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Cushing Memorial Library: A new face for an old building

Beth M. Russell

On October 20, 1998, nearly 300 donors, scholars, and descendants of Edward Benjamin Cushing joined with Library Dean Fred Heath, Cushing Library Director Donald Dyal, and members of the university administration to hear Sir Roger Elliott of Blackwell's Ltd. discuss "Scholars, Collections and the Research Library." This gathering celebrated the official rededication of the Cushing Memorial Library at Texas A&M University (A&M) in College Station. The ceremony focused appreciation on the role of the university library and the special place for research collections, such as those housed in the newly renovated building.

The reception marked the end of a four-year long process of rebuilding and renovation designed to bring the special collections and archives of the university to a wider audience in secure and attractive surroundings. While the aesthetic intent of the renovation was to return the building to its neoclassical grandeur, modern services and technology were also made available, many for the first time. Increased visibility for the collections and a higher public profile have also been realized through the renovation process.

THE BUILDING

Cushing Library, which opened in 1930, was the first building on the A&M campus specifically built as a library. It was named for E. B. Cushing, a former student and administrator who ensured the survival of A&M. When the school faced closure in 1912, Cushing not only marshaled support from the state legislature and brought legislators to College Station to experience the school firsthand, but he also personally guaranteed notes of credit to assist the school after a series of disasters. Upon his death in 1924, Cushing's private library was given to the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and formed the nucleus of the school's library.

Over the years, several additions were attached to the rear of the building to accommodate the expanding library collections of the growing school, which was renamed Texas A&M University in 1963. With more modern additions in 1968 and 1979, the original Cushing building was subdivided to serve assorted functions. The large reading room, with a hand-stenciled ceiling, was packed with study carrels. A lounge and snack machines occupied much of the second floor. The university library's cramped "old stacks" housed theses and other rarely used materials on open metal flooring. The remainder of the building became office space, housing at various times the university archives, remote computing facilities, and several academic departments. This deterioration of Cushing into a "catch-all" for university and library needs continued throughout the 1980s.

In 1992, the administrative unification of the university's archives and special collections departments signaled a change. Soon thereafter, the most heavily used archival collections were moved into space shared with special collections in the university's Evans Library. The remaining

materials, which formed the bulk of the collection, were moved to an off-campus storage facility. In 1994, Cushing was closed to begin the long process of renovation and rebuilding.

During the renovation, the interior of the building was gutted to remove all traces of asbestos and lead paint. Walls that had been added during the 1970s and 1980s were removed and the old style metal stacks were disassembled and replaced with standard floors. Various stages of building and decorating culminated in a colorful yet classic finished interior and a refurbished and newly accessible exterior. Additional work, such as the hand-painting of columns and beams on the first floor, was completed after the library reopened in August 1998.

The entry floor now boasts a beautiful restored terrazzo floor containing the seal of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas as it appeared in the 1930s. Exhibit space and a spacious seminar room, along with several offices, completes the first floor.

The second floor contains the striking main reading room. The ceiling, with abstract designs inspired by Native American artwork, was recreated by student volunteers who signed their names on a beam near the northwest corner of the room. Original oak bookcases and wainscoting were carefully restored. The original oak study tables and chairs served as a model for the new tables and chairs, which were endowed by donors and contain Internet hookups and power cabling. Additional exhibit space was created for the library's art, artifact, and paper collections on the second floor. The third floor and basement areas, both staff work areas, were furnished with attention to comfort and efficiency. They now house cataloging, preservation, and other processing operations for the library. All staff workstations are equipped with ergonomic furnishings, and many faculty and staff were provided with personal offices or cubicles for the first time. The entire building was wired to the library's LAN and made accessible and ADA-compliant. Climate control, security, and storage systems are state-of-the-art to ensure the safety of the collections.

THE COLLECTIONS

Cushing houses the research collections of A&M, the oldest public institution of higher learning in the state. Since the merger of special collections and archives, these collections have included books, manuscripts, works of art, memorabilia, historical and personal artifacts, film, photographs, and much more.

