

The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections¹

By ROBERT H. LAND

Library of Congress

ENTHUSIASM for a national register of manuscripts has itself had a respectable history. Such a register or union catalog has been described as just the handmaiden to answer one of Clio's most pressing "long-felt needs." Pertinent as it might be, the scope of this paper does not permit my establishing the historical setting for the present proposals that are being made by the Library of Congress. It will be possible only to tell you what these plans are. My paper, therefore, does not have a thesis; its burden is no more than a factual statement of what has recently been done. I have hesitated in using the term burden because of the connotation it may have. It certainly is no burden for me to discuss this topic of great (possibly overweening) interest to those of us at the Library of Congress who are engaged in the work of preserving manuscripts and making them available for use.

While I have forsworn to recount the various earlier efforts of individuals and institutions to establish bibliographical control of manuscripts and will not comment upon the probable reasons why their plans failed, I should like to quote one plea, aptly expressed, for such a register as the Library of Congress is attempting to establish. In 1947 Theodore G. Blegen in a chapter called "A Bid for Cooperation" in his *Grass Roots History* said:

Much has been done about historical materials. We have had archival and historical records surveys. Anarchy is yielding to democratic controls. And we are digging into kinds of historical materials that were not much used a generation ago. But we need to use modern techniques in grappling with scattered and diverse bodies of records to which we have no master key. . . .

By that I mean a great central inventory of archives and manuscripts, a key that will open closed doors—in fact, doors that many of us do not even know exist. We need some way of really knowing what has been preserved out of the past in the hundreds of collections throughout the land. Heroic efforts have been made by the Historical Records Survey to gather up information as to where our materials actually are, but we lack the master key: a

¹ Paper read at a joint meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, April 24, 1954.

national guide or inventory. Neither the Library of Congress nor any other great central institution has given it to us.

I do not know what form it will take. Perhaps it will be an index to a thousand guides prepared after the best models we have been able to devise; perhaps it will be a master union guide. Certainly it will be a flexible scheme, controlling what has been done in amassing historical treasures and keeping abreast of current growth.²

The Library's proposal to establish a national register was actually first made in 1951 to the Joint Committee on Historical Manuscripts. This committee had been set up in 1949 by the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History, and one of its five members was a representative of the Library of Congress. It was established at the suggestion of the American Historical Association, which in 1948 had voted to discontinue its own Committee on Manuscripts and had recommended to these other two associations their formation of a joint committee to take over the major proposals of the Committee on Manuscripts, the foremost of which was a union inventory.

The Library's representative on the joint committee on September 17, 1951, wrote the chairman a letter³ in which he proposed the establishment of a national register of historical manuscripts in the Library of Congress as a subsidiary of the National Union Catalog through two steps. The first was the formulation of rules for cataloging collections of manuscripts, and the second was the printing of Library of Congress cards for manuscript collections, prepared from copy supplied by the Library and by other depositories. It was suggested also that these printed cards would be offered for sale at small cost, that the Library might issue, as an annual supplement to its *Author Catalog*, a book catalog of all cards received in the preceding year, and that these might be incorporated into periodic cumulative volumes.

This letter is fully discussed because it closely prescribed the activities on which the Library is presently engaged. For example, it made the adoption of rules for cataloging manuscripts a prerequisite for the creation of a national register. It explained that only printed cards would be published in annual or cumulative volumes, but that the register need not be delayed until repositories had completed the recataloging of their manuscript holdings — an enormous undertaking in most cases. The letter suggested, rather, that temporary entries for the register might be derived by cutting

² Theodore G. Blegen, *Grass Roots History* (Minneapolis, 1947), pp. 253-254.

³ Dan Lacy to Lester J. Cappon, Sept. 17, 1951.

and pasting descriptions in published guides or possibly by filming and making enlargement prints of existing unpublished card catalogs of manuscript collections. The letter pointed out that such operations as these are normally carried on by the Library of Congress and that no special grant for the purpose would be required except to set up the initial union catalog on the cut-and-paste and microfilm-enlargement basis.

