

The Indexing of Historical Materials¹

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OF the making of indexes, as of books, there is no end. Nor should there be, for every body of accumulated fact is of value — greater or less — to the modern world, in the same degree that its details are readily and dependably accessible. Irrespective of design, the tool by which particular facts, names, and dates in any group, large or small, are quickly found and separated from the mass in which they are lodged, is an index. Most frequently indexes are thought of as applying to and forming an integral and important part of a book or set of books, particularly the exhaustive writings and compendiums on history, science, geography, classics, literature, business, and similar fields. But such ideas are rudimentary; today the index knows no limitation, its field is every activity that is embraced by human endeavor! In its simplest form the index is merely an alphabetical list confined to one or two loose pages; in its more complex and extensive form it may constitute a separate book or file of 100 or 1,000 or more pages. In extreme cases it is an exhaustive assemblage of tens of thousands of cards, such as the union catalog of the Library of Congress, or a grand set of volumes such as Joseph Sabin's *Dictionary of Books Relating to America*.²

It has been commonly thought that though superior intellectuality is required to write a book or a set of books, anyone of ordinary talent can prepare its index. Nothing could be further from the truth. The making of an index for a book or any group of unassorted facts or materials is not a purely mechanical function, although mechanics insofar as it embraces system, classification, and understanding is most certainly basic to the success of the undertaking. Besides these elements, however, the indexer should most certainly possess both imaginative and critical faculties and an ardent desire to make his index easily and effectually useful to the two large classes of persons that will of necessity make use of it. These are (1), investigators, scholars, and students, who are more or less,

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Lexington, Kentucky, Oct. 27, 1952.

² 29 vols. (New York, 1868-1936).

if not thoroughly, familiar with the subject matter; and (2), casual readers, who are largely if not wholly unfamiliar with the field and desire no more than to ascertain a few isolated or related facts, names, or dates.

Within the broad and expanding field of historical archives in the United States, indexing has become increasingly important during the past quarter of this century. Before and for a short time after 1900 most State and local historical societies and associations were content merely to gather and store — sometimes not too well nor too safely — precious archival material, allowing scholars, students, and the public generally to rummage through it at will in hit-or-miss fashion. Within the last several decades, however, a growing sense of archival responsibility has begun to develop, which has already resulted not only in better and more systematic storage but in the actual preparation of indexes to various kinds of material — indexes sometimes of very limited pattern, and again of refreshingly comprehensive scope. These partial indexes, prepared in type-written, book, or card catalog form, usually bear preparation dates subsequent to 1925. As they are used, the facility they lend to historical research is so apparent as to call forth spontaneous expressions of genuine satisfaction and admiration from both professional and amateur investigators and research workers.

The writer has made more than ordinary use of local, State, and Federal archives for some 40 years and during one or two intervals within this time has essayed the indexing of at least two rather extensive and important groups of State documents, the resulting manuscripts of which have been available in book form for more than 25 years. He therefore feels some degree of competency to lay before those who may be interested the ground work of a comprehensive plan that, with whatever modifications local situations may require, will certainly if adopted lessen somewhat the endless research labor of curators and librarians and increase the effectiveness of the archival material involved. Furthermore a certain element of appropriateness enters into these remarks and proposals in view of the apparently indisputable fact that very little has been written and printed on this particular subject. With much admiration for the many and important achievements that have been made by American archivists, curators, and librarians during these latter years, and with a proper regard and deference for the plans that have frequently been made but have been impossible to effectuate because of inadequate finance or improper housing, the following proposals are offered, particularly for local and State archives.

BOOKS

Libraries should be carefully and competently screened to eliminate irrelevant books, pamphlets, and magazines. Retained material should be immediately analytically cataloged, using Library of Congress cards wherever available. The master catalog of a historical library is a profoundly important index, the real value and far-reaching function of which is too often misunderstood and unappreciated. Of indexes printed in book form covering special groups of historical book and magazine material, E. G. Swem's *Virginia Historical Index*³ is the foremost example, the bright, the shining, the all-time ultimate goal of the specialized book and magazine indexer.

