

Serendipity in the Archive

By NANCY LUSIGNAN SCHULTZ

IN 1557, intellectuals in Venice became enamored of a newly translated Persian folktale. The “Peregrinaggio di Tre Giovani, Figliuoli del re di Serendippo” (“Adventures of Three Young Men, Sons of the King of Serendippo”) was quickly followed by translations into German and French. Educated Renaissance nobles loved riddles, fables, and literary games, and the charming story of three handsome princes and their successes in untangling brain-teasing problems captivated European imaginations. The first English translation, “Travels and Adventures of the Three Princes of Serendip,” did not appear until 1722. The British novelist Horace Walpole (1717-97) coined the word “serendipity” based on his boyhood reading of these stories.

In a 1754 letter to the British diplomat Horace Mann, Walpole recalled that the princely trio was “always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.” Serendipity, like chance, favors the prepared mind. Serendipity, however, requires that the mind be prepared in two special ways: with the flexibility to set aside the object of a quest, and with the wisdom to recognize that a collateral discovery may be equally important. Christopher Columbus, as we know, was searching for a direct sea route from Europe to Asia when he accidentally discovered America. And many of us are familiar with scientific breakthroughs that have purportedly happened through serendipity, including the discovery of penicillin, LSD, and Viagra.

In the humanities, a prime site for serendipitous discovery is an archive. This semester, I have introduced my graduate students in English to the concept of serendipity in archival research. As part of our scheduled library instruction, I included a visit to our campus archives at Salem State University. For students who now enjoy access to JSTOR and Project MUSE, in addition to such primary-resource databases as EEBO and ECCO, an actual archive might at first have seemed a quaint vestige of a former time. Some of my students perhaps wondered what could possibly be in an archive that cannot be found online.

Many were surprised to learn that our modest university archive holds rare treasures, such as travel journals by faculty from a century

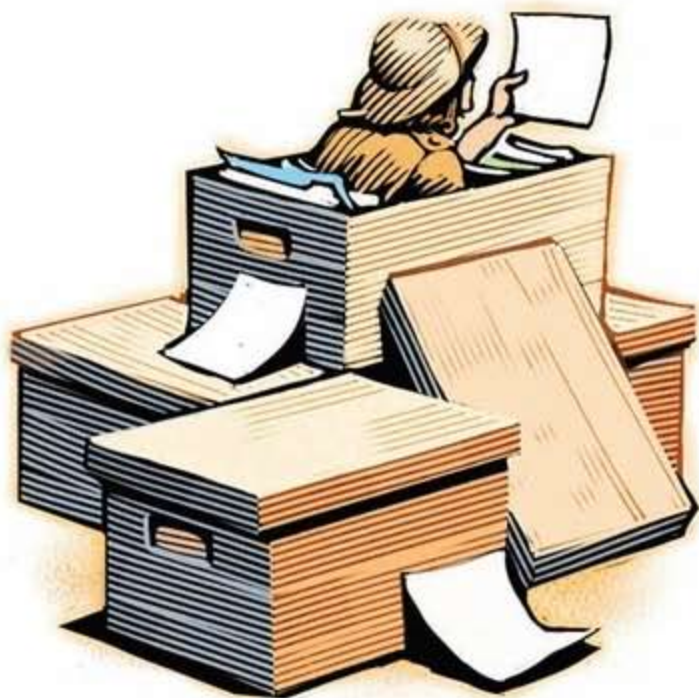


ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM FOLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Digitized material is no substitute for the tactile and sensory experience of being in an archive.

ago who made excursions to Asia, took photographs on glass negatives, and carried back the tiny, ornate shoes of foot-bound women, which we were able to fit in the palms of our hands. We examined 19th-century textbooks and looked at illustrated sheet music from the World War I era. My students now understand that most rare archival material, and materials in private collections, will never be scanned and digitized. And even if much of this material is digitized, its virtual presence is no substitute for the tactile and sensory experience of being in an archive.

Most important, however, the students got a taste of the thrill of discovery that one can experience only in an archive, where good sleuthing and the expert guidance of a willing archivist fosters serendipity. Archival researchers, those whom Richard Altick named “scholar adventurers,” still labor in the rarified spaces where only pencils and bare laptops—their carrying bags shuttered in lockers outside—are allowed. Here, acid-free boxes suddenly emerge from closed stacks at the flourish of a call sheet, and first editions recline on velvet book cradles. In one such archival sanctuary, in Canada, I was asked to don white gloves and turn the pages of a rare volume with a letter opener.



IN MARCH 1999, I traveled to Trois-Rivières, Québec, on an obsessive quest to find a missing painting. I was finishing my book, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (Free Press, 2000), about a notorious episode of anti-Catholic violence, and had been searching in archives throughout North America for a lost portrait of the convent’s controversial Mother Superior, née Mary Anne Moffatt. I had made a fortunate discovery in Québec City, a confirmation that a companion painting by the same artist had been sent as a gift to the Ursuline Sisters in Dedham, Mass., in 1964. That portrait—of Boston’s second Roman Catholic bishop, Benedict Fenwick—had been for several years unidentified and forgotten under the eaves of the convent attic in Dedham. The Fenwick portrait has since been purchased and restored by the College of the Holy Cross,

which the bishop went on to found in 1843. The portrait of the Mother Superior, who herself mysteriously vanished in Québec in May 1836, remains lost.

