



Philatelic Materials in Archival Collections: Their Appraisal, Preservation, and Description

Author(s): Peter J. Roberts

Source: *The American Archivist*, Spring - Summer, 2007, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2007), pp. 70-92

Published by: Society of American Archivists

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40294450>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/40294450?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Society of American Archivists is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Archivist*

JSTOR

Philatelic Materials in Archival Collections: Their Appraisal, Preservation, and Description

Peter J. Roberts

Abstract

Many archival collections contain significant quantities of material related to postage stamps and postal history. Many philatelists are interested in researching them. This paper reviews some of the issues surrounding the disposition of philatelic materials and provides guidance for archivists in appraising, preserving, and describing them.

Appraisal of Philatelic Material

Philatelic materials, which include postage stamps and postally used covers,¹ are found in most archives and often are a significant component of manuscript collections. Archivists often discard envelopes to reduce the bulk of voluminous collections or because they do not consider envelopes worth keeping.² In some instances, the address and date information on the cover is lightly penciled onto the manuscript and enclosed in square brackets. It is, however, a misconception that postal covers lack archival value and therefore fail to merit retention. The determination whether or not to retain philatelic materials depends on the type of archival repository, the archivist's appraisal philosophy, and the ranking given to the appraisal criteria employed.

Despite the fact that archivists often discard envelopes, repositories may, nevertheless, hold philatelic materials. Most commonly, archives retain entire

¹ In philately, a *cover* is any postally used envelope, folded letter sheet, postal card, or other piece of postal stationery.

² Two manuals recommending disposal of envelopes are Jane Boley, Marcelle Hull, Shirley Rodnitzky, and Gerald D. Saxon, *Archives and Manuscripts Processing Manual* (Arlington: The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, 1995), 28; and Lillian Bickerton, Leonard DeLozier, and Linda Johnston, *A Manual for Small Archives* (Vancouver: Archives Association of British Columbia, 1988), 40. Regarding reasons for disposal, see J. Douglas Mattox, *Philatelic Gold in the Archives* (Raleigh, N.C., 1993), 1. The University of Wisconsin—Madison cites envelopes as an example of material with no informational value that should be discarded at <http://archives.library.wisc.edu/transfer.html>, accessed 16 February 2006.

record series rather than trying to identify individual files or documents of historical value, so philatelic materials make their way into many archival collections. Philatelic materials are mostly found as covers in the correspondence of manuscript collections. They are inseparable from most pre-1850s correspondence and are also found in archival records as revenue and fiscal stamps on legal documents and bills.

Philatelic materials may be found in personal papers and governmental or institutional records for other, less common, reasons. Occasionally, personal papers may include a donor's private stamp collection. If the individual was a philatelist (a specialist in the study of postage stamps, postal markings, or postal history), an important element of the papers may be the philatelic materials themselves and information that accompanies them. Some archival institutions collect postcards, many of which are postally used. In a few instances, the records of printing firms and the papers of designers, engravers, typographers, and printing salespeople contain stamp proofs.³ Stamps overprinted or perforated with the word *Specimen* were sent between member countries of the Universal Postal Union to announce new stamp issues. Printing companies produced specimen stamps for design approval and presented them to important personalities and institutions. Postal administrations often issue stamps that honor a personality or subject directly related to an institution's archival holdings. As a result, these archives sometimes hold unique philatelic materials related to the stamp's creation, such as proposed designs or "essays," and materials surrounding the subsequent introduction of the approved stamp.⁴

The archivist's decision to save philatelic materials partly depends on whether he or she believes that the creator, the user, or society at large should determine the significance of the material. Archivists who take a macro-appraisal approach use functional analysis to determine archival value. Consequently, many of the record groups selected for retention may contain philatelic materials. They may then employ micro-appraisal criteria such as evidential value, use, scarcity, and informational value to determine what merits retention. The relative importance the archivist gives to those elements will alter his or her selection criteria in regard to philatelic materials.⁵

³ Katherine Hamilton-Smith, "Postcard Collection Directory," electronic bulletin board, 13 April 1998, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 10 June 2005. Michael Laurence, "How Proofs and Essays Get into Collections," *Linn's Stamp News* (11 May 1987): 3.

⁴ For instance, the Special Collections Department of Georgia State University holds the personal papers of lyricist Johnny Mercer that contain material related to the design of the Johnny Mercer stamp.

⁵ Terry Cook, "Archival Appraisal and Collection: Issues, Challenges, New Approaches," Special Lecture Series, University of Maryland and National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md., 22 April 1999, available at <http://www.mybestdocs.com/cookt-nara-990421-2.htm>, 4, 10, accessed 6 April 2006.

An institutional archives that focuses on accountability and the evidential value of its archival records may minimize the informational value of philatelic materials in its record management decisions. Alternatively, when public perception and institutional history are deemed important, institutions often establish visitor centers or institutional museums. In these or similar settings, philatelic resources can be helpful in communicating information about more mundane materials. The display of stamps and covers in exhibits helps unite contemporary records. For instance, a war-era manuscript shown with its stamped cover provides additional focus and context for the viewer. Some institutions effectively use philatelic materials to add color, interest, and life to an exhibit.⁶ When the Center for the History of Chemistry opened, among other exhibits, a display of commemorative postage stamps honored chemists.⁷ As part of its Cultural Olympiad, the Centennial Olympic Games featured an exhibit of historical memorabilia that incorporated a number of philatelic items.⁸ The corporate archives of organizations such as Disney or Time-Warner may retain stamps that directly relate to its business.⁹ Because the postal administration is an integral component of a country's government, philatelic materials in postal administration records are usually transferred to the country's national archives.

Some philatelic materials have enduring legal value. A cover provides legal evidence in cases where it is necessary to prove that a letter was mailed. The cover furnishes documentation that it was correctly addressed, had a return address, was not returned by the postal service, and had the proper postage. Such proof is *prima facie* evidence that the letter was received.¹⁰ Postmarked covers have also provided legal evidence for claims of residence in immigration disputes.¹¹ DNA isolations from the gum of used stamps and covers can reveal

⁶ Linda Wiler, e-mail message to author, 29 August 1995. The Southern Labor Archives exhibit *America United*, with a section on the American-Soviet space race, similarly benefited from the inclusion of a space stamp cover with a launch date special event cancellation.

⁷ Richard J. Seltzer, "Center for History of Chemistry Inaugurated," *Chemical and Engineering News* 61 (4 April 1983): 26–29. Stamps "enhance the picture" of the subject of a collection. Thomas Wildenberg, "Re: Postage Stamps & Archives—Research," electronic bulletin board, 12 March 1998, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 13 June 2005.

⁸ The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games Cultural Olympiad, *Olympihlex '96 / Stamps, Coins and Memorabilia*, Atlanta, Georgia, 19 July to 3 August 1996.

