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A Genealogy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, 1974-2014

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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank Joan Nestle, Deborah Edel, and the three anonymous reviewers of this manuscript. Thanks also to all the volunteers who have shaped the Lesbian Herstory Archives over the past forty years.
In the fall of 1974, the following announcement appeared in feminist, LGBT, and lesbian periodicals across the country, from Boston’s Focus: A Journal for Gay Women to the Lesbian Connection in Los Angeles: “The newly-formed Lesbian Herstory Archives is now in the process of collecting books, magazines, journals, news clippings, bibliographies, photos, historical information, tapes, films, diaries, poetry and prose, biographies, autobiographies, notices of events, posters, and other memorabilia and obscure references to our lives.” Appended below this wish list a New York City post office box address was included. “If you have materials that you would like to donate, please send them.”

But what, specifically, was this Lesbian Herstory Archives? Where in New York City was it located? Who was behind it? The announcement was understandably cryptic. In 1974, the “newly-formed Lesbian Herstory Archives” consisted of ten milk crates stored (supposedly temporarily) in a pantry in Joan Nestle’s Upper West Side apartment. More importantly, though, the Archives was a concept dreamed up by a half dozen women. Their vision was summed up in a statement of purpose, which was published a year later in the Archives’ first newsletter. “The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives.”

Still in existence forty years later, the Lesbian Herstory Archives is now the oldest and largest historical lesbian collection in the world. Blossoming out of Nestle’s apartment and eventually transplanting itself to a more public Park Slope townhouse, stories of the Lesbian Herstory Archives are well known and even “legendary” in gay and lesbian studies and among archivists. These accounts tend to emphasize the philosophical underpinnings of the Archives and its success

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(or failure) in bringing a utopian lesbian feminist vision into being—and rightfully so. This focus, however, is often to the exclusion of such practical matters as the acquisition and organization of the material in the collection. In other words, there is still not much written about the Archives as an archive.

In this paper, I trace the collection development of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I argue that the collection grew organically as a reflection of a dialogue between an evolving cohort of volunteer archivists and a community of donors. Primarily focusing on the first five years, this paper pinpoints key early decisions made by volunteer archivists. Specifically, I examine the Archives’ early collecting priorities and the introduction of the special collections in 1978. These decisions, I argue, laid the foundation for the Lesbian Herstory Archives and continue to shape it today, forty years later.

This study is primarily directed toward three audiences: (1) users or potential users of the Archives; (2) theorists who deploy “the archive” as an abstract concept in their work; and (3) archivists. For users or potential users of the Archives, this paper dovetails with a field-wide goal of better preparing users for archival research. In Mary Jo Pugh’s *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (2005), the writer identifies the task of translating users’ information-based questions into “search strategies” as the central challenge of archival reference services. This can be a frustrating process when the expectations of users do not align with what the archive collects, the ways in which the material is organized, or the rules governing the use of the collection. For researchers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, this can be exacerbated by the unusual and therefore initially difficult to navigate collection as well as the Archives’ lack of close oversight over the material in its custody.

In her dissertation on the materiality of archival repositories, Madhu Narayan describes her feeling of reticence during a visit to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. “I am afraid of touching things because I am afraid of being reprimanded,” she writes. “I have been trained to ask archivists for materials instead of looking for them myself.” In an unusually harsh indictment, another visitor, Rachelle Street, similarly characterizes the Archives as “overwhelming” and “confusing.”

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5 The internal guide for staffing procedures states that “sometimes researchers act like you are their ‘servant’ and want you to do their research for them . . . . For instance, you should not look through the cassettes for them,” 2. This is from the Lesbian Herstory Archives’ “General Information for Staffers,” last updated March 22, 2013.

luck finding anything there,” she gripes.7 Narayan and Street have in common a limited exposure to the collection, each having spent only one day at the Archives. However, while longer-term users eventually acquaint themselves with the collection either through independent exploration or by developing productive relationships with more knowledgeable volunteer archivists, the disorientation that Narayan and Street articulate is a good example of the challenges in providing the reference services that Pugh describes. In order to promote a more transparent relationship between archivist and user, this paper examines the ways in which the Lesbian Herstory Archives’ collection developed over time. In so doing, I hope to offer insight into how the collection can be used or might be used differently.

