

2-HL-Hidden in the Archives.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll get a chance to hear from contributors to Hidden Literacies: The Anthology. I'm Mary Mahoney, the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode, we'll talk to two archivists at institutions contributing items to hidden literacies. Ilene Frank, COO and Chief Curator at the Connecticut Historical Society. And Christina Bleyer, Director of Special Collections and Archives at Trinity College's Watkinson Library. We discuss the roles archives play in preservation, whose stories they allow us to tell and what digitizing items like those in our anthology can mean for people invested in exploring our shared past.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:08] Some months ago, while preparing this podcast, I had the chance to visit the Connecticut Historical Society and talk with its COO and chief curator, Ilene Frank.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:19] When I arrived, Ilene gave me a behind the scenes tour together, we descended the stairs to the basement and I realized I was getting to experience every archive lovers dream. I got to see all the stuff Ilene showed me aisles of portraits, centuries old, hung on shelves with care, dated fashions worn by Connecticut residents long dead, and rows upon rows of archival boxes holding papers that might reveal untold stories.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:50] Afterwards, we returned to her office for a conversation about archives and preservation. In my conversation with Ilene and later with Christina Bleyer, it was clear so much of the work in archives and museum collections is about making collections accessible to the public, either by digitizing collections for those who could not travel to CHS for a tour, for example, or by altering how and what institutions collect. As we'll hear, for so long, many archives and museums collected in areas that reflected the privilege patrons who founded their organizations and kept them going. Now institutions like CHS and the Watkinson are leading the way in making their spaces accessible by preserving histories of underrepresented groups, communicating through their exhibit work that visitors may discover objects and text in their collections that reflect their own stories. As representatives of two of the archival homes of text in the Hidden Literacies Anthology, Ilene and Christina can help us think about the importance of archives and special collections and of the digitization efforts that helped make possible work like Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:09] In our conversation, Ilene Frank described early experiences that led her to a career in museum education.

Ilene Frank [00:03:15] I spent a lot of times the museums as a child and just loved them and found them really fascinating. I grew up outside of Washington, D.C., so we were always at the Smithsonian and at the zoo and at the children's museum. And they just they were kind of like my playground.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:30] These experiences informed her own sense of wonder in the archives as she discovered items she'd never encountered before.

Ilene Frank [00:03:38] I have moments that I've had myself which are amazing. I've been at this job now for four years and the collection here because we were founded in 1825 and started actively collecting in the late 1830s and so we predate organizations like the National Archive in the Smithsonian. We have documents related to the early founding of our nation and and, you know, the colonial period that are really impressive. And so the first time that I held a letter written by George Washington is this moment of I'm I'm I'm holding a letter written by George Washington. You know, you just have this immense moment of ridiculousness, quite honestly, that this piece of paper has survived, that it was held by someone who we continue to talk about and raise up and look now look at the complexity of his life. But so I love I love those moments.

Mary Mahoney [00:04:45] In her work at Connecticut Historical Society, Ilene gets to help. Researchers have similar moments of discovery.

Ilene Frank [00:04:52] I had a researcher from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston who is looking at one woman's needlework. And so we pulled out these pieces that her work is held at a minimally three different museums. The MFA has some of her work, Fairfield Museum, some of the work. And we do. And we were looking at this item and you could see how the stitches changed. They there were some areas that were really tight and really well formed, and the stitch count was super, super high. And then there were areas where it wasn't as refined. And to be with the scholar who knew so much about it and could show me these things. And then I learned and then, you know, sort of hypothesizing that maybe the the woman who's been credited with this work was teaching someone else, you know, maybe there were someone there was another hand that was involved that you could start seeing that there were there were more than one person who were who were doing these stitches. That was that was a pretty awesome moment.

Mary Mahoney [00:05:50] But as she notes, archives are not sites of discovery and curiosity solely for researchers or museum educators.

Ilene Frank [00:05:57] Any time I have someone who's doing family history and they get to an item that connects them to a relative and they see that great great grandfather signature or they see a photograph or they hold a needle work that was done by a distant female relative. And all of a sudden those names that have been on a family. We become real people, I will never get tired of that moment.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:23] For some, the surprise discovery of loved ones in the archive contradicts received notions that archives exist solely to preserve the histories of elites, that it's a space for George Washington's papers, but not your parents. As Christina Bleyer describes, watching patrons stumble on connections in the archive speaks both to their power as meaning making spaces and to the need for inclusive collecting. Here, she shares a story about introducing a class to the papers of noted Chicano theorist Gloria Anzaldua.

Christina Bleyer [00:06:56] Before coming to Trinity, I was the head of special collections and archives at the Bensen Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. They housed the Gloria Anzaldua archives, all of her papers, journals, artwork, everything. And so I was doing an introduction to her archive with a group of English students. We were looking at all of her personal and biographical material. So things like birth certificates, school yearbooks, graduation certificates, diplomas, things like that. And one thing that we look at and I'll do, I wrote a story, a short story called Her Name Never Got Called. And in there she talks about how when she goes to school, they call her name

Gloria, and she doesn't reply because her mother always called her prieta or preitita. And so she didn't know her name was Gloria and she didn't respond. And then she got the teacher ended up hitting her because she didn't respond to her her name. And she got in trouble and she thought, oh, my gosh, my parents are going to be so mad at me. But I didn't know my name was Gloria. And so the students do an exercise where they look at her birth certificate and they look at her yearbook and they look at her high school diploma. And it's really interesting because on all three of those official documents, her name is misspelled or they have the complete wrong name. So, for example, in her high school diploma, it says Evan and they'll do it because her name is Gloria Evangelina. And somehow they got Evan from that. So we were looking through the yearbooks and looking through all of these documents. And one of the students was from the border, from the same town, I guess. And so he saw he went to the yearbook and he's flipping through. And it so happened that his mother was in the class like one class ahead Anzaldua. And so he the student was like, so thrilled. Right. Because for a number of different levels, this just struck him. One never thought that anyone from his town, you know, Gloria and I'll do, of course, is famous and important. But he never thought that he would see his mother represented in an archive. He never thought that he would see other people that he knew from his town there in this archive represented in the yearbook, having written messages to Gloria. And so this was a really powerful experience for him. He asked me to go out in the hall and he called immediately. He called his mother and said, you'll never believe what I just saw and took photos and texted it to her.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:54] For Christina, this speaks to an important point about the role archives can play in people's lives as sites of inclusion.

