

Manuscript Repositories and the National Register¹

By HOWARD H. PECKHAM

*William L. Clements Library
University of Michigan*

IN 1946 the American Historical Association appointed a committee on manuscripts, under the chairmanship of Herbert A. Kellar, to work out a plan for a union catalog of manuscript collections. The attitude of the committee was that a paid staff of office and field workers should compile the catalog. Accordingly it drew up a plan involving foundation aid and a 3-year budget of \$144,000. In 1947 the committee continued its exploratory work in consultation with numerous scholars and several institutions, chiefly to the end of finding a sponsoring institution to furnish quarters. Several refinements in the catalog were proposed, but the basic plan remained the same: to recommend that the association seek funds from a foundation for compilation of the catalog. The revised budget for a 3-year period was raised to \$224,100.

By this time the ardor of the American Historical Association council began to cool. In 1948, rather than adopt the proposal of its committee and face the task of looking for foundation aid, it simply discontinued the committee, filed its report, and suggested to the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History that they appoint a joint committee to study the matter of a union catalog. Those two organizations accepted the challenge in 1949 and invited the Library of Congress to be represented by a member. Because the possibility of finding foundation aid seemed remote, the joint committee took a new tack and considered whether a union catalog could be established by the voluntary cooperation of libraries and other manuscript depositories. Such a possibility, however, did not eliminate the necessity of locating the catalog in some institution that would assume the overhead costs and would supply at least a few employees, full time or part time, to compile the information that would be submitted

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. The National Register is now called the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

by the participating libraries. Although the American Historical Association's committee had favored a somewhat central geographical location and the University of Kentucky Library had made a tentative bid, the problem was solved at last in 1951 by the generous offer of the Library of Congress to undertake to house and be the headquarters for a national register of historical manuscripts collections. Since then, the joint committee has worked closely with the Library on ways and means.

Mr. Land has outlined the steps taken in the Library of Congress first of all to formulate rules for cataloging collections of manuscripts and then to print cards for the collections from copy supplied by participating depositories.² Since the Library is ready to take the next step and solicit entries for a union catalog, I should like to bespeak for the project the active participation of libraries, archives, and other institutions.

Is cooperation in creating a union catalog or national register too much to ask?

I think not.

The value and convenience to scholars of a central register of manuscript collections have been mentioned. They are obvious and do not need to be elaborated. Actually, a national register of manuscripts will be more useful to scholars than even the union catalog of printed books. Books usually exist in several copies and are likely to be found by a little searching; there are mighty few unique books. But every manuscript collection is unique; it exists in but one place. The creation of the present union catalog of books in the Library of Congress demonstrates what cooperative effort can do. That catalog is now used not only by scholars but by libraries as well. Similarly a union catalog of manuscripts will serve the institutions that contribute to it.

First of all, it will inform curators and archivists of collections related to those they already possess. Family papers are often divided among descendants, and in our migratory population the parts of a single collection may be a continent apart. If a library in Virginia learns that a private collector in Oregon has some of a collection of which the library has the major part, it may prevail on him to add his portion to the earlier gift. If two libraries discover that each has part of what should be a single collection, they can arrange to make some exchange, either of originals or photocopies.

Apart from these direct discoveries, however, many more libraries are likely to find through the register that additional collections

² See Mr. Land's article in *American Archivist*, 17:195-207 (July 1954).

relating to the area of their interest exist in other institutions — information that is lacking today unless learned by accident. Each such library will thus enlarge its reference potential by the referral it can give an inquiring reader. Nothing more may be added to the sum total of existing knowledge, perhaps, but the availability of that knowledge will be tremendously increased as the right person is directed to the right collection.

There is a third advantage arising from this proposed register. It may persuade librarians who are afraid of manuscripts to make a prompt examination of their collections in order to transmit the desired information to the central catalog. There are librarians, I repeat, who are made uncomfortable by manuscripts. The reason may be that their library-science training, in its emphasis on books, has bypassed manuscripts as mysterious bundles to which the orthodox rules will not apply; or that, their public being predominantly a book-seeking throng, the demand for manuscripts is so slight that they can be stuffed in boxes and closets and forgotten; or that, since most of our bibliographies are based on printed works, manuscripts need not be organized for research; or that the extra equipment needed for shelving manuscripts is the flexible item in the budget that can always be withdrawn or postponed. Or there may be some other reason, real or invented. Manuscripts are all too often the stepchildren of the library, ignored because they require some special attention. The call for them to be identified and counted for a national register, with the prospect of a printed catalog, will appeal to parental pride, however, and the stepchildren may yet be dressed and groomed to be paraded in the sun. If I seem harsh toward public librarians, let me add that I think they themselves will admit that they need an incentive like this register to justify giving more attention to manuscripts. The conscientious will respond. The prestige of being represented in the national catalog should be a powerful stimulant.

Inasmuch as the style of entry has been determined, the national register will serve to regularize cataloging procedures in our libraries, especially in small historical society collections. An example in a form adopted after considerable study will be placed before them. The amount and kind of information wanted will be clearly evident. The relative brevity of it will encourage rather than discourage work. Many institutions that have wondered just how to go at the business of describing collections will see that they are not strange and confusing jungles in which it is easy to get lost, but

groves that can be laid out with pathways through them. I look for widespread imitation of the proposed register entry in local cataloging, because the form will not challenge the capacity or the time of harried curators.

