

## **Hidden Treasures: The Special Collections and University Archives of Newton Gresham Library**

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While many students use the physical and digital resources available at the Newton Gresham Library, few are familiar with the Special Collections and Archives located on the fourth floor. These collections offer a fascinating look at Sam Houston State University and local Huntsville history, documenting various changes over time. Additionally, these rooms offer a plethora of invaluable resources available to students across all disciplines at the university.

First, it is important to make the distinction between Special Collections and the Archives, which may be easy to confuse with one another. While interrelated, Special Collections, located in the Thomason Room on the fourth floor, and the Archives, located next door to Special Collections, serve different purposes in the library. Special Collections works to “preserve and maintain special and unique books and manuscripts of Newton Gresham Library for generations to come” (“About the SHSU Special Collections”). In other terms, Special Collections has a variety of texts and documents that relate to the library, Huntsville, and local Texas history, among other subject areas. When visiting Special Collections, you can look at art made by local artists as well as collections featuring local authors. However, the Archives focus primarily on the history of Sam Houston State University as an institution, with a mission to “collect, preserve, and maintain materials related to the history of the past and present of Sam Houston State University” (“University Archives”). The Archives have an expansive collection of memorabilia from Sam Houston State University and record the changes made at the university over time.

The location of Special Collections and the Archives has changed accordingly as the library has moved three times. The Peabody Memorial Library was the first university library building in Texas (see fig. 1) and served as the campus library until 1928 (“About the Newton Gresham Library”). At this time, the Estill Library was established as the new campus library. However, the Estill Library was becoming overcrowded due to an increasing number of texts in the library; in 1967, there were

approximately 190,000 volumes in the building (Estill 72). Consequently, a third library was built in 1968 and later named after Newton Gresham, a member of the prestigious Board of Regents, in 1985 (“About the Newton Gresham Library”).



Fig. 1: Peabody Library, 1903

Although the Estill

Building now houses the Office of the Registrar, the Bursar’s Office, and Financial Aid, you can still visit the building and observe the American and European literary names carved on the exterior – Shakespeare, Virgil, Goethe, Poe, Hugo, Tolstoy, Homer, and Cervantes (see fig. 2).

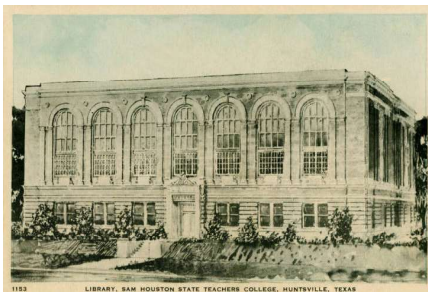


Fig. 2: Postcard of Estill Building, 1929

While they are similar in some ways, the history of the Archives differs considerably from the history of Special Collections. The Archives were formerly located in the Peabody building but were temporarily moved to the Newton Gresham library in the 1990s due to an outbreak of mold in the Peabody building (“Peabody Memorial Library”).

In 2004, the archives established a permanent residence on the fourth floor in the Newton Gresham Library (Kievit-Mason). While the larger library allowed the Archives to grow, it also led to the successful inclusion of reading rooms, workrooms, offices, and a “Texas room” (Estill 73).

What was, at the time, the Texas room in the Estill Building would eventually become the Thomason Room in Newton Gresham Library. John W. Thomason, Jr. was a Huntsville native who served in the Marines during World War I. Though he died at a relatively young age, many of his works survive in Special Collections. These include correspondence, manuscripts, and artwork (see fig. 3) that are housed in more than thirty

archival boxes and display cases (“John W. Thomason Collection”). Although he published multiple texts, Thomason’s renowned novel *Fix Bayonets!* remains listed under the US Marines’ recommended reading (Stewart). In 1993, novelist and reporter Donald R. Morris shared his impression of Thomason’s work:

His prose, moreover, is unique; he shares with Rudyard Kipling and H. H. Munro (Saki) the distinction of having stamped his identity on every paragraph. Nothing he wrote could ever be mistaken for anyone else’s work. His writing was lean and muscular...but it was also sensitive, and it carried his stories buoyantly, with never a word wasted. (Morris)



Fig. 3: J. W. Thomason, 1913

Clearly, Thomason’s text is unlike any other writer’s work, and many emphasize that *Fix Bayonets!* has preserved the memory of the Marines during World War I. Special Collections librarians have spent time and effort dedicating an expansive exhibit to Colonel Thomason. As you can see when visiting the top floor of Newton Gresham Library, the Thomason Room’s tribute to its namesake is admirable.