⁹ The subject areas sought in an archives' collecting policy may also include themes depicted on stamps. For example, it would be appropriate for the archives of the Walt Disney Company or Time-Warner Inc. to collect mint stamps depicting their characters or films. Dean DeBolt, "Re: Clarification on Stamps," electronic bulletin board, 12 March 1998, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 10 June 2005.

¹⁰ "Proof of mailing by evidence of business or office custom" 45 *American Law Reports* (4th Series), 476. *Horton v. Allstate Insurance Company*, No. 68186, Court of Appeals of Georgia, 171 Ga. App. 707 (1984).

¹¹ One example is that of an illegal alien who was granted amnesty under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Covers eventually shown to be properly postmarked and addressed to his New York residence proved he had lived in the United States for the required period of time. Ken Lawrence, "The Spotlight Is on Philately and the INS," *Scott Stamp Monthly* (September 1997): 34–35.

the identity of the person who licked the stamp and sealed the envelope. This information is helpful in paternity cases and genetic genealogy.¹²

Potential use of the materials by secondary users should be considered in archival appraisal. Stamp collecting is among the world's most popular hobbies.¹³ Of approximately 1,450,000 stamp collectors in the United States, about 115,000 are considered serious collectors.¹⁴ Over 43,000 people belong to the American Philatelic Society and 400 to the affiliated Postal History Society. The latter represents a fraction of the serious scholars currently conducting philatelic research in various archives worldwide. The wide popularity of stamp collecting and interest in philatelic research have led at least ten countries to establish national postal museums.¹⁵

Stamp collectors have produced philatelic literature since 1861 and today publish an estimated 750 journals, about 400 of which are devoted to specialized interests. Postal history, with its interest in covers, is a growing facet of philately. Philately constitutes a significant pastime for society and philatelists represent a large constituency who can, like genealogists, become vocal advocates of archives.¹⁶ The significance of many philatelic materials in archival collections may seem arcane to archivists who are not conversant in philately.¹⁷ This limitation can be overcome by consulting a postal historian who is likely to possess the knowledge to determine the importance of various types of philatelic materials. Such a dialogue would help archivists improve the description of philatelic materials in their collections and make them better known to the philatelic community.

¹² The success of DNA recovery depends on the storage condition and the age of the sample. Covers need to have been stored in a dark and dry place. A recovery success rate of about 50 percent has been reported by one laboratory for samples less than twenty years old, with the oldest successful recovery being from a fifty-five-year-old stamp. Thomas Krahn, "DNA from old stamps—Clarification," electronic bulletin board, 22 Mar 2005, available at <http://Genealogy-DNA-L@rootsweb.com/>, accessed 10 June 2005. See also, B. Hopkins, N. J. Williams, P. G. Debenham, and A. J. Jeffreys, "The use of Minisatellite Variant Repeat-Polymerase Chain Reaction (MVR-PCR) to Determine the Source of Saliva on a Used Postage Stamp," *Journal of Forensic Science* 39, no. 2 (March 1994): 526–31.

¹³ David Straight, "Adding Value to Stamp and Coin Collections," *Library Journal* (1 June 1994): 75.

¹⁴ Michael Lawrence, "Survey: Stamp Market Roared Back in 2004," *Linn's Stamp News* (13 June 2005), 3.

¹⁵ In 2005, the U.S. National Postal Museum Library had 314 research appointments for external users and many more internal use requests. Paul McCutcheon, "Annual number of users?" e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006; Daniel Bayer, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 11 September 1995; Don Chafetz, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 12 September 1995; Arwel Parry, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 14 September 1995; Patrick Bonacker, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 14 September 1995; Allan Tuchman, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 14 September 1995; David Mills, "National Postal Museums—How many?" e-mail message to author, 14 September 1995.

¹⁶ Bill Welch, "A Philatelist's Perspective," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., 31 August 1995. Gail R. Redmann, "Archivists and Genealogists: The Trend Toward Peaceful Coexistence," *Archival Issues* 18, no. 2 (1993): 126.

¹⁷ Frank Boles, *Archival Appraisal* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1991), 44.

Most archivists consider scarce records to be significant, and scarcity is an important element affecting selection.¹⁸ Many archival collections contain rare philatelic materials that archivists have overlooked. Some archives with significant pre-twentieth-century manuscripts contain scarce philatelic materials that would reap millions of dollars on the philatelic market.¹⁹ Indeed, many of the large “finds” or “caches” noted by the philatelic trade are purloined from archival material. The matter is important enough that rare postage stamps and related postal history materials have become the subject of new international laws and treaties.²⁰

The use of postage stamps as a record of payment for mail delivery is fleeting.²¹ The archival value of most philatelic materials is its informational value for users other than the creator of the covers. For these secondary users, philatelic materials retain their value over time because they contain information about topics that help define the history of a society and culture. The following examples highlight the informational value of philatelic materials and also serve as a guide to the types of philatelic materials that interest researchers and the types of materials that should be preserved.

Some postage and cover markings are important examples of mail service and so are valuable to understanding the history of postal systems.²² Scholarly research using philatelic materials has made worthy contributions to the historical record that would not have been possible using traditional historical resources. For instance, stamps can bear symbols that are part of a national system of communication.²³ The study of Ottoman stamps helped recount the history of the Ottoman Empire’s fiscal calendar.²⁴ Covers can reveal relevant historical information for biographies²⁵ and for the study of ethnic

¹⁸ Boles, *Archival Appraisal*, 38, 46.

¹⁹ Mattox, *Philatelic Gold in the Archives*, 1.

²⁰ Leo J. Harris, “Harvesting in Fields of Philately? Be Aware of the Legal Implications,” *The American Philatelist* (March 1989): 230. The United States has bilateral agreements of replevin with Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Ecuador. The U.S. and sixty other nations have also subscribed to the UNESCO Convention of 1970 which prohibits the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property (which specifically includes philatelic material). Harris, “Harvesting in Fields of Philately?” 230–32.

²¹ T. J. Collings and R. F. Schoolley, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials* (London: The British Library, 1989), 2.

²² Ann E. Pederson and Sigrid McCausland, eds., *Keeping Archives* (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists Inc., 1987), 151.

²³ Donald M. Reid, “The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 2 (1984): 223–49.

²⁴ Richard B. Rose, “The Ottoman Fiscal Calendar,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 25, no. 2 (1991): 163.

