

Small school given Digital's past Gordon College to house archives

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By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | April 16, 2007

Legendary computer engineer Ken Olsen graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1950. But when he decided to give his personal archives to a college, the founder of Digital Equipment Corp. didn't choose his alma mater; he donated his trove of papers and electronic artifacts to Gordon College, a small Christian campus north of Boston.

"We really view it as a privilege and an honor to have them, because we know there are many other places that would have come to mind more quickly to people," said Daniel Tymann, Gordon's executive vice president for communications and technology. "I think Ken realized it would mean a lot to us, but also . . . that we would really treasure and honor and use them in a way that he would want."

Olsen's collection is currently housed at Gordon's offices in Beverly, rather than the school's main campus in Wenham. It includes thousands of pages of business documents and technical research papers and a sizable collection of books. There's also a fascinating collection of gadgets -- everything from an ancient magnetic core memory array to a late-model desktop computer that until recently was Olsen's personal machine.

A devout Christian, Olsen served for three decades on Gordon's board of trustees, along with former [Raytheon Co.](#) chairman Tom Phillips and evangelist Billy Graham.

"During that time he really discovered that Gordon put a huge focus on science, which is not always typical of Christian colleges," said college spokeswoman Ashley Hopkins. "I think he really identified with that."

Olsen declined to be interviewed for this article.

Olsen was a major donor to Gordon starting in the early 1960s, and his contributions went well beyond cash.

"He'd work a full day at Maynard and then come over to the Gordon campus and drop off boxes of Digital computers and computer parts, just to help the college grow," Hopkins said. "He also oftentimes would come and just lecture to the students about what he was involved in at that point, what he was inventing."

During those years, Olson and his colleagues at Digital's Maynard headquarters were inventing breakthroughs like the first minicomputers -- machines far smaller and cheaper than the giant mainframes from rival [IBM Corp.](#) These minicomputers were to make Digital, for a time, the world's second-largest computer company, after IBM.

Like IBM, Digital later saw its business ravaged by the rise of cheap desktop computers. But unlike IBM, Digital never recovered. Olsen resigned from the company in 1992. Six years later, Digital was acquired by [Compaq Computer Corp.](#), which in turn was purchased by [Hewlett-Packard Co.](#)

Computer industry experts have long debated the causes of Digital's fall. Tymann thinks that Olsen's four large filing cabinets and a stack of cardboard boxes may provide some answers.

"I think the key decisions that were and were not made are in these papers," he said.

But it will take years for college archivist John Beauregard to sort through them all.

He'll have help from the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif., which houses a collection of Digital hardware it obtained from Boston's now-defunct Computer Museum in 1996.

"I think they've got a wealth of information," said John Toole, executive director of the Computer History Museum. "It takes quite awhile to go through and find the jewels in the collection."

Toole is working with Gordon College to scan Olsen's papers into a digital format and create an indexing system for them.

This will enable scholars to easily search the files for insights into Digital's history.

The researchers are already lining up. Tymann has heard from a reporter for Business Week magazine who's working on a book about the venture capitalist who backed Digital in its infancy. He's also been contacted by an Australian scholar who's doing a book on corporate management strategies.

As for the gadgets -- hard drives, circuit boards, a complete Digital VAX computer -- many of them will be put on display in the \$30 million Ken Olsen Science Center, presently under construction on the Gordon campus.

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