

Packing, Labeling, and Shelving at the National Archives

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LET us begin at the point in the archival process where accessions paperwork has been completed—where records are at hand and must be stored in a way to protect them adequately and make them readily accessible for reference use. The physical process of achieving these objectives naturally divides into the three principal stages of packing, labeling, and shelving.

PACKING

A processing (or staging or working) area is the first essential. Should it be permanent or temporary? A permanent area would obviously have great advantages because packing is done so frequently in an archival establishment. Space, however, is always at a premium, so that in many institutions it may be necessary to set up temporary processing areas as required.

Whether permanent or temporary, the area should have certain minimal facilities—a table, the larger the better, on which to put the records, boxes, and other equipment while working with them; shelves, on which to store bound volumes, packages, bundles, boxes, and other containers that cannot properly be left on the floor (as file cabinets can) before processing; additional shelves, for sorting in connection with any required repacking arrangement work; and one or more trucks, for moving the records about. The amount of equipment needed varies with the volume of records being dealt with in a given project.

Once packed, records are for practical purposes frozen in their arrangement. Hence it is essential that they be arranged properly beforehand. This is not the place to review the basic principles of

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archival arrangement, but it is important to stress that before starting any packing operation the archivist should have clearly in mind the order in which he intends to arrange the records he is dealing with. To determine this order he should know what series they comprise, he should understand fully the relationship of the series to each other and to the record group of which they form a part, and he should know their internal structure.

Getting this information may be easy or difficult, depending on the specific project. If the archivist has to cope with only a few series in good internal order, mere inspection will supply the required information readily, and after that he can quickly decide on the order of the series and proceed to pack each in turn. But it is another story when he is faced with a large number of series, many of which are more or less disarranged, and when some series are subdivided into segments that are physically separated from one another. Here inspection alone will not suffice. The archivist must have some system of organizing his observations on paper before he can see the whole picture and make the necessary decisions on arrangement.

Following is a description of such a system. Though primarily intended to deal with more complicated projects, it can readily be employed in simpler cases, and should give the user a firmer control over the records being processed than the simple inspection method mentioned above.

Assume that a fairly large accession of approximately 20 series is awaiting processing—an accession housed in file cabinet drawers, transfer cases, packages, and bundles. The first step in arrangement is to number the container units serially, covering the units systematically in the order in which they are lined up physically. Write in chalk or crayon directly on the containers, attach tags, or use whatever method will serve best.

Then examine the container units one by one in serial order, and for each series (or segment of a series) in each container unit prepare a separate note on a sheet of paper of standard dimensions (e.g., 5" × 8"), indicating (1) the number of the unit (this will serve to fix the location of the series or series segment); and (2) the title of the series in brief, specifying whether all or only part of the series is present—and, if the latter, what part, in inclusive terms. If there are more than one series or series segment in the container unit, be sure that the physical boundaries between them are clear. Where they are not clear, insert markers (they can be makeshift ones like upended blank outcards) to denote the boundaries. Thus

at the end of the process there will be one or more sheets of uniform size for each container unit, and the whole will provide a simple location and descriptive guide to all the records being processed.

Sort out these sheets first by series, so that all sheets for each series are together. Then, guided by the basic principles of archival arrangement, determine the proper order, in relation to each other, of the various series involved in the project, and rearrange the series sheets in that order. It is in this order that the series will be boxed.

In processing the individual series, refer first to its sheet or sheets. (Where there are multiple sheets, arrange them in an order that conforms to the apparent internal arrangement of the series, judging from the inclusive content data on each sheet.) Using the sheet or sheets as a location guide, examine the series in its original container or containers to determine whether it is in final internal order or not. If so, it is ready for packing.

If not—if the series is disarranged in whole or in part—it will be necessary to perfect the internal order. To do this, remove the series (or its constituent segments) from the original containers and sort the records appropriately on the shelves set aside for the purpose in the processing area. After the work of rearrangement has been completed, the series will be ready for packing.

In exceptional cases, instead of perfecting the original order of a series, it may be desirable—usually to improve efficiency of reference—to rearrange the series completely. Thus, in one case, ships' logs, originally arranged chronologically by date of deposit with a regulatory agency, were rearranged alphabetically by name of vessel because searchers usually ask for them by vessel name.