²⁵ Information on covers and postal cards helped Bill Welch to document Dr. Rolando Kuehn’s varied activities on the Mosquito Coast. This information pointed him to areas he would never otherwise have considered investigating, e.g., several covers from Hawaii led to the link with King Kalakaua of Hawaii and the legendary Hawaiian missionary Father Damien de Veuster. Bill Welch, letter to author, 17 October 1995; Bill Welch, “The Bones of Rolando Kuehn,” *The American Philatelist* (March 1993): 222.

migrations.²⁶ The time required to disseminate information among the medieval aristocracy can be gleaned from postal markings on European state letters.²⁷ Later postal markings supplement written accounts by providing dated records of the world's transportation history, including the mode and route of travel.²⁸

Auxiliary markings on wartime covers can help researchers to better interpret correspondence. For instance, censor markings, "Free-POW Mail" hand stamps, preferential postal rates, and unusual mail routes provide clues of governmental or self-imposed censorship.²⁹ First and Second World War-era European covers occasionally provide information about the complicated and cumbersome schemes used to circumvent mail restrictions between warring nations. Organizations such as Thomas Cook and Son and the International Red Cross aided mail delivery by establishing forwarding facilities that worked with censors. In some instances, the covers, which were sometimes addressed to aliases, were sent to a forwarding agent at a designated postal box or dummy firm in a neutral country like Switzerland or Portugal. The mail was then transferred to the intended addressee.³⁰

Dated correspondence and a cover's postal markings inform researchers about the lapse of time between when a letter was written, posted, and received at the destination post office. Mail delays can be determined by comparing a cover's postmark and backstamp.³¹ Dated postal markings provide date information similar to time stamps often found on office records. Knowing when a stamp was issued can also assist a researcher in approximating the year of an undated letter. Furthermore, the dates of otherwise undated correspondence can be estimated from postage on a cover when the date stamp cannot be read. A processing archivist probably won't have the time to look up the postage stamps in a catalog, but a determined researcher undoubtedly will.

Some postal markings indicate the occurrence of severe weather conditions like snowstorms.³² Other postmarks and stamps provide some insights into

²⁶ Alfred A. Gruber, "Tracing the Chinese in Mexico through Their Covers," *The American Philatelist* (June 1993): 568.

²⁷ James Mackay, *The Guinness Book of Stamps* (Middx, U.K.: Guinness Publishing: 1982) 43.

²⁸ Reid, "The Symbolism of Postage Stamps," 225.

²⁹ Louis Fiset, e-mail message to author, 5 December 1994.

³⁰ Thomas J. Gobby, "World War II Message Schemes," *The American Philatelist* (April 1988): 342–49.

³¹ A *backstamp* is a postmark applied to the reverse of a cover of incoming mail to show date and time of receipt at the receiving post office.

³² Randy Stehle, "Auxiliary Markings—Snow Delays," *La Posta: A Journal of American Postal History* (November 1995): 40–43. Turn-of-the-century backstamps in the U.S. and Mexico contained regional weather forecasts. Bob De Violini, "Weather Reports and Condition Cancellations?" electronic bulletin board, 13 December 1995, available from the author. Alfredo V. Basurto, "Mexican Weather Forecast 'Flag' Cancels," *The American Philatelist* (March 1994): 245–47.

popular culture and marketing.³³ Covers may include illustrations that provide important visual information to the historical record. For instance, Civil War–era covers occasionally have engravings of regimental encampments or patriotic cartoons.³⁴

Other visual clues provide a record of the outbreaks of disease and acts of bioterrorism. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century covers with clipped corners or punched holes are often evidence that the contents were disinfected in an attempt to prevent the spread of diseases such as cholera, yellow fever, and bubonic plague. Envelopes mailed since November 2001 to the White House and congressional and other federal government offices have markings indicating they have been irradiated to destroy anthrax spores and ricin.

Other information may be gleaned from covers. Notations may indicate an address change or forwarding address. An enclosed manuscript may be continued on the back of the cover in the form of a postscript (P.S.) notation. Covers may contain other clues such as the use of the familiar “c/o” abbreviation to indicate if the addressee was residing in the care of another person.

Postal authorities frequently issue stamps to fulfill postage rates for special mail classifications. Special delivery, registered, certified, or insured stamps or markings provide researchers information regarding the importance of accompanying documents to the sender. Express mail or airmail stamps usually signify the sender’s desire for faster conveyance despite the higher cost. The use of certain stamps indicates that the writer is in the armed services or mailed the letter from an occupied country. The use of official stamps indicates the correspondence is from a government office or agency.³⁵

The placement of stamps on an envelope occasionally adds meaning to the accompanying correspondence. Stamps positioned upside down have been used to express anti-war sentiments and also love.³⁶ The scholar who edited the

³³ For instance, the nineteenth-century “Shoo Fly” cancellation from Waterbury, Connecticut, was inspired by a popular song of the day. Richard M. Cabeen, *Standard Handbook of Stamp Collecting* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1979), 138–39. Publicity slogans, often promoting tourism or special events, are often found on twentieth-century and later cancellations. Some French and Italian postmarks include commercial slogans for branded goods. Mackay, *The Guinness Book of Stamps*, 54–58. Italy and New Zealand have produced stamps with advertising on them. Mackay, *The Guinness Book of Stamps*, 123–24.

³⁴ William Stromberg, “The Large Regimental Patriotic Envelopes of the U.S. Civil War,” *The American Philatelist* (July 1991): 614–16.

³⁵ Airmail stamps of other countries are identified by overprints or phrases in their design: “Poste Aérienne” (French), “Luftpost” (German), “Legiposta” (Hungarian), “Posta Aerea” (Italian), “Correio Aereo” (Portuguese), and “Correo Aereo” (Spanish). Similarly, official stamps are identified by “G” (for government—Canada), “Tjeneste” (Denmark), “Dienst” (Germany), “O.H.M.S.” (for On His/Her Majesty’s Service—Great Britain), “Service” (India), and “Officiel” (Switzerland). Michael Baadke, “Stamps that Fulfill Special Postal Services,” *Linn’s Stamp News* (30 March 1998), 46.

³⁶ During the antagonisms preceding the American Civil War, Southerners may have placed stamps upside down in support of secession. Gene Lightfoot, “Position on Envelope?” e-mail message to author, 13 December 1994. In protest against the Vietnam War, some dissenters also pasted U.S. stamps

letters of Sara Haardt and the American literary critic H. L. Mencken noted, “. . .most of them were mailed with the postage stamp carefully pasted upside down: a code which, in those days carried an additional message—that you were in love with the person you were sending your letter to.”³⁷ If the archives had disposed of the covers such an observation would have been lost.

To identify the most important philatelic materials in their collections, archivists may survey their collections to determine if they contain significant stamps or covers. When dealing with the personal papers of a stamp collector, the archivist can make a quick note in the accession record that the collection may contain important materials if there is evidence that the donor was a member of a philatelic society or purchased materials at auction. Repositories should keep not only philatelic materials with informational value for traditional researchers but also those that are important to postal historians and philatelists. The following examples can guide archivists in making those appraisal and retention decisions.

