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Partnering with Archivists to Process the Manuscript Collection Present at the Marshall University Herbarium

The Marshall University Herbarium (MUHW) is located on the third floor of the Science Building at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, United States (Fig. 1). It was founded in the 1930's by Dr. Frank A. Gilbert when Marshall was still Marshall College. Today, MUHW is the second largest herbarium in West Virginia with about 50,000 specimens, including 20 types. Mostly composed of vascular plants, the herbarium also contains small collections of non-vascular plants, fungi, algae, fossils, and some ethnobotanical material, mainly brought from Ecuador by one of the former curators, Dr. Dan Evans between the 1980's and 2000's. Apart from these biological collections, the Herbarium also has a small library and many other documents from former curators: letters from 1920-1930 written by Dr. Gilbert during the early years of MUHW, and research, teaching, and personal documents from Dr. Evans.

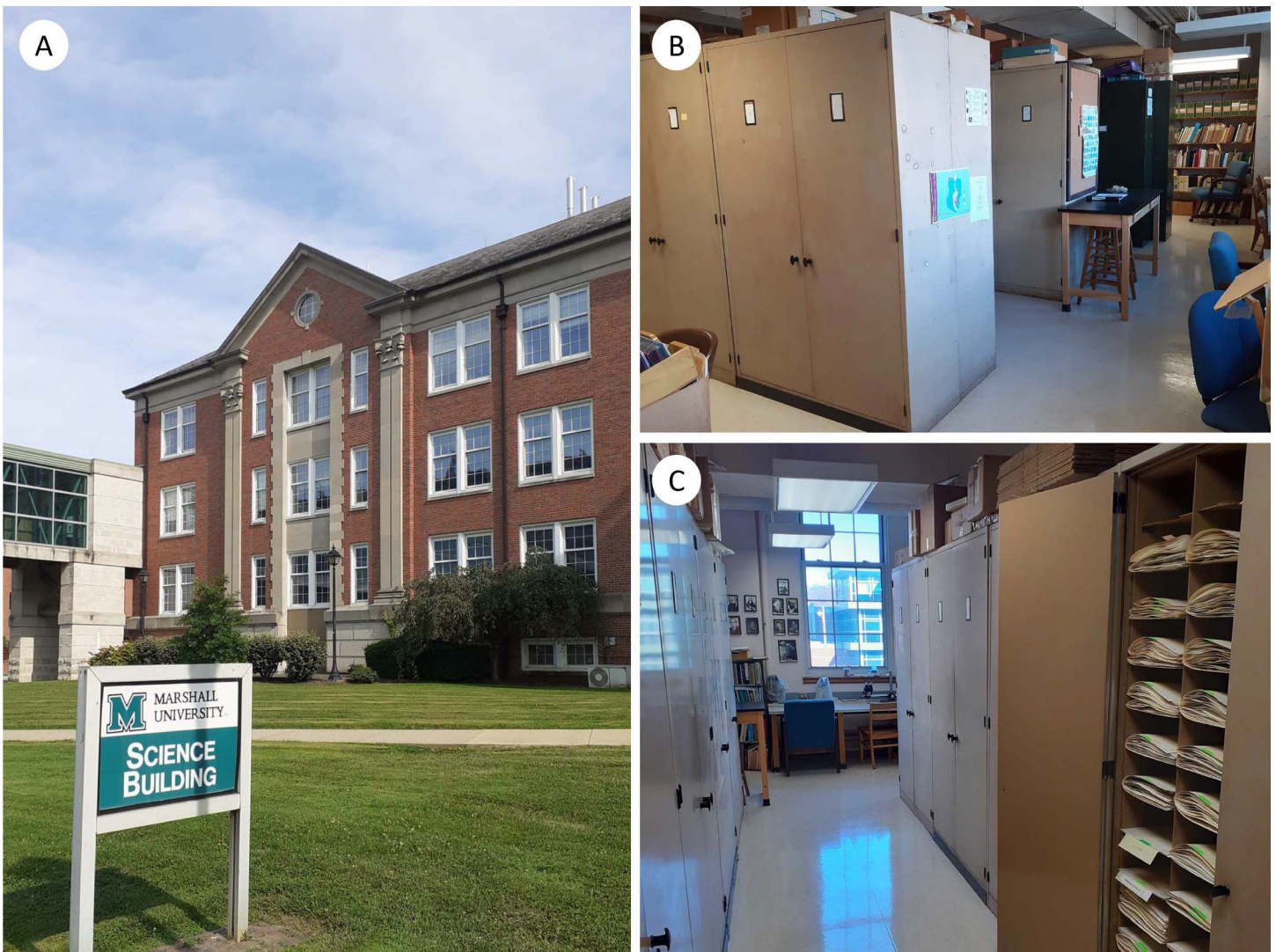


Fig. 1. (A) Location of the MUHW Herbarium in the Science Building. (B) General Herbarium view. (C) Detail of one of the cabinets. Photos: Pamela Puppo.