This paper also participates in an emerging interdisciplinary dialogue that interrogates the meanings of “the archive.” In Kate Eichhorn’s The Archival Turn in Feminism (2013), the writer describes the abstraction of the term “archive” within this discourse from its literal meaning to what Judith Jack Halberstam has described as a “floating signifier” that extends beyond “a place to collect material or hold documents.”8 Although admitting her own tendencies toward abstraction, Eichhorn advocates a greater specificity and an adherence to “professional definitions and standards.”9 Arguably, this is especially critical when writing about the Lesbian Herstory Archives—an archive that uses terms in ways that vary slightly or substantially from the definitions laid out in Richard Pearce-Moses’s A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology (2005). Indeed, the Lesbian Herstory Archives describes itself as “part library, part museum, part community gathering space.”10 Some of its material is catalogued like a library collection, while the special collections are governed by archival principles of provenance and original order, and other material does not narrowly fit within either schema. Without a full understanding of traditional archival definitions and standards as well as the ways in which the Lesbian Herstory Archives deviates from them, analyses risk becoming imprecise or even sloppy. In this paper, I build upon Kate Eichhorn’s work by providing a conceptual frame for thinking about archives in general and the Lesbian Herstory Archives in particular that is mindful of the definitions and standards of the field.

10 “Virtual Tour,” Lesbian Herstory Archives, lesbianherstoryarchives.org/tourintro.
It is significant here to note that in recent years the Lesbian Herstory Archives is most often written about within gender and cultural studies. This trend responds to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist analyses of “the archive” as well as the paradigm-shifting birth of queer theory in the early 1990s. More specifically, though, it can be traced back to the publication of *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) a decade ago. *An Archive of Feelings* investigates the affective life of lesbian culture through an examination of “cultural texts as repositories for feelings and emotions,” including but not limited to trauma.\(^\text{11}\) In the final chapter of *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich turns her attention to the Lesbian Herstory Archives as an example of an actual repository that “address[es] the traumatic loss of history that accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics.”\(^\text{12}\) Narayan’s recently completed dissertation, “Writing the Archive: Context, Materiality, Identity” (2013), is one example of a new work that explicitly extends Cvetkovich’s influential analysis. With at least another four dissertations in the process of completion, this continues to be a rapidly amassing body of literature.\(^\text{13}\)

In contrast, very little has been written about the Lesbian Herstory Archives by archivists—bringing me to the final audience for this study. While the Lesbian Herstory Archives is routinely referenced as an exemplary community-based or LGBT archive, it is rarely afforded more than this passing mention in archival literature. Exceptions to this general rule include the writings of current or former volunteer archivists like Judith Schwarz, Polly J. Thistlethwaite, and Shawnta Smith-Cruz, all of whom work(ed) as librarians or record managers. Like the aforementioned writers, I am also a coordinator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives with formal archival training and experience. Perhaps analyses originating from volunteers directly involved with the Archives are necessary to encourage a more sustained—and much needed—attention to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in the archival field.

\(^{11}\) Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 7.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 241.

\(^{13}\) Cait McKinney, a doctoral candidate in communication and culture at York University, is presently working on a dissertation on the cultural politics of digital media in queer contexts. She has two articles on the Lesbian Herstory Archives forthcoming in *Radical History Review* and *Feminist Studies*. Tamara O. De Szeghlo Lang, a doctoral candidate in women’s and gender studies also at York, is completing her dissertation on affective relationships users form to queer archives. Rebekah Orr is a doctoral candidate in sociology at SUNY Bridgeport. She is also pursuing a certificate in women's and gender studies. Her dissertation is titled “Imagining Queer: LGBTQ Archives and the Construction of Queer Communities.” Rebecka Sheffield (the only archivist among the bunch) is working on a dissertation on LGBTQ archives as social movement organizations.
Crucially, the Lesbian Herstory Archives was founded in the same historical moment that American archives took a significant step toward standardization and field formation. With the rising ubiquity of computers, the Society of American Archivists convened a National Systems Task Force in 1977 with the intention of creating standards for this new environment. In *Processing the Past* (2012), Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg remind us that “even the idea of machine compatible standardization was met with great skepticism [in 1977]. Most archival institutions had their own idiosyncratic methods for description and access, based on the uniqueness of their collections, their history and their resources.”

