Building a Legacy

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For over fifty years, the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections has been committed to building an historical collection of manuscripts, printed works, newspapers, photographs, maps, oral histories and other materials documenting the history of the University and southwestern Michigan. The origins of the Archives date back to the summer of 1956 when WMU President Paul Sangren asked Dr. James Knauss, the retired chair and faculty member of the history department to sort and arrange the papers of Dwight B. Waldo, WMU’s first president, and those of Ernest Burnham, who headed the rural Education Department during WMU’s early years. In 1959, Dr. Alan Brown, a faculty member in the History Department, was chosen to take over the archival program on a part-time basis. The next year an archival committee headed by Dr. Willis Dunbar was established and it recommended enlarging the program to include regional materials. In 1962, the Michigan Historical Commission designated the Western Michigan University as a depository for public records of twelve counties in southwestern Michigan. The joint mission to preserve both WMU archives AND the regional history of southwest Michigan catalyzed a tremendous growth in the depth and breadth of the unit.

Over the decades, parts of the Archives and Regional History Collections have been physically stored in several locations. The first location was probably a closet in Sangren Hall. This makes sense given that Sangren was also the location of the History Department, but the closet was quickly outgrown. By the 1960s, Dr. Katharine Stokes, head of the Library, provided space for the collections, but this space was supplemented by storage across the campus and it did not offer a place for the public. When Waldo Library was remodeled and expanded in 1967, the Archives and Regional History Collections moved to more spacious quarters in the lower level of the building. The area had access to an auditorium and public working areas near the Collections.

By the late 1980s, WMU’s entire campus was in the midst of many physical changes, and the College of Business, situated on the East Campus, was poised to move into new quarters on the main campus. Waldo Library was filled to capacity and no longer had adequate space for students or its regular collections. With the new construction and expansion of Waldo Library, the Archives and Regional History Collections moved to what was identified as a “temporary” location in East Hall in early 1990. The former business library (Western’s original library building) on the East Campus soon reverted to use as overflow storage for the University Libraries. The Business Library, as a separate branch of the University Libraries, disappeared as it was integrated into the Waldo collections.

While the East Campus location provided opportunities for growth and elevated the collections to the status of branch library, maintaining collections under poor conditions and providing appropriate workspace for employees and amenities for researchers has been challenging. East Hall had been deteriorating for years and the “temporary” relocation suggested that no major repairs could or would be supported. Some 15 years later, it is evident there is a need for a new building to sustain the growing operations of the Archives and Regional History Collections and provide climate-controlled, secure storage for collections.

As the years passed, the University and Libraries administration has explored several existing building options on and off campus, but in all instances, the buildings proved inadequate because of the requirements for weight bearing floor capacities or the exorbitant cost to install the proper environmental controls in an existing, aging building. Removing lead paint and asbestos also increased the cost of using an existing building and many of the buildings considered did not have sufficient space for future growth. A 2008 study of McCracken Hall was appealing in that it would relocate the Archives in closer proximity to Waldo Library but the cost exceeded 30 million dollars. With an estimated budget of $11 million, new construction is the least expensive and most efficient option. It will also result in a building that is more energy efficient thereby costing less to operate in the long run.

In March 2012, 100 faculty, students, and community members gathered for a Town Hall Meeting at the Fetzer Center to view the preliminary designs for a new building. The designs resulted from nearly two years of meetings with WMU Campus Facilities staff and the architects from the SHW Group. Archival and shelving consultants were also part of the process. Presentations were made by the architects of the SHW Group and staff of WMU Campus Facilities and the University Libraries. Audience members posed several questions and gathered to speak with the presenters.

The proposed building is planned to house (1) the archival collections, (2) materials currently in the libraries overflow collection and (3) some volumes presently located in Waldo Library. It features an atrium with display cases, a dedicated classroom, a group study room, reading room, special rooms for document and collection conservation activities, and a storage area for manuscripts. One of the most striking features of the building will not be in the public area. The majority of the materials will be stored using a system of 30-foot high shelves, accessible by a lift. This will allow for a smaller building footprint and maximize the HVAC systems to provide the optimal building envelope to maintain strict environmental controls.

The key site under consideration is near the College of Health and Human Services on Oakland Drive. The location is important because
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the building needs to be accessible for students traveling by foot, bus, or car. The materials housed in the Archives support the research and teaching mission of Western Michigan University, and last year, nearly 1000 students took part in class sessions. The range of classes using the collections is impressive and includes first year experience, film, nursing, communications, English, and, of course, history students.

The facility also needs to be easy for the public researchers to find and have adequate parking. Public researchers range from community researchers studying buildings or genealogy to traveling scholars. Among the collections that draw international researchers is the French-Michilimackinac Research and Translation Project, the largest collection in the United States of microfilmed French documents about the history of European settlement in the Great Lakes and North America. Researchers have also traveled to consult the vast array of paper company records, which include materials from the Kalamazoo Paper Company, Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Company, and Watervliet Paper Company. In recent years, The Upjohn Company records have added a unique set of historical and international pharmaceutical data. The WMU collections have been the basis for a number of publications, and since 1990, more than 30 books from university and private presses have relied on the resources of the WMU Archives and Regional History Collections.

The long-anticipated and much needed building will be constructed with private monies including grants, gifts, and private donations. The state funding formula is different for buildings that are not primarily classrooms so WMU will be reaching out to the Michigan and regional communities and benefactors who have helped this University to become not only a regional but a national treasure for Michigan education and research. This building, when completed, will mark our commitment to the Legacy Collections that have been entrusted to us. Our motto might well be that. WMU and our supporters will sustain this window to the past with an investment in the future.