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Digital Tour of the Furniture City: Grand Rapids on the World Wide Web

By Patricia Bravender, Professional Programs Librarian, Grand Valley State University

Most have probably heard of Grand Rapids, Michigan, the host city for the MAC 2012 Annual Meeting and 40th anniversary celebration, and some may have visited in the past. Others may not know that before it became famous as the home of Gerald R. Ford, the 38th President of the United States, Grand Rapids was called the “Furniture City.” Grand Rapids has a rich history of furniture-making that started with the city’s founding in the mid-1830s and continued until the city was the first center of mass-produced furniture in North America. In fact, by the 1880s, its reputation for quality furniture had spread throughout the world. Grand Rapids is still a major source of office furniture today, but the city is also becoming known for its public art. In 1969, Grand Rapids purchased its first notable piece of public art from Alexander Calder and installed it in front of City Hall. This Calder Red steel stabile, *La Grande Vitesse*, has become a symbol of the city, and MAC attendees will see its image on every street sign. The purchase of “The Calder,” as it is popularly known, led to the annual spring Festival of the Arts held in downtown Grand Rapids. In 2007, the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the first LEED Gold-certified art museum in the world, opened in the city center. More recently, Grand Rapids has begun hosting ArtPrize, an art competition that attracts thousands of artists and art lovers from all over the world every fall. Residents of Grand Rapids are proud of their heritage and are looking forward to the future. Many local institutions that preserve the city’s history and cultural artifacts in their archives have also made these resources available on-line, and MAC attendees can get a taste of the “Furniture City” by visiting some of these digital archives prior to the conference.

The Grand Rapids Public Library and the Grand Rapids Public Museum are among the primary repositories of the city’s documents, photographs, and artifacts, and the digital collections at both institutions serve as an effective introduction to the history of the city. The Grand Rapids Public Library, a beautifully restored beaux arts building in downtown Grand Rapids, has a number of photograph collections that can be accessed on-line at http://cdm15416.contentdm.oclc.org/index.php. The digital version of The Robinson Studio Collection offers a selection of images from the largest archival collection held by the Library, which contains more than 950,000 black-and-white negatives and photographs of Grand Rapids people, places, and businesses from the 1930s to the 1960s. A related collection, The Robinson Studio-Vinegar Syndrome Collection, contains selected images of photographs that were damaged by vinegar syndrome and later restored. The Furniture Manufacturers Association Collection contains photographs of many Grand Rapids furniture companies, such as the Grand Rapids Chair Company, Berkey and Gay, Widdicomb, Sligh, Stickley, and the Robert W. Irwin Company. Other on-line photograph collections include The Morris Photo Collection, which contains photographs taken by former Grand Rapids Herald photographer Murch S. Morris between 1924 and 1931. Another interesting digital collection is that of the Ladies Literary Club, which was founded in 1887 for the purpose of educating women, and later became a prominent social organization that promoted literacy and cultural events. The digital collection contains photographs of the building, members, and related papers.

The Grand Rapids Public Museum also provides digital access to its collections at http://grmuseum.org/collections/photo_galleries; however, these photo albums represent just a small fraction of the many millions of items held by the Museum. One collection contains 205 daguerreotypes, some depicting former residents of the city. There are several collections that contain historic photographs of Grand Rapids and the surrounding vicinity. Other
on-line photo albums include images of paperweights, valentines, quilts, and other artifacts from the Museum’s vast collections.

The Grand Rapids Historical Commission, which was established by the city in 1962, has a formal mission to collect, preserve, publish, and disseminate the history of Grand Rapids. The Historical Commission hosts an on-line archives, http://www.historygrandrapids.org/browse_subject.php, and solicits historical items from the community for digitization, including a number of photo essays, documenting the people and places of Grand Rapids.

Several of the local colleges and universities that house collections related to the history of Grand Rapids also offer on-line access. Grand Valley State University Archives has posted an extensive collection of digital images and oral history interviews at http://gvsu.cdmhost.com/cdm/. Selections from these collections include images and interviews of descendants of many of the founders of Grand Rapids in the Grand Rapids Oral Histories Collection, as well as resources on women who played baseball in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. The eclectic digital collections also include images of Civil War-era diaries and nineteenth century documents related to slavery and abolition. The related Patriotic Envelopes Collection displays images of envelopes produced by both the North and South during the Civil War, featuring artistic war-time propaganda. A collection of Joseph Sparks’ block prints, called “The Pine Tree in Michigan,” and a selection of images of paintings by famed local artist Mathias Alten can also be viewed on-line.

During the nineteenth century, Grand Rapids and the western Michigan area became home to a variety of settlers, none more prominent than the Dutch, who began settling there in the 1840s. Dutch influence can be seen throughout the area, from the names of towns, such as Holland and Zeeland, to the founding of two renowned colleges: Hope College in Holland and Calvin College in Grand Rapids. Archival resources regarding the history and culture of the Dutch community can be found in many archives in the city, but no collection is more comprehensive than that of Calvin College. In addition to vast holdings of printed historical and genealogical material, the Hekman Digital Archive offers access to some of its material at http://library.calvin.edu/guide/collections/hda. The Making of Modern Michigan is a large collection of photographs, organized by community, and featuring people and places important to the Dutch community. Historical photographs of Calvin College and its seminary can be found in the Calvin College Photograph Collection and the Calvin Seminary Collection. The Meeter Center Collection contains images of John Calvin both in print and featured on bronze medals.

The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, where the reception for MAC’s 40th anniversary will be held, hosts a number of digital collections, http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/museum/online.asp, highlighting temporary and permanent exhibitions at the Museum. For example, the “Watergate Files” exhibit draws upon materials from the Museum’s collection to provide a detailed presentation of the events that led to the downfall of President Richard M. Nixon, and, ultimately, to Ford’s presidency. Although the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library is physically located in Ann Arbor, its digital archives can be accessed through the Museum’s Web site at http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/docs.asp. The library holds over 25 million documents, almost a half million photographs, and many audiotapes, videotapes, and films. Among the resources that have been digitized and made available for searching are the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Daily Diary Online, key presidential speeches, and historical photographs of both Gerald and Betty Ford.

The joint digital archives of the Library of Michigan and the Archives of Michigan, at www.SeekingMichigan.org, provides access to a wealth of information relating to the history of the residents, businesses, and communities of Grand Rapids through digitized primary source documents, such as vital records, maps, images, and oral histories. Among the growing collection of digitized items are thousands of photographs of Michigan communities, digitized death records, maps, sheet music, and an extensive collection of Civil War documents, diaries, and other items.

As exciting as electronic access to these digital collections may be, it will never serve as a complete substitute for the smell and feel of the old papers, books, photographs, and maps that the digital collections represent. Hopefully, you will be able to find time during the Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids to visit at least one of the city’s archives to experience its collections in person.