Because the advent of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and basic standardization of the field were nearly simultaneous, it is not quite accurate to suggest that the Lesbian Herstory Archives broke from any preexisting model of a traditional archive. Rather, the development of the Lesbian Herstory Archives must be seen as parallel to the development of the archival field, sometimes constituted by it and at other times resistant to it. Thus, attentive study of the Lesbian Herstory Archives is instructive both in historicizing the rise of community-based and LGBT archives and in providing a differently angled point of entry into the history of modern American archives. Finally and perhaps most importantly, now that a wide range of non-LGBT repositories are collecting lesbian material, the strategies that the Lesbian Herstory Archives gradually developed over the past forty years cannot be dismissed and—on the contrary—deserve to be seriously engaged by archivists. This paper begins that work.

**HERSTORY OF AN ARCHIVE**

When she retells the history of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Deborah Edel, one of the founders, sometimes begins by breaking down the meaning of its name. By boldly beginning with “lesbian,” the Archives combats the historical invisibility of lesbians and their absence from archives that are part of the “military industrial complex”—to quote Nestle. More subtly, this naming also affirms the importance of a specifically lesbian collection rather than a broader feminist, women’s, or LGBT one. “While all Lesbian history is women’s history, not all women’s history is Lesbian Herstory,” Nestle explains. “These identities may be intertwined at times, but they are separate, distinct legacies, and at other times they may be in conflict.”

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15 Beth Hodges, “Preserving Our Words and Pictures: Interview with Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel,” *Sinister Wisdom*, no. 13 (Spring 1980): 102. Nestle is specifically referring to archives in colleges and universities, though she would certainly extend this critique to governmental archives.

Originally coined by Robin Morgan in her seminal essay “Goodbye to All That” (1970), the second term, which combines “her” and “history,” is also a political statement. Although herstory is now often cringed at, it was selected to reflect an “embrace of the political notion that a women’s culture and history must not be engulfed and eclipsed by gay men’s or straight history.” According to Edel, this playful word was also meant as a “joke,” “to prove we had a sense of humor.”

Finally, the Lesbian Herstory Archives opted to call itself an “archive” to confer “status” and “dignity” on its undertaking. More of a strategic semantic choice than an exacting description, the Archives has never exclusively collected material that narrowly aligns with Moses’s definition of “archives”: “Material created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of the creator.” This paper will clarify this point in the pages that follow, but first a brief history of the Archives is necessary.

In the spring of 1973, a group of gay faculty, graduate students, and a smattering of undergraduates began to casually meet in New York City. These informal discussions soon formalized into the Gay Academic Union (GAU), a national organization that sought to “actively oppose sexism in the educational system and all forms of discrimination against women and gay people, to support individual academics in the process of coming out, to combat myths against gayness, and to promote new kinds of scholarship and the teaching of gay studies.” In November 1973, the GAU held its first of four annual conferences at John Jay

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17 Morgan was a member of W.I.T.C.H., a feminist group whose name was a flexible acronym. “Women Inspired to Commit Herstory” appeared alongside her name in the byline to her essay “Goodbye to All That,” which was first published in the underground newspaper R.A.T. This essay was subsequently republished in numerous feminist anthologies, including Morgan’s own *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970).


20 Deborah Edel, community discussion, Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum of Art, June 7, 2014.


22 Gay Academic Union Flyer, Gay Academic Union Organizational File, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
University, which drew 325 attendees from 65 colleges and universities. Among those in attendance were Julia Penelope Stanley, Sahli Cavallaro, Pamela Oline, Nestle, and Edel—the five founders of the Archives.

Julia Penelope Stanley was a linguist who had just resigned from her position in the University of Georgia’s English department in an attempt to move more toward “the periphery of patriarchal society.”

Sahli Cavallaro, the youngest in the group, was a psychology major. After meeting through the GAU, Stanley and she would soon become romantically involved. Pamela Oline, the oldest, was a feminist psychotherapist with a private practice. Oline also contributed her energies to movement projects like the Feminist Therapy Referral Collective and Identity House, a counseling service for gays and lesbians. Joan Nestle was an English instructor in the SEEK program at Queens College. A few years earlier, Nestle had left New York University’s PhD program in English after being discouraged from writing her dissertation on Langston Hughes, a now canonical poet associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, Edel was a doctoral student in psychology who worked with children with learning disabilities as an educational psychologist. Like Stanley and Cavallaro, Nestle and Edel too became lovers. Yet unlike the former’s short-lived relationship, Edel and Nestle’s partnership would go on for the next decade, serving as the backbone for the soon to be created Lesbian Herstory Archives.

