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LBSC 605, Fall 2012

7 November 2012

### Archives Visit Report:

Montgomery County Historical Society, Jane C. Sween Library

#### **Basic Information**

The Montgomery County, MD Historical Society (MCHS) runs the Montgomery County Archives, but it was “closed until further notice” in 2010; all information about the archives has been removed from the MCHS website and all records are closed to the public. However, the MCHS also runs the Jane C. Sween Library, which has many non-circulating books and additional archival records. The Library is located in the Beall-Dawson Historical Park at 42 W. Middle Lane, Rockville, MD. The MCHS website includes a dedicated section for the Jane C. Sween Library, which can be found here: <http://www.montgomeryhistory.org/jane-c-sween-library>. Interestingly enough, the website does not have any information about Jane C. Sween. I learned from my onsite visit that she was a lifelong resident of Bethesda, MD, avid Montgomery County historian, and operated the library for years, but found no further information on why the library was named after her.

#### **Mission and Collections Policy**

The mission statement of the MCHS is, “The Montgomery County Historical Society (MCHS) collects, interprets and promotes the history, heritage and culture of Montgomery County, Maryland” (MCHS, Mission). The MCHS operates the main archives (now closed), the Beall-Dawson Historic House Museum, and the Jane C. Sween Library; I had to assume that

the mission statement applied to all three organizations as I found no information to suggest otherwise.

The MCHS has an “Object Donations” webpage with specific policies for donating physical items, but the webpage ends with, “Different policies apply to donating photos, documents, and other archival material. For more information on the library and archive collection, or to inquire about donations, please contact [pandersen@montgomeryhistory.org](mailto:pandersen@montgomeryhistory.org)” (MCHS, Object Donations). I had to assume that the “Object Donations” policies only applied to the Museum collection. I sent an email to the address provided asking for their specific library and archival collections policy, but received no response. Since human interaction did not help in this endeavor, I browsed through the website further and found a few PDFs outlining the MCHS collections, ethics, and deaccessions policies. Since the language in these policies referred to the “Museum” and “Library,” I assumed that they encompassed the Jane C. Sween archives. The MCHS overall collections policy has a “three-fold goal:”

1. To preserve the history of Montgomery County. Thus, we collect items directly related to that history, such as documents, images, and objects owned by county families which shed light on the way they lived and worked.
2. To assemble articles illustrative of historical changes in particular fields, so that changing lifestyles in the County can be traced in educational, informative, and entertaining displays, lectures, and other programs.
3. To provide the wherewithal to bring the Society museums and events alive and make them meaningful to the general public. (MCHS, Collections Policy)

These goals follow Greene’s (1998) “utilitarian approach” to collecting, as the Montgomery County community is definitely the focus of the MCHS collection appraisal, accessioning, arrangement, description, and outreach. The collections policy also specifies that there are no date restrictions for donations, with the exception of the Museum weapons collections (MCHS, Collections Policy). In addition to meeting their “three-fold goal,” the MCHS takes the following

into consideration when appraising and accessioning items: “Montgomery County provenance, uniqueness of item to the collection, uniqueness of item in general, condition, conservation and preservation requirements (i.e. objects in good condition, but easily deteriorated), and size” (MCHS, Collections Policy). Considering this list is probably in descending order of importance and the fact that there are no date restrictions for most donations, it can be inferred that the MCHS places value in provenance and uniqueness over scope or ability to store and preserve records. This is further bolstered by their donation policy which says,

Objects which have restrictions placed on them by the donor will not be accepted, except in the case of extreme relevance or uniqueness. Acceptance of a restricted item will be recommended by the Director of Collections, and approved by the Executive Director and the Board of Directors (see Accessions for full details and procedures on accessioning). Reproductions and objects accepted for use as hands-on demonstrations will be placed in the curatorial collection, which is separate from the permanent collection...Donations to the permanent collections are tax deductible. MCHS cannot provide appraisals of objects for tax purposes...nor does MCHS allow indefinite or “permanent” loans. Donations are made with the understanding that all rights and titles transfer to MCHS. (MCHS, Collections Policy)

Their “three-fold goal” focus and language that implies the possibility of accessioning out-of-scope or restricted collections gives the MCHS the freedom Anderson speaks of in his cyclical approach to collecting, which “allows the archives to better respond to chance and opportunity, which are inevitable and important factors in any collecting program” (Anderson 1985, 32).

A goal focus rather than specific parameters might also be a detriment to the MCHS, as the “loop holes” might turn their policies into “occasional tool[s] rather than...integral part[s] of the repository” (Sauer 2001, 325). The MCHS might have taken these pros and cons into account, however, as they have new deaccessioning and ethics policies on their website, which suggest that they have become aware of the danger in accessioning out-of-scope collections. Having these policies online is a great way to keep prospective donors informed and might possibly

reduce the number of out-of-scope donations. While a deed of gift example is not available on the website, the detailed information on the legal implications of donations (see above) suggests the MCHS has taken the Society of American Archivists “A Guide to the Deed of Gift” to heart (SAA, A Guide to the Deed of Gift).

