

BENTLEY LIBRARY

THE MICHIGAN HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

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Responsible for all collecting activities relating to the history of the State of Michigan, the library in its first decades collected as widely and as broadly as possible. Dr. Vander Velde believed (probably correctly) that if the MHC did not collect a body of papers or records then nobody else would. Given the fact that local history materials were not always as prized as they are today, it was inevitable that valuable documents would be destroyed if the MHC did not provide a home for them. As a result, the MHC became the willing recipient of scores of Michigan-related manuscript and archival collections. Today, because of the library's original all-encompassing collecting mission, the Bentley Historical Library has become the home for a rich body of historical documentation—the papers of public figures, clergy, educators, soldiers, farmers, and businesspeople, as well as the records of church, civic and cultural organizations, philanthropic and reform groups, women's organizations, citizen action groups, and many others.

The library stacks contain many treasures donated over the past seven decades. Of course, there are diaries and letters of soldiers from Michigan who served in the Civil War. On one shelf is a portfolio containing the founding documents of the University of Michigan, including the 1817 draft of the "act to establish the Catholepistemiad, or University of Michigania.". On another shelf are volumes of field notes (some with original drawings) of Douglass Houghton resulting from his geological survey of the state from 1837 to 1841. There are boxes filled with hundreds of letters from prominent individuals: presidents, literary figures, captains of industry, social reformers, celebrities of all sorts, and even a few rogues and otherwise infamous. These letters provide a fascinating mosaic of state and national history. Here are just a few examples. In 1899, Susan B. Anthony wrote to the Anti-Saloon League urging their support of a woman suffrage amendment; Mathew Brady in an 1849 letter to Alpheus Felch hoped that he could add this congressman's portrait to his National Gallery; Gerald R. Ford in 1931 wrote to U-M football coach Harry Kipke thanking him and mentioning his anticipation in attending the university. Biographers and historians would find much to amuse and enlighten them in these boxes: Robert Frost accepting a position to teach at the University; John Dillinger writing tauntingly to the chief of police of Port Huron; and Adlai Stevenson, in a handwritten letter to Margaret Price, talking about the Democratic Party closes with this salutation: "Horrors! What a mess! But what a Party!!" Here also is the original draft of Hemingway's "Snows of Kilimanjaro" with the editorial notations of Arnold Gingrich, publisher of *Esquire Magazine*, where the short story first appeared. Then there are the note cards used by Lyndon Johnson when he made his Great Society speech at the university, and

just beyond that, the original draft of the inaugural address of Stevens T. Mason, Michigan's first governor. The list of treasures held by the Bentley is seemingly endless.

By the early 1980s, as the Bentley Library building was quickly filling up with new collections, the staff began to look more systematically at what had been collected in the past and what should be collected in the future. Library staff conducted a collection analysis, assessing the state of its collections in terms of size, number of collections, and subject areas represented in the collections, as well as projecting what might be worth collecting in each subject area. After studying the results of the collection analysis, the staff agreed that the library needed a clearer collecting focus and policy. Beginning in 1985, the library began to devote its collecting energy toward important collections in several targeted subject areas. These areas are reevaluated periodically, with new targets being added and older ones moved to lower priority. The highest collecting priorities include a mixture of building on our traditional strengths (such as state-level politics); developing new aspects of areas we have long collected (e.g., African American churches, to complement earlier collecting of mainline Christian denominations); and developing new areas with great research potential (for instance, family life, the environment and gay and lesbian issues).

What the future holds, there is no way of knowing. Library staff can no more look ahead to what the character and content of the library's holdings will be toward the end of this century than Dr. Vander Velde could foresee the library as it is today. One thing seems clear. The holdings of the Bentley Library in this first decade of the 21st century reflect the research and hard work of staff members, like Dr. Vander Velde, who loved history and were conscientious and occasionally passionate about collecting and preserving the raw materials of history. Over the years collecting efforts of the library have been coordinated by the field representative, a position occupied by Elizabeth Adams, Henry Brown, Ruth Bordin, Robert Warner, Richard Doolen, J. Fraser Cocks, Kenneth Scheffel, Christine Weideman, Catherine Abernathy, Suzanne Steel, and Leonard Coombs. Whether in digital format or paper, the success of future collecting will require a continuing dedication that has characterized each of those who have occupied the field position.

### **President Gerald R. Ford Papers**

In 1964, the library began collecting the papers of a Republican congressman from Grand Rapids who had assumed the minority leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives, Gerald R. Ford. Over the next decade Ford's congressional staff shipped yearly installments of his papers to the library for processing and safekeeping. On August 9, 1974, Gerald R. Ford became president of the United States and the collection of his papers took on new importance. Throughout 1975, Robert Warner planned for appropriate housing of the Ford papers under the terms of the Presidential Libraries Act. The designs for a separate building

next door to the Bentley Library were approved in 1978. Coincidentally, Dr. Warner left his post at the Bentley Library in 1980 to become Archivist of the United States just in time to accept the new Gerald R. Ford Library as part of the National Archives in 1981. Although the Ford Papers were in its charge for a brief period, the Bentley Library is proud of its decade-long stewardship of these significant materials.

## **The Governors of Michigan**

On December 31, 1960, the library received 742 linear ft. of papers of Governor G. Mennen Williams. With this large accession of gubernatorial papers, Gov. Williams became the first of the post-World War II governors to donate his papers to the Bentley Library directly upon leaving office. The Gov. Williams papers are significant for the accomplishments of his administration and for his leadership within the state and national Democratic Party. With the recent accessioning of the papers of John Engler, the library has now acquired a continuous run of gubernatorial records from the administrations of the last six governors. This succession of records begins in 1949 with the first term of Governor G. Mennen Williams and is followed with the files of governors John Swainson, George Romney, William Milliken, James Blanchard, and John Engler.

