

PROBLEMS OF ARCHIVES CLASSIFICATION

AMERICAN practice has, out of long experience, established the basic significance of library classification. Many schemes and techniques of library classification, and various administrative forms for carrying out these techniques, are used, but the underlying definition is generally accepted.

Library classification is the assignment of a book to its place in some predetermined logical scheme of subject matters, and the assignment to such a book of a subject matter symbol representing its place in the scheme.¹ The function of library classification is twofold (and this is much more true in American than in European practice). First, it determines where a book shall be physically shelved, not only so that it may be found, but so that it shall, for the convenience of readers, be found in proximity to other similar books in association with which, presumably, it will often be used. Second, by the use of subject matter symbols, it provides a handy record device useful in the making of catalogue cards, the making and filling of calls for books, etc. The classification scheme may be the Dewey Decimal system, the Library of Congress system or any one of a number of others; the administration of classifying activities may be vested in a separate library unit or be attached (as is often done) to the cataloguing unit. In any case, the generalizations above set forth still hold.

Archival practice in the United States is still young and flexible enough not yet to have laid any such systematic groundwork of recognized definitions and accepted functions. It is—or should be—still testing out concepts of archives classification with an open mind as to what kind of classification work, if any, is best suited to the conditions peculiar to archival economy.

As formulated above, library classification work is based on three elements:

1. A predetermined logical scheme of subject matters and a system of symbols representing the elements of the scheme
2. The physical arrangement of material in accordance with this scheme
3. The finding of material by means of this scheme and of the physical arrangement based on it

It will be noted at once that the second of these elements runs

¹ Cf. *Webster's New International Dictionary*, second edition (1938): "A system or schedule classifying the field of knowledge for the purpose of arranging books, etc., in classes."

counter both to archival theory and to the practical conditions of archival work. The physical arrangement of archival material is governed theoretically by the principle of provenance (*respect pour les fonds*). Practically, it is governed by the fact that the most important users of archives are, first, the agencies of origin, and, second, other agencies of government; and by the further fact that arrangement of archives by agency of origin provides the least arbitrary or artificial form of arrangement and the most widely known symbolism for general content. Last but not least, this is the minimum condition upon which agencies of origin will usually surrender their records.

An example *ad absurdum* may clarify these statements.

Let us suppose that a classification "personnel records" has been set up. Such a classification is in conformity with our provisionally assumed definition of a "predetermined logical scheme of subject matters." The setting up of this class, however, and the assignment of certain records to it cannot contribute to "the physical arrangement of records." Were all records of a personnel nature to be placed together (as, in a library, all books on personnel problems are shelved together), instead of finding a Division of State Department Archives, of Highway Commission Archives, or other administrative *fonds*, we should find government records grouped within an archives establishment as "personnel records," from all government agencies, as "accounting records" from all government agencies, as correspondence" from all government agencies, and so on; the principle of provenance would be violated.

This principle has overriding practical considerations in its favor. The first duty of an archives establishment, after preservation of records, is to hold them in readiness for official use. This, it may be noted, is especially true in American archives establishments, so large a part of whose records are relatively modern and therefore invested with an administrative value for the present equal to—if not greater than—the purely historical value which attaches to so much of the older European collections.

It is, therefore, as a purely practical matter, more efficient to have a center in an archives establishment for, e.g., State Highway Commission records, rather than for personnel records from whatever agency of origin. This provides for the State Highway Commission itself, the easiest access to its own personnel records, and in most if not all cases for other agencies interested in some particular item

or group of the commission's personnel records—as, for example, the Compensation Board for State Employees or the office of the civil service commissioner. Such experience as has been had at the National Archives indicates that the principal calls by government agencies on collections of the functional type like our example are calls of a fairly specific—not general subject matter—nature, based on some fairly specific administrative or functional need.

However, we must not fail to consider nonofficial calls. These may be considered as of two sorts for the purposes of our discussion. One is the case of the private searcher interested in a specific personal history. "What was my grandfather's rank in the Union Army at the time of his discharge?" "Was my late husband's claim against the Interior Department for travel allowance ever finally decided?" "Is there any record of a previous conviction against John Doe?" These are typical questions whose answers may appear in personnel files. In every case, the initial clue is to the agency of origin of the relevant papers.

