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## Tracking Down the Contents of the Port Authority Library

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Back in the 1980s, I wrote a short book on the architecture and planning of the World Trade Center. Fortunately for me, the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, the quasi-governmental agency that built and operated the Trade Center, had organized and catalogued an enormous amount of printed material about the Center's construction. I spent many months in the Authority's library, poring over documents.

The library occupied space on the 55th floor of Tower One, reached by the Trade Center's extraordinary local and express elevator system. I can still remember what it felt like to zoom up in the express elevator - it could be an ear-popping experience. The library was a lovely space, well lit, comfortable, with spectacular views. Its only discomfiting aspect was the creaking of the walls, perhaps caused by the tower's swaying slightly in the wind. The librarians - lovely and extremely helpful - made available all kinds of material, from promotional brochures to press releases to telegrams to internal discussion documents to endless newspaper and periodical clippings. They also permitted me (though I suspect this had to be cleared at higher levels) to make copies of much of the material. I couldn't have written the book without their help.

In 1995, the Port Authority's leadership changed, and the new executive director, in cost-cutting mode, closed the library. Not long afterward, I spoke with a couple of people at the Port Authority - all of them uniformly dismayed at the library's closing - and they suggested that perhaps I now had the only set of copies of archival material regarding the Trade Center's construction. That seemed unlikely - how could such an archive just be thrown out? If the library had been disbanded, perhaps it had been acquired by another library, or perhaps it was in deep storage somewhere. So when, earlier this year, I began planning a new edition of the book, I tried to learn the collection's fate. It took some doing, but thanks to the members of the SLA I did eventually find the answer.

Turning first to the web, I came across an article by a library student at Kent State University, according to which nobody knew what happened to the Port Authority library. That sounded distinctly unlikely - given the thousands of people working at the Port Authority, somebody must have known. I'd heard that some of the papers of the World Trade Institute had been acquired from the Port Authority by Pace University. So I called the Pace library to inquire if by chance they had also acquired the Port Authority library. Unfortunately - as Michelle Fanelli, part-time reference librarian at Pace, explained - while the university had indeed acquired the Institute (which remained on-site at the Trade Center), it hadn't also acquired the library. She then suggested that I try the discussion list of the New York Chapter of the Special Libraries Association. And that's when I discovered the power of networking within the library community.

After joining the SLA discussion list and posting a question, I received close to two dozen responses. These included the names of former staff of the Port Authority library; accounts of people who'd tried

to find the library and been unsuccessful; suggestions for other libraries that might have acquired the material; and even a request from an employee of a law firm involved in WTC-related litigation to pass on the information if I found it.

One SLA member passed on the request to an engineer who had worked at the Port Authority for 20 years. The engineer wrote:

I can ask around, but from what I recall all the material was basically up for grabs for whoever wanted it. I know in Engineering we grabbed some stuff. The Planning Department and some of the other Line Departments may also have some stuff. It was a sad day when they disbanded the library.

Melinda Gottlieb, Chief Librarian of the Staten Island Advance, sent the following:

According to a 2002 article from [Archaeology](#), "Cultural Loss in Lower Manhattan" by Colleen P. Popson, the Port Authority archives were still housed at the World Trade Center and were lost in the 9/11 attacks. The good news: "Found beneath Tower One were portions of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's historical pictorial archive, which documents the last 80 years of the metropolitan transportation system."

Another member asked a friend, formerly an employee of the Port Authority library, who sent this response:

If memory serves, the Port Authority attempted to sell the collection to many places but was unsuccessful. The library was quite large, 75,000 volumes, with three full-time reference librarians. I believe we had a total staff of 10 or 12. Our transportation and world trade subject concentrations were impressive. We also held most of the original blueprints and other materials related to the building of the New York-New Jersey bridges and tunnels, and the Trade Center itself. In addition, we had the original Compact [creating the Port Authority] signed by New York and New Jersey in 1921.

Jane Minotti, librarian at the Research Library of the New York State Department of Transportation, passed on the request to Carol Paszamant, librarian at the Research Library of the New Jersey Department of Transportation (both are members of the SLA Transportation Division). Ms. Paszamant reported this remarkable story:

In 2001 the Port Authority invited a bunch of libraries, including Rutgers, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, SUNY-Maritime, and New Jersey DOT, to meet to discuss the splitting up and sharing of the Port Authority Library's collection [which] had previously been packed up and [stored] in the fourth sub-basement of the World Trade Center. Some of their most important documents had gone to an office in Queens instead of to the sub-basement. We had all met a couple of times at the Port Authority's offices in Newark, NJ to discuss how we would split up the collection, and at one point, they supplied each of us with a CD containing the metadata of the library's holdings. We had been scheduled to return on September 11th, but the meeting was postponed ahead of time. Needless to say, we all know what happened that day, and the collection was destroyed with the rest of the WTC.

Finally, a former librarian at the Port Authority passed on my request to the PR folks there, who sent the official response:

The Port Authority Library was closed in 1995 by Executive Director George Marlin as part of a broader focus on the agency's transportation mission that resulted in a downsizing of the agency. As to the collection, the short answer is much of the collection was a victim of September 11. Some items in the collection went to individual libraries -- but not in bulk -- and the balance was being stored in a cage on the B-4 subgrade.

In summary, the library once held some 75,000 volumes, tended by three full-time reference librarians, with extensive holdings on transportation and world trade, as well as original blueprints of bridges and tunnels and, of course, documents about the history of the Trade Center itself. In 1995, under a new administration, the Port Authority closed the library as a cost-saving measure. It was packed up and stored in a basement area at the site. Some parts of the collection were rescued by interested Port Authority employees, and if those documents were taken off-site, perhaps they still exist somewhere. An effort in 2001 to split up the collection among other libraries would have secured the rest of the collection, but that, unfortunately, hadn't yet happened by September 11 of that year. So the bulk of the collection, in the basement area, was destroyed during the disaster.

The account of the hunt, as it originally appeared on the SLA discussion list, has been picked up in several blogs, including an entry - posted by a student at Pratt Institute's School of Information and Library Science - in a blog called "Free Government Information (FHI)." That blog entry has in turn been picked up by several other sites.

It appears that my file drawer full of copies of documents from the library may, after all, really be the only surviving set of World Trade Center documents from the Port Authority archives. I'm planning to scan and include as many of them as possible in an appendix in the new edition of the book. Because this is a self-publishing venture in the brave new world of POD and e-books, I have more latitude to include such things than might have been possible with a traditional publisher. With luck, the book will come out sometime in 2011.

Thanks, again, to all the members of the SLA who sent suggestions and information!