

Memories Can't Wait:

The Confluence of Emotional, Physical, and Intellectual Labors in Accessioning Work

Rosemary K. J. Davis, Accessioning Archivist
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting → August 16, 2018

Good morning! Thanks to all of you for joining us and thank you to all my fellow presenters for the amazing and excellent work they've put into this session. I feel very fortunate to be here today.

All archival work contains elements of physical, intellectual, and emotional labor. But in my experience of working as an accessioning archivist, these three types of labor feel like they are intertwined **more** intimately, **more** stressfully, and with a complexity that feels remarkable in some way. And so...I'm going to remark on it.

The fact that I feel a bit self-conscious about centering my personal experience probably speaks not only to some level of imposter syndrome, but also to what could be seen as a very real disjunct between these sometimes *less* acknowledged facets of the work that we do and the much more visible and **urgent** expectations from our institutions about linear footage, metrics, and the concept of "access" writ-large.

I am the Accessioning Archivist for the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Prior to my role with the Beinecke, I worked a series of project processing gigs at various institutions, with terms ranging anywhere from three months to two years. During that time—which also coincided with my first five years out of library school—I gained what I **thought** was a pretty strong understanding of the labor often required of an archivist.

But after two years at the Beinecke, I am here to tell you that accessioning is, in fact, three-dimensional archival chess. It requires the use of multiple types of labor, often simultaneously, in various combinations. It's rife with quick pivots and long detours. There are always many fires burning at the exact same moment. And those of us doing this work are expected to have *at the ready*: responsiveness, diplomacy, and strength of all kinds.

The pace of acquisitions at the Beinecke is, to put it mildly, brisk as hell. We are voluminously well-staffed—around 118 souls in the library proper, 24 of whom work in the manuscript unit, with 5 of us working solely on accessioning--and yet! A hallway full of pallets, stacked high with collections material, is much more the rule than the exception.

To give you an idea of numbers: in the two fiscal years that I have been working at the library, our team has accessioned over 1200 acquisitions measuring at more than 2100

linear feet and also performed baseline processing for over **2000** linear feet worth of collection material. On average, our five person team processes about 2-3 times the linear footage of the rest of the manuscript unit, which is doing item-level processing and cataloging.

I work with Tina Evans, Jim Fisher, Leigh Golden, and Michael Rush to accession all incoming manuscript items and collections. Our team is responsible for:

- assisting with or establishing shipping arrangements for incoming acquisitions, including in-person pickups
- for creating the initial accession record
- for generating acknowledgment and payment paperwork
- for verifying the contents of collections
- for physically stabilizing materials including freezing and rehousing
- and for performing baseline arrangement and description (i.e. a finding aid in ArchivesSpace and a collection-level catalog record).

This is a big tangle of responsibilities but we manage.

Physically obtaining materials is one of the very first steps in our workflow and I'd like to break it down for you.

There are a lot of dynamics that go into arranging pickups with donors and sellers. Some situations are very straightforward. This many boxes, this address, this day, this time. But many pickups require more logistical gymnastics and a higher level of emotional sensitivity. Dealing directly with donors and dealers requires kindness, efficiency, and flexibility. Now, all of us here know that collection materials are rarely just boxes full of old things--those boxes are full of lives lived, good and bad memories, accomplishments, personal connections. And it can be difficult to pin down a single spot on the calendar when asking someone to surrender the physical evidence of their own history, or the history of someone they loved or hated.

Internally at Yale, we also have to work out details for pick-ups with our transportation department, who provides us with drivers and moving vans. We have to be very precise about where the truck is going, what kind of street they'll be parking on, if there are stairs, how many boxes, and so on. We even have to very specifically include that someone will be riding down in the van with them. Otherwise, **someone** might get left in New Haven because they forgot to type, "Pick up Rosemary and **then** proceed to New York City."

And yeah, many of our pickups **are** in cities, particularly New York City. That can bring up a **lot** of interesting issues. Traffic, finding a safe place for the van to be while we load it up, walk-up apartments several floors up, super fancy buildings that won't let us use the front door so instead we have to go all the way down to the basement and use the service entrance.

Country pickups can also be **really** interesting. Lots of dirt roads and big hills out there in this world of ours!

