IDEAS

Archives are my favorite places for time travel and serendipitous discovery

Bygone worlds dwell inside boxes of manila envelopes.

By Abigail Santamaria Updated October 27, 2025, 4:00 a.m.

A collection labeled "Dance Cards/Invitations, 1884-1889," in the Smith College Special Collections, discovered by the author on a hunch. ABIGAIL SANTAMARIA/SMITH COLLEGE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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This essay is part of the occasional Globe Ideas series Genius Loci, featuring writers' explorations of the importance of place.

At the Smith College Special Collections not long ago, a page delivered to my desk an archival box I'd requested on a hunch: "Dances and Recreated records," its label read, with contents dating from 1881 to 1990. I was researching Smith's social milieu during the undergraduate career of "A Wrinkle in Time" author Madeleine L'Engle, class of 1941, the subject of my biography in progress. But before I located the salient files ("House Receptions: 1938-1940," for one), my eyes hit on a manila folder too enticing to pass over, despite its seeming irrelevance to my work: "Dance Cards/Invitations, 1884-1889."

I spread the contents beside my laptop and picked up several palm-sized booklets bound in satin ribbon with length left for affixing them to wrists. Tiny pencils dangled from them by delicate rope cords for writing names beside each dance: "Galop," "Waltz," "Polka," "Promenade."

The stuff of period films! But these weren't props. The artifacts I held were once clutched in the gloved hands of bustle-wearing young "ladies": "Miss Day," "Miss Chester," "Miss Blair."

There was a thick cream-colored paper inked with pristine calligraphy: "The class of Eighty-Eight will be happy to meet you in the Social Hall, on Wednesday evening, October 14th, 1885." An adjacent card reminded the girls of their goal: to find a husband. "He is in search of a very domestic young lady; one who wears white aprons in the afternoon, you know."

Juxtaposition of present and past could not hold; the glass walls of the Maya Lin-designed reading room in which I sat faded, and the dance cards, transcendent of time and space, became a threshold to a world that movies and books, even at their best, keep at a remove. Enchanted, I could almost hear the sonatas; sobered, I gazed in my mind's

eye into the hopeful faces of teenagers longing to be chosen. Their lives, while privileged, were confined to a single track, if they were lucky: wifedom.

Tangibility has the power to transfigure facts and ideas from the abstract to the corporeal. For that reason, we reach out. Witness the impulse to feel a stranger's pregnant belly. Think of all you understand through the first touch of a would-be lover. Archives invoke a similar stirring.

At times, archival objects heighten the visceral longing for what can never be known. Jennifer Morgan — a professor at New York University and 2024 MacArthur Fellow for her work as a scholar of slavery — will always remember reading slave traders' journals in the archive of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England. Jennifer's work centers on enslaved women, many of whose lives are lost to history beyond their captors' logs, rendering the archive, as she says, "a place of exclusion rather than inclusion." There are no names, no birthdates, no photographs.

Surrounded by stoic Brits, Jennifer, who is a colleague and a friend, struggled to maintain her composure while reading pages penned by John Newton, captain of the slave ship, "African." Newton noted that a woman "big with child," known only by the number 83, was raped "brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck."

Proximity to the violence documented in Newton's elegant hand elicited "a very different suck of breath," Jennifer told me, than, say, encountering the detail in a textbook. *I've just seen her*, she thought.

Jennifer's husband, Herman Bennett, a scholar of slavery and race at City University of New York, had a very different experience while researching Africans in colonial Mexico at Mexico's Regional Archives. Tucked inside the oversized bound volumes of Inquisition cases, he discovered small satchels of hair and fingernail clippings, evidence used to convict those accused of witchcraft. He was "stunned." What could be more capable of conjuring the realness of long-dead people than their literal organic matter?

The word “archive” refers both to a physical place and a physical collection of papers and objects that illuminate people, cultures, and events of the past. These materials exist in legions of forms and places, from public libraries to private homes. My biographer colleague Heather Clark wrote an entire novel — “The Scrapbook” — inspired by her grandfather’s World War II scrapbook, secreted away until the day of his funeral in 2015.

Her grandfather, Sergeant Herbert J. Clark of the 86th Army Division, was among the troops who rolled into Dachau concentration camp during the final days of April 1945. Unlike most soldiers, he carried a camera. “I felt time collapsing when I turned the brittle pages and saw the photos he had taken at Dachau’s liberation,” Heather recalls. “The scrapbook was a portal to the worst experience of my grandfather’s life; touching this dark family heirloom became, in turn, one of the most intense moments of my own life.” Inspired by the “gaps and silences,” Heather retraced her grandfather’s footsteps across Germany to understand “the psychic weight of what he had preserved, and what it meant to inherit his haunting archive.”

Near the end of Mariska Hargitay’s powerful documentary “My Mom Jayne,” the Law & Order SVU star sifts through a storage unit of things that once belonged to the mother she never really knew; the actress Jayne Mansfield died in a car crash when her daughter was 3. Cracking a box, Hargitay gasps. She pulls out a Golden Globe award, similar to the ones she received but tarnished with age — a conduit. Turning to her siblings, she urges them to feel its weight: “Hold it, guys.”

A grainy black-and-white clip of their mother accepting the 1956 International Stardom Award” floods the screen — a cinematic bridge to convey to viewers Hargitay’s evident electric current of connection.

Watching this, I was reminded of one afternoon in Madeleine L’Engle’s storage unit, with its archival cartons of manuscripts, journals, photo albums, fan mail, and more. Her granddaughter, Charlotte, opened a box and unfurled the bright floral handsewn gown

I'd seen only in black and white photographs. L'Engle wore it to the 1963 Newbery-Caldecott Banquet. Accepting her medal that day, she spoke of her predecessors and recalled reading their Newbery-winning books during her own childhood. "And now," she said, "to be a very small link in the long chain of those writers, of the men and women who led me into the expanding universe, is both an honor and a responsibility."

The dance cards were part of that continuum, too. A half-century after that parade of bustle-wearing young Smith ladies came an aspiring author who didn't wait to be chosen.

I tucked the tiny pencils and invitations back into their manila envelope. The sonata faded and another link took shape in my understanding. Curiosity and imagination are prerequisites for probing archives successfully. They also lead to rabbit holes — all part of the adventure. But sometimes, unexpectedly, a rabbit hole becomes a tunnel into the expanding universe.