The AAVSO Archive Project

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Abstract The historical documents and archival records at the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) are for the first time being evaluated, arranged, and catalogued in a systematic and comprehensive way. The goals of this project are to establish an archive that is efficiently accessible, and to produce a descriptive catalogue that will be useful both as a finding-aid and as a research tool.

1. Introduction

In October 2000, former AAVSO President and Council Member Thomas R. Williams wrote to Director Janet Mattei proposing an approach towards organizing the AAVSO's collection of archival records and historical papers (Williams 2000). His proposal was driven by the need to begin his work on the AAVSO centennial history, to be published by 2011. As a start, Thomas R. and Anna Faye Williams offered to provide funding on an annual basis over a period of ten years, contingent upon the AAVSO Council's willingness to match that amount. At the October 2000 meeting, the AAVSO Council voted to accept this proposal.

The AAVSO Archive Project was begun in late October 2000 when Director Mattei asked me to take charge of all aspects of the work. What follows is a description of the project, including a sketch of its historical origins, the project's purpose, its plan and methodology, its accomplishments to date, and an outline of future work.

2. Historical background

By the time the AAVSO was founded in 1911, there was already some 30 years' worth of papers pertaining to variable star work accumulated at Harvard College Observatory (HCO). This was the product of HCO Director E. C. Pickering's interest in variable stars, which began in the early 1880s. Most of these papers are now in the Harvard University Archive, but some remained in the hands of the AAVSO.

After Leon Campbell was named Recorder in 1915, the AAVSO had its own office in the west wing of Building A on the grounds of HCO. There, for the next 38 years, more letters, reports, and other material accumulated. When Margaret Mayall was named to succeed Campbell in 1949, she added her own collection of papers from her years as a HCO staff astronomer, and she took up the task of overseeing the receipt and generation of more documents at AAVSO Headquarters.

On October 5, 1953, the President and Fellows of Harvard College passed a resolution stating that variable star research is no longer as important as it was in 1931 (when the Pickering Memorial Endowment for variable star research was established), and that the income from the Pickering Endowment (which in part went towards the AAVSO Recorder's salary) be devoted to "other astronomical research" (Harvard College 1953). Director Mayall and the AAVSO Council were warned a year earlier by HCO Director Donald H. Menzel that something like this would happen (Mayall 1953). And so—after a year of rumor, speculation, and discussion—this news was expected, but it was, nonetheless, shocking news. Director Mayall felt that there would be enough time to make careful plans to re-establish the AAVSO both as an organization and as a physical entity. But on December 8, 1953, HCO suddenly announced that Building A—housing AAVSO Headquarters—was to be demolished as part of an expansion program (Menzel 1953). The AAVSO was told to vacate the premises by January 1, 1954. The move was made on January 2 by about a dozen AAVSO members and friends (Anon. 1953).

When the surviving papers of 68 years—from the Pickering, Campbell, and early Mayall eras—were moved away from HCO, they were taken-in by anyone who could offer a safe haven: Margaret Mayall and her administrative assistant Helen Stephansky each kept boxes of papers at home; Clinton B. Ford held onto the Secretary's files; and the immediately-useful material was taken to the AAVSO's newly-rented office at 4 Brattle Street—in Harvard Square—in Cambridge. Everyone involved did the best that they could under the circumstances to ensure the survival of the organization's most important documents. However, due to the greatly reduced storage space at the new office, Margaret Mayall and Helen Stephansky spent many hours, day and night, sorting through the old files, keeping only what was important, and discarding the rest (Stephansky 1954).

The surviving files (with the exception of the Secretary's files, which Ford kept at his residence until the early 1990s) were eventually reunited in 1965 at the next AAVSO Headquarters location at 187 Concord Avenue, Cambridge. They remained there during the remaining term of Mayall's Directorship, and then from 1973—when Janet Mattei became the Director—through 1985.

Up to this point, "archives" was mainly synonymous with "old records"—there was no clear distinction between the two types of material, and there was no systematic way to access any of it other than to open a box or a filing cabinet and rummage around. Margaret Mayall and Janet Mattei had only what might be described as "local knowledge" of the old records—they knew where to find certain important or useful documents, but the rest of it was only "in the files."