The types of philatelic material of interest to philatelists or postal historians are not just the stamps themselves but also details such as color varieties of ink or paper, the earliest and latest dates a particular cancellation was used, or the route and rate required to send a cover through the mail. Stampless covers (stampless folded letters), cancellations and other postal markings, and indications of mail rates are most likely to be significant to postal historians and may indicate rare or expensive philatelic material.³⁸

Most monetarily valuable philatelic material usually consists of stampless covers dating from the mid-seventeenth century to the 1850s when envelopes replaced stampless covers.³⁹ These letters often have written or hand-stamped markings indicating the originating post office, payment, routing, and postal recordkeeping information.⁴⁰ Noncircular postmarks on these covers are atypical and therefore often of more interest to postal historians.

(and specifically flag stamps) upside down. Jeffrey N. Shapiro, letter to author, 27 December 1994, and Jill L. Schneider, “Re: Postage Stamps WILL Have Archival Value,” electronic bulletin board, 16 March 1998, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 13 June 2005. Since the 1870s, the placement of stamps has developed into an elaborate symbolic language of courtship. M. Valencia and Donald Loker, “More Stamp Codes,” *Linn’s Stamp News* (16 March 1987), 4; George Ade, *Artie: A Story of the Streets and Town* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1896), 18; John M. Hotchner, “What Is the Significance of Stamp Placement?” *Linn’s Stamp News* (9 October 1995), 6; Jacob P. Busch, “Briefmarken-Sprache (Language of Postage Stamps),” *German Postal Specialist* (December 1991), 520; Werner Rittmeier, “Briefmarken der 50er Jahre grüßen,” *Deutsche Briefmarken-Zeitung* 2 (1992): 126.

³⁷ Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, ed., *Mencken and Sara: A Life in Letters: The Private Correspondence of H. L. Mencken and Sara Haardt* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 72; and Charles Antin, “Love Letter Code,” *Linn’s Stamp News* (9 February 1987), 4.

³⁸ Mattox, *Philatelic Gold in the Archives*, 2.

³⁹ Mackay, *The Guinness Book of Stamps*, 9.

⁴⁰ Most of these markings are in the country’s native language or in French, the official language of the Universal Postal Union, which was founded in 1874. Noncircular handstamps (i.e., oval or irregular) are usually rarer. Mattox, *Philatelic Gold in the Archives*, 2–4.



Stampless cover from Annapolis to Frederick, Maryland. Stampless covers are typically folded letters with wax seals mailed before the issuance of postage stamps in 1847 and before the use of stamps became mandatory in 1856. The originating post office wrote or hand stamped its city name. If the postage was collected at the time of mailing, the letter was marked PAID, if not, payment was collected at time of delivery. *Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.*

The postal system has used a variety of markings to cancel stamps to confirm that the sender made proper payment for the mail's delivery and to ensure that postage stamps are not reused. These postmarks often indicate the time and place of origin, route, destination, and mode of transportation. Archivists should be aware of the more uncommon varieties that are of interest to philatelists and postal historians.⁴¹ Noteworthy originating town marks include those of small towns, discontinued post offices, ghost towns, territories, manuscript cancels, and rural free delivery cancels. Some cancellations or cachets denote unusual post office locations like those in the air, aboard trains, buses, ships, and even on the sea floor.⁴²

⁴¹ Jeffrey N. Shapiro, "Uncommon Things to Look for on Common Covers," handout with letter to author, 6 December 1994.

⁴² Just prior to World War I, the Deutsche Reichspost authorized the establishment of post offices on board the zeppelin airships. Simone Short, "Collecting Air Mail," *The American Philatelist* (October 1992): 925. In 1946, the U.S. Post Office Department and three airlines investigated the feasibility of processing the mail en route. Dan Barber, "Flying Post Office Proved Impractical," *Linn's Stamp News* (17 November 1986), 65. A history of the undersea post office is available in Harold G. D. Gisburn, *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of the Bahamas* (London: Stanley Gibbons Ltd., 1950), 105–7.



Steamboat cover from Philadelphia to Providence, Rhode Island. The U.S. Post Office officially recognized steamboat mail in 1825. The postmaster at the receiving post office paid the master of the steamboat two cents for each letter received, but this fee was not passed to the recipient. The steamboat hand stamp on this cover was in use from 1832 to 1852 and applied in Providence where the letter entered the U.S. postal system. *Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.*

Other markings indicate the covers traveled to remarkable destinations like the North Pole, the Antarctic, and the moon.⁴³ Cover markings (and some stamps) may indicate unusual means of conveyance such as via tin can, pneumatic post, balloon, inland waterway, packet boat, steamboat, pony express, early railroad or airmail, and rocket.⁴⁴ Some postal markings indicate the route the mail traveled and its destination. These receiving marks indicate how long the letter was in transit and any changes in the route taken.

Some cancellations are distinctive for their visual appeal. Some postal clerks in the late nineteenth century created fanciful personal hand stamps for

⁴³ Dwight Eaves, "Deep Freeze Cover," *Linn's Stamp News* (11 August 1986), 48; Armand Singer, "Philately from Pole to Pole," *The American Philatelist* (March 1995): 196; "Postmark: The Moon," *Newsweek*, 24 July 1972, 74.

⁴⁴ During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), balloons reportedly carried about 2.5 million letters out of besieged Paris. These balloons also transported over 300 carrier pigeons to transport the return mail. An alternative means to get mail into the beleaguered city was to float the letters down the Seine, past Prussian marksmen, in hollow steel balls. The sharpshooters sank most of them and about a thousand letters have been recovered from sunken balls. Mackay, *The Guinness Book of Stamps*, 25. The first example of American balloon mail (now missing) dates from 1793 and was from George Washington. Short and Simine, "Collecting Air Mail," 922, 924. Steamboats transported a large quantity of North American mail during the mid-nineteenth century, later to be supplanted by the railroads. The variety of steamboat markings is reputed to be unequalled in any other area of U.S. postal history. James W. Milgram,



1887 railway post office fast mail cover to Louisville, Kentucky. A railway post office (RPO) was a railroad car, usually on a passenger train, where mail was sorted en route to speed delivery. Sorting mail aboard moving trains revolutionized mail processing. Profits from RPO contracts helped railroads subsidize a number of otherwise unprofitable passenger routes. Note the abstract added to the cover by the recipient to aid in retrieval from a pigeonhole desk or bundled correspondence. Such abstracts aid in understanding recordkeeping practice in the 19th century. *Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.*

cancellations such as geometrical figures like stars and concentric circles and organic designs like plant and animal forms, fraternal emblems, hearts, and shields. These uncommon and distinguishing stamp cancellations are of interest to many postal historians. Although U.S. postal regulations usually specified black ink for cancellations, some cities occasionally used red, blue, green, magenta, and, in extremely rare cases, orange or yellow.⁴⁵

Postal historians are often interested in the various mail rates. Indications that the postage was temporarily changed, prepaid, or partially prepaid are noteworthy. Way markings indicate that a post rider accepted the letter along his route for deposit in the post office to which he was going. Some rates were short-lived and only used during wartime or other emergencies. Some people

"Steamboat Markings," *The American Philatelist* (June 1992): 550; *Vessel-Named Markings on United States Inland and Ocean Waterways 1810-1890* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, 1984). In 1939, Cuba issued a postage stamp for rocket mail. Three flights were conducted. In 1959, the U.S. Post Office Department sent mail from a submerged submarine via a guided missile to Mayport, Florida. The covers were then forwarded to members of Congress. Les Winick, "Taking Up Space," *The American Philatelist* (September 1993): 847-48.

