
Manuscripts: An Untapped Source for Exhibits

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Manuscript materials should be very useful and important to the development of exhibits in libraries and museums. Unfortunately, manuscripts are many times overlooked or not even considered as a source for displays. Still, the use of manuscript collections to supplement artifacts, provide information, and give focus to an exhibit is a relatively inexpensive and professional method to improve the quality of the exhibit.

The first step in the development of an exhibit concept is research. It is possible, and often convenient, to examine an exhibit topic entirely from secondary sources, but this approach limits the originality of the exhibit's content and sometimes leaves an exhibit with little real focus. A broad subject needs to be narrowed, and a precise direction must be developed. This is especially true for small libraries or museums with a limited amount of space.

The use of manuscript materials helps remedy the problems of direction and originality. A broad topic, such as World War I, can be handled in both a general and original manner. After a brief introductory statement explaining the war in very general terms, accompanied by familiar photographs of "boys going over the top" and the steady gaze of General Pershing, the focus might be narrowed to involvement by local groups and the community's response to the war. Anti-German feelings were extremely intense nationally, and letters written by local folks or people who lived within the state may produce evidence to substantiate strong anti-German sentiment on a provincial level. Correspondence from local, regional and state manuscript collections might reflect the patriotic desire to "kill the Kaiser." The exhibit automatically has at least one focus, and energy can be concentrated into a theme which presents the big picture of American patriotism and how it was reflected in the community or state.

When one is researching an exhibit and narrowing a topic, artifacts needed and artifacts available to make the exhibit more meaningful and compelling should be kept in mind. Objects and photographs draw people to and into an exhibit, stimulate interest, and create a thirst for more knowledge. Manuscript collections sometimes contain visual materials that help make an exhibit work. An eighteenth-century colonial map, an original first edition newspaper headlining a politician's landslide victory, and a nineteenth-century advertising broadside for a theater production are examples of what a collection might supply. Photographs are always in demand for exhibits, and manuscript collections can provide new views of old subjects from pictures never before made public. Correspondence itself might be used for artifacts, and excerpts with strong descriptive qualities can be magnified for exhibit use.

Manuscript collections offer a potential gold mine of artifacts, but extracting the gold from the mine may pose a problem. Restrictions on a particular collection may prevent its use, and factors such as preservation, security, and insurance should always be considered. No curator or director can be expected to lend irreplaceable manuscripts for exhibits unless adequate security is assured. Still, copies of photographs or documents can be made, excerpts from correspondence can be drawn out, and legal and personal reservations can, in most cases, be worked out to the satisfaction of all concerned parties.

The problems with using manuscript collections for exhibits are usually time and money. A relevant collection might be located some distance from the library or museum or be too voluminous to be searched carefully for the right item. A basic knowledge of manuscript collections available in one's region and state helps ease these problems. For more specific knowledge of collections and their holdings, one should consult a variety of manuscript catalogs or descriptive guides. Most institutions provide catalogs and guides to their collections at little or no charge. Developing personal relationships with curators

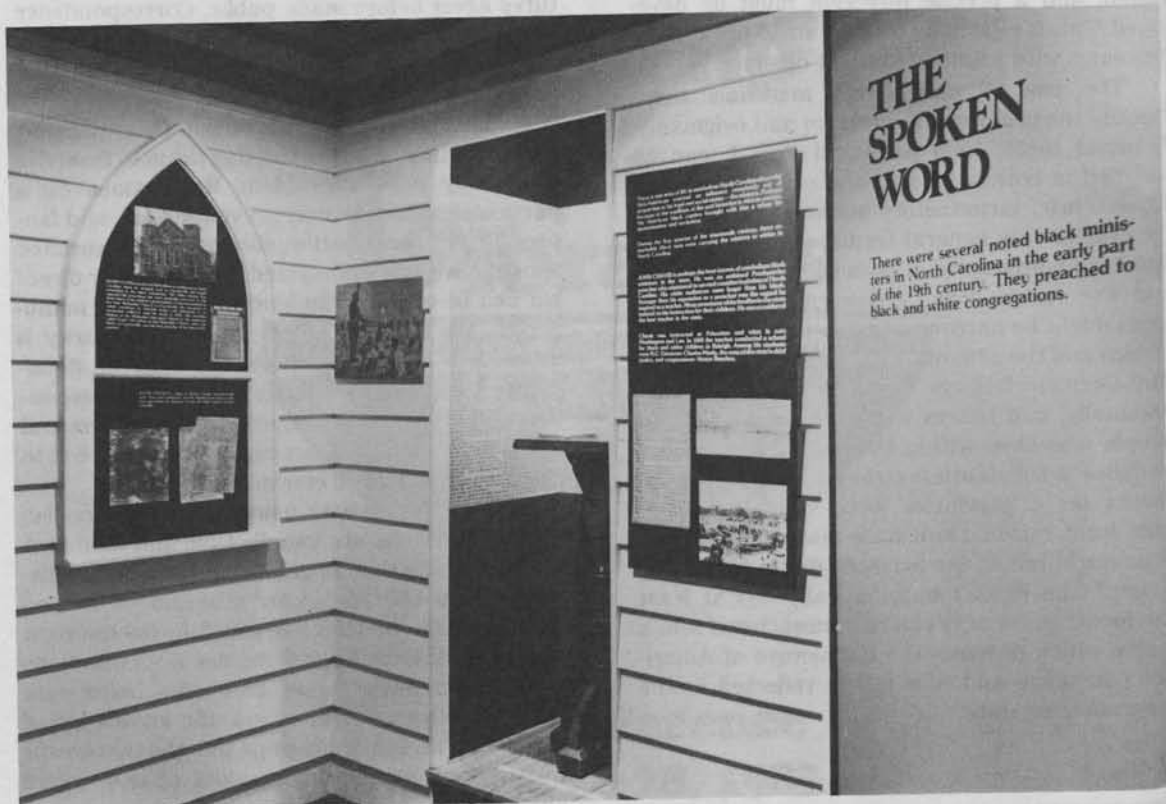
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of manuscript collections is useful since most are extremely knowledgeable of their collections' contents, and they can keep one informed of recent acquisitions.

Manuscript collections should be included in, not excluded from, the development of exhibits for libraries and museums. The original textual and visual materials they can provide give depth and focus to such exhibits. They are a source waiting to be tapped.

Selected Bibliography

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The use of primary sources in exhibits is seen in a recent exhibit by the North Carolina Museum of History on the black presence in North Carolina.