The other type of nonofficial call may be of a general, intellectual or academic nature. Dr. Richard Roe comes to an archives establishment for material for his researches into "Personnel Problems in Government Employment," for example.² This is a type of call which might conceivably be better dealt with by a center for personnel records than by a congeries of centers for agency records. Actually, however, the advantage would probably not be great. Dr. Roe cannot work on the whole body of personnel records at once and will in any case have to apply himself to personnel records agency by agency. Furthermore—and this is a point of great general practical importance—he will find in many, if not in most, cases that personnel records alone do not suffice for his purpose. He must go to related correspondence files of the agency, to fiscal files, to organizational files of office regulations and orders, etc. And in many cases he will find that the indexes he must use are general indexes to the central files of particular agencies, which cannot be broken up to accompany segregated *fonds* of personnel records, budgetary records, etc.

It is unnecessary to labor the point further. It has not been the intention here to make a case for agency centers of archives within an archives establishment, as against what might be called functional

² This general type of call may, of course, come from an official source as well—as, e.g., in the case of a legislative investigation.

centers. The principle of provenance and the empirically determined practice of archives establishments have already made this case impregnable for as far ahead as we can see.

The purpose has, rather, been to clarify the relevancy to archival economy of the second of the three elements above provisionally assumed to be the basic components of classification work.

The position to which our discussion has led us may now be summed up as follows: "The physical arrangement of material in accordance with a predetermined logical scheme of subject matters" (element 2 of our premise) is not a viable concept or technique in archival economy. It must also be true, then, that "the finding of material by means of this scheme and of the physical arrangement based on it" (element 3 of our premise) is equally not a viable concept or technique in archival economy.

With its two practical consequences thus eliminated, element 1 of our premise obviously requires careful scrutiny. This element was: "A predetermined logical scheme of subject matters, and a system of symbols representing the elements of the scheme." This concept we may find it profitable to examine from a tangent.

Let us first consider what, in general, actually happens to bodies of archives, as they are assimilated into an archives establishment, in the way of giving them names and local habitations.

In many cases, the matter of naming and placing collections that have been received is simple. Records are received from a given department of government, they are transferred under an adequately descriptive title, and they come in good order. An actual example, from the experience of the National Archives, is a numerical file of personnel records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Department of Labor. The process of naming and placing such a collection is one of recognition, not of classification as hitherto defined.

Other cases are somewhat less clear. Again we may cite an example from experience in Washington. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor, transfers a collection of employment schedules. But it becomes clear upon study of the history of the papers that other agencies had a share in the creation of this collection, and questions arise as to the ascription of a name and place to it.

Or the Department of Justice transfers a number of collections which are accordingly named and placed; later on a small group of papers is found which seems to have originated in another agency.

Research shows that this group found its way into the larger body by a series of accidents occurring during a period of "dead storage"; the group is replaced and renamed accordingly.

A last example: From War Department quarters comes an unorganized collection, long inactive; it is known to contain the records of certain wartime boards and agencies, but study is required to determine just what record groups belong to each. Physical disentanglement must be undertaken before an assignment of names and placements may be made.

Now the question is, are these activities classification? The answer must be in the negative, if we apply the formula hitherto employed, that is, the assignment of records to a place in "a predetermined logical scheme of subject matters" and their identification by "a system of symbols representing the elements of the scheme."

The activities we have just described are determinations of objective fact, not applications of an intellectual scheme. Within the framework of our present definition, we have not classified records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Department of Labor, when we recognize them as such. We have not classified the records of the wartime Board of X when we have recognized them as such and segregated them from the welter of records of boards A, B, C and D.

This analysis may be carried a step further. The records of the Board of X are of various sorts. Some are in the form of letters, some are vouchers, some are the schedules and tabulations of a research problem in munitions supplies, and so on. Various types of evidence make it possible to group these records into what might be called "series"—evidence such as physical contiguity, recurrence of some original filing-system symbol, some specific record found outlining the organization of the board or information procured from a veteran employee of the board whose memory may be trusted.

These activities, again, are not classification within the framework of our present definition. To recognize correspondence as such, vouchers as such, schedules as such; to determine by research what correspondence, what vouchers, what schedules originally constituted a unitary subgroup or series of records; to make a physical arrangement or rearrangement of records on this basis—these activities are determinations of objective fact, not the applications of an intellectual scheme.

