

Cuba Paradigms

1. The Johns Hopkins University Experience

ABSTRACT

Jeanne Drewes, then head of preservation at Johns Hopkins University's Milton S. Eisenhower Library, participated in a conference sponsored by the Northeast Document Conservation Center and held at the National Archives in Cuba in 1998. Following that visit she arranged for the students traveling to Cuba through the Johns Hopkins University Cuba Exchange program to do a work project at the provincial archives in Matanzas where the students rehoused single-sheet documents. The success of this project led to a project the following year when students cleaned and refolded maps in the National Archives.

As the preservation librarian for the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at Johns Hopkins University, I became involved with the Archivo Nacional de Cuba after being asked to meet with the director and vice director during a brief visit they were making to the United States, sponsored by the Johns Hopkins University Cuba Exchange Program. This program has been in existence since 1977 and is sponsored in large part by the Ford Foundation. Its purpose is to provide a means of fostering and strengthening intellectual exchanges which already exist between the United States and Cuba. As a result of that visit I was asked to be a part of the International Conference on Preservation of Paper and Photographs, a workshop co-sponsored by the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) held at the Archivo Nacional de Cuba in Havana. The Cuba Exchange funded my participation. In addition, I traveled to Matanzas to visit the Archivo Histórico Provincial there. This was at the urging of

Franklin Knight, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University. He had done research at this provincial archives and felt that the collections there were as important as any he had seen. I traveled with Erin Loftus, a conservator working at the Library of Congress. Erin had a particular interest in Cuban music and dance and traveled to Cuba at her own expense. Erin traveled with me to Matanzas, and it was her idea to have a work project to wrap the paper documents we saw there. The idea was to design a work project that Hopkins students could perform without needing a great deal of training. For this project the wrapping would protect the documents from the sun and dirt and reduce the damage that was being caused by the stiff sisal twine that was used to secure the bundles.

I took this idea to the Director of the Cuba Exchange program, Wayne Smith, who liked the idea and agreed that the exchange program would fund my participation and the necessary supplies and equipment for the student work project.

The Cuba Exchange has sponsored an Intersession course for credit in Cuba for Hopkins undergraduates since January 1997. The Intersession course is one part of the exchange program. Each year, students apply for the sixteen to eighteen spaces available for the course. They must be conversant in Spanish and in good academic standing. The course focuses on some aspect of Cuban culture and changes each year. The January 1999 course "Cuba and the Arts: Past & Present" was by its very nature interdisciplinary: the group had an architectural history discussion and tour of the city of Havana which included a visit to the Museo de Bellas Artes, the National Archives, Casa de Africa, and the Cementerio de Colón in addition to lectures. The history focus fit well with the housing of nineteenth-century documents.

Before talking with the students to secure their interest in this project, I first contacted Graciela Milian Martinez, the Director of the Archivo Histórico Provincial in Matanzas to confirm her interest in such a joint project.

Presented at the Book & Paper Group Session, AIC 28th Annual Meeting, June 8–13, 2000, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Received for publication Fall 2000.

During our initial visit there was no talk of a specific project, but we had toured her facility and expressed interest in working with her. She had expressed interest in working with us as well. Graciela was delighted that this first student work project would be at Matanzas. The planning began with two key pieces of information, the measurement of the documents and establishing the work dates. With the help of Eva Gonzalez, administrative assistant for the Cuba Exchange, the materials were ordered and the arrangements made. The Cuba Exchange purchased the acid-free kraft paper, the pre-cut 20-point board, the flat twill tape and scissors.

Several weeks before the trip there was a meeting for the students and Cuba Exchange personnel who would lead the course. I used this opportunity to explain the project and secure the interest of the students. Pictures of the archives and a little talk about the beach at Veradero made for nearly instant enthusiasm. The process was straightforward. All the documents were grouped in bundles, which were tied with sisal twine. The stiff twine cut into the top and bottom documents effectively quartering them. The idea was to use pre-cut board on both the top and bottom of each bundle, to wrap the bundles in acid-free kraft paper and secure the package with flat twill tape.

Each of the bundles, which I had seen in the initial visit, had been indexed to facilitate its use by researchers. The archives staff had spent long hours recording the names in the documents, so the organization of the materials already in place had to be maintained.

Matanzas is the third largest city in Cuba and is about a two-hour drive outside of Havana. It was the center of sugar cane production, and the earliest plantations had slaves. Many of the documents Erin and I had seen were from this neo-colonial and colonial period. The students were eager to help and excited about the prospect of seeing these documents and seeing some of the countryside.

