In an address delivered on Alumni University Day in 1924, English Professor Chauncey Brewster Tinker, later Yale's first Keeper of Rare Books, outlined the relationship among University faculty, students, and books:

There are three distinguishing marks of a university: a group of students, a corps of instructors, and a collection of books; and of these the most important is the collection of books. By the interaction of these three factors the university manifests its twofold activity to the world. Its scholars, by means of the books provided for them, advance the cause of knowledge and the reign of truth, and so make of the university a seat of learning. In the second place, this corps of instructors mediates between the books and the students, and . . . puts a new generation in touch with the stored-up thought of the world. Without books . . . no university and, indeed, no civilization, is possible. . .

Professor Tinker's formulation is, to the modern ear, unremarkable. We may readily assent to the notion that a great university supports research at least in part through its library and that the library's holdings form a nucleus around which a curriculum and faculty research interests are focussed. That is, after all, the very raison d'être of a contemporary research library.

But it wasn't always so. Well before the advent of sophisticated library services and the development of extensive research collections, institutions of higher education were small colleges with limited enrollment, a library with a

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small number of volumes, and virtually none of the services that we now assume every library provides, whether it be checking out, ordering, or borrowing books. Until the late nineteenth century, American college libraries had little to offer, especially where recitation and memorization were central parts of the curriculum.

It is my purpose to review briefly the origins and development of American academic libraries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to explore the factors in the late nineteenth century that stimulated the emergence of rare books and special collections in the twentieth century. My theme is the interdependence of developments in American higher education, the scholarly disciplines, and rare books and special collections.

American colonial college libraries had extremely modest and even haphazard beginnings. John Harvard’s library of more than 300 volumes was kept in a locked room. The earliest libraries at the College of William and Mary were destroyed by fire in 1705 and again in 1859. And at Yale, some 25 percent of the original titles in the Library were lost in an early eighteenth-century conflict between residents of New Haven and Saybrook; the latter, believing that the University should remain in their town, took direct action in an effort to retain it there by seizing library books.

At the time the College of New Jersey left Newark to relocate in Princeton (1756), it was reported that two large boxes of books were shipped there and placed in a second-floor room in the new Nassau Hall. King’s College, now Columbia, had an auspicious beginning, receiving several gifts for its library. But the library was ravaged during the Revolution, and a good many volumes were evidently carried off by soldiers, a fate similar to that suffered by the library in Princeton.

There were few, if any, funds appropriated for the purchase of books at these colleges and most support came in the form of gifts and bequests, such as those of John Harvard, Colonel Francis Nicholson to William and Mary, George Berkeley to Yale, and Jonathan Belcher to Princeton. Some institutions charged students fees for library support and others sought methods such as lotteries to generate support: Penn fined trustees and students for missing meetings, and the Virginia General Assembly, anticipating by about two hundred years the Permanent Fund of the University of Texas, dedicated some state tax revenue (a liquor tax in this case) to William and Mary, so that “some part thereof should be spent on books.”

The eighteenth-century student studied a single text for each course, recited or memorized passages, and had generally little need for the library, where borrowing was unknown. A medieval educational idea still prevailed in many American colleges in the colonial and early national period.

The first two-thirds of the nineteenth century witnessed precious little
change. Colleges, if somewhat more numerous than in the eighteenth century (from 30 in 1800 to 133 in 1850 to 305 in 1876) remained small, rarely enrolling more than two or three hundred at any one time. Traditional methods of instruction continued to prevail, and there was little change in the role of the library. Textbook study and recitation of classical, moralistic, and pedantic passages did little to fire the imaginations of its practitioners. As an historian of nineteenth-century Rutgers observed:

The formal educational program prescribed by the Trustees and the faculty, intended as it was to strengthen the mental faculties and provide the students with a highly ornamental store of knowledge, allowed little scope for genuine intellectual inquiry nor did it afford adequate opportunities for creative self-expression. The heavy diet of classics, mathematics, and theologically-oriented philosophy, presented by teachers of limited pedagogical skills, was scarcely intended to excite interest or arouse curiosity . . .

Though there was a conscientious effort to expand library holdings at institutions such as Harvard, Brown, South Carolina, and Michigan, the nineteenth-century college library remained very limited. Books were housed first in alcoves, then on shelves, and later in the century, in small rooms that often served several purposes.

These libraries were open for only a few hours each week; reading rooms and study areas were generally unknown and circulation of books outside the library was all but forbidden. When the idea of circulating books was introduced, it was limited to only a few books, and a fee was often levied on the hapless borrower.

The first separate library building on a campus was at the University of South Carolina in 1840; separate buildings soon followed at Harvard, Yale, Williams, and Amherst, among other places. Morbid, if real, fear of fire kept such buildings poorly lighted and unheated. Gore Hall at Harvard, for example, did without lights until 1896!