⁴⁵ Cabene, *Standard Handbook of Stamp Collecting*, 138; Jeffrey N. Shapiro, letter to author, 6 December 1994.

and organizations have free franking privileges allowing them to send mail without charge. Soldiers are often permitted free franking during wartime and some countries grant government and religious figures this privilege. One of the most common instances allows U.S. congressional representatives to use their signatures in place of the postage stamp on mail sent in the course of congressional business. Postal historians are also usually interested in instances of mixed frankings, where stamps from different countries were required to deliver a letter.

The addressee and return address can be important to some collectors and historians. Famous, historical, notorious, or exotic places and people may be of interest. Additionally, the envelope itself can be of a historical nature. For instance, during and shortly after the American Civil War, paper was in short supply. Envelopes were sometimes turned inside out for reuse or made from other materials such as wallpaper or bark.

The types of markings may be significant and include colonial, territorial, military, war, early western or U.S. overland mail routings, forwarding agent, private post, official, and governmental. Any foreign destination routed to the United States is important, especially those with non-European origins; or foreign destinations routed to Europe, especially those with non-North American origins.⁴⁶

Stamps that are torn, missing perforations, heavily stained by cancellations, or printed somewhat off center are of little value to collectors unless they are considered rare.⁴⁷ One notable exception is stamps on “crash covers” that survived transportation accidents such as plane crashes and ship sinkings. These items are often torn or missing stamps and usually have smoke or water damage.⁴⁸ They pose difficult preservation problems, yet their proper care and retention are justified since they typically represent a powerful, tangible, and visual record of an important and horrific event. Stamps with pin and staple holes are also of little value, except for those with perfins, perforated designs or lettering to deter their unauthorized use. Most of these nineteenth-century imperforate stamps are highly collectible.⁴⁹

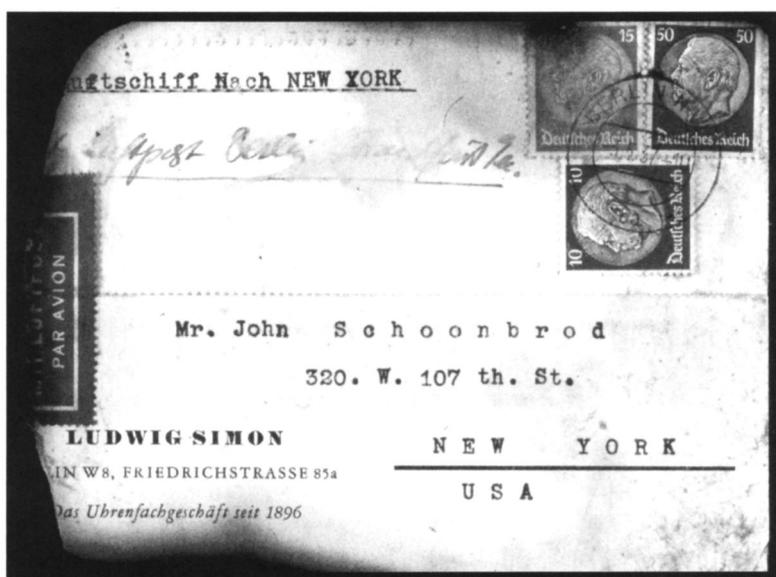
Archives wishing to attract philatelic researchers must appeal to their areas of interest. Besides covers, philatelists are also interested in information about important stamp collectors, dealers, authors, publishers, and exhibitors. They

⁴⁶ J. Douglas Mattox, letter to author, 22 April 1992; conference handout, Society of American Archivists, Washington D.C., 31 August 1995.

⁴⁷ If the design is centered so poorly that the perforations fail to even touch the margins then the stamp becomes a valuable and highly collectible “freak.” John Sicker, “Collectors Should Seek Best Centering Possible,” *Linn’s Stamp News* (9 March 1987), 68.

⁴⁸ Two notable references regarding crash covers are Carl W. Ehlerding, “Wreck Covers Ship and Air,” *The American Philatelist* (June 1959) and Adrian E. Hopkins, *A History of Wreck Covers* (London: Robson Lowe Ltd., 1970). See also Collings and Schoolley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 3.

⁴⁹ John Sicker, “Collectible Copies Require Undamaged Perforations,” *Linn’s Stamp News* (16 March 1987), 54.



One of 347 crash covers salvaged from the 1937 Hindenburg zeppelin disaster in Manchester, New Jersey. Accidents were a regular occurrence during the earliest days of airmail transport. Postal authorities would usually apply a postal marking to the cover explaining the delay and damage. Crash covers are tangible artifacts of tragic events. *Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.*

seek manuscript materials related to postal employees and private mail carriers.⁵⁰ One emerging research area is historic philately, which is best described as the “. . .study of some stamp, card, or cover that relates to, or helps us to understand, an event, person, or era in history. In other words, it is the use of a philatelic item to illustrate history.”⁵¹ Fiscal stamps and related documents provide valuable information for the growing field of revenue philately.⁵²

Preservation of Philatelic Materials

While many of the standard preservation measures should be followed in caring for philatelic materials, unique concerns also need to be addressed. Most postage stamps are inherently unstable because they are frequently manufactured using highly acidic paper. More varieties of paper have been used in the production of stamps than in any other specialized field of printing. Postage stamps are produced with little concern for permanence. Not only are many stamps made of

⁵⁰ Welch, “A Philatelist’s Perspective.”

⁵¹ Albro T. Gaul, “Historic Philately Is Not Postal History,” *The American Philatelist* (September 1990): 818.

⁵² David R. Beech, “British Library Unique Resource for Research,” *The American Philatelist* (July 1995): 597; Welch, “A Philatelist’s Perspective.”

acidic paper with destructive additives and coatings, but they usually have acidic gum adhesives, and some stamps and covers are also printed with harmful inks and dyes. In general, philatelic materials should be housed in chemically inert enclosures (such as Melinex) or neutral pH ones.⁵³ Archivists and researchers should always use stamp tongs to handle stamps and clean cotton gloves to handle envelopes. Powder-free latex gloves or finger cots may also be used.⁵⁴ When possible, do not separate panes, blocks, strips, or pairs of stamps. Intact instances of these can be very rare among the early issues and are thus more collectible and valuable.⁵⁵ Since most commercially available philatelic album pages and stock books are acidic,⁵⁶ archival enclosures should be used for stamps and covers. Loose stamps and those stored in glassine envelopes should be transferred to archival stamp stock books or archival enclosures. Older collections are often mounted with acidic glassine stamp hinges to acidic paper. If warranted, these collections may be photocopied or filmed to record their original arrangement and then removed from the pages to avoid further damage. Interest is growing in some of the earliest stamp albums, philatelic books, and catalogs, which should either be retained or donated to a philatelic research library.⁵⁷

Glassine stamp hinges should never be employed to mount mint stamps since they will damage the gum. Stamps in albums should instead be individually mounted using inert plastic stamp enclosures.⁵⁸ Covers and other large

⁵³ Collings and Schoolley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 2, 3, 7, 19.

