

A Historian Looks at Archives and Manuscripts

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TO SOME observers it may appear ungracious, to say the least, or discourteous, to say more, for one who has been generously and courteously welcomed in every manuscript collection and archival agency he has ever visited now to be cast in the role of critic of these very friends who have in most instances exceeded the bounds of duty and gone the second mile. But in a meeting such as this one's purposes and motives will surely not be misunderstood, nor one's gratitude doubted. While endeavoring to keep my remarks pertinent, I indulge the hope that no one will regard them as impertinent.

It is, of course, a commonplace to remark that historians are increasingly dependent upon the scholarly resources controlled and serviced by the various archival and manuscript agencies which not only characterize our public services but also adorn our academic institutions. In our own generation we have witnessed a marked and welcome increase in both the quantity and quality of such collections, so that serious historical production, except on the most restricted scale, is now virtually impossible without the fruits of long hours spent in research amid the treasures of such establishments. It may be assumed that each of these depositories collects materials for use as well as for preservation, but the welcomed increase of significant historical materials has brought problems as well as advantages. How these numerous documents and manuscripts may best be made available and usable to historical scholars is a problem not always easily answered. The observations made in this paper are based primarily on the writer's experiences in about a dozen manuscript collections and archives in the course of his research on Zebulon B. Vance. His experience is therefore limited and his observations do not pretend to be either inclusive or authoritative.

When a historian enters a library to work with printed or manu-

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script materials he usually has in mind a fairly definite, limited objective. He wishes to draw from its holdings information about a particular person, subject, or geographical area, or perhaps on a period of history. His success or failure to do this in a reasonable number of days, or perhaps even to do it at all, will depend most of all on what sort of control the library has over its material. Published guides sometimes help him to decide which manuscript collections to visit, but rarely do such guides do more than suggest certain leads from which a beginning, though sometimes a very fruitful beginning, can be made. And published guides will never be a final answer to the historian's needs because they are out of date when they are published.

The scholar is therefore vitally concerned with the kinds and degrees of control that have been developed by the servicing personnel within the library concerned. There appear to be at least four types of control of manuscript material practiced by libraries which I have visited. These types I shall attempt to describe and evaluate by illustrations drawn from my experiences with them.

First, there is the library which simply lists its collections in a card catalog and includes on these cards nothing but the name of the collection and a partial list of persons whose correspondence may be found therein. If, for example, there are Vance letters in this library, that fact may be established by searching the cards for each collection separately, but the cards give no indication of how many Vance letters there may be in any particular collection or what their dates are. To the historian looking for Vance letters this type of control means that he must sift each collection in which Vance's name is listed among the correspondents, for what may be a dozen letters or may be only one. Under this control system there is no way of telling, until the last item in a given collection has been checked and inspected, whether or not all pertinent documents have been found. Furthermore, in a card system of this kind there is no indication of the subject matter of the collection or of its quality and value to scholars. These things we must discover for ourselves, and in the hardest possible way. Such a system of control is of very little value to the researcher.

Better is a second type which, in addition to the card system just described, adds written summaries, varying greatly in length and detail, for all collections in the library. Usually such summaries are done chronologically, and this improves the degree of control. These descriptive summaries usually include some list of important subjects upon which information may be found and the important

people involved as correspondents. In this type of control a Vance letter would be noted, usually by decade or possibly by year, but rarely by the exact date, and often some mention would be made of the general subject matter of the letter. I well remember one such description which mentioned a Vance letter of 1885 on the subject of the railroads in politics. This sent me to the collection in question for that year, only to discover that there were more than 10,000 items for that year alone — and of course my letter was at the end of the year. So it took me several days to find a letter which could have been noted by its exact date in less than one minute by the person who wrote that description. Still, the hint that sent me searching was there, and that hint is far better than nothing at all.