The procedure outlined above may appear to be complex, but in actual practice it is quite simple and effective. Its main advantage over less formal procedures is that it provides the archivist with a systematic method of reaching decisions on arrangement before packing is done—a method that insures that each series will be dealt with as a whole and in proper order.

We have now reached the packing stage. Today most textual records in archival institutions are packed in document containers of the types shown in Figures 1 and 2 (see photographic insert). These are the most common and among the cheapest containers now in use. Durable and lightweight, even when filled, they can be handled easily by anyone of normal physical strength. Unbound records of standard dimensions will fit these boxes snugly. When the final internal order of a series consisting of such records has

been established, the files should be taken from their original containers or the sorting shelves and inserted vertically in the boxes, the documents resting on their sides and facing forward with folder tabs, if any, on the upper side, so as to be readily visible when the lid is raised. Use as many boxes as are required to contain the entire series, being careful to fill each box comfortably, that is, neither underpacked nor overpacked. Underpacking will result in bending and crumpling of the files with attendant damage; overpacking will make for difficulty in inserting and removing files, thus crushing or tearing them.

Packing a series consisting of loose papers (papers not in folders or other protective covers) necessitates a preliminary step—their insertion in folders appropriately labeled to indicate their inclusive content in terms of the filing arrangement of the series involved (for instance, nos. 95–138; G–N; etc.). The folders will prevent the crumpling that would otherwise result from vertical filing.

As a rule each series should be contained in its own box or run of boxes. No two or more series should ordinarily share a box—certainly not the end of one series and the beginning of another. This rule is essential to clarity of arrangement and ease of reference. Too rigid application of the rule, however, may sometimes waste space when very small series comprising a folder or two apiece are involved. When the order established among series results in a number of successive little series, it is permissible, in order to save space, to put more than one series in a box, provided that they are clearly demarcated, ordinarily by being placed in separate folders appropriately labeled with the title of the series.

Series consisting of bound volumes require no packing and in ordinary circumstances can be shelved directly. If the bindings are damaged or weak they can be repaired, or if this is not practicable their contents may be removed from the bindings and packed like unbound records.

Outsize records that do not fit the conventional containers must be handled separately. Ordinarily they are removed from their proper place in the series of which they are a part and put at the end of the series, at the end of the record group, or (in the case of a repository much smaller than the National Archives) in a special area set aside for outsize materials of all record groups. (Of course, in such cases cross-references are required; these will be discussed below under labeling.) If bound, outsize materials can be laid flat on the shelves without any covers, but if unbound they should be packaged. In making up the packages, one should use



