

6-28-2022

Distinctive Collections Sexennial Report, 2016-2022

Karen Walton Morse
University of Rhode Island, kwmorse@uri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/ts_rpts



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walton Morse, Karen, "Distinctive Collections Sexennial Report, 2016-2022" (2022). *Technical Services Reports and Statistics*. Paper 263.

https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/ts_rpts/263

This Annual Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Technical Services at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Technical Services Reports and Statistics by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.

DISTINCTIVE COLLECTIONS SEXENNIAL REPORT, 2016-2022

K. Walton Morse, Director of Distinctive Collections
28 June 2022

The following overview and report was prepared in support of the Department of Technical Services' Academic Program Review (2016-2022).

HISTORY & MISSION

A functional unit of the University Libraries, Distinctive Collections (FKA Special Collections and University Archives) was established in 1974 to “create a collection of unique research materials that will adequately serve the University's academic community, at all levels, and secondarily serve the needs of those from outside the University who would have reason to use these unique resources.”¹ The rare, unique, and specialized research material held in the Unit supplements the Libraries' general collection in support of the University's educational, scholarly, and research programs.

An academic library's special collections are what sets it apart from its peers at a time when holdings of current scholarship have become increasingly homogenous.² The Association of Research Libraries, membership in which is an aspirational goal of URI Libraries, identifies special collections as “not only the heart of an ARL library's mission, but one of the critical identifiers of a research library.”³ The maintenance of these unduplicated collections of rare and one-of-a-kind material also represents the university's commitment to the researchers of the future. The importance of URI's special collections is recognized in the 2016-2021 [Academic Strategic Plan](#), which called on the university to “make [Distinctive] Collections a centerpiece of scholarship and a distinctive element of URI and the State of Rhode Island.”⁴

Distinctive Collections' holdings include URI's university archives, as well as diverse rare book, archival, and manuscript collections. Our collection strengths include local history, state and national politics, labor and unionization, book arts and small press publishing, textile manufacturing and fashion, and the performing arts.

¹ Maslyn, D. Special Collections: Mission - Goals, March 1976 (Distinctive Collections office files).

² Beyond differences in collecting based on the realms of research/teaching interest of their college/university, all academic libraries are purchasing books from the same academic publishers and maintaining subscriptions to the same key journals. Differences in quality and extent of core collections are relational to a library's collection budget (current and over time).

³ “Research Libraries and the Commitment to Special Collections,” endorsed by the ARL Board of Directors on February 6, 2003. Available: <https://www.arl.org/resources/special-collections-statement-of-principles-research-libraries-and-the-commitment-to-special-collections/>

⁴ Goal 2, Strategy 1, Action 5; p.14.

Distinctive Collections has long been a designated public records repository⁵ for the papers of governors of the state of Rhode Island and other related public records.⁶ It currently holds the papers of eight Governors,⁷ three Senators,⁸ three Representatives,⁹ one State Representative,¹⁰ and select other individuals involved in public service, as well as the records of state agencies like the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Game and Public Transit Authority.

Our collections are used by URI students, faculty, staff, and alumni and myriad external researchers. These include scholars affiliated with other institutions as well as architects, attorneys, creative writers, educators, environmentalists, fashion designers, genealogists, journalists, local historians, museum professionals, public servants, scientists, and interested members of the general public. Our most heavily used collections include:

- The Colt Family Papers, 1793-1961, which document the social, political, and economic history of several generations of one of Rhode Island's most prominent families;
- The world-renowned Commercial Pattern Archive, which is both the largest collection of commercially-produced paper sewing patterns in the world (over 55,000) and a unique scholarly database used by costumers, fashion designers, museum professionals, scholars, and vintage aficionados from across the globe;
- The Fayerweather Family Papers, 1836-1962, which contain the personal papers and memorabilia of several generations of the Fayerweather family, descendants of enslaved Africans, who served the village of Kingston and the surrounding countryside as blacksmiths throughout the nineteenth century;
- Records of Foster Parents Plan,¹¹ an organization which was active in evacuating and supporting orphaned and refugee children during/after the Spanish Civil War and World War II;
- Senatorial Papers of Claiborne Pell, 1960-1993;
- Senatorial Papers of John H. Chafee, 1976-1999;
- Rhode Island Collection of historical and contemporary published material on the local and state culture and history; and

⁵ Distinctive Collections was established fifteen years before the Rhode Island State Archives (Rhode Island General Laws Chapter 42-8.1-3, 1989).

⁶ Official post factum authorization in Wagner, Albin (Public Records Administrator) to David Maslyn (Head of Special Collections and University Archives), June 27, 1990 (Distinctive Collections office files).

