

Seeking the Fugitive: Investigating Missing Materials

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Abstract

Dealing responsibly with missing materials is a serious and sometimes bewildering challenge for archivists. For collections that are known or suspected to be stolen, the professional literature provides excellent resources. But for cases where theft is not suspected, the literature is nearly silent, leaving archivists to rely on local practice or an entirely ad hoc approach. This essay describes a case of a missing collection, the Grace Isaacs Papers, with suggestions for conducting and documenting an investigation.

Introduction

Archivists know (and love) the thrill of discovering something wonderful in our collections that we didn't know we had. It's a universal and delightful work benefit. Less delightful, and less discussed, is the opposite experience: something wonderful that should be in our collections, but cannot be found or accounted for. It is difficult to know how common this is, in part because our professional literature is mostly silent on this issue, with the important exception of identifying and responding to theft. This essay will focus on collection losses and mysteries where theft is *not* suspected, emphasizing one ongoing case at my own institution.

It is a rare and especially distressing scenario in an archives. We may use special care in choosing our terms to describe the situation, but this is about items, or entire collections, that we should have but don't, that we should be able to find but can't. Whether we say they are temporarily unavailable, missing, unaccounted for, not on shelf, fugitive, unlocated, estrayed, or just plain lost, if we take our custodial responsibility seriously, they haunt us. They compel us to find them, or, at the very least, to discover their fate, however cold the trail. The imperative to seek the lost comes very naturally to archivists, an essential aspect of stewardship, part of what Scott Cline has described as a covenant obligation.¹

First steps: suggestions for thinking about missing materials

If our goal is to find, or at least account for, missing collections, it makes sense to begin by defining the universe of possible explanations. If the search becomes complex and/or prolonged, these can help to restore perspective. There are three general explanations that apply to missing items or collections. It is important to determine which explanation applies, since it helps to suggest avenues of investigation.

1. It was never here.

It is important to locate definite evidence of receipt and accessioning, if available. Without this evidence, archivists must consider the possibility that the materials were never in the custody of the repository. Sometimes it is a simple case of a mistaken reference, for example,

the archives have been misidentified, and a small amount of research reveals the correct institution.

2. We have it, but our tools for intellectual access and collection management fail to lead to discovery.
Maybe the collection is still safe in the physical custody of the repository, but "lost" due to errors, or because it doesn't appear in the tools we rely on for intellectual control and collection management (catalogs, finding aids, accession registers, or archival management systems).

3. It was here once, but now it's gone. It may have been deaccessioned, loaned, transferred, lost, or stolen.
A collection may have been deaccessioned without documentation, or with documentation we haven't located. It may have been loaned back to the donor, or to a trusted researcher, long ago. In these scenarios, it isn't surprising that we find no record of the loan, and any personnel who would have known about it are long gone. Maybe it was transferred to another part of the institution. These problems are avoidable, sometimes arising from the loss of institutional memory due to generational changes in staffing over time, compounded by ineffective documentation practices. Perhaps there is a record, but it has been buried in old, inactive files, or filed in an unexpected location.

Seeking the Grace Isaacs Papers

In a repository with hundreds or even thousands of distinct collections, such as Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) at Washington State University, problems with missing materials are typically discovered in the course of providing reference services. Researcher inquiries often send us to the shelves, paging materials for on-site visitors and investigating collections seeking answers to patron questions.

In 2010, a routine reference question led me to search in vain for a manuscript collection that our repository had once held. At four years and counting, I have yet to find it. It feels a bit risky to relate a story that may expose a grievous lapse of custodial responsibility, of the covenant obligation Cline described. But as I have searched for this collection, I have come to believe that exposure may be part of the remedy, whether or not it leads to the discovery of the missing Grace Isaacs collection. My purpose is to help foster free and open sharing of information about missing materials, and to encourage conversation about options for dealing with them.