In order to process the documentation present in the Herbarium, the MUHW curator reached out to the chair of the Special Collections Department at Marshall University, whose focus is precisely on manuscript collections like this and their historical relevance to the University and the Huntington area. Coincidentally, every spring, the chair of Special Collections teaches a graduate class at the History Department (“HST 640 Archives Seminar”) during which students learn how to process a manuscript collection. So, at the end of 2020 we got together for a guided tour of the Herbarium and to see the documents present at MUHW, and it was decided that for the next edition of the class, the students would work with the Marshall Herbarium documents.

Thus, at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester, the Archives Seminar class came to MUHW for a tour. Most students did not know what an herbarium was and certainly never imagined Marshall University had its own. We are always happy to show our collection, and this was a great opportunity for students because they were able to see where the collection is housed, the care we take of the material, and hear about the herbarium’s relevance. Most of the time when archivists receive manuscript collections, the collections are already in boxes, and the archivists rarely get to see them in their original setting.

After the students’ visit to MUHW, Special Collections took two filing cabinets from the Herbarium and assigned one drawer to each one of the nine graduate students taking the class. During the semester, students sorted the contents of their drawers and, using prevailing archives theory, determined if the material is unique or has historical value. Things like purchase receipts, reimbursement forms, copies of the same document, material in bad shape (moldy, stained with ink, etc.), or other documents with no historical value were discarded. Students then organized the documents in folders and boxes of archival material according to date or topic and created a finding aid. A finding aid is similar to an index that is used to locate the documents they have previously organized at a folder level. These finding aids are available at the Special Collections website (https://mds.marshall.edu/sc_finding_aids/) and are fully searchable. Students also did a collection appraisal, where they estimate the cost associated with processing the manuscript collection considering the archival materials they used (folders, boxes, and others) as well as their time (using as reference the minimum wage for West Virginia, \$8.75/hour). The average cost estimated by the students was \$170 per drawer which, multiplied for nine drawers, gives a total of \$1,530 for processing the two filing cabinets!

At the end of the Spring 2021 semester, students presented their findings (Fig. 2). Presentations were hybrid, open to the public (with masks and social distancing), and virtual. Among the attendees were staff from the Special Collections, the Dean of Libraries, faculty from the Biological Sciences and History departments, and some friends



Fig. 2. Students of HST 640 Archives Seminar presenting at the end of the Spring 2021 semester. (A) one of the graduate students, Hallie Knipp, presenting. (B) View of all students. Photos: Pamela Puppo.

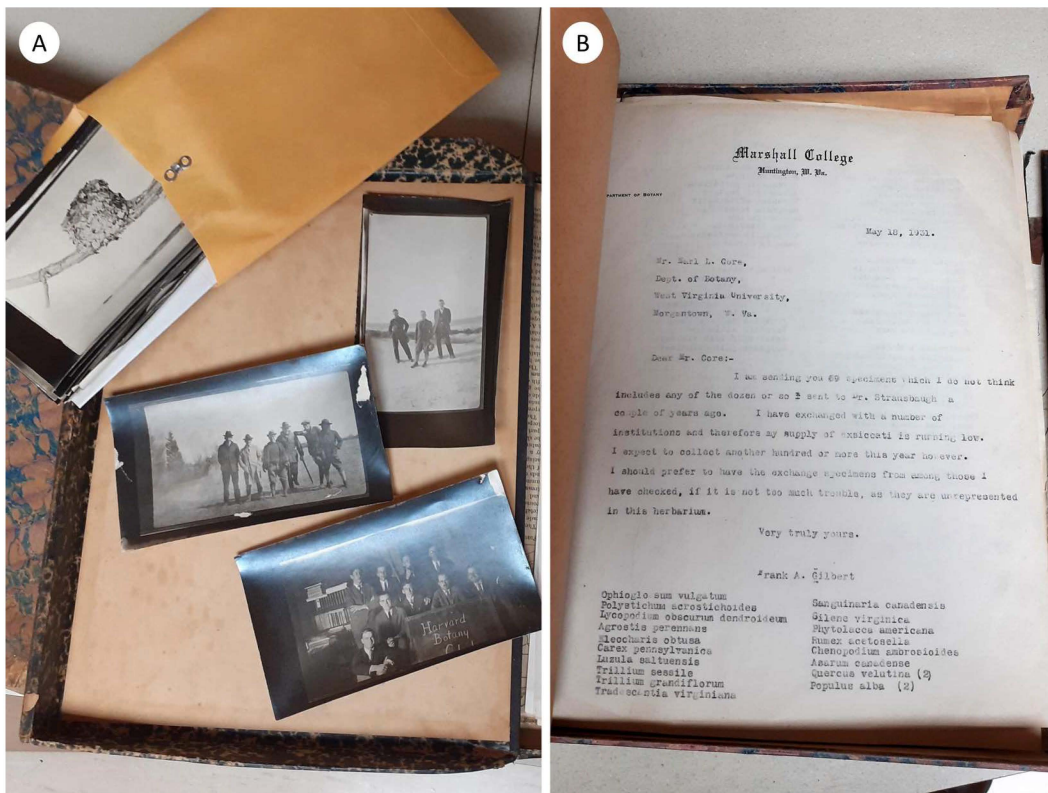


Fig. 3. Historically valuable documents at MUHW. (A) Photos of Harvard Botany Club. (B) Letters from Dr. Gilbert, all from the early 20th century. Photos: Pamela Puppo.

of Marshall University and alumni who heard about this presentation through an email that was sent to staff and students from these departments, as well as through the Facebook page of the Biology Department.