⁷ Governors William Vanderbilt (1939-1941), John Chafee (1963-1969), Frank Licht (1969-1973), Philip Noel (1973-1977), J. Joseph Garrahy (1977-1985), Bruce Sundlun (1991-1995), Lincoln Almond (1995-2003), and Donald Carcieri (2003-2011).

⁸ Senators Claiborne Pell (1961-1997), John H. Chafee (1976-1999), and Lincoln Chafee (1999-2007).

⁹ Representatives Robert Tiernan (1967-1975), Claudine Schneider (1983-1991), and Robert Weygand (1996-2000).

¹⁰ Rhode Island Representative David Dumas (1983-1990).

¹¹ Now Plan International.

- URI's university archives, especially the photograph and presidential records collections and student newspapers and yearbooks.

Additionally, the records of the state's Episcopal churches—approximately thirty of which are housed in Distinctive Collections as part of its role as the records repository for the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island—are heavily used by genealogists and family historians.

The Unit further supports URI's mission in numerous additional ways including

- adapting to the changing technological needs in records and research data management in order to reflect the dynamic needs of students, staff, and faculty;
- advising, as necessary, university departments on questions about records retention;
- advocating for the development of agency-specific records retention schedules and facilitating their creation in collaboration with the State of Rhode Island Public Records Office;
- contributing historic content (images, documents, etc.) to all university units in aid of commemoration, fund-raising, and marketing;
- hosting classes for course-integrated instruction and other groups for tours and/or special events;
- maintaining non-active personnel records and providing essential service to university Human Resources;
- managing the acquisition, conservation, and maintenance of unique, rare, and at-risk materials in all formats (including artifacts, documents, images, and digital content) that provide valuable historical context to the university, its locale, and the state of Rhode Island and facilitating their use;
- providing research and programmatic support as needed to alumni relations, communications, and development staff;
- serving as the institutional memory of the University by documenting the history and heritage of URI since its earliest beginnings in the university archives;
- supporting research of students, faculty, and other community members interested in the myriad topics included in our collections;
- retaining and preserving, in compliance with state records laws, university records of permanent or lasting administrative, legal, fiscal, research, or historical value on behalf of the university;
- supervising experiential learning in support of Department of History and Graduate School of Library & Information Studies degree programs (typically through HIS 477/577 and LSC 595); and

- working with teaching faculty across the disciplines to incorporate the collections, primary source literacies, and archival research into their courses.

STAFFING

While Unit staffing levels have recently increased to pre-2006 levels (3 FTE plus a modest student budget), it remains well below that of URI's aspirational peers.¹² University of Connecticut has 9 positions in its special collections unit.¹³ University of Delaware, 12.5.¹⁴ University of Virginia, 16.¹⁵

Among public institutions of higher education in New England, URI currently ranks above University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth (with only two special collections positions),¹⁶ but below University of Massachusetts, Boston (5), University of Maine (6), University of Vermont (6), University of Connecticut (9), and University of Massachusetts, Amherst (9).¹⁷ In the area of special collections staffing, URI's true peer institutions in the region are University of Massachusetts, Lowell¹⁸ and University of New Hampshire.¹⁹

Staffing snapshot:

July 2016:

- Mark Dionne (Lecturer), Pell Papers Archivist (and *de facto* Unit head as of June 2015)
- Joy Emery (Prof. Emerita), Curator of Commercial Pattern Archive (PT, unpaid)
- Student budget: \$27,720

¹² Per URI Peer Institution Analysis Executive Summary (February 27, 2004), available:

https://web.uri.edu/ir/files/exce_summary1.pdf

¹³ UConn Library Collections and Discovery Org Chart (last updated 6 May 2022);

¹⁴ 12 staff in Special Collections, plus 0.5 for the Interim Director of Special Collections and Museums; University of Delaware Special Collections and Museums Staff Roster <https://library.udel.edu/special/contact-us/staff-roster/> (retrieved 22 June 2022)

¹⁵ Not counting the Harrison-Small Building Manager, but included AUL for special collections, special collections cataloger and special collections conservator; University of Virginia Library Staff Directory <https://www.library.virginia.edu/staff/> (retrieved 22 June 2022).

¹⁶ UMass Dartmouth Library Staff Directory (retrieved 24 May 2022).

