Cooperative Collecting of Manuscripts in the "Old South"

Timothy D. Pyatt

Editor's note: This essay was presented, in a slightly different form, as a paper at the 40th annual ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Preconference, "Border Crossings: Exploring New Territories for Special Collections," June 21–24, 1999, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Given the history of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, it is somewhat ironic to be using it as an example illustrating cooperative collection development. For those unfamiliar with the history of the Southern Historical Collection, its founder was J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton, who became known as "Ransack" Hamilton due to his collecting techniques. He publicized his plans for creating a "national Southern collection" in Chapel Hill in a series of lectures, newspaper articles, and pamphlets. A 1930 pamphlet opens describing Hamilton's efforts to rediscover the "Old South" as follows:

> Among historians and scholars nothing in years has made a stronger appeal than the plan, sponsored by the University of North Carolina, to assemble at Chapel Hill in a fire-proof library, every accessible scrap of paper bearing upon any phase of the history and development of the South. For generations it has been observed by the cau-

Timothy D. Pyatt is the curator of manuscripts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

> tious student of history that the historians have given undue emphasis to the East, and particularly to New England, to the neglect of the South and the West; and that result has been a lopsided, and unintelligent interpretation and appraisement of American history.[1]

The pamphlet concludes with the following compelling argument for cooperating with Hamilton and building such a national collection in Chapel Hill:

> For generations, millions of Americans in the North and West have been kept in ignorance of the historic splendor of the South, and recent publications have demonstrated that the entire country is highly sympathetic toward an adequate interpretation of her life. But that historical rehabilitation, which means so much to her, can come to her only through active cooperation. She cannot be indifferent to her records, destroy them, conceal them, withhold them, and then complain that the whole truth has not been adequately presented by the historians. These are more than eager to do justice now if the raw material of her history is made accessible. And it is not enough that this material may be found by an extensive tour of all the Southern States, with laborious researches in hundreds of cities and towns.... Here is the plan that will relieve him of the impossible task of reaching the material now scattered over a vast territory. It is proposed to assemble it for him. So rich should be the sowing of Chapel Hill that scholars and historians will make a deep path from the North, the East, and West to the seat of this collection, and the result will be reflected in a juster, saner, less sectional interpretation of our American life.[2]

Hamilton worked tirelessly to fulfill this plan as he scoured the South in the 1930s and 1940s, gathering plantation records and Civil War manuscripts from Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina. While his collecting efforts did not bring "every accessible scrap of paper" documenting the South to Chapel Hill, he did collect over two million manuscripts prior to his retirement in 1948, and the collection grew to more than 17.5 million manuscripts by 1999. The prediction that "historians will make a deep path" to use the Southern Historical Collection has proven true. However, Hamilton's "pan-regional" collecting has not sat well with later colleagues at institutions and universities in the aforementioned states. In defense of Hamilton, he operated in a different era. When he founded the Southern Historical Collection in 1930, there were no other formal academic manuscript repositories in the South, only one state archives in the South, and the National Archives was still four years away from opening its doors. Hamilton's efforts to save documentary

evidence of the Old South helped heighten awareness of the importance of primary source documentation in the region and spur other institutions to collect and build manuscript collections.

From competition to cooperation

After describing how the Southern Historical Collection tried to acquire all of the region's manuscript collections, the transition from competition for manuscript collections to cooperative collecting needs to be explained. Competition between repositories and institutions is not always a bad thing. Most organizations compete for resources:

- within our own institutions with other departments for funds and resources;
- with other repositories for grants, such as National Endowment for the Humanities and National Historical Publications and Records Commission awards;
- with other institutions for corporate and private donors in fundraising;
- so why not for collections?