The discovery of this collection mystery started with an inquiry from a researcher investigating sources cited in an old journal article. The 1951 essay in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, an important regional history journal, featured the Grace Isaacs Papers.² I was not familiar with this particular collection, but that is not unusual at MASC. With thousands of collections and vast numbers of individual items, we are not familiar with each of them. In such cases, we normally find the collection right where it is supposed to be, ready for use but infrequently consulted. But what if it isn't? If a decades-old reference clearly and unambiguously points to a collection in your repository, but the materials are no longer there, what should a responsible archivist do next?

This is a case from the "unsolved collection mysteries files" of MASC. This is as much of the story as I have been able to reconstruct after several years of investigation. The Isaacs collection was especially

rich, with excellent primary sources for Pacific Northwest women's history, some with national importance, including early items about women's suffrage activism. It included manuscripts and rare printed ephemera donated by Grace Isaacs of Walla Walla, Washington in the 1930s, a period of intensive and successful collecting at the Washington State University Library.

Following my normal reference process during the initial inquiry, I found the Grace Isaacs Papers in our catalog right away, but quickly discovered that it was just a small remnant of the collection as it had existed in the 1950s. The slender folder contained only seven items, but an old catalog card filed with the collection showed that it had previously contained approximately 300.³ During our subsequent search, we located two additional Isaacs items filed in our historic newspaper collection, for a total of nine accounted for. Nearly the entire collection was missing.

