

## Mixed Media

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### Working through COVID-19: The Sterling Morton Library

*By Kristin Arnold, Archivist; Rita Hassert, Library Collections Manager; and Danielle Nowak, Digital Assets Librarian*

Through these unprecedented times, the Sterling Morton Library (of the Morton Arboretum) in Lisle, Illinois, outside of Chicago, has had to adapt and evolve to accommodate the current circumstances. Since the temporary closure of the arboretum, the library has transformed many of its in-person services and projects into digital endeavors. Additionally, the library has been proactive in archiving the arboretum and its staff's responses to the current climate.



*Viburnum dentatum (southern arrowwood), cluster of fruits and drupes. Photographed by John Hagstrom, courtesy of The Morton Arboretum*

#### Virtual Opportunities in the Sterling Morton Library

Leafing Through the Pages is a discussion group for members of the Morton Arboretum launched by the Sterling Morton Library in 2003. Through the years, this monthly group has discussed a wide range of nature-related topics focusing on ecology, natural history, gardening, and our relationship with the natural world. Authors discussed have included Thoreau, Watts, Pollan, and Dillard with our selections including books, poetry, short stories, and films/documentaries. With the closure of the library during the pandemic, we started brainstorming

how we could continue offering this opportunity for our active and engaged discussion community. During the closure, potential attendees were invited to participate in a remote discussion using the video conferencing platform Zoom. Once attendees had preregistered, they were forwarded several discussion questions as well as supplemental information about the author. While a number of the participants were unfamiliar with Zoom, they were also eager to continue with their participation in the group. With only a few minor technological glitches, we were impressed by the reception of the overall virtual discussion experience.

Offering this virtual discussion was an opportunity to foster community and engagement during a period fraught with anxiety and, in some cases, social isolation. After our first virtual gathering in April, participants were uniformly positive and enjoyed seeing and hearing from other attendees. One participant described it as “a wonderful two-hour vacation.” Basing our measurement of success on attendance numbers (30!), ease of use, overall experience, and other factors, we will continue to create and foster these virtual experiences for the foreseeable future.

In 2020, we launched a new program in the library for arboretum staff. In addition to the library's focus on physical and virtual collections, items, and artifacts, it also supports and encourages community and connectivity. We recognize there are many different ways to share and transfer knowledge and information! In collaboration with other programs, we identified an arboretum staff need for informal learning and engagement opportunities. After brainstorming, we decided to pilot an “Office Hours” program hosted by arboretum colleagues with a focus on various topics such as the application of technology, the discovery of a new initiative, and the exploration of topics such as invasive plants, wildflowers, and plant collecting. Various arboretum staff members hosted these in-person informal peer-to-peer learning experiences. With the closure of arboretum buildings in March due to the pandemic, we recognized there would be an increased need for these learning experiences, so we rebranded them as Virtual Office Hours. Taking place three times a week and using Zoom, these virtual opportunities and

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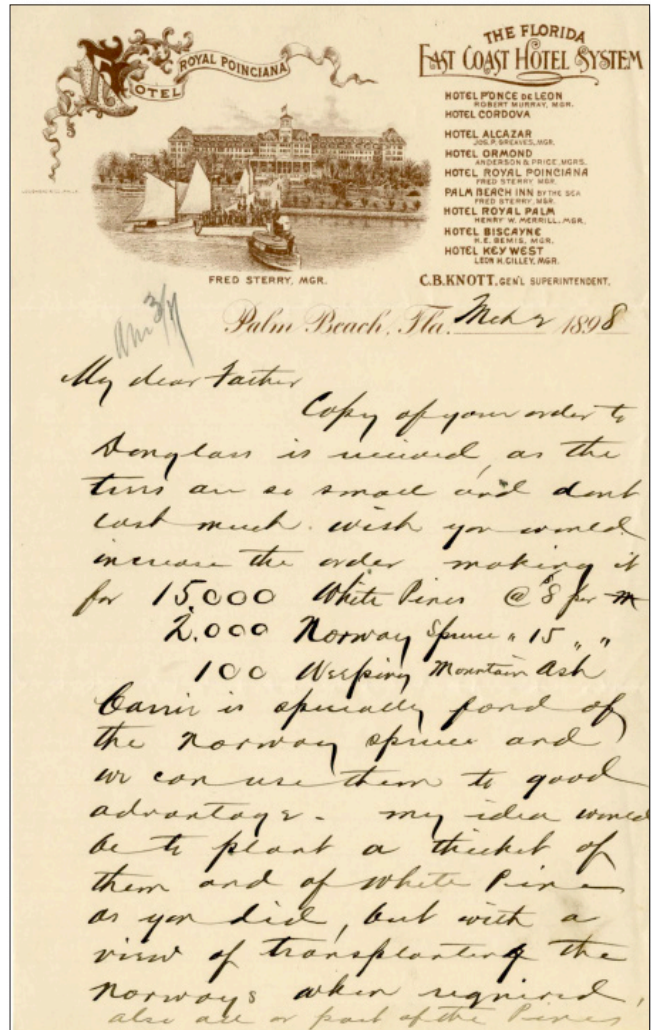
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experiences have witnessed an increase in attendance and engagement. Hour-long sessions might take the form of a presentation or might follow a question-and-answer format. Staff who might not have previously been able to attend in-person sessions due to scheduling, now have more flexibility. With colleagues working remotely, there is also an increased interest in gathering together, albeit virtually. And, this program is a direct contributor to the identified arboretum employee value to “Keep Learning.” While more casual in-person staff interactions are not possible during this time, our Virtual Office Hours have kept these peer-to-peer learning experiences fresh and impactful.