One of the main considerations is professional ethics, something that did not exist when Hamilton started collecting. The Society of American Archivists' "Code of Ethics for Archivists" has several relevant passages directly pertaining to competition for manuscript collections. Under Article III, the code states:

> Archivists arrange transfers of records and acquire documentary materials of long-term value in accordance with their institutions' purposes, stated policies, and resources. They do not compete for acquisitions when competition would endanger the integrity or safety of documentary materials of long-term value, or solicit the records of an institution that has an established archives. They cooperate to ensure the preservation of materials in repositories where they will be adequately processed and effectively utilized.[3]

The accompanying commentary states:

> Because personal papers document the whole career of a person, archivists encourage donors to deposit the entire body of materials in a single archival institution …. Institutions are independent and there will always be room for legitimate competition …. When two or more institutions are competing for materials that are appropriate for any one of their collections, the archivist must not unjustly disparage the facilities or intentions of others …. It is sometimes hard to determine whether competition is wasteful. Because owners are free to offer collections to several institutions, there will be duplication of effort.[4]

It should also be noted that, particularly with regards to twentieth-century documentation, duplication of effort is good and necessary, as there is more documentation of enduring research value being created than all of us together can collect!

The practice of cooperative collecting

When talking about cooperative collecting in the South, the starting point should be the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN). The proximity of several major research libraries in North Carolina helped create TRLN. In 1933 the presidents of Duke and UNC formed a Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. In 1935, this became a formal Program of Cooperation with library collaboration as the strongest component. This program later expanded to include libraries at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh and North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in Durham. For much of its history, TRLN's cooperative programs have consisted of coordinated collection development and resource sharing.

TRLN and cooperative collecting of rare materials have only been a fairly recent phenomenon. Cooperative collection development had been limited primarily to the general (circulating) library collections. In broad terms, there has been some basic cooperation, particularly with rare books. UNC knew that Duke had the definitive Confederate imprint collection and did not make that a point of collecting emphasis. UNC had the superior Latin manuscript and early printed book collections, so Duke did not collect as extensively in those areas. Duke has extensive early Greek manuscripts, so UNC did not collect there. On the rare book front, NCSU and NCCU have not been as active players as their collections and rare book collecting activity have been far more limited.

For much of their histories, the manuscript repositories at Duke and UNC competed for collections (particularly antebellum and Civil War era papers), with several collections split between the two repositories. Given the proximity of the two libraries (only 11 miles apart), these splits are not as problematic as they could be for potential researchers. In at least one case, the papers of the late UNC alumnus, North Carolina Governor, Duke University President, and United States Senator, Terry Sanford, the donor (Sanford) purposely chose to divide his personal papers between multiple repositories against the advice of all parties involved. His official papers as governor and senator are with the North Carolina Division of Archives and History and the National Archives as prescribed by law, while his personal papers are split between UNC and Duke.

The present level of cooperation between the various TRLN institutions is a miracle, given their history of competition. Among collegiate rivalries, the rivalry between Duke and UNC in athletics is considered one of the strongest in the country. This competition often extends to other aspects of the university's operations and can even have university development staff question the "loyalty" of an alumnus from a rival school working for the "competitor." Within TRLN are three state-funded institutions teamed with a private school. Given the bureau-

cracy of most state institutions, it can be quite difficult to share resources with nonstate institutions. Yet, TRLN has shared services, networks, and catalogs. A good example of this sharing is the implementation of Encoded Archival Description by both NCSU and UNC. It would not have been possible without substantial technical support from Duke.

The development of NCSU's special collections program during this decade provides a good example of present TRLN cooperative collecting efforts. NCSU staff carefully sought underdocumented areas that meshed with the science and technology mission of their campus. They consulted with colleagues throughout the region and concluded that architectural records was one of the areas in which they should collect. The Southern Historical Collection had acquired several large architectural collections in the early 1980s. Since their donation, the primary users of these collections had been NCSU faculty and students. After consulting with the donors, Southern Historical Collection staff decided to transfer the records to NCSU and add to their quickly growing wealth of records from various architectural firms. This cooperation lead to close working ties between the departments and to the joint solicitation of another collection. Duke also worked closely with NCSU and transferred one of their collections, as well.

Another collaboration has been between NCCU, a historically African American university, and UNC. In the days of segregation, NCCU was a leader in the education of African Americans and produced many notable graduates. Out of loyalty to the institution, many of these graduates placed their papers with NCCU, even though it did not have a formal archival or special collections program. Caring for these collections proved difficult for the underfunded library, until the dean of the NCCU's School of Library and Information Science suggested a partnership with one of the TRLN repositories to care for their collections.

