

OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

New archives space

IN MID-OCTOBER, THE CENTER'S staff relocated the majority of the Railroad Heritage Visual Archive from the space adjacent to our office on Price Place to a 1,450-square-foot suite on Madison's South Park Street. This will serve as our main archival storage space for the next five years. While the physical work of assembling shelves and stacking boxes only occupied the Center's staff for a few days, the move itself was the culmination of a year's worth of planning, searching, and negotiations. While I will not recount all of those details here (especially the months of lease negotiations), the following overview of the process may be helpful to small organizations looking to improve their collections storage as well as citizen-archivists following along at home.

ARTICLE

Adrienne Evans

PHOTOGRAPHS

As noted

Increased storage capacity

The main reason for the move was simple: we were running out of space! Our archival storage on Price Place was never intended to serve as a "forever home." This fact became glaringly apparent in early 2018 as we contemplated the logistics of taking on the Shaughnessy Collection. Already three-quarters-full, our 180-square-foot storage room, which had served as the CRP&A's archival space since 2015 when the Center's holdings totaled "merely" 161,000 images, was just too small to accommodate Shaughnessy's additional 90,000 images. Plus, the room was already doing triple-duty as an archive, a prep area for book mailings, and a part-time office for our bookkeeper. It was time to find a new home for the collections.

In late 2018 we began searching for more space that would accommodate both the growing archives and a larger administrative office, since our personnel has grown right along with our collections. Yet the combination of Madison's oversaturated commercial real-estate market, the nature of the space we sought, and our own lack of available time stymied our early efforts. Only when we enlisted the help of a real estate agent did we begin seeing a few viable options.

The ensuing months had brought big changes to the Center—namely new commitments to preserve large and significant collections by John Gruber and Victor Hand as well as increased interest from more potential collection donors. While we had initially sought a space that would double or even triple our storage capacity, we now needed to project how much the archives would grow in the next few years and find sufficient space with a little wiggle room for unexpected additions. We adjusted the parameters of

our search to include even more storage capacity. In the words of Sheriff Brody from the motion picture *Jaws*, we were "gonna need a bigger boat."

Improved preservation environment

The length of time that photographic materials and other types of images can be physically preserved depends mostly on their storage environment—this was another reason for and complication of the move. Unchecked temperature and relative humidity (RH, a measure of how saturated the air is with water), can greatly reduce the usable life of photographic and other types of images. For example, high RH, which is temperature dependent, can cause a host of problems in archival collections such as the curling of photographic prints; the softening of gelatin emulsions; increased detrimental effects from original processing materials; mold growth; vinegar syndrome in acetate-based negatives; and the accelerated aging of otherwise stable materials. Archivists typically attempt to head off these problems by maintaining temperature and RH within a specific range (low 60s and 30s, respectively, for our materials), but our Price Place location does not include access to the building's thermostat. Needless to say, as we looked for increased storage capacity we also prioritized locations that would allow us to begin incrementally improving our preservation environment.

This facet of the search posed problems: many of the office suites we initially encountered did not have thermostats independent from the building's main HVAC system. Plus, our ideal archival storage temperature is lower than most peoples' thermal comfort zones, complicating the goal of finding an adjacent office and archives, as such a space would require two separate thermostats. Surprisingly, we did tour a few suites that contained two distinct temperature zones. Yet there were other problems associated with these spaces: one had flooded during the historic rainfall of the previous year, and the other was an unfinished space that we would have had to build out ourselves. While discussing our concerns with our board of directors, we decided to seek an offsite archives space in a separate building from our administrative office. We altered our search, and after a few false starts, we finally landed at the South Park Street location.

Standards versus reality

The new space ticks a lot of boxes on our wish list. Comprised of a suite of three rooms, the space totals



Above: CRP&A staff members Scott Lothes, Adrienne Evans, and Hailey Paige show off the new archives space on South Park Street on October 18, 2019, following two full days of assembling shelves and moving boxes. The Jim Shaughnessy Collection fills the shelves at left. Photograph by Scott Lothes



Far left: Hailey Paige and Adrienne Evans assemble shelves in the new archives space on October 17, 2019. Photograph by Inga Velten



