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Practicum in History

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For my practicum in history, I focused on archives, and archival scanning. Specifically, scanning in all the old campus maps and architectural building plans that were in the archives, so that they might be digitized. The reason my practicum was focused on the archives was that I want to be an archivist after I graduate college, which will include a master’s degree. For this practicum, I also drew on my own history. When I first came to Ottawa, I was an engineering major, wanting to focus on architectural engineering. I wanted to go and restore historical buildings across the world, which was when I realized that my passion for what I was doing was based more in history than it was in engineering, and so I switched majors. I grew up with two engineers in my house, in my father and my sister, so these types of documents were things that I was familiar with having seen them when going to see my father at work or looking at my sister’s homework. I decided to do my practicum on them, because not only was I interested in the archival part of the documents, but their actual content as well was something that intrigued me, and it was something that I already had some knowledge in.

To begin, I had to go through what was down there. When I was whittling down the documents that were in the stacks, I was left with 28 actual campus plans. During that process, I found some other interesting documents including a college degree, and some different engineering technical drawings. Of the actual documents that were relevant to this practicum, they ranged in age from the very beginning of the university to the newly built Gangwish Library within the new Gibson Student Center. There was also variation in paper type, and type of document that they were. For some background, most building plans when they are complete, have about 100-200 pages, and in the modern day include things like the plumbing, landscaping, and electrical plans, as well as the technical details of the building, which are more the floor plans, room layouts, and the architectural and structural notes. In the archive, most of what I found were mostly floor plans and room layouts and were copies of the originals that would’ve been shown to the university staff when they were presented. Of all the documents, only 4 were original documents, from what I could tell. In addition, none of the documents were full design plans either. Most of what I had were partials.

I started in the middle of the timeline, where the bulk of the individual documents were. In the 1950’s, Ottawa University was looking to expand. In the archives, I found many different proposed plans for what the university could’ve looked like. They were mainly from two different firms, Foster H.Hyatt and Hardy & Schumaker. Of the plans that these two firms had in the archive, they were mainly of full campus layouts, for a proposed future of Ottawa University. However, most of the plans revolved around the Library/Art Center, which today is only the Art center. In the past, it has been the library/art center, but when the Gibson Student Center, and the Gangwish Library was built, it became the Braves Athletic Performance Center. In 2021, the BAPC was moved into its own building, so currently the building only hosts the art department. In the archive, I found quite a few drawings of what the building could’ve looked like. 7 of the 28 total drawings were about the Library/Art Center, and of the 7, there were 4 proposed layout plans, one elevation drawing, and one exterior drawing, that had two copies. One of the most interesting things about all these drawings for the Library/Art Center, was that 5 of the 7 drawings were blueprints. Which wouldn’t mean much, until we went to scan them, which I’ll come back to.

The next thing I tackled was the plans for the expansion and remodel of Ward Science Hall, which was done in 1991. These sheets came from a full set of design plans, as they were numbered on the bottom right corner of the page and marked for an index that I didn’t have. What I did have were 10 pages. These pages were marked as the following: EQ 5, EQ 4, EQ 3, EQ 2, EQ 1, A 16, A 15, A 6, A 5, and A 4. These 10 pages contained the three floor plans, with a page for each floor’s lab equipment plan details, and a page each on where all the equipment would go. It is of note, however, that the first and second floor detail plans were combined into a single page. There were also two pages on the interior elevations, one for the elevations themselves and the other for the details of such elevations. An interior elevation in simply every interior wall or surface, drawn on a scale. The other documentation that I scanned in were two plans for the Wilson Field House, an exterior elevation plan and an interior floor plan. These were done on white paper, done in 2001, by Hollis and Miller.

The most interesting thing that I found were the 4 original documents that were from the earliest days of the university. The first two documents were both survey maps, one being a topography map and the other being just a general survey map. A topography map is a map of the geography in a given area, dictated by the lines that the map shows. The lines are there to describe changes in elevation, but the maps also include waterways, such as rivers or lakes, since most of the time their banks sit lower than the average elevation for a given area. The other survey map was a general survey map, which included a layout of the campus and what buildings were where, as well as the topography of the campus. Both survey maps were on this card stock like paper, which back then most likely was the normal high-quality paper that would be used for documents like this. The other two documents are the oldest pieces of paper I’ve ever personally held myself. These two documents were the original plats for the university. The plats, which predate the university, are what the surveyors used to dictate what land the university was to be given. These two documents were incredibly fragile, and they were made of this paper called vellum. Vellum is made of animal-skin, but it’s very thin. The best comparison for it is tissue paper- very thin and very delicate. Of all the documents I scanned, these four were the four that I was most interested in, since they were the oldest. For me, these documents were the most important of the stack, and when we went to scan them, they were also the ones I was most worried about.

My father, who works for an engineering firm, agreed to let me come in with these documents and scan them. So one weekend, when I wasn’t traveling for softball and he was in town, we went to scan these documents. Of , the time-management and challenges around doing this practicum, scheduling the time to go and scan these with my father was probably the hardest thing of them all, since both of our schedules changed all the time. When we went into scan them, it was a fairly easy process, but it just took a little bit of time. Most of the documents scanned in pretty easily, bar a few. Since most of these documents for storage were rolled up, we had to carefully unroll them, and re-roll them in the opposite direction so that when they went through the scanner, they were flatter. Most of the documents went through fine, but we had some trouble with the original plats, since they were so thin. However, we got them through, and they are still in one piece, thankfully. However, a hurdle that I didn’t realize that would be there, was the blueprints. Since the scanner at my father’s work had a blueprint scanner option, that was how we scanned them in. In person, these documents are that jewel-toned blue that we all know, were black and white. Since the light exposure needed to capture the light could damage the blueprints, as they are created using chemicals and heat, they scan in black in white which doesn’t damage the images. Once we had all of it scanned, then all that was left to do was to take the flash drive that the scans were on to the library, so they could be put into the system. The only set of plans that I did not scan were the plans for the Gangwish Library and Gibson Student Center. Since the construction for the building was done in 2016, the plans for those were most likely digital first, and then printed for easier access on the job site. In the context of this practicum, I have passed on the contact information for the firm, so that the university can access the digital plans for the archives. This allows for not only copies of the original documents to be in our archive, as much of what I scanned were original copies, but also so that there can be a full set of plans in our archive, and not partials like most of our documents were when I did my practicum.

Since this semester is also softball season, finding time to this practicum was an exercise in my time management skills and my ability to go with the flow. This practicum, which was the start of my experiences with documentation and archival knowledge in general, drew on not only my knowledge of this specific type of documentation, but it laid out the basis of what my career will teach me. This opportunity has been incredible, and I will forever cherish the experience.