During the first conference of the GAU, a separate women’s caucus broke off in order to address specifically lesbian issues. This caucus then divided itself into two smaller consciousness-raising groups. Serendipitously, Stanley, Cavallaro, Oline, Nestle, and Edel all joined the same discussion group, where the topic of preserving lesbian history was brought up “and the possibilities for organizing an archive were discussed.” In the months that followed, a fluid working group, primarily consisting of women from the GAU, began meeting to “develop a deeper vision” of the Archives.

By November of 1974, concurrent with the second annual conference of the GAU, the working group disseminated news of the Lesbian Herstory Archives throughout the underground press in hopes of growing the small collection that was accumulating in Joan Nestle’s apartment. This apartment was initially

24 Joan Nestle, email message to author, August 17, 2014.
26 “A Brief History,” Lesbian Herstory Archives, lesbianherstoryarchives.org/history.
intended as a provisional home. In fact, in February 1975, the Archives momentarily left New York for Tennessee, where Cavallaro (recently graduated) and Stanley (now unemployed) moved in order to join a rural lesbian separatist community. Stanley and Cavallaro took the ten milk crates that comprised the Lesbian Herstory Archives with them to Tennessee with the aim of cataloging the material. This project, however, was never completed and after the couple’s painful break up, Stanley accepted a teaching position at the University of Colorado, Cavallaro began a graduate program in psychology, and the Archives was driven back to New York City in Deborah Edel’s car Pigpen. “This is when we learned never to let the Archives go traveling,” Nestle explains. “We took it home,” where it stayed for nearly two decades.  

A GENEALOGY OF THE COLLECTION

ge·ne·al·o·gy— 4: an account of the origin and the historical development of something

The Lesbian Herstory Archives officially opened its doors to researchers in January 1976 “with over 150 hardbound books, a small Lesbian ‘trash’ paperback collection, one overflowing file cabinet, an easily countable number of Lesbian periodicals, a small tape and photography selection and a bulletin board of messages and flyers.”

For the rest of the decade, day-to-day operations of the Archives were tended to by Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel, who literally lived with the collection after Edel moved in with Nestle. Although the involvement of the three other co-founders tapered off over the course of the decade, Nestle and Edel’s caretaking was supplemented by the participation of an ever-widening network of lesbians who discovered the Archives through word of mouth or the underground press. This significantly included Judith Schwarz, an independent scholar with a day job as a records manager in Washington, DC, who first wrote to the Archives in October 1977 and was officially asked to join the collective two years later. In the pages to come, this paper will return to Schwarz’s influence on the Archives.

As the collection grew, so did the need for a system for organizing and cataloging the material. Although none of the founders were librarians or archivists, most were well versed in library and archival research. Furthermore, numerous librarians and archivists were included in the network of volunteers. By 1982, Edel estimated that the number of regular volunteers fluctuated between ten and

29 Thistlethwaite, “Becoming Invisible,” 44.
twenty. Among them were two archivists and another five librarians. As a result, the Archives adapted “new approaches,” purposely bending existing standards to suit the Archives’ shoestring budget and lesbian feminist principles. A good example is the decision to file material alphabetically by first name. Not only did this call into question the patriarchal practice of adopting surnames from men, it also was necessary because many of the women in the collection opted to use only their first name—particularly women of an earlier generation who came of age in the lesbian bar scene.

From the beginning, the Lesbian Herstory Archives has avoided making value judgments as to what constitutes lesbian history. Recalling the announcement with which this paper opens, the Archives is by policy “inclusive,” accepting “ANY materials that are relevant to the lives and experiences of Lesbians.” Still, this does not mean that the Lesbian Herstory Archives is a passive depository. On the contrary, the Archives has always actively molded its collection, especially in the early years.