Figure 3
EQUIPMENT FOR STORAGE OF INDEXES OR OTHER CARDS

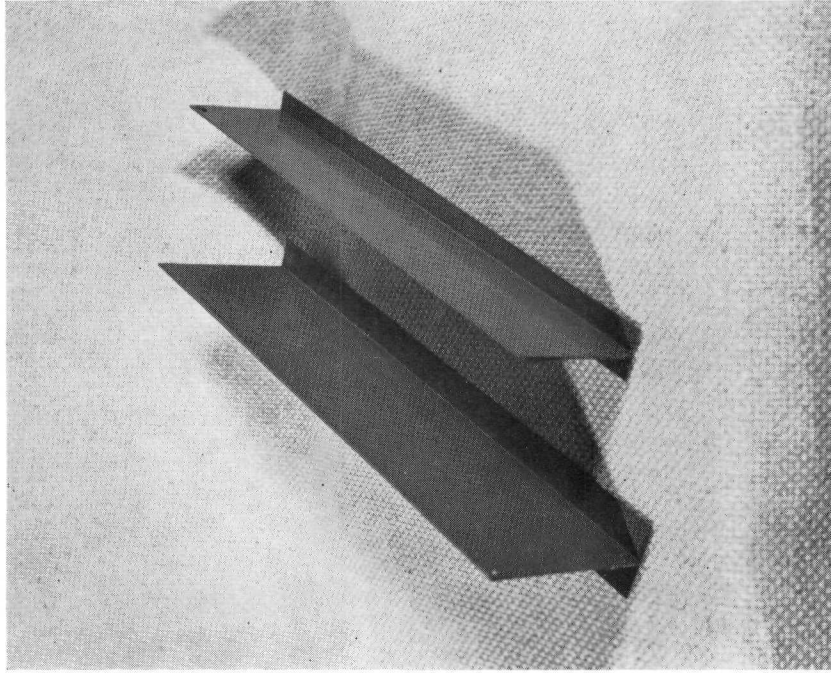


Figure 4
DIVIDERS FOR SEPARATING ROWS OF CARDS

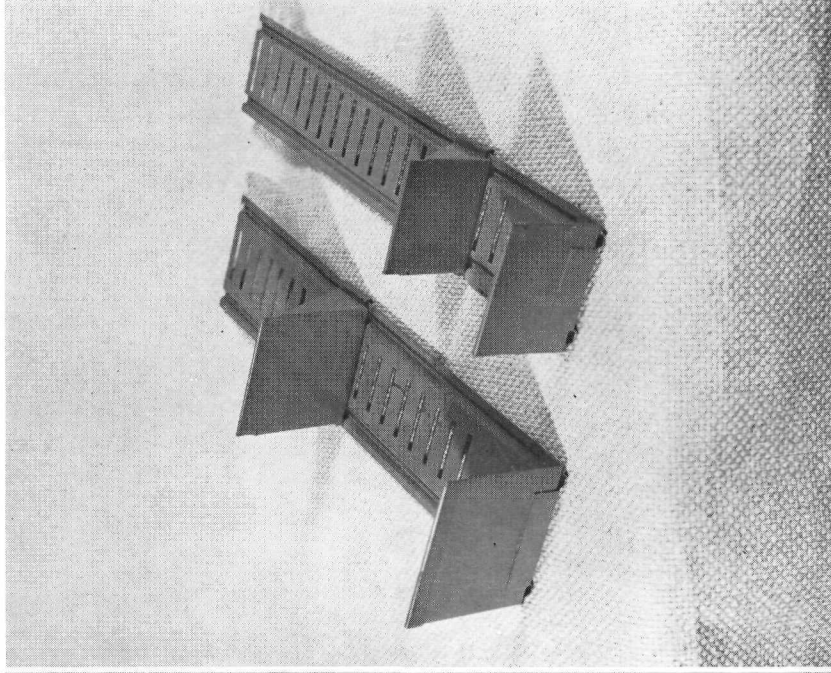


Figure 5
TRACKS AND SLIDING BACK SUPPORTS FOR CARDS



Figure 6
STORAGE OF CARDS IN ROLLER DRAWERS

Box No.	Box No.
Box No.	Box No.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION - NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
ARCHIVES BOX LABEL COPY SHEET

