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Finding Hidden Treasures in Special Collections

Stacy Etheredge

University of Idaho College of Law, stacye@uidaho.edu

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Finding Hidden Treasures

in Special Collections

It looked cramped and forgotten, as if put there by someone who hadn't known what to do with it and didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it. It was an overstuffed manila envelope, locked in a cabinet in our library's small special collection of South Carolina legal history. Easily sidetracked by enigmatic, forlorn-looking envelopes, I yielded to my curiosity and opened it.

A cursory glance showed that I had found some papers and memorabilia of James Byrnes, a South Carolina politician. I didn't know all that much about Byrnes, except that he was a "favorite son" of the state with an impressive biography—state governor, U.S. senator, U.S. Supreme Court justice, wartime assistant to President Franklin Roosevelt, and secretary of state for President Harry Truman.

I was casually sifting through the usual photos, letters, and speeches when I came across a small piece of faded blue paper. It was a typewritten note on White House stationery, dated June 21, 1949. Addressed, "Dear Jim," and signed by Harry Truman, it was a routine note responding to a recent letter. But on the bottom of the page was a handwritten postscript by Truman: "Since your Washington and Lee speech I'm sure I know how Caesar felt when he said 'Et tu Brute.'"

Ouch.

I didn't know what Byrnes had said in that speech but whatever it was had

certainly hurt Truman's feelings. I flipped through the rest of the materials hoping to find more and got lucky. There was Byrnes' carbon copy of his typed, one-page reply to Truman, dated July 9, 1949, and addressed, "Dear Mr. President." Expressing his disappointment and regret at Truman's postscript, he ends the letter with his own Roman reference: "I hope you are not going to think of me as a Brutus, because I am no Brutus. I hope you are not going to think of yourself as a Caesar, because you are no Caesar."

Double ouch.

This was obviously going to require further investigation, but there seemed to be no doubt that I held in my hands the primary evidence of a falling out between two major political figures. Until five minutes earlier this evidence had been lost to the world in our library's little special collection. I've worked off and on with the collection for two years but had never opened this particular cabinet. In a perfect moment of library serendipity I had stumbled across a hidden treasure.

Lost Treasures—Seek (or Stumble upon) and Ye Shall Find

Managing a special collection that is only one small part of a library is replete with challenges. The most problematic of these is that usually no one person can be devoted to the collection on a full-time basis. Overseeing the collection will probably be just one of a librarian's many responsibilities; even if he or she has a genuine interest in it, there will almost certainly be a lack of time necessary to maintain it properly.

There are other factors that exacerbate this situation of isolation. For example, the small special collection will most likely not be located in the main part of the library but will be somewhere out of the normal flow of traffic—out of sight and, just as likely, out of mind.

As soon as a library allows any part of its collection to become unused it runs the risk of "losing" materials. The items are not really lost, since they're on the shelves for all to see. It's when people stop seeing them that awareness of the materials begins to fade, sometimes to the point where there simply is no awareness left. So stumbling across an important historical artifact like I did is probably not so strange after all.

Luckily, though, if ever there were a group of people apt to find lost treasures, it's librarians. Part of our nature simply can't resist organizing information and resources. Give us a roomful of books and enough time and we'll find some way to inventory it because we know that libraries are of no use if they're not used.

Librarians are also blessed with another special, perhaps even more important trait—we are keenly aware of the serendipitous nature of library stacks. We still have that beginning reader living inside us, the one who knows we will come across something wonderful in the shelves, especially when we aren't looking for it.

Realistically, of course, there will never be time for full-scale search parties. So when it comes to thinking about hidden treasures among your stacks, it's best just to assume that the treasures will find you, if you let them. Try to always keep in mind the notion that probably there are "lost" items in your stacks; that way your treasure radar will constantly be alert to possibilities.

