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### In the Trenches of Law Librarianship - Assessing a Special Collection from Ground Zero

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# In the Trenches of Law Librarianship

## *Assessing a special collection from ground zero*

Working with special collections can be one of the most interesting aspects of a librarian's job. These collections are generally created with a great deal of pride and care, because they are often designed to showcase the distinctive resources and materials of particular institutions. But due to the realities of budgets, time, and personnel, a special collection can sometimes evolve into an existence of benign neglect.

It is usually not a question of having been allowed to fall into disarray and disorder, but rather a situation where the collection is technically maintained but not actively monitored, sometimes for lengthy periods of time. Thus, every once in a while a librarian with no special training in special collections will be called upon to get a collection up and going again and will need to assess the special collection, basically from ground zero.

I recently found myself in this challenging situation in my new job as a reference librarian at the University of South Carolina School of Law. The law library maintains the South Carolina Legal History Collection, which encompasses the legal, political, and historical developments of South Carolina. The collection was created in 1985, and after 20 years it had become slightly adrift; it was there, but nobody was paying much attention to it.

The library now plans to make the collection a more publicized and active part of the library. In discussing our plans for moving forward with the collection, we quickly came to the conclusion that before we could proceed any further we would have to perform an assessment of the collection, i.e., we needed to get a handle on what was in there.

Being a newly minted MLIS, I certainly did not have any greater expertise to deal with this task than anybody else on the staff, but I did have more time on my hands, as well as a personal love of history and old books. Thus, the task of assessing our special collection was offered to me, and I eagerly accepted it. What follows is a list of tips that I learned from my neophyte journey, which I hope will be helpful to others who find themselves facing the same challenge.

### Conduct a Visual Inventory

If you are assessing a special collection from ground zero, the best first step is to conduct a visual inventory. This is a quick and sure-

fire way to get to know the basic nature of the collection. Undoubtedly there are many nuances and layers that won't be noticed, but these can wait. The object of the first visual inventory is to get a feel for the general types and categories of materials that the collection contains and to note these down. At a later date, after you have become more familiar with the collection, it is advisable to do another visual inventory, this time paying closer attention to the categories that you've noted but also opening yourself up to new categories and subcategories.



Photo by Stacy Etheredge.

*Oil portraits and display cases for John Rutledge, Charles Pinckney, and Nicholas Trott, notable South Carolinians in the University of South Carolina School of Law's South Carolina Legal History Collection.*

I assessed our South Carolina Legal History Collection. Given the name and the fact that the collection is housed in a law school library, I assumed that all of the materials would be strictly legal in nature. However, when I conducted my visual inventory I found that the collection was much broader than I had thought and contained a large selection of books regarding the history of the South generally and of South Carolina specifically.

In addition, I easily saw that these overall categories had several interesting subcategories. For example, there were books regarding the history of regions (specific counties and cities), major eras (antebellum South, reconstruction), and groups of people (Native Americans,

African Americans). In hindsight this makes perfect sense because the history of a society and culture always involves the interplay of laws and legal issues, but it was not something I expected. My first visual inventory soon put me on the right track.

### Use a Shelf List

Another excellent way to become familiar with the collection is to use a shelf list, whether you find an existing list or create a new one. Perusing a shelf list would be tedious if your aim were to look intently at every single entry. However, again the purpose here is to use the shelf list as a method for discerning the general categories and subcategories of information that your collection includes. As with a visual inventory, a method of “serious glancing” is in order.

The beauty of shelf lists is that they are in call number order and therefore organized around LOC subject classifications. Thus, the easiest procedure is simply to look down the list in order. You will find yourself noticing groups of LOC classifications and will flesh out your knowledge of them by looking at occasional titles.

I found myself looking at a number of “E” and “F” subject classifications; a quick look at some titles told me that I was in the general classifications for American History (although I did verify this later by checking the LOC classifications). I was able to move down the list fairly quickly in this manner.

Also, if you do choose to use this method, some care must be taken to find an up-to-date list. I was pointed to a shelf list for the collection that was actually cards in an old shelf drawer. Because the collection had been neglected for a while, I figured this was the only list available. A 1994 note on the first card stated that there were 1,501 books in the collection. I just started to go through this shelf list when the head of our cataloging department informed me that our new III Millennium system could create a shelf list for me, because all of the materials had been catalogued with a special location classification. Her alertness netted a completely up-to-date shelf list, which showed me that the collection included 1,106 titles.