Library catalogues had been published in pamphlet form since the middle of the eighteenth century, though librarians at Harvard experimented in the mid-nineteenth century first with loose sheets and then cards. With the appearance in the 1850s of a card catalogue, libraries were much better able to record information about their holdings. Library holdings tended to emphasize classical authors at the expense of contemporary authors, possibly because, in many instances, campus literary societies tended to acquire more contemporary materials and served as the circulating collection for casual reading. Continued limited book funds further constrained the capacity of libraries to add to their holdings, except by way of gift.

By mid-century, a rapidly feminizing library work force constituted a (poorly paid) labor pool that maintained those catalogues and permitted libraries to
keep pace with their remarkable growth later in the century by adopting labor-intensive procedures.\(^5\)

By mid-century, the typical academic library might contain several thousand volumes and add to that several hundred each year. Book budgets were in the hundreds of dollars, though little money was spent on staff because libraries were open to students and faculty only a few hours per week. Furthermore, librarians of that period generally had many other duties (such as teaching) outside the library. In short, academic libraries played a minor role in American higher education as late as the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, American higher education underwent a transformation, and the academic library was among those aspects of college life where the change was most dramatic. There were a variety of reasons for such far-reaching change, ranging from social change to international intellectual currents to specific legislative enactments. The federal Morrill Act of 1862, for example, created a mechanism for conferring land grants to the states to enable them to fund or strengthen publicly-funded institutions of higher education.

There were in this period two intellectual currents that had an epochal effect on American higher education and how universities defined their missions and organized themselves to meet them. First, there was the impact of the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin on the clergy who directed the many American denominational colleges and, second, there was the rapidly expanding influence of the German research university and its reliance on the scientific method. As Darwin’s theory spread rapidly among American scientists, religious opposition mounted, primarily in an expression of fear that religious faith and moral sanction would be annihilated by the increasingly popular Darwinian formulations. As science increasingly accepted evolutionary theory, and the college curriculum in turn gradually accommodated science, American colleges became battlegrounds between proponents of Darwin and those who resisted his theory as godless. By the end of the century, however, most universities and secular colleges had become open to the secular spirit of freedom of inquiry. Needless to say, this “secular spirit” has not prevailed unassaulted, as was demonstrated by the Scopes Trial of the 1920s and the recent Supreme Court decision striking down a Louisiana statute that mandated equal time for teaching “creation science” when evolution was taught.\(^6\) Ideas were no longer evaluated in terms of their moral consequences or the religious faith of their proponents. In scientific criticism, the separation of an individual’s beliefs from his or her work became a cardinal principle, as religious authoritarianism on campus gradually disappeared.

As American institutions of higher education grew more secular, specialized, and intellectually ambitious, Americans turned to German universities to pur-
ssue the research degrees that could assist them at home. Only 200 Americans attended German universities prior to 1850, and up to 2,000 in the decade of the 1880s alone. German universities of the nineteenth century pursued science for rational understanding, to study things for their immediate utility, for the study of things in themselves and for their ultimate meaning. Teaching by means of lectures and seminars was combined with research and became the American model.

The course of American academic libraries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century cannot be understood apart from these transforming changes in American higher education. As research became a primary university objective, the lecture and seminar took precedence over the textbook and recitation; scholarship was institutionalized and professionalized.

The new university provided a center of concentration and opportunity for association and communication with other scholars, as well as a facility containing research materials, laboratories, and a means of disseminating the results of scholarly activity through university presses. If scholarship had become the vital core of the new profession, then the university library had become, in Harvard President Charles William Eliot’s felicitous phrase, “the heart of the university.”

If there was recognition that these libraries constituted “the heart of the university,” there was also recognition that they needed financial support to insure a strong and steady heartbeat. Budgets for books and periodicals rose rapidly; library staffs, headed by professionals, grew equally rapidly; and governance passed from university trustees to faculty committees. These changes also brought a shift in values from conservation and protection of materials to access and use, from the library being an afterthought to the curriculum to a central component in the curriculum, from fixed shelf locations for books to classifying and shelving by subject, owing to the remarkable growth of library collections, and from rudimentary cataloguing information to fuller bibliographical description in the card catalogue. Under the leadership of late nineteenth-century library pioneers such as Justin Winsor at Harvard and Melvil Dewey at Columbia, hours were dramatically expanded, literary society libraries were absorbed by the university library, stacks were opened to readers, interlibrary loan and reserve collections were implemented, and reference service was initiated. In short, the modern and recognizable research library had begun its ascendancy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, this process of library specialization and differentiation of function, as the sociologists would have it, produced conditions in which the concepts of “rare books” and “special collections” find their true origins. For it is in the research library serving an academic constituency that the concept of “rarity” emerges, though the concept also owes its origin to the expansion of the antiquarian book trade. Conversely, the phrase “special col-
lections” was generally used to designate a concentration of books, not necessarily rare, on any given subject.

