Source Materials and the Library: The Dispersion of the Beaumont Papers

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the confusion, attributable to misleading references, which long obscured the location of the main portion of the William Beaumont papers. The collection was previously thought to be in the National Library of Medicine, but it is actually housed in the Washington University School of Medicine Library. This has been clarified by the discovery of a series of previously unpublished letters of Sir William Osler, as well as by other newly found materials.

The history of the Washington University School of Medicine Library is reviewed, and the facts relating to the disposition of the Beaumont collection in that library rather than the National Library of Medicine are told. Also considered are some of the problems which the dispersion of documentary source materials creates for the scholar. With the Beaumont papers as a case in point, various locations of such materials are cited, and their contents briefly noted.

THE dispersion of source materials is a problem which confronts the scholar doing research in all fields, and the history of medicine and its major figures are no exception to this broad generalization. The reasons for this are many; some are easily explained and others are, and will perhaps always remain, inexplicable.

Probably the most common and easily understood distribution is a geographic one. People generate source documents in whatever localities they happen to reside at a given time. When a person becomes noted, there is always a local impulse to retain whatever of his records may exist in that place. Also, the individual might have corresponded with people in many places; this, coupled with his own peregrinations, might mean that a man's papers would indeed be scattered and the historian would have to consider many localities. This presents the scholar with a difficult, time-consuming, but not impossible task of reconstructing the history of his subject.

A more difficult problem, however, arises when the figure was controversial and his family has reason unknown to the investigator to suppress information, perhaps to avoid embarrassment for itself or others. Together with the vagaries of fate and time, in which documents are haphazardly destroyed or lost, this presents the investigator with a stimulating, though frustrating, situation.

Whatever the reasons for this scattering of materials, the fear must always haunt the scholar that he may not have seen all the material pertinent to his subject. Important collections often exist in local repositories, their existence unknown to all but a few. In the United States we are perhaps more fortunate in that steps have been taken to list and analyze the holdings of many sources of historical data. This effort is embodied in Hamer's *Guide to the Archives and Manuscripts of the United States* (1), but even this estimable work is not complete and cannot be regarded as a final authority; it must be used rather as a starting place for a search. An example of such a problem is the dispersion of the William Beaumont papers, whose location has been obscured by inaccurate references and lack of publicity.

Collections of Beaumontiana are numerous, and an important fact for the scholar is that no two duplicate each other; each has something unique to offer. Documents can be found in the Yale University Libraries, University of Michigan Libraries, University of Chicago Libraries, a private museum at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, the National Archives, and the Washington University School of Medicine Library. The contents of these widely scattered collections and the mystery surrounding the disposition of the major portion of the collection have just begun to be clarified; in this process, the histories of two medical libraries had to be investigated.

The Beaumont family came to this country in 1635 and settled in Connecticut. William Beaumont was born on November 21, 1785, the second son in what was eventually to be a family of nine. He had the usual education of the day, and apprenticed himself to a doctor in Vermont in 1810, after having read medical works for three years in the office of another doctor. He was graduated in 1812, and commissioned as Surgeon's Mate by President Madison. Stationed at Plattsburg, New York, Beaumont was actively engaged in the Battles of York (Toronto) and Sackett's Harbor in the War of 1812. He was in and out of the Army during the following years, engaging in private practice in Plattsburg; finally, in 1820, he reentered Army service at the instigation of Surgeon General Joseph Lovell.

While stationed at Fort Mackinac in 1822, he was faced with the situation that was to make him famous: here began his investigation which advanced the science of physiology so greatly. He was called to tend Alexis St. Martin, who, in a brawl, had received a gunshot wound which laid open part of his abdomen and thorax. When the wound healed, a fistula remained through which the interior of the stomach was accessible. Beaumont conceived, undertook, and duly reported a series of experiments, first in a current journal, the *Medical Recorder*, and then in his book, *Experiments and Observations on the Gastric Juice and the Physiology of Digestion*, published in 1833. In 1834 Beaumont was stationed in the St. Louis area; he left the service of the Army in 1839, and settled there, becoming a prosperous and active citizen until his death on April 25, 1853.

Understandably, his papers remained along his trail; records of his youth are to be found in Connecticut, Vermont, and New York. Army records are now deposited in the National Archives, some personal papers are housed in Chicago, some personal records are in Michigan, while the medical notebooks and most of his correspondence are located in St. Louis.

Fittingly enough, the school which now houses this collection is a successor to the medical school which offered Beaumont the chair of surgery on its faculty while he was still an Army surgeon.