Special Collections offers resources available to many students in the humanities and social sciences. Numerous literary gems may be of interest to English majors, including a first edition copy of John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*. There are extensive collections of works by literary greats such as Mark Twain, H. G. Wells, and Gertrude Stein. Additionally, there is the Wild Dog collection, a series of poetry and correspondence belonging to the Beat poets, including Allen Ginsberg. Many texts in Special Collections also pertain to historical studies. Special Collections offers an extensive collection of Civil War documents, including correspondence. There are also newspapers dating back to the 1800s that have recorded major local events, such as Huntsville’s yellow fever epidemic in 1867. A historical marker of the event was placed at Oakwood Cemetery in 2016 (Waddill).

While it may seem more obvious that English and history students can benefit from visiting Special Collections, there is something available for every student across disciplines. There are collections from the personal libraries of the first two directors of the Bureau of Prisons, Sanford Bates and James V. Bennett, which offer priceless resources to criminal justice students (Rainey). Criminologist Austin MacCormick, who catalyzed the process of reforming Texas prisons by demanding better living conditions for inmates, has a collection spanning the years 1923 to 1978 (Shotwell). In addition, resources on Texas agriculture and local forests and plants, such as in the Big Thicket collection, are located in this room. One notable text is a book with actual cross-sections of different tree species in Texas. Photography, art, Texana, and early imprints attract many scholars and visitors.

Special Collections and the Archives both have resources that may interest students as well as their families and friends when they come to visit. Texas' largest printed book, *The Bird Book*, is an unbound monograph that is more sizable than most dictionaries and reference books, with dimensions of 29 inches x 23 inches x 3 inches (Stewart). On the other hand, Special Collections has a display case of miniature books, some handmade, that came in tobacco boxes. Another remarkable piece in the collections is a page from a 1493 block print detailing the lives of the saints (Spencer). This leaf, titled "The Lyf of Saynt Denys," is the oldest item in Newton Gresham Library. Even for casual visitors, Special Collections and the Archives have an abundance of curiosities waiting to be discovered.

The Archives offer a detailed history of Sam Houston State University. Among the numerous documents are blueprints, administrative reports, student directories, and bulletins. For example, if you want to learn what the university was like when your parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents attended, there is an extensive collection of yearbooks, newspapers, and photographs that document previous events dating back to when Sam Houston State University was Sam Houston Normal Institute. There are even pieces salvaged from the stained-glass windows of Old Main before the devastating fire in 1982. When examining this collection, one may notice that the fire was so blisteringly hot that it fused glass into brick ("Building SHSU"). The Archives offer a great deal of information about Sam Houston State University's history.

Like the stained-glass pieces that belonged to Old Main, there is a great number of ephemera that tell the unique history of this institution. Prior to 1924, Sam Houston State's colors were yellow and white, rather than the now iconic orange and blue; in fact, blue was not added to the university's colors until the 1980s. There have also been, believe it or not, many changes to Sammy the Bearkat's design over the years. While this is evident when looking at some of the memorabilia, history professor Dr. Ty Cashion elaborates on these changes in his book, *Sam Houston State University: An Institutional History, 1879-2004*. When first established as the mascot for Sam Houston State in 1923, the bearcat was an East Texas urban legend, a creature believed to be half panther and half cat (Cashion 126). Because Sammy the Bearkat is based on a mythological animal, his changes over time have been substantial, as can be observed when you visit the University Archives. One recent addition to the Archives is a marching band uniform that has been nearly perfectly preserved, and items are added to the Archives every day.

Both the Archives and Special Collections offer a rich cultural history of Texas and its surrounding areas. The Archives have a small collection of pottery from the Alabama-Coushatta reservation in Livingston, Texas. There is also a small collection of china printed with Sam Houston State University's likeness, including a mustache cup made in Austria, commemorative plates, and a set of china from Oklahoma. Special Collections has the Breitenbach Mexican Mask Collection on display on the fourth floor of the library. This is the fourth largest collection of Mexican art masks in the United States (Breitenbach). The masks feature human and animal faces or skulls and are often featured in Mexican holiday celebrations and festivals, such as *Cinco de Mayo* and *El Día de los Muertos*. While art majors may be particularly interested in these collections, they are available for everyone.

While the Sam Houston Memorial Museum is located next to campus, Special Collections and the Archives offer a series of miniature exhibits that may be more readily available to students on campus. Although both the Archives and Special Collections are working toward digitizing more materials, there is nothing quite like seeing history up close and personal. Whether students are majoring in biology or studying history, they can benefit from visiting the fourth floor of Newton Gresham Library. ■

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