Next, do whatever is feasibly possible with your special collection, given all the confines that you normally face. For instance, try to engage in small episodes of purposeful finding, if you can, even if this can only be done infrequently or in connection with related work with the collection. If you can engage in even infrequent episodes of active looking, while always remaining open to serendipity, then sooner or later you are bound to unearth interesting things that nobody remembered were in the collection.

Found Treasures— Preserving and Informing

Although relying on serendipity is a wonderfully whimsical approach to life, in truth it is not a good way to run a special collection. Library collections are designed with end users in mind. Even a special collection, which might require limitations and restrictions about usage, generally has the goal of being used. Thus, the first step one should take once a lost treasure is found is to make sure it is never lost again. The

following are practical ideas for responding to a lost treasure.

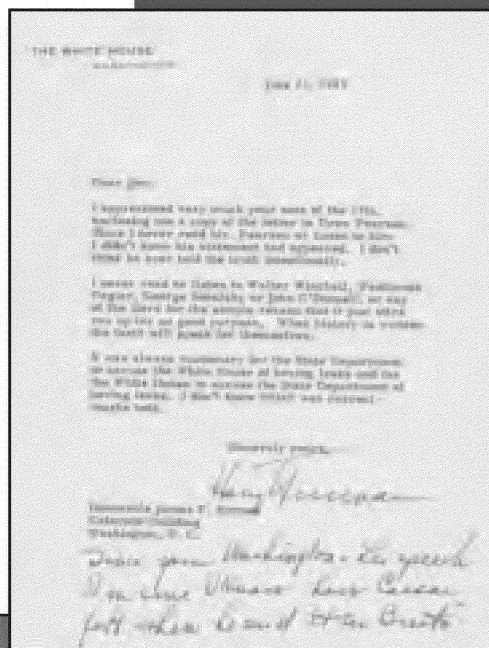
Catalog It. Make sure the item is catalogued. Things often become lost because people don't know how to find them. If someone is researching a subject and searches the catalog but does not come across the item because it is not in the catalog, then it is, for all intents and purposes, lost to that researcher because she doesn't know the library has it.

When catalogued, there should be effective use of the note fields. Even if the item itself is properly catalogued, if the aspect of the item that makes it especially interesting is not noted, then again, it's lost. If you have things that are unusual to you, such as letters or photographs, take a cue from archivists and figure out how to catalog the items. For instance, you might catalog them individually (e.g., Truman Letter to Byrnes, June 21, 1949), as a subject grouping (e.g., James Byrnes Correspondence), or even one big entity (e.g., James Byrnes Collection). But whatever you do, make sure the items are in the catalog.



Display It. Another way to make sure that a found treasure is never lost again is to make sure it is a prominent part of the collection. This opens up a wide range of possibilities and allows you to do whatever fits within the goals and resources of the library.

President Truman's letter to James Byrnes on June 21, 1949, is a routine note responding to a recent letter, except for the handwritten postscript.



Secretary of State James Byrnes (left) and President Harry Truman onboard the USS Augusta on the way to the Potsdam conference in July 1945. The two men had a long friendship until a sudden split in 1949, documented in personal letters.

Photo by Bill Belknap, Navy photographer, courtesy the University of South Carolina Coleman Karesh Law Library

5 Tips for Finding and Preserving Lost Treasure

1. Be open to serendipity.

Try to always keep in mind the notion that probably there are “lost” items in your stacks; that way your treasure radar will constantly be alert to possibilities.

2. Engage in small episodes of purposeful finding whenever you can.

Even infrequent episodes of active looking are bound to unearth interesting things that nobody remembered were in the collection.

3. Catalog the item(s).

Things often become lost because people don't know how to find them. When cataloged, you should effectively use the note field to point out what makes the material interesting.

4. Display the material.

Make sure it is a prominent part of the collection. Place the item in a display case or glassed-in bookcase with other relevant items.

5. Publicize it.

Get the word out about your find whenever and however you can, such as in a bibliography for the special collection, on the library's Web site, or in an article for the library or institution newsletter.

