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[Archival Chronicle Index](#) | [CAC Homepage](#)

Special Collections: The Future of the Past



Above, a poetry book in Special Collections reveals its secret—a fore-edge painting. During much of the 19th century, women and young girls worked long hours producing these individual pieces. The design is created by fanning the edge of the book and painting the design on the edge of the pages. When the book is closed, the painting “magically” disappears.

Next year will bring much change to the Center for Archival Collections: first, our staff will be gaining a new Records Manager who will be working with university academic and administrative departments to help them keep their correspondence, minutes, financial statements and other records under control as they move from creation to disposition to permanent historical records. Bowling Green State University generates tens of thousands of pages of paper and electronic records each year in the course of educating its students. Because it receives some state funds for its work, it is accountable to the public, and as a large, complex, and old institution, it benefits from having a “memory” which extends beyond the recall of the longest-serving employee. Both the university and the public will benefit from the work of our new Records Manager.

The other change will occur as the Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections retires. For the past several years, I have also been serving as half-time reference archivist, in addition to my duties with the Rare Books and Special Collections, and serving as webmaster and editor of the Archival Chronicle. At this writing, the CAC does not know what arrangements may be made about staffing to cover these tasks. In the short term, at least, this will be the last issue of the Archival Chronicle. I’d like to take the opportunity to share a few thoughts about the place of special collections in research.

There has been much discussion of late, not only in the library and archives communities, but in the public arena as well, about the “future of print.” Everywhere, one seems to hear that print is dead and that soon—very soon—all the books will be online. My cynical response about people who say that is that they must not read very many books or spend much time on the internet. It is not simply a matter of time and manpower to get “everything online.” Nor is it a question of “just” historical research.

Let’s begin with university records. Alumni returning to school years after graduation or looking to be certified in a professional or technical field often contact the CAC to get course descriptions of the classes they took at the time they were students here. Over time, the curriculum changes to meet new instructional needs, so the original course description is the one that demonstrates what was studied in the class.

Reading the text of a book or story is not the only way to interact with it. The text can change over time. Walt Whitman continually worked on the poetry in *Leaves of Grass* throughout his lifetime, publishing several editions of his work under that title. Each is different and worthy of study on its own and as part of the growth of the work. Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451* (a story about the destruction of books as a kind of cultural censorship), discovered that one of the paperback publishers had removed and altered some of his text without his permission. What were the changes, why were those passages chosen, and what does it mean in terms of freedom of expression vs. censorship? There are books with long publication histories, marketed in different formats with strikingly different cover art. While the text remains the same, the book clearly means different things to people over time and allows us to study changes in marketing and in the place in society the work has held over time.

Manuscripts are unique connections with the past. A collection of letters gives us an intimate glimpse of people, preserved just as they were at that moment in time. They share their individual point of view as eyewitnesses to great events. It takes hundreds of letters, regimental records and reports and newspaper articles to learn what took place at a complex event like the Battle of Chickamauga. It was not until author Peter Cozzens was able to use the regimental records and soldier's letters of the 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry that a more accurate understanding of the battle.

The internet provides wonderful opportunities for people to access a wealth of information. More appears online every day. Do a simple search on a topic and you may get thousands of hits. How do you sift through the mass of information? How do you tell what you're actually looking at? A copy of the first edition? A censored copy? The past is a rich resource. Your librarian or archivist is the experienced professional who can assist you. We're here to help.

--Lee N. McLaird