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A Comedy of Errors: Repository Renovation in Reality

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The University of Mississippi in July 2004 transferred responsibility for approximately 7,000 linear feet of political and legal collections from the Law School to the Department of Archives & Special Collections. At that time, the department faced a severe shortage of available storage space for new collections. University officials recognized and quickly resolved this dilemma by designating a soon-to-be vacant Physical Plant building for off-site library storage including an entire floor (6,900 square feet) for the newly created Modern Political Archives unit (MPA). In the mean time, two full-time staff and several student workers began processing one of the large congressional collections stored in an older structure scheduled for renovation itself that spring.

The archives building renovation described here by no means purports to be a case study in how institutions should manage such projects. Anyone who has read the literature or attended professional seminars on the subject will recognize that the following narration frequently contradicts recognized guidelines. Unfortunately, several useful resources did not appear or went undiscovered by the author until after the construction project ended. Those who foresee blueprints and construction particulates in their future should examine the more detailed and comprehensive advice provided by one or more of the following: Thomas P. Wilsted's *Planning New and Remodeled Archival Facilities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007); Northeast Document Conservation Center's website "Resources Preservation Leaflets, Emergency Management, 3.9 Protecting Collections during Renovation" at www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/3Emergency_Management/09ProtectingCollections; the SOLINET online class by Kara McClurken "Under Construction" (December 2007). However, life rarely meets the ideal, and it often falls short. This aphorism would hold true even if University of Mississippi archivists had possessed more authority over the process. After all, any renovation or construction project typically encounters setbacks and delays.

In this particular instance, the archives also faced terms and timelines dictated by a university administration with limited resources and multiple competing interests as well as a construction management system which had no incentive to respond to client requirements. Physical Plant managed the construction project. At that time, it had no institutional system such as regularly scheduled meetings, progress evaluations, or project reviews with building occupants to encourage improved service or satisfaction. The archives initiated almost all contacts with Physical Plant and the project supervisor.

The following excerpted sequence of events took place between the fall of 2004 and the winter of 2007 during the Library Annex renovation at the University of Mississippi. The author provides this timeline as anecdotal evidence of various hazards and problems one repository experienced during the construction process...a warning for those facing similar projects to plan ahead, maintain vigilance, and expect the unexpected. This article will conclude with small series of general lessons learned.

- April-May 2005. With a June deadline fast approaching for when the MPA must vacate the original storage site, the archives discovers that Physical Plant has not yet completed interior demolition and renovation on the first floor of the new Library Annex where the MPA will permanently reside. The project supervisor promises to complete staff offices and workspace

prior to the move, but that the archives must temporarily store its collections for six months on the second floor of the Annex.

- 13 June 2005. On a preliminary trip to the new facility two days prior to the move, MPA staff members find the paint job uncompleted and construction debris everywhere. When the telephone serviceman arrives to install phones, he discovers that Physical Plant has removed all telecommunications wires throughout the entire building. On this same day, the project supervisor informs the archives that the flat roof leaks regularly and that a new roof and HVAC system are not scheduled for at least two more years. At this point in time, the Library Annex possessed only window air conditioning units. Since preservation plans called for plywood to cover all windows except those in workspaces, all but three units on the first floor and two units on the second quickly disappear. The thermometer on the upper level where the collections temporarily reside regularly reads 80-85 degrees first thing in the morning and thereafter climbs higher. Of more immediate concern, staff discovers that the raised pallet system installed on the second floor as temporary storage for the collections is not as described in previous meetings. The MPA staff hurriedly develops yet another moving procedure and creates a new schematic for arranging the collections.
- 15 June 2005. The first occurrence of a security problem that would plague the Library Annex throughout the renovation process takes place. Archives staff leave the building locked and later return to discover that Physical Plant workers had entered and then left the building empty and unlocked.
- 17 June 2005. Physical Plant informs the archives that further demolition will require use of a small bull dozer which will drive in and out of the building. Carpenters erect a framed plastic "wall" between staff work space and the hallway used by this heavy equipment. " 27 June 2005. Physical Plant damages an exterior door to the extent that it no longer closes and locks securely. A carpenter jury-rigs a temporary fix by nailing the door in place.
- 28 June 2005. Library representatives meet with the project supervisor to discuss ways to lower the temperature on the second floor. Electricians determine that the entire building will need rewiring.
- 30 June 2005. The HVAC engineer examines the Library Annex. The archive provides him with documents outlining archival standards for HVAC systems. Since there are no plans for roof replacement, all ductwork will run down the central aisle of the shelving stacks. On the first floor, this arrangement will cause anyone over 6'4 to walk in a stooped position down the hall. If the administration had made the decision at this point to install a new pitched metal roof, the ductwork could have gone between the old and new roofs.
- 6 July 2005. The Head of Special Collections emails a reminder to the project supervisor about the need to decrease the heat and humidity on the second floor of the Annex.
- 19 July 2005. A rainstorm results in significant leaks throughout the building. For the next year and a half, plastic sheeting drapes most of the collections and supplies. Upon request, carpenters remove a portion of the new drywall to insure that the leaks have not soaked the new insulation. Physical Plant installs plastic flashing to the outside area they believe causes the leaks.
- 27 July 2005. Physical Plant finally installs portable cooling units upstairs, but temperatures

