

The Principle of Provenance and Modern Records in the United States

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AMERICAN archivists owe a great deal to the International Congress of Archivists that met here [in Brussels] 54 years ago. It was largely because of the discussions of the congress, in 1910, that the principle of provenance became known in the United States. At the 1910 meeting of the American Historical Association's Public Archives Commission, Waldo G. Leland and Arnold J. Van Laer, who had attended the Brussels congress, emphasized the significance of the principle of provenance and urged its adoption by American archivists. The principle was discussed at several other meetings of the Public Archives Commission and came to be regarded, by leading American historians and archivists, as "the 'summum bonum' to be desired in the classification of archives" and as the "one principle that should govern all the rest."

In my opinion, the principle of provenance should be applied to the modern records of the United States in the following manner:

1. It should be the guiding principle in arranging Federal and State public records in archival institutions. The principle is particularly applicable to the large quantities of records that are produced by Federal and State governmental agencies in the United States. It enables an archivist to deal with records collectively, to treat records from a given organic source or a given organic activity as a unit, to deal with groups and series instead of single record items or single record volumes. For this reason the principle is as basic to the archival profession in dealing with large organic bod-

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ies of documentary material as is Dewey's decimal classification system in dealing with expanding library holdings. Both the principle of provenance and Dewey's classification system provide methods that can be applied to ever-increasing quantities of material: the former because it applies to collective record units, and the latter because its classes and subclasses may be expanded indefinitely.

2. The principle of provenance should be extended in breadth in the sense that it should be applied to private as well as to public records. Generally American manuscript curators do not recognize the applicability of the principle to private papers, though most of them, at the present time, keep documents from a given source together. They no longer classify them, that is, disperse items from a given collection among various classes. They have abandoned the subject and chronologic-geographic schemes of classification that were formerly in vogue. But they use the term "provenance" to designate the place from which private papers were purchased or otherwise acquired, not their organic origins—even in the most important repositories of the Nation.

3. The principle of provenance should be extended in depth in the sense that it should be applied to series within manuscript collections and archival groups. Series, which are units of records arising from organic activities or transactions, are being kept intact by most American archivists and manuscript curators, though some of the latter do not admit as valid the proposition that private papers can be arranged into series.

4. The principle of provenance should be applied to the description as well as the arrangement of private and public records. In the 1910 meeting of the Public Archives Commission, Van Laer stated that there was "practical unanimity among the archivists of continental Europe" as to the importance of adopting the principle, and that the congress formally had resolved "that the 'principe de la provenance' be adopted for the arrangement and inventorying of archives, with a view to the logical classification of separate documents as well as in the interests of comprehensive historical study." The applicability of the principle to inventory or descriptive work has been largely overlooked by American archivists. The principle facilitates the description of records. Because they are the product of activity, the most meaningful attributes of records are those relating to their organizational and functional origins. Information on organizational origins is as

important in respect to records as is information on authorship in respect to publications; and information on functional origins, as important as is information on subject-matter in respect to publications. If they are preserved according to provenance, records may be described in terms of attributes derived from their provenance. The principle of provenance is a key to effective descriptive work.

5. The principle of provenance should also be applied in arranging public records for current use. According to American practices, records relating to individual matters—such as personnel, investigative, and legal actions—are generally brought together into case files, which are the equivalent of European registered files. Since each case file usually comprises all records pertaining to a specific action, it may be said that case files are organized in accordance with the principle of provenance (if the principle is assumed to mean that records arising in an organic transaction or activity should be kept together). But under American filing systems records pertaining to the direction, administration, and supervision of programs and policies are not organized according to their provenance in activity. Such records, which comprise the most valuable documentation produced by governmental agencies, are usually organized under subject heads that are chosen largely in accordance with American library practices, or, at least, are not consciously chosen to reflect governmental functions and activities. Such records, as well as those pertaining to the detailed execution of programs and policies, should be organized under functional heads, whenever possible. They are generally the result of function; they are used in relation to function; and they should, therefore, be classified according to function. Only records that are accumulated for informational purposes as distinct from functional purposes should be classified under library subject heads.

Maxims

I should never have succeeded as I did in rejuvenating [the Archives], one of France's oldest institutions, had I not relied above all on young people.

To inspire his staff with a feeling for their work, with enthusiasm, in the absence of which any task is sterile—that, it seems to me, is the first duty of a chief.

—CHARLES BRAIBANT, *Un Bourgeois sous trois républiques*, p. 208, 362 (Paris, 1961). Staff translation.