, and it was decided to sell those items that were deemed out of scope relative to other collection strengths within the general collections, these strengths being in such areas as children's literature and local and regional history. The mission of the library was described as "educational but not academic"; and the statement claimed that the library "has not assembled collections for scholarly research and does not consider this role..."
as one of its primary functions." The library’s collections are “predicated on public access and usage. Materials which cannot be used because of their condition or high value are of little utility in a public library. . . . To the public library, multiple copies of the works of Plato that can be borrowed, read, and understood are much more appropriate and valuable than a beautifully bound single volume that cannot be borrowed." In short, Kansas City Public and its board decided that as a collection its rare books did not add up to much in the way of subject focus, that it was small, stagnant, not housed adequately for preservation, and not used; and that the mission of the library did not include the kind of research that is supported by rare books.

Though deemed of little use to the library, the rare book collection was viewed as having sufficient monetary value to be worth selling, and the administration proposed to its board that the library’s selectors survey the rare book collection and reassign to other collections any books that fit intellectually into those other collections, such as the library’s holdings on western expansion. The proposal further recommended that the remaining books be sold at public auction with all sale proceeds placed in the library’s endowment fund for new acquisitions.

As a publicly supported institution, the library felt an obligation to hold a public hearing on the deaccession issue, which a total of ten people attended, one of whom was vehemently opposed to the idea. This person over the next three years, while plans for deaccession progressed, fought a rearguard action to prevent the sale. This involved efforts to use the deaccession issue as a litmus test for the appointment of new library board members, and attempts to sway community leaders, local foundations, the congressional delegation, the Kansas City Star, and the NEH, which had given Kansas City Public a challenge grant for a new humanities endowment. While these efforts to prevent deaccession had little effect locally, the controversy did make the national media and the library press, which served to broaden the concern to a much wider public.

Despite the controversy, the library forged ahead with its plans and as of mid-1993, about half the rare books had been scrutinized with ninety being retained for the library, some 200 put aside to offer to nearby libraries, and about 1,000 identified for sale at Swann Galleries. As of the date of Mr. Bradbury’s address to RBMS in 1994, 639 of these books had been sold and $155,000 had been added to Kansas City Public’s endowment. The sales were scheduled to be completed in 1994 or 1995.

* * *

As my final case study, I cannot resist some allusion to the recent Clements Library auctions, particularly since they elicited such varied, if predictable, responses on the listserv EXLIBRIS. The Clements Library over the past few years has conducted five mail auction sales of materials that are duplicates in its collection and materials that are deemed out of scope. As John Dann, the library director, stated in the introduction to the catalog for one of the auctions:
Our work is a continuation of traditions as old as libraries themselves. We actively collect and build the collections, which requires considerable amounts of money, and we constantly evaluate our collection policies and the effectiveness of our acquisitions in serving the needs of our users. A truly active rare book library, like any good public library, not only collects, but deaccessions holdings which no longer serve the needs of its public. Over the past three years, the Clements Library has carefully and systematically evaluated its role and its acquisitions policies, and the last three duplicate sales have served as a fair and profitable method of dispersing “out of scope” materials and actual duplicates.

This seemed sensible enough, but the flaws of so brief and general an introduction became apparent when, on April 18, the flames of outrage began to flicker, feeding upon the Ethernet on EXLIBRIS. I quote from the first message:

Has anyone else been alarmed by the presence of important manuscripts in the catalog of the Clements “Duplicate Mail Auction”? The Director's preface admits that the catalog includes not only actual duplicates but also “out of scope” materials. But Washington letters? Three of them? Written during the war and discussing military affairs? One dated “Valley Forge”? This from a library renowned for its American Revolutionary War manuscript collections? What gives here? Sounds like a fire sale to me.