The students carried the work project materials as part of their luggage. There is a weight limit for luggage of sixty pounds per person so the materials were divided into twenty packages for the students and other members of the Exchange. Once in Havana the materials were transported to the National Archive. After I arrived, I arranged for a car to take the supplies to Matanzas prior to the rest of the group and to make arrangements for the project. That planning visit was key because it allowed me to discuss the project with the archives staff and let them plan the work areas and how they would organize the students. This was very definitely a joint project and we worked together to plan how best to use the limited table space. We had brought the equipment I thought would be needed including scissors and razors, but the Archives staff came up with the broom handles to hold the rolls of kraft paper and the chairs to support the rolls. They moved tables together to make work areas. I left the same day and drove back to



Fig. 1. Exchange program students rewrap bundles of documents at the Archivo Histórico Provincial in Matanzas.

Havana where I joined the students the following day for the bus ride to Veradero, the beach resort just beyond our work project destination.

The next morning the first order of business was a tour of the facility, former home of nineteenth-century poet José Jacinto Milanés y Fuentes (1814–1863), a wonderful old house with an inner courtyard filled with plants, kept meticulously clean by the archives staff. The archives houses over 880 linear meters, records that document Matanzas's rich history. After the tour and welcome the teams were assigned to stations and the work began (fig. 1). Archives staff brought the bundles to the worktables where the student work crews carefully untied, straightened and rewrapped the bundles. The labels were carefully attached to the new packages and the archives staff reshelved the materials. Materials had been purchased for 1500 bundles. I had no idea how many bundles we could package, and while the students wanted to know how many they were expected to wrap, I declined giving a number. Rather, the objective was to start the project—whatever we accomplished would be a start—and I preferred that the students be careful with their work rather than try to speed through the process. The students completed 777 packages in the two-day work project (fig. 2).

At the end of the last day of work the archives staff arranged for a thank-you party with music and refreshments and a parting gift for each of the student workers. There was even a parting gift for Erin who we felt was with us in spirit as we brought to fruition the project she had imagined. The students felt good about a job well done. They could see the results of their project in the neatly wrapped packages that replaced the unprotected bundles. The Archives staff had the remaining materials to complete more wrapping.



Fig. 2. Rewrapped bundles of documents at the conclusion of the two-day work project at the Archivo Histórico Provincial in Matanzas

The success of the first work project led to a second project the following year. In January 2000, in spite of the fact that I was no longer working at Johns Hopkins University, I led another work project for the Cuba Exchange. This project I had conceived in the previous trip and had already laid the groundwork for cooperation. In 2000 the students were already traveling outside of Havana for part of their study so it was much easier to have a project in Havana. Again the project was a housing project, something that the students could learn to do quickly but that would have a long-lasting benefit for a collection.

This second project was to folder maps in the National Archives. The map collection is housed in one room of the Archives. While there is wide shelving for the maps, there is also a good deal of sunlight that the maps are exposed to, so placing maps in folders would protect them from dust and sunlight. As with



Fig. 3. Student teams clean and place maps in folders at the Cuban National Archives.

the previous project the key was to assure the agreement of archives staff beforehand and to purchase the materials and have them travel as part of the student's luggage. Again Eva Gonzalez was instrumental in arranging the transport and purchase of the acid-free folder board, brushes for surface cleaning, and knives and bone folders for folder construction. Because of the study trip outside of Havana there was less time for this work project, so only one day was planned. As with the first project, I arrived prior to the students to work with Archives staff to set up workspace and organize workflow. One day of student work produced over six hundred cleaned and foldered maps (figs. 3 and 4). As one student said to me, "I would never have been able to touch such old materials at home, I would have looked



Fig. 4. Foldered maps stored on shelves at the Cuban National Archives

at such maps through glass. Here I can touch them, and know that I am helping to preserve them for others to use.”

Certainly the work projects disrupted the normal day of the Archives. The students brought a high level of energy and noise to the otherwise scholarly quiet of the Archives. But in both cases the projects provided the start of a useful project for the Archives staff that might otherwise have languished for lack of enough staffing. For the Cuba Exchange the work project was part of the learning experience for the Johns Hopkins University students as a compliment to their more formal study and lectures. While they did not study the materials, they did very much get a sense of the value of such primary documents, and some expressed the wish to come back and research a topic. The Archives contributed to the learning experience through the tour and explanation of the materials to be housed and gained useful assistance; the students contributed valuable time and energy to the project and gained a satisfaction in contributing to the preservation of primary source documents and working with Archives staff. Such jointly planned work projects provide a means to bridge the political distance between our countries.

JEANNE DREWES

Assistant Director for Access and Preservation

Michigan State University Libraries

East Lansing, Michigan

drewes@mail.lib.msu.edu