Since this school is the major repository for the Beaumont papers, especially the materials on the St. Martin experiments, it is appropriate to consider its early history briefly, and then to see how the collection came to be located there.

The present Washington University School of Medicine stems from two main roots. The elder, Kemper College, was the first school to offer medical education west of the Mississippi. Its Medical Department was incorporated in 1837, but did not offer its first course of lectures until 1840–41. The faculty then consisted of six men, and the course was of two years' duration after a two year "apprenticeship." The school failed financially in 1845, and then became the Medical Department of the State University after a reorganization under the direction of Joseph Nash McDowell, one of the original faculty. It continued its university association until 1855, when it became an independent school. Renamed the Missouri Medical College, it maintained its independent status until 1899.

The second root of the present school was the St. Louis Medical College. Preliminary discussions relative to the formation of this school began in 1846, and it was at this time that the trustees sought William Beaumont for the chair of surgery. He was unwilling to accept the position, and wrote to Surgeon General Lovell stating his case:

> Having recently been elected to the Chair of Surgery in the new medical school about to be established in this place as you will perceive by the enclosed copies of communications—I conceive it my duty to consult the department and obtain your views and opinion of the propriety of such a course before giving a definite answer to the proposition.
>
> Feeling great diffidence in my own qualifications and fitness for such an appointment I was more inclined to seek an excuse than to cherish the acceptance and urged my official connections with the Army, the uncertainty of my continued location here, and the necessity and doubts of obtaining the sanction of the department and your approbation....
>
> I should prefer in your reply a good excuse for non-acceptance.

The trustees persisted in their urging, and on February 10, 1837, he wrote to them, saying:

> I have consented to accept for the time being, the proffered "Chair of Surgery" in the Medical Department of St. Louis University, with the privilege of withdrawing from

said Professorship at any time, should the Heads of the Public Departments under which I am officially placed here, withhold their consent or disapprove the act....

Nothing came of these early plans, however, and the school was not finally constituted until October 1841 as the Medical Department of St. Louis University. This Jesuit university is the oldest institution of higher learning west of the Mississippi, having been founded in 1818. The Medical School continued its affiliation until the mid–1850's, when the political activities of the American, or "Know Nothing," party (so-called because, when questioned in regard to the group's plans, aims, purposes and activities, the members replied, "I know nothing") made it seem wise to sever the school's connections with the Catholic university and incorporate as a private independent school. Its official title was the St. Louis Medical College, but since the dean of the school was Charles Pope, it was less formally known as Pope's College. The distinction between the disaffiliation from the university and the popular name of the school was probably lost on a crowd bent on riot, which attacked the school in protest against dissection of human bodies.

The school remained independent until 1891, when it was offered and accepted an alliance with Washington University as the latter's Medical Department; the name of the school, however, remained the same, with its university connection designated parenthetically, i.e., St. Louis Medical College (Medical Department of Washington University). Finally, in 1899, the Missouri Medical College merged with the St. Louis Medical College and both became officially the Washington University School of Medicine.

The libraries of these institutions also had complicated histories. Kemper College apparently did not have a separate library room; whatever collections of books existed were probably housed in the offices of the professors. That the St. Louis Medical College did have a library is attested to by the number of books on the shelves of the present Medical Library that bear the early school's bookplate. (Parenthetically, it is interesting to note an earlier philosophy of library service shown by the bookplates, all of which bear the legend, "This book is not to be taken from the Library Room.")

In 1910 the Library consisted of some 3,000 volumes which remained from the collections of the various merged institutions, and which were identified only in an incomplete list. At that time the Library was reorganized and given $15,000, with a guarantee of an adequate annual budget, space for housing the collection, and facilities to service it. Under these conditions the growth of the Library was rapid, and in ten years the collection had grown to more than 32,000 volumes. Of these, the enormous number of 7,415 volumes were acquired during the first year, surely a tribute

to the energies and stamina of the Library Committee and the part-time Librarian. As was common in that period, book selection was in the hands of the faculty, who prepared lists of desirable works in their fields and listed them by priority of importance for purchase.*

Special collections came early and in great profusion. Dr. George Dock, Professor of Medicine, and head of the Library Committee from 1910 to 1922, was an indefatigable worker to this end. It had been set down as Library policy that rare books, or "antiques" as they were then called, would not be purchased but would be sought as gifts. In 1913 the Library received as such a gift an extensive collection from the library of Dr. Julius Pagel of Berlin, all volumes dealing with the history of medicine. Other collections on specialized subjects followed: the Shapleigh library on otology, the Joseph Green and Adolph Alt collection on ophthalmology, and the W. E. Fischel materials on internal medicine.