There is, therefore, a choice: either the type of activities we have described are not to be regarded as classification, or we must redefine

classification for archival purposes in a fashion which entirely rejects any analogy with library terminology—which, indeed, departs even from dictionary definition.

A new definition of archives classification, to cover these descriptive activities, might run as follows: The objective determination, by the appropriate techniques of legal and historical research (when necessary), of the agency³ of origin and agency or agencies of custody of a group of records; and the similar determination of the functional types of records represented in the collection, and their boundaries, temporally, geographically or otherwise objectively delimited.

It would be well to give concrete form to this necessarily complex formula. The steps it envisages for the classification of any minimum group of records involves determinations as follows:

1. Agency and subagency of custody
Department of Labor, Immigration and Naturalization Service (e.g.)
2. Agencies and subagencies of previous custody
 - a. Same department, Bureau of Immigration and Bureau of Naturalization
 - b. Department of Commerce and Labor, same bureaus
 - c. Department of the Treasury, Commissioner of Immigration
3. Agencies and subagencies of origin
All of the above, under 1 and 2a, b, c
4. Functional type of records
Personnel records, including related correspondence
5. Temporal limits of records⁴
1900-1904 (five-year group)
6. Geographical limits of records
Port of New York
7. Final delimiting description of records
Deputy Commissioner John Doe's special file

The new definition is a lengthy one, and the process it describes is intensive. This increased scope, as compared with the old formula, is significant. We may evaluate its significance in a final comparison with library technique and thus with the library definition of classification work.

To begin with, classification of the library type is an exercise in taxonomy. Under it, the question asked is not "What is this item?" but rather "What kind of item shall we call this?" In the archival procedure outlined above, only the first question is asked.

³ In "agency" here is included subagency, subunit, etc.

⁴ From this point the breakdowns are hypothetical, in order to carry out the full implications of the new formula.

Next, the skills and the facilities required by the two formulae are very different. The library classifier must have the ability to construct a frame of reference (the classification scheme itself) of general applicability, to extend or to contract this scheme as circumstances require and to make the very subtle discriminations that sometimes separate economics from history (for example); these are the basic skills involved. The facilities needed are few: access to the item to be classified and to the taxonomic scheme, to be sure, in addition to basic works of reference where technical distinctions (e.g., chemistry, physics, biology, biochemistry, biophysics, physical chemistry) have to be made.⁵

The archives classifier who operates the intensive scheme outlined above must, in contrast, have at his command a comprehensive range of techniques and facilities. Most obviously, he must have the temperament and training of a historian, for in the most general terms, his work is that of piecing together the historical evidence which identifies individual records, groups of records and record-producing agencies. His knowledge about his records must approach that of the responsible officials who created and used them, for only intimate acquaintance can assure the accuracy of his description of subject matter and organization. He must, therefore, have not merely access to the records, but close and continued contact with them. He must have access to and contact with not only the records themselves, but with the laws, regulations and practices governing the creation and functioning of the agencies from which the records come. Familiarity with the personnel of these agencies as it existed at the time of the creation of the records is often the key to puzzling archival situations. It is highly desirable, too, in order properly to describe records and place them in their setting, to have some acquaintanceship with the subject matter they cover and the literature thereof, as labor economics, the history of business regulation, diplomatic history, etc.

In short, taxonomic, library-type classification is a generalized and extensive function, having very little technique in common with other library functions. Descriptive, archival classification (if we elect to use the term) is highly specialized and intensive, and its research techniques have much in common with those which must be performed for custodial and reference functions as well.

Thus far, although we have traversed much ground, we have

⁵ It is not intended by this hasty characterization to minimize the importance or difficulty of this type of classification.

raised only one question: Which of two definitions of classification shall we accept for purposes of archival economy, and what are the implications of each?

Now we may raise another: If we accept the new, intensive, descriptive formula, how shall we implement it in archival organization in view of its scope—by centralization in a classification unit or by decentralization throughout the agency centers of an archives establishment?

For centralization, it can be argued that uniformity may thereby be better secured. But in the nature of the case, there can be little uniformity among the descriptions of records produced by widely differing governmental agencies. The assignment of consistent—not uniform—symbols to groups of records, when described, may be the limit of uniformity possible.

