

Research Center 50th anniversary

Collaboration

Ten years after I left the Sheldon, a scholar in England – David Jeremy - got in touch with me about the Markham papers – the textile machine drawings. David was part of the network of amateur and professional historians, curators, and researchers who had identified them in 1981, had recently retired, and wanted to see them published, so I became his assistant – with the help of Research Center librarians Orson Kingsley and then Jane Ploughman, and college archivist Danielle Rougeau who saw to their digitization.

David's book described the use of drawings, manuscripts, books and serial publications, and a network of collaborators to develop and share a common understanding on which they built the machinery of the industrial revolution.

That's similar to what goes on at the Research Center – the staff actively managing the many collections for researchers who then share their findings to further public understanding of the past.

I had come to the Sheldon originally while doing research on women's work in the 19th century and found more resources for that here than at the major Vermont institutions. I was hired to move the collections into the newly built RC, organize and make them available to researchers, with the help of many volunteers and sometimes additional staff. In this role, I not only was able to discover more resources on women's work, like the timebooks of a Middlebury woolen mill and a series of family letters comparing working here to working at a giant cotton mill in Lowell, Mass, or teaching school or keeping house on a large farm. I was also able to put them into the hands of researchers like Deborah Clifford, who did the harder work (to my mind) of analyzing and writing about them so they became part of the shared understanding that had been lacking when I went looking in 1973.

Having the collections used by a wide range of researchers has always been the RC's goal so that we can all learn from them and also learn what's missing and needs to be added. What's in the archives is not hidden, but it does require collaboration to make the stories they hold known.

I've been known to rattle on and on about what's in the collection.

A lot of you have experience here:

- Working with the collections as staff or volunteers
- Doing research (Greg Pahl, David Munford)

- Supervising students doing research (Jim Ralph, Bill Hart – jr. faculty in the Am. History dept. now Ellery)
- Or cooperating as colleagues at other institutions.

I bet that any one of these people has stories out of the archives – of discoveries, favorite items, researchers, projects, and what they learned. Just ask them. This is the network that is mining (and expanding?) the RC's wonderful collections – printed, audio, visual, manuscript – develop and spread knowledge of the area's past, enriching our cultural understanding, as Markham's network developed the understanding of technology.

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