In late 1985 the AAVSO packed-up once again—this time on a happier note—to move into its new (and current) headquarters at 25 Birch Street, also in Cambridge. The move gave Janet and her staff an opportunity to take their first good look in many years at these old papers. The process of packing up the office literally uncovered all of the old papers for a few moments, only for them to be returned to drawers and boxes once again at the new headquarters.

As part of the 75th anniversary meeting of the AAVSO, held in August 1986 at the new Birch Street headquarters, Janet Mattei asked me to set up a display of the AAVSO's history in photographs, papers, and other items. This was one of the few times that such material was put on display as "from the AAVSO archives," and it was certainly the largest—300 square feet—and most comprehensive exhibit of the AAVSO's historical material ever. This was also the first up-close acquaintance that most of the meeting attendees had ever had with the AAVSO's history. A sampling of papers from the AAVSO Archive is shown in Figure 1. After the 1986 annual meeting, the displayed material was stored away in cabinets and boxes once again, to be mostly left alone for the next 14 years.

Figure 1. A sampling from the AAVSO Archive. Counterclockwise from upper right: souvenir of the 4th Spring Meeting, May 1917; *The Practical Observing of Variable Stars*, 1918; *General Instructions to Observers* pamphlet; catalogue of the AAVSO C. Y. McAteer Library; blueprint and photographic charts; letters and postcard (1919–1921) from Charter Member, Prof. Anne S. Young of Mount Holyoke College.

Janet Mattei was keenly aware of the value of the AAVSO's archive: she referred to it whenever there was a need to clarify a discussion, or to cite a precedent or point of protocol for the organization's operations. It was always Janet's intention to organize the archive, but limited staff and budget, and many higher-priority projects kept this from happening. For example, the archival observations database project (1985–1997) was followed and overlapped by the *Hands-On Astrophysics* education project (1995–1998). Many other projects were being attended to at the same time, in addition to the daily database and office work. But at last, in 2000, three factors came together that would permit the start of the archives project: staff availability and interest; the approaching 100th anniversary of the AAVSO; and availability of funding through the Thomas and Anna Faye Williams matching grant.

3. Description of the AAVSO Archive Project

3.1. Purpose

The primary purpose of the project is to organize, evaluate, and catalogue the AAVSO's historical archival material so that everything has a place, can be located efficiently, and can be returned to its place so that it can be found again when needed.

The secondary purpose of the project is to identify material that is an important or significant part of AAVSO history, or is simply interesting. All such material will be described in the archive catalogue with notes, cross-reference information, and keywords, so that the catalogue will be useful both as a finding-aid and as a research tool.

3.2. Rules for a system of arrangement

While libraries may have strict cataloguing rules to follow, there are no corresponding sets of rules for archives. Every archive is unique, and it is the archive itself which determines the rules. There is, however, one fundamental archiving rule to be applied whenever possible: to preserve the original order of any found set of papers.

With these thoughts in mind, I outlined a system of arrangement which generally mirrors how the AAVSO has generated its documents. First, there are distinct historical "epochs," which divide according to the periods of leadership: the Pickering/Olcott era, the Campbell era, the Mayall era, and the Mattei era. Second, there are distinct ways in which documents are generated, or materials are acquired at AAVSO Headquarters: Correspondence, Organizational, Administrative, and Special Collections. I use these basic building blocks to form an identifier for each item, folder, box, and collection. The identifier then becomes a means to describe the physical location on a shelf, and the sub-location within a box and folder, of an item listed in the catalogue. The following are the parts which make up the identifier:

A. The Era

ECP	Pickering Era	1877–1911
WTO	Olcott Era	1911–1915
LC	Campbell Era	1915–1949
MWM	Mayall Era	1949–1973
JAM	Mattei Era	1973–2004

Subsequent years are to be added to the archive at 5-year intervals.

B. The Collection

The *AAVSO Correspondence Collection* is all material found filed in letters folders, many of which were found labeled with a specific correspondent's name.