The concept of “rare books,” with its origins in the antiquarian book trade and book collecting, was substantially shaped by the professionalization of scholarship. The rise of the research university and the founding of scholarly organizations created, through peer review and criticism, scholarly standards and professional expertise that extended knowledge in a variety of disciplines. The establishment of the American Historical Association (1884) and the Modern Language Association furthered the professionalization of these fields, while 79 other learned societies were organized in the 1870s and an additional 121 in the 1880s alone! This dramatic extension of scholarly formalism and authority gave cohesion and structure to a variety of disciplines so that evaluation of scholarship could proceed in an orderly fashion.9

This process of professionalization in the academic disciplines resulted in the identification and creation of a scholarly canon of significant texts in many fields, but especially in history and literature, where the recently adopted elective system in university curricula created greatly expanded opportunity for research and teaching in these areas. Popular courses in history and literature spread rapidly, replacing formal recitations in philosophy and the classics, as well as Bible study.

The professionalization of scholarship and the appearance of a scholarly “canon”—that is, a body of significant texts—emerged almost simultaneously with the growth of the antiquarian book trade. The scholarly use of original sources and an increased interest in establishing and analyzing the texts of authorities conferred significance on imprints deemed important to a given academic discipline. This significance confirmed “collectability” on sources and thereby nurtured, if it did not direct, the antiquarian book market and book collecting.

Book collecting, which, of course, has a long and honorable past, especially flourished in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the decade of the 1880s inaugurated what has been described as the “golden age” of American book collecting. The sale of the library of George Brinley in 1879, the ascendancy of the American Art Association auction house in the 1880s, and the founding of the Grolier Club (the aim of which was the “literary study and promotion of the arts entering into the production of books”) in 1884, all point to the rapidly growing vitality and prestige of book collecting in that period.10

This expansion of collecting, and the consequent interest of research libraries in acquiring the collection formed by bibliophiles, also led those institutions to safeguard rare items already among their holdings. This impulse to safeguard rarities led to their segregation at Yale in the 1890s, interest in their exhibition at Princeton in the same decade, and growing interest at Harvard, Columbia and elsewhere in the notion of acquiring “rare books.”11
This first phase in the emergence and development of rare books and special collections at the end of the nineteenth century entailed little more than identifying and segregating rare books. There were no separate departments, no staff, and little or no money with which to make acquisitions. Rare book collections were locked up and, if their value ultimately came to be appreciated, there was at that time little if any interest in encouraging research use. In this period, special collections covered a variety of formats of materials on any given topic. But these collections were not regarded as rare and were most often found in the general library stacks.  

The next phase in the evolution of rare books in academic libraries occurred in the first third of the twentieth century when “treasure rooms” and “rare book reading rooms” began to appear. The “Treasure Room” in the new (1915) Widener Library at Harvard revealed a new attitude toward rare books neatly conveyed in the ambiguous word “treasure.” Though the artifacts collected might be “treasured” as source material for scholarly research, no doubt their financial value—not to say prestige value or even elitism—was also duly recognized. The principal focus remained on rare books and not on special collections, to which no particular association with primary sources was attached. The Rare Book Division of The New York Public Library was founded in 1914, while Rare Book Rooms were opened at Princeton, the Library of Congress, Michigan, Wellesley, and Yale. Modest levels of staffing for separate rare book departments began to appear in this period, and endowed book funds often, though certainly not always, accompanied gifts of libraries. Library friends organizations explicitly dedicated to helping support these departments also date from the decade of the 1920s.

In the years after 1930, there was an expansion of what constituted suitable materials for collecting primary sources, and especially a growing interest in collecting manuscripts and archival material in addition to books. The great Southern Historical Collection was founded by de Roulhac Hamilton at the University of North Carolina in 1930, while the Michigan Historical Collections were founded at the University of Michigan in 1935. It wasn’t until after the Houghton Library opened at Harvard in 1942 that there was intense activity undertaken by W.A. Jackson in collecting manuscripts at that institution, while it wasn’t until Julian Boyd undertook the ambitious collecting program called the “Princeton Archives of American Letters” that Princeton began forming its contemporary manuscript holdings. In the same manner, the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College was founded in 1942, and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe in 1943, to cite but two examples from this decade of the dramatic increase in repositories interested in collecting unpublished source materials. It should also be noted that the Society of American Archivists was founded in 1936, and the American Association for State and Local History in 1940.
This period (i.e., the 1930s) inaugurated the third phase in the evolution of rare books and special collections in academic libraries. The rapid expansion of American higher education and the broadening of scholarship fueled the rapid growth of such units in academic libraries. In this phase, the phrase “special collections” began to acquire a connotation of rarity and value, not only a concentration of books and other materials bearing on a single subject. Generally, the phrase also suggested materials in a variety of non-book formats. Materials such as broadsides, newspapers, maps, prints, sheet music, and a variety of other primary sources were identified as “special collections.” These collections were often of no great monetary value, but of sufficient “density” or content on a given subject to contain research value. And indeed, the word “special” is sufficiently ambiguous to include not only items or collections with research value, but also came to confer a value or standing much in the manner of rare books.