remain in the high 80s.

- 15 August 2005. The project supervisor relays the HVAC engineer's opinion that the light-weight, off-the-shelf equipment he originally intended to install will not perform adequately.
- 23 August 2005. The electricians have reached the point where they can no longer continue working without the HVAC schematics. The HVAC engineer cancels his meeting with the project supervisor.
- 7 September 2005. The motors on the second floor portable cooling units freeze and create large puddles. Fortunately, all collection boxes rest on pallets to prevent contact with storm puddles.
- 9 September 2005. With no advance notice, men in hazmat suits appear, erect a plastic barrier to part of the first floor space, and hang an Asbestos warning sign. Over the next two days, they remove asbestos tile from the floor.
- 12 September 2005. Staff notices that one of the second floor portable cooling units is missing and its absence has left a foot-wide hole in the exterior door through which the vent had run. Members of Physical Plant had retrieved the unit for another function on campus.
- 16 September 2005. Puddles and leaks occur throughout the building from a previous night's thunderstorm.
- 26 September 2005. Ditto.
- 17 November 2005. MPA staff members relocate to Special Collections because the Library Annex is too cold. The next day, casual conversation with a previous resident in the building reveals that one of the first floor window units also has a heating function so staff returns to the Annex.
- 1 December 2005. The Dean of the Library, the Head of Special Collections, and other library representatives meet with the project supervisor, the Director of Physical Plant, and the University Architect. Participants receive maps that show the existence and scope of puddles regularly appearing after storms. The University Architect volunteers to approach the administration about advancing plans for a pitched metal roof. Physical Plant also promises to install better heating.
- 5 December 2005. Physical Plant drops off two small space heaters for the office.
- 12 December 2005. Physical Plant installs three large heating units in the rest of the Annex. However, only one is operable. Later in the week, the archive informs Physical Plant about current puddles including a leak that runs down the wall alongside the electronic circuit board.
- 4 January 2006. The compact shelving company begins installation. The Head of Special Collections discusses concerns that the HVAC engineer's delay in delivering specs will delay the bidding process and consequently installation of air conditioning until after summer heat had already begun.

- 11 January 2006. The project supervisor informs the archives that HVAC installation will finish by April and that the administration has approved a new roof to be completed by the summer.
- 13 January 2006. Extensive puddles appear throughout the building from the previous night's storm.
- 8 February 2006. Library staff attempt to turn on the large heating units, but oily smoke appears on the second floor. Physical Plant workers had failed to continue the vent up through the second floor out the roof.
- 13-24 February 2006. Roofing contractors place a new flat roof over the office area.
- 9 March 2006. A storm results in several puddles throughout the building, including locations that the new roof was intended to solve.
- 31 March - 18 April 2006. Archive staff and Physical Plant personnel move collections from the second floor to the compact shelving on the first floor.
- 3 April 2006. The project supervisor promises air conditioning within a month. Wary, the archives requests temporary cooling units in the building until HVAC installation is complete [air conditioning is not operable until the end of July; roof installation due before summer does not even begin until October].
- 11-14 July 2006. Contractors complete air conditioning installation and turn on the units. A few days later the roof units freeze into blocks of ice and the contractor reorders a malfunctioning part. The archives inquires into the delay of the Cold Room construction (an 800 square foot space on the first floor designed to store the department's photographs and recordings at lower than normal temperatures; the room will require specially designed ceiling and walls with a separate HVAC system). The project supervisor stated that the contractor will not return calls. When asked if the extensive delay voided the contract, the supervisor stated that the agreement did not include a firm completion date and voiced a desire to give the contractor more time.
- 21-25 August 2006. The Cold Room contractors finally arrive but quickly discover that a measuring error has caused them to order manufactured walls too large for the space. Installation waits as walls are cut down to size and a new door ordered.
- 30 August 2006. A new HVAC engineer conducts a final review to insure that the contractor has followed up on previous suggestions. When asked why humidity levels had not dropped to a level that would permit the elimination of supplemental portable dehumidifiers, the engineer replies that the specs for the HVAC contract contained nothing about maintaining the low levels of humidity required by archival standards.
- 13 September 2006. Library representatives meet with the roof contractor. Prior to erecting a pitched metal roof, the crew will remove tile, tar, and other materials leaving just the concrete roof. The contractor warns that during the next two-week period, the facility may experience leaks, but that he has purchased plenty of plastic sheeting to cover all the compact shelving on the first and second floors.
- 16 October 2006. The Cold Room crew completes installation, although the separate HVAC

system is not yet operable.