Left: Kevin P. Keefe and Scott Lothes move part of the Fred M. Springer Collection into the new space on October 18, 2019. Photograph by Inga Velten

a little under 1,500 square feet, providing us with ample storage for at least the next few years. The suite's high ceilings can accommodate archival-grade steel shelving and additional vertical storage for our collections as well. It also has desirable preservation and security features: its own thermostat, a fire suppression system (absent from our Price Place location); an onsite building manager; and 24/7 security monitoring with a guard present during all open hours. While the location is somewhat removed from our administrative office, we have found that we can monitor and modify environmental conditions via smart dataloggers and dehumidifiers, and the space is only a fifteen-minute drive from our offices. Plus, owned by the City of Madison, the suite is located in a former community college building that has been repurposed for local non-profit and museum use, making it an excellent opportunity for networking and new partnerships. Some of the neighboring organizations include the University of Wisconsin Science Museum; the Madison Public Library; and the Urban League of Greater Madison.

Now, while I have been excited about South Park Street from the start, I am also the first to admit that the space is not *perfect*. Throughout our search, I frequently consulted the Society of American Archivists (SAA) approved standard, *Archival and Special Collections Facilities: Guidelines for Archivists, Librarians, Architects, and Engineers*. While the book is an excellent reference, the standard is intended to guide archival facility management and construction for enterprises on the scale of the National Archives and the Smithsonian. Practices and conditions described in the standard are important aspirational goals, but as we continue to build up the Center as an institution, we have to balance our financial means against every aspect of our mission. Those include the sometimes-opposed goals of taking on more material and storing it as securely as possible, a challenge that nearly every archive faces.

Ultimately, our new space is an excellent incremental step towards ideal archival conditions, even though a few of its aspects fall into the “not recommended” category of the standard. First, the suite is located on the garden level of the building it occupies, and as the standard points out, basements are susceptible to temperature extremes as well as leaks. However, the new suite is located far away from any flood zones, the surroundings are well-maintained, and we can mitigate the threat of leaks by storing our materials well off the floor and by utilizing water alarms and other careful monitoring.

Additionally, the suite is carpeted, and carpets can trap moisture, off-gas harmful chemicals, and present mold problems. We took some time to consider whether removing the carpet and resurfacing/sealing the floor below would be worth the cost. We consulted the Northeast Document Conservation Center, a nonprofit that provides conservation services to

institutions that do not have in-house conservators (small archives take note—they will answer your preservation questions for free via “Ask NEDCC” on their website.) We learned that changing the carpet should be a low priority in the new space. Applying various floor sealants to the space could create new problems by introducing harsh VOCs to the atmosphere. According to the consultant, the amount of money required to apply a special type of epoxy to the floor would be better spent on environmental monitoring and maintenance (especially as we are only signing a five-year lease). Finally, carpets off-gas less and less the longer they have been in place, making our current, older carpet much less problematic than a new installation. With this in mind, we moved forward with the space as-is.

Despite the challenges, we are delighted with the new space: our storage capacity has grown eight-fold and with better environmental control and monitoring, as well as increased security, our incremental preservation improvements feel like very significant steps.

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates

Between our recent move and several new acquisitions, we have been quite busy at our Madison office. The arrival of the Jim Shaughnessy Collection occurred synchronously with our relocation to the new archival space. I have begun in earnest to create an initial survey of the 90,000 images in the collection. Archives assistant Natalie Krecek will soon followup on this work, digitizing and cataloging the majority of the materials. In the meantime, Natalie is busy with the final batch of the Victor Hand negatives to arrive at the Center. To date, Natalie has digitized approximately 46,000 images from Hand's fifty years in railroad photography. We will post a finding aid to the collection on our website soon. Volunteer John Kelley continues his work with the Fred Springer Collection; John is currently recording metadata for a selection of photographs that Springer shot in the northeastern United States. In addition, Marty Bernard, our newest volunteer, has been captioning the latest Donald Furler albums to hit Flickr.

In other news, congratulations are in order for Colleen O'Keefe, our associate archivist at Lake Forest College. After working for the Center for four years, Colleen has accepted a position as a digital imaging technician with the Barack Obama Presidential Library (see more on page 7). Before leaving for her new position, Colleen finished making high resolution scans of the first five boxes of the Wallace Abbey Collection. As one of the Center's longest-serving assistants, Colleen has made innumerable contributions to the Center's collections work. We wish her all the best in her new endeavor.

