Report of Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts Set Up by the American Historical Association in December 1948[1]

AT Christmas 1948 an *ad hoc* committee on manuscripts was set up by the American Historical Association to study "the arrangement and use" of recent large collections. Since both users and guardians of such collections were involved, the committee was made up of three historians who work in recent materials and three archival experts who face the problem of handling these materials, preserving them, and making them available to the reader. The committee has studied the problem carefully. At one time it sent to about eighty administrators of manuscript collections and archives a detailed questionnaire concerning the practices of archives and libraries in regard to recent manuscripts. Forty-one of the eighty questionnaires were returned. If the failure of thirty-nine to return them indicates a certain lack of comprehension of the seriousness of the problem, the careful, thoughtful, and helpful replies of the forty-one who did answer indicate that many archivists who handle recent collections are well aware of the problem and are giving it careful consideration. The results of this questionnaire were carefully compiled in tabular form and digested by Alexander Clark of the Princeton Library in a 35-page analysis of current practices as revealed in the questionnaire.

The sheer mass of recent collections presents problems as to both care and use that scholars and repositories dealing with medieval or even colonial American materials do not encounter. The questionnaire asked, among other things, whether "large recent collec-

[1] It is the editor's judgment that this report merits publication in the *American Archivist* because of the wide interest of our readers in the problems involved in the handling of historical manuscripts, from the points of view both of the custodian and the research user. The term "archivist" is used in the report in the broad sense of persons concerned with the preservation and exploitation of records of enduring value, whether or not they be in official archival agencies. It should be noted that Julian P. Boyd, who was initially a member of the Ad Hoc Committee, was obliged to withdraw before the completion of the report. The document is published exactly as submitted to the American Historical Association.

tions of correspondence ought to be handled differently from early smaller collections" and requested advice as to the date that should form the dividing line between "early" and "later" manuscripts. As might have been expected, there was no agreement as to the beginning of the "later" period, though the year 1900 came as near, perhaps, to being satisfactory as any. But there was some recognition of the fact that the invention of the typewriter and the gradual increase in its use has, by now, made necessary what amounts to a revolution in archival practice with regard to the handling of manuscript materials of recent origin. Older manuscripts are more nearly (though not wholly) gathered into repositories; they are less voluminous; they are, piece by piece, more valuable, being more scarce, than much of the recent material; and they are undoubtedly well suited to the careful arrangement and individual indexing, cataloging, or calendaring to which they have ordinarily been subjected in the past.

While most archivists are considerate of the reader's time and energy and are generous, under handicaps of inadequate staff and funds, in making manuscripts easily available to readers, a few place unnecessary and irksome obstacles in the reader's way. And while most readers understand the problem archivists face in trying to give the best possible service on often pitifully inadequate budgets and in trying at once to make manuscripts easily available for the current user and to preserve them intact for future use, all too many, even the most well-meaning, fail to comprehend the archivist's problems. Others are thoughtless, or careless, or merely unaware of the value and fragility of old paper. This committee hopes to be helpful by making general good practice known to all. It hopes to emphasize the reader's point of view to archivists who do not always appreciate how difficult it is to find time and energy and funds to use large recent collections. It hopes that knowledge of current good practice and understanding of the archivist's problems will make the reader more cooperative and more appreciative of what the archivist does for him. So, by mutual discussion of the problem, both guardian and user will contribute toward better use of the large recent collections.

I. *Arrangement of Manuscripts.*

Any discussion of manuscript arrangement should be preceded by the statement that each group presents a separate case; that general principles can be recommended, but many exceptions will be found; that, in a word, judgment is constantly required, together

with a proper respect not only for the needs and wishes of the research scholar but also for the hard limitations (time, money, personnel) of most manuscript repositories. With all this in mind, the following comments and recommendations are made.

1. *If any significant arrangement can be discovered in incoming groups of recent papers, the committee recommends that it be retained, at least through the preliminary processing stage.*[2]

Various reasons for this appear at once. Such order as is discovered may be presumed to have been created for use and to have served users, during the "live" or active period of the papers. It can be assumed that the same order will be of some value to scholars and others who approach the papers from the research point of view. When, moreover, indexes or other finding aids accompany the papers, they are valuable only so long as the existing order is preserved. From a practical point of view, even when eventual change in arrangement is thought advisable, it should be deferred until all work necessary to effect that change can be done with dispatch, and completed within a foreseeable time. Failure to bear this in mind has all too often resulted in utter chaos for the user of manuscripts. And again, speaking practically, the identification and perfection of existing arrangement, being less time-taking than complete reorganization, is more likely to lie within the realm of possibility. It therefore aids the archivist in his struggle to keep *all* holdings in some degree of control, rather than spending disproportionate time on detailed processing of certain groups while permitting unwieldy backlogs in other quarters to accumulate.