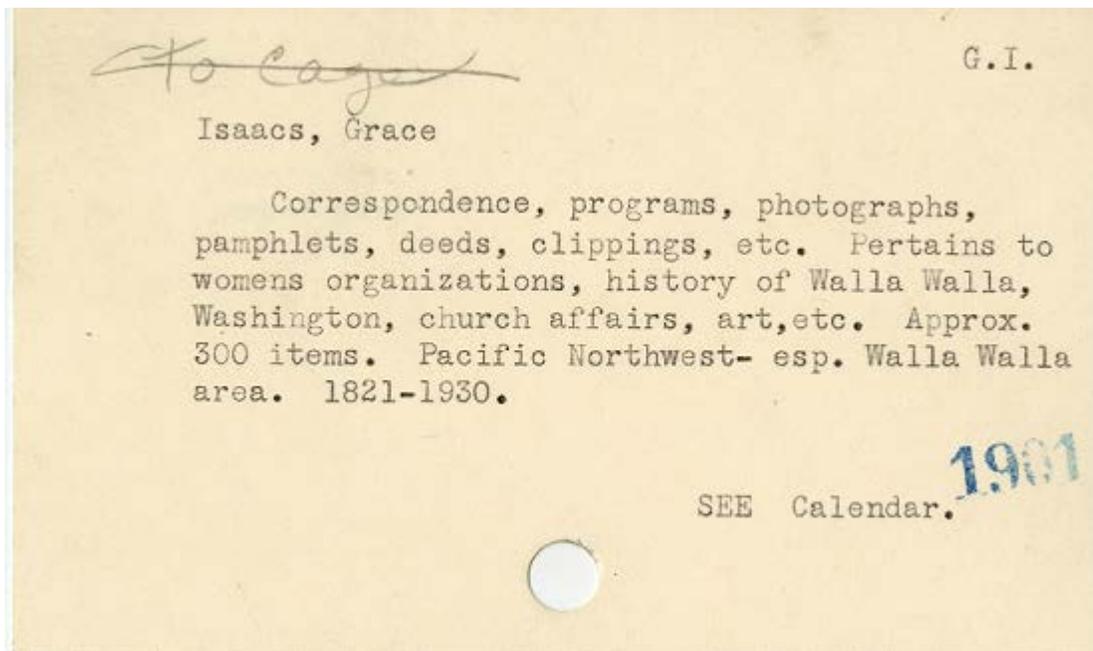


Figure 1. Catalog card for the Grace Isaacs Papers, circa 1950s

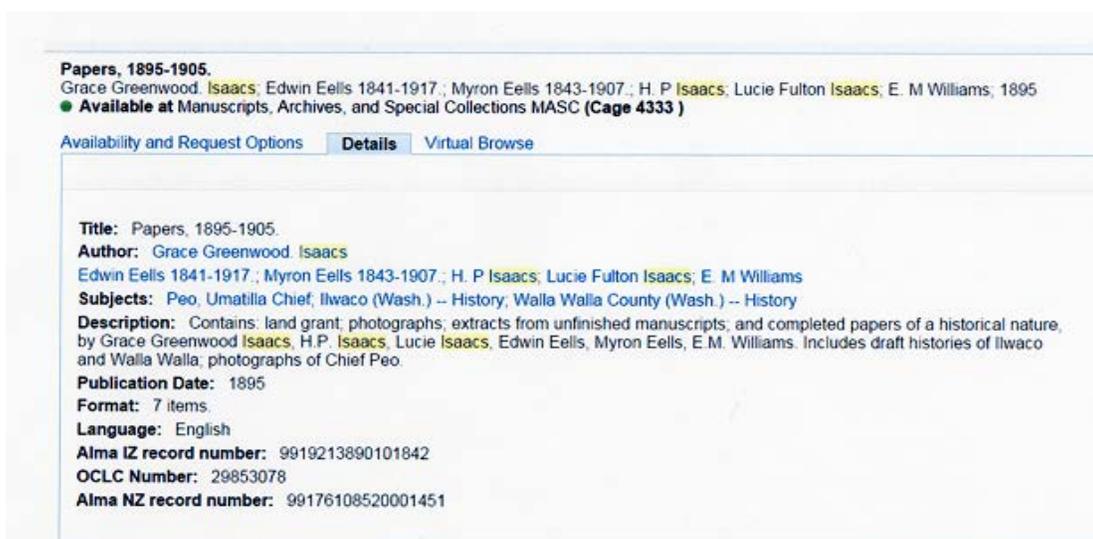


Figure 2. Catalog record display for the Grace Isaacs Papers, 2014

Along with the old catalog card, a detailed inventory of the original Grace Isaacs Papers is filed with the tiny surviving collection. This inventory was prepared by a WSU English professor, Nelson Ault, who was the author of the 1951 article citing the collection. This itemized listing made it painfully clear what was missing, and eliminated any possibility that the repository information in the article's references was incorrect. It was not just another case of institutional mistaken identity, where a researcher contacts us about a collection actually held elsewhere. This eliminated the "it was never here" explanation for the missing Isaacs material, leaving us to investigate the less appealing possibilities that it was still in our custody but required more research than usual to find, or that it was gone.

The details contained in the inventory made it possible for us to conduct extensive research at the item level, and, at first, I was optimistic that we would discover that the collection had been reprocessed, broken up for item-level cataloging, or merged into another collection within our repository. If not, if the materials had been stolen, or transferred to another institution, or loaned but unrecovered, or returned to the donor's family, the item-level information might help to trace them.

To date, nearly every clue has led to a dead end, or a circle back to our own repository. The trail begins in the 1930s when we acquired the collection, and continues into the 1950s with the last reference I have found clearly citing the intact collection. It picks up again in 1970, with a letter in our inactive files indicating that a small amount of Isaacs material was transferred to another repository. A few other, scattered references from 1970 reveal the existence of a large-scale project of manuscript collection reappraisal, reprocessing, and some deaccessioning, but they offer very few details.

Investigative tools and methods

What and where are the resources for an archivist, curator, or librarian in this situation? Unless criminal activity is suspected, our professional literature doesn't offer much help. Faced with the possibility of a serious, but almost certainly non-criminal, failure of stewardship, and the imperative to account for collections placed in our care, what should responsible professionals do? Guidance is challenging to find, probably because this is a sensitive subject. Readily-available literature generally focuses on theft, making the articles and other resources less useful for non-theft situations. During the long search for the Isaacs collection, I identified a few potentially helpful resources:

- The "Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections" published by the Association for College and Research Libraries/Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (ACRL/RBMS). These are useful, but are specifically designed for cases of theft.⁴
- An excellent 1939 *American Archivist* article focusing mainly on public records.⁵
- The now-defunct OCLC project missingmaterials.org.⁶
- "Report of Missing Manuscript/Document," a form published jointly by the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which is a good starting place for internal documentation, but not sufficiently detailed to guide a specific investigation.⁷

I do not believe I overlooked the case studies on lost collections, or the manual, checklist, or best practice guidelines, although these may exist as internal documents in specific repositories. Reticence on this subject is understandable, out of concern that institutional or personal reputations might be harmed, or that the profession might be harmed as a consequence of such exposure. If professional organizations were to develop readily-available resources for dealing with missing materials, this might imply that it is a common occurrence.

Our informal professional discourse occasionally reveals illuminating clues about widespread past practices unknown to current practitioners. I noticed an example of this in the spring of 2013 on the Archives and Archivists discussion list. In a thread about the pros and cons of reassigning or retiring unused collection numbers, library and archives consultant Susan Knoer advised against reassigning. She recalled that during the 1970s in advance of the national bicentennial commemoration,

There was a lot of "loaning" and "depositing" of records in the 70s, as the bicentennial approached, often with no paperwork, since people assumed the originating repository would build a new home and reclaim them in a year or two. I know of collections that have been in "temporary" storage for over 40 years, and no one knows who they really belong to, or what's there. For legal as well as archival purposes, it's best to abandon any numbers without a collection attached. Archives are forever- but archivists aren't!⁸

Before reading this post, I was completely ignorant of this part of professional history, and it gave me something new to consider in the ongoing investigation of the Isaacs case. It also raised the possibility that, even in a repository with a good track record of maintaining professional standards, materials can leave our custody for lots of reasons, sometimes with little or no documentation.

By sharing this story, I hope to encourage discussion and action, so that we can all do a better job in this especially challenging area of collection stewardship. Our training as archivists and/or librarians gives us some advantages as investigators, but when the obvious avenues fail to reveal the fate of a lost collection, as in this case, it is helpful and reassuring to find mutual support among our colleagues, and to share information about our practices.

After my failed initial attempts to find the rest of the Isaacs collection and respond to the researcher's inquiry, I opened a "Lost/Mystery Collection" file to document my search. We started developing these files in MASC in 2004, as an in-house resource to reduce our reliance upon unsystematic methods, especially institutional memory, for tracking these problems. These files are clearly labeled, and placed in plain view within our active departmental files. This has been a simple and effective method for documenting mysteries, and has made it easier to solve them.

Realizing that this investigation would be complex and might last for years, within the first few days I began keeping detailed notes about my research. I used a copy of the collection inventory to record item-level notes, keeping a separate log for notes about the investigation: what records were reviewed, what information was found, which individuals and institutions were contacted, what databases were searched, and when.

Clues in the collection itself

In this case, the detailed inventory filed with the surviving collection is the best clue of all, especially since most of the items listed are rare or unique. The materials related to women's suffrage activism are an especially serious loss, as a few examples will show:

- (44a) 26 copies of an 1889 pamphlet favoring equal suffrage, issued by the Advocates of Equal Suffrage in Conference at Olympia, Washington. It is unclear whether any copies of this pamphlet survive.
- (44e) A rough draft of the constitution of the Washington Woman Suffrage Association.
- (46j) A letter from activist Abigail Scott Duniway to Mrs. H. P. Isaacs, December 16, 1914, on the letterhead of the National Council of Women Voters, discussing her wish to found a national Free Suffrage Association that will not be dominated by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).
- (48a) "Walla Walla Equal Suffrage League, 1886-1889" Ledger (minutes etc.).