The *AAVSO Organization Collection* comprises any material pertaining to AAVSO's divisions, committees, minutes, treasurer's files, secretary reports, and so on. These are, in general, any files involving decision-making that were found filed as such, apart from the AAVSO Correspondence files and other collections.

This collection also contains anything pertaining to the AAVSO in general which does not fall into any of the other categories.

The *AAVSO Administration Collection* consists of such items as meeting notices and planning, papers relating to publications and mailings, samples of printed matter, business items, and so on. This is generally any material generated by, or representative of, routine office functions, and which was found stored as such.

Special Collections comprise all material given or bequeathed to the AAVSO, and any internal material that cannot (or should not) be assigned to the AAVSO Correspondence, Organization, or Administration collections; for example, the AAVSO Charts Collection. A working list of the AAVSO Archive's Special Collections is given in Table 1.

The other parts which make up the identifier are self-explanatory: C. box number; D. file unit (usually a folder or group of folders); and E. the item or set of items within a folder. The identifier is used to make up a label on a box or folder, or as a call-number in the catalogue. A call-number, for example, would be written: AAVSO Corresp. LC Box 5 McAteer, C. Y.

As a visual locating aid, the box labels (Figure 2) are color-coded—white for Correspondence, blue for Organization, green for Administration, and yellow for Special Collections.

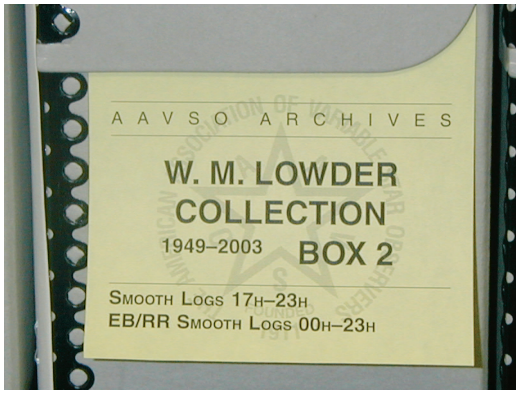

Figure 2. An archival box label.

3.3. Archiving method

Here are the steps involved in processing a batch of archival material:

1) Look at the papers individually and as a group, and make a decision about their place in the overall archive. Also consider the significance or interest of the papers—historical, organizational, biographical, anecdotal, etc.—and make rough notes on a sheet of paper as you go.

2) Examine the material to determine what found order exists (if at all). Whenever possible—and if meaningful—papers are kept in their original order; otherwise, papers are generally arranged chronologically within a folder. If the contents of a box or folder were found obviously misfiled or in disarray, remove the items that do not belong in that arrangement, to be dealt with at another time; otherwise,

you must assume that the items' context, as found, is important—in which case keep the items together even if a group of items cover the time period of two or more series. Letters are collected according to the individual who sent the letter to Headquarters, or to whom Headquarters sent the letter.

3) Arrange the contents of a folder in order of date (unless it is clear that an item was meant to be together with other paper(s) out of order); and if a folder is a group of unrelated papers (i.e., A–Ai misc. letters), the papers are first arranged in order of name, then by date.

4) While working with a set of papers, examine their condition: straighten creased pages; remove staples, clips, rubber-bands, etc.; brush away dust and dirt; if soiled or moldy, carefully clean if possible; repair tears using archival-quality paper tape. If the paper is badly deteriorated, brittle, soiled, or is made of pulp paper, make a photocopy on archival-quality bond paper. Reserve the original document in a separate folder, if warranted.

5) Place the papers neatly into a new, acid-free, archival quality folder; write the identifier on the folder tab. Write any other useful information on the front of the folder, such as date-range, keywords, cross-references, names or subjects mentioned in the papers, and a brief description of any unusual or significant contents.

6) Arrange the folders alphabetically, chronologically, or by other means, as determined by the contents of the set of folders.

7) Place the folders in an acid-free, archival quality file box. Write a call number on the box on a strip of paper, and temporarily hang the paper on the outside of the box (permanent labels for the boxes to be made once the final order is determined, and the contents have been catalogued).