DOCUMENTS

This type of source material should be divided into two groups, the bound and the unbound material. Properly and systematically filed, it should then be separately card cataloged after the manner of the principal library. If either regular or special funds are available, the documents should be logically subdivided and alphabetically indexed. These indexes should be presented in modest but readable book form so as to implement the use of important source material even at distant points. Notable instances of achievement in this field of specialized indexing are not too numerous. Outstanding recognition is perhaps rather widely accorded to Adelaide R. Hassé's *Index of Economic Material in the Documents of the . . . United States: Kentucky*.⁴ Alone in their respective fields and widely and effectively used are the writer's exhaustive indexes, *The Kentucky Land Grants* and *The Old Kentucky Entries and Deeds*.⁵

MANUSCRIPTS

Source material of this character should be divided into two groups, originals and transcriptions. Both types should be thoroughly card cataloged with numerous briefing and analytical entries. If funds can be found, the index to this material, carefully designed to serve the purposes to which it will be put, should be printed in book form. A shining and well-known example of achievement in this field is Mabel Clare Week's unique volume, *Calendar of the Kentucky Papers of the Draper Collection of Manuscripts*.⁶

³ 2 vols. (Roanoke, 1934-36).

⁴ Washington, 1918.

⁵ Louisville, Ky., 1925, 1926.

⁶ Madison, Wis., 1925.

RECORDS

This group of sources will also naturally fall into two subdivisions, bound and unbound records. Separate indexes for each of the bound volumes and a collective index for the unbound material can be readily designed as an aid to investigators, as for instance for deeds, indexed by names of grantors and grantees. A card catalog should be designed to embrace this entire group on an alphabetical basis. The extensive nature of this class of material, together with its very localized and frequently questionable historical importance, suggests the inadvisability of attempting to print such an all-embracing index. If other forms of indexing this type of material are desired, the suggestions offered by Laurence P. Jones in his manual of procedure entitled *Indexing of County Records*⁷ may be consulted.

PHOTOSTATS

Source material of this class is usually eagerly sought by scholars in history, professional genealogists, and writers of magazine articles. In too many archival collections photostats are kept loose and unorganized in broad flat steel filing cases, where they are constantly pawed over by research workers and others. The end result of this method of filing is unnecessary wear and tear, coupled with the occasional *loss* of an item owing to the open invitation to theft afforded by loose and indiscriminate filing. In many archives, for some unaccountable reason, some photostats are bound while others remain unbound. As an inviolable rule, all photostats available to the public should be bound, listed, and carefully cross indexed in a card catalog or typed volume. A notable example of precise and detailed indexing of photostats and manuscripts is afforded by the index of the vast Draper collection, made by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Few local and State historical societies devote the attention and care to photographs that this type of source material really deserves. In most places photographs, if not loosely filed in drawers or boxes, attain their zenith of attention when simply dropped in a vertical file, which to appease conscience is usually subdivided on a chronological, geographical, or name basis. All such methods are far too primitive. If photographs are worth keeping as archival ma-

⁷ N.p., n.d.

terial they should be separately filed in envelopes of suitable size according to some definite scheme of indexing whereby a name, a date, and a description of 5 to 10 words, coupled with a number, will be reflected in a special card catalog. This type of indexing will naturally invite investigators, as in a well organized library, to search for the particular items they desire and to ascertain quickly without the help of the curator whether the archives visited contains the desired photograph or not. The simple and effective filing and indexing methods used in the cut and photograph "morgues" of large municipal daily newspapers might well be examined by officials in charge of archives who desire to improve their own methods of handling photographs that are to be made available to the public.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers are a vast and increasingly important body of material to which unfortunately much too little attention has been paid. The newspapers of today become the highly important sources of tomorrow, and files of newspapers 50, 100, and 150 years old are now considered so important that no piece of historical writing can be ranked "top flight" unless it has exhausted their factual and opinionated contributions, if any, for the period covered. Most historical libraries of the better class attempt to have their newspapers bound. Unfortunately a chronological index of these volumes is generally the height of attainment by the curator—more frequently the actual chronological filing of the bound volumes is all that is done, and sometimes not even this rudimentary step has been taken.