⁵⁴ George Saqqal, "How To Preserve Stamps and Covers," *The American Philatelist* (February 1996): 125.

⁵⁵ T. N. Trikilis, *Stamps for the Investor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 104–5.

⁵⁶ The results of a testing program by an independent testing laboratory have shown approximately 55 percent of the philatelic album pages then available on the market had an unacceptably high acidity level (a pH of less than 6.5). After accelerated aging tests (equivalent to 150 years), only approximately 27 percent of the album pages had a pH above 6.5. Only 8 percent fell within 6.5 and 7.5 before and after accelerated aging. Arthur Salm Foundation, *Report Number 1* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, March 1991); Arthur Salm Foundation, *Report Number 2* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, 1992); Arthur Salm Foundation, *Report Number 3* (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, April 1995); Collings and Schoolley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 41–42.

⁵⁷ A review of notable early stamp albums appears in Bill Welch, "America's First Stamp Album Celebrates Its 125th Birthday," *American Philatelist* (December 1987): 1134. The American Philatelic Library collects photographs, scrapbooks, medals, catalogs, books, and periodicals. It is especially interested in post office publications, maps, and rate charts, as well as in manuscript collections of important philatelists, dealers, and publishers. Welch, "A Philatelist's Perspective."

⁵⁸ John Sicker, "Mounts Showcase Stamps without Disturbing Gum," *Linn's Stamp News* (22 June 1987), 46. Appropriate plastic stamp enclosures should have a nonabrasive surface and be free of chlorinated compounds, external plasticisers, surface coatings, slip agents, UV inhibitors, adsorbents, and solvent activity. Most commercial brands, in fact, do not meet all these criteria. Collings and Schoolley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 42–45; Fred Korr, "Philatelic Preservation," *The American Philatelist* (April 1996): 298. A preferred plastic is polyester in an uncoated, biaxially oriented, polished form. Other recommended plastics include archival polypropylene, archival polystyrene, and polyethylene without additives. Thomas O. Taylor, "Protective Plastic Films in Philately: How Do We Find 'The Right Stuff'?" *The American Philatelist* (March 1988): 234.

materials may be encapsulated using an archival plastic film.⁵⁹ At least one archival supply company has now recognized the need for specialized storage products for philatelic materials.⁶⁰

Philatelic materials ideally should be stored at 30%R.H. and 50°F (10°C); however, most damaging molds can be avoided if stamps are stored in an environment of less than 65%R.H. and below 64°F (18°C). Molds prefer static air conditions, therefore some air circulation should be provided during long-term storage. If high R.H. is unavoidable, archival Mylar should be used to interleave sheets or blocks of gummed stamps so they do not fuse together.⁶¹

Security is also an important facet of preservation. Archival collections with valuable or coveted philatelic materials can pose serious safekeeping problems. If an archives decides to keep covers and stamps with significant monetary value, then sufficient measures should be exercised to protect them from theft. The American Library Association's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Security Committee states that permanently marking special collection materials is essential since it provides a visible deterrent to thieves and allows administrators to positively identify recovered stolen property.⁶² In keeping with these guidelines, many rare book librarians carefully place neat and discreet ownership marks in their books, but this practice is debated since it usually reduces the book's monetary value.⁶³ Similarly, any alteration, repair, or almost any mark that is made to philatelic materials will significantly reduce their monetary value. Placing ownership marks on philatelic materials or intentionally damaging them by some other means to deter theft is not advisable since archivists are ethically bound to guard their materials against defacement and physical damage.⁶⁴

The preferred measure for protecting significantly valuable philatelic materials is to scan, photograph, or microfilm them to record unique postmarks,

⁵⁹ Archival plastics are clear, colorless polyethylene terephthalate films such as Dupont's Mylar D and ICI's Melinex 16 or equivalent. Korr, "Philatelic Preservation."

⁶⁰ *Gaylord Archival Storage Materials and Conservation Supplies Catalog* (Fall 1995), 40.

⁶¹ Collings and Schooley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 22, 24, 32–33; Saqqal, "How To Preserve Stamps and Covers," 127.

⁶² "Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections," Appendix I, *C&RL News* 51 (March 1990): 240–44; Susan M. Allen, "Marking Rare Books," electronic bulletin board, 25 July 1995, available at <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/exlibris/>, accessed 19 July 2005.

⁶³ Wayne Hammond, "Marking Rare Books," electronic bulletin board, 26 July 1995, available at <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/exlibris/>, accessed 19 July 2005; Harvey Tucker "Marking Rare Books," electronic bulletin board, 26 July 1995, available at <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byform/mailling-lists/exlibris/>, accessed 19 July 2005; and Margaret Vanhove, "Marking Rare Books," e-mail message to author, 25 July 1995.

⁶⁴ Council of the Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics for Archivists*, Section VIII (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists 2005).

centering, and perforation details. These materials could also be segregated from the collections into a more secure area and used by researchers under more restricted conditions.⁶⁵ To protect the condition of the originals further, high-grade surrogate copies can be made for reference purposes to reduce handling.⁶⁶ When it is necessary to separate a cover from a manuscript collection, a photocopy surrogate of the cover should remain with the original manuscripts, thus enabling the maintenance of the collection's original order.⁶⁷ To aid postal historians, the original cover should also be accompanied by a photocopy of the original correspondence. High-grade surrogates may provide researchers acceptable reference copies while promoting the original's preservation by reducing its handling.

Description of Philatelic Materials

Because archivists have traditionally ignored the cultural significance of the postal system,⁶⁸ many archival collections containing philatelic materials are inadequately described to attract the attention of postal historians. As a result, postal historians tend to conduct their research primarily at home using collected examples.⁶⁹ Manuscript collections remain the greatest untapped postal history resource. Given the belief that archival programs will improve when more segments of the public learn about and can access them, it behooves archivists to retain and improve access to their philatelic holdings.⁷⁰ The Postal History Project, which catalogs postal history material at the North Carolina State Archives, is one model that could be emulated by other repositories.⁷¹ Finding aids should describe noteworthy materials adequately enough to allow philatelic researchers to locate these resources. By creating a record of the existence of important philatelic materials within a collection, these descriptions will also provide some degree of security for those materials.