Christina Bleyer [00:10:01] I think this was really powerful for me to see because it showed me the importance of making sure that diverse groups of people are represented in archives and the importance of being able to see your history and connect with your history in archives.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:21] Archives were not always dedicated to being inclusive, as both Ilene and Christina can attest. Ilene described complications of not centering exclusivity and preserving histories of the suffrage movement.

Ilene Frank [00:10:34] There's a real question about how do we confront the fact that our holdings are not representative of everyone's history. And that is something that is really important for the for the field to be aware of and for the public to be aware of. We have a situation right now where 20 20 will be the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment and women's suffrage. And we know people who are working on commemorating this anniversary across the nation. We know that people of color, women of color, were involved in that movement. Doing the work to unbury those histories is a challenge because that information wasn't saved in the same way that the information was saved about the middle class and upper middle class white women who were seen as the leaders of the movement. And so even though now as we want to commemorate this this on the 100th anniversary and we want to raise up the stories, it's it is hard to find the material evidence to support those stories. I think that a lot of that evidence just doesn't exist in official repositories and that we have to go to families and ask what they still have and their family collections. We have to think about different places. Maybe they maybe there's archives that are held in houses of worship, you know, that that are not the state historical society or the state library. But just the fact that those archives don't exist doesn't mean that that history didn't happen. And so it's really important to keep that in mind and know that that is a huge discrepancy in our holdings.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:14] This is why digitizing materials can be so important. It can connect people to materials they otherwise would not have access to.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:23] As Christina explains, the ability to travel to archives to do research is a privilege and has long mostly been the privilege of elites.

Christina Bleyer [00:12:30] You know, in the past, especially archives and special collections, were something maybe just for the elite right there, the ones that had the time to go sit in an archive for a week and do research. They could afford to travel to whatever archive to go do the research,.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:47] New methods of digitization and curation or changing whose stories get archived, the degree to which communities can maintain control over where and how their materials get archived and who has access to them. As Christina explains, post or non-custodial digitization and collecting is one such method.

Christina Bleyer [00:13:07] There is a number of ways that I think digitization is changing the ways that archives are curated because someone when I was at UT, we did a lot of what we called and I think is now being called either post Custodial or non-custodial archiving. And so this is where you leave the collection, no matter what it is, the papers or any kind of records, whatever. But you leave it in the community where it was created. So in the past, if you wanted to acquire an archive, you had to bring it. You had to physically bring the archive to the repository process to do the finding of that. But because of digitization, now you can leave the archive in the community where it was created. And then the way that we did it, it was that we would train the community members to do the digitization. And they would also be the people that were collecting the metadata for the collection because they know the most about it. So in that sense, the community maintains both physical and intellectual control of the material.

Mary Mahoney [00:14:18] Digitization brings with it new challenges. Younger researchers not taught cursive in school, struggled to read it in the archive, for example. But digitization can offer new ways of sharing and accessing collections, even as in-person research still holds its own charms.

Ilene Frank [00:14:37] I just believe that there's a power in the real object there where there is that emotional connection or you gain. Your senses are just used differently when you can see the ink on that paper or even touch the paper or get that smell of old paper. But what the digitization can do is it can improve readability. You know, you can make things bigger and blow them up. You can play with contrast.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:02] These trends reflect a greater awareness among archives and special collections groups of the need for greater accessibility, both of all communities to these spaces and for the need to digitize and make accessible collections grounded in a physical space. Doing this work contributes to an intention I. Lean refers to as, quote, lifting everyone's stories up, but that intention comes with complications. For example, what role does consent and privacy play in digitizing collections? As Ilene describes, in some cases, not all subjects in archives were offered the right to give consent to have their image or story preserved.

Ilene Frank [00:15:43] Consent is a huge issue that we're wrestling with now. You know, people participated and had things in newsletters are great. Example are photographs

of like marches and stuff where people who were in those marches in the 70s, 80s, even in the 90s, had no concept. I had no concept in the 90s of what social media would look like today and the the real negative side of social media. And so, of course, there's a fear of if you put of a photo of me attending a rally, you know, whether abortion rights or gay rights or that that could put me out there to have a negative attack. Come at me now. I mean, that that's a that's a real question around privacy.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:31] In other cases, specifically within the indigenous communities, some of our contributors either belong to and or study some knowledge is not meant to be shared outside the community, complicating digitization projects or preservation practices linked to public access.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:50] This project respects these traditions as it offers a digitized anthology from which researchers, teachers and curious readers may share in texts both known and unknown, and think with the stories our contributors found there.

Mary Mahoney [00:17:05] In the episodes that follow, you'll hear from our contributors about the texts they've contributed to hidden letters, literacies and what they make of them.

Mary Mahoney [00:17:16] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to Hidden Literacies for more information on Hidden Literacies and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.hiddenliteracies.org