

Women's Archives and Women's History

(Joan Wallach Scott's comments on the dedication of the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives, October 10, 1986)

No Documents, No History

Many of us are here today to celebrate the opening of the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives, a collection within the University library archives especially dedicated to the history of women at Brown, in the state of Rhode Island, and more generally in the United States. These archives bring into visibility and make accessible to scholars and researchers the history of women at the University and the history of women's activities as private and public figures in the towns and cities of this state. These archives, too, are part of a long and honored tradition of establishing women's archives, a tradition that—not at all coincidentally—began in the 1890s and early 1900s around the time the Women's College was founded. For there is a connection between the pursuit of women's education and the documentation of women's past activities. The women and men who insisted that women were capable of and entitled to learning also understood the importance of providing historical evidence about women's capabilities—and for that they needed records.

Although books and articles on the history of women have appeared throughout the ages, the practice of creating special collections and archives for women is a relatively recent phenomenon, not quite a century old. It is only in the last few years that historians have become aware that there was a pattern to the establishment of women's archives in Western Europe and the United States. It turns out that dozens of collections, large and small, were begun in the first decades of the twentieth century, usually by women active in the suffrage movement or in some other enterprise devoted to improving women's access to education, employment, the professions, public and political life. These women had a sense that they were making history and that the memory of their activity must be preserved for posterity. They knew from experience



Photo Credit: Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives

Christine Dunlap Farnham '48 was the first chair of the Pembroke Associates Council and an early supporter of establishing an archives of Brown and Rhode Island women.

that women in the past had been neglected in major libraries and document collections, and they wanted to be sure that would not happen to them. Some also wanted to make the experiences of their predecessors visible to present and future generations. "Seeking information regarding women of bygone days," wrote one of these dedicated collectors, "is like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack of historical writings." Without visibility, they knew, women would not be included in the record of the past and so would have no sense of historical memory or identity. Mary Beard put it very succinctly when she set out to organize a world center for women's archives in 1935: "No documents. No history."

“Memory,” the philosopher/historian Michel Foucault has written, “is actually a very important factor in struggle. . . . If one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. . . . It is vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, administer it, tell it what it must contain.” Archives provide the stuff of memory, the raw materials out of which collective identity and a place in history are fashioned. And so it is not surprising that archives became the concern of those preoccupied with women’s collective identity, a preoccupation that took the form, in the early years of the twentieth century, of a movement for education, employment, and the vote.

Today I want to spend some time looking at the history of women’s archives. It is instructive, it is full of wonderful stories, and it will help us grasp the full significance of the Farnham Archives at Brown University.

A Preoccupation with Women’s Collective Identity

In England, the great repository for women’s papers is the Fawcett Collection, an extensive library built around the papers of two formidable leaders of the women’s movement. Millicent Garrett Fawcett headed the National Women’s Suffrage Society and actually negotiated the details of the legislation that granted British women the vote in 1918. Her sister, Louise Garrett Anderson, was one of the first women doctors in England and a longtime advocate of education as well as professional access for women. Their papers are the basis of this now vast collection.

In France, there are two major women’s archival collections. One, begun by Marguerite Durand (1864–1936), a feminist journalist, grew out of Durand’s clippings and articles from her newspaper, *La Fronde*. Over the years she enlarged the collection to include books and various papers, and she invited the public to consult these resources. (Lucky visitors to her library were invited to join Miss Durand for tea.) An extremely enterprising and shrewd planner, Durand began negotiations with the city of Paris in 1930 to

secure official status for her books and papers. And in 1932, with all the arrangements in place, she turned her collection over to the city. That library still flourishes as an independent institution today.

The other French collection has a very different and in some ways more typical story. Marie-Louise Bouglé (1883–1936) came from a poor family, and she craved the kind of education that would have enabled her to read and buy books. Instead, she worked at various jobs in Paris and in the 1920s joined women’s and pacifist groups. She was surrounded by women intent on creating a history of their current activities and its links to women in the past. Their small apartments were crammed with papers and books; one was writing a women’s encyclopedia that came to 166 volumes; another clipped any articles in any newspapers having anything to do with women. The death of any of these women created not only sadness but consternation. Who would take over a collection? Who would preserve and carry on the job of amassing women’s archives? Usually, in the 1920s and early 1930s, it was Marie-Louise Bouglé who took over her colleagues’ accumulations of paper when they could find no other home. Bouglé articulated the motive that many of the group must have shared:

The thought that all our efforts and ideas might be lost to the future worried me. I resolved to collect everything concerning present day women’s activities. From there to the past was an easy step. . . . Time pressed. Collections appeared each day and they had to be saved. I told myself that what I saved would (last forever). And then began the development of a passion I didn’t know I had. The usefulness of my research, the growing interest in it, the success of my searches (for more books and papers), all contributed. At first, I planned only to save a few documents, but as days passed, I filled a room with books, pamphlets, newspapers, documents of all sorts, often rare and of great value and I found myself creating the vast library I had so yearned to have.

Each day after work, Marie-Louise Bouglé visited bookstores, riffling through materials until she found some treasure. She spared no expense. In fact, in many years she spent more on her archives than on rent, food, and clothes combined. Shop owners began to put aside “Bouglé-type books” (*livres du genre Bouglé*). She would pay for them, take them home, and fill out a catalogue card immediately. In three years, Bouglé had twelve thousand documents assembled; by 1923, she opened her “library” to the public two evenings a week. Can you imagine the fervor that inspired her not only to possess but to make available her collection so that the work of creating women’s history, fashioning collective memory, would happen? When Bouglé died in 1936, those who knew about her work set up a Society of Friends of the Marie-Louise Bouglé Library and tried to raise enough money to protect and permanently house the collection. They were not successful and in 1942 her husband tried to donate the by-then crumbling and disordered lot to the Bibliothèque Nationale. But that great library’s curators deemed the collection insignificant (thereby proving the need for separate women’s libraries and archives). Finally, it ended up at the library of the city of Paris: the books were integrated into the general collection, and the papers stored in boxes in the basement. Only in 1977, when a graduate student looking for photographs for a book she was about to publish on the history of French women was directed to the boxes did the collection see the light of day. It was eventually catalogued and is now preserved as a separate collection, providing eager researchers (among them Brown graduate students) with invaluable and otherwise unavailable information about the history of women in France.

The story of the Bouglé Collection is instructive for many reasons, not the least of which has to do with the reciprocal relationship between women’s movements, archives, and history. Bouglé was driven by the need to create and preserve the history of women’s experience. She assembled documents to make that possible. Forty years after her death, a young woman, inspired by a renewed attention to women’s status, used those documents to illustrate a book about women’s history.

And she did more. She catalogued the entire collection, making it visible and available for future scholars. She worked on the catalogue, moreover, under the direction of Michelle Perrot, the preeminent historian of women in France today.

In April this year I visited the Netherlands for the first time, and in Amsterdam I went to the International Archives of the Women’s Movement (IAWM). Established in 1935 with the support especially of women who had been active in pacifist movements during World War I, the archive flourished for a few years. Its driving force was Rosa Manus, an active member of international feminist organizations. She not only donated her own extensive collections but wrote to women all over the world asking for donations. During World War II, the Nazis confiscated the archive. Some of its contents were lost, some were transferred to Germany and have disappeared, some of it was saved. After the war, the archive became a part of the International Institute of Social History. In the 1960s, the rebirth of the women’s movement led to increased interest in and use of the library, and in 1981 it moved to its own, larger premises. The archivists at the Amsterdam archives have proven what many of us have learned in doing women’s history: when you define a subject or a source worth saving, it becomes visible. In the 1960s, the IAWM undertook a search for diaries and letters by women, and within a few months they began pouring in. They arrived in potato crates and wire boxes, they varied from a single holiday diary to a file of letters, to seven hundred notebooks written by one woman. This year, the archives became an incredibly important place because the Dutch Minister of Education decided that one of the questions on the history exam for secondary school teachers would be on Dutch women’s history. Historians have been working frantically with high school teachers to prepare curriculum materials so students can be prepared to take the exam.