While the archives of the Trois-Rivières Ursulines did not bring the painting to light, a serendipitous find led to my next book project by introducing me to an attempt at a miraculous cure that took place in the Charlestown convent. In a nearly two-century-old letter about the illness and subsequent death of the convent's Mother Assistant, dated September 1827, its author, Sister Marie-Jean, wrote: "We have made two novenas, together with the Prince Hohenlohe, but our prayers were not altogether favorably heard. ..." As I read on, my interest grew. The following month, the sisters continued to follow the prince's directions for a cure, but again, they were disappointed. "The hoped for miracle not having taken place, there was nothing to do but submit to the holy will of God."

This story was only a sidebar to the topics I was researching, but I was intrigued by the account of a failed miracle. Certainly this Prince Hohenlohe, whoever he was, must have some miracles to his credit if the Ursuline community was attempting to tap his abilities in a crisis.

I came to believe that these serendipitous discoveries were themselves small miracles. I began to research the prince and found that he had been best known in the United States for a dramatic cure attributed to him three years before the letter I found in Trois-Rivières had been written. In the spring of 1824, in the young capital city of Washington, D.C., Ann Carbery Mattingly, the widowed sister of the city's Roman Catholic mayor, was miraculously cured of late-stage breast cancer. Just hours before her anticipated death, she arose from her sickbed free of agonizing pain and able to enjoy an additional 31 years of life. That miracle was attributed to the charismatic German priest Prince Alexander of Hohenlohe, who was purported to have cured hundreds of people throughout Europe and Great Britain.

Following the prince's instructions, sent in a letter carried across the Atlantic by ship, Mrs. Mattingly's priests scheduled nine days of prayer, followed by a Mass on March 10, 1824, timed to coincide with the prince's morning service in Europe. Unlike the unanswered petition of 1827, the 1824 cure was a dramatic event that riveted the nation's capital. I found that debates over the miracle's validity and meaning helped illuminate larger questions about race, gender, and class in the early American republic.

After some preliminary research, I published a few essays on the Mattingly miracle. Mrs. Mattingly's great-great-granddaughter, who was working on her family history, saw the articles and contacted me. She had made good progress on the family tree, but had been stymied by a lack of information about the widow's husband and son, both named John. Mrs. Mattingly's son predeceased his mother by more than 15 years. I was able to build on some of this descendant's findings and collaborate with her to solve a longstanding family mystery: Why had Mrs. Mattingly, who experienced two miraculous cures, one from cancer in 1824 and the other from a dangerous infection in her foot in 1831, disinherited her own grandchildren? Why did her wealthy brother, the former mayor Thomas Carbery, also leave them out of his substantial estate? While other nieces and nephews were named in his will, Carbery left the bulk of his estate, which would have been worth about \$4 million today, to the St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum. Mrs. Mattingly's grandchildren, themselves orphans, were not named as heirs.

Information about the family was enriched by a coincidence that occurred at the Georgetown Visitation Monastery in Washington, where Mrs. Mattingly had sought refuge after her dramatic cure made her a public figure. The archivist and other religious women at Visitation hosted me for four nights in the Hermitage, a little apartment that had once been part of the school's dormitory. There, I studied letters, annals, and other convent records about miracles at the monastery, and I conducted research at other archives in the city. I was thrilled to be a guest where Mrs. Mattingly herself had found some measure of peace.

A few months after my stay, the monastery archivist gave a presentation to alumnae of the venerable Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, updating them on recent initiatives at the high school for Catholic girls and on the planned renovations of the campus, including the archives. The talk was part of a fund-raising effort for alums, and the archivist happened to mention that a professor had been doing research at Visitation for a book on the Mattingly miracle.

When the archivist finished her talk, a remarkable coincidence occurred. Coincidences are not miracles, and generations of Carberys and Mattinglys had continuing relationships with the Visitation Monastery. But what happened next was revelatory, at least to me. The archivist told me that an elderly woman approached her and introduced herself as a direct Carbery descendant. The archivist reported that the woman said that "something was troubling her, that she had a box of letters and assorted papers, some of them Ann Mattingly's, and she wondered if I would want to see them. I said I did, and asked permission to tell you about them also."

Following this tip, I contacted the descendant, launching a friendship with Ann Mattingly's then-84-year-old great-great-niece, whose important collection of family materials was an invaluable resource for my book. The descendant and I talked on the phone, and she invited me not only to see her collection but also to stay with her. So I went to Washington with my scanner and slept on couch cushions on the floor of the apartment of a total stranger. We also collaborated in unraveling the mysteries of the Mattingly family. Her collection includes letters, photos, scrapbooks, and crucial transcriptions from a now-lost family Bible. This collaboration, among others, led to solving one of the family's deepest mysteries: the reason for the alienation of Mrs. Mattingly's son. (You can read about it in my book.)



As Shakespeare in "Henry V, Act IV," observed: "All things are ready, if our minds be so." Miracles are not the same as coincidences. But who is to say that the encounters we pass off as happenstance are not revelations of the interconnectedness that binds us all in the web of history? Unexpected discoveries in the archives, fortuitous encounters, and willingness to pass through any door that opens can help scholars untangle brain-teasing academic problems. Like our forebears, the three princes of Serendip, modern-day scholar adventurers continue their quests for new knowledge. In the archives, their hope is for happy accidents and the sagacity to find serendipity. ■

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