In the 1970s, the major collecting priorities included: (1) books and periodicals, (2) photographs, and (3) oral history cassette tapes. In “The Will to Remember,” Joan Nestle explains that a major impetus behind the formation of the Archives was the knowledge that in “this early day of lesbian publishing . . . our presses and publishers were fragile undertakings and we were concerned about preserving all their precious productions.” It is not surprising, then, that books and especially periodicals were systematically collected throughout the 1970s. Each month, members of the collective contributed a tithing to the Archives, whatever each could afford. Much of this went toward the purchase of print materials. To obtain periodicals, the Lesbian Herstory Archives also participated in subscription exchanges in which it would barter a subscription of its irregularly published newsletter for a subscription to more frequently published LGBT, feminist, and lesbian periodicals. Although the correspondence to the Archives evidences some unrest over the inequality of this trade, most publications were happy to contribute issues to the permanent collection of the Archives, ensuring its posterity and accessibility to community members and researchers.

Figure 1: Judith Schwarz at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, c. 1980

Figure 2: Deborah Edel at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, c. 1980
The second major collecting priority was photography of and by lesbians. In 1979, the Lesbian Herstory Archives advertised the start of a National Lesbian Photograph Drive, which called on lesbians across the country to send photographs of “themselves, friends, children, homes, pets, activities to the Archives” in order to ensure that “our future sisters can see us.”\(^{35}\) Similarly, in the November 1976 newsletter, photographs and oral history tapes are listed among the most “urgently needed” material. Unlike photographs and cassette tapes, “books, newsletters, pamphlets are easy to come by,” the newsletter notes.\(^{36}\) In addition to collecting cassette tapes, the Archives also introduced its own oral history projects. The most famous of these is an extensive series of interviews with Mabel Hampton, an African-American lesbian born at the turn of the last century, conducted by Nestle. In 1979, excerpts from Hampton’s oral history were transcribed and published in the feminist periodical *Feminary*. These interviews remain an important document in the study of women’s and LGBT history.\(^{37}\)

While the Archives actively purchased and specifically solicited certain items for the collection, an ample quantity of paper-based material amassed more naturally. Before 1978, all paper-based material was stored in large filing cabinets collectively referred to as the vertical files. Judith Schwarz vividly describes this arrangement in a brief essay that was printed in the feminist newspaper *Off Our Backs* in May 1978. “I begin this article in the cozy room that houses the bulk of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City,” she writes.\(^{38}\)

Several tall filing cabinets crowd a corner of the room, filled with over 500 bulging file folders on every conceivable aspect of lesbianism and minutes of the meetings of the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the files of the no longer publishing *Lavender Woman* newspaper, original research papers and personal recollections by the noted linguist Julia Stanley, and the papers from the 1975 Lesbian Herstory Exploration in Los Angeles.\(^{39}\)

In the above quoted passage, Schwartz mentions in shorthand the Archives’ subject files (“500 bulging file folders on every conceivable aspect of lesbianism”) and unpublished papers (“original research papers”). She also refers

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\(^{37}\) In 2008, Mabel Hampton’s oral history interviews became the first cassette tapes that the Lesbian Herstory Archives digitized and made available on the Internet. [http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/collections/show/29](http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/collections/show/29).


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
to four discrete archival collections—the records of the Daughters of Bilitis, *Lavender Woman*, and the Lesbian Herstory Exploration, as well as Julia Stanley’s personal papers. As we shall see, these collections were physically and intellectually separated from the vertical files shortly after this article was published.

The emergence of the special collections from the vertical files is a pivotal and instructive moment in the history of the development of the collection. As the July 1980 newsletter explains, special collections are “any extended collection of material that reflects our lives—as they were or as they are now. It can include writings, letters, papers, drawings, tapes, songs, graphics, records of jobs, organizational involvement, etc.”

More specifically, an early guide to the collection defines the special collections as “groups of works or papers by one woman [or one organization],” which “remain together.” In other words, the special collections are governed by provenance—“a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family or organization that created or received the items in the collection. The principle of provenance or *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context.”