Among the documents students processed, some of them had particular historical value (Fig. 3). Those documents included, for example, Dr. Gilbert's letters from the early 20th century during the establishment of MUHW, photos from his time at the Harvard Botany Club, documents indicating the requirements for Biology to become a major at Marshall College in 1940, and documents that attested to Dr. Gilbert's participation in WWII. Among Dr. Evan's documents, students found transcripts of the speeches given by the former president of Marshall University, Dr. Donald Dedmon, after the fatal plane crash of 1970, in which 75 persons lost their lives, including most of Marshall University's football team. This tragedy is still very much present in the minds and hearts of the Marshall community, so these transcripts have particular historical and sentimental value.

This partnership made us realize the similarities between the archival sciences and biological collections. We both use special boxes and folders to sort and store our collections, we both assess whether a collection is relevant or not, and we both digitize our collections. It was also interesting to see the different foci we have. Archivists are interested in the persons and their historical connections, whereas herbarium curators are more interested in the research these persons did, the outcomes, and their applications. Another important aspect of this partnership is that Special Collections will archive any material that is not necessarily relevant for the Herbarium, such as Dr. Dedmon's speeches. This, on the one hand, allows us to free some much-needed space in the Herbarium, and on the other hand, helps archivists have these documents at hand for people who might want to study them from a historical perspective.

One of the graduate students that took this class last Spring is currently working as a summer intern for Special Collections. He will be looking into the history of the Herbarium based on Dr. Gilbert's documents and will also be looking at two Herbarium books present in our collection, one from 1896 and another from 1926 (Fig. 4), and trying to find out who made these books.

Overall, this was a win-win collaboration: students learned, and we got things done. This was a great opportunity for students to get exposed to other types of collections such as biological collections, and also helped us look at our collection with new eyes. For instance, it helped us think about the monetary and historical value of some of these adjacent collections in our Herbarium. Furthermore, this partnership helps us bring new awareness to the importance of MUHW, also by having other departments at our institution advocating for the value of our collections. We are looking forward to continuing this work in future editions of this class, especially since there are still many more documents waiting to be processed at the Marshall University Herbarium.

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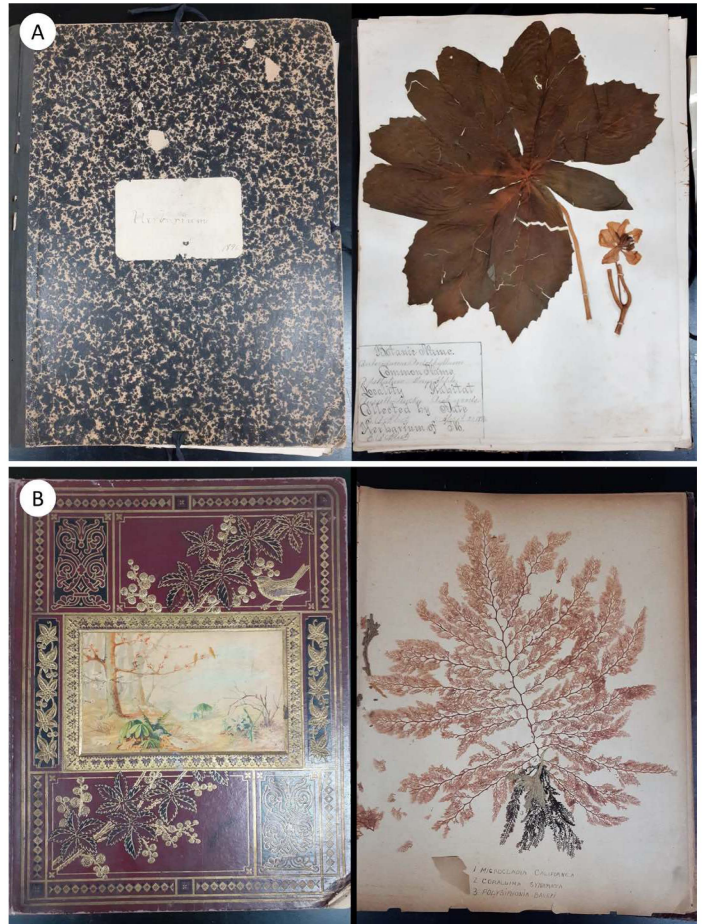


Fig. 4. Old herbarium books at Marshall Herbarium: One (A) from 1896 containing plants collected in Kentucky, United States, the other (B) from 1926 containing algae. Photos: Herbarium archives.

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