8) Enter the collection, box, folder, or item in the catalogue database. If warranted, write descriptive notes, provide cross-references, keywords, and any other useful information—such as the names of individuals, places, or institutions mentioned or represented in the papers.

3.4. The catalogue

The archival material is catalogued using PROCITE relational database software. This software is designed as a researcher's bibliographic reference tool, but it readily lends itself to use as an archival cataloguing program. For example, one feature of the software allows entries to be assigned to a named "group," and be viewed as a group—all of the AAVSO Organization entries of the Leon Campbell era, all of the Special Collections entries, and so on.

When a selection of archival material is arranged, placed in folders, and boxed, a catalogue entry is also made for the material. Depending on the value or interest of the material, an entry might be made with only minimal information—a name or title and a date—or it might consist of detailed notes, cross-references, and so on. Material is usually catalogued folder-by-folder, but in many cases, an entry will be made for an entire set of folders or boxes, or even as an entire collection, without further detailing. Here is a typical catalogue entry for a folder of material of general interest:

Item: Texas Observers. Burleson, Texas; 1929. 1/8 in. [Folder].

Notes: Souvenir photographic collection presented to Leon Campbell; includes: photographic star-fields made with the Charles A. Post Camera at Burleson, Texas; photos of the Burleson telescope and its installation, and the Texas Observers members.

See also: Oscar Monnig; Sterling Bunch; James H. Logan; Blakeney Sanders. Also see O. Monnig corresp. in MWM Collection regarding Bunch Telescope.

Keywords: Amateur groups (formal)/ Manuscripts, typescripts/ Telescopes and Instruments

Call Number: AAVSO Organiz. LC Box 3 Texas Observers

4. Project accomplishments

At first, progress was somewhat slow, as it took time to become familiar with the materials, to develop a pattern of working, and to make adjustments to the archiving plan along the way. But once the rules and procedures were established, the work moved along very rapidly. The following is a summary of what was accomplished over the past four years (a general summary of work completed is given in Table 2).

• Preliminary arranging of the correspondence files from Leon Campbell's time was begun in January 2001, and further adjustments to the archiving plan were made as work progressed. Much of the preliminary catalogue data entry work for the Campbell and Mayall era correspondence was done by AAVSO staff member Sarah Sechelski. Several boxes of the correspondence files were completed by July 2001.

• By October 2001—the end of the project's first year—most of the correspondence files of the Campbell and Mayall eras had been arranged and catalogued, and work was begun on collecting the organizational and administrative files.

• October 2002: the correspondence collection was completed through the Mayall era, and that of the Pickering and Olcott eras as well. All Campbell and Mayall era organizational and administrative files were completed. Work was begun on the Mattei era correspondence files.

• October 2003: work on the Mattei era correspondence continued, and work on the special collections was begun.

• October 2004: cataloguing of all primary AAVSO archival material—correspondence, organizational, and administrative files—from the Pickering/ Olcott, Campbell, Mayall, and Mattei eras (through 1993) was completed.

• October 2004: Archiving and cataloguing of the special collections was well underway and approximately 60% completed.

5. Future work

The major parts of the AAVSO Archive are now arranged and catalogued. What remain are several special collections, the remainder of the Mattei era correspondence, and a fair amount of AAVSO material having less immediate importance. More detailed catalogue entries will be made for selected items on a continuing basis. Storage space is at a premium at AAVSO Headquarters, but the process of breaking-out the files from old boxes and drawers, and carefully re-boxing and shelving them, has helped to make efficient use of what storage space we have (Figure 3).

5.1. Physical deterioration

As mentioned earlier, attention is given to basic physical preservation as papers are processed and problems encountered. Badly deteriorated or soiled material was immediately photocopied on acid-free paper, but there still remain many pages of pulp paper that are currently in fair condition, but which will need to be photocopied in the near future. Most of the pulp paper can be found in the Campbell era files, especially those of the 1920s and 1930s. This preservation work will probably begin in 2005.

Figure 3. A view of the Campbell and Mayall files (left side), Mayall and Mattei files (center), and a portion of the archival chart collection (right foreground).