FORM
NAR DEC 60 368

Figure 7
FORM FOR ORDERING PREPRINTED LABELS



Figure 8
LOSS OF SPACE BETWEEN ADJOINING STACK ROWS

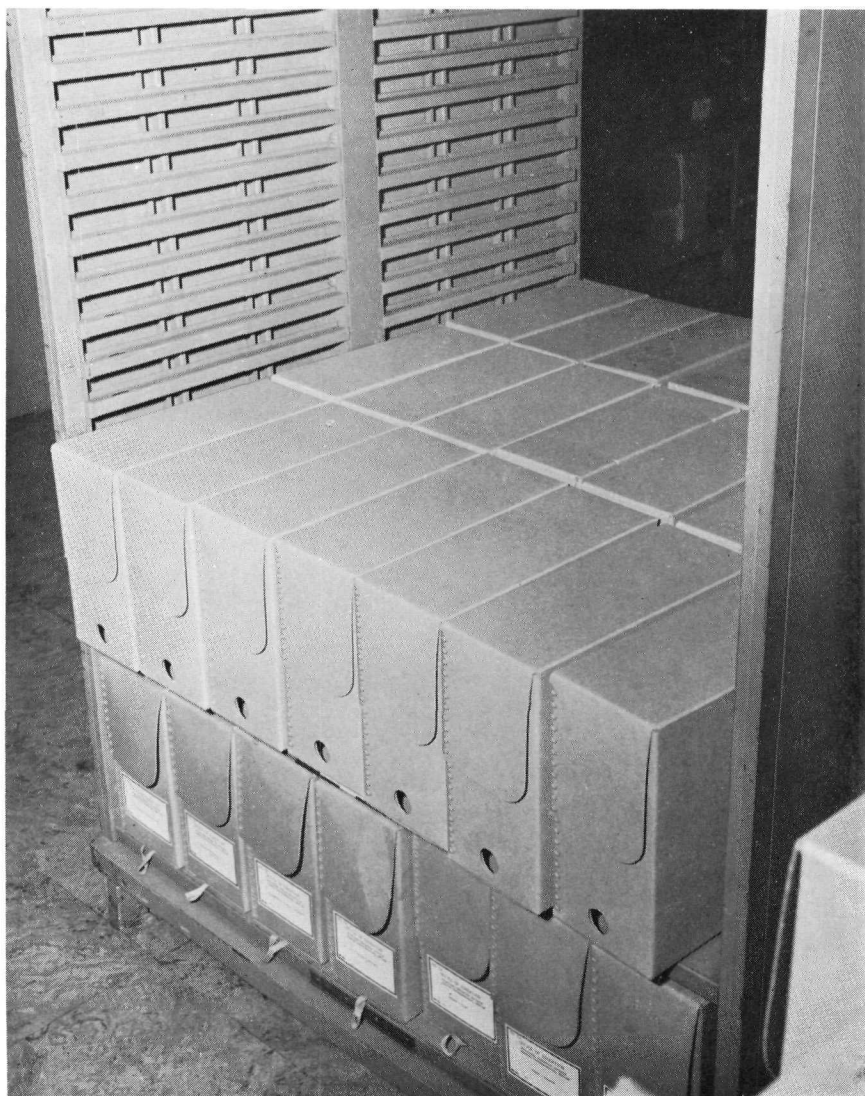


Figure 9
REMEDY OF SPACE LOSS BY DOUBLE-SHELVING
(*Letter-Size Boxes*)



Figure 10
REMEDY OF SPACE LOSS BY DOUBLE-SHELVING
(*Legal-Size Boxes*)

cord or tape rather than rubber bands, which may tear the records and which in any case become dry, break, and drop off after a time. Packages may be laid directly on open shelves or in roller or map drawers.

Series consisting of index or other cards must also be handled separately. Ordinarily they are stored in trays within card cabinets, as they were in offices, or more efficiently, in the National Archives, in roller or map drawers which are capable of holding large quantities (see Figure 3). In drawers such as this certain special equipment is necessary: metal dividers to separate the rows of cards; and, for each row, a metal track with a sliding back support. This equipment and its use are illustrated by Figures 4, 5, and 6.

The cards are filed in their proper order, in rows running the depth of the drawer, from left to right. As with series of other physical types, the order of card series should be determined before their placement in the drawers—particularly since there are often many series in a single drawer—and each series must be clearly separated from the others by distinctive guide cards.

LABELING

As series are packed, appropriate labels should be devised; the two processes go hand in hand. Each packed box should bear an individual label identifying not only its specific contents, but its provenance as well. The latter information is needed when the box is used out of its usual place in the stacks. Typically a label should contain the following information:

- (1) The number, letter, or other symbol representing the record group of which the box is a part.
- (2) The name of the creating agency, governmental or other, whose records compose the record group.
- (3) The name of the particular subdivision of the agency that created the series of which the box is a part.
- (4) The title, in succinct form, of the series of which the box is a part.
- (5) Data identifying the specific part of the series in the box (in inclusive terms only): for instance, nos. 4-25; 301.3-410.4; Appleton-Brooklyn; etc.
- (6) The box number. (Numbering of boxes is discussed below.)

A label currently in use in the National Archives is illustrated below. Note the location of each of the elements. Note also that the first three elements are printed, while the others are typewritten. The reason for this is that the former are often repeated from box to box, perhaps hundreds or thousands of times; it is therefore more efficient to have them preprinted rather than typewritten over and over again individually. Sometimes when a particular series is very

RG 178
U.S. MARITIME COMMISSION
DIVISION OF REGULATION
Active Company Tariffs
1940 - 1947
Isabrandtsen Co. - Jose Morey Co.
Box No. 360

EXAMPLE OF BOX LABEL

voluminous its title is also preprinted along with the more general information above it. In such cases there remains to be typewritten on each label only the specific inclusive contents of the box and the box number.