What followed over the next few days was an airing of the issues which emerged from the case studies I have just written about, issues which may or may not have pertained to the Clements, but which show up time and again when a library undertakes deaccession. Some of these issues, sometimes discussed cogently and pertinently, but just as often presented with the heat and arrogance endemic to listservs, were: the proper role of boards of trustees; the question of short-term gain versus long-term institutional goals; the public relations effect upon donors (one or two of whom, on the basis of what they read on EXLIBRIS, decided not to bequeath their collections to any library); the loss to scholarship of the deaccessioned items that disappear into private hands; the nature of “true duplicates”; the need for honesty and candor between library and donor relative to potential deaccession before a gift is made to the library; changes in library collecting policy over the years; change in staff over the years, both in Special Collections and in general administration, that can result in radical and perhaps capricious change of direction in Special Collections; and such earthly issues as lack of space and the need for cash, whether for Special Collections or for the general library.

As the flames began to die down a few days later, it appeared that the preponderance of messages attempted a balance between a library's rights and privileges regarding its own collections and internal affairs with a concern for dealing in a straightforward manner with donors and for openness and caution when deaccession is under consideration. One of the respondents noted that
We do not always think that keeping a collection intact is the best course. Sometimes we have received a collection which adds to a similar collection already here, and the two have been merged. . . . In other instances, we have kept collections intact and have added to them—sometimes but not always by means of related endowments. We are honest with the potential donor who wants his collection kept together, and if we disagree we say so. Even when a gift collection is merged with existing holdings, it can still be a “monument” to the collector by means of a specially designed bookplate, or an exhibition drawn from the collection and a related handlist or catalog.

A good summing up of the issue was provided by Everett Wilkie, at the time from the Connecticut Historical Society, who said:

As much as I appreciate a collector’s concern about what is to be the ultimate fate of his or her collection upon [his or her] decease or after it is given to an institution, I believe historical perspective on the matter indicates quite clearly that the ultimate outcome cannot be known either by the institution or the collector. It seems to be that a collector/potential donor should spend some time examining potential recipients for a collection, and both donor and donee should not hesitate to talk about conditions, restrictions, policies, and the like, which will influence the destiny of the donation, and determine its governance after the fact. With such discussion and understanding in place, surprise and unhappiness will hopefully be minimized before the stage of bitterness.

For any readers who may be contemplating deaccession, let me suggest the following, taken from the proceedings of the Brown deaccession conference and specifically from the remarks of David Stam, who at the time was Andrew Mellon Director of the New York Public Library. Taking his text from Thessalonians Ch. 5, verses 21-22, Stam quoted St. Paul: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.” Conservative a stance as that may betray, he went on, it does summarize well the essence of a sound deaccession policy, namely, to examine carefully all aspects of disposal decisions on a case-by-case basis, to keep your essential purposes and mission in mind in deciding what to retain and what to discard, and finally to keep it on the up-and-up, free of conflicts of interest, lies and evasions, and other forms of evil, apparent or otherwise. For some people, the preceding verse, 17, might also prove helpful. It reads: “Pray without ceasing.”

First presented, in different form, as a seminar paper at the 37th RBMS Preconference, July 4, 1996.

NOTE
1. See the article by Daniel J. Bradbury, "Barbarians Within the Gate: Pillage of a Rare Book Collection," RBML 9.1 (1994): 8-16, on the sale of the rare book collection at the Kansas City Public Library.
Invitation to Consign

Fine & Rare Books and Manuscripts

Twain, Mark. More Tramps Abroad. London: 1898. Clemens' copy, signed by him as "Mark Twain" and heavily annotated throughout. One of 250 volumes from the Twain family library, which sold for $200,300.

FREE APPRAISALS

If you have property you are considering selling at auction and would like to receive a complimentary estimate, please call Richard Austin, (Books & Maps), at (415) 861-7500 ext. 204 or Gregory Shaw (Books & Manuscripts) at (213) 850-7500 ext. 286.

California Book Auction Galleries

A DIVISION OF

Butterfield & Butterfield

Fine Art Auctioneers and Appraisers since 1865
220 San Bruno Avenue San Francisco CA 94103
7601 Sunset Boulevard Los Angeles CA 90046