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Managing Special Collections in a Small Academic Library: A Case Study of Preservation and Access to the Sailors' Snug Harbor Collection

Abstract

This article presents a case study of how a small academic library managed one of its special collections that has rich significance to the history of New York City and the maritime industry. With the acquisition of the valuable Sailors' Snug Harbor research collection and faced with limited financial and personnel resources, the librarians at SUNY Maritime College set forth to aggressively pursue external funding, creatively generate personnel resources, and developed in-house expertise to successfully preserve, promote, and enhance access. Digitization and creating open access technology tools were key components of improving access to the collection. As a result, there has been a significant increase in research activities using the collection.

Keywords: special collections, academic libraries, Sailors' Snug Harbor, Minto Farm, New York City History, Staten Island, preservation, digitization .

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Introduction

Many academic libraries, museums, and other institutions keep special collections and it's usually a challenge, especially for smaller institutions, to generate financial, personnel, and practical support to maintain such collections. Libraries usually strike a delicate balance between attaining optimal conditions for caring of special collections versus preserving and promoting such collections to the best of their abilities given limited resources (Darbey & Hayden, 2008). Bengston (2001) boldly

expressed that libraries that are not prepared to manage special collections should not do so. However, with careful planning and advocating for funding, libraries can be ready to manage special collections. For the greater value of advancing scholarship and research, librarians as caretakers of special collections, have a huge responsibility to preserve and promote access to these unique resources. Therefore, with strategic use of in-house resources, actively pursue funding opportunities, and use of open access technology, librarians can fulfill this responsibility.

This article presents a case study of how a small academic library, SUNY Maritime College Library, managed one of its special collections, including activities surrounding acquisition, preservation, and access. Working with very limited budget for special collections, librarians at SUNY Maritime seized upon grant funding opportunities, utilized staff resources, and used in-house expertise to manage the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection. Many technological tools were developed and implemented to help preserve the collection, and foster and promote access. With most of the online research tools implemented in the past decade, including a searchable database and an extensive website, the librarians have noticed a significant increase of research activities using the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection. Authors, professors, historians, documentary filmmakers, doctorate students, artists, and descendants of residents of the Harbor have been in the mix of researchers using the collection.

The Sailors' Snug Harbor special collection bears heavy significance to the history of New York City and to the history of maritime operations in the United States. The documents and records pertain to the administrative and day to day operations of the Sailors' Snug Harbor, an institution founded in 1801 for retired and injured seamen. Over 10,000 sailors were cared for at the institution and their personal records make up a large segment of the collection; hence the rich genealogical value of the collection. The institution was based on Staten Island in New York City for close to 150 years and the representative documents and records for this period give a historical depiction of the area, including architecture, infrastructure development, and the surrounding grounds. Probably the most hidden value of the collection is the link to the history of lower Manhattan of an area once called Minto Farm which was owned by the founder and trustees of the Sailors' Snug Harbor. Housed in the collection are the Trustees minutes of meetings, land deeds, and other documents that give a clear description of what became of the Minto Farm, ten square blocks bounded by Fifth and Fourth Avenues, Waverly Place, and Tenth Street in lower Manhattan.

The Sailors' Snug Harbor collection is very valuable to the research community and for the past several decades, librarians at SUNY Maritime have been living up to their responsibility to care for and provide access. Regular operational budget provided very little financial support for special collections

and thus the librarians had to be very active in soliciting external funds to maintain the collection. Many regional, state, and national grants were pursued and private donors were sought after. Librarians also had to be very creative with personnel resources, inviting Library School interns and attracting volunteers to work with the collection. Quite often the librarians had to rely on their own in-house expertise to maintain the collection and develop access and promotional tools.