¹⁷ UMass Boston Healey Library Archives and Special Collections staff list, <https://www.umb.edu/library/about/departments/uasc> (retrieved 24 May 2022); University of Maine Fogler Library Staff by Department, <https://library.umaine.edu/contacts/staffdept/> (retrieved 24 May 2022); University of Vermont Jack and Shirley Silver Special Collections Library Staff Directory <http://specialcollections.uvm.edu/about/staff> (retrieved 24 May 2022); UConn Library Collections and Discovery Org Chart (last updated 6 May 2022); UMass Amherst Robert S. Cox Special Collections & University Archives Research Center Staff List, <http://scua.library.umass.edu/scua/scua-staff/> (retrieved 24 May 2022).

¹⁸ UMass Lowell Center for Lowell History staff list (retrieved 24 May 2022).

¹⁹ University of New Hampshire Library Faculty and Staff Directory (retrieved 24 May 2022).

June 2022:

- Mark Dionne (Sr. Lecturer), Archivist
- Jennifer Follen (Asst. Prof.), Chief Digital Preservation Officer (as of 5 June 2022)
- Karen Walton Morse (Assoc. Prof.), Director of Distinctive Collections (as of 9 July 2017)
- Student budget: \$21,109

PAST SIX YEARS

Between July 2016 and June 2022, Distinctive Collections experienced substantial growth and development particularly in the areas of staffing (see above), security and collections care, infrastructure (both physical and software), and student engagement. Of additional note is the Unit's adroit response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Security and collections care:

One of Distinctive Collections' priorities has been to improve the security and environmental conditions under which the collections are stored. Significant progress has been made in both areas during the period under review.

While environmental conditions remain unchanged, sensors were purchased and installed to track the changes air temperature, dew point, and relative humidity in Distinctive Collections' various collections storage spaces. Collecting this data will help to provide justification for future requests for building HVAC upgrades and advocating for the Carothers being treated like "buildings with laboratories or where research is being performed"²⁰ during long weekends and/or heatwaves.

More recent collaboration with URI Facilities and Environmental Health and Safety on mold remediation has led to the development of a plan to provide more specialized custodial services to the Unit. We hope it will also yield at least a partial solution to humidity-management in the Distinctive Collections suite.

As part of ongoing work to better secure the unique and rare materials stewarded by Distinctive Collections, three significant security gaps were addressed. Three additional security cameras were installed in the Distinctive Collections suite on the second floor of Carothers (two provide coverage for the Reading Room, the third monitors the large vent between Room 231 and the open area of the second floor, through which collection material could be easily smuggled). A more significant upgrade was made on the third floor of Carothers when security doors were installed at each of the mezzanine landings, effectively blocking unauthorized access.

²⁰ URI Weather Energy Alert email, August 7, 2018.

Infrastructure:

Physical improvements: additional cameras installed to address gaps in security (2021), data-loggers placed to monitor changes in environmental conditions in our storage spaces (2021), additional door-bell ringers installed to provide full coverage of Distinctive Collections suite (2021), ergonomic chairs purchased for faculty and student workers (2017/8), furniture replaced in the Distinctive Collections Reading Room (2018), electronic adjustable table and modular foam book cradle purchased to make our Reading Room experience a bit more accessible (2021), mold remediation (2022), remodel of 220 with new semi-private workstations (2022), and security doors installed for mezzanine storage area (2019).

Software and equipment: archives management software (2022), data-loggers to monitor changes in environmental conditions in our storage spaces (2021), digital preservation management software (2021), Forensic Recovery of Evidence Device (2018), specialized scanners (2020, 2022).

Student engagement:

Distinctive Collections works with teaching faculty across the disciplines to incorporate the collections, primary source literacies, and archival research into their courses. During the period under review, Distinctive Collections has hosted numerous classes from disciplines as diverse as Chemistry and Music for course-integrated instruction and/or tours.

To further the College goal of better supporting the General Education curriculum, K.W. Morse developed LTI 350G, Bias: Interrogating the Archive, successful completion of which provides General Education credits in Information Literacy (B4), Integrate and Apply (D1), and Grand Challenge (GC). URI's university archives serves as both subject and experiential learning lab for students enrolled in the course. The first offering of LTI 350G was fall 2021. It will be offered again in fall 2022.

More recently, engagement with teaching faculty resulted in two course offerings for the spring 2022 semester that included sustained engagement with Distinctive Collections throughout the semester. Both ENG 410 and HPR 412 also incorporated final project assignments created in consultation with Unit faculty that requiring the use of collection materials in the rare books collection (ENG 410) and university archives (HPR 412)

Additionally, throughout the past five years, Distinctive Collections has hosted an average of one course-based practicum or internship per academic year (typically HIS 477/577 or LSC 595) in support of the Department of History and Graduate School of Library & Information Studies degree programs.