2. If no order is found when manuscript groups reach a repository, a suitable arrangement must be decided upon after due consideration of the type, bulk, provenance, etc., of the papers in question. All other things being equal, *this committee recommends, in such case, general chronological arrangement.* In order to increase the usability of papers in such general chronological order, *it is further recommended that within that arrangement papers covering relatively short time periods* (months, years, groups of years, depending on individual circumstances) *be treated as sub-groups, and within these groups be alphabetically arranged. Furthermore, when rearrangement of papers is necessary, it is recommended that certain large categories of letters, such as those dealing solely with*

[2] By preliminary processing is meant the work done on manuscripts as soon as possible after their arrival in a repository — usually boxing, labeling, shelving, and brief description — in order to make them usable. Preliminary processing should aim not at perfection, we feel, but at prompt availability.

patronage or pensions, be segregated so that readers who have no interest in this type of material will not have to go through it.

3. *The committee recommends that recent manuscript material be evaluated as soon as possible after its receipt, and certain groups of little or no foreseeable use be segregated and in many cases permanently disposed of, either with or without the safeguard of microfilming, in order to make space for and assure proper processing and administration of papers of undoubted value.* To eliminate the unimportant, calls for courage and critical judgment. The task is not one to be undertaken by the novice or delegated to the lowest-paid assistant. The word "useless" does not appear here, since practically any paper may conceivably be of some use, to somebody, at some time. But the archivist must recognize that certain ephemeral types of material ("house-keeping" files in the case of institutional records, perhaps, and in the case of personal papers, occasional social or financial trivia) are not, in the long run, worth the time it would take to put them in usable shape. Such papers, moreover, often bulk large, in a world in which space is now at a premium and is going to be more so; and they take an undue proportion of the archivist's time in processing them, and of the reader's in turning them over.

It is felt, in a word, that a sense of proportion is here urgently needed, that the archivist must be wise enough, and bold enough, to take a calculated risk, and that the historian and the biographer must recognize the difficulties, assist with conference and advice whenever possible, and, finally, accept the situation.

II. *Guides.*

With the invention and increasing use of the typewriter and the resulting increase in the mass of paper produced by institutions and individuals alike in the carrying on of their daily concerns, the making of individual index or catalog cards for individual manuscript items has become more and more difficult, and is now, in many repositories, considered obsolete. Dictated letters, fifty or more in a morning, and duplicate copies of memoranda to be circulated to and annotated by twenty recipients — these and similar developments have not only swelled the bulk of manuscript holdings, but have increased the time needed for individual indexing, or cataloging, or calendaring, out of all belief.

It is recommended that this situation be recognized by archivists and research scholars alike; that, in the case of large groups of recent materials, indexing of individual manuscript items, however

ideally desirable, be considered for practical purposes the exception rather than the rule; and that there be substituted therefor descriptive sheets or memoranda (registration sheets, inventories, guides, etc.) which describe the arrangement of manuscript groups, give their bulk and scope and other pertinent information when available, and themselves serve as finding aids. These descriptions would have a further use as bases for entries in preparing published guides to manuscript holdings.

III. *Acquisition Policies.*

Few who answered the questionnaire admitted competition with other repositories in the acquiring of collections. Yet anyone familiar with the field knows of cases where two or several repositories have vigorously sought a given collection for their own instead of cooperating to get the collection into a safe and usable place. In some instances competition lessens the chances of all competitors by confusing the owner or giving him a false notion of the monetary value of such a collection. *The committee can only urge that the important thing is to bring valuable manuscripts into a safe place where they will be most available to the largest number of users.* Careful thought should be given, however, to deciding whether papers of a man of importance both in his own state and in the nation should be placed in a national repository like the Library of Congress or in a state repository. In the former case they could be used in conjunction with those of his contemporaries on the national scene; in the latter they would be available to those concerned with his state activities but less accessible to students of his wider service. Perhaps some day, through the use of the microfilm, such papers can be made available in both places. The dilemma has been resolved in certain instances by dividing papers and putting those of local interest in a state repository and those of primarily national interest in the Library of Congress. This committee feels that the difficulties attending the logical division of a group of papers are so great that such a division merely forces the reader to go to both institutions; and that of all solutions such division is the worst.

