Silver Threads Through the Diamond:
A Reflection on 25 Years of the AALL Archives
in Honor of the 100th AALL Annual Meeting

In accord with the 100th AALL Annual Meeting, the 2007 AALL Archives exhibit looks back on the 25-plus years of the AALL archival program based at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In establishing these archives in 1980-81, AALL ensured its heritage would be properly preserved for its future generations.

In the late 1970s, as AALL approached its 75th anniversary, the need for archives became more and more apparent, but the creation of the AALL Archives actually has its origins considerably earlier in the establishment of the AALL headquarters office in 1964. The headquarters office was originally intended to house historical records, but ultimately it was seen that the archival need was larger than the space available at the headquarters office, so the late 1970s saw a concerted effort to ground the AALL archives in a major institution. After investigating several options, AALL concluded an agreement with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in mid-1980. The first acquisitions were obtained in August, 1980, although the agreement was not signed until November, and formal processing began in January, 1981. The first AALL Archives Assistant was Thomas Wood, and 23 others have succeeded him.

The development of the AALL Archives took a long time in coming, however.

Living at the time that the discipline of modern history was developing, AALL’s early leadership understood the importance of archives and historical records in general. Thinking more of the records of government, George S. Godard, State Librarian of Connecticut and third president of AALL, said in a talk at the American Association of Law Libraries 26th Annual Meeting in 1931, “Archives are the ancestors, relatives and neighbors of public records and are essential to the proper study and fuller understanding of public records” (24 LLJ 137, 1931). As later AALL members realized, archives were of similar value to organizations, not the least of which was AALL.

No doubt Godard’s perspective must have tweaked the minds of the coming generation of AALL leaders. Helen Newman, who served as AALL Secretary-Treasurer and later as its President, systematically gathered records of the association and its early members in the 1930s and 1940s, and her papers provide thorough documentation of AALL’s growth. Interestingly, a relatively early attempt to establish archives was made as AALL approached its half-century mark. As Secretary-Treasurer Margaret E. Coonan reported at the 45th Annual Meeting in Toronto in 1952, “[a] system of cumulation of committee records has been initiated, and arrangements are under discussion for their storage and the establishment thereby of Association Archives. Such a system would substitute for some of the physical advantages which would have resulted if a fixed Association headquarters had been possible” (45 LLJ 218, 1952) (Item 1). Apparently, however, this attempt was not successful.

Still, once the headquarters office was established a decade later, it was able to do double duty for a while. As Stanley J. Bougas, Matthew F. Dee, Bethany Ochal, and Chair George A. Strait indicated in their 1969 Report of a Committee on Chapters, “Chapters that publish a newsletter, bulletin, or have held programs, workshops, or professional seminars during the past year have been urged to coordinate with the Membership Committee and the Education Committee, with the national office serving as a repository of the archive file of such programs, etc.” (62 LLJ 253).

By the late 1970s, though, space was short and frustration was mounting. In a memo to AALL President J. Myron Jacobstein (Item 2) of Stanford University Law Library, Roger Jacobs, then U.S. Supreme Court Librarian, implored, “For goodness sakes, let’s get some library to take over the care and feeding of our archives” (Item 3). Fortunately, momentum had already been building, and a committee exploring archives options (Item 4) was by then in place.
As AALL Secretary Cameron Allen reported in 1979, he 

. . . served along with Mary Fisher as a Board Committee of two to investigate establishment and location of an Association Archives. In this matter contact was had with such other library associations as American Library Association, Special Libraries Association, Medical Library Association, and American Society for Information Science, several of which contributed valuable insight from their own experiences and operations. The Secretary visited SLA Headquarters on this project. (72 LLJ 710)

Ultimately the University of Illinois was a logical choice because it had housed the extensive holdings of the American Library Association since 1974. The AALL Archives were thus able to become a part of the wealth of holdings on the history of librarianship at the University of Illinois. Maynard Brichford (Item 5), Archivist of the University at the time, shepherded the agreement through the formal channels (Item 6), and the AALL Archives became a reality. In his very next report Allen, finishing his term as secretary, was able to “close on a note of satisfaction that an Associational archives has at last been worked out that will enable us all to have better access to the salvageable work-product of prior years” (73 LLJ 760, 1980).

