

# Cataloging Manuscripts—A Simple Scheme

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THE holdings of a manuscript repository are useful to the scholar only to the extent that he knows what they are and how he may perceive their pertinence to his problem. It is true that masses of uncataloged and unarranged material bearing on his subject can be used by the researcher. Certainly it is more convenient for a potential biographer to find his subject's papers in good order; but regardless of their state of disarray they can be used. The scholar searching for only a supplementary letter or two in a collection, however, needs unusual persistence to wade through foot after foot of an unprocessed collection looking for a gem that may give him insight but is not necessarily central to his subject.

As the volume of manuscripts increases, proper processing can become an almost insuperable task. The Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan is a medium-sized manuscript repository, roughly equivalent in staff and resources to many State historical society libraries or the regional manuscript collections at major universities. Its rapidly growing holdings total approximately 3¼ million manuscript items in over 3,000 collections ranging in size from a single item to a thousand feet. Approximately 80 percent of these collections are personal papers.

The focus is on Michigan history and Michigan people, but because the latter have ranged widely both geographically and in interests the repository has rich resources on many non-Michigan subjects; indeed, letters of many Americans of importance who were not from Michigan appear in its holdings. In its quarter of a century of existence, the Michigan Historical Collections has changed from a small regional collection (with which any staff member could easily become sufficiently familiar to aid researchers from memory) to a major manuscript repository. In a recent single year its accessions totaled nearly a thousand feet (or over half a

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million items) of manuscript material, including several major collections each of which needed processing. At the same time there existed a backlog of uncataloged material from previous years.

Our staff is small. Manuscript processing (sorting, arranging, and cataloging) is done by only five persons, all working on this aspect of their jobs less than half time. We have devised no miracle solutions to our problems; nor do we expect ever to find ourselves with all collections in good order and adequately indexed. Information retrieval will be discussed in this paper and no attempt will be made to include problems of ordering and arrangement. Over the years we have developed a cataloging system in which minimum labor of the processor produces maximum information for the researcher.

There is nothing complicated about the system. All manuscript catalog cards (main cards and cross-reference cards) are filed according to standard procedure in a single alphabet. This catalog will eventually be supplemented by a chronological index (by half decades) to all holdings—an index now completed only for diaries. For a few collections there are also calendars, inventories, or all-inclusive name indexes.

After a collection is sorted, arranged, and boxed it is read by a member of the staff. In this reading, catalog notes of several types are made. The reader is alert for subject references—anything from railroads to cookery, antislavery to temperance—and he indicates under the particular subject heading where, in any given set of papers, material on a subject can be found and something of its nature. The Michigan Historical Collections has developed its own subject-heading list (based in part on Sears' *List of Subject Headings for Small Libraries* but especially adapted to its needs). The cataloger also notes material applicable to Michigan place names; he notes place names outside Michigan if a rich source of material is discovered.

Perhaps most importantly, the cataloger compiles, as he reads, a select list of correspondents, noting the dates and sometimes the subjects of individual letters if they occur rarely in a collection or merely the inclusive dates and general subject coverage if the papers include a large body of correspondence. Here broad familiarity with the names of people important in all aspects of American life is essential; this is where thorough training in American history plays a most crucial role. There are dangers, of course, in developing a select list instead of a complete name index because the list's usefulness is dependent on the cataloger's discernment. But where staff

resources are limited the saving in time seems to warrant taking the risk. This list of correspondents is supplemented by the names of persons about whom there are significant materials, but no letters authored by them, in the collection.

As can be seen, correspondents, subjects, and place names are brought into prominence through cross-references; the main catalog card is limited to a general description of the collection. Both notes and catalog cards can be best illustrated by the following examples of actual notes and cards prepared in cataloging the papers of Henry Howland Crapo, land speculator, lumberman, and Governor of Michigan (1865-68). The numbers in the right-hand corner of the card indicate the donor. Our classification number for unbound personal papers appears on the left of the card opposite the name of the assembler of the collection.

## EXAMPLE OF ROUGH NOTES

Giddings, Orrin N                      1814-  
     several letters, 1854, 55, 56, 57, mostly about land purchases  
 Williams, Harvey, 1812-1867. of Eaton County  
     letters, 1854, 55, 56, mostly about land  
 Railroads  
     material on railroad bill vetoes 1867  
     Oakland and Ottawa RR described in letter, Dec. 28, 1854, of WWC  
     to HHC; also one of April 2, 1855  
     Lansing and Saginaw Railroad—letter, March 26, 1856  
     Flint and Holly Railroad—letters, Aug. 30, Nov. 23, Dec. 1862; 1863;  
     1864; Jan. 21, 1867.

## SAMPLE CATALOG CARDS

1060

11

Ab      Crapo, Henry Howland, 1804-1869.