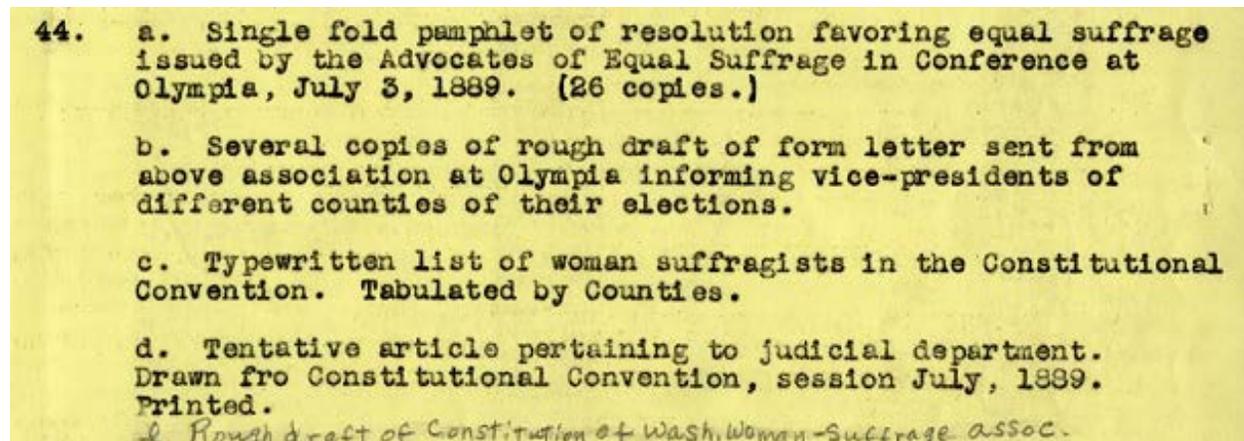


Figure 3. Sample entries from detailed collection inventory, 1950.

While it is disheartening to see in such detail the significance of these missing materials, it is also tremendously valuable for this investigation to have so much information.

The few surviving items also reveal helpful clues. We were able to examine them for identification and ownership markings, knowing from experience that, until the 1970s or 1980s, it was normal procedure for items in our archival collections to be marked. We discovered that there were two distinct marks on some of the Isaacs items: a penciled "GI" collection item identifier, and a numerical ownership stamp with the number 1901. When we found items that matched the inventory, we were able to compare them with the known Isaacs items, and we successfully confirmed that two of these survived elsewhere in our collections.