### Remote Volunteer Projects

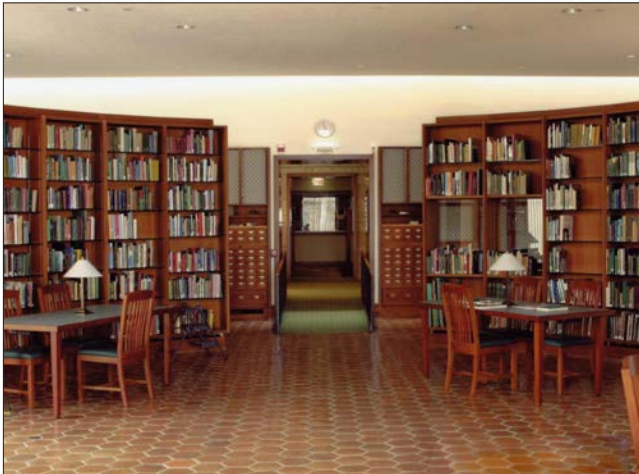
Volunteers are a driving force behind many projects at the library. Because of their dedication, eagerness to learn, and willingness to experiment with technologies new to them, we were able to initiate two projects that they could work on remotely. Volunteers at the library have a diverse range of knowledge and skills. Some are former librarians/library staff, retired plant professionals, and/or lifelong library supporters. Understanding this, we wanted to be able to provide them with projects that would satisfy both their skills and their interests. To do so, we prepared two projects: one involving cataloging born-digital plant photographs and the other transcribing handwritten correspondence that had been digitized prior to the arboretum’s temporary closure.

The first project, cataloging born-digital photographs, had been worked on both remotely and in person prior to the pandemic. This project, focused on the Collection of John Hagstrom Images, requires volunteers to log in to the backend of our collection management system (CMS) and then work through the program to input metadata. For our plant experts willing to explore the backend of our CMS, this project was a perfect fit. This initiative has largely been successful due to the combination of our volunteers’ plant knowledge with their technical training that took place on-site. Of our five volunteers who took part in this project, two of them took the opportunity to work on it remotely. Our collaboration with them has resulted in nearly 500 new images being cataloged and made accessible online.



1898/03/02: Joy Morton to J. Sterling Morton, Courtesy of The Morton Arboretum

The second project, transcribing handwritten correspondence, was initiated after the temporary closure began. With the arboretum’s centennial approaching in 2022, transcribed letters will be an essential tool in researching how the arboretum was founded and in developing a further understanding of how it got to where it is today. With most, if not all, of our volunteers diligently staying at home, this seemed like a perfect opportunity for us to get the transcriptions completed. Of the 11 volunteers we reached out to about the project, 10 have been actively participating. So far, they have transcribed over 50 letters with many more to go.



