



Unveiling Archival Narratives: Clemons' Papers and the University of Nanking (1927-1947)



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I. Introduction



William Harry Clemons (1879-1968)²

This study explores **archival materials related to Clemons and the University of Nanking**, highlighting their **historical significance** in documenting the university's development following the Nanking Incident as well as **Clemons' sustained connection with his former colleagues and students**.

- William Harry Clemons (克乃文), was born on 9 September **1879**, in Pennsylvania, U.S.
- In **April 1913**, Clemons was sent to the **missionary University of Nanking** (金陵大學) in China, "for English (Department) and the Library as well, representing the Presbyterian Board".¹
- From **1913-1927**, Clemons worked to expand the University's collection resources, established the library science course, advocated for Sino-American indexing cooperation, and facilitated opportunities for Chinese students to study in the United States.
- In **March 1927**, the **Nanking Incident** marked a period of anti-foreign violence during China's Northern Expedition. Following the upheaval, Clemons had to **leave China**.
- In **July 1927**, Clemons was appointed the **tenth University Librarian** at the University of Virginia (UVA). Serving from 1927 to 1950, Clemons led the UVA Library through a transformative era in American higher education.

Clemons' enduring connection is reflected in **over 100 letters** exchanged with former colleagues and students at University of Nanking **over two decades**.

克乃文
通信人名錄
(1927-1947)

陳裕光
劉國鈞
李小緣
吳光清
王翼廷
陳長偉
沈學植
曹祖彬
俞寶書
萬國鼎
過探先
徐國懋
魏學仁
馬文煥
戴安邦
徐澄

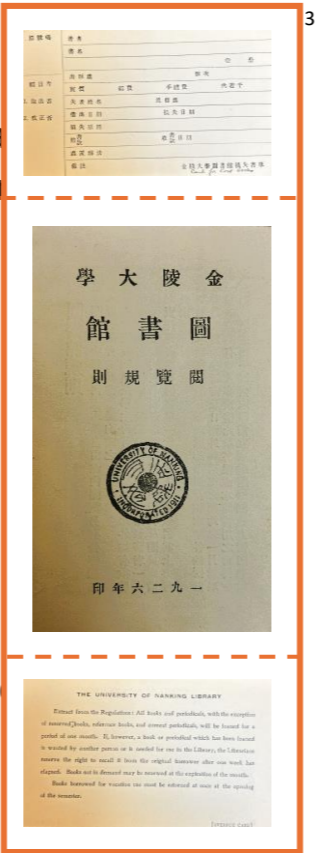
Chen Tsu-Kwei
Chen Chuen-ho
Tung Tsen
Mrs. Kuo T. S.

Note: The four Chinese names of these individuals are yet to be identified and verified. The Romanized forms appear in archival records.

II. Overview of the Clemons' Papers

Housed in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at UVA, Clemons' Papers encompasses a wide range of documents that reflect the breadth of his professional and personal life, both before and during his tenure as University Librarian. This research is focused on the materials related with University of Nanking within the Clemons's Papers. It contains a wealth of **primary sources from 1920s to 1940s**, including

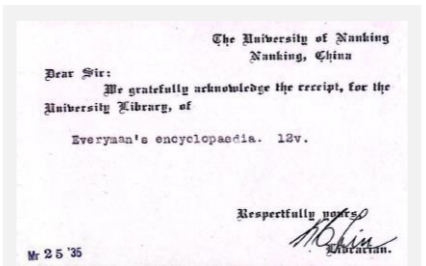
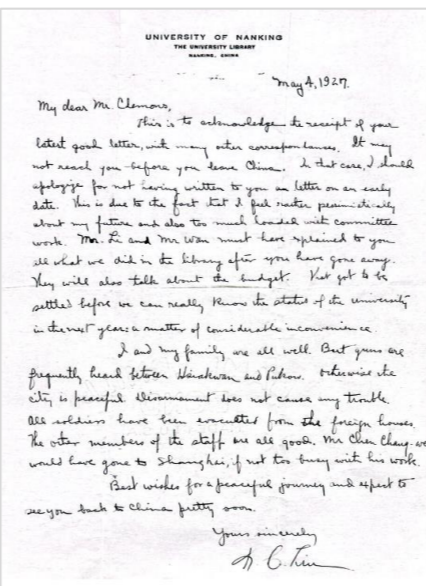
- Over 100 letters** exchanged between Clemons and his former colleagues, the majority of which were sent to rather than written by Clemons.
- Numerous meeting minutes** from the University of Nanking's Board of Executive Finance Committee, and the University Library
- Circular letters** to University of Nanking stakeholders
- Statements** addressing the impact of the 1927 Nanking Incident
- Library-specific materials such as **lost book cards**, **serial cards**, **cards**, etc.