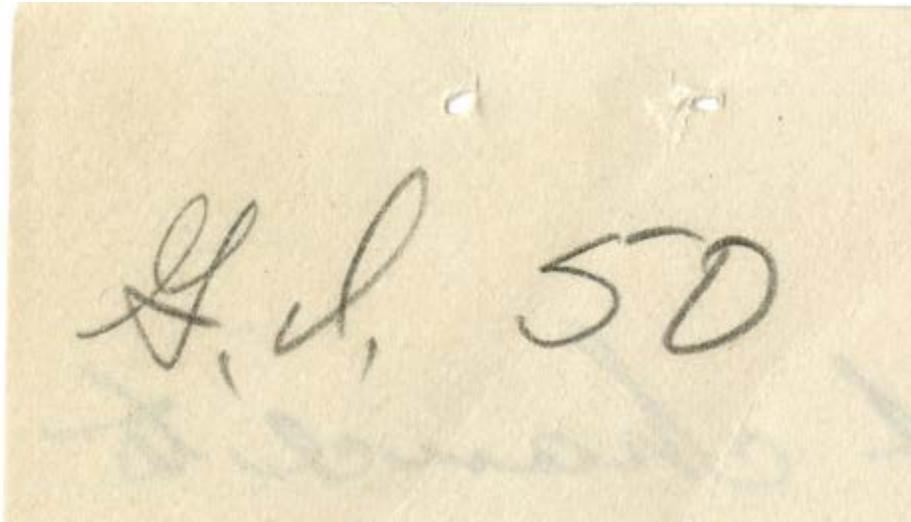


Figure 4. Penciled item identification mark

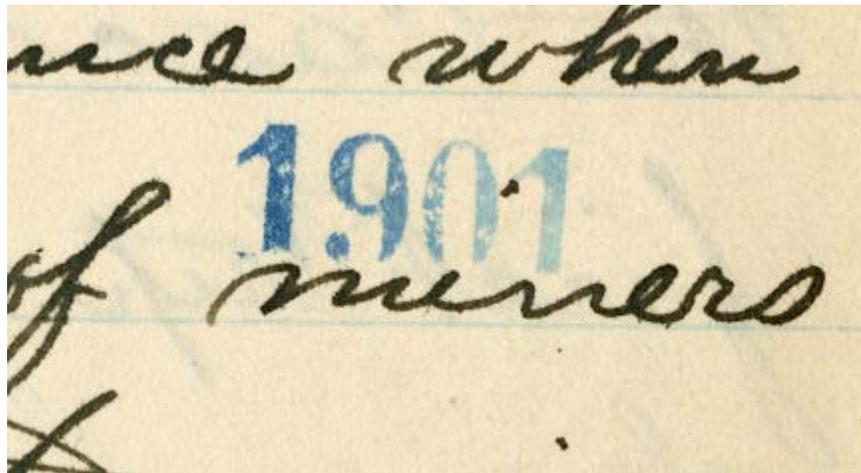


Figure 5. Numerical identification stamp

Clues in administrative records

Repository records are an obvious place to seek information about missing materials. Investigating this case, I had mixed success, but found some clues, in a search of our collection records, including accession documentation, catalogs, and administrative files (active and inactive). I searched extensively through all of the files I could identify that might contain acquisition or disposition information about the collection. I found no accession record, and little documentation of materials leaving our repository (deaccession, loan, exhibit, etc.). There was a small amount of donor correspondence from Grace Isaacs and, later, from a niece, all related to the donation in the 1930s, but nothing later.⁹ I knew from past experience that collection documentation in our repository can end up in many different places, especially for acquisitions earlier than the 1970s or so. For most archival materials, formal accession and deaccession records were not created prior to that time, except in rare cases when they appear in the library's master accession books. This type of research is not as straightforward as simply consulting centrally filed accession and donor records, deeds of gift, loan files, etc. The needed information, if available at all, is likely to be filed in a hard-to-find place.

While deaccession or transfer of collections is rare in our repository, it was a plausible explanation. I looked for inactive files of correspondence with other repositories, beginning with Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, since so much of the missing material was directly connected to that city. One incoming letter from the summer of 1970 confirmed the transfer of a group of 44 items to the Penrose Memorial Library at Whitman.¹⁰ In speaking with the archivist there, I confirmed that these items, which matched a listing in the Isaacs collection inventory, were in their collections.¹¹ Other correspondence from that same summer reveals the existence of a broader, more systematic project in progress at that time. In a letter, the head of our department offered materials to the University of Washington library, and explained a comprehensive reappraisal program for manuscript collections at WSU.¹² Also in the summer of 1970, at least one other Walla Walla-related manuscript item (one not listed on the Isaacs inventory) was transferred to Whitman.¹³ Additionally, in the WSU library staff newsletter from October of that year we found one more reference to the 1970 project. It is both informative and tantalizingly opaque: "What goes on? Weeding, re-evaluation, re-cataloging, re-arranging. The entire manuscripts collection is under treatment. Henceforth, we will use a rifle rather than a shotgun to kill two birds with one stone. Information, where art thou?"¹⁴ We will continue seeking details about this, hoping that if a major, programmatic reappraisal and transfer of collections was underway at that time, we will find more evidence of the project.