The research worker, no matter how precious his time may be, is required to sit idly by while the curator, the librarian (and sometimes, sad to say, the janitor) pool their labor, intelligence, and luck in an effort to find a particular newspaper or group of newspapers vital to the furtherance or completion of the scholar's product. Of course, all newspapers should be thoroughly indexed.⁸ Quite a few historical societies and libraries are now beginning to do this work on their oldest newspapers, somewhat after the manner employed by the *New York Times* or in line with some practical and efficient plan such as has been suggested by Harry A. Friedman in his book, *Newspaper Indexing*.⁹

⁸ The highwater mark of attainment in this specialized field is the distinguished two-volume work of L. J. Cappon and S. F. Duff, *Virginia Gazette Index: 1736-1780*, which was issued in 1,308 pages at Williamsburg in 1950.

⁹ Milwaukee, 1942.

MICROFILMS

If any kind of archival material is worth reproducing on rolls of microfilm it should be immediately and competently indexed by a card catalog. Too often, however, the loose or paper-boxed films are dropped indiscriminately into some vacant drawer, like a school boy's marbles, without even the semblance of a list to show what is or is not possessed by this important division of archives. And furthermore, in many such cases, the thought of indexing on alphabetical and analytical cards the details of the separate microfilms — the newspapers, manuscripts, land records, or whatever — has never occurred to the curator as a challenge to his vision, abilities, and responsibilities. Wading through the microfilms of the average local historical society today is like — pardon the simile — swimming the whole South Pacific to find the location and nature of some particular, possibly inconspicuous isle.

MUSEUM PIECES

Any item of sufficient value to be stored or exhibited in a museum should be indexed in an alphabetical card catalog that reveals *all* that may be known about it — its date of acquisition, donor, origin, age, original ownership, use, and any other relevant facts. This catalog should be built upon the plan of the master catalog of a first-class library, and without exception the acquisition number of the specimen should appear on the card. It goes without saying that this catalog should contain every item, even those designated for perpetual storage.

All exhibited items should be properly indexed and briefly described in a printed pamphlet or booklet of convenient pocket size, and such guidebooks should be available for a very modest sum — perhaps a quarter or a half dollar — to every visitor. Special investigators and research workers form a large and important group of visitors to any museum, and usually they do better and vastly more accurate and rapid work if they are left to themselves with satisfactory guidebooks, than if they are thrown, even with a maximum of good will, on the tender mercies and erratic memory of poorly informed or over-enthusiastic floor guides.

PAINTINGS AND BUSTS

This particular group of museum pieces deserves special consideration because of the biographical element involved. To any one writing either a brief sketch or a full-length and definitive biogra-

phy of any historical personality, an oil, pastel, or crayon portrait or a bust in marble or bronze is a great and monumental find. In most local and State museums it is still too early to find card catalogs or printed booklets indexing *all* of the paintings, portraits, or busts possessed by the organization. In some grand hall, those on exhibit are usually named and in rare instances dated, but those standing in dark storage, frequently unwrapped, gathering dust, dirt, and spider webs are all too frequently more or less if not completely unnumbered and unknown! Although Alexander Wilbourne Weddell's *Virginia Historical Portraiture: 1585-1830*¹⁰ and one or two other such works are close to if not the acme of attainment in the indexing of historically important portraits, very much still remains to be done. It is a sad commentary on the easy conscience of the average curator or archivist — whether he aspires to be known by such an elegant title or not — that this situation can and does widely exist during these middle years of the twentieth century within the sacred walls of many, perhaps most, of the local historical societies, associations, and museums of the United States.

¹⁰ Richmond, 1930.

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