For instance, you might want to highlight the item in a very visible manner, such as putting it in a display case. This display case does not necessarily need to be within the library itself, but could be anywhere in the law school, firm, or institution. As long as there are identifying notes, then it will be known as being a part of the library's collection.

If you want to keep the item inside the special collections area, you might keep it with other special items in a glassed-in bookcase. You don't have to decide immediately whether to keep it under lock and key or not. The point is to put it in a special place so that people are aware of it.

Publicize It. Another way of keeping something found is to make it part of the institutional memory with as many people as possible. Get the word out whenever and however you can.

There are myriad little ways to publicize your newly found treasure. For instance, if you have a bibliography for the special collection, add the item to it; also make sure the bibliography is posted on the library's Web site as well as available via print copies in the library. You might do nothing more extravagant than create a simple inventory or list of the special items. The key is just to make sure the list is easily available so that people can learn about the items.

Along the way, you can think about bigger ways to publicize the newly found item. You should consider writing an article about the find in the library or institution's newsletter, or at least send out a mass e-mail to the faculty, staff, students, attorneys, judges, etc.

If the item is of real interest and you have the resources available, plan an exhibit around it. The local paper might also be interested in doing a story on the item and its background, with or without an exhibit. The point is to get the new discovery into your community's awareness and memories.

Found Treasures— The Bigger Issues

Finding lost treasures in small special collections can also bring up bigger issues for the library. But rather than being seen as problems, these issues can be used as opportunities for growth.

Evaluating the Item. Once a lost treasure is found, the first decision that needs to be made is whether the library should keep the item. This isn't as easy a decision as it first appears. The normal reaction to the find is to keep it because, well, it's owned by the library—“it's ours.” But being owned by a library isn't the same thing as “belonging” in a library. This is especially true with the kinds of treasures

found in special collections; there are always going to be other institutions that will share a historical interest in the item and perhaps even have a more logical claim.

The lost Byrnes letters that we discovered are a perfect example of this situation, as I can think of several other institutions that might possibly want them. So what we need to do now is engage in a truly honest assessment of the item and where it belongs. For instance, if one sums up Byrnes' total career, it is overwhelmingly political and not legal; even the letters themselves do not revolve around legal issues. Are we justified, then, in keeping the letters in our *legal* history collection?

On the other hand, provenance should also be taken into account, i.e., how did the library acquire the items in the first place? For our story, there is some indication that the materials were given to the law school by Mrs. Byrnes (after Byrnes died). Naturally, this episode would need to be verified, but still it brings up another facet of consideration—is it right to give away gifts that were specifically given to your library?

These are just some of the issues you'll be faced with when you evaluate the item, and the process of deciding will not be an easy one. However, for the good of the larger research community, when you discover a lost treasure, you must have the courage to ask yourself the hard questions—where does it really belong, where would it do the most good, and where would it best fit? And after asking those questions, you must be prepared to face the answers.

Evaluating the Special Collection. A more complicated issue is whether finding the lost item is a sign that the library needs to re-evaluate the special collection itself. After all, perhaps the treasure remained lost for so long because no one uses the special collection anymore. And if no one is using it anymore, is it because no one knows about it (which is easily fixed) or because no one cares about it (which is much harder to fix). These are all questions that should be examined closely.

The easiest situation would be to find that the collection is not being used because people don't know it exists. This state of affairs, while discouraging, can probably be rectified quite easily with an awareness-building campaign. The much more difficult situation is to find that no one uses the special collection anymore because they no longer care about it. The thing to remember here is that this does not necessarily mean that the library has done a poor job of maintaining the collection. Perhaps it is simply a case of the special collection no longer fitting within the

mission of the library or larger institution. There is certainly no shame in this. The goals of libraries, like the goals of any other entity, change with the times and bend with new interests.