III. Discoverability & Access Challenges

While a finding aid for the Clemons Papers is available online, it remains largely inaccessible to users until they navigate to the specific collection record in the library catalogue (See the record screenshot below).

- Limited keyword visibility:** Users unfamiliar with Clemons' name or work are unlikely to find this collection when searching for topics such as missionary education or library development in early 20th-century China.
- Metadata gaps:** Existing metadata does not reflect Clemons' extensive ties to the University of Nanking or his significant role in transnational library collaboration.
- Barrier to interdisciplinary research:** Scholars exploring global missionary networks, library history, or transnational education support may overlook the Clemons Papers due to inadequate descriptive access.
- Need for enhanced contextualization:** Richer metadata that highlights Clemons' professional network and contributions would increase discoverability for a broader range of researchers.



Record Screenshot

Papers of the University Librarian

Creator

University of Virginia University Librarian, Clemons, Harry, University of Virginia

Format

Manuscript/Archive

Publication Date

1920 - 1964

Subject

1. Clemons, Harry -- 1879-1968 -- University of Virginia Library, 1825-1950 -- story of a Jeffersonian foundation
2. University of Virginia -- Library
3. University of Virginia -- University Librarian
4. Administrative papers
5. Personal papers

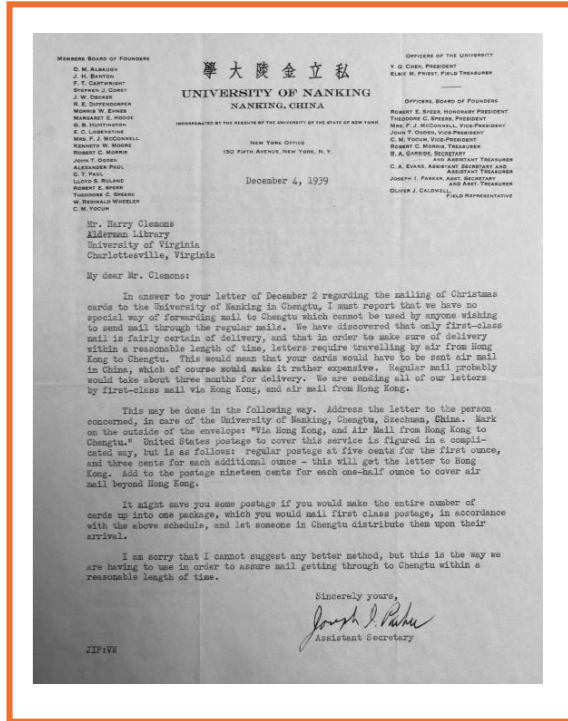
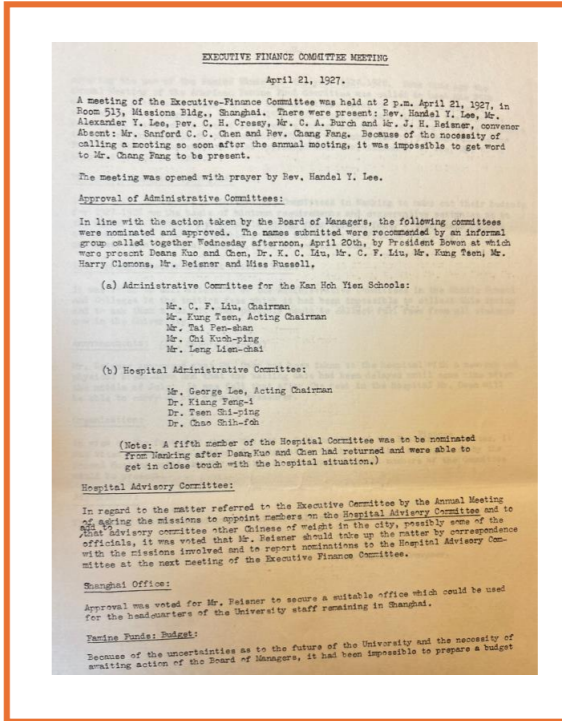
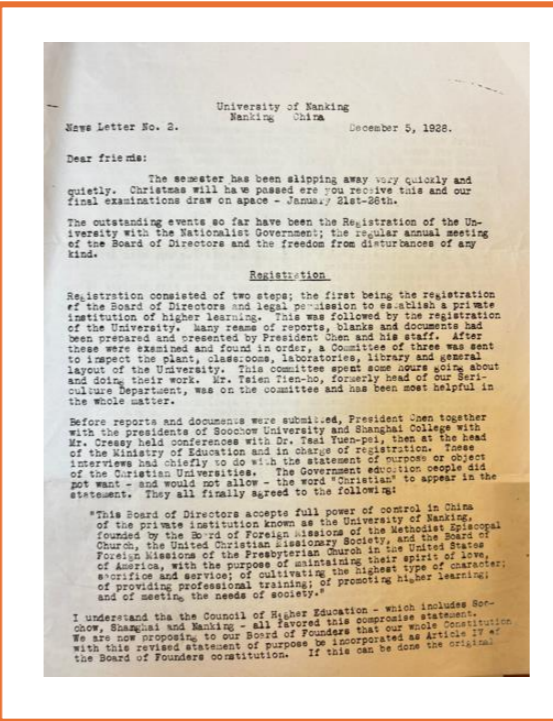
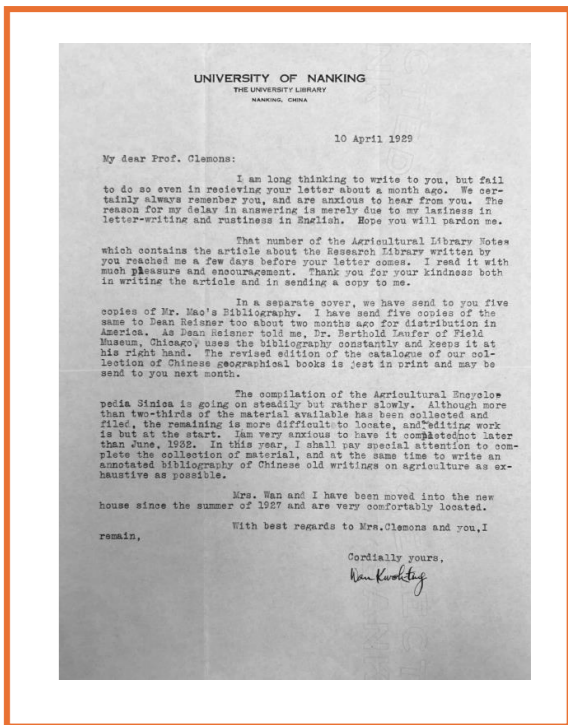
Summary