Facilities for preprinting—a photographic process is employed in the National Archives—may not be available in smaller archival institutions, and of course preprinting is not an efficient procedure when only a few labels bearing recurring information are required. In such cases the entire label should be typewritten for the sake of clarity. Handwritten labels should be avoided; if typing is not feasible, labels should be handprinted in indelible ink.

The form reproduced as Figure 7 is used in the National Archives to order preprinted labels. In accordance with the archivist's instructions, the language to be preprinted is typewritten, just as it is to appear in the finished label, in each of the rectangles on the form. The filled-in form then serves as the original of a photographic master from which as many labels as desired can be printed.

Because preprinted and typewritten labels are customarily used at the National Archives, finished labels are not ordinarily attached to the boxes at the time of packing. The first step in the labeling process, which is carried on concurrently with the boxing, is the preparation of the label list, one for each series boxed. Each list is headed by the name of the series involved, preceded by a letter designation assigned to the series in succession. Then as boxes are

packed their inclusive contents are noted in successive entries on the list, the entries numbered serially starting with 1. At the same time the letter symbol for the series and the specific entry or box number are written in chalk or crayon on the box exactly where the label will later be affixed. Thus: B-5 or K-10. This is done to enable the archivist to match the finished label to the proper box later on.

(It will be noted that the above procedure involves numbering the boxes making up each series separately, rather than continuing one run of box numbers from series to series throughout a packing project. The writer considers numbers assigned at this stage temporary ones, to be replaced by permanent numbers only when the entire record group has been received. At that time a single run of numbers would be used for the entire record group.)

The label lists provide the information needed by the typist to complete the preprinted labels that have been ordered in the meantime from the photographic laboratory. She fills in on each label the series title, the inclusive content data, and the box number. In cases where the preprinted label already bears the series title, that of course is not repeated. The completed label—the preprinted ones used at the National Archives are gummed on the back—should be pasted at the end of the box where the pull-tag or pull-hole is located, either above or below the tag or hole, depending on the space afforded by the box design. The permanent label should always cover the chalked or crayoned temporary one.

Groove-holders for label insertion are used on some types of document boxes but are not available on the types customarily ordered by the National Archives. Groove-holders are less desirable because they are less secure; the labels tend to slip out of their grooves too easily. The whole point of groove-holders is to make it possible to reuse old boxes. This can be done as easily with standard boxes, however, by pasting new labels over the old ones.

Bound volumes as a rule need no labels. They are shelved directly and the legends on their spines should suffice. If the legend has become hard to read it can be reproduced on a new label of proper size pasted on the spine. If the legend is misleading or absent, one should be devised showing the record group number and title, the series title, the inclusive content of the volume, and the volume number (if any). In pasting a new label on the spine of a volume, care should be taken not to obscure the original legend if one exists; it may have significance not understood at first.

Oversize materials consisting of bound volumes should be handled, from the labeling point of view, in the manner just described.

Oversize packages or bundles should be labeled in the same way as the series to which they belong—although the specific inclusive content may well be indicated in greater detail—and the labels should be pasted on prominently. If bundles or packages are stored in roller or map drawers rather than on open shelves, each drawer should be labeled "Oversize Materials"; and, depending on the range of a drawer's contents, its label should supply additional information about the record groups, record group, or specific series of a record group involved. There should also be cross-reference sheets or cards leading from the main body of a series to any oversize item of that series stored separately. The cross-reference should describe the oversize item specifically and indicate its exact location by stack area, row, section, and shelf or drawer.

Card records housed in trays in card cabinets or in roller drawers also require labels. Both types of equipment generally carry groove-holders in which label cards can be inserted.

Each card tray in which a series begins should bear a distinctively colored label on which the record group number and name, the title of the series, the inclusive contents of the tray, and the tray number (these beginning anew with each series) are indicated. Succeeding trays in each series should bear white labels with the same information. Normally each series should begin in a new tray, but this is not feasible when there are a number of small series in succession. In such cases it is suggested that the outside label merely indicate the record group number and name, and refer the searcher within. At the head of the tray one should insert a contents card listing the titles of all the series therein, and immediately before each series a distinctively colored guide card repeating the series title.

When several indexes are put in one roller drawer, there should be a distinctively colored guide card before each series giving its record group number and name, series title, and inclusive content within that drawer (if it continues from or to another drawer). The card labels inserted in the groove-holders on the front of each drawer should list the record group number and name, series title, and inclusive row locations of each series in the drawer. For any series continuing from or to another drawer, the inclusive series content should also be indicated. The groove-holders are usually large—in the National Archives there are typically two of them on each drawer—so that considerable information can appear on label cards inserted in them.