This letter was received by the chairman of the joint committee too late to permit his circulating it to the other members before making the formal report of the committee on October 1. It was, however, summarized as an addendum to this report, and as such it was published in the April 1952 *American Archivist*.⁴ This offer by the Library to administer the national register had the approval of Luther H. Evans, then Librarian of Congress, who had felt an especial concern for manuscripts since the days when he was the organizer and first director of the Historical Records Survey. It can be noted, however, that the Library's determination in this matter has not faltered since Mr. Evans resigned last year to become Director General of UNESCO.

The 1951 report of the joint committee announced that its function was "to act in an advisory capacity to whatever institution or agency may be directly responsible for the administration of the register and the results achieved." It endorsed a national register as being more desirable than regional registers. It stated that entries in the register should be restricted to manuscript collections and that a nucleus of the register could be prepared from published guides.⁵

In the same year the National Historical Publications Commission, whose counsel the Library later sought, also supported, in two of its reports, the creation of a national register as a "basic need for the detailed planning" of its publication program and as "essential to the efficient operation of the commission."⁶

The first step the Library took in following up its proposal to the joint committee was reported in its weekly *Information Bulletin* of November 19, 1951, which announced the appointment of an assistant chief of the Union Catalog Division with immediate responsibility for the creation, development, and maintenance of

⁴ *American Archivist*, 15:180 (Apr. 1952).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-180.

⁶ *The National Historical Publications Commission, 1934-1950; a Report to the Commission* (Washington, 1951); *National Program for the Publication of the Papers of American Leaders; a Preliminary Report to the President of the United States by the National Historical Publications Commission* (Washington, 1951).

a national register of historical manuscripts. Along with other duties, he was to plan and develop procedures for the reproduction, maintenance in a union catalog, and distribution of catalog cards for historical manuscripts.

Early in 1952 a committee was appointed at the Library to prepare a draft of rules for cataloging manuscripts, and its first assignment was to devise a code for cataloging collections. Naturally the assistant chief of the Union Catalog Division was named a member of this committee; the chairman and two other members were from the Descriptive Cataloging Division; and three members were appointed from the Manuscripts Division. Later the chief of the Rare Books Division, who has custody of medieval and certain literary manuscripts, and representatives of the Subject Cataloging Division were made members of or advisors to this committee. Advice on specific questions has been received from the Copyright Office, the Law Library, and the Map and Music Divisions. Of the Manuscripts Division members of the Cataloging Committee, one was the chief of the Division — who was also, at that time, serving as the Library representative on the joint committee — and another was the head of the Recent Manuscripts Section, who had served on the American Historical Association's ad hoc committee set up in 1948 to study the arrangement and use of large recent manuscript collections.

To some of the administrative officers of the Library of Congress, the assigned task of this committee represented only another effort on the part of the Library to draft rules for cataloging special materials, such as music, maps, films and recordings; but, to those of us whose duties were primarily devoted to handling manuscripts, it meant that our holdings and those of other repositories could be cataloged scientifically — a *sine qua non* for a national register. I wish therefore to speak of the work of this committee and to describe briefly the rules which it has drawn up.

In general the relation of the Manuscripts Division members (none of whom were catalogers) to the other members of the committee (most of whom were catalogers) was this: we were there to say what we thought the rules should provide, and the others were there to discover the means for effecting our purposes in accordance with the *A.L.A. Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries* and with the *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging in the Library of Congress*, of which our rules for cataloging manuscripts would necessarily become a part. In considering our rules it is important to bear this fact in mind, as well as another premise on

which they are based: that entries which result from them should be capable of incorporation into a general library catalog. There are Library administrative reasons for these premises, but our committee has not felt they adversely affected the rules. They will mean that a library, if it wishes, can catalog its manuscripts so as to provide in one place its total cataloged holdings of the writings of an author, whether published or unpublished.

At the outset our committee decided that we should prepare rules for cataloging all kinds of manuscript materials and that, though we should first draft rules for cataloging collections, we should also prepare rules for cataloging single manuscripts. In all our deliberations, which were frequent and long, we kept the national register in mind because we fully realized that our rules must be acceptable to the repositories that would be solicited to supply copy for cards to be printed for it by the Library.