But the most exciting group of documents to come to the Library was the unique and extremely important collection of Beaumont manuscripts presented by William Beaumont's granddaughter, Miss Lily Beaumont Irwin. The deposit of the collection at Washington University was a very different end from that which had long been anticipated.

For many years, Sir William Osler had been interested in the Beaumont papers, and had advocated their placement in Washington, D. C., at the Surgeon General's Library (now the National Library of Medicine). As early as 1900, Osler had been aware that Mrs. Sarah Beaumont Keim, Beaumont's daughter, had planned thus to dispose of the collection, and in an address to the St. Louis Medical Society in October 1902, which was printed in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* later that year, he said:

> It is satisfactory to know that the ultimate destination of this most valuable collection of papers is the Surgeon General's Library of the United States Army, of which Dr. Beaumont was so distinguished an ornament (2).

Jesse S. Myer, in the preface to his *Life and Letters of Dr. William Beaumont,* thanked the Surgeon General for his assistance and said:

> ... I gained personal access to archives including many volumes of old ledgers containing abstracts of letters received at and sent from the surgeon-general's office from 1812 to 1840, the period during which Beaumont was an officer in the army.... In addition to this, through the remarkable system maintained in his department, the surgeon-general succeeded in bringing to light for me a number of most important letters, which had for years been stored in the basement of the Surgeon-General's Library (3).

* In 1917, Miss Ella Bailey Lawrence became the Librarian and held that post until her death in 1942. As well as running a library which was dynamic and vital, she also devoted herself to the affairs of the Medical Library Association, for which, single-handed, she ran the MLA Exchange.

These two citations have been the cause of much confusion as to the exact location of the major portion of the documents, and only in the last year were previously unknown letters and transcripts of oral addresses relocated; these shed some light on the problem.

Osler had agreed to write the preface to Myer's book, and in the ensuing correspondence, Osler wrote:

10th Sept. 1912

Dear Myer,

Many thanks for yours of the 18th August. I felt that the introduction was rather brief, but perhaps it is none the worse for that. I shall be very interested in the book. I hope the family are still in the same mind—to put all the Beaumont documents into the Surgeon General's Library, where they would be permanently secure. My love to Dr. Dock when you see him.

Sincerely yours, (signed) Wm. Osler.

Thus as late as 1912, the Surgeon General's Library was apparently still considered the ultimate repository of the collection. But it now appears that Osler was one of the prime movers in the plan to get the materials transferred to Washington, while others held different views. Dr. Dock, in a typescript volume issued in 1934 by the Barlow Medical Library (Barlow Sanatorium) for the Beaumont Anniversary Celebration in Los Angeles, recorded that in 1902, Osler

...had said that the relics should ultimately find a permanent home in the Surgeon General's Library in Washington, and at the time the idea seemed very proper to me, but even twenty years ago Beaumont's memory was very vivid in St. Louis.... On the other hand, the reading of Beaumont's diaries and letters shows that his experience with the Surgeon General's office was often disagreeable, and I often thought that he himself would not have cared to see his papers in Washington (4).

Dr. Dock goes on to state that there was considerable feeling that the Beaumont collection should rest in the new medical school buildings which Washington University was constructing in 1913–1915. He corresponded with Osler on this point, and Osler finally agreed that St. Louis was a suitable repository. The family was persuaded to the same opinion, partly through the efforts of Dr. Myer, who was Mrs. Keim's physician, and in 1915 the documents were given to that Library.

The donation of the collection was coupled with the dedication of the new buildings which took place April 28–30, 1915, and on that occasion Osler wrote the following letters to Dr. Dock:

15 March 1915

Dear Dock,

I am delighted to hear that you have got the Beaumont collection. After all, it is more appropriate with you than at the Surgeon General's....

and again on June 8, 1915:

Dear Dock,

...I am sure that you must have had a delightful celebration. Do not forget to send me the reports. It is really very satisfactory that you have got all the documents relating to Beaumont.