Papers, 1830-1920, of Henry Howland Crapo and the Crapo family, including correspondence dealing with Crapo's land speculations, lumbering, and political activities in great detail, and correspondence of his son *re* his estate and land holdings after his death; speeches, notes, and other papers dealing with the governorship; deeds and other papers dealing with his land purchases in Ohio, Iowa, and Michigan; clippings, biographical material, obituaries; personal and business accounts; receipts and vouchers. [see shelf list]

32 boxes

Main card with list of cross-references on back

1060

II

- Ab      Giddings, Orrin N      1814-  
          Crapo, Henry Howland, 1804-1869.  
          Papers, 1830-1920, of Henry Howland Crapo and the Crapo  
          family, including several letters, 1854-1857, and one Jan. 19,  
          1867, from Orrin Giddings, mostly dealing with land matters.  
          32 boxes

Cross-reference card for correspondent

1060

II

- Ab      *Adrian, Mich.*  
          Crapo, Henry Howland, 1804-1869.  
          Papers, 1830-1920, of Henry Howland Crapo and the Crapo  
          family, including a letter of August 16, 1847, about a cholera  
          epidemic in Adrian; also letters, 1853, written by Crapo to his  
          son and dated from Adrian with some comments on the com-  
          munity.  
          32 boxes

Cross-reference card for a place name

1060

II

- Ab      *Railroads.*  
          Crapo, Henry Howland, 1804-1869.  
          Papers, 1830-1920, of Henry Howland Crapo and the Crapo  
          family, including considerable correspondence and other papers  
          dealing with Michigan railroads, among them the Oakland and  
          Ottawa Railroad, described in a letter of Dec. 28, 1854; Lansing  
          and Saginaw Railroad, March 26, 1856; material on the Flint  
          and Holly and the Flint and Père Marquette; also papers and  
          correspondence *re* Crapo's vetoes of the railroad acts during his  
          governorship.  
          32 boxes

Cross-reference card for a subject

For large collections two sets of notes are made simultaneously. Along with the cataloging notes described above, a running description of the papers—more detailed than that appearing on the main catalog card—is made; this shows their scope and content and the principal correspondents as they vary and develop from period to period. The running description is combined with a shelf list and placed with the papers.

Two traits are essential in a cataloger: wide familiarity with many phases of American history and culture and a knack for empathy—above all the latter. This ability to perceive in any collection of papers the uses to which they may be put distinguishes the competent manuscript cataloger from the incompetent. The person with research interests of his own is more likely to understand what kinds of material are useful, to differentiate between the trivial and the significant, and to record his conclusions analytically.

As the result of these cataloging techniques even the inexperienced researcher can easily learn, for example, how many Arthur H. Vandenberg letters we have, from what periods of his career they come, and in what collections they are located, simply by looking up Vandenberg in the manuscript catalog and thumbing through the cards. In recent years our collections have been used by several graduate classes in developing community studies of social mobility at given points in time. Again, a glance at the catalog—under Adrian or Hastings or some other Michigan community—quickly shows what business records, church and organization records, personal papers, diaries, and other records in our repository originated in or relate to a particular place or community. The student interested in temperance, lumbering, medical practice, or any other subject of concern to our catalog can begin his research similarly.

Of course there are gaps. Some collections have been inadequately cataloged or occasionally not cataloged at all. For others there is little more than a general description of the papers. This will probably always be true, but a certain amount of information given orally by staff members to researchers will help to bridge the gaps. As for the mature scholar—he can be saved much time by good cataloging but he will never be at its mercy.

Noting the subject and date of a letter in a collection, however, takes little more time than listing only its author's name as part of a list of correspondents on a main catalog entry—and this procedure can save hours of searching. Transferring name lists and subject notes to catalog cards takes no more time than retyping a

calendar or inventory or preparing multiple cards under the main listing, but it is a much more efficient system. Auxiliary finding aids such as inventories, calendars, or separate indexes to individual collections have their place but we feel that it would be a mistake to expend a major portion of staff time on their preparation.

Our problems are very different from those of the Presidential Libraries, for example, where the holdings are chiefly the papers of a single individual and his executive office, where auxiliary collections cluster around a certain period in time as well as the career of a single individual, and where use is primarily by the mature scholar working on subjects that he is competent to handle. Similarly, our needs and therefore our methods differ from those of a repository whose holdings relate generally to one broad subject field or one whose holdings consist predominantly of institutional records (as contrasted with personal papers). In such repositories inventorying and indexing by individual collection may well prove to be the most effective methods in preparing finding aids. For us, emphasis on a single catalog where most information about all collections in our care can be found in one place seems both economical and efficient.

### ***Incidental Intelligence***

b141 VIRGINIA. Leaf torn from old ledger book, 4to, Richmond, June 18 to 25, 1788. Covering both sides of the page appear the signatures of outstanding Virginians. On June 18, eighteen signed, including James Monroe, Light Horse Harry Lee, Alexander White; on June 19, Green Clay, Theodoric Bland, Robert Breckinridge, and four others; on June 20, Benjamin Harrison, Signer of the D. of I., and 3 others; and on the 25th, William Lowther, Hezekiah Davisson, and 4 others. The Constitution of the U.S. was ratified by Virginia June 26, 1788. Could there be some tie up between those who sign this page and the vote taken? A curious item which we cannot explain, but that may have greater significance than appears on the face of it. \$50.00

b271 LINCOLN, Robert T. (1843-1926). Son of the President. Secretary of War. LS, 4to, Chicago, Feb. 19, 1903. To O. S. Mahon. "*. . . I have . . . only one or two specimens of my father's handwriting for the simple reason that the letters which I had (not many in number) were burned in the Chicago fire. . .*" \$20.00

—*The Collector: A Magazine for Autograph and Historical Collectors*, vol. 76, nos. 7-10 (1963), p. 2, 13.