

**“Make No Little Plans”: The Future Possibilities for
Business History at the James J. Hill
Reference Library and the Hill Papers**

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The paper that Tom White (first curator of the James J. Hill Papers) has just read supplied you with a succinct, but by no means exhaustive, idea of the research potential of the recently opened James J. Hill Papers. I join him in adding my enthusiastic encouragement to all interested in the serious study of American material civilization in its most exciting phase -- the railroad revolution -- to make plans to include the Hill Papers in their future research programs.

For myself, I would like to make just a few remarks going beyond what Tom White has covered and fantasize -- if that is the correct word -- about the nucleus for a larger and broader center for the encouragement of business history that I believe the Hill Papers and their custodian, the Hill Reference Library, can become.

The first step, in what I hope will grow into a much broader operation in the coming years, will be to make the Hill Papers themselves as fully available to scholars of every conceivable shade of interest as is possible. To this end, the Library is at present seeking funds to microfilm the heart of the collection, which consists of (1) the letterbooks, containing the thousands of letters that Mr. Hill wrote to a varied list of correspondents, on matters of interest to him -- and covering far more than railroad building and operation -- from the day in 1868 that he set up in business as his own boss in the steamboat agency business, to a few days before his death in May 1916; and (2) the thousands of letters written to him from these and other correspondents, many of whom were important people in their own right but who left few, if any, papers of their own. While nothing I may say here this morning about future policy of the Hill Library in reference to the Papers should be considered as official -- or necessarily accurate -- it is my understanding

that arrangements will probably be made to sell positives of these microfilms.

I should remind you that the Hill Papers are unique. They are the most complete collection of business and personal papers of a major business leader from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth. They are more complete than the Andrew Carnegie Papers. Although Joseph Wall found that the Carnegie letters remaining in the files of the US Steel Corporation, to which he was fortunate to achieve access, added immeasurably to our knowledge of that complicated man's career, other Carnegie scholars have not been so fortunate. Hill scholars will encounter no such obstacle.

The second step will be to fund a program to facilitate exploitation of the Papers as intelligently as possible. Small grants-in-aid for visits to the Library for research purposes, in the style of the presidential libraries, are part of this plan, and tentative consideration is presently being given to the encouragement of publication of books and articles based in substantial part on the Papers. There may even be a monograph series with the Hill Library imprint. One early project, if it succeeds in finding the money, will be an edited volume of Hill letters, consisting of both letters he wrote and extended quotations from letters written to him.

The third phase of development of the Hill Papers as an institution -- and perhaps the most important long-run phase -- will be the location and acquisition of the papers of other important American business leaders. Here, the emphasis will be upon leaders in business entrepreneurship in the Upper Midwest and Northwest, but this will not rule out acquisition of the papers of other major national figures. (Western historians resent what they consider a tendency on the part of the Eastern "intellectual establishment" to assume that only Eastern business leaders can have exerted any significant national or international influence. As the biographer of Mr. Hill, I can confirm a considerable tendency in that regard. The time has come to extirpate this unfortunate provincialism.)

A fourth phase, far in the future, would be the establishment of a center for the encouragement of business history. I am sure that we are all aware that our profession -- our little specialty might be a more accurate and less grandiose term -- continues to suffer from a certain ambiguous quality; ambiguity as to what a business historian is; ambiguity as to what a business historian does, especially as to what he teaches; ambiguity as to the proper preparation of the business historian; even ambiguity as to how many of us there are, where we are, and what we do.

What I am suggesting at this very early stage -- and the comments and suggestions of all of us will, I know, be welcome at the Hill Library -- is that the Library become an institution or center for the administration of a graduate program, in collaboration with a major degree-granting institution -- offering fellowships and leading to a full-fledged degree in history with a competence in business history based on original research and writing in business history. My model, as many of you have already guessed, is the joint fellowship program in the history of technology administered by the University of Delaware and the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library in Wilmington.

American society has many unfinished projects in its evolution, but one stands out today more dramatically than ever before: the question of the relationship of business and business power, to the body politic. Future policy, unless the American experiment is, after all, to fail must be based on a pragmatic view of the actual stewardship of American business leaders. Who else is there to ascertain what this stewardship has been and to insist that it become a part of the intellectual and political fabric of the nation -- which it is a long way from being a part of at present? The question, I think, answers itself.

These are big plans, stemming from big talk, and they require big action. But why start with little plans? Jim Hill liked to tell people like the president of the New York Central Railroad, during the early years of this century when the railroads of America were being virtually rebuilt, "Don't be even a little bit afraid of getting your cars and locomotives too big." About that same time, America's most exuberant architect, Daniel H. Burnham, who helped give the American city what beauty and elegance it ever had, supposedly said, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood." We in business history have made too many little plans. The men and women whose lives we study made big ones. We need to follow their example.