NCCU chose to place their African American Resources Collection with the Southern Historical Collection at UNC because it was another state-funded repository with strong African American holdings. The NCCU Collection includes more than a half-million manuscripts, oral histories, and video tapes documenting the development of Soul City, the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, and the Triangle region African American community. The NCCU School of Library and Information Science assists in providing access to and maintaining these archival collections by supplying a graduate intern from its program to work with the collection. Combined with a project archivist recently hired by the manuscripts department in July of 1999 and a two-year National Historical Publications and Records Commission grant, greater researcher access to all of the collections is being provided due to this partnership. All of the NCCU collections will be processed and fully accessible by June 30, 2001.

Cooperation has not been limited to TRLN members. The Southern Historical Collection has worked closely with the North Carolina Division of Archives and History to recover wayward state records, as well as prevent personal

papers from being split. Frequently, the Division of Archives and History is offered family papers by later generations of families who have already placed papers at UNC or Duke. It is always careful to refer the donors to the repository in possession of the earlier portion of the papers.

Occasionally the system works the other way. When one of the Southern Historical Collection's donors uncovered some personal papers of mid-19th-century Governor Henry Toole Clark, we referred the donor to the Division of Archives and History, who already had all of his official papers and the bulk of his private papers. In some cases we have recovered and returned state records. A turn-of-the-century UNC law professor was the state's former attorney general and had placed his official office letterpress books in the Law Library. The Southern Historical Collection was able to transfer successfully these letterpress books to the Division of Archives and History, filling gaps in the records of the attorney general. In another case a rare book and manuscript dealer offered some 18th-century Orange County (North Carolina) Court records that had been liberated by some past generation. After mentioning the possibility of replevin under the state records law, the dealer decided to donate them to the Division of Archives and History.

This regional cooperation encourages national cooperation. When one of UNC's graduates approached the Southern Historical Collection about placing his papers at UNC, we discovered his mentor was prize-winning poet Hayden Carruth, whose papers are at the University of Vermont. The bulk of the donor's papers contained correspondence with and comments by Carruth. Instead of accepting this potentially excellent literary collection, we referred the donor to Vermont where he ultimately placed his papers.

When competition still occurs

This description of TRLN and cooperative collecting does not mean that partner institutions never compete for collections. Competition for Civil War diaries, letters, and antebellum materials offered for purchase still occurs. We also compete for literary collections—Duke, NCSU, and UNC all have the papers of notable authors placed with their repositories. William Styron's and Reynolds Price's papers are at Duke; Shelby Foote's and Walker Percy's are at UNC; and Lee Smith's and Kaye Gibbons's are at NCSU, for instance. While each repository may deny it, in all probability all of us have communicated with National Book Award winner and Raleigh resident Charles Frazier after the success of his novel *Cold Mountain*.

Reasons for success

Even with historic and present competition, why has cooperation between TRLN manuscript collections been successful? Part of the success has been the close professional ties between the repositories and staff. North Carolina has strong professional organizations such as the Society of North Carolina Archivists (SNCA), which gives staff members the opportunity to meet and exchange information.

Organizations like SNCA, combined with the repositories' proximity with each other, have spawned good communication and trust between staff. Also some credit must be given to "cross-fertilization" of staff—there are former Duke staff at UNC and former UNC staff at Duke and State. This informal "staff-exchange" only helps breed trust and understanding between repositories. We continue to strengthen these ties. In 1998, TRLN formed a Special Collections Task Force, which looks at ways to build upon and improve our resource sharing and cooperation.

Finally there is the reality that one repository cannot collect it all. The late 20th century may have been touted as the paperless society, but it cannot be proved by looking at archival collections and the body of documentation yet to be collected. Combined with the challenge of collecting media-based archival materials, congressional collections, and business archives, many repositories must work together to ensure these collections are preserved and made accessible for research. As we face the Sisyphean task of collecting media that is obsolete within five years of its creation (or less!), cooperation between institutions will only become more vital.

Notes

1. Claude G. Bowers, *Rediscovering the Old South*. Chapel Hill (University of North Carolina, 1930) 1.
2. Ibid., 13–14.
3. *Code of Ethics for Archivists* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992) 2.
4. Ibid., 2.