

Preserving and Promoting Gray Literature: The Smithsonian Libraries' Aerospace Legacy Materials Collection

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Introduction

Housed in a large, but nondescript storage facility in Landover, Maryland, is the Smithsonian Libraries' (SIL) Aerospace Legacy Materials (ALM) Collection. Currently consisting of approximately 500,000 items across 4300 linear feet, the collection is almost entirely comprised of what is now defined as "gray literature." Falling somewhere outside the realm of serials, monographs, and traditional archival material, this collection of gray literature serves as a valuable resource chronicling the history of civil aviation and early efforts in the field of spaceflight. A work-in-progress, the ALM Collection has experienced growth, division, relocation, and must face several challenges to ensure its long-term preservation.

Past to Present

The origins of the ALM Collection can be traced back to the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) Library's first librarian, Catherine "Kitty" Scott. Prior to her appointment as the branch librarian by NASM's first director, Michael Collins, Scott was a librarian with Bellcomm, Inc. In her time with Bellcomm, she acquired the company's collection of technical reports. At the time, technical reports were viewed as ephemeral material not intended for long-term retention. Rather than seeing the technical reports tossed in the trash, Scott brought the collection with her when she assumed her position with the Smithsonian in 1972.¹

¹ Catherine D. Scott, "Man's Aspiration to Fly: Flight Collections in the National Air and Space Museum Library--Smithsonian Institution," in *Aeronautics and Space Flight Collections* (New York, NY: Haworth Press, 1985), 173-193.

Physically, the collection was originally stored in Alexandria, Virginia in a facility known as the Torpedo Factory. Between 1979 and 1980, the collection was transferred to Washington, D.C. and housed in a warehouse located at 1111 North Capitol Street. Over the years, and through the diligent efforts of library staff like Scott and Philip Edwards, the size of the collection grew—largely in part to transfers from libraries in government agencies like the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and donations from personal collections and the private sector. In 2007, the warehouse was purchased for renovation by National Public Radio (NPR), and the ALM Collection—along with other Smithsonian objects and collections—were transferred to a storage facility in Landover, Maryland.²

Currently stored in the collections space of the Smithsonian Libraries Research Annex (SILRA), the technical reports section of the collection is undergoing the arrangement process with a collections-level finding aid soon to follow.

Future

Given the possible variables and challenges such as staffing changes, fluctuating budgetary issues, shifting organizational priorities, and unanticipated events, the long-term goals for the retention, preservation, and management of the ALM Collection are remarkably focused. Ultimately, the priorities are enhancing discoverability and ensuring long-term preservation. To accomplish these goals, SIL must first address several issues: arrangement, digitization options, growth, and relocation.

For the immediate future, the primary goal continues to be the physical arrangement of the technical reports by their acquisition numbers. Once this task is completed, the next step is creating a collections-level finding aid with the use of the archives management software, ArchivesSpace. In addition to promoting accessibility and awareness of the ALM collection as a resource for researchers, the challenge of managing its long-term preservation depends on two courses of action: digitization and relocation.

² Phil Edwards, librarian, interview by author, 16 January 2018.

Due to the sheer size of the ALM Collection and its physical condition, digitization is both a pressing need and a serious challenge. While housed in storage at North Capitol Street, the collection was subjected to less-than-desirable conditions, including fluctuating temperatures, humidity, and pest control issues. As the material housed in the ALM Collection becomes increasingly fragile, digitization becomes the ideal solution for long-term preservation. The question is, to what scale will the collection be made digitally accessible? Ideally, it is hoped that all of the technical reports will be digitized and made available online to researchers. Pragmatically, whole-scale digitization faces the standard challenges: labor, time, and finances. While much of its contents consist of reports financed or published by the federal government, copyright issues still need to be considered. Another approach would be to digitize the card catalog, thus creating an online index where researchers can conduct searches and request material for digitization on a case-by-case basis.

Though the ALM Collection currently consists of approximately 500,000 items, its existence has largely depended on growth through the acquisition of technical reports from other agencies and private donors. Consequently, the collection is designed for future growth, with a possible 250,000 items coming from another library in the future. However, in this post-eBay world, “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure,” and technical reports once viewed as disposable material have taken on a second life as collectibles—largely due to their increased scarcity. Ultimately, the continued growth of the collection depends on a proactive approach involving outreach, networking, persistence, good will, and just a bit of luck.

With regards to relocation, the revitalization/renovation project currently underway at the NASM site on the National Mall promises long-term consequences for both the NASM Library and the ALM Collection. In the summer of 2018, the library will be relocated to NASM’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center (UHC), in Chantilly, Virginia. This would mean transporting NASM-related collections housed at the Paul E. Garber Facility in Suitland, Maryland, and the ALM Collection in Landover, Maryland, to Chantilly. Before such an undertaking can occur, the Smithsonian must complete the construction of storage facilities (or modules) intended to house its collections. The

ALM Collection is slated to be housed in Module 2, which is currently in the early funding stage. Ultimately, the goal is to have all of NASM's collections and research resources (specifically the archives and library) housed either on the National Mall or in Chantilly, with UHC functioning as a research center for curatorial staff and visiting researchers interested in the history of space and flight.³

³ Chris Cottrill, branch librarian, interview by author, 18 January 2018.