History of Sailors' Snug Harbor, Staten Island

Sailors' Snug Harbor was founded in 1801 upon the death of Captain Robert Richard Randall. Captain Randall, created a family fortune as an entrepreneur, privateer, and patriot. His bequest established an institution "for the purpose of maintaining and supporting aged, decrepit and worn-out sailors." This institution became firmly established on Staten Island with a site that overlooked Upper New York Bay and the Kill Van Kull. On this site, the architect Minard Lafever designed a complex in the Greek Revival-style that would accommodate 200 seamen. It was the first maritime home and hospital for retired sailors in the U.S., offering food, lodging, healthcare and companionship. Since that time, the complex expanded until by the early twentieth century there were more than 1,000 residents, or inmates as they were called, living at Sailors' Snug Harbor. These residents occupied a facility of more than fifty-five buildings, including Randall Memorial Church (a replica of St. Paul's Cathedral in London), a Music Hall, and a hospital (Barry, 2005). By the 1930's Sailors' Snug Harbor had fallen on hard times. Financially, the institution was barely able to cover expenses and as a result, the institution fell into disrepair. After the country recovered from the Great Depression, and beginning in 1950, reconstruction projects began on the site in which two dozen buildings were razed. Further reconstruction was planned but this was halted when in 1965 New York City's new Landmarks Preservation Commission at its first designation hearing, landmarked and saved the old Greek Revival-style dormitories. This was aided by the efforts of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis who spoke of the need to preserve Sailors' Snug Harbor, "Attention should be brought to a place like this. There's no place in all the five boroughs where there is such a sanctuary as this... it must be preserved" (The Bowery Boys, 2007). With the Staten Island site now designated as an historical landmark, the trustees of Sailors' Snug Harbor claimed they would not be able to maintain adequate housing for their inmates as well as cover costs. They therefore obtained land in Sea Level, North Carolina and relocated there. Almost immediately after, New York City launched plans to turn Sailors' Snug Harbor into the cultural and educational institution which it is today.

History of Minto Farm, Manhattan

Andrew Elliot, a Scotsman by birth and a British Colonial New York Customs Collector and official purchased several tracts of farmland in lower Manhattan where he sought to build his home. This property was promptly consolidated to emerge as a 21 acre estate, ca. 1766, and was named Minto after Elliot's Scottish uncle who was Sir Gilbert Elliott, 1st Earl of Minto (MacDougall, 1917). On this new estate, he erected an octagonal shaped mansion that was located approximately at what is now known as Broadway and Ninth Street.

In 1790, Capt. Thomas Randall, a famous privateer and captain of the barge that brought George Washington to his 1789 inauguration in New York City bought the estate. He was only to live on the grounds for seven years before his death where thereafter his son Robert Randall inherited the estate and resided there until 1801. A unique event occurred after Robert Randall's death in 1801, he bequeathed the Minto farmland to a body of maritime, religious, and civic leaders of the New York area with the main goal of managing the estate to financially assist and provide a home for old and decrepit mariners who were no longer able to support themselves. The Sailors' Snug Harbor Trust was founded several years afterward on April 21, 1806 (Barry, 2000). The endowment's size was substantial and this would lead to contestations over the will from Randall's siblings and alleged descendants that brought it to closely becoming nullified. This culminated in the court case *Inglis v. Trustees* in 1826 where Bishop John Inglis "claimed he was the only collateral heir to Robert Richard" (Barry, 2000). The case travelled all the way to the John Marshall Supreme Court and Daniel Webster assisted with Inglis' representation in the case. The court ruled in favor of the Sailors' Snug Harbor Trust due to the grounds that Inglis was an alien (of British nationality) and unable to inherit New York State property. This was a factor in inhibiting the trust from moving forward with Randall's vision and it wasn't until the late 1820's before the Sailors' Snug Harbor home could actually come to fruition.

The original plan was for the home to be located on the Minto premises itself but the idea of a seamen's hospital on the acreage was questioned due to community concerns. In the early 1800's, "mariners, and especially sailors, were reviled by respectable society" (Williams, 2012). The new area around Washington Square was originally designed to attract more affluent New Yorkers and the sailors' gruff habits, scars, and tattoos could offer offense. Would these elite New Yorkers want to live next to a retirement community of destitute and haggard old salts?