The dramatic expansion of American higher education in the 1960s stimulated the fourth phase in the development of “rare books” and “special collections.” With government subsidies and demographic patterns reinforcing one another, the numbers of college students, and the institutions educating them, rose precipitously. The breathtaking expansion of state university systems was the principal, but not the only, locus for this expansion. Research became ever more specialized and scholars sought interdisciplinary approaches to solve vexing social problems brought on by rapid social change.

The changing nature of contemporary scholarship altered the literary “canon” so that it has been redefined and broadened to include authors and texts that would have elicited little or no interest just a few short years ago. Not only is this obviously true in emerging disciplines such as women’s studies and area studies, but in literary scholarship generally. Changing fashions in literary taste have been exacerbated by fickle schools of literary interpretation: the New Criticism, deconstructionism, and now the new Historicism, all of which have been influential in shaping—and changing—the character of the literary canon and those texts deemed worthy of scholarly explication.13

The institutionalization of private libraries such as the Lilly Library at Indiana and the Beinecke Library at Yale, together with the growing presence of publicly funded repositories such as the Humanities Research Center at Texas, all strengthened further the commitment of academic institutions to developing research collections. The current vogue of social history, beginning in the 1960s, also generated interest in ephemera, newspapers, and other sources that had generated little if any interest among collectors and scholars until very recently. Social historians have turned with a vengeance to sources such as newspapers, diaries, chapbooks, broadsides, popular music, and anything else that might shed light on the common people and refocus history, as one proponent has put
it, "from the bottom up." Historians have turned to cultural history with a lower-case "c," featuring use of social science theories, especially anthropologists who have displaced historical sociologists as most influential among social historians.

The period of the 1960s also witnessed the rapid proliferation of special subject repositories such as the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota, the Popular Culture History Center at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and the Barker Texas History Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin, to cite but a few of many instances.

Special collections units were often formed on new campuses such as at the University of Nevada at Reno in 1965, and these units collected in new areas, supported research topics in areas in which it was relatively easier to assemble collections, and in turn helped shape, through their very acquisitions activities, new areas of scholarly inquiry. Indeed, the growth in the number of curators of rare books and manuscripts had led to the creation of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ACRL in the late 1950s. The ambiguity of the phrase "special collections" serves us very well in this, for it continues to connote both research and market value. As such, the acquisition of these materials creates an aura of institutional success, participation in the act of scholarship and the creation of new knowledge through possession of valuable artifacts, all of which assist the institution in validating its purposes.

We have thus travelled a course from the initial steps at the end of the nineteenth century entailed in identifying and segregating rare books (when special collections were in fact subject collections) through the opening of treasure rooms and the organization of rare book departments in the first third of our own century, to the interest in collecting unpublished source materials in the middle third of the century. With the increased collecting of a wide diversity of source materials in a multiplicity of formats, the concept of "special collections" has steadily broadened—very much like the scholarship it supports. It is this current phase, that of a broadened understanding of "special collections," that enables our profession to participate in and support new directions in humanistic scholarship.

We take for granted the links among research in primary source materials, teaching, and the purposes and mission of the contemporary research university that Professor Tinker celebrated more than sixty years ago. These links were hard-won and, if we value them, we need to understand how they came to be forged and how fragile they might prove to be if we do not continue to be diligent and responsible custodians. Perhaps, in understanding the nature of our past, we might take comfort in the persistent and intrepid efforts of our predecessors and resolve to continue to contribute even more directly to the purposes of the institutions that we serve.

2. Apart from scattered institutional historical sketches, the literature on the history and development of rare books, manuscripts, and special collections is slight indeed. Students interested in this topic perforce turn to library history generally to begin to assemble information.


8. Carpenter, First 350 Years of the Harvard University Library, 102; see also Wayne Cutler and Michael H. Harris, eds., Justin Winsor: Scholar-Librarian (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1980), and Hamlin, The University Library in the United States, 48–53.


12. Hamlin, The University Library in the United States, 56. See also Coleman, “Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton,” and Lohf, The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia for details on special collections among the general collections in this period.

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