Archives Reenergized: Using a Milestone Anniversary to Reinvigorate Interest in Your Collections

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How do you generate interest in the archives on a campus of working adults at an institution known for looking forward? This question lingered among the curators of Peirce College’s archival collections, and the answer was found in marking a major milestone at the institution, the sesquicentennial anniversary.

Peirce College in Philadelphia is celebrating its 150th year throughout 2015, and this has provided an opportunity to dig through the archives to better tell the history of the school to the community. Founded as the Union Business College by Dr. Thomas May Peirce and a group of educators in September 1865, the original purpose of the school was to provide business training to returning soldiers and supply the rapidly growing industrial sector of Philadelphia with clerks, office workers, and managers. An educator, master penman, and prominent Philadelphian, Peirce collected and preserved several items related to the early years of the school and even established an archives.

Sharing Our Story

The anniversary was a chance for Peirce librarians to “rediscover” the archival collections and collaborate with the communications department and the anniversary task force to promote the history of the college. The staff was able to expose the archives to a wide audience, with historical photographs appearing on various promotional and event items, internal exhibits promoted through social media, and a monthly space on the campus blog that highlighted various items and their relationship to the history of the institution.

Items from the first fifty years of Peirce history were displayed in the library. This first half-century saw the college grow in size and scope, and exhibit items include catalogs; letters from presidential commencement speakers, including Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt; and photographs of Peirce family members who ran the school in those years. Subsequent planned exhibits will document the second and current half-century histories of the school.

The previous year, the librarians began a dialog with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), creating an opportunity to display select items from the collections beyond the Peirce community in a physical setting viewable to scholars, genealogists, and the general public. Peirce first loaned items to HSP for an exhibit last year on nineteenth-century penmanship. Following the success of this collaboration, the college loaned additional items related to the sesquicentennial celebration for the 2015 exhibit 1865: Eyewitness to History. Fitting to a school founded as the Union Business College, a sketch of the original campus and a copy of the 1865 catalog were included in a section of the exhibit related to programs for returning Union soldiers. A discussion and photographs of the exhibit were shared with the Peirce community on the Peirce Connections blog.

Preserving Our Present

Sharing preserved items wasn’t the only way the archives was engaged in the anniversary. During the annual alumni reception, former students recorded their memories and experiences at the school. Representatives from classes that graduated in the 1950s through recent graduates participated in this voluntary activity, and their stories will be preserved, ensuring future anniversary celebrations will have physical representations of this.

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was likely our motivations and comfort with sharing research findings would differ. Did we implicitly trust each other because of our roles as “archivist” and “historian”? Would that be complicated by the fact that I provided reference services and acquired collections used by him and others? How might his commitment to donate his research papers influence how I worked with other researchers? Would my ethical obligation to this researcher interfere with my work to promote the archive?

Kopp gave me time, contacts, advice, a dissertation, and a promise of his papers, but he couldn’t give me full access to his research because his final product was still in progress. At times he was also concerned about the promotion of the archives itself; hops and brewing are popular topics, and since he’d spent many years gathering materials and cultivating relationships with people in the industries, he didn’t want someone else to write the book first. I was creating an archives that would make future research easier, but I was still an archivist and had ethical obligations to this researcher. When he asked me for subtlety and patience, I asked him to finish the book.

As time passed, our relationship evolved. Kopp became an even more valuable advisor for the archives, answering questions about his research, but also reminding me to be patient when working with the communities. As I grew the archive and answered reference queries, I made new connections in the materials and offered him new perspectives based on what I’d learned. He’s understandably curious about what others are researching, but as I settled into my role as both researcher and collector, I found it easier to separate Kopp as the advisor from Kopp as the researcher.

One of the most exciting changes is that we’ve adopted new roles as content creators, conducting oral histories and participating in events or conferences together. At the National Council on Public History last spring, he referred to two stages of his work as “B.T.” and “A.T.”—before and after Tiah.

I relish the challenges that this archives offers and appreciate the colleagues who make growing it so interesting. Kopp offered a bit of advice early on that I’ve tucked in my pocket and take out regularly: “Be patient. Building these relationships takes a lot of time.”

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celebration. Just as archived items from the 125th anniversary helped inform the 150th anniversary committee, the minutes, programs, and promotional items from the sesquicentennial will be preserved to guide future anniversaries. We largely used items drawn from our physical collections for this anniversary. Having tangible items to display, loan, and discuss added to the understanding of the past and how the college evolved into its present-day manifestation.

Showing the Value of Archives

An anniversary provides an excellent opportunity to engage an institutional community in a discussion about the importance of archives, particularly at institutions with little budgetary allotment to archival preservation. Archivists know the importance of preserving physical items to engage in a historical dialog about the institution, and telling the story of Peirce’s 150 years would be difficult without an archival record to discuss, debate, and display.

Notes


Caption TK. Courtesy of Peirce College Archives.