

MODULE 21

LIGHTS, CAMERA,
ARCHIVES!

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2. Navigating interviews successfully is a learned skill. It takes practice to be able to articulate historical stories without stumbling over them, making unsupported claims, or boring your audience to death. Early on, the Barnes archivist stumbled on the subject of Dr. Barnes's early life because there were many rumors and little concrete documentation about it. By the time *The Barnes Collection* was filmed in 2012, however, she had rehearsed how to tell the story without including unprovable assertions. In general, this documentary was (from an archivist's point of view) far more successful than the earlier HBO film. The filmmaker expertly interweaved images of archival materials, selections from archival letters, images of artwork from the collection, and a present-day interview to allow Dr. Barnes to tell his own story, the result of a successful archivist-filmmaker collaboration.
3. You cannot control the final product. Before a prominent psychiatrist was interviewed for the HBO documentary, he read letters the archivist had chosen for him from the Barnes archives, and he talked with her at length about Dr. Barnes, leaving her with the impression that he had a good understanding of what was and was not true about the man. However, the archivist did not think that his interview reflected a nuanced understanding of the collector. Almost nothing the psychiatrist said was verifiable; worse, the archivist knew there was nothing she could do. He had chosen what he wanted to say, just as researchers regularly choose what they want to write or use from our collections—and as archivists, we have to let it go. The best we can do is be prepared for the next journalist or filmmaker knocking on our door, wanting to ask questions of us and our collections.

Titanic and the Independence Seaport Museum

With thanks to Megan Good Carrington

Philadelphia's Independence Seaport Museum maintains collections relating to the area's maritime history, so it was only natural that museum staff assembled a commemorative *Titanic* exhibit in 2012, the one-hundredth anniversary of the steamer's maiden voyage and sinking. The exhibition drew upon the museum's archives, in particular

letters and ephemera from the Thayer Family Collection. The Thayers were a prominent Philadelphia family who traveled the world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Three members of the family—father John, mother Marion, and son Jack—were aboard the *Titanic*, and their lives were forever changed by it. Using menus, passenger lists, receipts, and other materials, the museum’s archivist and curatorial department developed a small exhibit, “*Titanic* Philadelphians,” that detailed passengers’ backgrounds and lives after the disaster. The *pièce de résistance* was Mrs. Thayer’s first-class passenger list, which she unknowingly carried in her coat pocket when she left the ship in a lifeboat. The list is one of four copies that exist today and one of only two that are held by historical institutions.

Many people know the history of the *Titanic*’s sinking, so the exhibit told a compelling story for visitors and the media. The institution received many requests from media to film, photograph, and record the exhibition, and the museum’s archivist became the exhibition spokesperson. Here are some of the lessons she learned from the experience:

- Wear a comfortable outfit that you can walk in. Shooting may take one hour or eight. You never know what view or backdrop the camera crews will want to use, and it’s not fun to stand on a milk crate for an hour in three-inch heels, just so your height is the same level as the camera.
- Wear bottoms that are “camera ready.” Nothing is more horrifying than being asked to do a walking shot on camera while wearing dirty jeans from an exhibition install.
- Never underestimate the ability of interviewers to use Google and find obscure facts that you may not be aware of. For example, Widener University also had a *Titanic* exhibit opening around the same time as the Independence Seaport Museum. The university’s exhibit focused on the Widener family, another Philadelphian family who was aboard the *Titanic* and the namesake of the school, and the stories of loss and heartache that followed the sinking. Their exhibit also included information about the death of pets aboard the vessel. Consequently, one of the first questions that interviewers asked the Independence Seaport Museum’s archivist was: “What do you know about the dogs on the ship?” As the

archivist recounts, “I was surprised, but able to answer that question based off of two things: the extra research I did, and the fact that I read an article about the other exhibit the day before. My tip: set up a Google Alert to track other postings about similar exhibits so that you are not surprised on the day of your interview.”

- Remember your audience. When the local CBS station contacted the Independence Seaport Museum about the exhibit, they did not need the technical details of the *Titanic* sinking; they wanted to know heart-wrenching facts that would connect with viewers. The news radio station wanted that too, but they also needed extra descriptive information because their radio listeners, and most of their audience, could not see images of the items the museum had on display. It is helpful to think about your audience before the day of a media event so that there are fewer surprises.
- Build in time for media to visit the exhibit or items. The exhibit designers and archivist at the Independence Seaport Museum added an extra two days to the exhibit planning phase to ensure that any last-minute problems could be fixed. If they had not, media crews would have filmed the exhibit with half of the graphics and photo wall cut to the incorrect scale.

Overall, working with the media is a trying process that requires patience, understanding, and a good deal of work ahead of time. As the Independence Seaport Museum’s archivist says: “Believe me, I have talked for hours about an exhibit focusing on death and despair, which others seemed to enjoy, but it has been a rewarding part of my journey as an archivist.”

“The Special Collections Equivalent of a Stampede at a Rock Concert”

By Daniel J. Linke

The title of this case study is a phrase I uttered at the end of an interview about a T. S. Eliot collection that was about to be opened.²² The

²² *Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot*, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library. A finding aid for this material is available online at <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C0686>, captured at <https://perma.cc/7YJX-4BHS>.