IV. *Physical Protection of the Manuscripts.*

One of the chief functions of the archivist is the protection for posterity of an important source of future historical and biographical writing. Yet the protection of the manuscripts, which presumably could best be served by locking them in a safe never to be used

by anyone, must be balanced against the other important function of the archivist, namely, to make manuscripts as easily available to the user as is compatible with reasonable safety. Neither function should be completely overshadowed by the other.

Physical protection involves guarding against abuse, misplacing, or theft of manuscripts. A few repositories examine briefcases, but only a highly paid expert could do this effectively, and searching by ordinary guards only lends a false impression of security. Most repositories require that readers use manuscripts under some supervision, but few supervise carefully enough to be effective. A large number of repositories permit scholars well known to them to work with no supervision at all. Checking each individual manuscript in and out, as is done by one well-known repository, provides an effective safeguard, but is completely impossible for any but a little used, overstaffed institution and is so costly in time and nuisance value for the reader as to be unjustifiable. Certainly manuscripts should not except in rare cases be removed from the building.

Protection of manuscripts against abuse or even constant hard use is as important as protection against the rarer hazard of possible theft. Care is made especially necessary by the large masses in which recent papers have to be served to readers and the fragile quality of much contemporary paper. Therefore *the committee recommends that each reader be asked to sign a statement such as the following*:

I hereby agree that in using manuscripts in the ———— I will abide by the following rules:

1. No smoking.
2. No use of open ink wells; caution in use of fountain pens.
3. No marking of manuscripts and no writing of notes on top of manuscripts.
4. Careful preservation of the existing order of manuscripts.
5. Notification to archivist of any manuscript apparently misplaced.
6. Extreme care in handling fragile material.
7. Obtaining, before publication, knowledge of libel law and literary property right law.

V. *Qualifications of Users and Restrictions on the Use of the Content of Manuscripts.*

The difficulty in protecting and preserving manuscript material and still making it available for proper use comes when protection and preservation interfere with what seems to the individual to be proper use: Means must be found to manage the first two without

interfering with that individual liberty so essential to the true scholar.

One reply that came with almost complete unanimity from archival institutions was: No survey of reader notes. Even the Library of Congress, which has for many years attempted this time-taking, laborious task, undoubtedly irritating to staff and user alike, is on the point of discontinuing the practice except when it is specifically required by donor restrictions.

Responsibility for making "proper" use of the contents of manuscripts reposes, then, in the user thereof — and rightly so in the view of this committee. It is up to the user to avoid the publication of libelous matter, for his own sake and for the sake of others, the more so since obvious misuse of donor-controlled papers may result in the complete closing of those papers for a period of time or the deterring of potential future donors. It is up to the user so to make his citations that those who come after can satisfy themselves as to his use of original sources. It is up to the user, too, and his publishers, before publication, to obtain the necessary permissions from owners of the literary property rights in unpublished material. The problem of literary property rights is proving a thorny one wherever its implications are fully understood. These rights are a matter of common law. Consequently legal interpretations differ from time to time and from case to case. The principle is fairly well recognized that the writer of a letter or other paper retains the sole right to publish the contents of that paper, unless he parts with that right, and that the right descends to his legal heirs. But to what extent does this affect the repository, and, concomitantly, the user of manuscripts? There are many still unsettled questions in this connection — can public exhibition be considered publication, for example, or can photocopying be considered publication — which this committee cannot attempt to answer. *The committee does recommend strongly, however, that further study of these matters be undertaken by scholars, archivists, and legal experts,* to the end that some legally acceptable conclusions be reached and, if possible, some legal action be promoted to stabilize such conclusions; *and that, in negotiation for the acquisition of manuscripts, the archivist make every effort to secure in that connection a dedication to the public of literary property rights held by prospective donors in any unpublished letters or other writings.*

The very fact that responsibility is placed upon the user of manuscripts increases the necessity under which the archivist operates of screening in the first place those who request access to papers.

It is evident from replies to the questionnaire that most repositories have struggled with this problem, and few have come to any satisfactory conclusion. "Scholars, writers, graduate students" may use the papers; those having "a reputation as a scholar"; "anyone having a good reason"; "anyone having a serious purpose." Even institutions reporting that all comers may use all manuscripts incline to contradict themselves sooner or later.

