Defining Archives and Special Collections

A Special Collections or Archival Repository is a place where professionals care for and preserve historically significant documents. For private individuals or families, documents may include letters, diaries, financial records, land records, legal documents, school records, maps, and photographs. For corporations or other organizations, documents may include correspondence, meeting agenda/minutes, reports, bylaws and governance papers, photographs, and publications.

Whether personal papers or corporate records, these documents provide unique insight into our past. Local history gives relevance to our communities and it is not often taught in schools. By donating your historic records and papers to UNF Special Collections you allow it to become a part of our community’s collective memory. Each collection received is unique and adds to the story of our region in Northeast Florida.

UNF Special Collections and University Archives

Special Collections at UNF is the home of the University’s Archives, documents tracing our institution’s history and development since our early days in the 1970’s. We also house rare and historic materials, such as books by local authors, significant local history materials, and limited/signed editions.
Some of our most popular items, however, are our Personal Papers and Primary Resources Collections, which draw UNF students and faculty as well as external researchers. These papers are the true heart of our Special Collections and include personal papers, manuscripts, organization records, and primary source materials of prominent individuals and organizations throughout Jacksonville and Northeast Florida. In the past decade, many of these collections have been digitized, allowing an even wider audience to view our collections.

**Growing our Collections**

UNF has over 60 Special Collections ranging from small individual collections, such as the papers donated by Bishop Desmond Tutu after his time at UNF to large corporate collections, such as the newly acquired Florida Blue records. All tell a story about Jacksonville and Northeast Florida. We are actively seeking collections from individuals, families, churches, businesses, civic organizations, and institutions in the Jacksonville area that represent our region’s rich heritage. We accept original paper documents, photographs/negatives/slides, audio and video recordings, and electronic records, and prefer the originals rather than a photocopies or other facsimiles. Please note that by accepting any donation, we are a party in the transaction and cannot provide an appraisal for the items donated.

**The Benefits of Donating Your Collection**

To preserve collections in our care for future generations we first re-house all materials in acid-free folders and boxes. All items are stored in a secure, climate controlled environment, which is particularly important in Florida where humidity plays such a significant role in our climate. Digitization is also a preservation tool we use at UNF. We create copies of historic items, which allow researchers to see the items in detail without actually handling them, thus preserving fragile items while still allowing the content to be viewed.

Special Collections not only preserves the records in its care, we also make them accessible. After all, if you have a collection that no one sees, how is it relevant in today’s world? One of the first things our processing archivist does is to gain “intellectual control” over the new collection that is to become fully acquainted with its contents. She will go through that materials several times to determine the organizational structure of the collection. Once the archivist fully understands the contents of the collection, the next step is re-housing. She will make sure that every item is treated carefully and stored in an appropriate container.

Once the collection is sorted and housed, the archivist creates a finding aid, which can be an index, a list in an Excel spreadsheet, or a formal document that lists information about the collection as well as the contents of each box. A finding aid is the initial tool a researcher uses to access the collection to determine if they can use the information contained within. The finding aid contains a lot of information about the collection: date range of the items, where the collection came from, when and who processed it, as well as a brief history of the donating entity and how it came to own the material. A finding aid usually includes a box and folder list that provides the researcher with an inventory of exactly what the collection contains.
Digitization of Collections
Digitization was mentioned as a preservation tool, and it is also an access tool. While the archivist is processing the collection, she is also making note of the portions that would be digitized and uploaded to UNF Digital Commons. Digitizing includes scanning documents, photographs, books, maps, and newspapers; or making digital audio or video files from tapes or film; or taking photographs of 3D objects and making them available online. Digital librarians are part of the team at UNF and they implement the current best practices for digitizing our collections, including making sure the resolution allows remote users accessing the collection by computer to have the same information as someone seeing the collection in person. We attach standard information to each scan, including key words, date, location, and creator. This information allows online users to search for specific collections items.

Marketing Collections
One of the final aspects of access, is letting everyone know about your collection. UNF has the resources to reach out to potential researchers by promoting the repository’s collections and services on our website and through our Coordinator for Marketing and Community Service.

What to Expect When Donating Your Papers to UNF Special Collections
When you make the decision to donate your papers to UNF one of the first things that will occur is an archivist will talk to you about the details of your collection. The archivist uses that interview to determine the collection’s size, date range, what types of items have been collected, where the collection has been stored, and if there are audio/video/digital portions of the collection that need special attention. An archivist or team from UNF may come to make an onsite assessment of the collection. At that time, we would look at it with you and prepare an inventory of what we are particularly interested in obtaining. There is a chance that not all items will fit within our collection policy, so we may not ask for the entire collection. At this time, we will also be looking for contextual information about the collection. Where the items are from, people who appear in the photographs, or any stories behind significant items in the collection are just as important as the collection itself. This information is very useful when the archivist is processing the collection and creating the finding aid. Once both parties have reached an agreement regarding the donation, we will draw up a Deed of Gift, which is a legal document that will transfer both the physical collection and the copyright (where you have it) to UNF Special Collections. A Deed of Gift will also allow you to consider how the public will use your collection. Although archivists would rather not restrict parts of a collection, it is an option to consider if full access is stopping you from donating the collection.

Some Things You Do Not Have to Do Before Transferring Your Papers
- Do not tidy it up – we would rather sort through everything than lose information helpfully edited out.
• Do not reorganize the materials – the original organization of a collection tells the story of the collection and arranging things differently will change the context, as well as confuse the inventory made on site.

• Do not rehouse the materials – archivists hate binders, plastic sleeves, paper clips, rubber bands, and any type of metal fastener. Anything that is not archival grade storage media will be tossed during processing. So, please don’t spend your money on office supplies that will be thrown away.

Financial Support for Processing Your Collection

An important item to consider is that archival collections are living entities that require a lot of care. Software upgrades are needed to keep up with the latest computer operating systems, digital files must be periodically checked to make sure they have not been corrupted, paper files deteriorate over time and must be rehoused, and if any disaster happens such as a hurricane or flood, measures must be taken to care for any damaged items. In addition, funding allows UNF to hire assistance to process your collection and digitize it in a quicker time frame. A lot of work happens between the time the collection is donated and it is entered into the library’s catalog and uploaded to its website. So, although the collection in itself is valuable historically, please consider a monetary endowment to include with your gift to insure its continuity.

For More Information

For information about the UNF Thomas G. Carpenter Library Special Collections and University Archives please contact Susan Swiatosz, s.swiatosz@unf.edu, (904) 620-1533.