5.2. Preservation for access

Another part of archival preservation has to do with replicating selected documents as digital files. There are two advantages to this work: 1) a copy of the document will exist in case the original is lost or destroyed; 2) the document will be accessible to many more readers and researchers than would be possible if they were required to visit AAVSO Headquarters to inspect the original item. Depending on the document selected for digital replication, an item might be

scanned or photographed as an image, or it may be scanned as text (i.e., via an optical character recognition program), or both. A preliminary selection of material for possible scanning has been marked in the catalogue.

5.3. On-line access

Many of the documents selected for digital replication will be posted to the AAVSO website. A searchable finding-aid—derived from the archive catalogue—will also be available on-line.

6. Conclusion

The AAVSO Archive Project is a major first step towards preserving the AAVSO's institutional memory. The continuing maintenance of the archive, using established rules and procedures, will ensure that our institutional memory will be dynamic, that it will be regularly exercised with additions and research, and that it will be available to many.

7. Acknowledgements

Thanks to Thomas R. and Anna Faye Williams for their generous funding of the AAVSO Archive Project, to the AAVSO Council for their enthusiastic support of the project, and a special acknowledgement of gratitude to the late Janet Mattei, for whom the AAVSO archive always held a central place in her many-leveled and wide-ranging vision for the AAVSO's future.

References

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Stephansky, H. 1954, letter to Richard W. Hamilton (January 15), AAVSO Corresp. MWM Box 5 Hamilton, R. W., Folder 1, AAVSO Archive, Cambridge, MA.

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Table 1. Working list of special collections in the AAVSO Archive.

Special collections archived and catalogued as of October 2004			
Special Collection	*Number of Boxes**	*Special Collection*	*Number of Boxes**
AAVSO Charts	23.0	M. W. Mayall	7.5
AAVSO Membership Applications	4.0	R. N. Mayall Treasurer Records	0.5
AAVSO Office Records	6.0	Merit Awards	2.0
AAVSO Treasurer Records	9.0	Observations (various sources)	2.0
BAA-VSS Observations	1.0	W. T. Olcott	1.0
T. W. Backhouse Observations	3.0	M. D. Overbeek Charts	2.0
Cape Proper Motion Charts	3.0	D. B. Pettengill Charts and misc.	2.0
S. C. Chandler	1.5	RASNZ-VSS Observations	1.0
G. Diedrich Charts	1.0	A. W. Roberts Observations	2.0
J. H. Eadie Obs. and Letters	0.5	D. W. Rosebrugh	4.0
D. W. Edgecomb; C. A. Post	1.0	E. F. Sawyer	2.5
C. B. Ford Secretary Files and misc.	12.5	J. Schmidt Obs. and ECP notes	0.5
Hagen (HCO) Charts	1.0	Schoenfeld Observations (and Waterfield Reductions)	1.0
W. Herschell; F. Argelander Obs. (copied from originals)	0.5	Southern Vars. Observations	1.5
W. S. Houston	24.5	P. W. Witherell Treasurer	3.0
C. J. Hurless Charts and misc.	6.0	J. E. G. Yalden	7.0
W. M. Lowder Obs. and misc.	6.0	P. S. Yendell Observations, notes, and letters	11.5
H. A. Luft	3.5		

Special collections not yet archived and/or catalogued	*Number of Boxes**
J. A. Mattei	~120
R. N. Mayall (non-AAVSO materials)	~ 12
E. D. Hoffleit	~ 6
C. H. Hossfield	~ 30
Milton Fields (to be catalogued)	~ 24
Misc. AAVSO papers, materials, and artifacts	~ 30
Misc. smaller individual collections	~ 15

**Numbers given are total of standard 5-inch archival boxes (5×10×12 inches) or equivalent.*

Table 2. Summary of work completed.

Collection	*Number of Boxes**	*Linear Feet**
AAVSO Correspondence	41.5	17.3
AAVSO Organization	57.0	23.75
AAVSO Administration	29.5	12.3
Special Collections	157.5	65.5
Total	285.5	118.85

**Numbers of boxes given are total of standard 5-inch archival boxes (5×10×12 inches) or equivalent. Linear feet measure is based on 5-inch width of standard box, or equivalent.*