Personal papers of Harry Clemons but containing considerable quantities of official material. Contains material relating to Clemons's history of the University of Virginia Library (The University of Virginia Library, 1825-1950 : stories of footnotes and bibliographical citations. Collection contains a letter from Pearl Buck to Mrs. Clemons thanking her for congratulations on the Pulitzer Prize and commenting on which was written for young children of 12 to 14 "so that children in the churches might learn something about China without knowing

Show more details

IV. Scholarly Significance

- Missionary Networks & Institutional Memory
- Transnational Educational Support for Chinese Librarianship
- Cross-National Transfer of Library Materials
- Interpersonal and Professional Networks
- Insights into Political and Social Tensions
- Underutilized Primary Source
- Essential for Biographical and Institutional Research



- Letter from Wan Kwon-ting to Clemons on April 10, 1929, regarding Agricultural Library and Mr. Mao's bibliograph distribution in U.S.
- Newsletter on December 5, 1928, regarding Registration of the University of Nanking with the government in China at the time.
- Executive Finance Committee Meeting Minutes on April 21, 1927, regarding administrative committee approval and budget uncertainty.
- Letter from the University's New York office to Clemons, responding to his inquiry about sending Christmas cards to the University of Nanking's temporary location in Chengtu.

V. Collaborative Potential across Institutions

Given that the University of Nanking's arts and science faculties were merged with those of National Nanjing University in 1952 to form the new Nanjing University at the former University of Nanking's Gulou campus (鼓樓校區), a potential partnership could involve digitizing these archival materials to enhance access. Similar cross-institutional digitization efforts between U.S. and Chinese universities could serve as models for integrating these records into broader narratives of library and educational history.