An announcement was published in the AALL Newsletter (Items 7a & 7b) once the final agreement was signed. Connie E. Bolden, who had presided over a substantial period of archives building and who was outgoing AALL president when the actual agreement was reached, was one of the earliest contributors and the first past-president to deposit his own papers (Item 8).

In the following year, AALL president Francis Gates, in introducing the report on the AALL Archives, announced proudly, “Believe it or not, as librarians, we even have archives of our own” (74 LLJ 754, 1981). Mary Fisher (Item 9), General Electric Company Corporate Legal Librarian, followed with an extensive report on the AALL Archives to the 74th Annual Meeting in Washington, DC., in 1981, informing those gathered,

. . . [University of Illinois law librarian] Carol Boast [Robertson] (Item 10) tells me that some material is already in place at the law library for reference use. Much more material is sought to flesh out the record of the Association, and on behalf of the Board, I urge all of you to cull your records for those files of permanent interest to the Association, and then mail them to the University whose staff will sort and refine them according to the guidelines set forth. . . .

It seems especially appropriate that as the Association moves to its 75th year, . . . we do what we can to bring together the retrospective record of the Association, and equally important, that we who continue to work in the Association in all areas, be it SIS's, Chapters and committees, prospectively to consider and develop procedures by which this material can go regularly to the Archives. (74 LLJ 755)

Following the founding participation by Ed Hess, Carol Boast Robertson and Cheryl Nyberg (Item 10) were other University of Illinois law librarians who worked closely with the University Archives through the 1980s and 1990s to ensure the AALL Archives holdings were in usable form.

Early acquisitions in 1980 included the 1965 Headquarters Fund Drive Publications, 1927-37 issues of Law Library News, the first set of Roy M. Mersky Papers, the George E. Wire Papers, the first set of the H. Charles Hallam Papers, and the first set of Committee Reports and Issuances. The Committee on Automation and Scientific Development, the Financial Records Committee, the Committee on the Index to Legal Periodicals, and the Library Exhibits Committee were the first committees submitting sufficient material to warrant their own series in 1980-81. The Academic Law Libraries SIS, the Government Documents SIS, the Micrographics and Audiovisual SIS, and the Private Law Libraries SIS were the first special interest sections to have their own series as of the fall of 1981. Meanwhile, the Southern California Association of Law Libraries holds the distinction of having been the first chapter to submit its materials to the AALL Archives in April of 1981.

Fittingly, AALL founder A(rthur) J. Small’s papers and the first set of Helen Newman’s papers were also early acquisitions, both officially received on September 24, 1980, with an additional accession of Helen Newman
papers on June 10, 1983 (Item 11). Another very significant accession was made in 1983 when William R. (Bob) Roalfe’s papers came to the AALL Archives (Item 12). Many of the Roalfe papers were very fragile (disintegrating, in fact) and were microfilmed to ensure their preservation. The value of these papers cannot be overstated, especially because of Roalfe’s pivotal role in restructuring the organization so it was in a position to expand and grow once the difficulties of the Depression and World War II were past. His papers enable AALL Archives users to reflect on the substantial breadth of changes in the life of AALL.

Not surprisingly, the AALL Archives themselves have changed as well. While holdings information and inventories are still maintained in paper form as back-up (Item 13), the archives have continued to expand from the early use of computers to maintain descriptive and administrative control of holdings. As throughout the library and archival professions, there is increasing reliance on more advanced computer programs and systems to support even more efficiency and ever greater access. With the Internet, the AALL Archives have become still more available to users far and wide (Item 14). Needless to say, the size and scope of the holdings have grown substantially (Item 15). The chart shown here (Item 16) illustrates the growth in both the number of series and the amount of cubic footage, with a total of 203 record series now occupying 260.2 cubic feet. In addition, the AALL Archives has begun to maintain electronic holdings and currently holds 363 megabytes of Special Interest Section and Chapter newsletters online.

While photographs are among the most interesting holdings in the AALL Archives, identifying the people in them has always been a challenge (Items 17, 18, 19). Carol Boast Robertson recalls with fondness standing with “oldtimers” at annual meetings as they reminisced about their colleagues and tried to name some of the people in the photos (personal communication, May 4, 2007). The AALL Archives house an impressive set of photographs dating back to the organization’s beginning and covering much in between (Items 20a, 20b, 20c). Researchers examining these holdings can find everything from formal portraits of officers and members to snapshots taken of annual meetings, workshops, skits, and other recreational events.

