

Early Manuscript Collecting in Business, Industry, and Technology

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Abstract: The quantity and quality of records preserved concerning business history, industrial heritage, and the history of technology, has been inconsistent across institutions, geographic regions, and recent decades. This research compares and contrasts the founding and early manuscript collecting activities of four publicly accessible American archival repositories known for their extensive holdings in business, industrial, and technological history: the Baker Library, the Hagley Library and Museum, Archives Center at the National Museum of American History, and The Henry Ford museum.

The research considers how institutional contexts influenced appraisal and selection activities at these repositories during their formative years 1905-1983, including institutional mission, anticipated users, models inspiring their initial work, partner agencies and networks that supported their collecting activities, and the education and training of their staff. This study analyzes how these contexts affected the manuscript collections preserved and available for research today and why other records were ignored, passed over, or destroyed.

The study reveals the idiosyncratic nature of manuscript collecting at the four repositories. Acquisition was not guided by pre-established policies or guidelines, nor did the repositories develop standardized approaches. Instead key individuals at each institution determined the direction of manuscript acquisition, usually in an ad hoc manner; personality took primacy over written policy. The separate and often disparate approaches that resulted, however, led to the preservation of a much broader range of record formats, business types, and industrial sectors than might otherwise have survived.

About the Author:

Erik Nordberg earned his Ph.D. in Industrial Heritage and Archaeology from Michigan Technological University in 2017 with his dissertation research focusing on an archival history topic. He completed his graduate archival training at Wayne State University and also holds a second masters in literature from Trinity College Dublin. His archival work includes positions at Indiana University South Bend, Michigan Technological University and the Reuther Library at Wayne State, where he recently accepted an interim appointment as Assistant Dean for University Libraries.