Model Example 1

University of California, Berkley x Sichuan University (May 2021)

With support from the Alibaba Foundation, this major collaboration focuses on digitizing pre-1912 Chinese-language materials from the East Asian Library at UC Berkley, preserving them for both current researchers and future generations.⁴

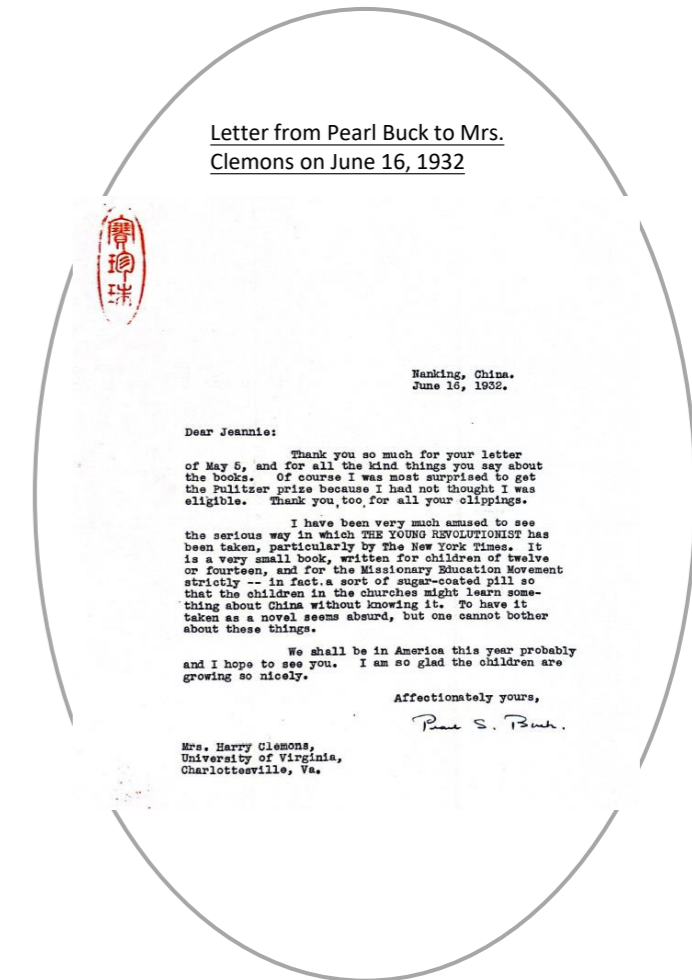
Model Example 2

Cambridge University Libraries x UC San Diego Library
(June 2023 -- June 2026)

This digitization project has been made possible through the sponsorship of the Avery-Tsui Foundation in honor of Sally T. WongAvery. With their support, both libraries have been able to preserve and share digitally an array of items from the Chinese collections.⁵

VI. Conclusion

The Clemons Papers offer rich, underexplored insights into U.S.-China educational and library history during a critical period of transformation. By highlighting gaps in metadata, discoverability, and cross-institutional access, this project underscores the scholarly importance of making such archival narratives more visible. Future efforts—such as digitization and collaborative curation—could unlock broader interdisciplinary research potential.



A Glimpse into the Collection

This personal letter from **Pearl S. Buck** to Mrs. Clemons adds a distinctive literary and historical dimension to the collection. Her correspondence offers a rare glimpse into the network of individuals who shaped U.S.-China educational and cultural exchanges in the early 20th century.

Notes

¹"Report, the University of Nanking, 1913", https://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/UnitedBoard/University_of_Nanking/Box%20195/RG011-195-3368.pdf
²Image of William Harry Clemons from FamilySearch: <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/MRJJ-LSC/william-harry-clemons-1879-1968> (accessed June 2025)
³All materials from Papers of the University Librarian, UVA Special Collections, unless otherwise noted. Papers of the University Librarian, ca. 1920-ca. 1964, Accession # RG-12/1/1.671, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va. https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u370294
⁴See <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/about/news/chinese-treasures>
⁵See <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/stories/East-Asian-Partnership>

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Ms. Chung-Ming Lung (龍宗敏) for initially pointing out Clemons' connection to China, which guided me to the Clemons Papers housed in Special Collections.

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