*Sterling Morton Library Reading Room entrance. Photographed by Trent P. Roberson, courtesy of The Morton Arboretum*

### Archiving the Arboretum’s Response to COVID-19

The library and archives community across the Midwest has been proactive in collecting records that document the public’s response to the COVID-19 health crisis, which inspired us to preserve records specific to the Morton

Arboretum’s experience. This is a sensitive topic and involves records created in many departments across the arboretum, so it has been essential to gain support from the leadership team. By involving the organization’s leaders in the process, we have benefited from their guidance in identifying pertinent records, and their approval supports our efforts as we reach out to staff members. To communicate to the leadership team what we meant by “archiving the arboretum’s response,” we produced a plan identifying three main record groups that we aim to collect. These groups include announcements communicated to arboretum staff, volunteers, members, and the public; documents created by the arboretum’s COVID-19 response team; and staff reflections.

The first and second record groups, announcements and the response team documents, already fall within the scope of the organization’s document retention policy, but these records are naturally taking on a different form and sense of urgency during this time. We included these record groups in our plan to communicate that we will be actively collecting these documents as they are being produced to ensure we are capturing them in their entirety.

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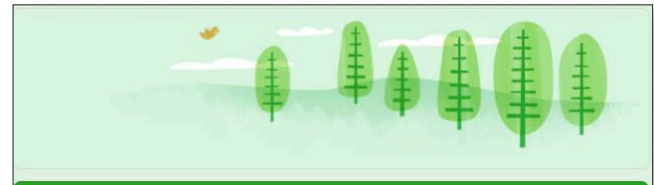
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The arboretum's internal and external communications are the most concise and straightforward summary of what has happened, what decisions have been made, and how the pandemic affects different groups connected to the arboretum (staff, volunteers, members, and the public). These records are not only evidence of *what* the arboretum has communicated, but also of the arboretum's most effective *means* of communication. Documents created by the response team, such as meeting notes and agendas, serve as evidence of the decision-making process.

Of the three record groups we identified, staff reflections is the biggest unknown, but it is also an intriguing opportunity to learn how the arboretum's adjusted working conditions have affected employees across departments. While we do not typically preserve such records, we believe this exceptional situation warrants it. The arboretum's announcements and response team documents are excellent resources that show how the leadership team handled the crisis, but staff reflections can offer a diverse array of observations, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities experienced by arboretum staff. It is important to capture the perspectives of a variety of employees because we are all experiencing COVID-19 and the adjusted working conditions differently. A facilities employee who is working on-site will have different insights from those of a librarian working from home.

Following the example of the La Crosse Library Archives and History Department Documenting Community Voices project, we created a Google Form to serve as a space for staff to reflect on their experiences. It consisted of eight to ten open-ended questions intended to guide reflection, particularly in regard to experiences related to the arboretum. We selected this method because it is fairly straightforward to execute and engage with. Not only is this an opportunity for staff members to journal and reflect, it will also reveal how the situation has affected working conditions, both for those working remotely and those who continue to go into work. They may bring some observations or challenges to light, which in turn may influence future decision-making. They can

help arboretum leaders understand what has and has not worked or what could be done to prepare for future crises, or they could lead the arboretum to explore more opportunities for remote work. These staff reflections will give a voice to staff and provide the institution with a better understanding of how each department has been individually affected.



**Reflection: How has COVID-19 affected you?**

The archive of The Morton Arboretum, which is part of the Sterling Morton Library, collects materials that document the Arboretum's history, mission, and contributions. While we house historic materials dating back to before the Arboretum's founding, we also actively collect content to record experiences, responses, and events taking place today. Like other organizations, families, and communities, The Morton Arboretum is greatly affected by the global spread of COVID-19. To better understand how the health crisis is affecting The Morton Arboretum and its employees, we are requesting your stories, thoughts, and observations.

Below you will find a series of questions to guide your reflection. Feel free to write in complete sentences, bullet points, or any other style— it's up to you. You do not need to answer all of the questions. You can share your name or remain anonymous. You may also fill out this form as many times as you would like. The situation is rapidly changing and we understand that your thoughts and observations may adapt.

If you have questions, contact our archivist, Kristin Arnold, at [karnold@mortonarb.org](mailto:karnold@mortonarb.org).

Thank you for contributing to the Arboretum's historical record.

This survey has been adapted from the La Crosse Public Library Archives & Local History Department's Documenting Community Voices project.

*COVID reflection form. Courtesy of The Morton Arboretum*

At the time of writing, the staff reflection form was to be distributed at the end of April, and the library team was reaching out to other departments in the arboretum to gain a firmer grasp on what records are being created. As is the case with many archival projects, this process is a work in progress, from which we will continue to learn and grow. We look forward to receiving staff reflections and collecting COVID-19–related records, through which the archives and the Morton Arboretum as a whole will be able to adapt and thrive.