Some sort of screening of applicants for permission to consult recent papers is felt by this committee to be desirable. Part of a sentence or paragraph from a confidential letter written, perhaps, by someone still very much alive, if lifted out of context, spread on the front page of a yellow journal or quoted in false context at one of our more lurid public hearings, not only causes sober scholars to shudder, but may also, understandably, cause prospective donors of valuable papers to decline to become actual donors. And scholarship thereafter will suffer. Irresponsible persons, then, are not ordinarily qualified to use recent manuscript material.

The question remains: How can the hard-driven archivist separate the sheep from the goats in this difficult matter? In certain cases the responsibility is to some extent taken out of his hands by the fact that institutions must from time to time accept papers under donor restrictions. While there is a general feeling, in which this committee joins, that this is undesirable and should be avoided whenever possible, it is occasionally inevitable if papers are to be preserved at all. Such donor restrictions most often take the form of the requirement that names of applicants for permission to use manuscripts must be submitted to the donor (and sometimes, after his death, to his heirs) for decision. While this occasionally results in inequities, the situation can usually be guided by the archivist who is in a position to supply the donor with pertinent information and to recommend a course of action. Even in the case of donor-restricted materials, then, and in all other cases relating to recent materials, the archivist is confronted with the necessity of doing a screening job, and a difficult and thankless business it is.

With full appreciation of the problems involved, *this committee submits, as a partial basis for such screening, the following list of questions, answers to some or all of which might well be required of applicants for permission to use manuscripts of recent origin.* It will be seen at once that the questions are framed, not to discourage or disbar the beginner (though undergraduates are not ordinarily considered ready for work with recent papers), but to draw out information about the subject in which he is interested,

his capabilities, his plans, etc. — information that will aid the archivist not only in passing upon his application, but later, if he is given the permission for which he asks, in advising him as to his manuscript work. It will be obvious also that certain of the questions are framed in order to elicit information on the general purpose and the publishing history of free-lance writers, and also of those who may conceivably have it in mind to consult manuscripts for other than scholarly purposes.

1. Name.
2. Address.
3. Institution with which connected, if any.
4. Status (undergraduate, candidate for A.M. degree, candidate for Ph.D. degree, professor, free-lance writer, etc.).
5. If student, name of and letter of introduction from principal adviser.
6. Subject of work on which engaged.
7. Publication plans, if any.
8. Prospective publisher, if any.
9. Pertinent books published, if any.
10. Newspapers or magazines in which pertinent articles have been published.
11. If not publication, other purpose for which permission is asked.

This information, together with a personal conference whenever possible between the applicant and the responsible archivist, should furnish, it is believed, a fair basis for objective judgment. In this connection, a brief quotation from one excellent response to the committee's questionnaire may be suggestive:

". . . all we require with reference to qualifications of prospective users is that we be convinced that they are trustworthy, intend to use the material for scholarly purposes, and are reasonably qualified to do so."

VI. *Facilitation of the Use of Collections.*

Generally speaking, as has been said, archivists are considerate of a reader's time and energy. Where they are not it is usually because of thoughtlessness or because rules and regulations for safeguarding papers are allowed to get in the way of use of papers, or in some instances because of requirements of law or other limitation on a public institution that arise not from its own volition but from the fact that, as part of a public service system, it is bound by general regulations. Physical facilities provided are sometimes painfully inadequate, and for the reader who works long hours under pressure they are extremely important. Among these are good

light, comfortable chairs, stands for volumes of manuscripts, adequate table space, and quiet. Occasionally other readers are thoughtless, but the worst offender is apt to be a well-meaning staff member who cannot resist talking at length with readers, sometimes ostensibly to provide help. Certain repositories forbid the use of the typewriter altogether with great resultant hardship to the reader who always uses one. A few repositories require noiseless machines, again a hardship, unless the repository itself provides the noiseless machine without loss of time and at nominal rental.

The committee wishes to emphasize the importance of sparing the reader time-consuming processes in getting materials out, reserving them for the next day, applying for permission to use restricted collections, and filling out forms. The practice of requiring readers to sign for individual manuscripts should be discouraged, the committee feels.

