

A Collection and Its Donor

I would like to talk about working with a particular donor to secure his family's legacy, while expanding the valuable resources within a community archives. I think that our time together demonstrates the value of archivists developing relationships with donors. It also emphasizes how individuals with personal papers can benefit their communities by becoming involved with their local cultural heritage institutions.

The Ryan family of Waltham had deep roots in the community. During my years as their first professional archivist, the Waltham Public Library received some of the Ryan papers. They were contained within a research collection that was created to write a book about the ethnic heritage of the city. The paperwork indicated that two Ryan brothers had loaned the materials for the project and had not formally donated it. So, I set out to procure the proper donor consent to make our ownership official. I wrote to Mr. Albert M. Ryan II and asked if he would like his material returned or if he did not want the papers back I told him, "We can make an appropriate home for them here with your permission." Mr. Ryan responded that he wanted me to keep his things and that he had more to give.

The first Albert M. Ryan was the grandfather of my corre-

spondent and it was his papers that were sitting in the archives. Albert M. Ryan I had worked for the City of Waltham and also served as a city historian, taking photos of town landmarks, writing about his reminiscences and painting City scenes. His notebooks were enlightening and his images helped preserve memories of the past.



The notebooks of Albert M. Ryan I

This alone was a great boon for our growing collection that was attempting to document a complete history of Waltham and its people. Albert M. Ryan I was very visible among our papers as a historian attempting to make sense of local affairs, much as I was doing as an archivist.

The grandson namesake who stepped into my office helped expand his family's legacy through his donation. He also breathed life to his ancestors stories for me with regular visits to the archives and short conversations over six months time.

My visitor told me he was 82 when we first met. We had trouble communicating in person because he was losing his hearing. Most of our conversing was

done through letter writing while we were apart or handwritten notes from me to him while we were together. Mr. Ryan had the forethought to label his materials with his reminiscences before our meetings. We tried to work together to piece the story of his family for the future and to fill gaps that confused me as an outsider. I enjoyed his company and his easy, infectious laughter, and we ploughed through our task with patience despite conversational adversity.

The papers of the Ryan family include those of my donor's parents and reach back to the personal papers of his great grandparents. Their writings that have remained for us to view today hit some of the highlights of American history from 1850 through the mid twentieth century. I'd like to share some of them with you.



Correspondence of Henry Ryan I

The oldest papers dated from 1852 and were letters written by great-grandfather Henry Ryan I who set his sites on San Francisco and headed west to participate in the gold rush. He wrote letters home to his brother that sit among the collections at the Waltham Library today.

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October 30, 1852

Dear Brother:

I wrote you a letter on the 13th instant I then told you that I was going to the mine and I went but they did[n't] prove to my liking [sic] and so I have returned to this place and have gone to work at Carpenter work at \$7.00 per day...

...See how the folks get a long [sic] and write to me all the news that you can find and see that they have all they want if you can find it for them without injury to yourself if I have my health I shall be able to repay you shortly..."

Nine months later, Henry's brother received a letter that Henry was ill for about two weeks before dying. The first letter sits in the beginning of Henry's archival folder. The last sits at the end, summing the adventure of a short-lived life.

Henry Ryan's son grew up to take an equally interesting role in

American society. Henry served as a Captain in the Union army during the Civil War. He retained the paperwork that told about the items given to the soldiers under his command along with other official documents. The teenager also wrote letters home to his mother that are now among those in the Ryan collection.



Photo and letter of Henry M Ryan I

*In the Field, Fla
Wednesday, March 22d,
1865*

Dear Mother,

I sit down to commence a journal which I think will please you to read, although I do not know what I shall have to write whether defeat or victory...



Also among the Ryan papers at the Waltham Library are those of my donor's aunt. Ida Annah Ryan is the most famous of the interesting Ryan family. She was the first woman to graduate from M.I.T with a master's degree. She went on to open her own architectural firm and to rally as a suffragette. Her signs urging citizens to fight for women's right to vote [pictured left] were painted by her brother, our historian, Albert M. Ryan I.

Family collections can show us the many activities with which relatives involve themselves, their personalities, triumphs, defeats, and relationships. They also tell us a lot about a society at a given time.

Community histories are built on the personal papers of residents. The histories within our local repositories are indebted to Mr. Ryan and donors like him who are willing to share their stories and their time with archivists like me. Many of our most important archives are based on donations of personal papers that have value beyond personal family memories.

The other day, I had the opportunity to review this collection that I have not viewed in fifteen years. My own recollections came rushing back and I wondered what happened to the elderly gentleman who taught me so much about working with the public when I was a young archivist. I did a little research and found that Mr. Ryan passed away on May 27, 2008 at the age of 94. This newsletter is written in honor of him and what he taught me. An archivist can learn a lot by reaching out and listening..



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