In still other libraries serious efforts have been made to implement another type of control — a card index of all correspondents, with dates of all letters indexed under the names of the letter writers. In many libraries where this system prevails only a few collections have been so indexed, for admittedly it is a tremendous job. But where such a type of control exists I can quickly locate a Vance letter by the exact date if one exists in any particular collection. But I must look through an index for each collection, for no master index has yet been made, nor does this sort of control give me any aid under topic or subject. This may be a serious lack, for one is ordinarily so pleased to find an index of this sort that only through experience does he realize that it will not do all his searching for him. Interested in Vance as I am, I went to the Library of Congress to see what, among other collections, the Grover Cleveland papers could offer. The Cleveland papers are one of the collections in that vast storehouse of manuscript treasures which have been indexed, and it was therefore easy to determine the extent and even the exact date of all letters between Vance and Cleveland. But the index did not tell me what other letters to Cleveland might discuss Vance or political questions in which Vance — and I — were interested. There was, for example, an important letter to Cleveland from William R. Cox, chairman of the Democratic State Executive Committee in North Carolina, that was filled with discussion of Vance and his attitude toward civil service reform. This letter was more valuable to me than any Vance-written letter I found in the Cleveland papers. An index does not tell me these things, and grateful as we historians are for such controls we realize that we still have to do our own research.

Most satisfactory of all, therefore, is the library that can furnish the nearest approximation to the complete subject-person index for

each collection, and add a master index for its resources as a whole. I have found this service attempted in a limited way in some depositories. For example: a local politician in Fayetteville, North Carolina, wrote to President Jefferson Davis a long and illuminating letter on the subject of Vance's attitude and policies toward Davis and the Confederacy. This letter is duly indexed and its subject matter noted on cards filed under Davis, Vance, the writer of the letter, Confederacy Internal Problems, and possibly other subject heads which I did not discover. It is also noted in a master index under all such headings. It is admitted that to make such detailed indexing available for all collections in all depositories would be a tremendous job; that is the reason why historians appreciate it so much when we do find it.

Archival materials certainly offer additional and perhaps more complicated problems. The historian is more likely to have difficulty in working with archives than with manuscripts, because he must contend with the strange complexities of the political mind and administrative practice. A good inventory is the first requirement of effective control; beyond the use of such an aid my experience has suggested nothing so good as interviews with the people who service the materials. The researcher must lean on the learning and professional competence of the experts who serve him in these matters, and happily he has little cause to complain of them. I know of no library where any criticism of the willingness and graciousness of the attendants would be regarded as reasonable. But I have been to places where the attendants know too little history to be of much expert service to all scholars. At the top of the organization there is doubtless a person well qualified in this regard, but he rarely serves the ordinary routine visitor directly. Often a historical scholar needs guidance that he sometimes fails to receive. The top man may be, indeed is likely to be, a good administrator and he may know more history than the researcher, but often he does not know the materials; the attendant knows the materials, but no history, and so neither can give complete service. It is of course true, and especially true in archival agencies where local records are kept, that the staff serves more people who are not historical scholars than it does those who may be so described. It may therefore be more important for the attendant to know details about, say, the marriage bonds of County X, or the genealogy of an obscure family. If he cannot be all things to all men perhaps it is more politic to be all things to some men than some things to all men. But it remains true that a broad knowledge of general

history on the part of those who service archival and manuscript materials would often be a boon to the bewildered researcher.

In addition to controls and reference services, there is one other field in which the scholar requires a service from manuscript collections and archival agencies. I refer here to such items as microfilm service, the making of photostats or photoprints, or any such means by which vital documents or other materials may become the possession, in practical ways, of the researcher. Happily these services are now almost universal, and they are very efficient and reasonably cheap. Without them scholarship on the present scale would be almost impossible and certainly very difficult.

Such observations and criticisms as are here stated or implied ought not to be taken to mean that any scholar expects the personnel of any library to do his research for him. I know of no one in the historical guild who does expect that, nor do I know anyone who wishes it. To the uninitiated person — to the one who has never experienced the thrills and joys of working in authentic manuscript materials, to the one who has never made hosts of friends among those who have long since departed this vale of tears — to any of those no mere statement of the pleasures and rewards of such work could possibly give him any adequate respect for it. But every scholar who has wandered through masses of musty manuscripts to glean snatches of the relevant from mountains of the irrelevant admits the long-range value of the journey. Serendipity is a treasured aspect of historical labors, for unfailingly unsuspected nuggets enrich our routine searches. Amid these searches we realize anew what actually we already felt: that, although we may find in your manuscript and archival treasures more facts than we can master and more truth than we can exhaust, there will always be some facts we shall never find, some truths we shall never discover, unless it be in that day when St. Peter's archives are available to us and final truth is known. But until then we are content to use yours.