These six gubernatorial collections complement those of twenty-two earlier governors whose papers are held by the library. These collections, received over the years through family donations and bequests, begin with Michigan's first governor, Stevens T. Mason. The papers of nineteenth and early twentieth century governors, although decidedly smaller than their modern counterparts, are significant for their insight into the formative period of state government. The papers of Gov. Mason, for example, document Michigan's government in its transition from territory to statehood. Unfortunately, Gov. Mason's vision for the state was interrupted by bank closures and other economic travails. These and other issues are reflected in some of his correspondence and in manuscripts of his various messages to the state legislature. Prominent in early to mid-twentieth century state history were governors Chase Osborn and Frank Murphy. Gov. Osborn was perhaps Michigan's most literary governor. As a former newspaperman, he authored travel books, an autobiography, and a study of Hiawatha and Native American folklore. More than the papers of a governor, the Osborn's papers describe the development of economic resources of the Upper Peninsula, party politics during the progressive era, and the governor's interest in conservation issues. Similarly, the papers of Frank Murphy are worthy of mention for their full and revealing documentation of the career of a man, who in addition to being governor, served as mayor of Detroit, governor-general of the Philippines, U. S. Attorney General, and justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. The Murphy papers were received from family members and have been the source of biographical studies, articles and monographs on Detroit and Philippine history, the Flint sit-down strike, and studies of landmark Supreme Court decisions. According to historian Sidney Fine, the Bentley Library's

accumulation of gubernatorial papers is an unmatched resource for the study of state government in the last half of the twentieth century.

### **The Earl and Florence De La Vergne Collection**

The Bentley Library's most important donation of books and maps documenting the earliest periods of Michigan's history is the collection of Earl and Florence De La Vergne. Earl De La Vergne was a Detroit area businessman and book collector who returned to his hometown of Harbor Springs after he retired. Mr. De La Vergne became interested in Michigan history during his time as a student at the University of Michigan. He applied his historical interest to building a fine collection of early maps of the Great Lakes region and a comprehensive library of both early and modern books documenting the places he loved. A longtime friend of the Michigan Historical Collections and the Bentley Historical Library, Mr. De La Vergne helped build the library's holdings of books, maps, and manuscripts from 1940 until his death in 1982 by donating materials from his own collection. A passionate collector at heart, he also worked with library staff to locate other collections in the Harbor Springs area.

In addition to his periodic donations during his lifetime, Mr. De La Vergne bequeathed to the Bentley Library his entire collection, totaling almost 2,000 volumes, 120 maps, and 70 prints. The collection comprises a major source of research material relating to the history of Michigan and the Great Lakes region, concentrating on the French and British periods, the Territorial period, Indians, missionaries, L'Arbre Croche and Harbor Springs, and Mackinac.

### **Michigan Newspaper Project**

Newspapers have long been recognized as important resources for historical and genealogical research. The Bentley Library has been an active participant in the Michigan Newspaper Project, a part of the national project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities to identify and preserve our country's newspaper heritage. Since planning began for the Michigan project in 1992, representatives of the Bentley Library have helped guide the work of the project. The inventory and cataloging phase of the project identified some 3,700 newspaper titles published in Michigan. The microfilming phase, which began in 2002, will film a selection of titles with the most research value. Leonard Coombs represents the Bentley Library on the project's advisory board.

### **Conservation and Preservation**

The Bentley Library takes seriously its commitment to not only collect but also preserve and conserve the treasures that have been put into its care. Although the library has always

been dedicated to the preservation of its manuscript and archival holdings, the balance between what needed to be done and what could be done, especially in our early history, was rarely achieved. For many years, Ida Brown performed valiant service rebinding the torn and patching the tattered. Her work is still seen in many of the volumes on our shelves. With her retirement in 1970, the library was without any of her skills learned over a lifetime. Then in 1974, in a fortuitous merger of need, available space, and talent, the library obtained the services of James Craven to work full time in what was initially a basement storage area, but what would become in short order a state of the art conservation lab. Mr. Craven had been with the U-M bindery for more than twenty years prior to coming to the Bentley Library. Jointly employed by four campus units – the Bentley, Clements Library, Special Collections Library of the University Library, and the Rare Book Room of the Law Library – Mr. Craven has brought unique skills and an innovative mind to the conservation and preservation needs of the university and his work is recognized and appreciated throughout the wider university community.

In 1978 Mr. Craven was chosen by the Bureau of History of the State of Michigan to do restoration work on the contents of the cornerstone of the Capitol in Lansing. In the history of the Bentley Library, this is the only set of documents to be delivered via state police escort. And in 1994, Mr. Craven was called on by the state to undertake extensive restorative work on the original 1835 and 1850 state constitutions.

Mr. Craven has also been mentor to students wanting to learn the basics of conservation. Many of these individuals went on to work in other colleges and universities, including Brown and Dartmouth, but one of his first students, Ann Flowers, remained at the Bentley Library assisting him as needed. She is also responsible for the library's microfilm preservation program. Through her efforts, the library has a growing bank of microfilmed collections that save wear and tear on the fragile originals and can be loaned out to distant libraries when a trip to the Bentley is inconvenient for a researcher. Among the most requested microfilmed collections are diaries and letters of Michigan Civil War soldiers. In 2003, the department completed a comprehensive survey of the library's audio, motion picture, and video holdings. This survey will act as a prelude to the selection and digitization of the library's most at-risk audio-visual treasures.