Arletta Jacobs Gerritsen (1854–1929), the first woman physician in the Netherlands, amassed an enormous collection of books, papers, and periodicals having to do with women. She felt she owed her ability to become a doctor to the women’s



Helen Warren '59 takes advantage of the resources of the Pembroke College Library.

movement of her day. By 1900, the collection was so big that the family hired someone to prepare a catalogue for publication. Eventually the collection was sold, and somehow it crossed the ocean, landing first in Chicago at the Crear Library then at the University of Kansas. Seven or eight years ago, as it became clear that university libraries were unprepared to meet the enormous demand for materials generated by women's studies courses, the Gerritsen Collection was filmed and copies sold to libraries. A grant from the Lowe Foundation enabled Brown to buy a copy of the Gerritsen Collection, making available a major research resource on women just as the Pembroke Center came into existence.

In the United States there are many variants on these stories, and there are interesting connections. In the 1920s, a Hungarian pacifist named Rosika Schwimmer, who had immigrated to the U.S., urged Mary Beard to establish a World Center for Women's Archives in the U.S. Schwimmer had helped organize the first International Congress of Women in the Hague in 1915 to mediate an end to the war, and she was eager to preserve the records of these efforts. Mary Beard agreed to the project and spent a

good deal of time collecting and raising money. In 1940, in the face of World War II, she abandoned the effort. The collections she acquired were dispersed to various libraries, among them the New York Public Library, the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe.

The Schlesinger Library began with a donation of papers from Maud Wood (Parks), Radcliffe, class of 1898. Ms. Wood was an ardent suffragist in college, and when she graduated she organized the National College Equal Suffrage League, a coalition of local women's college groups. In 1917, she went to Washington to lobby for the Voting Amendment, and when it passed, she became the first president of the League of Women Voters. Ms. Wood saved everything—her papers, those of her coworkers, materials on the history of all aspects of the women's rights movement in the United States. In 1943, she donated her collection to Radcliffe with the hope that a scholarly resource, a museum, and a memorial to the cause would be set up. Radcliffe trustee and Harvard historian Arthur M. Schlesinger suggested that the Maud Wood Parks papers become the kernel for a much larger effort—a library and archive of the history of women in America.

The project was supported by individuals who gave their papers: the doctor Mary Putnam Jacobi and the labor organizer Leonora O'Reilly; by historians like Mary Ritter Beard, whose efforts to set up an international women's archives in New York had been interrupted by the war and who then redirected her attention to Radcliffe; by Arthur Schlesinger and his wife—also a historian—who donated their large etiquette and cookbook collection; and by activist book collectors like Miriam Holden, who described the Radcliffe archives as a place “that makes possible the study of women's inherited traditions.” It also gave a home to unwanted collections like that of Annie Dillon. Dillon was a Chicago suffragist who decided that the movement for the vote ought to be documented for future generations, so she began collecting suffrage pamphlets. Before the collection grew too big, she contacted the Northwestern University library, which assured

her of its interest in her work and promised to take the collection when she was ready to give it. When the time came, however, and Dillon offered Northwestern the collection, its archivists were no longer interested and so refused to accept Dillon's boxes of material. Shocked and dismayed, Dillon sought another repository for her papers. And—despite a belated attempt by Northwestern to reclaim them—they are now in the Schlesinger Library. In 1965, when Arthur Schlesinger died, the library was renamed in honor of the historian and his wife, and it has since been devoted to documenting not only famous women's lives but the lives and achievements of American women.

For me, the purpose of that library (and indeed of women's archives generally) is wonderfully illustrated in an article written in 1957 by Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger. Although she never held the institutional positions won by her husband and son, Mrs. Schlesinger was an accomplished historian in her own right, and she was particularly interested in establishing the place of women in history. The article I want to tell you about was called "The Philosopher's Wife and the Wolf at the Door." It was the account of the life of Abigail Alcott, the wife of the eccentric New England figure Bronson Alcott, and the mother of Louisa Mae Alcott, author of *Little Women*. In the article, Elizabeth Schlesinger refutes the notion that the lack of fame won by women like Abigail Alcott was due to the insignificance of her activities. Using Abigail's diaries to make her case, Mrs. Schlesinger shows how she ran the household and earned most of the money that supported the family. "Mr. Alcott cannot bring himself to work for gain," Abigail noted, "but we have not yet learned to live without money." Another entry, commenting on Bronson's penchant for philosophical musings, gives insight into Abigail's perspective: "Give me one day of practical philosophy," she wrote. "It is worth a century of speculation and discussion." To earn money for the family, Mrs. Alcott became a Boston city missionary in 1848. Visiting the poor and writing case reports as a paid employee, Mrs. Alcott was a pioneer in what would become the field of social work. In the article, Elizabeth Schlesinger not only examines Abigail's life but contrasts it sharply