On May 19, 1952, the Library through the *Information Bulletin* gave notice of its intention to print catalog cards for its own collections and to extend the service to other repositories supplying "cooperative copy" and of its hope to initiate a card and annual book-form catalog with long term cumulations. By that time the work of our committee had reached the stage where we were prepared to submit a draft of the rules for cataloging collections for study by members of the joint committee and by the executive director of the National Historical Publications Commission. Thus the latter officer, Philip M. Hamer, and members of the joint committee, Lester J. Cappon, Philip C. Brooks, and Colton Storm, were given the opportunity to consider the draft before meeting with us and the Library's consultant on manuscripts on June 19 to discuss it.

At this conference the Library reaffirmed the proposals it had made to the joint committee in 1951, the premises for the rules were explained, and the visiting experts recommended minor revisions and approved our draft as "suitable for the purpose for which it was intended." Much of the discussion was devoted to the national register. There was agreement that it should include not only collections of private papers of individuals, families, and organizations, but also governmental archival material — that is, official manuscript records on the national and State level as found in official repositories — and, if possible, also such records not in official repositories and local records. At first, however, no special effort would be made to reach these last collections. The hope was expressed that private collections could also be recorded through

the aid of the members of the Manuscripts Society. The inclusion of records from outside the United States, especially from Canada, and the records of foreign archives in possession of United States repositories (in original or photocopy form) was also felt to be desirable. As a practical approach, the Library in requesting co-operative copy from other repositories was advised to ask them to give priority to significant collections recently acquired, since they could catalog a collection at the same time they organized it for use. Copy for older acquisitions could be prepared as time permitted with preference given to those not described in published guides or other reference works.⁷

The steps the Library would follow in establishing the national register were outlined. First the revised draft of the rules would be submitted to the Library's Processing Committee, which must approve all its cataloging rules. Then it would be sent for suggestions and recommendations to manuscript authorities, who would be informed of the plans for the national register. Before adoption, the rules also would have to be approved by the American Library Association. It was suggested to the chairman of the joint committee that he approach a few principal repositories to make sure of their general agreement, in paving the way for a wide appeal for cooperation. Colton Storm later said of this meeting: "It was one of the most successful all-day meetings I had ever attended." It was "a little startling that we accomplished so much in so little time."⁸

The Librarian's annual report for 1952 stated that the completion of the rules for cataloging manuscripts would make it possible to proceed with the development of the national register, which would come to include "all collections of manuscripts of historical character, regardless of subject or field." This report spoke of the register's furnishing, when the data were available, information about collections in Canada and Mexico and later extending this range to other foreign countries.

Our cataloging committee continued to meet that summer and fall and with the advice of the Processing Committee further revisions of the rules were made. It was not until late in 1952 that the chairman of our committee could forward them to some 70 specialists in accordance with the procedures announced in June.

These rules can best be illustrated by means of sample printed

⁷ Library of Congress Committee on Manuscript Cataloging, minutes of meeting, June 19, 1952; Lester J. Cappon to John E. Pomfret, Oct. 9, 1952.

⁸ Colton Storm to David C. Mearns, June 26, 1952.

catalog cards prepared for collections in accordance with them.⁹ The rules provide directions for choosing the main entry under which a collection is entered and for making added entries. The description of a collection is to consist of:

- (1) A title with inclusive dates of the manuscripts.
- (2) A statement of form, such as transcript or photocopy, if the manuscripts are not originals.
- (3) A physical description in terms of the approximate number of items or the linear feet of shelf space occupied by the collection (or both).
- (4) The name of the repository in which the collection is located.
- (5) A scope or contents note bringing out the type of papers, special features (such as the dates for which the material or particular segments of material is largest); and, for personal papers, essential biographical data and mention of names which are to be used as added entries.
- (6) Reference to the best or most nearly complete published description of the collection.
- (7) Notice of availability in the repository of any unpublished guide to the organization and content of the collection.
- (8) Comment if there are restrictions on access to the collection.
- (9) Statement of availability of information on literary rights.
- (10) Note on provenance.

