

Documenting Women's History at the Schlesinger Library

By **Jenny Gotwals**, Curator for Gender and Society at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University

A talk given to the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco's Annual Meeting, May 22, 2021

[Slide 1 – Exterior of Schlesinger, 2019]

Today's Schlesinger Library began in 1943 with the "Woman's Rights Collection," archival material from the suffrage movement collected and curated by Radcliffe College alumna and suffrage activist Maud Wood Park (class of 1898).

[Slide 2 – Maud Wood Park]

First president of the League of Women Voters, Park was concerned that the long history of the fight for women's suffrage would not be remembered without the preservation of letters, speeches, writings created by women working to gain the right to vote. She gathered these materials from her friends and fellow activists, and donated them to Radcliffe College in anticipation of her 45th reunion, and as a memorial to the achievements of the suffrage activists. On August 26, 1943, Radcliffe College announced her gift and introduced the new Radcliffe College president Wilbur Jordan.

[Slide 3 – Woman's Rights Collection arriving at Longfellow Hall]

The Woman's Rights Collection was housed in a small room in Longfellow Hall. It doesn't really look here much like an archive, but the collection contained portraits of suffrage activists that you can see on the wall, and documents were displayed in the glass case along the wall.

[Slide 4 – interior of Longfellow Hall with Woman's Rights Collection on display]

This collection was the seed that began the Women's Archives. At the time, very few libraries or archives thought women's lives and activities – even those focused on political action – worthy of documenting and preserving. Radcliffe President Jordan's interest and support for collecting and preserving primary documents of women's accomplishments and contributions to the nation's history was critical to the growth of the archives at Radcliffe. President Jordan consulted with his Harvard colleague Arthur Schlesinger and historian Mary Ritter Beard on what to collect.

[Slide 5 – Wilbur K. Jordan and Mary Ritter Beard]

Mary Ritter Beard had been trying to create what she called a World Center for Women's Archives, but her efforts were stymied by World War II, and instead she turned to advising other

institutions on what to collect. Beard suggested to Jordan that the collecting focus at Radcliffe should be not just on what she called the “equal rights movement” - or working for political equality - but on all aspects of women’s lives. Together Mary Ritter Beard, Arthur Schlesinger, and Wilbur Jordan solicited donations from notable women and organizations.

Among the first collections to be donated were those of labor activist and suffragist Leonora O’Reilly, shown in the next slide in a 1970s era poster promoting her achievements in labor activism.

[Slide 6 – Leonora O’Reilly]

O’Reilly’s papers include documentation of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Other early collections were the papers of international law expert Fannie Fern Andrews, the records of the National Consumers’ League, and a collection of etiquette books. By 1949, enough material had been received and cataloged to open what was now called the Women’s Archives in Byerly Hall. The next slide shows the reading room.

[Slide 7 – Women’s Archives room in Byerly Hall]

Seven researchers came that first year. In 1950, The Women’s Archives became a separate department within Radcliffe College, with staff of a director, an archivist, and a secretary. This is essentially the same administrative structure as today; the Schlesinger is one of Harvard Radcliffe Institute’s programs.

Collections added in the 1950s included papers of women prominent in government, labor activism, and criminal justice reform. The next slide shows women’s prison reformer Miriam Van Waters and Hilda Worthington Smith, who ran schools for women industrial workers in the 1920s and 1930s.

[Slide 8 – Miriam Van Waters and Hilda Worthington Smith]

The Women’s Archives also began collecting family papers, including those of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s family, shown in the next slide.

[Slide 9 – Beecher Stowe family papers]

Other family papers included the Blackwell family, and that of Nellie Nugent Somerville, the first woman elected to the Mississippi state legislature. While these families included prominent women, who are the subject of historical inquiry themselves, large collections of family correspondence also give insight into family roles and relationships, generational shifts in social norms, and domestic arrangements.

In 1961 Widener Library transferred 1500 books on cookery to the Women’s Archives, which were the seed of our culinary collections, as shown in the next slide.

[Slide 10 – Cookbook interior]

Around that same time, the Women's Archives first had funds to purchase books, and used them to buy more historic cookbooks and etiquette books. A Curator of Published Materials was hired in the late 1960s to oversee the collection of books. Barbara Haber, who worked as that curator for almost 30 years, was herself instrumental in developing the field of culinary history, and in using historic cookbooks as primary sources.

In addition to the many books, the papers of Amelia Earhart and Susan B. Anthony were donated in the early 1960s. As the collections grew, the Women's Archives needed more space than the small room in Byerly Hall.