The university's archival collection, which includes artifacts of great historical importance to the university as well as official publications, records, and manuscripts, is one of the most popular collections at Cushing. Much of the collection highlights the history of the institution and the activities of outstanding alumni. Clipping and vertical files attract students researching projects ranging from mathematical studies of campus monuments to designs for student group t-shirts to theses and dissertations on the history of the school.

Cushing's large research collections in military history, Texas local history, and range and livestock studies are well-known. Literary collections, including science fiction and collections of published and unpublished works by authors such as Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and P. G. Wodehouse, also bring researchers to the library. Illustration, in both print and book form, is well-represented. Several notable gifts in recent years have joined the university's significant rare books collection, including copies of the Kelmscott Chaucer, the 1632 Second Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, and a sizable collection of Africana. Finally, Cushing owns the largest art collection on campus, much of it on display to the public in the new galleries.

SERVICES IN THE NEW BUILDING

The greatest improvement in services in the new building is that provided by the "elbow room." In the temporary quarters of the university's main library, researchers using materials often shared tables with student assistants processing collections, while a bibliography class participated in

a practicum on hand printing in the corner. The renovation allows all users of the library the chance to view, appreciate, and study the collections in a spacious, well-lit, and attractively furnished area. The most important service offered in the newly renovated building will continue to be support for research using the library's collections. New, compact mobile shelving throughout the building offers easy retrieval, while an electronic filing system keeps the popular vertical and photograph files quickly accessible while requiring much less space. In addition, users will benefit from connections in the reading room, which will allow them to search the A&M Libraries's growing list of electronic databases and the Internet. Recent staffing additions have made professional staff more available to answer reference questions both in the reading room and by phone, e-mail, or letter. Security is much improved in the new space, as well. Lockers on the first floor house personal belongings for researchers, while access to the stacks is tightly controlled. The front desk is attended at all times to answer questions and give directions.

Many people visit the library "just to look around," and for these people self-guided tours are provided. Plaques describe features such as the original ornate iron gateway into the reading room, which contains brands from notable Texas ranches. Attendants at the front desk and the second floor reading room can also answer questions that may arise about the building or the collections. The exhibit space created in the new building will allow a much more vigorous exhibit program, and rotating exhibits will become one of the major ways the university and local communities experience Cushing. During the rededication, an exhibit focusing on treasures of the collections drew enthusiastic praise from the attendees, while the display of artwork in other spaces highlighted this long-neglected resource.

Another form of outreach made possible by the new building is teaching. The library owns a working reproduction of a wooden handpress, based on a 16th-century design. This press is now housed with various sets of type and other printing equipment on the library's third floor. Classes will be able to work with the press to study the history and technique of printing in a much more comfortable space. Other collections and materials that support teaching will be much more accessible and easy to display in the new building, while the seminar room on the first floor will make it possible to hold classes using Cushing materials without disturbing researchers in the reading room.

Since the building reopened, many curious visitors have climbed its stone steps and opened its doors. Publicity, ranging from notices in local newspapers to mention in the main library's bibliographic instruction courses, has yielded an increased visibility for the building and for its collections. The construction itself piqued the curiosity of many visitors wanting to see what had been happening behind the safety barricades. Compared with the Cushing's former location in a low-visibility area of the second floor of the Evans Library, this prominent public profile can only increase interest in and use of the collections.

The benefits of the renovation to the staff and the collections are obvious, and include more suitable storage and workspace and greater security. Equally important are the benefits that the newly renovated building offer to the university as a whole. By saving one of the oldest buildings on campus, the university has preserved a piece of its history, much as the collections of the Cushing Memorial Library will be preserved for generations of future researchers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth M. Russell is cataloging librarian at Texas A&M University
An exterior view of the Cushing Memorial Library.
A student works in one of the library's new reading rooms.