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Pohanka Reflection: Special Collections & Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

Bryan G. Caswell
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

The reading room of Gettysburg College's Special Collections is one of those singular spaces where the denizens of academe encounter the uninitiated yet insatiably curious members of that nebulous group known as the public. Indeed, many summer afternoons on the fourth floor of Musselman Library witness researchers diligently pouring over primary source material and rare books while intrigued visitors study the numerous displays of artifacts with equal dedication. While my duties in Special Collections are mostly confined to working with the collections themselves, I have upon occasion received the opportunity to observe our visitors as they interact with the history that is on display. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Archives

Disciplines

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Pohanka Reflection: Special Collections & Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

July 9, 2014

by Bryan Caswell, '15

The reading room of [Gettysburg College's Special Collections](#) is one of those singular spaces where the denizens of academe encounter the uninitiated yet insatiably curious members of that nebulous group known as the public. Indeed, many summer afternoons on the fourth floor of Musselman Library witness researchers diligently pouring over primary source material and rare books while intrigued visitors study the numerous displays of artifacts with equal dedication. While my duties in Special Collections are mostly confined to working with the collections themselves, I have upon occasion received the opportunity to observe our visitors as they interact with the history that is on display.



The author in his habitat.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig's seminal 1994 study of the ways in which the American public relate to history determined that though "a majority of Americans feel a powerful sense of connection with the past," this connection is most often a personal one wrapped up in familial or ethnic identity. This rings true with many of the visitors to

Special Collection's exhibits, though in regards not to family or heritage but rather pride in a shared institution: Gettysburg College.

A majority of those who visit Special Collections for non-research purposes do so because they are connected in some way to the college, whether as alumni, current students, or the family of students and faculty. Here the similarities with Thelen and Rosenzweig's study end, however, for the exhibits that evoke the most interest and enjoyment from visitors to the reading room are not those dealing with elements of the college's history. Rather, it is the two centerpiece displays on nineteenth-century medicine and African-American history that continue to fascinate the public.

My own observations have led me to suspect that the reason behind these exhibits' appeal challenges one of Thelen and Rosenzweig's primary findings. Both offer stories radically different from visitors' contemporary experiences, and when confronted with such shocking artifacts as a surgeon's kit, complete with amputation instruments, or an iron slave collar fitted around the neck of a mannequin, this difference inspires curiosity to discover the scope and reasons behind the disparity. This curiosity first manifests itself in the reading of the numerous panels of interpretive text scattered throughout the exhibits, but many times these short passages do not offer easy answers. This then often leads visitors to question the staff of Special Collections or even their own companions about the history displayed before them. These discussions result in wonderful interpretive moments, where knowledge may be shared between both visitor and staff, myths about certain subjects can be dispelled, and visitors can come to a new understanding of the significance of certain items in the development of modern society.

It is this last outcome that visitors tend to value the most, and indeed it is invaluable to impress upon the public that no item or person, however small, is insignificant in the progression of the historical narrative. But this does not come without pitfalls. Though the exhibits present a wonderfully human and nuanced story of their respective subjects, they cannot cover the entire history of their respective fields. History is never straightforward, and while race relations and medical science may have drastically improved over hundreds of years, the drive forward may not have been linear, but instead a journey riddled with numerous obstacles and setbacks. Without the complicated context of the developments between the period of the exhibits and the present, however, visitors are able to view this history as a purely progressive narrative, and may leave the library with a mistaken impression that medicine and race relations have improved without incident since the nineteenth century.

Yet despite the contrast between my own musings and the conclusions drawn by Thelen and Rosenzweig, neither must necessarily be incorrect or misguided. While studies and surveys are a useful method for gauging general trends, it is nearly impossible to apply any one generalization to something as unique as an individual's relationship with history. All people connect to the past in a myriad of ways, and it is the role of the interpreter to facilitate those diverse connections.

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