with her husband's. In a barely veiled condemnation, Mrs. Schlesinger writes: "One may well wonder what Bronson Alcott did in Boston while his wife was working." And she goes on to point out that the answer is, not very much. Mr. Alcott did have an occasional twinge of conscience, but for the most part, Schlesinger notes (and these are her words), he was "quite smug about the importance of his own thoughts." "While they feed not my own family," he wrote, "they will serve as an exchequer from whose drafts coming generations are to be fed and nourished." One concludes the article with great admiration for Abigail and a much deflated impression of her famous husband, and that, surely, was Schlesinger's intention. Here is the conclusion of her piece:

She (Abigail) ranks high among the Alcotts. Louisa lives in her books, not as the neurotic personality she actually was. Bronson lives because of his friendship with Emerson and Thoreau, not because of the intrinsic merit of his philosophy. But Abba, although now nearly forgotten, lives anew in her diary as a gallant wife and devoted mother and in her reports as a pioneer social worker.

That conclusion is surely the explanation and justification for women's archives. They gather the documents—written by and about women—that make it possible for later generations to glimpse their lives, to extract the meaning of those lives, and to give them historical significance. For Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger, it was not simply a matter of giving due to obscure lives but of establishing their place and their worth as the subjects of history.

The history of individual private collections has yet to be written. But when it is, the name of Miriam Holden will be prominent. Mrs. Holden was a member of the National Women's Party as late as 1965, and she wrote regularly on questions of women's history and women's employment. She was particularly interested in librarians, perhaps because of her own passion for books, and she called attention to "discriminatory practices" that led libraries to hire large numbers of women for low-level positions while high-paying directorship jobs were reserved for men. Miriam

Holden supported the Schlesinger Library, corresponded with Arletta Jacobs and other bibliophiles like herself, and spent a great deal of time and money acquiring documents by and about women. Mrs. Holden's collection—carefully compiled and fully catalogued by the owner—now fills a room in Princeton's Firestone Library. The Holden Collection is a special space at a (still) very male-oriented institution, a space where the importance of women quietly asserts itself from every shelf.

The Stuff of Memory

Among Brown alumnae, we have some avid collectors too. Margery Leonard '29 amassed an impressive number of feminist books, many of which she has given to Brown, and Ethel Nichols Thomas '34 in 1985 presented her treasured collection of books on women to the Sarah Doyle Center library. There are dozens more who have given us their papers, their diaries and memorabilia of college life at Pembroke, their letters and clippings from later years. And to organize and make visible and usable all of this wonderful material, we now have the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives. I think you can see that the Farnham Archives continues a long tradition of establishing collections of women's papers. But it is worth taking a bit more time to point out the way in which this archive relates to a very special local history. The women I have talked about today were determined to preserve for posterity the record of their own actions and to gather up in one place records of women's experience in the past. The Farnham Archives does just that for women at Brown University. Its purpose, as Chris enthusiastically understood it, is to restore to visibility the history of the Women's College that for a time was lost to view. In boxes in the basement of the John Hay Library are the records and papers of the Deans of Pembroke College, hastily removed from file drawers when the merger was declared, now waiting to be catalogued and organized by our new archivist. In files and cartons in offices of the Pembroke Center are documents that alumnae have given as they cleared out their attics or

moved house. And all over the University are scattered papers and reports about women that need to be cross-indexed so that researchers will be able to track them down. All this has begun to be supplemented by oral history interviews that enrich and flesh out the story of women at this University and by letters we have solicited from alumnae like Esther Cook '16 that document in wonderful detail undergraduate life in the early days of the Women's College and that provide the beginnings of her autobiography. From a purely institutional point of view, the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives are a vital reminder that women at Brown University have an extraordinarily rich and exciting history.