For decentralization, it can be argued that the objective determinations required are then made by the agency centers which are in constant contact with the respective collections and which are required to make these determinations in any case for other purposes.

But since we are dealing here so much with the hypothetical, we may leave this question unanswered—the more so, since the answer must depend, logical and theoretical considerations notwithstanding, on such objective factors as the size, scope and complexity of a given archives establishment. But although we must here refrain from a categorical answer, the question will be a crucial one in any archives establishment and cannot there be evaded.

One further point should still be raised. Can any generally applicable “predetermined logical scheme of subject matters” be devised for archives and would any purpose be served thereby?

The devising and application of such a scheme may or may not be deemed “classification,” according to the choice we make between the formulæ discussed above; and we should be free, upon adopting such a scheme, to centralize or decentralize its administration on a basis similar to that already suggested.

In our own discussion here we have from time to time found it convenient, in the course of offering illustrations, to refer to “personnel records,” “correspondence files,” “fiscal files,” “organizational files,” “schedules and tabulations,” etc. These terms may be called “type-names,” because, while it is a matter of objective determination to place any given group of records under one of these headings, the headings themselves are of general applicability. If a set of such

type-names could be devised which covered descriptively the whole field of archives, we should then have something closely approaching classification of the library type, lacking only easily imaginable symbols.

Would any purpose be served thereby? Experience suggests that the answer may be in the affirmative. One of the earliest functions which devolves upon an archives center having custody of records is to identify the collections which it holds, to determine the intermediate (subagency) record groups in the collections and to define the minimum record groups (perhaps to be called series) thereunder. This is a continuing function, always looking towards more exact and more descriptive identification. This activity is not carried on solely as an end in itself, but produces papers descriptive of "series," and lists of series.⁶ These papers in turn record the identifications which have been made and make them available for further uses. They make it possible to say, not that a given record is available for a searcher, but certainly that there is available a "series" of a nature likely to include such a record; where it is a question, not of a given record, but of a given subject matter, that there are available "series" which might bear upon this subject matter; that in addition to a "series" or a record asked for and produced, there are other "series" of a nature likely to yield additional information. They do this not, of course, in most cases as a substitute for search upon the records; but usually they will narrow the physical scope of the search required. They may, therefore, be regarded as one of the keys to reference service.

Further, such descriptive papers and lists, especially where accompanied by historical and administrative data necessarily uncovered in the course of preparation, provide the material on which published descriptions of archives may be based, from which catalogue data may be drawn, etc.—again, not always by their employment as substitutes for examination of the records themselves, but certainly as leads for such examination.

All these and other uses of descriptive papers and lists of "series" might well be facilitated if instead of taking a random form (based, for example, on the physical sequence of "series") they were arranged by type-names—if they were, in short, in a certain sense of the word at least, "classified." Suppose that an inquiry comes in about hearing

⁶ The first two steps in this process at the National Archives produce respectively preliminary identifications of series, and series identification reports.

transcripts of the Board of X, Southeastern Region. At least a lead into the search required—sometimes even a substantive answer—would be more easily procured if the list of series for the Southeastern Region group, Board of X collection, of records were arranged under standard rubrics one of which subsumed “hearing transcripts.”

The problem then is to set up an inclusive system of rubrics under which all types of papers resulting from the work of all record-producing agencies of government may be subsumed.

In an experimental way, the following ten type-names, with definitions, may be worth considering:

1. Finding Media (indexes, docket books, catalogues, file classifications, *et sim.*)
2. Correspondence Files (“general correspondence files” where the agency of origin has set up a classified filing scheme, by subjects, into which all correspondence is put. The series under this heading will be based on date lines drawn through the file, geographical designations, senders’ and writers’ names, etc., if and as so constituted by the agency of origin or transfer. Descriptions should show which of the nine types of subject matters covered by this scheme are included, and such other description as may be helpful. Where there are correspondence series relating to any of the other subject matters covered by this scheme, if such series are not part of an organized general file, they should be grouped under the appropriate rubric as “Personnel Correspondence” under “Personnel,” “Field Agents’ Correspondence” under “Research,” etc. Where subject matter dossiers have been created by the agency of origin or transfer which include correspondence, the series is to be listed under the subject matter rubric, and the description should include the words “and related correspondence”)
3. Subject Files (general files including many or all types of records created by an agency, which were bound into a single “fonds” by the agency creating them, according to some filing scheme of its own. Correspondence items may also be included. Such files cannot be indexed under any other single heading)
4. Administrative Files (matter setting up procedures, general and special orders, organization charts, instructions, *et sim.*)
5. Personnel Records (applications for jobs, appointments, pay rolls, leave cards, severance notices, compensation matters, efficiency records, *et sim.*)
6. Fiscal Records (budgets, allotments, accounts, vouchers, *et sim.*)
7. Property Records (furniture, supplies, rental of quarters, transfer of property to field agencies, bids, estimates, proposals, *et sim.*)
8. Research Material (schedules, agents’ instructions, tabulations and work sheets, reports, MSS, proofs, *et sim.*, where the object of the

