

The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections: Progress

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to describe very briefly the progress that has been made during the operational phase of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. I hope that my listeners will agree that I must assume a knowledge on their part of the historical development of the plan, which has now become a project. The earlier phases of the proposal have been fully described elsewhere, and there is no time here even for summarization.¹ I will, therefore, begin my narrative at once with that element which is basic to any project, namely the money.

In December 1958 the Council on Library Resources, Inc., made a grant of \$200,000 to the Library of Congress for the establishment of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections in order to provide for (a) gathering the essential data for such a catalog, (b) editing these data, (c) preparing catalog entries according to standard catalog rules, (d) printing catalog cards

* Paper read in slightly condensed form on Oct. 8, 1959, at the meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Philadelphia, and repeated on Oct. 9 at the business meeting of the American Association for State and Local History in the same city. Dr. Born heads the project he describes. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, chairman of the Society's Committee on Bibliography, and editor of the abstracts department of the *American Archivist*. The catalog is reviewed in the review department of this issue.

¹ The transitional stage from proposal to project has most recently been described by David C. Mearns, "To be Enduring: the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *College and Research Libraries*, 20: 341-346 (Sept. 1959). The background and the plan—when it was still envisioned in simpler form—is set forth at greater length by Robert H. Land, "The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist*, 17: 195-207 (July 1954). Francis L. Berkeley, in his carefully documented paper, "History and Problems of the Controls of Manuscripts in the United States," in *Proceedings, American Philosophical Society*, 98: 171-178 (June 1954), examined the concepts and characteristics that would make for a successful union catalog of manuscript collections. Reports of the American Historical Association's Committee on Historical Source Materials, in particular of its Special Committee on Manuscripts, published in the *Annual Reports of the American Historical Association*, contain a good bit of background information on the long struggle toward the goal of a National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

for the entries and furnishing each participating institution with the printed cards that cover its reported collections, and (e) assembling in the Library of Congress a national union catalog in dictionary form of all such collections.

Rules for the cataloging of manuscript collections have been ready and approved since 1954. Approximately 90 repositories—large and small, bibliothecal and educational—had pledged their cooperation during the last stages of planning in 1955-57. Early in 1959 an Advisory Committee on the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections² was established and provided in its one full meeting on April 10 guidance, policy directives, and generous encouragement. The Descriptive Cataloging Division of the Library of Congress, which had been given operational responsibility for the new program, meanwhile was busily recruiting a staff for the small, completely new Manuscripts Section, which, according to previously prepared plans, was composed of a head, three senior catalogers, and a clerk-typist. When the head of the section arrived on April 27, 1959, the operational phase of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections actually began.

The purpose of the union catalog, as stated in the introduction to the *Rules*,³ is:

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. It is assumed that more extensive records of collections, such as indexes, calendars, guides, accession lists, etc., will be available at the owning institutions.

The sample copies of the first five printed cards which I have distributed here⁴ are the result of painstaking application of the rules for cataloging manuscript collections, and the equally careful application of commonsense, selectivity, and thought in preparing the content note describing the collections in brief compass. In other words, these cards are the first step in the fulfillment of the stated purpose of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

As of September 30—that is, at the end of a mere five months of operation—the Union Catalog had received for cataloging reports on some 3,500 collections from 11 repositories, and the Manuscripts Section—despite the many problems that inevitably arise in any new operation, conferences essential to the adequate solution

² The representation on the Advisory Committee is given in the *American Archivist*, 22:360 (July 1959).

³ *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging . . . Preprint of the Rules for Collections of Manuscripts* (Library of Congress, Sept. 1954. 10 p., processed).

⁴ Representative catalog entries published with this paper are not in facsimile.

Ashley, Frederick William, 1863-1942.

Material for a history of the Library of Congress, 1939.

7 MS. boxes.

In Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

Librarian and scholar; Superintendent of the Reading Room and Chief Assistant Librarian of Congress. MSS. for a Library history.

Unpublished register in the library.

1. U.S. Library of Congress—Hist.

MS 59—1

Library of Congress

[3]

Gage, Thomas, 1721-1787.

Papers, 1754-83.

49 ft.

In William L. Clements Library (Ann Arbor, Mich.) Division of Manuscripts.

British general; commander-in-chief in North America. Correspondence, in two series: an English series with British officials, including Secretaries of State and War, the Treasury, the Board of Trade, the Board of Ordnance and others; and an American series with colonial governors, Indian superintendents, admirals, engineers, contractors, and other officials and subordinate officers.

Described most fully in Guide to the manuscript collections in the William L. Clements Library, compiled by H. H. Peckham (1942) The 2d ed. of the Guide, compiled by W. S. Ewing (1953) contains a full listing of correspondents and signers

(Continued on next card)

MS 59—5

Gage, Thomas, 1721-1787

Papers, 1754-83

(Card 2)

of documents. Parts of the English series were published in The correspondence of General Thomas Gage with the Secretaries of State . . . compiled and edited by C. E. Carter (1931) Among the several publications containing portions of the American series are New light on the Boston Massacre, by R. G. Adams (1938) and George Croghan's journal of his trip to Detroit in 1767, edited by H. H. Peckham (1939)

Acquired upon settlement of the Clements estate, 1937.

MS 59—5

Michigan. Univ.
for Library of Congress

Clements Library

to those problems, and the newness of the staff to each other and to the work at hand—had completed cataloging about 825 separate collections and had sent to the printer the first cards to be printed in production quantities. Two ad hoc meetings of the Advisory Committee settled policy with respect to a working definition of “collection” and the appropriate way in which to cope with the large number of personal names that often are listed in reports on collections.

There remains only one last topic to report. The section head traveled from Maine to North Carolina—with substantial gaps, to be sure—visiting nearly 30 repositories so as to establish personal liaison, to try out the working definition of “collection” already mentioned, to get a closer approximation of the number of collections that would be reported by institutions that had earlier indicated willingness to cooperate, and to sample the attitude of other representative institutions that were, for one reason or another, not already on this list. These trips have been most rewarding in all aspects, and the general enthusiasm for the purposes and methods of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections has been most encouraging.

That is all I have to say. I will be glad to answer questions on any phase of the work at any time, and I will be glad to put your names on the list of cooperating librarians, manuscript curators, and archivists if you will be good enough to tell me to do so.⁵

⁵ *Editor's note:* Dr. Born may be addressed at the Manuscripts Section, Descriptive Cataloging Division, Library of Congress, Washington 25, D. C.

Less Prickly Reserve and Hesitation

A few of the problems confronting the publishers, before the contract was signed with Mrs. Ickes, were capable of quick and relatively easy solution. One was to put a lock on the door of the office in which the manuscript was being worked on. Another was to take steps to make certain that the original document, exactly as it was on the day—February 3, 1952—when Mr. Ickes died, should be preserved from the ravages of editors and printers to be given to the Library of Congress where, a hundred years from now, historians may treat it with less prickly reserve and hesitation. . . .

—Simon and Schuster's advertisement of the publication of *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 29, 1953, p. 31.