Before these rules were mailed out to the manuscript experts, the chairman of the joint committee had reported the results of his enquiry. Of the 14 selected repositories he addressed, he had received favorable responses from 12, expressing "great interest" and a desire to do whatever they could to implement the national register. These 12 were: Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Princeton, and Virginia Universities; the Bancroft, Clements, Huntington, Morgan, Newberry, and New York (Public) Libraries; and the Historical Society of Wisconsin. He did not report having heard from the University of North Carolina, and the University of Texas replied that it had an insufficient staff to supply the information necessary or to enable it to give tentative support to the project.¹⁰

Hard upon this auspicious report came replies from the experts. Our committee was heartily gratified that the rules received almost universal approbation. The rules were improved by the helpful suggestions and constructive criticisms that were offered. Several of the recommendations made by E. G. Swem, the compiler of the *Virginia Historical Index*, were accepted in the interest of clarity and conciseness. One of the most felicitous letters we received was written by John Cook Wylie, curator of rare books but at that

⁹ Three sample cards are reproduced at the end of this article.

¹⁰ Lester J. Cappon to Lucile M. Morsch, Nov. 26, 1952; Jan. 6, 1953.

time acting curator of manuscripts at the University of Virginia:

After careful consideration of your rules for descriptive cataloguing of manuscript groups, submitted on December 31st, we have nothing to say about them other than to congratulate you on a job extraordinarily well done.

Aware as we are of the difficulties of stating in general terms the specific compromises represented by any set of rules, our own manuscript cataloguers are of the opinion that they could not have drawn up this document as well themselves.

If you will make a normal allowance for the vanity of human nature, you will realize that this is very high praise indeed.¹¹

The Archivist of the United States, Wayne C. Grover, spoke of the Library's "important activity . . . progressing so well" and other archivists praised the draft. A dealer, Mary Benjamin, mentioned our completeness and carefulness. A curator of manuscripts, George K. Boyce of the Pierpont Morgan Library, could "only commend . . . a well thought-out body of rules," and other curators mentioned our having considered all contingencies. A librarian, Clifford K. Shipton of the American Antiquarian Society, felt the rules represented "a very considerable advance over any previous practical system" that had come to his attention, and other librarians believed they admirably covered the cataloging of manuscripts. A director of a historical society, R. W. G. Vail of the New York Historical Society, called them foolproof; and other directors could not make suggestions for improving them. A historian, Boyd C. Shafer, executive secretary of the American Historical Association, said later, "The idea is excellent, the rules sound. Scholars will be helped. This fully justifies what you are doing and are planning to do."¹² Other historians considered the draft comprehensive.

To prevent a suspicion of partiality in selecting comments, it should be noted that one State Archivist said: "The whole thing seems quite complicated to me, perhaps too complicated to be used effectively by small institutions," and the head of a large manuscript division in a university library was "somewhat overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task" of creating a national register.¹³

The Library of Congress was delighted when replies indicated a willingness on the part of institutions to cooperate with the proposed national register as did the Maryland Historical Society,

¹¹ Letters, Jan. 3-Feb. 18, 1953, in correspondence file of the chairman, Library of Congress Committee on Manuscript Cataloging.

¹²*Ibid.*; Boyd C. Shafer to Robert H. Land, Mar. 31, 1954.

¹³ Letters, Jan. 3-Feb. 18, 1953, in correspondence file of the chairman, Library of Congress Committee on Manuscript Cataloging.

North Carolina's Department of Archives and History, and the University of California, Los Angeles.¹⁴

Our committee, or certainly the Manuscripts Division members of it, particularly appreciated the comments on the ease with which other repositories could adopt these rules. B. E. Powell, librarian of Duke University, said: "Your rules as we interpret them allow enough latitude to permit us to report most of our holdings with a minimum of revision of entries." George P. Hammond, director of the Bancroft Library, wrote: "I have gone over this [draft] with my manuscript staff and find that our practice coincides almost identically with your suggestions." Robert W. Hill, keeper of manuscripts at the New York Public Library, wrote, "On most points there are no significant differences from our practices; our cards would lend themselves readily to the union repository or be sufficiently understandable to its users." Andrew H. Horn, associate librarian of the University of California, Los Angeles, stated: "Your rules are substantially the same as those which we have been following." David C. Duniway, State Archivist of Oregon, wrote: "I was surprised to find how similar our practices are to those which you are developing." Watt P. Marchman, director of the Hayes Memorial Library, discovered that the rules coincided with his views, and William D. Overman of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company Library and Archives, tested them by cataloging two series of documents in his collection and found them clear and workable.¹⁵ It would appear that our committee has succeeded in drafting rules acceptable to other repositories.