research was scholarly, informational, promotional, etc. but had no specific bearing on operations)

9. Operational Files (records of the work done by the agency in the course of performing its specific functions, in the form of work done upon material things or for or to persons not in the service; in the case of PWA, for example, blue prints, specifications, construction orders, etc., issued in the course of erecting a building; or in the case of the Federal Trade Commission, proceedings had, evidence submitted, orders made, etc., in enforcing law upon citizens)
10. Information Files (marked books, near-print, mailing lists, etc.)

These type-names fall into four groups. The first consists simply of No. 1, "Finding Media," since this is a type of record of unique character whose importance to the user of records is usually such as to warrant giving it prominence. Next come two types of records which may be said to be "cross-sectional" for any agency or subagency in which they exist, dealing with any or all other types of activity represented by other types. Third come four types of records (Nos. 4-7) of an administrative or bureaucratic type; and finally three types of functional records.

If some such scheme should commend itself to the archives profession, to work it out—not only in respect to main headings of the above type, but to possible subdivisions—will be a task worthy of our best efforts. The difficulties it involves are clearly indicated even in the above crude sketch, for example in the length to which it has seemed necessary to go in defining type 2, "Correspondence." Another problem has been found to center about types 4-7, when administrative and personnel records are found to be part of a single "series," or where personnel, fiscal, and property records are found to be part of a single "series" whose emphasis is on the budgetary side. In such cases, the solution lies, perhaps, in employing combination rubrics, such as "4. Administrative, including Personnel," and "6. Fiscal, including Personnel and/or Property," as may be appropriate.

Certain highly specialized agencies of government also present problems. For example, it may be said that all records of a civil service commission are "5. Personnel," as all records of an independent controller-general are "6. Fiscal." This view would defeat the purposes of the scheme, however; and it would be more practical, without in the least violating the principle of the scheme, to proceed in these cases in a somewhat different fashion. The archives of a civil service commission would then be classified under the rubrics indicated, with

the records of its own personnel transactions subsumed in type 5; the records in its possession of the personnel of other government agencies would be subsumed under "9. Operational," since these records represent the commission's rule-making and other substantive-determinative powers over others than its own personnel.

A last difficulty in devising such a scheme seems to be the recalcitrance of judicial and especially of legislative archives to treatment under the same rubrics as the archives of executive and administrative agencies. This, however, may not be insurmountable; and in any case, if the problem is worth attacking along these lines at all, something may be gained by subduing executive and administrative archives to this kind of order.

In summary then, the following problems have been raised in this paper: Two definitions of classification have been offered. One, based on analogy with library technique, takes its departure from "a pre-determined logical scheme of subject matters." The other takes its departure from "determinations of objective facts by research" descriptive of collections, subgroups, and "series" of a discrete nature.

With respect to the first, "scheme of subject matter" formula, we have seen that it does not make possible the same techniques in archival economy as in the library, because of the principle of provenance and no less because of certain practical conditions of archives work. We have also seen, however, that from the "scheme of subject matters" formula there may be saved a valuable residuum of descriptive technique.

With respect to the second, "determination of objective facts" formula, we have seen that it involves a departure from hitherto accepted concepts of classification, and that it coincides with much of the general organizational, descriptive, and research work of an archives establishment—so much so, that it becomes difficult to define classification as a sharply distinguished archival function.

With respect to both formulæ, we have seen that they have implications for archives administration which still leave problems after the choice between them has been made.

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