Photos, however, are just a small portion of the holdings. Official organizational records and personal papers make up much that is extremely useful for researchers exploring the history of AALL. A 1906 letter from Franklin O. Poole (Item 21), for example, shows that the issue of institutional membership was raised very early in the existence of AALL. As Poole pointed out to his colleagues, some law libraries were still being managed by students under the supervision of academics other than law librarians at the time, so it made sense to consider an alternative form of membership. (No separate category was provided then, however.) More professionalization would come later, of course, and whatever the nature of these existing affiliations, they undoubtedly helped AALL establish higher standards at such institutions. Institutional membership as such, meanwhile, was not formally proposed as a separate category in AALL until 1932 (25 LLJ 186, 1932).

The AALL Archives also enable the preservation of fragile items, such as this early AALL membership application from 1910 (Item 22). Current members will undoubtedly be struck by the annual membership fee: $2.00!

At this, the AALL’s 100th Annual Meeting, it is particularly important to emphasize the value of the AALL Archives as a repository for annual meeting records. The AALL Archives include the following ten record series, amounting to 30 cubic feet, which are devoted predominantly to annual meeting documentation:

- Artifacts and Memorabilia (85/1/20)
- Annual Meeting Program File (85/1/150)
- Annual Meeting Performances and Skits File (85/1/154)
- Annual Meeting Registration Lists (85/1/155)
- Annual Meeting Transcripts (85/1/156)
- Annual Meeting and Events Photographs (5/1/157)
- Annual Meeting, Institute, and Workshop Videotapes (85/1/158)
- Annual Meetings Administration File (85/1/159)
- Audio Tapes (85/1/160)
- Local Arrangements Coordinator’s Files (85/1/175)
As mentioned earlier, photos go back to the very beginning of AALL in 1906 (Item 20c), and AALL programs date back to the 3rd Annual Meeting in 1908 (Item 23). Clearly these materials comprise an invaluable record of AALL activities and achievements.

In addition, the AALL Archives staff has produced an exhibit for the annual meeting every year since 1982, with handouts produced for every annual meeting since 1987 (Items 24a & 24b). Beyond the exhibit, AALL Archives staff members regularly process new AALL acquisitions, maintain the paper and electronic records of the holdings, manage the proper storage of the physical holdings themselves, arrange for the preservation and conservation of delicate objects, and handle a wide variety of AALL research requests in addition to compiling information of interest to AALL members. For example, information on membership and annual meeting attendance over the years has been gathered and charted, and a map visually documenting all the locations of AALL meetings to date has been developed (Item 25).

In addition to papers, photographs, electronic holdings, and audio and video recordings, a selection of commemorative items is held by the AALL Archives and evidences the evolution in event-going. T-shirts commonly provide identification with a group, as those commemorating the annual meetings in San Diego in 1984 (Item 26), Chicago in 1987 (Item 27), and Atlanta in 1988 (Item 28) illustrate. Conference bags are also popular items and include the portfolio bag from Houston in 1983 (Item 29) and tote bags from Seattle in 1994 (Item 30) and Washington, DC, in 1999 (Item 31). Headgear includes a visor from the 1990 annual meeting in Minneapolis (Item 32) and a baseball cap from 2004 (Item 33). Several of the more unusual items include the NJLLA mouse pad from 1991 (Item 34), sunglasses from the 1998 annual meeting in Anaheim (Item 35), and an undated drink can holder indicating that “Law Librarians Tip the Scales in Your Favor” (Item 36). Even medals make their appearance, such as one from Indianapolis in 1996 (Item 37) and one in need of further identification (Item 38) – can you help us identify this item?

Indeed, it is mainly because of the generous contributions of AALL members that the AALL Archives contain the records of 100 years of AALL meetings and more. Perhaps you’ll consider providing the next acquisition!

This exhibit was prepared by Joyce D. Meyer under the direction of William Maher at the University of Illinois Archives at Urbana-Champaign. The documents and photographs are from the AALL Archives administered by the University of Illinois Archives. Special thanks are due to Frank Houdek, Carol Boast Robertson, Cheryl Nyberg, Mary Burch, Al Coco, Sally Wiant, Roy Mersky, & Lolly Gasaway. The Archives welcomes additional AALL records and information concerning the papers of law librarians.

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