SHELVING

Efficient shelving requires utilization of available space to the full

extent compatible with maximum accessibility. In turn, accessibility is dependent on the orderly utilization of space. To insure such orderly utilization, an archival institution must develop comprehensive space-allocation plans providing for the contiguous storage of the records of each record group it holds. All shelving should conform to the provisions of such a plan.

Records should be shelved in the space intended for them as soon as they have been packed, even though the box labels have not yet been affixed. Temporary storage until the entire packing project has been completed and/or until the labels have been pasted on merely means two moves instead of one. (Sometimes temporary storage is unavoidable, as when the space allocated to a record group is largely or completely exhausted but new accessions to the record group cannot be delayed. In such a case the records must be placed temporarily in space otherwise assigned until plans for space allocation can be revised and necessary reshelving can be undertaken.)

Typically, shelving should proceed from left to right on each shelf, from the top to the bottom shelf in each section, and from the left to the right sections in each stack row. Series consisting of legal- or letter-size boxes or bound volumes of normal size will ordinarily be shelved without distinction between the two types and in the main areas of space allocated to record groups. Oversize materials may be put on open shelves or in roller drawers at the ends of series, in special areas of record groups set aside for such materials, or in a central "oversize" area for all record groups. Similarly, card cabinets or roller drawers, either in special record group areas or in one central area, may be used for card records.

Vertical side-by-side shelving of the boxes and volumes composing the bulk of most record groups—combined with the use of movable, closely spaced shelves—maximizes stack area space utilization. Vertical shelving also makes for maximum accessibility, since each box or volume can be removed individually without disturbing any others. Loss of shelf space does occur, however, when there is a gap between boxes at the same shelf level facing opposite aisles in two adjoining stack rows; this situation is illustrated by Figure 8. Such a loss can be remedied and considerable space economies can be effected by so-called double-shelving as illustrated by Figure 9.

Shelving in the manner illustrated is possible because the shelves are open and those facing opposite aisles in each section are ordinarily placed at exactly the same level. Thus the inner row of boxes

bridges the two shelves. In the National Archives the combined depth of two adjoining sections (which varies even within stack areas) is often sufficient to permit double-shelving of letter-size boxes on one side or the other. This is usually not possible with legal-size boxes unless the outside boxes project into the aisles, with resultant difficulty of access. Another method, however—putting two boxes in the rear of the shelf at right angles to the boxes in front—permits limited legal-size double-shelving (see Figure 10).

Double-shelving obviously decreases the accessibility of the boxes in the rear, but it is a useful device for storing large series that are not very active. The space saving, with National Archives shelf equipment, of seven boxes per shelf for letter-size boxes, and two boxes per shelf for legal-size boxes, can be very great when the total number of shelves in the building is considered. This saving, however, is counterbalanced by difficulty of access; and it is therefore inadvisable to double-shelve series that are frequently used.

After a body of records has been shelved, it is often necessary for description and reference purposes to refer to its exact location in the stacks. For this a system of space notation is required. The system favored by the writer depends on the previous numbering of each stack area, row, section, and shelf. It is simple enough to assign numbers to the relatively few stack areas in a small archival repository. The sometimes odd configuration of rows within a stack area (as in almost any National Archives area) may make numbering more difficult, but with some thought a logical system (for instance, with the numbers running clockwise beginning with the row nearest the main entrance into the stack area) can be devised. Sections within rows are logically numbered from left to right, and shelves within sections from top to bottom. An example of a specific location then might be: II-12-6-4, or stack area II, row 12, section 6, shelf 4.

To facilitate use of the numbers, they should be posted conspicuously: row numbers at both ends of rows; section numbers above each section; and shelf numbers on the exposed edge of each shelf. The labels bearing location numbers could be inserted in groove-holders or pasted on appropriate surfaces.

This discussion of the mundane and unglamorous yet essential archival functions of packing, labeling, and shelving does not pretend to exhaustive coverage of the subject or to consideration of differing schools of thought on various aspects of the subject; it merely reflects the author's own views formulated from long experience in the National Archives.