The special collections were physically removed from the vertical files and intellectually distinguished as a separate collecting area in 1978—and in 1979 they received unique accession numbers, beginning with the poet Adrienne Rich’s collection, number 7901. There are, I speculate, two reasons that the special collections came into being at this moment in time. First, this was likely due to the involvement of professionally trained archivists and librarians. As noted, although the Lesbian Herstory Archives is deeply critical of archival institutions as a whole, it has always welcomed the expertise of individual librarians and archivists. The Archives’ relationship with Ann Allen Shockley is a good example. In August 1975, the Lesbian Herstory Archives received the first letter of what would grow into a voluminous correspondence with the writer and librarian Shockley. Written on official stationary from her office as the associate librarian of Fisk University, the letter explains that Shockley first heard of the Archives after a newsletter was forwarded to her by the office of the National Black Feminist Organization. “As one who works with oral history, archival and

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41 “List of Graphic Arts; Map to LHA Original Small Room” folder, Archives of the Archives, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
manuscript collections, I can readily sympathize as well as appreciate your massive undertaking,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{43}

In the years that followed, Shockley visited the Archives relatively routinely during trips to New York City. Through these visits, Shockley became an informal consultant of sorts on the best practices for historic preservation. “You may want to look into getting Hollinger boxes and permalife folders to house your primary source materials i.e. manuscripts, correspondence, etc.,” she gently urged after her first visit in July 1978.\textsuperscript{44} “Don’t forget to check about the Princeton Files. They are metal and come in various sizes,” she reminded the Archives a year later after another visit.\textsuperscript{45}

It is likely that Nestle was thinking of Shockley (among others) when she stated the following in a 1979 interview: “We went to libraries and spoke to women who [had professional training]. We learned about archives and we found places we could buy things cheaper.”\textsuperscript{46} Likewise, the special collections also bear the imprint of professional archivists. Indeed, it is likely not a coincidence that 1979 was both the year that the special collections were first accessioned and the year that Judith Schwarz became a member of the collective.

The second probable motivation behind the creation of the special collections as a separate collecting area was the nature of material the Archives received. As community members increasingly donated organizational records or personal papers, it became clear that these archival collections could not be integrated into the subject- and genre-based classifications that the Archives had originally set into place. Close analysis of the personal papers of Adrienne Rich or the journalist Beth Hodges, for example, evince a self-conscious patterning of the holdings of traditional archives. This led not just to the creation of the special collections but also to the eventual adoption of (a modified and simplified version of) field-wide standards for arrangement and description.

FORTY YEARS LATER

Today, more than four hundred collections of personal papers and organizational records comprise the special collections. These collections are piled to the ceiling of the Park Slope townhouse that the Archives has inhabited since 1993: crammed

\textsuperscript{43} Correspondence 1975, Archives of the Archives, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
\textsuperscript{44} Correspondence July–September 1978, Archives of the Archives, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
\textsuperscript{45} Correspondence, November 1979, Archives of the Archives, Lesbian Herstory Archives.
\textsuperscript{46} Beth Hodges, “An Interview with Joan and Deborah of the Lesbian Herstory Archives,” \textit{Sinister Wisdom}, no. 11 (Fall 1979): 12.
into every available corner and filling hundreds of linear feet of offsite storage. Overflowing with material, it is understandable that users often initially find the Lesbian Herstory Archives difficult to navigate. With countless collections organized by subject and countless more by genre, it is easy to see the confusion between the subject, geographic, biographic, organizational, and conference files; the book, periodical, spoken word, photography, t-shirt, and button collections; and the subject- and genre-transcending special collections. As this paper has hopefully demonstrated, though, the logic to this apparent chaos is located in the history of the collection.

Like a palimpsest, we can spot traces of past iterations as the collection continues to grow. By tracking this process, I have argued that a number of key decisions made in the first five years of the Archives’ existence laid the groundwork for the collection as it exists today. Crucial among these decisions were, first, the choice to privilege collections of books, periodicals, spoken word, and photography. Here, the continued strength of the collection in these areas is deeply indebted to these early efforts, particularly as the Archives begins digitizing its photography and spoken word collections. Second, I contend that the separation of the special collections from the vertical files is an important moment in the Archives’ history—ripe for further investigation—that complicates the place of the fiercely independent Archives within the larger archival field. From 1974 until 2014, the Archives has matured from a lesbian feminist movement project to a institution that has tenaciously survived to provide “future generations with ready access to material relevant to their lives.” It is this vision and the collection strategies that undergird its execution that sustain the Lesbian Herstory Archives—and carry it into the future.

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47 Cait McKinney’s forthcoming articles on this subject in Feminist Studies and Radical History Review are useful in much further fleshing out this argument.


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