Further proof of this is the use made of the tentative rules for cataloging collections by one repository to describe, in a published guide, over 300 of its collections. The Library of Congress was delighted to receive late in 1953 a copy of this work, the second edition of a *Guide to the Manuscript Collections in the William L. Clements Library*, compiled by William S. Ewing. Its preface voiced the hope, "that the long needed National Register of Manuscripts will become a reality and that the descriptions can be entered immediately."

After making further refinements in the draft of rules for cataloging collections, our committee proceeded to draft rules for cataloging single manuscripts, such as manuscript books and similar material (music, maps, diaries, journals, and memoranda and account books); letters; speeches, lectures, and sermons; and legal

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

papers. The rules for single manuscripts are of immediate concern to the national register chiefly because it was decided by the Library not to forward the rules for cataloging manuscripts to the American Library Association until they had been completed both for collections and for single manuscripts.

The completed draft upon which the Processing Committee of the Library was fully agreed, except for one minor aspect, was forwarded to the A.L.A. in March 1954. It is hoped that the A.L.A. will give its approval of the rules in the near future.

Though the Library has not yet begun to catalog its own collections and though actual steps to establish the national register are held in abeyance pending A.L.A. approval of the rules, the assistant chief of the Union Catalog Division has drafted plans for establishing and maintaining the register; and submitted them for consideration by the chief administrative officers of the Library on April 13. He proposed, on the basis of a modest budget, to edit, clip, paste, and type entries from published guides and from the shelflist of collections in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, to interfile these in one file, to compile an index to the file, to scan other publications for descriptions of additional collections, and to edit the cooperative cataloging copy supplied by other institutions for inclusion in the file. Alternative plans for developing temporary entries for the register were then suggested, such as typing on a card the appropriate entry for a collection followed by a bibliographical reference to the published description — but giving on the card information on the location and, if available, on the size of the collection. Only one decision of importance was reached: the name of this bibliographical apparatus would be changed from the national register to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Carrying out any one of the several plans discussed would make a worthy beginning of this union catalog of manuscript collections. Among the problems yet to be decided by the Library are those involving an index or subject and name approach to the catalog and whether special funds are necessary to underwrite the initial cost of the project.

In an address on the "History and Problems of the Controls of Manuscripts in the United States," delivered at the fall, 1953, meeting of the American Philosophical Society, Francis L. Berkeley, Jr., pointed out that the two characteristics of an effective control of unpublished source material would be its national scope and its emergence as the product of the routine activities of the normal staff of repositories. The Library's plan has, or very nearly

has, these elements. It is hoped that the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections will live up to the name given it; certainly, as a condition precedent to its success, national participation has been sought. The plan is neither grandiose nor ethereal. From the outset, the Library has assumed that, no matter what large initial funds might be secured to inaugurate a national catalog of manuscript collections, no matter how good its staff, how able its administration, or how extensive its physical equipment, it would avail but little without the complete and continuous cooperation of a substantial number of the institutions holding the major manuscript collections. The Library is proceeding cautiously, in the light of its experience with the National Union Catalog (of books). Our Manuscripts Cataloging Committee can testify to the fact that the problems of manuscript control are more difficult and varied than those of book control. Books, after all, have common physical characteristics: for example, authors, titles, numbered pages, and imprints, which lend themselves to standard description. One or more of these characteristics are frequently lacking in manuscripts. Books, moreover, ordinarily deal with a single subject. Collections of manuscripts, on the other hand, are naturally miscellaneous in their content. Indeed manuscripts are the most refractory materials with which custodians have to deal.