Another obstacle to a Manhattan locale was the Commissioner's plan of 1811, which eventually divided the lower Manhattan area into cross sectioned streets and this included the Minto farm area. According to the plan, the farmland would be "subdivided into 253 leasehold lots covering most of the

ten square blocks bounded by Fifth and Fourth Avenues, Waverly Place, and Tenth Street” (Barry, 2005). With factors such as urban congestion, community concerns, and the 1811 street plan the original Manhattan site for the potential Sailors’ home was questioned. This led the trustees in an attempt to modify the Randall will and possibly build the site on a location other than lower Manhattan. In 1828 the trust was granted permission to construct the new retirement community on Staten Island which became the home of Sailors’ Snug Harbor from 1833 until 1976 when the mariners were re-located to a new facility built in Sea Level, North Carolina.

While construction began in Staten Island the Minto property itself was still mostly farmland but Manhattan was destined to grow exponentially as the 19th Century progressed. Shortly after a former potter’s field was paved over and renamed in June, 1826 as the Washington Military Parade Ground, the Washington Square area and new park began developing into a desirable area (Stokes, 1928). The affluence of the area was also increased as New York University, then called University of the City of New York, was established with the opening of their completed University Building in 1835. While adjacent to the Randall farmlands on the N.E. corner of Washington Square Park between Waverly and Washington Place it was not built on the Randall property itself. However, NYU would later expand into this property, Washington Square Park, Greenwich Village, and beyond as it would grow into one of the nation’s largest private Universities in our modern day. Although, initially the University was not a success and NYU spent \$40,000 for building expenses and then went into debt (Murphy, 2008). Money troubles for the new University would continue throughout the 19th Century beginning with the onset of The Panic of 1837.

Although the University was certainly eager to create more elbow room it was in the trust’s advantage to liquidate their holdings to overcome the leasing rents binding and invest the proceeds. As maintenance on the Staten Island property became expensive and as health care costs were rising the Randall will was challenged in the early 1970’s to enable the trust to sell their interests outright. To help accrue more income because the leasing system was thought to be outdated. The plan was to move the facility to a new area and to sell property to keep the money to deliver “will most effectively accomplish the testator’s charitable intent.” The trust ultimately bought land in North Carolina at Sea Level and then proceeded to sell the Staten Island and Manhattan properties. The trust opted to sell individual parcels of land than the entire tract on Manhattan and indeed received more originally appraised at \$13 million the trust reached approximately \$26million. The last parcel of Manhattan property sold in 1986 (Barry, 2005).

Sailors' Snug Harbor Print Collection

The Sailors' Snug Harbor collection is one of SUNY Maritime Library's largest collections of documents relating to maritime and New York City history. This collection was accessioned as two sets of documents, first in 1976 and as recent as 2008. In the Spring of 1975, the Director of the Library at SUNY Maritime College, became aware of this decision and made inquiries as to the disposition of the organization's records. When he learned that the Harbor planned to get rid of most of the old records, the College began negotiations to accession the papers, for it was obvious that their destruction would be a loss to the city as well as the Maritime Community. The College had other reasons as well. First, the Sailors' Snug Harbor has an interesting history and is one of the oldest charitable institutions in the country. Second, the records of the Marine Society of the City of New York are also in the College archives, and there is a close association between that organization and the Harbor (e.g., the Marine Society President and Vice President are on the Board of Trustees at the Harbor). Arrangements were finally completed in 1976 for the records to be placed on permanent loan to the Maritime College. This first set of records of the Sailors' Snug Harbor originated at two different offices although both served the one institution. The group of records from Staten Island, the location of the institution from 1833-1976, were contained in three large sea chests and reposed on open shelves located in the attic storeroom of the administration building. These records deal mainly with the daily subsistence and management of the Harbor, from its opening in 1833 to some time in the 1960s. Part of the collection consists of records of the Office of the Governor of the Harbor, including correspondences, daily journals, and reports (included are the records of Governor Thomas Melville, brother of Herman Melville). Detailed account books with the butcher, baker and shoemaker, Governor's Day Books, Farmer's Diaries, and bedding and clothing books are only a small sampling of the various account books kept at the Harbor. Business invoices, library registers and records of governors, trustees and comptrollers, employees, and inmates (including wills) as well as visitor's registers, round out the collection. Collectively they present a fairly complete picture during various periods of life at Sailors' Snug Harbor.