In September 1966, as some of you may recall, Hilles Library opened in Radcliffe Quad, and the Radcliffe College Library collection moved from the Radcliffe Yard to that new building. The former Radcliffe College Library building was then renovated, including the creation of climate-controlled vaults for archival material. At this same time, the Women's Archives was renamed for Arthur Schlesinger, and his wife Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger, a scholar of women's history.

[Slide 11 – Elizabeth Schlesinger with Radcliffe College president Matina Horner, and Arthur Schlesinger with Barbara Miller Solomon, director of the Women's Archives and Assistant Dean of Radcliffe College]

In 1967 the newly named Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America moved into our current building. At that time the Radcliffe Institute (the postgraduate fellowship program) also had offices in the building. The next slide shows the Library Director's Office in 1971. Some of you may recognize the Sarah Wyman Whitman stained glass window.

[Slide 12 - 1971 interior view of Schlesinger Library]

This space in the building has served many purposes – after being an office, it was home of the culinary collections, then was part of the general reading room, and now is a conference room called the Radcliffe College Room.

In 1969, the Schlesinger Library had 250 researchers. Definitely more than the 7 who had come 20 years prior, but that figure would soon change dramatically again. By 1976 there were 3200 visitors -- more than a tenfold increase over 7 years. These years of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a huge growth in interest in women's history, women's studies, women's accomplishments.

[Slide 13 – photographs of marches and protests for women's equality, 1970]

Because of the women's liberation movement, more women were looking for historical models, ways women had lived creatively, and worked outside the home, and insisting that this history be taught in higher education. As many of you know, Radcliffe students were demanding this too, as well as equality at Harvard in other ways.

In general, more women were getting PhDs, and looking for sources with which to write history about women and theorize gender. The Schlesinger Library's collections were critical to the growth of women's history as a discipline in the academy – and to the general awareness of how women's history needed to be preserved. The next slide shows Gerda Lerner, an influential early scholar of women's history, who taught and mentored many other women historians, and whose papers track the history of the discipline. Also shown is Bunny Sandler, best known for her work writing and publicizing Title IX, but who started working for equity in educational settings because she and many other women with PhDs weren't being hired in equal positions to men.

[Slide 14 – Gerda Lerner and Bunny Sandler]

Indeed, students and scholars' interrogations into whose history was being told also led to questions about what constituted historical evidence. As the research value and historical importance of ephemeral material like diary entries, recipes, love letters, and scrapbooks was articulated by scholars, the Schlesinger sought to add more of these primary documents of women's private lives. The next slide

[Slide 15 – Julia and Paul Child valentine]

shows a Valentine made by Paul and Julia Child. Collecting and describing such material, across the vast collections of the Library, allows researchers to trace how romantic love is expressed over time. The next slide, a World War II ration book, which can be used to research family economies, wartime scarcity, and culinary history. Both of these kinds of documents were once considered irrelevant, and not the sort of evidence that a serious scholar would use as a primary source when writing history.

[Slide 16 – World War II ration book]

With an eye toward documenting the lives of women who were not yet represented in the Schlesinger or any archive, the Library began to undertake significant oral history projects, primarily focused on racial minorities and recent immigrants to the US who might not have had archival collections to donate but whose life stories were critical to understanding the history of women and the United States. The Black Women Oral History Project, begun in 1976, interviewed 72 Black women, from the nationally known, like Rosa Parks, shown in this next slide with her granddaughters, to the locally known, like Charleszetta Waddles, a Detroit minister and activist who used her church to provide services to that city's poor residents.

[Slide 17 – Charleszetta Waddles and Rosa Parks with granddaughters]

The Schlesinger's collections grew significantly in the 1970s, in part due to the growth of women's organizations. From the mid 1960s on, women founded groups to tackle collective problems. From grassroots, local activism, to national membership organizations, to small feminist collectives, these groups of women worked together on numerous issues, and in many

cases the organizations are still working today. Schlesinger staff reached out to many of these groups within months of their founding, urging them to keep their archives and send them to the Schlesinger for posterity. The next slide shows posters from a few of these groups – an ERA walkathon sponsored in 1981 by the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, whose records the Schlesinger holds. The Republican Coalition for Choice poster is from the papers of Mary Dent Crisp, a co-founder of that group.

[Slide 18 ERA walkathon and Republican Coalition for Choice]

In 1979, Radcliffe College celebrated its centennial. At that time, the College realized how important its own archives were, and an archivist was hired to locate, organize, and list the official Radcliffe College Archives, and to determine what other records were available to be collected. Jane Knowles worked in this capacity until her retirement in 2007.