Pandemic response:

Distinctive Collections closed for in-person research in March 2020. Through August 2020, researchers were served remotely by Unit faculty who conducted research in collections and provided enhanced scanning services.

At the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, we reopened for in-person research by appointment only with appointments limited to current URI students, faculty, and staff in accordance with university reopening precautions and the prohibition on visitors to campus. We continued to serve external patrons remotely.

As restrictions lifted, we began to allow other patrons to make appointments while still continuing to provide services remotely. First, Rhode Island state residents on May 24, 2021. Then, all interested researchers on June 7, 2021. We have continued to serve external patrons remotely upon request to the present.

Despite myriad uncertainties, Distinctive Collections was able to adapt the Unit's policies and procedures throughout the pandemic, enabling us to continue to meet the research needs of both our URI and external patrons.

Significant events and changes that occurred during the period under review are outlined below.

- 2016: Academic Strategic Plan, 2016-2021 calls on the University to “make [Distinctive] Collections a centerpiece of scholarship and a distinctive element of URI and the State of Rhode Island” (Goal 2, Strategy 1, Action 5; p.14).
- Fall? 2016: Unit renamed from Special Collections and University Archives to Distinctive Collections by Dean Boughida
- July 2017: New Unit head (Karen Walton Morse, Assoc. Prof.) joins Department and Unit:
n.b. Unit head position vacant June 2015-June 2017
- May 2018: Forensic Recovery of Evidence Device purchased for use with legacy born-digital records stored on media and hard drives
- June 2018: Furniture in Distinctive Collections reading room replaced
- Sept. 2018: Commercial Pattern Archive curator (Joy Spanabel Emery, Prof. Emerita) passes away
- June 2019: “Centering the Marginal” Symposium hosted in collaboration with Project StAND (Student Activism Now Documented).
- Jun/Jul 2019: Mezzanine secured, addressing the Unit's most significant security concern

- Nov. 2019: Professor Michael Vocino reassigned to work with the Commercial Pattern Archive
- March 2020: Distinctive Collections closes for in-person research. Through summer 2020, researchers were served remotely by conducting research in collections and providing enhanced scanning services.
- May 2020: Professor Vocino retires
- Sept 2020: Distinctive Collection reopens for in-person research. Appointments limited to current URI students, faculty, and staff in accordance with university reopening precautions and the prohibition on visitors to campus. We continued to serve external patrons remotely
- Dec. 2020: Mold outbreak in select collection material housed in Carothers 226 discovered and remediated internally
- May 2021: Preservica, digital preservation management system, acquired
- May 2021: Electric height-adjustable table and modular foam book cradle for the Distinctive Collections reading room acquired
- May-Jun 2021: Monitors (30) placed throughout Distinctive Collections storage spaces to track environmental conditions (temperature, relative humidity, and dew point)
- June 2021: Security cameras installed in reading room and to cover the vent between 231 and the open part of the 2nd floor, eliminating two significant security gaps in security.
- Fall 2021: First offering of LTI 350G, Bias: Interrogating the Archive, a General Education course for which URI's university archives serves as both subject and experiential learning lab
- April 2022: ArchivesSpace, archives management system, implementation begins
- June 2022: Chief Digital Preservation Officer (Jennifer Follen, Asst. Prof.) joins Department and Unit
- June 2022: Digital Lab space remodel, including the creation of semi-private office spaces
- June 2022: Mold remediation conducted by specialized vendor on select collection material housed in Carothers 226 and 231.

FUTURE PLANS

Distinctive Collections has the following goals for future development:

- Develop an inclusive and sustainable digital preservation program
- Fully implement ArchivesSpace management system for centralizing administrative and collection management, and explore online access options to collection materials
- Hire part-time staff for Commercial Pattern Archive (funded by Emery endowment)
- Continue to collaborate with faculty (particularly those in the College of Arts and Sciences) to incorporate Distinctive Collections into their courses
- Update collection metadata to conform to current best practices, informed by the principles of reparative description
- Improve the environmental conditions under which our physical collections are stored
- Upgrade Distinctive Collections web presence (ADA compliance)
- Acquire secure off-site space to quarantine new collection material
- Acquire additional collections storage space by fully shelving room 231
- Create and fill additional positions to bring URI staffing in line with peer institutions. Initial goal: parity with University of Massachusetts, Boston, which has 5 positions in their special collections unit.²¹

²¹ UMass Boston Healey Library Archives and Special Collections staff list, <https://www.umb.edu/library/about/departments/uasc> (retrieved 24 May 2022)