### Investigate Living Memory

This next step is not only the most fun and interesting one but it is also critical. Often

special collections are created under the stewardship of people who have dedicated interest in the project and thus immersed themselves completely in all of the proceedings. These people may either still work at the institution or may be easily located.

There also may be people who know a great deal about the collection, either because they have been around long enough to have a superb institutional knowledge or because they have a deep personal interest in the subject matter. In addition, there are individuals who by the nature of their work have dealt with the collection in more than cursory ways, such as staff in the cataloging and acquisitions departments. There is a wide array of valuable information that can come from varied and often unexpected sources, which can make for a delightful investigation.

Our collection was created 20 years ago by the then-current dean, who saw the project through from his initial idea. Being new to my school and state, I was not aware that he was still in the area; I now know that he is and plan to contact him. I also had several interesting conversations with library staff who have worked with the collection.

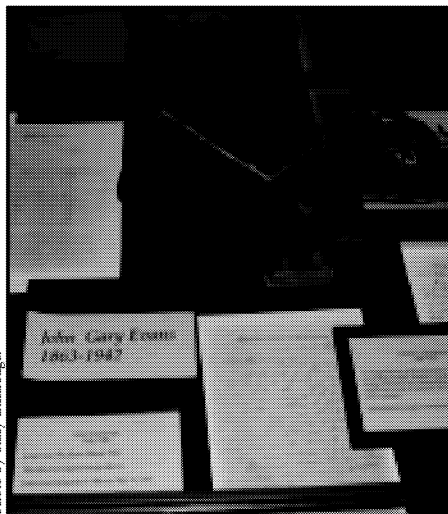


Photo by Stacy Etheredge.

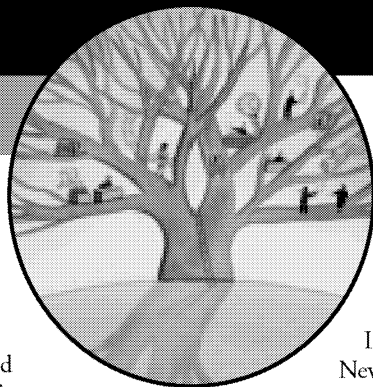
*Memorabilia for John Gary Evans, South Carolina lawyer, state representative, and governor.*

For example, our copy cataloger became interested in some materials she worked on and read them. She told me about her favorites, and I investigated that part of the collection further.

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## Five Steps for Assessing a Special Collection

1. **Conduct a visual inventory.** Get a feel for the general types and categories of materials that the collection contains and note these down.
2. **Use a shelf list.** Peruse the list to discern the general categories and subcategories of information that your collection includes.
3. **Investigate living memory.** Talk to people who know a great deal about the collection, either because they have been around long enough to have a superb institutional knowledge or because they have a deep personal interest in the subject matter.
4. **Do a practical project.** One excellent method for doing this is to write a selective annotated bibliography. It is a good way to learn more about the collection and a project that will benefit the library.
5. **Be creative with other sources of information.** Try to be like Sherlock Holmes: gather what elementary facts you can and then start building your knowledge outwards.



## New Librarians

**Aslihan Bulut** joined the reference department of the Arthur W. Diamond Law Library, Columbia Law School. She received her MLS from Rutgers University in 2000 and her JD from the City University of New York School of Law in 2005. She has worked in libraries, primarily academic and public libraries, for nearly 10 years, most recently as a reference librarian at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

**Beth Williams** joined the reference department of the Arthur W. Diamond Law Library, Columbia Law School, after earning an MLIS with a special certificate in law librarianship from the University of Washington in August 2005. She also holds a JD from Syracuse University and an MA in philosophy from Marquette University. Prior to attending library school, Williams practiced public interest law in Maine.

## New Places and Responsibilities

**Janet Peros** has joined Wachtell Lipton Rosen Katz in New York as a reference librarian. She was most recently special projects librarian in the New York office of Bryan Cave LLP.