The second group of records came from the Manhattan office of Sailors' Snug Harbor on Greene Street. These records are concerned with the physical maintenance of the facility on Staten Island, employees at the institution, and, for the most part, the "business" of the institution, the administration of the trust, and members of the Board of Trustees involved in that administration. There are early documents, dated in the 1700s, concerned with the Randall will, copies of deeds and other documents pertaining to the "Minto Farm", the property which was the basis of the trust in Manhattan, and papers

dealing with the acquisition and disposition of Staten Island property. This collection has important historic records for land property in New York City's Manhattan and Staten Island boroughs, including records on designated historic landmark buildings that make up the current Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Staten Island. One of these buildings has been completely restored by the Noble Maritime Museum using documents in the Library's collection. In addition, the Sailors' Snug Harbor Trustees' minute books, comprising of 26 large volumes, contains information on business activities, construction, and real estate transactions for Manhattan and Staten Island properties.

With the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection proving to be of such high research value, the Library Director negotiated with (and persuaded) the current trustees of the Snug Harbor Institution to give the remaining institutional repository documents to add to the existing archival collection. In 2008, the Library acquired another set of documents from the Snug Harbor Trustees. The records were originally shipped in 20 cardboard boxes and in very poor housing conditions. These records had to be immediately transferred to acid free archival boxes and basic preservation methods performed to help preserve their longevity e.g., staple removal, paper unfolding, tissue paper interleaving, and using polyester sleeves where appropriate. Almost 90% of the new set of documents are personal records of mariners who resided at the Sailors' Snug Harbor Institution – records that carries a rich genealogical research value and are critical to filling many research requests received by the Library. Another historically significant document is a blueprint of the historically landmark Snug Harbor cemetery plot in Staten Island showing the burial site location of each mariner. The personal inmates' records consist mostly of admission papers and death certificates. Most of the early records to approximately the 1930's just consist of this information. Inmate folders from later dates have a good deal of more information. To give some examples would be United States Citizenship and Naturalization documents, sea time, mental health records - entitled social service notes, post cards and other correspondence, photo portraits and tax forms.

The men who resided at Sailors' Snug Harbor came from a wide variety of backgrounds both ethnic and racial. During the mid-nineteen century, approximately one-third of the sailors were foreign born and throughout its history, Sailors' Snug Harbor had African American residents beginning in 1842 with William Watson. Despite their varied backgrounds, the sailors of Snug Harbor had a common heritage. All had lived hard lives as common seamen which often resulted in permanent physical injury or other problems such as alcoholism. Each one of these men and their records, offer a unique glimpse of the history of maritime sailors and their culture. The approximately 27,600 pages of documents belonging to these mariners are as diverse as their background. Genealogical materials, such as birth

certificates, licenses, and citizenship papers are prevalent, but also extant are medical records, photographs, and scrapbooks. Each one of these items has unique historical significance in detailing the social history of American mariners.

Sailors' Snug Harbor Digital Collection and Open Access Tools

Digitizing and Content Management

Recognizing the value of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection, the SUNY Maritime College Librarians decided to pursue the avenue of digitization to increase access and awareness and also to preserve the documents by minimizing handling of the physical collection. In 2006, the Library laid the groundwork for the Sailors' Snug Harbor Digital Collection by acquiring a grant to digitize over 500 pages of documents of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection to illustrate the founding of the institution, the daily activities, and the subsequent disposition of the property, including photographs and newspaper clippings on the history of the institution. This grant was funded by the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) to purchase equipment, software, and hire staff to digitize more than 500 pages of documents. All documents are uploaded to CONTENTdm management system and are fully searchable with appropriated metadata. The project was a huge success and the digitized portion of the collection serves as a complement to the entire collection, increasing awareness to researchers and the public in general of the type of original documents that exist in the Sailors' Snug Harbor archival collection. In addition, the value of this collection to New York State's history has been recognized by the New York Heritage organization which has added the Sailors' Snug Harbor digital collection to its repositories of collections on New York State's people, places, and institutions – view the collection at url: <http://www.nyheritage.org/institutions/maritime-college> and click on "Maritime College, Sailors' Snug Harbor."