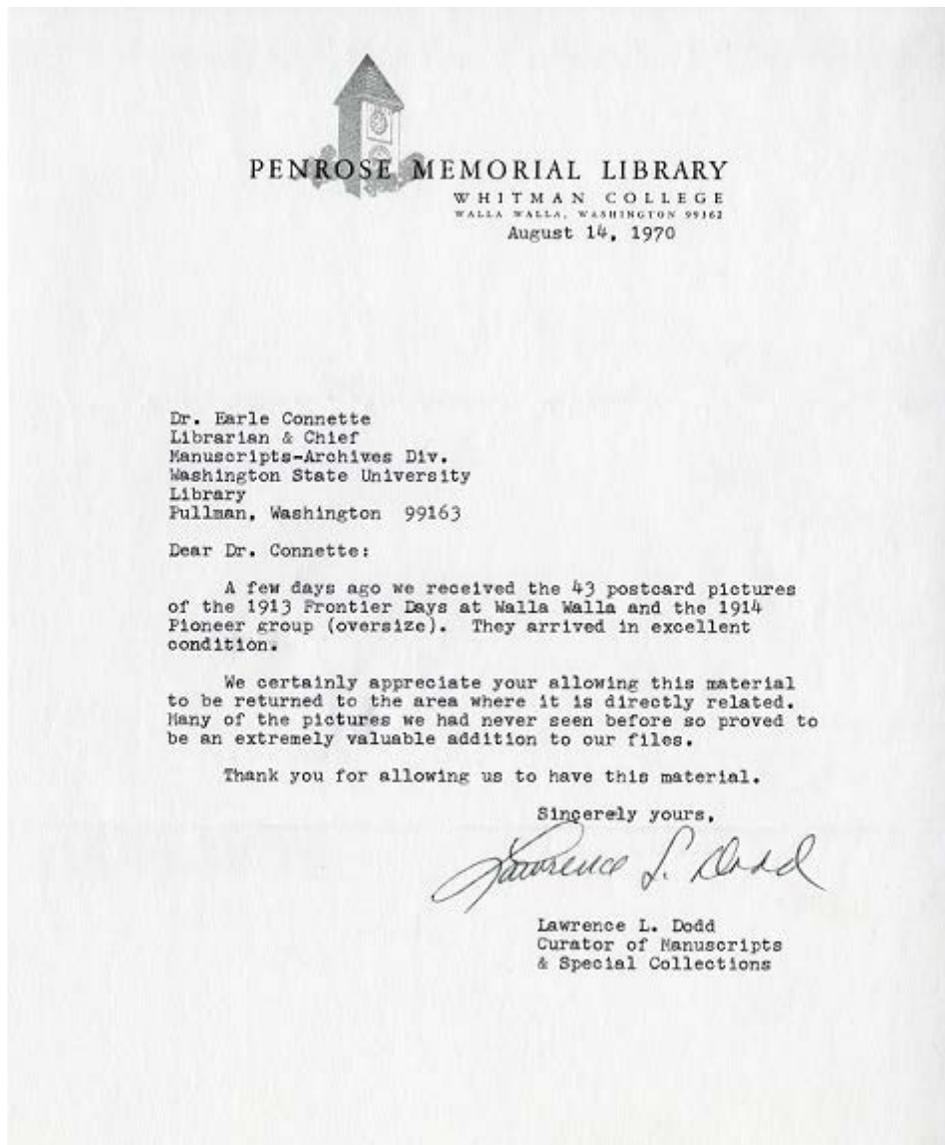


Figure 6. Letter confirming transfer of certain items from the Isaacs Papers, 1970

Clues in physical spaces

An important step in the search process is a thorough physical investigation. In this case, I began with a complete walk-through, shelf-reading and exploring all areas where our department stores collections, and then searched other areas within the library building where archival collections were stored in the past. I found no clues about Isaacs, but did discover other, unrelated missing/mystery materials. Some of these had apparently drifted out of processing workflows many years earlier; others were mislabeled, so there were unexpected benefits from this time-consuming part of the investigation.

Clues in external resources

Throughout the search process, I relied on the array of standard bibliographic and reference resources that are essential tools for archivists and reference librarians. Using details from the Isaacs inventory, I searched bibliographic databases and directories, including WorldCat, Northwest Digital

Archives, ArchiveGrid, and published directories of Pacific Northwest archival collections. I also searched history journals and history research databases and conducted general online searches for both the collection and for many specific items, without success.