Myer mentioned in his preface that the main materials from which he drew the information for his book were contained in "two old chests in the possession of Mrs. Sarah Beaumont Keim," then 70 years old. In order to try to determine as conclusively as possible the nature of the materials which Myer used in Washington, an interview was held on April 23, 1962, with Dr. Jerome Cook, who as a young man had worked with Myer both in examining the papers and in aiding in their transcription. He stated that none of the materials which came to the Medical School had ever been in Washington, nor were any of the Washington items ever owned by Mrs. Keim. The materials used there were the letter books of the Surgeon General's office, which were records of official correspondence between Surgeon General Lovell, his successors, and Beaumont. These volumes are now in the National Archives. Dr. Cook recalled that the materials borrowed from Mrs. Keim were taken in bushel basket lots, and the full basket had to be returned before any more materials could be borrowed. Judging by the size of the final Medical School collection, there must have been other family papers involved, which were not presented to the school, since the papers now there would fill scarcely more than a basket or two. The identity of the "most important" papers which Myer found in the basement of the Surgeon General's Library is no longer ascertainable, although a case may be presented for believing that they were the letter books mentioned. It is sure, however, that they are no longer in the possession of the National Library of Medicine, for extensive searches were made in 1956 and 1959 in connection with the determination of a founding date for the Library. On June 1, 1959, Dr. Dorothy Schullian, then Assistant Chief of History of Medicine Division, wrote to the Librarian of Washington University School of Medicine in response to a request for a photocopy of a manuscript leaf of Beaumont's, known to be in the National Library of Medicine collection. At that time she stated, "I know of no other Beaumont manuscripts in this Library."

We have seen that the confusion about the location of the manuscripts began as early as 1902 and first was committed to print in Osler's article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association.* The confusion was further compounded by the wording of Dr. Myer's preface to the 1912 edition of his work, and most recently the error has been reinforced by the republication of Osler's 1902 article as the preface to a 1959 reprint

of Beaumont's original book. One is not surprised, therefore, that scholars continue mistakenly to seek Beaumont's papers in the National Library of Medicine and then in other places.

Were it not for the work of Dr. Dock, the papers might, indeed, have been housed in Washington as originally contemplated. It was his determination to keep for St. Louis a collection so important, and so closely connected with a man bound to the city through years of active medical practice, which enabled him to convince Dr. Myer, and through him, Mrs. Keim (5), and Sir William Osler that that city was the logical and best home for the collection. In the light of the letters and statements of Drs. Osler, Dock, and Cook, it appears that the mystery of the supposed disappearance of Beaumont manuscripts from Washington has been clarified.

The other collections of Beaumont papers and artifacts mentioned earlier in this paper should not be forgotten. All of these are dynamic collections subject to constant addition. Let us take, for example, the St. Louis collection. Photocopies from the University of Michigan collection dealing with the later years of Alexis St. Martin, pertinent materials from the Yale University collection, three William Osler letters cited here, and other photocopies have been recently acquired. In addition, typescripts of the letters in the Washington University collection have been made into a four-volume bound set. This enables the reader to work through the collection more easily and quickly than by deciphering Beaumont's handwriting, which is not easy to read unless it is in fair copy. It also helps to preserve the collection, growing fragile in its second century of life. Future plans include the microfilming and publication of the entire collection. Microfilming will preserve the originals by making a substitute available for examination and will provide a "vault copy" to ensure the preservation of the collection, should the originals be destroyed, while publication will make the texts of the papers available to scholars at a distance.

All preservative measures are, of course, valuable, but the best measure of the value of a collection is its use. At present there are a number of scholars using the documents as source materials; among these is a candidate in the Ph.D. program of the university's History Department, who is working on a biography of Beaumont in his St. Louis period, and a retired chemist who plans to work on the knowledge of the chemistry of digestion in America in the nineteenth century.

In the case cited here, the historian tracing Beaumont's life must begin on the east coast with the collection at Yale and the materials in New York, follow his westward course to Michigan and thence to St. Louis, investigate materials in Washington, D. C., covering his Army service, and finally examine the collections at the University of Chicago, for personal effects,

and journey to Ann Arbor to trace the end of the story about Alexis St. Martin.

We do not, however, always learn from the past, and the dispersion of documentary source materials, rather than their cohesion, seems to be a trend which is continuing today as seen in the establishment of the many libraries erected to house United States presidential papers. The scholar of the future may not have to spend time searching out the locations of his materials, but he will always have to travel widely to examine them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to thank Mrs. Max W. Myer for her kind assistance in locating the three letters of Sir William Osler pertaining to the preface of Dr. Myers' biography, and Mrs. Harry W. Asher for her generous gift of these letters to the Washington University School of Medicine Library.

All manuscript materials cited in this paper are in the collection of the Washington University School of Medicine Library.

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