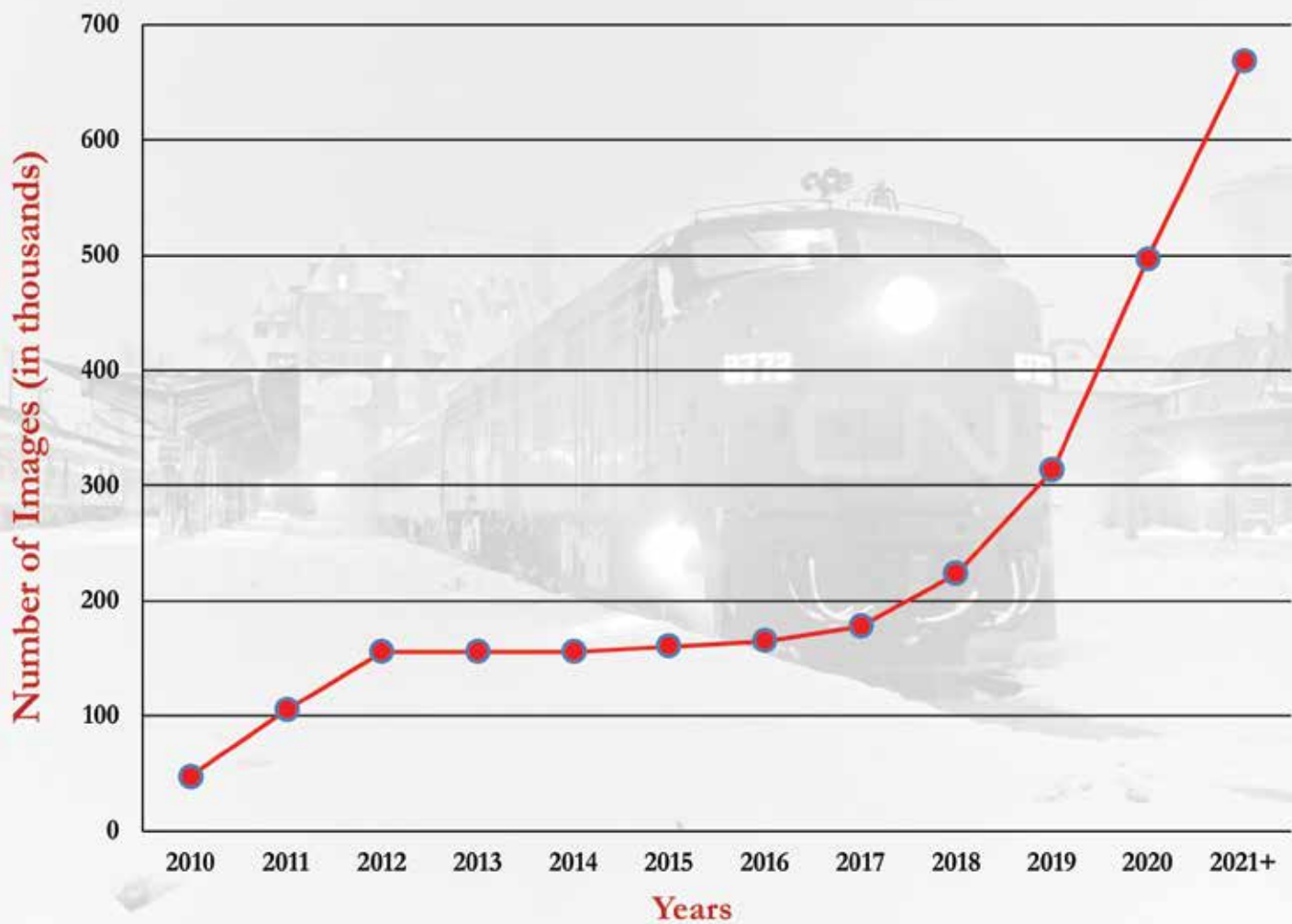
You can view highlights and galleries from many of our collections at www.railphoto-art.org, and we continue to post new selections each week to our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. •



Left: Jim Shaughnessy's father, James A. Shaughnessy, poses as a veteran Rutland station agent, validating a ticket behind the screened window at Mount Holly, Vermont, on February 19, 1961. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy

Below: The CRP&A's Railroad Heritage Visual Archive is growing fast, including several major commitments coming in 2020, 2021, and beyond.

Collections Growth, 2010-2021





Above: New York Central 4-6-0 no. 1199 on the turntable in St. Thomas, Ontario, in 1956. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy

Opposite: Nickel Plate 2-8-4 no. 774 with a freight train at Conneaut, Ohio, on April 16, 1957. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy

Bon French has sponsored pages 16 and 17