But of course, we are even more ambitious than that. In recent years, Brown undergraduates in women's studies courses have unearthed not only the fascinating history of Pembroke but the important connections between the Women's College and women's organizations and activities in Rhode Island. Local women like the schoolteacher Sarah Doyle worked tirelessly to get women admitted to Brown, and Pembroke graduates served as teachers, social workers, club women, and political volunteers in the state. Women's college graduates went on to extraordinary lives of reform and political activity—some of you have heard Martha Sharpe Cogan '26 tell her story, others of you can now read about this unique woman in the papers she has contributed to the Farnham Archives. Providence women like Mary Elizabeth Sharpe served on Pembroke advisory committees, contributing hours to efforts relating to women's education. The papers of this remarkable woman, too, have been donated to the Farnham Archives by her family, and they will enable students of women's history to gain real understanding of the workings of various kinds of women's organizations. Because of the interconnections between women of Brown and women of Rhode Island, we decided to make the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives a repository for papers of both those groups. The Farnham Archives is now the center in the state for research on women.

The Archives has its own history of determined supporters. Unlike the stories of individual women I have told you today, the Farnham Archives has been from the beginning a collective effort. The idea for the archives grew with the Pembroke Center. Those of us involved in the Center became increasingly aware of a need to know more about the history of women at Brown, and we became aware of the rich resources that existed to write that history. We began to scheme about ways to bring together those resources that were scattered throughout the library, bundled in boxes in basements and forgotten in attics and closets. With the help of Martha Mitchell, we located files and papers already in the University archives. We asked people to clean out their closets and give us Pembroke materials, and they did with enthusiasm. We interviewed alumnae and followed their suggestions about others to interview. We assigned students papers on the history of women at Brown and in Rhode Island, and they came up with new documents as well as new interpretations. Soon we realized we had begun to collect more material than we could control, and we sought the advice of experts. Polly Kaufman '61, herself a historian of women, headed a committee of Pembroke Center Associates that came up with a plan for an archives, and she insisted (with the kind of passion that must have inspired Marie-Louise Bouglé and Miriam Holden) that we do it right. The directors of the libraries, Merrily Taylor and Sam Streit, endorsed the plan, and it became a joint University Library–Pembroke Center project. Chris Farnham was then founding president of the Pembroke Associates, and she supported the idea with even more than her usual enthusiasm. Chris knew the importance of history, and she wanted Pembroke's history to have a permanent and proud place in the story of Brown University. When Chris died and we sought a way to memorialize her, Phyllis Young and Judith Charles led the effort to establish the archives she had so energetically supported. Their efforts enabled us to hire Karen Lamoree, who turned a dream and scattered efforts into a wonderful reality by establishing a research guide to the holdings. And those are only a few of the people involved in the creation of this women's archives. It is truly a collective effort, and it will continue to be so—as it should be.

Photo Credit: Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives



A photo from the early 1960s, Roberta Erickson '61 and Marlene Drummond '62 operate the Pembroke switchboard.

With the establishment of the Farnham Archives, Brown University proudly acknowledges the history of its women, gathering together the materials from which many different kinds of collective memories will be fashioned. With the founding of the Women's College in 1891, the University granted that women had the right and the ability to be educated just as men were. The creation of the Women's College declared and secured women's identity as rational, educable people with a distinctive sense of purpose. The long years of Pembroke's history provided generations of women with an experience of equality and difference. They were equal to men in ability but treated as a separate group; indeed, the deans spelled out in great detail the virtues and duties of "womanhood." Infused in the Pembroke experience was the notion Sarah Doyle articulated in 1897. Women had a separate sphere, she believed, but it was one of "infinite and indeterminate radius." The confusion and anger that surrounded the merger in 1971 threatened to obscure this long and interesting history, and it threatened, by entirely absorbing women into the University, to lose sight of the distinctive position women had fought to hold. The Pembroke Center took its name as part of an effort to bring



The Ivy Chain procession leaving Pembroke Hall in 1911.

women's experience, its accomplishments and its problems, back into community consciousness. The Farnham Archives is the historical arm of the Pembroke Center, accumulating the documentation upon which a permanent, though inevitably changing, historical memory can be built.

For more information about the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives or for inquiries about donating materials, please contact pembroke_archives@brown.edu or (401) 863-6268.

To view a small selection of items from the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives, please visit our website: www.pembrokecenter.org/farnham_archives/

Published by

The Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, Brown University – Box 1958, Providence, RI 02912

Website: www.pembrokecenter.org | **E-mail:** Pembroke_Center@brown.edu | **Phone:** 401-863-2643 | **Fax:** 401-863-1298