Sometimes we pick up dozens of boxes.

And sometimes a pick-up is a **single** item. That happens too.

More often than not, though, we go to people's homes. We go into their apartments. We see where they live. We navigate their living rooms. We usually get into conversations about what they're giving to the library and why. We explain how we'll take care of their collections. We explain what "processing" means. We tell them there will be a catalog record and that they will be able to find it online. We talk about the library and how people use its collections.

Sometimes they'll make a cup of tea and extend an invitation to sit in their kitchen.

I've heard more than one person beamingly say they're honored to have their collection at the Beinecke. And I've also seen people grow quiet, standing off to the side pensively as I try to unobtrusively and quickly label boxes, shift things around, and load up the hand truck.

I always try to answer questions. I always ask if they **have** questions. I always try to say, "is there anything you need from me?" Part of this work is being a resource for the donor, to demonstrate that careful stewardship of their collection starts in that moment when I'm standing in their home or their garage or their storage unit. Part of this work is convincing them that even though I'm very sweaty and wearing jeans and loading a truck, that I'll also be helping to make sure that the documentation of their lives and work will be cared for, will be visible to others, will be understood. I ask for trust every time I show up at someone's door.

And of course the other big part of this work on pickup day is obviously **actually** getting things packed up. Collections come to us in all forms. Beautifully labeled, inventoried, secure boxes.

More often though, these collections accrue over time and as such, they are boxed up to save space or packed in a hurry just before we show up. When I arrive at a location, in addition to being present and helpful to the person onsite, I also have to assess the physical status of everything that needs to be loaded up and make constant judgments about how to efficiently and safely move things out of that space

Sometimes we have to take multiple trips to a site in **advance** of the moving truck in order to sort through the materials and pack them up. Sometimes things **are** “packed” but still difficult to move. Boxes without lids, huge flats of posters, delicate framed artwork, dozens of awful awful wine boxes crammed with paper. We essentially have to be ready for anything **and** everything.

But even when it’s hectic, there are moments of quiet. When the boxes are packed and my hands are covered with four kinds of grime, it still feels really good to be helping someone. But it’s also kind of surreal? They **really** don’t prep you for this type of labor in library school. And they should.

Keep in mind that collection material pickups are just one of the first stops on the accessioning train. After getting materials to the library, members of our team then proceed to:

- pay the bills
- record the collection’s physical presence at the library
- ascertain what exactly is in all those wine boxes and make sure we **have** what *we expected* to have
- decipher any existing inventories or documentation that came along with the collection
- ensure that the material is physically stable and figure out if we have insects or mold to deal with
- shift other collections in our physical space to make room for temporary storage **and** active work with the new materials
- correspond with the donor to answer questions about **when** the materials will be available or **why** does the finding aid look so different than the spreadsheet that was provided

- respond to researchers who need to use the collection before we've even taken it off the pallet
- and work (independently or as a team) to perform the first iteration of physical and intellectual processing.

We work with multiple collections at once. We field emails from curators and booksellers and access services and preservation. We have an "incoming acquisitions" spreadsheet that goes months and months into the future but I also had a request last week to make a pickup today (I had to work out an alternate date). And we are constantly up against a yearly goal of clearing 1000 linear feet in baseline processing alone, in addition to all the other aspects of our work. The flow of acquisitions doesn't stop for death, museum retrospectives, international researchers, or silverfish.

This is challenging stuff. As archivists, we all move boxes. We all find materials that document stressful or joyous or hateful experiences. We all endeavor to accurately represent what we see in front of us in the form of correspondence and galley proofs and scrapbooks.

But the experience of doing accessioning work can feel hidden, misunderstood, or worse: quantified without full comprehension of all that goes into what we do.

Perhaps it's because these procedures are dispersed between multiple staff members as opposed to a single individual or a dedicated team. Perhaps because it's a small shop and everyone does everything. Perhaps because accessioning work is a true hybrid of archival workflows from so many different areas: administrative, legal, transportation and moving, arrangement and description, donor relations, preservation, cataloging.

Regardless, I hope we can all be more mindful of the immense amount of energy, ideas, and Big Feelings that go into accessioning work.

I'm thankful for the opportunity to do what I do.

And I thank you all very much for your time today.