### **Online Reference Access Tools and Formulating the Reference Question**

As I searched through the online access tools available on the MCHS Jane C. Sween Library webpage, I found a comprehensive list of finding aids (MCHS, Resources at the Jane C. Sween Library). The Library’s finding aids are grouped by subject area and location in Montgomery County. Descriptions exist at the group-level and, surprisingly, the record groups are divided by subject (maps, cemetery records, early records, family records, manuscripts, vertical files, etc.). In some group-level descriptions, there are links to PDF finding aids listing names of businesses, families, organizations, etc. which have records in that group. These finding aids were extremely helpful in figuring out a research question.

Since I grew up in Montgomery County, I was familiar with most of the organizations listed in the PDF finding aids. In the vertical files—businesses group, I found a finding aid list that included the Bethesda Community Store. My father grew up in Bethesda, MD and the Community Store has always been a staple in my life. But, everyone in my father’s family and family friends who also grew up in Bethesda call the store “Brown’s,” and they could never give me a reason why. I figured it probably had to do with someone who worked at or owned the store at some point, but no amount of researching on the internet or in the Community Store itself could give me the answer. So I decided to visit the Jane C. Sween Library with the research question, “Why do members of the Bethesda community call the Bethesda Community Store, Brown’s?” From searching the MCHS Jane C. Sween Library webpage, I also found out

that they provide research services to email or snail mail reference questions for a voluntary fee of \$25 per hour. The Library will also mail photocopied materials for a fee. I thought this was a great service for users, but since I needed and wanted to do the research myself, I went to the Library's "Hours and Directions" webpage (MCHS, Hours and Directions) where I found convenient Saturday hours and that I needed to pay a \$5 research fee. The next step was to visit the archive, where I was sure I would find further information and procedures.

### **The In-Person Visit**

#### *Archive Design and Security*

I set out to visit the Jane C. Sween Library on a Saturday afternoon as it opened at noon. I am familiar with the Rockville, MD historical district, but I had trouble finding the Library. I knew from my online "orientation" that the Library was near the Beall-Dawson Museum, which had a lot of signage directing visitors, so I decided to follow those signs and hope the Library was close-by. I finally found a small building, which heavily resembled a barn, with the Library's name and operating hours on a sign affixed to the door. It was a few minutes past noon, so I opened the unlocked doors and walked into a very small room with file cabinets, book shelves, a large research table, and an information desk. Behind the information desk was a lot of cluttered boxes, a photocopier, more file cabinets, and another door. But, there was no one at the desk or behind it. I cautiously walked behind the information desk, thinking maybe someone was in the back or out of sight. Finding no one, I made my way back to the desk. There was a lot of signage and marketing materials littering the desk. I finally found a sign that said, "Please sign in and pay the \$5 research fee to the volunteer." I signed in and waited for about 5 minutes. The confusing signage, which suggested that the volunteer was simply a pay till and could not help with reference questions, and the long wait led me to believe that I would have to

go through the records myself and leave the fee at the desk. I knew I probably should not be wandering and going through things on my own, but my survival instincts kicked in and I decided to just go for it. This was definite proof that security in the Library is not of the utmost concern.

### *The Reference Interview*

As I started gravitating towards a file cabinet, a man walked in and said something to the effect of, "I saw you walk towards the building but I wasn't sure if you went in. I guess you just came right in, then." I'm not sure where he saw me from, or if he was scolding me for going in the Library without his permission. I stammered something about having signed in and he went behind the information desk and asked me what I needed help with. I asked him my research question, with the background story, and showed him the online finding aid I had printed out which indicated that the Library had records for the Bethesda Community Store. The man let me know that he was a volunteer and he wasn't sure where those records were. Instead of going through the query "abstraction," "resolution," and "refinement" process (Pugh 2005, 113), which should have included finding out where the records were or asking me more questions to determine if there was another group of records that could help, he simply focused on the location of the Community Store. He said I should look through a book about Bethesda, *Bethesda: A Social History*, which was compiled by a local historian. He went over to the stacks and again could not find where it was. He said that he only volunteers once a week and the location of items keeps changing. He finally found the book and handed it over to me. He also went to a filing cabinet and pulled out a folder of records labeled "Bethesda." He said those two resources contained all the information the Library had about Bethesda, but I knew from my online "orientation" that this was not true. He then went behind the information desk and started

doing his own work.