Thus, the found treasure, as exciting as it may initially be, might actually be a sign that an honest analysis of the special collection needs to be done. Snap judgments should be avoided, of course, but you would do the library a disservice if you did not take this opportunity for re-evaluation. It may be time to consider disbanding this particular special collection in order to focus your energies on another type of special collection, one that would have the interest and support of the institution and its patrons.

Evaluating the Collection

Development Policy. When a lost treasure is found, it almost can't help but have a positive effect on the special collection. Anyone who is interested in the find, whether librarians or patrons, will seek to learn more about it and thus, by natural extension, will also learn about the collection it comes from. Once they start to "see" the special collection again, they will understand why it is a worthwhile and exciting part of the library. It's just a short step from that to a revitalization of ideas and energy.

One way to take advantage of this renewed spirit among the library staff is to examine the collection development policy for the special collection. If there isn't a policy, then this is an opportunity to create one, whether it is a stand-alone document or a section of the library's overall collection development plan. If a policy is already in place for the special collection, this is the perfect time to evaluate it.

Studying the collection development policy, whether new or existing, is a wonderful way to get back in touch with the special collection. It will make you examine in detail the unique and sometimes problematic spin that special collections put on such standard collection development issues as nature and scope, intended user groups, subject focus areas, methods of acquisition, funding and budgets, and weeding projects. And don't forget to include a section on the event that spurred this particular reinvestigation—how to handle a collection's special treasures.

Evaluating the collection development policy is just one of many possible outcomes of finding a lost treasure. The trick is to look upon the discovery as presenting not problems but opportunities for growth. It doesn't really matter what you do with

the new find, as long as you apply your new interest and energy to moving the special collection forward.

Caesar and Brutus, circa 1949— The Conclusion

Although James Byrnes resigned as Harry Truman's secretary of state in 1947, they remained friends and political allies. But then, in 1949, they very suddenly and dramatically split, ending a relationship that had begun in the mid-1930s when they were both U.S. senators. The split turned out to be irrevocable, and they both died in 1972 without ever seeing or communicating with each other again (Truman did make one small overture in 1952 to which Byrnes didn't respond).

The turning point seems to have been the speech Byrnes gave at the bicentennial celebration of Washington and Lee University on June 18, 1949. At this point his political philosophy was beginning to change, and he took the occasion of the speech to criticize Truman's domestic policies, which ended up being widely reported in the press. Truman, hurt by Byrnes' speech, scrawled his Brutus postscript on June 21. Byrnes, hurt by Truman's postscript, dashed off his "you're no Caesar" letter on July 9. And the friendship was no more.

Of course, the end of any type of relationship is always complex, especially if politics are involved. We would be ridiculously simplifying the story if we put the rift down to one speech, a postscript, and a reply letter. However, it is also undeniable that the "Brutus and Caesar" communications are obvious high-water markers in the break between Byrnes and Truman and are direct and primary evidence of what occurred.

Astoundingly, and much to our delight, that evidence is contained in the South Carolina Legal History Collection—although maybe not for much longer, as the general thought seems to be that the letters probably belong somewhere else. If they do go, we'll miss them. But we'll also always be grateful for the serendipitous discovery that breathed fresh life into our special collection. ■

*Stacy Etheredge (ethereds@gwm.sc.edu)
is a reference librarian at the University of
South Carolina Coleman Karesh Law Library
in Columbia.*

3 Questions to Tackle if You Find Lost Treasure

Should your library keep the item? How did the library acquire the item in the first place? Where does it really belong? Where would it do the most good?

Should your library re-evaluate its special collection? Why was the material "lost"? If no one is using the collection anymore, is it because no one *knows* about it or because no one *cares* about it?

What is your library's collection development policy? Does the library have a policy? If there already is a policy in place for the special collection, this is the perfect time to evaluate it. Be sure to address nature and scope, intended user groups, subject focus areas, methods of acquisition, funding and budgets, weeding projects, and how to handle a collection's special treasures.