Worldcat and Harvesting

To expand on open access and maximize visibility of the digital collection, all items were harvested into OCLC Worldcat and with the benefit of CONTENTdm being OAI-PMH compliant the metadata migration process was without a glitch. WorldCat is the world's largest network of libraries and its OPAC (worldcat.org) is searched by many users around the world.

Website

After launching the digital collection and harvesting each digital item into Worldcat, the popularity and awareness of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection increased significantly. Inquiries and requests for access were more frequent and the librarians at SUNY Maritime College seized upon a grant opportunity to deliver access to more tools that empower users with answers about the collection. In 2009, SUNY Maritime College Library received a Documentary Heritage Program grant from the New York State Education Department to improve on the preservation of the collection, develop a database of the inmates records, and promote the collection with a website. The website, now accessible at <http://stephenbluce.sunymaritime.edu/sailorssnugharbor/index.html>, serves as the single portal to all details about the collection, including finding aid, digital collection, inmate database, photo gallery, and a history of the institution and collection. Many users have expressed their appreciation for the website.

Database Development

One highlight of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection is the 9,000+ records of the residents (inmates) consisting of their official and personal records. These materials date from the late nineteenth Century until the mid-twentieth century and are approximately 134 cubic feet in length. The records are of historical and genealogical importance because they consist of such items as United States citizenship certificates, professional licenses, medical records, photographs, and scrapbooks. The librarians began to field many genealogical inquiries about sailors who resided at the Harbor. It was then determined that providing open access to a database of this information would better serve the research community. With funding from another grant an online searchable database was developed with a complete list of all the Harbor residents (inmates) and their corresponding types of records. Actual records were not made available online since the information is personal, with some medical history data. The database was designed with SQL relational database management language and a search interface was embedded on the Snug Harbor website. Users can readily lookup the Harbor's sailor residents and determine if and what records are available. This tool proved very useful for researchers, especially the layperson seeking information on their ancestors.

Funding and Staff Support

Like other institutions managing special collections, the librarians at SUNY Maritime College are faced with the challenges of having to care for the Sailors' Snug Harbor special collection with limited

budget and personnel resources. Knowing the research value of the collection the librarians remained committed to ongoing preservation and access to the documents. For financial support they had to aggressively pursue external funding, seeking out any possible grants and encouraging donors. Since the acquisition of the collection in 1975 several grants and donations were received to support the collection, but most of the success for funding happened in the past decade when the Librarians took an aggressive approach to promoting the collection. The present state of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection, with adequate preservation of the print documents, a growing digital collection, and several online access tools, is due almost entirely to external funding. Below is a highlight of the major funding sources received since the collection's acquisition:

- In 1977, received a grant from the National Historic Records Preservation Committee (NHRPC) to "preserve, arrange, describe, and develop finding aids" for the Sailors' Snug Harbor Collection. Reformatting to microfilm was done for some of the more fragile print documents.
- In 2006, received a regional grant from the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) to digitize several hundred pages of documents and provide open access through a content management system. Included in the funding were monies to purchase specialized digitization equipment which allowed for continued digitization activities after the grant was over. Also included was no cost content management hosting for grant produced and all future digital documents of the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection.
- In 2008, received a significant donation from the Trustees of the Sailors' Snug Harbor in the City of New York to continue preservation needs for the collection. This funding was negotiated with the Trustees to align with the acquisition of the second set of records that make up about 40% of the collection.
- In 2009, received grant funding from the New York State Archives' Documentary Heritage Program to process and preserve records, update the finding aid, develop database tools, and develop a website for access. Receiving this grant demonstrated recognition of the research value of the Sailors' Snug Harbor records for New York's history.
- In 2011, received donation from Northern Trust corporation to continue preservation and promotional activities
- In 2012, received grant funding from the New York State Education Department for a Preservation Survey and Long Range Preservation Planning for the Archives at SUNY Maritime College Library, including the archives of Sailors' Snug Harbor.