- 17 October 2006. Overnight, the roof contractor's pump on the old roof becomes clogged with tar and ceases working. Rainwater pours in and collects on the old roof. Archive staff arrive in the morning to find leaks everywhere from water seeping through the concrete ceiling. Despite plastic sheeting draping everything, damage is heavy on the second floor storage space for the Main Library; on the first floor, thirty boxes of political collections come into contact with water. Library staff react quickly, and Physical Plant supplies dehumidifiers, wet vacuums, and large fans to circulate air. Archives staff work all day laying out every damp document on any horizontal space available. Mid-morning, standing water is discovered underneath the plywood base of the compact shelving. Physical Plant personnel return with more water vacuums [fortunately, this water immersion has not resulted in buckling or mold growth].
- 10 November 2006. The archive asks the project supervisor for a timeline on the completion of the Cold Room.
- 21 November 2006. The contractor finally begins installing the new pitched metal roof and finishes the job over the Thanksgiving holiday.
- 12 January 2007. With all major renovation tasks complete, Physical Plant personnel no longer appear in the Annex on a daily basis. The archive sends an email to the project supervisor with a list of small, uncompleted tasks.

Remember, the above timeline is abridged (as well as expurgated). For examples of other mishaps, the author might have included descriptions of how a contractor left the keys inside a piece of heavy moving equipment and escapades by an unknown party resulted in expensive damage to university vehicles parked nearby. Or perhaps she could have mentioned the crew member discovered smoking in the building while installing compact shelving.

The perils described do not include numerous mundane details involved in construction. It also does not convey the ongoing efforts made by archive staff to educate Physical Plant personnel and contractor crews regarding the unique significance of the collections and their preservation requirements. Although the archives came into contact with several helpful, conscientious individuals during the course of this project, most workers involved did not care about archival priorities. That their supervisors also demonstrated little respect or concern certainly did not deter lapses in preservation standards. The author presents these problems not to complain but to emphasize the early, consistent determination needed to convince administrators, supervisors, contractors, and crew members that renovation of an archive-occupied building is not just another ordinary construction project. Legal agreements with outside contractors should reinforce this distinction by outlining agreed upon tactics to address preservation concerns and requiring liability insurance if damage occurs.

Another lesson learned is that all those involved in the decision making process should meet early in the planning stages to agree upon goals, budget, and blueprints. Participants should include high administration officials who have monetary approval, architects, engineers, construction supervisors, and representatives from the archives. If major changes appear necessary at any stage during construction, the group should convene again. Project supervisors and involved archivists should plan regular monthly meetings to review progress and report concerns. All interested parties should receive minutes of these sessions and retain copies of these records in a

project file.

Necessity dictated that the Library Annex renovation would proceed with the MPA already present in the building. The down side is obviously the vagaries of temperature and humidity, poor building security, particulates from construction and paint, and the potential for fire and water damage. The benefit from onsite occupation is that archivists were quick to spot undesirable actions and to suggest practical improvements in the plan. The library may never have understood the severity of leaks in the old roof if staff had not documented the resulting puddles from numerous rainstorms. These reports motivated the University Architect to lobby for a new roof sooner than anticipated. Any archives not currently inhabiting a facility under construction should arrange weekly inspection tours of the site to supplement the lack of daily observation.

Finally, although many readers might interpret the above timeline as a tragedy rather than a farce, the fiascos related did not result in death or document destruction. Like any comedy of errors, a happy resolution eventually emerged. In this case, the MPA now thankfully resides in a newly renovated facility with over 20,000 linear feet of compact shelving...of course, things have become a bit snug lately with the transfer of political collections from storage locales across campus and the donation of recent congressional records. "All's well that ends well" does not mean that experience has not taught valuable lessons that might smooth the path of future building endeavors!

Leigh McWhite has a Ph.D. in History from the University of Mississippi. In 2004, she served as the interim director of the newly created Modern Political Archives unit at that institution, accepting the post of Political Papers Archivist & Assistant Professor a year later.