Librarians should perceive another benefit from participating in the national register. Suppose that they have not cataloged their manuscript collections — if they will do no more than make out a single card for each collection and forward it to the Library of Congress they will receive on printed cards or in the published book catalog a guide to their own collections, useful to them and to their readers. The return on the investment of time will be tremendous. Each library will also be able to have this union catalog in book form under its own roof. At only a small additional expenditure a library may photograph its own particular entries, group them together, and by lithoprint produce a handy guide to its own collections exclusively.

Lastly, I think that the preparation of a national register will serve to set in motion another activity. Many of our historical societies and universities know of the existence of manuscript collections in private hands. Perhaps they have dropped a hint about obtaining those collections as a donation. Perhaps they have put off doing anything, waiting for the right occasion or the proper intermediary. A union catalog will afford them a reason and a motive for taking positive steps toward acquisition. The appeal should not be lost on the private owner, either, when he can get grandfather's papers listed in the Library of Congress' big union catalog.

In this connection perhaps State and county historical societies can reach agreement on the proper depository in their State for manuscripts. As a former State historian, I found many county societies eager to build up collections for local history in their courthouse quarters or in the public library of the county seat. Yet they felt uneasy about soliciting or holding manuscripts. They were aware of the need of special care for manuscripts, and they recognized the value of having a central repository, such as the State historical society library, the university library, or the State library, to which to send them. Many local societies need only encouragement or the promise of safe custody to persuade them to surrender the responsibility of caring for manuscripts. The finality of registering these collections in a union catalog should afford a splendid opportunity for reaching a decision on this matter of centralizing their custody.

These considerations I see as appealing to librarians in the proposed national register. I think they outweigh the few objections that the plan may arouse. Some criticisms may be dismissed as inevitable in a cooperative enterprise. The committee has neatly sidestepped defining a collection by leaving the definition to each contributing library. And why not? If some agency wants to consider 3 letters of George Washington a collection, let it think so. Who is to say that they are less important than 300 letters of Elmer Fudd of Pinhook, Indiana? I am not disturbed by the probability, even the inevitability, that the union catalog will contain entries of uneven quality. That must be expected and accepted; I am sure it applies to the union catalog of books. It will not, however, mar or overshadow the collections described that are currently considered to be of great significance.

I think the committee was wise to insist on the collection as the only feasible unit of entry for historical manuscripts. A register of individual letters and documents is obviously impossible, but even our largest depositories do not have an insuperable number of collections. The proportion may perhaps be illustrated by my own library: we have approximately 200,000 letters, but they form only 300 collections. To make 300 or 600 or 900 cards describing them is not beyond the range of possibility. The listing of collections only will of course prevent the inclusion of miscellaneous lots. Admittedly this is a disadvantage, but the lack of listing for these relatively small groups should not blind us to the great advantage of having the great majority of the manuscript collections over the nation listed in a union catalog.

To me a more serious question is the brevity of the information on the contemplated card. It may be all that a 3 x 5 card can accommodate. I recall, however, that the American Historical Association committee considered a 4" x 6" card and finally chose a 5" x 7". There is nothing sacred about the 3 x 5 card, even if it has become the standard in book cataloging. It may well be that the present joint committee feels that brevity is absolutely necessary if cooperation is to be induced and has acted on the assumption that a little information is better than none. I am not attracted by the proposal to use more than one card to describe a collection, because if multiple card entries should become the rule, it would be evident that a larger card should have been chosen in the first place. I shall not, however, quarrel about this decision or suggest it as a reason for noncooperation. I too believe that a hint is better than no information. By making the task appear not too formidable and

by using the tool most familiar to librarians, the project can best be set in motion.

I hope that the joint committee will soon decide whether a book catalog is to be published. Mr. Land has spoken of printed cards and their availability for purchase by libraries. I believe that the libraries will not be interested in buying cards if a book catalog is in prospect.

No library should get the notion that it must catalog its manuscript collections before reporting them to the national register. That is not necessary and should not be used as an excuse for not participating. So little detailed information is required for the register that it can be culled after a brief examination of a collection. Most of the ten questions read by Mr. Land from the sample cards can be answered from the accessions record. Any descriptive cataloging desired by the owner institution can be done later; it is not prerequisite to contributing to the union catalog.

Self-interest as well as service should invite the participation of libraries. Every one of them has a stake in the national register and will benefit from it, not to mention the scholars for whom it is so clearly a long-wanted tool. The value of the union catalog will increase in geometric proportion to the number of participating institutions, and everyone who may ignore it will reduce its value by more than his fractional relation to the whole number. The union catalog of books has already demonstrated its serviceability. As I said earlier, there is even more reason for creating a union catalog of manuscript collections.

Of course, this will mean a little extra work for libraries, but not only are the benefits to be great but the extra work, I submit, is the obligation of those institutions that have accepted manuscripts for custody. I hope this is not an unorthodox view in library administration. In fact, I will put it more strongly. Librarians and curators owe a positive duty to the materials in their care that takes precedence over their duty to serve readers. Those administrators who have made a fetish of public service and then complain because they are understaffed for organizing some of their materials are confusing the goals of their profession. Librarians are first of all conservationists, who preserve what may easily be destroyed; secondly, they are organizers of this mass of written knowledge, through shelving, binding, classifying, cataloging, and the making of bibliographies and union catalogs; lastly only are they entertainers, civic innovators, and teachers.