⁶⁵ "Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections," 242; Allen, "Marking Rare Books."

⁶⁶ Collings and Schoolley-West, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, 4.

⁶⁷ Cimon Morin, letter to author, 31 January 1995. If surrogate copies are impractical, the archivist should use a dated cross-reference or separation sheet to note the original cover's location.

⁶⁸ Peter J. Wosh, "Going Postal," *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998): 222.

⁶⁹ Welch, "A Philatelist's Perspective."

⁷⁰ Philip F. Mooney, "Modest Proposals: Marketing Ideas for the Expansionist Archives," in *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists*, ed. Elsie Freeman Finch (Metuchen, N.J.: The Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994); Elsie F. Freivogel, "Wider Use of Historical Records," *American Archivist* 40 (July 1977): 333.

⁷¹ A description of the North Carolina Archives Postal History Project is available at <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/archives/postal/default.htm>, accessed 19 July 2005.



July 1864 prisoner of war cover from Fort Delaware, Maryland. A prisoner's cover was usually marked "examined" to note that prison officials had reviewed it. Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

The primary reference tools for describing archival collections are collection-level catalog records and finding aid inventories. Like other components of archival collections, philatelic materials should be described by group rather than item-by-item. In catalog records, archivists should employ controlled vocabulary subject terms and use scope and general content notes to identify significant collections with important philatelic materials. In inventories or other finding aids, more detailed scope and content notes can be employed to identify the series in which philatelic materials are found, to narrow the search to a small portion of a large collection.

On-line access to postal history and stamps in archival collections has been limited by the number of archival collections identified as containing philatelic materials. A search of RLIN and OCLC's WorldCat retrieved fewer than a hundred archival collections identified as containing noteworthy philatelic materials, which is certainly a gross underrepresentation of the actual number of collections containing postal history.

The MARC 655 field employs authority-controlled descriptive terms indicating the form, genre, and/or physical characteristics of the materials being described. The *Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* has a very limited number of descriptive terms, including *postage stamps*, *postal cards*, and *postal stationery*. The *Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus* is somewhat more inclusive, providing terms such as *postage stamps*, *precancels*, *airmail stamps*, *postage due stamps*, *special delivery stamps*, *philately*, *postal cards*, *aerogrammes*, *cancellations*, and



Confederate adversity cover made from wallpaper. By the end of the Civil War, paper was in short supply in the South. Letters and envelopes were fashioned from whatever was available including ledger sheets, printed circulars, maps, and book flyleaves and title pages. *Courtesy National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.*

*cancellation marks.*⁷² Because 1,700 different philatelic books have been cataloged, the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* provides the best resource for controlled-vocabulary general subject terms to describe the wide variety of philatelic materials important to most postal historians. Since 2002, established LC subject headings may be used as genre headings in the 655 field. These headings contain an assortment of narrower subject terms under postage stamps and postal service and a limited number of narrower terms for cancellations, envelopes, and postal stationery.

The scope and general content of the philatelic materials in a collection should be noted in the MARC 520 field. The level of detail in this collection summary may vary depending on the audience, thus it allows for an adequate description of those materials of interest to a postal historian. The Postal History Project at the North Carolina State Archives provides some additional keywords for field 520 that were found useful in describing items in that collection, including *4-bar* [cancels], *colonial*, *Confederate*, *Doane* [cancels], *Federal*, *flag* [cancels], *folded letter*, *meter* [stamps], *perfin*, *postmark*, *railroad* [post offices], and *registered*.⁷³

⁷² The Getty Museum's Art and Architecture Thesaurus Online is available at http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat/, accessed 17 February 2006.

⁷³ The North Carolina Archives Postal History Project is available at <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/archives/postal/default.htm>, accessed 19 July 2005.

Other keywords of importance to some collectors include *slogan* [cancels], *pictorial* [cancels], *maritime*, *first flight*, and *war censor markings*. Illustrations to help archivists identify most of these specialized terms are easily available via Web search engines such as Google Images or Yahoo Images.

The following are two hypothetical examples of collection-level MARC records containing descriptions of philatelic items likely to be of interest to a postal historian.

Example 1:

520 Personal papers of the Dekle family of Mobile, Alabama. The collection includes letters written during the American Civil War between Maud Dekle and her son Joseph Dekle, who was a Confederate officer and prisoner of war. . . . The correspondence describes . . . and includes Confederate postmaster provisional stamps from Mobile, Alabama, patriotic covers, adversity covers, and prisoner of war covers with examiner handstamps from Fort Delaware, Delaware.

651 0 United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861--1865 -- Postal service.

655 0 Rare postage stamps lz Confederate States of America.

655 0 Imperforates (Philately) lz Confederate States of America.

655 0 Handstamps (Philately) lz Confederate States of America.

655 0 Franking privilege lz Confederate States of America.

655 0 Covers (Philately) lz Confederate States of America.

655 7 Postage stamps lz Confederate States of America ly 19th century. l2 lctgm

655 7 Cancellations lz Delaware lz Fort Delaware ly 19th century. l2 aat

655 7 Cancellations lz Alabama lz Mobile ly 19th century. l2 aat

Example 2:

520 The collection consists of Taylor's personal papers from his career in commercial design. . . . Included are United States airmail stamp designs, first flight covers, wreck covers, and mobile post office covers in Georgia.

545 Campbell F. Taylor (1906--1980) was a commercial designer and local historian. He founded Taylor Made Graphics in 1930, and retired in 1961. His commissions were primarily for the railroad and airline travel industry, and included postage stamp designs. He served as director of the Clayton County Historical Society (1964--1967) and president of the Georgia Postal History Society (1974--1976).

650 0 Stamp collectors lz Georgia.

650 0 Postage stamp design lz United States.

650 0 Mobile post offices lz Georgia.

650 0 Railway mail service lz Georgia.

650 0 Air mail service lz United States.

655 0 Essays and proofs (Philately) lz United States.

655 0 Handstamps (Philately) lz Georgia.

655 0 Covers (Philately) lz United States.

655 0 Wreck covers (Philately) lz United States.

655 0 Postage stamps lz United States.

655 0 Aerogrammes lz United States.

655 7 Postal stationery lz United States ly 20th century. l2 lctgm

655 7 Cancellations lz Georgia ly 20th century. l2 aat

Like a catalog record, a finding aid inventory is also a summary description of a collection. However, the scope and general content notes of an inventory allow for more expansive description of components such as philatelic materials. To narrow a researcher's search to a small portion of a large collection, the scope and content notes can identify the series in which particular types of materials are generally found. When appropriate, notes on philatelic materials can be included in series descriptions to help users identify the containers that include relevant philatelic materials.

The following is an example of an expanded scope and content note for an inventory.