To investigate the possibility of a decades-old unrecovered loan, I searched for evidence of use of the collection. Other than the known citation in the 1951 *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* article, I found no relevant references. Call slips are not available for the 1950s-1960s time period at our repository, so we were not able to review these. Inactive correspondence may yet yield answers, but we lack sufficient clues to approach these voluminous files in a systematic way.

Personal communications were another important strategy in the search. I contacted former MASC personnel and their descendants, other WSU departments, and colleagues at other repositories in the Pacific Northwest region, places where this type of material would fall within the normal collecting scope, to see if they could assist. Sadly, this is such a "cold case" that it predates the tenure of most of my surviving predecessors in MASC, and those who were available had no knowledge of the collection. To date, the items transferred to Whitman College in 1970 are the only ones I have been able to locate in another repository.

A successful case from the "Lost and Mystery Collections" files

Once a collection mystery is discovered, documentation--even very basic documentation--can, eventually, lead to its solution. It is worth repeating, though we all know it: institutional memory is ephemeral and sometimes unreliable. We depend on our predecessors and our current colleagues for routine collection documentation, created and filed so that we can find it, even decades later. With or without this type of documentation, our own record of investigating a collection mystery can function to keep important information about "open cases" in an easy-to-find place, until we find the collection, or the letter, note, file, list, report, or person that answers our questions.

To illustrate how these "Lost and Mystery Collections" files work in our repository, I will offer an example of one of our successes, the solved mystery that we came to know as the "Moldenhauer Exchange." Over a period of about three years, several unrelated reference questions sent me looking for important music manuscripts that, quite apparently, we had once owned, but that I couldn't locate or account for. Eventually, serendipitously, all of these mysteries were simultaneously cleared up when I found and read the contents of a folder in our office files cryptically labeled "Moldenhauer Exchange." The "missing" manuscripts, plus more for a total of 33 items, had been deaccessioned as a part of this "exchange." The transaction took place in 1979, and it was well and thoroughly documented at the time, but because of the way the documentation was labeled and filed, it was invisible when we investigated the missing items. With the passing of just one generation of departmental staff, this major deaccession disappeared from the institutional memory and, for practical purposes, from our collection records, until we found it by accident. This experience taught us the importance of filing this type of documentation so that it is easy to find in the future, and keeping it in permanent, active records status.¹⁵

Practical suggestions

Collection mysteries such as those described here are avoidable. For practitioners in any type of archival repository, minimizing the risk of lost and mystery collections begins with documentation. Keeping clear, accurate collection custody records (accession, deaccession, loans, exhibits) in a sustainable and easily discoverable location is critical (in other words, don't file important deaccession documents under "Moldenhauer Exchange").¹⁶ If collection materials are leaving your custody, keep a record, and maintain it in a prominent, easily accessible location. Know the less-obvious places where old collection documentation may be found, such as inactive departmental correspondence files, accession books, or physically filed with collections.

An archivist faced with missing materials should recognize the ethical imperatives and challenges inherent in the situation. Investigate as thoroughly and systematically as you can, and document "mystery collections," by making notes on your investigations.

It is important to be sensible about external communication, and sensitive to implications for institutional and personal reputation, but do not hesitate to share appropriate information in a good faith effort to account for lost materials.

If your repository has an effective system for dealing with missing materials, consider sharing, as a contribution to developing best practices.

Conclusion

The fate of the Isaacs papers is still unknown. Because of the obvious importance of the material, and its clear fit within our repository's collecting scope, at first we did not suspect deaccession or transfer, but the bits of 1970 correspondence and the brief statement in the newsletter from that year indicate that there was a program of reappraising, reprocessing, and transferring collections elsewhere at that time. With continued diligence and care in keeping the investigation alive, we are optimistic that, eventually, we will discover what happened to it. We certainly hope that the contents of the collection survive, at our repository or elsewhere, and will be accessible again in the future.

Acknowledgments

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