[Slide 19 Radcliffe College founding documents and printed material]

In addition to official records, papers of Presidents and papers of Deans, material from Radcliffe College alumnae that document their student days is an important part of the Archives. The next slide shows a scrapbook kept by Victoria Ogden Howarth, Radcliffe College Class of 1911.

[Slide 20 – Howarth scrapbook]

The Radcliffe College Archives was given a separate room in the Schlesinger Library building and was in some way a subset of the larger Schlesinger Library - reference services were separate and there were separate call numbers for archival collections. After Jane Knowles retired in 2007, reference and curation of the Radcliffe College Archives has been taken up by Schlesinger staff.

The Library grew so much in the 1970s that it overtook the entire building. The offices of the Bunting Institute moved out in 1987 and the Library underwent renovations to better serve researchers and staff working with collections. The building was renovated again in the early 2000s, and again in 2019.

In the last few decades we have added to our archival holdings significantly, with a clear eye toward documenting the lives and activism of women whose contributions and histories weren't heavily found or actively sought in the first 40 years of collecting. The goal is to diversify and expand the histories and stories that can be told from the collections. We pay careful attention to what topics researchers ask for that we don't currently document.

Some of the most popular collections for researchers are those that document women's activism around racial injustice. The next slide shows Black feminists and activists Angela Davis and June Jordan, whose papers get heavy research use. Davis and Jordan were friends, and this highlights another things we take into consideration when building collections – documenting women working together, corresponding, groups working on similar issues.

[Slide 21 – Angela Y. Davis and June Jordan]

At the same time, we want to document situations where women disagree, and actively work against each other. To not collect papers of women of varying political and ideological beliefs will produce an inaccurate historical record, and make it difficult for historians to understand women's differing views on social and political issues. This next slide shows two women whose papers are critical to understanding conservative politics in the second half of the 20th century: pro-life activist Dr. Mildred Jefferson, and anti-Communist and Republican Party activist Anna Chennault.

[Slide 22 – Anna Chennault, Mildred Jefferson and Phyllis Schlafly]

We also want to build collections documenting lives of women living in poverty or experiencing homelessness. The next slide shows a diary kept by Eleanor Skelton Cash when living in a women's homeless shelter in 1986. She only had access to toilet paper, not notebooks. We're lucky this ephemeral document survives, and it is a reminder of how much about women's lives in the US we can't easily document because physical evidence doesn't survive.

[Slide 23 – Cash's diary on a toilet paper roll]

We want to ensure that our collections document lives of lesbians, trans and nonbinary people. Gender expression and sexuality is changing a lot, and very rapidly, and we know this will be a source of keen historical inquiry. The next slide shows Pauli Murray, lawyer, civil rights activist, and Episcopalian priest, who struggled with her gender identity throughout her life. Recent scholarship has suggested that today she might identify as trans or nonbinary, but she didn't have that language available to her. Also shown is poet Adrienne Rich, Radcliffe College class of 1951, whose changing sexuality was an important component of her poetry.

[Slide 24 – Pauli Murray and Adrienne Rich]

We continue to look for material that documents the lives of "ordinary" women like in the next slide. This is Beatrice Whiting's sewing exercise book from 1915, and Jennifer Halpern's 1975 teenage diary entry about going on a date. We don't have much more than these items to document the lives of either woman, but together they speak to different circumstances in the lives of young women across the 20th century.

[Slide 25- Whiting exercise book, Halpern diary page]

We're attentive to shifts in technologies, and collect blogs, email, websites, social media. We think a lot about what kinds of evidence future historians will want to have access to when writing about lives of women in the US today.

Today the Schlesinger Library has over 4000 archival collections – and they range in size from one item – like a diary or a letter - to 300 boxes. Each one is different, which is challenging

and exciting. We have entire categories of collections I haven't had time to discuss – including those documenting women's health, and women's entry into male-dominated professions.

We currently have a team of 3 curators focused on appraising what new material to acquire. We are no longer the only serious research library focused on documenting women – thank goodness! - but the amount of material we are offered is much larger than what we can responsibly steward for the long term. We want to add collections in new areas of historical inquiry, that make a difference in our knowledge of the lives of women and the understanding of gender in the United States.

In addition, we want to be sure that our research and outreach in terms of what collections to pursue is expansive. We're currently working with two advisory groups – of Radcliffe College alumnae, donors, activists and scholars – to help us with current collecting initiatives focused on Asian American women and politically and socially conservative women.

This last slide is a view of the newly renovated exhibit space at the Library, which we're excited to be able to return to this August after over a year of working mainly remotely due to Covid. We'll be thrilled to welcome alumnae back to the library next year on Radcliffe Day.

[Slide 26 – Schlesinger Library interior, 2019]