The limited time during which repositories are open for business constitutes one of the toughest problems for the out-of-town reader or the reader who works during the day in another institution. Many archivists offer to work late at night or on Sunday for the convenience of a single reader. Such individual sacrificial meeting of the problem should not be necessary, however. Some smaller institutions leave readers well known to them entirely unsupervised. This, however, can serve only an occasional reader and would be impossible in large public institutions. Moreover, an archivist is often estopped from such accommodation by the rules of his institution. The hours problem, it is felt, can be partially solved by staggering staffs, by getting manuscripts out ahead of time and providing only a skeleton supervisory staff in off hours, or even, in certain cases, by transferring manuscripts for a Sunday or a holiday or an evening to some safely guarded portion of the building that is open anyway. *The committee urges that readers try to understand the difficulties many repositories face in this matter of hours, and that repositories make an even greater effort to adjust their hours to the needs of readers who have come at great cost in time and money.*

Then there is the problem of photostating and microfilming. Some repositories give excellent and reasonable service for such work. Others make arrangements for photocopying outside. Still others provide no facilities at all. An occasional repository, even when facilities are close at hand, refuses to permit photostating or microfilming on the ground that the staff has not the time to prepare the material for photographing. *The committee feels*

strongly that photocopying is a modern service as important as providing good lighting and a staff to bring manuscripts from the stacks. Two problems arise, however, that need further discussion. *First, there is great need for standardizing the cost.* Photostating seems to many to cost disproportionately in comparison with microfilming. The question arises how much of the overhead and the cost of staff to prepare the manuscripts and return them to their place should be charged to the reader. Second, where photo-reproduction is concerned, the question of literary rights often arises (see p. 235) and also the problem of control of restricted papers. The reader who takes away large amounts of manuscript reproduction may himself be a responsible person who has been carefully screened against abuse of the material, but it is hard to protect the material after he has taken the film or photostats away. This angle of the case makes some repositories rightfully reluctant to permit photo-reproduction. The Library of Congress and the Roosevelt Memorial Association have worked out a happy relationship whereby the Roosevelt letters in the Library of Congress may also be used on film in the Harvard Library — but only after the Library of Congress, which permitted the film to be made, has screened the reader at Harvard. *The committee feels that the practice of requiring a reader who has paid for filming parts of a collection to return his film to the original repository is unfair to the reader; that proper screening of the reader as discussed on pages ?..?..? would serve most needs.* If, however, restrictions on papers require the deposit of the film, *the committee recommends that it be placed in an institution geographically near the reader,* with a reciprocal arrangement whereby the parent-repository screens *further applicants for permission to use the film.*

The committee suggests that it is of the utmost importance now and will be increasingly necessary in the future to permit the filming of large groups of manuscripts in order to make them available elsewhere. It seems important therefore to work out reciprocal arrangements between repositories whereby collections or parts of collections can be made available in two or several places with proper control retained by the original possessor whose responsibility it is to protect the papers against abuse.

The committee feels that the proper selection and training of staff members is of vital importance to the use of manuscripts. There are too many repositories on whose staff only one person is competent to be genuinely helpful to readers. The committee is not ready to recommend what kind of training or how much training

should be required of staff members, but it urges that more attention be given to this matter, and in the meantime it deplores the custom in vogue in some localities of using archives or manuscript repositories as places for pensioning worthy but unqualified politicians or indigent relatives of trustees.

VII. *Protection of the Researcher.*

In most cases the repository is not primarily concerned about protecting the reader. There are, however, four special problems that should be recognized. One concerns University libraries and the manuscript theses deposited in them before publication. In order to avoid hard feelings and injustices, *the committee recommends that such repositories of unpublished dissertations adopt the Harvard rule of permitting no one to use these without permission of the author for a five-year period*, after which it would be reasonable to throw them open for general use. The second concerns the policy, occasionally imposed by a donor, of restricting the use of papers to particular readers. *The committee recommends against giving any reader a monopoly in the use of papers.* The third concerns the practice followed by very few institutions — of permitting faculty members or graduate students to earmark certain groups of papers and close them to scholars from other institutions. If this practice were followed widely, scholarship would shrivel up or be limited to the narrow confines of each little bailiwick. Those who answered the questionnaire are, like the committee, unanimous in feeling that no retaliation should be practiced against such institutions. *This committee does, however, deplore the practice of granting special privilege to members of the owner-institution.* Finally, *the committee feels that repositories can serve as important clearing houses of information useful to readers* by keeping and making available files that show who is using each group of papers and the purpose for which it is being used. Many an archivist has rendered invaluable service to readers by bringing together those who have interests in common so that they can discuss their subjects and exchange mutually helpful information and material.

Respectfully submitted,

THOMAS C. COCHRAN, *Chairman*
HOWARD K. BEALE
KATHARINE E. BRAND
GEORGE E. MOWRY
ALICE E. SMITH