Another challenge in managing special collections is adequate staff support and the librarians at SUNY Maritime had to be creative in generating the personnel time to maintain the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection. College administration did not support a full time archivist and therefore Librarians had to convince administration to hire a part time archivist and justify the position as dual responsibilities for reference services and archives. Also, internships and volunteer opportunities were advertised at local library schools resulting in hiring of several interns and volunteers. The librarians were willing to teach and mentor these potential archivists while they work on actual preservation and digitization tasks for the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection.

Research Value

Many researchers have used this collection since it was established as a prominent collection in the SUNY Maritime College Library Archives. Even more so, research activities have increased significantly in the past decade and this is most likely due to more aggressive promotion and access to research tools in the online environment. Several authors have written books based on researching documents in this collection – a few titles include:

- *Sailors' Snug Harbor, 1801-1976* by Shepherd Barnett
- *The Sailors' Snug Harbor: A History, 1801-2001* by Gerald Barry
- *The Marine Society of the City of New York: A Concise History* by Gerald Barry

Many other scholars, historians, journalists, and students have written dissertations, journal articles, trade publication articles, newspaper articles and academic research papers based on research done using the Sailors' Snug Harbor Collection. Baugher (2008), a professor of landscape architecture at Cornell University, researched the collection to link her archaeological findings at the Staten Island Snug Harbor site with the daily lives of female employees. Baugher (2010) again researched the collection to write about the power dynamics between the Governor and the inmates of the Sailors' Snug Harbor. In addition, the Library has received many requests over the years for access to the Sailors' Snug Harbor archives by researchers writing about maritime history, Staten Island history, or conducting genealogical research. Noteworthy examples are: In 2013, over the course of 3 days, an author thoroughly perused the inmate records looking for residents with Saban ancestry to further his genealogical research. He was successful in his endeavor, acquiring information for his upcoming book. Another notable example is from 2008 – 2013, artists in residency at the Harbor have consistently used materials from the Sailors'

Snug Harbor collection in various projects. In one particular instance, one artist's research results on female Sailors' Snug Harbor residents, was aired on NBC. In another example, in 2011, the Coen brothers requested our assistance in the provision of photographic material for one of their set designs for the film "Inside Llewyn Davis." Other instances include a doctoral student requesting the administrative records, inmates' letters and letter press volumes for work on a dissertation and a request from the Parks Department looking for architectural and blueprints of Snug Harbor's Main Gate to help in a reconstruction effort stemming from an accident. Also, the Library staff has filled numerous research requests for individuals looking up ancestral information on family members who were mariners at the Snug Harbor institution.

Conclusion

Libraries, especially small academic libraries, are sometimes hesitant to acquire special collections due to fear of not having the resources to manage these collections. More so, libraries may already have valuable special collections sitting on their shelves and not provide much preservation and access due to limited resources. Lee (1993) suggests that guardianship for special collections requires the staff, space, and facilities to properly manage the collection. However, with limited resources librarians should take a pragmatic approach to managing special collections. As Scham (1987) pointed out "Intelligent planning has always been and will remain the key to the success of a special collections department."

Given the more than often situation of low budgets for special collections, librarians should not be discouraged, but be very proactive in pursuing alternate avenues of resources to help manage their special collections. SUNY Maritime librarians took a stance to not just sit back and let their special collections of very rich significance collect dust on the shelves. They took an aggressive approach to seek external funding, to use their own expertise, to creatively generate staff resources so as to preserve and promote access to the collections. The Sailors' Snug Harbor collection is of high significance to New York City and Staten Island history, and to the history of the maritime industry. The efforts of the librarians to bring about awareness, promote and enhance access to this collection have been rewarded with an ever increasing request to use the collection for a multitude of research activities, from scholarly publications to the general genealogical inquiries. The success of managing the Sailors' Snug Harbor collection serves as a model for other collections in the SUNY Maritime Library archives, such as the Marine Society of the City of New York collection.

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