The Library is encouraged by the proffers of aid that have already been made. It will count heavily upon the support of such organizations as the joint committee and the associations it represents. The executive director of the National Historical Publications Commission has given me permission to quote from the galley proof of a forthcoming report. This report is indicative of a sustaining interest in the plans to establish "a national register of archival and manuscript groups as a part of the Library's union catalog activities." After mention of the guide to depositories of archives and manuscripts in the United States now in preparation by the commission's staff, the report goes on to say: "Both the guide and the register can be of very great usefulness, but only if the depositories extend their full cooperation. The commission recommends most strongly that all custodians of archives and manuscripts give their full support to these two enterprises."

Not the least among those from whom the Library seeks to secure assistance are the professional historians. In requesting this help, we shall not be able to assure historians that the catalog will eliminate their peripatetic exercises; but it should reduce them. For it will save the historian from retracing his steps if, before he

starts his travels, he can determine what are the pertinent sources of value to his study and where they are. As the introduction to the draft of the rules for cataloging manuscripts states: "The entries for collections of manuscripts are planned to give concisely the basic description and the information most essential to a research worker who is surveying the field and deciding where his source material is most likely to be found."

The historian should bear in mind that, in the proposal for the union catalog, there will be relatively few entries for single manuscripts. Thus the catalog will not be able to provide the answer to every question he might ask in locating the documents he needs. At best it will tell him where collections are, and this will indicate the probable source where it may be profitable to direct a search or an inquiry.

April 24 of this year marked the 154th anniversary of the founding of the Library of Congress. During the course of its life its officers have discussed many plans, not all of which have materialized. We at the Library have high hopes for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, but we do not wish to overstate the case for it. We must avoid confusing proposals with accomplishments. Even if nothing more should come of our efforts than adoption of our rules by repositories, the Library will have made a contribution towards the creation of a union catalog of manuscript collections — by providing, as the first step, the means for nationwide uniformity in describing manuscripts. We trust that our efforts in behalf of the catalog have been solidly based. We shall leave it to others to say whether the problem is finally being met adequately "with the broad perspective of a national undertaking" which it deserves.

Breckinridge Family.

Sample

Papers, 1752-1949.

246 ft.

In Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.

Correspondence and other papers of the Kentucky family: John Breckinridge (b. 1760, d. 1806) U. S. Senator from Kentucky and Attorney General in Jefferson's cabinet; his son, John Breckinridge (b. 1797, d. 1841); another son, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge (b. 1800, d. 1871) Presbyterian clergyman and president of Jefferson College; son of Robert, William Campbell Preston Breckinridge (b. 1837, d. 1904) long-time U. S. Representative from Kentucky; John Cabell Breckinridge (b. 1821, d. 1875) Vice-President of the U. S.; Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge (b. 1866, d. 1948) educator and pioneer social worker.

Unpublished guide in repository.

Given by members of the Breckinridge family and by Edith Abbott, 1905-49.

1. U. S. — Hist. — Sources. 2. Jefferson College, Canonsburg, Pa.

Library of Congress

MS 52-4

Merriam, John Campbell, 1869-1945.

Sample

Papers, 1899-1938.

89 ft.

In Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.

Paleontologist and educator. Correspondence, reports, notes, articles, maps, and other manuscript and printed material, mainly relating to the Carnegie Institution, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Research Council and the national parks.

Unpublished guide in repository.

Open to investigators under Library restrictions.

Gift of the Merriam family, 1951.

1. Carnegie Institution of Washington. 2. National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D. C. 3. National Research Council.

Library of Congress

MS 52-2

Woodson, Carter Godwin, 1875-1950, *collector*.

Sample

Negro papers, 1803-1927.

6 ft.

In Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.

Material relating to the history of the Negroes, mainly in the U. S., collected by the editor of the Journal of Negro history. Includes bills of sale of slaves to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, certificates of emancipation and of ordination, diaries, letters from Negro migrants, from members of the Frederick Douglass family, from Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar and others.

Unpublished guide in repository.

Gift of Carter G. Woodson, 1929-1938.

1. Negroes — Hist. — Sources. 1. Title.

Library of Congress

MS 52-5