Example 3:

The collection consists of Taylor's personal papers from his career in commercial design. . . . The Career series includes proposed and approved logos for Eastern Airlines and Amtrak as well as proofs and essays for three United States airmail stamps. . . . The Clubs and Societies series includes papers related to his activities with the Clayton County Historical Society and the Georgia Postal History Society as well as his collection of Georgia postal history which includes 32 first flight covers, 2 wreck covers, and over 50 covers from his philatelic exhibit on mobile post offices in Georgia.

The following are examples of philatelic materials described in two series descriptions. The first describes revenue stamps within a legal documents series, and the second describes philatelic material in a correspondence series.

Example 4:

Series VI. Legal Documents and Contracts, 1863–1910

Arranged chronologically by record type.

Miscellaneous legal documents comprising deeds to property, loans, and wills. . . . Included are mortgage, power of attorney, conveyance, life insurance, and probate of will revenue stamps, 1863–71. . . .

Box 1, Folder 2: Pine Valley Plantation mortgage, 1867.

Example 5:

Series IV. Correspondence, 1850–1910

Arranged chronologically.

This series consists of incoming correspondence pertaining entirely to the business of the Mercer Cotton Company; agreements from Glasgow

merchants to purchase bales Included are blockade runner, express company, and mixed franking covers.
Box 3, Folder 5: Dugald McPhail Ltd., 1860–68.

Disposition Issues

At the 1994 Society of American Archivists conference, a philatelic broker spoke to the Acquisition and Appraisal Section citing security concerns and fund raising as reasons for archives to sell rare and expensive philatelic items. An archivist in the audience lamented that he inherited a manuscript collection in which a former librarian had cut out all stamps from the covers and sold them at auction to raise funds for the archives.⁷⁴ At least one institution has argued that it is common practice for manuscript repositories to sell accumulations of envelopes and deposit the proceeds into an endowment that supports other parts of the collection.⁷⁵

Manuscript repositories have a variety of policies for dealing with philatelic materials found in their collections. At the National Archives of Canada, textual record acquisition sections routinely transfer covers and other philatelic material to the Canadian Postal Archives.⁷⁶ At the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, postal covers are sent to the museum.⁷⁷ At one repository, a postal historian convinced the archivist of the philatelic research value of its covers, and the repository now retains many of the covers it formerly discarded.⁷⁸

Archivists collect and preserve original materials with informational value and provide them to researchers. Archivists do not make copies of autographed letters or important documents and sell the originals to manuscript collectors as a means of generating revenue, and the same rationale should apply to philatelic material. Processing manuals should be amended to specify that covers and other philatelic materials be retained unless the curator has made a carefully considered judgment to dispose of them.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Peter J. Wosh, "Postage Stamps and Archives—Research," electronic bulletin board, 12 March 1998, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 19 July 2005.

⁷⁵ Larry P. Alford to Patricia C. Crawford, memorandum, 19 August 1991, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Conference handout, Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., 31 August 1995.

⁷⁶ Cimon Morin, letter to author, 31 January 1995.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Stallard, "Stamps," e-mail message to author, 16 November 1994.

⁷⁸ Karyl Winn, "Philatelic Materials," e-mail message to author, 16 November 1994, and Louis Fiset, "Philatelic Materials in Archives," e-mail message to author, 5 December 1994.

⁷⁹ The processing manual for the Beinecke Library provides a good example to follow, available at <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/manuscript/process/vii.html#VII.M.%20Envelopes>, accessed 6 April 2006.

Many philatelic researchers claim that it is easier to pursue their subject by collecting examples themselves, rather than trying to locate and study them in an archives.⁸⁰ In fact, most research involving nineteenth- and twentieth-century philatelic materials derives from personal collections.⁸¹ Many collectors believe that preserving postal history in archives keeps important material out of circulation.⁸² But disbursing these collections to the open market disenfranchises postal historians of the important informational resources that archives offer. Philatelic research is actually hampered when key materials are closeted in private hands. Materials in a public archives comprise a shared cultural patrimony for the appreciation, research, and education of everyone, not just for the private study of those who can afford to purchase them. As one noted philatelist rhetorically asked, "Should we study these items in the privacy of our stamp dens, to the exclusion of historians and others in the country in which they were found?"⁸³

Archives should not sell stamps or covers that fall within an institution's scope of collection that might be important to a community's heritage or history, or that might be of literary or historical research value.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the sale of archival materials may create mistrust among donors. Even when such sales are permitted, some public institutions may require that surplus inventories be disposed of through government surplus and that the income be returned to the institutions' general fund without directly benefiting the archives. Thus, many archives discover that it is not worthwhile to sell philatelic material.⁸⁵ Still, a few archives choose to sell selected philatelic materials with professional guidance.⁸⁶ In some cases, their actions generate rich financial rewards that benefit their primary collecting areas. Such endeavors must elicit the same admonitions that would the sale of materials from any archival or

⁸⁰ Welch, "A Philatelist's Perspective."

⁸¹ David Moltke-Hansen, "Posting to the Bank with All Deliberate Speed: Recent Handling of Philatelic and Numismatic Sales for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Manuscripts Department," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., 31 August 1995.

⁸² Welch, "A Philatelist's Perspective."

⁸³ Harris, "Harvesting in Fields of Philately?" 230.

⁸⁴ Alford to Crawford, memorandum.

⁸⁵ Georgia State University, Business Services, Policies and Procedures, available at <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwpch/PropertyControlPolicies.htm#300121>, accessed 22 November 2006; Moltke-Hansen, "Posting to the Bank with All Deliberate Speed." The Special Collections Department of East Carolina University considered selling covers from its collections but ruled it out to protect its relationship with its donors. Dale Sauter, "Stamps," e-mail message to author, 19 November 2005.

⁸⁶ A reputable philatelic broker or agent is recommended since they know more than archivists about auction venues and market values thus enabling them to realize top prices. Doug Mattox, "Questions asked at SAA," electronic bulletin board, 6 September 1995, available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcs/univapps/netapps/listserv/>, accessed 19 July 2005.

museum collection.⁸⁷ The best course of action is to retain philatelic materials, but if they must be relinquished, proceed with an abundance of caution.

Conclusion

Many archivists overlook the appraisal, preservation, and description of philatelic materials. Failure to recognize the archival value of these materials is an appraisal problem. Better descriptive practices will likely improve the use of collections in which they reside.⁸⁸ Recognizing the value of philatelic materials and then describing them adequately requires that archivists think in new ways and learn to use a new language. The effort is worthwhile considering the number of new researchers poised to enter our doors and the significance of what they may discover.

⁸⁷ The Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has developed a list of seventeen general rules that govern its strategy for selling philatelic and other similar archival materials. Moltke-Hansen, "Posting to the Bank with All Deliberate Speed."

⁸⁸ Philip Eppard, "Philatelic materials article," e-mail message to author, 26 January 2006.