## Professional Activities

**James E. Duggan**, director of information technology and professor at Southern Illinois University School of Law Library, is the co-author (with **Susan D. Herskowitz**) of *Legal Research Made Easy*, 4th ed., published by Sphinx Publishing in 2005. ■

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and intellectually-rich group. I look forward to meeting friends, both old and new, every year at the Annual Meeting and contributing to the advancement of the profession."

— Beth Williams

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By far my most valuable find was a retired reference librarian and acting director of the law library, who still occasionally teaches. Not only has he been associated with the law school and library for more than 30 years, but he is also blessed with a phenomenal memory. And even better, he is a "South Carolina boy," with a great love for the history of his state. He had a depth of knowledge of the collection that was both astounding and extremely helpful.

## Do a Practical Project

At some point you will probably want to acquire a more thorough understanding of the collection. You will need to go beyond a general knowledge of the main components and will have to delve into it to get a better grasp of its extent. There are myriad ways of accomplishing this, but if one follows the double-tasking approach to work, then a good way to learn more about the collection is to do a practical project that also will benefit the library.

One excellent method for doing this is to write a selective annotated bibliography. A selective bibliography, even an unannotated one, by its very nature forces an analysis of the collection for its breadth and depth in order to pick out those materials

that best represent the different aspects of the collection. An annotated bibliography is even better; not only does it give you practical knowledge as to specific resources, but it also cannot help but give you a deeper feeling for the essence of the collection.



Photo by Stacy Etheredge.

*A shelf of South Carolina digests from the 19th Century in the University of South Carolina School of Law's South Carolina Legal History Collection.*

A prime motivation behind the decision to assess our special collection was the goal of making it a more active part of our library. I decided to create an annotated bibliography because we could use it later as a helpful resource by making it available in the library as well as posting it on our Web site. We would be able to spread the word about the collection and would also have a finding aid to help assist patrons.

After conducting my visual inventories, reading through the shelf list, and interviewing individuals, I felt I was ready to break down the collection into the bibliographic categories that I wanted to represent. I will admit that it did take a good deal of time and effort, especially as I had never done one before, but it turned out to be a critical step in my education. The process of honing down my selections, and then reading them enough to be able to write annotations, immersed me in the collection like nothing else could have.

## Be Creative with Other Sources of Information

After you utilize these main methods, there is still a myriad of smaller ways to assess the collection, but the idea here is to be creative. The following are some ideas that I found particularly useful:

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- Try to locate any extant documents about the collection. Keep in mind that the more you spread the word about your project, the greater the likelihood of something finding its way to you. For example, one of my fellow librarians cleaned out her office and found a pamphlet about the collection that had been given out at its opening ceremony.
- Look at catalog records for individual items and then use their subject headings to run subject searches in the catalog. This is an easy way to lead you to specific materials, or even larger categories of materials, that your visual inventories may have missed.
- Check provenance records, if you have them, because they might give you interesting information about who donated what kinds of materials and why. Were the materials accepted and a de facto collection created, or was the idea of a collection created and then materials actively sought and acquired? Background circumstances such as these very often drive collection development.
- If you are new to the theme of the collection, use a source like the Internet to briefly educate yourself on background information. For example, although I love history, I am new to South Carolina. The first thing I did was run Web searches on the people in the oil portraits in our special collection, which helped give me the mindset of what the collection was about and what I needed to focus on.

As you can see, you are only limited here by your own thought and creativity. Try to be like Sherlock Holmes: gather what elementary facts you can and then start building your knowledge outwards. There is a surprising amount of information to be learned from the small methods.

### Let the Journey Begin

Assessing a special collection from scratch can certainly be a challenging undertaking, but it need not be overwhelming or burdensome. There is no need to be intimidated by what you do not know and how much there is to do. Instead, treat it as a project that exercises your varied skills as a librarian and then take it one step at a time.

There are many different ways to approach the assessment, and you can use the ones that you are most comfortable with or find the most effective. In fact, you will probably find yourself coming up with different ideas and methods as you go along, as I did. At some point you might get so caught up in your adventure that you will forget that you are working.

Doing a basic assessment of a special collection is a wonderful opportunity to learn about your library, the people working with you, and a specialized subject that you might not know much about. The best part, though, is that it can also be a lot of fun. ■

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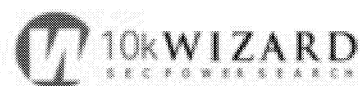


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