### *Onsite Access Tools and Finding Information*

There were no further onsite access tools available; the volunteer was supposed to be the sole access point and he definitely did not follow through with providing the link between the finding aid and “intellectual access” of information that Pugh outlines in her description of the importance of finding aids (2005, 109-110). I was a little stunned at his unwillingness to help and the fact that he gave me a book when I specifically asked for records, but I decided to venture forth. I went through the folder of records first, since a book was not the proper source for this assignment. The “Bethesda” folder included essays, local government documents, pamphlets, and a large number of newspaper clippings glued to card stock paper. The folder was obviously artificially compiled; the records were probably pulled from a lot of different collections to compile a “Bethesda” collection. There was no discernible order to the records and I am sure I put things out of order as I was pulling out relevant records. I thought this was strange, as so much of archival arrangement relies on original order, with the archivist using description to suggest relationships and assist users in researching topics (Meehan 2009). I later realized that since the organization was called a “Library,” they treated the arrangement of their archival materials like a library (subject-based) instead of an archive (provenance- or *respect de fonds*-based) (SAA, Glossary). I will discuss the implications of this subject-based arrangement later.

After spending 45 minutes going through the folder, with the volunteer carrying on with his own work, I only found the name of the Bethesda Community Store’s original owner. I decided to cross reference that name in *Bethesda: A Social History* to see if I could find

anything. After cross-referencing and intense index searching in the book, I found that a group of Bethesda citizens had shared renting and running the Community Store in the 1920s, one of whom was named Ernest Browns. Ernest's popularity earned the Community Store its nickname, Browns'. The full answer to my question appeared in a footnote, which I believe was a quote from Jane C. Sween herself, about how generations of Bethesda citizens since then have called the store Browns' without ever really knowing why. I was disappointed to have found the answer in a book, but without having gone through the "Bethesda" folder, I would have not known where to look in the book; *Bethesda: A Social History* is very poorly indexed. After doing a silent victory dance, I let the volunteer know that I had found the answer to my question. He was pleased and then treated me to a long-winded back story of Bill Offutt, author of *Bethesda: A Social History*, and how he had spent months pouring through the Library and interviewing Jane C. Sween and other volunteers about Bethesda. My initial disappointment that I had found the answer in a book disappeared; all of the information in the book had come from the Library's archival records. The volunteer confessed to me that he just tells people to search *Bethesda: A Social History* if they have any research question about Bethesda, which I realized was probably the reason why he wasn't familiar with archival records about Bethesda businesses. Referring researchers to the book was his "easy way out."

### **Providing Access in Archives: Lessons Learned**

This experience gave me a lot of insight into how "intellectual access" (Pugh 2005, 109) should be provided in archives. While the MCHS obviously spent a lot of time creating finding aids for their Library webpage and the overall online experience was very comprehensive, the onsite experience did not match. I was expecting to encounter an archivist who was familiar with the online finding aids and knew where the records in said aids were located. While I understand



that smaller archives need to use volunteers to offset costs, volunteers should be continually trained on how the archive is set up, the information that is on the website, and any issues that arise (i.e., the need to move files or books) during the days they don't volunteer. Well-marked access tools (online finding aids, indexes, records locations) should also be provided onsite not only to the archivist and volunteers, but also to the researcher. A researcher could use these onsite access tools make connections between records and then let a volunteer or archivist know where the records they want to view are located, so the archivist's memory isn't the only location tool. Security and having a fully staffed information desk with clear signage is also important to providing intellectual access; I could have stolen any number of things or messed up organization even more during those five minutes I was alone in the Library.

Conversely, however, even though the volunteer knowledge, reference interview, and security were lacking at the Jane C. Sween Library, I was impressed by their user-focused organization. The archival materials in the Library follow a library arrangement, with records artificially arranged by subject area rather than a *fonds* focus with archival description as the driving force in creating records relationships. While this goes against almost every piece of archival literature that exists, this method of organization is proof of the MCHS's focus on the community they serve and represent. As I learned from the story of Bill Offutt and Jane C. Sween's relationship, the MCHS employees have made great efforts to develop relationships with community researchers and these relationships are reflected in their subject-based record arrangement. Is this archival blasphemy? In this situation, I think not. For such a small archive with a narrow focus and a strong emphasis on serving the user, I think it should be possible to forgo traditional arrangement standards for a more "utilitarian approach" (Greene 1998) that makes intellectual access more user-friendly. Since users are familiar with the arrangement and

design of a library, archives should try to accommodate these user expectations when possible. This subject-based arrangement technique would not work in larger archives with a wider focus, and some professional historians might not be so appreciative of the archivists doing their work for them. But, if an archive is small and their mission is to serve and document a specific community, then the archive should have the freedom to break free from traditional archival bonds in order to uphold their mission and relationships with the community users.

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