

A Historian Looks at The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections

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PERHAPS I should begin by explaining that I am not an archivist, not a librarian, not a curator. I have no direct inside knowledge of the actual operations and problems of any of these offices, and until I agreed to prepare this paper I had more or less taken them for granted as the people to whom I was indebted for providing the materials that I needed for research or other scholarly purposes. I am not sure that I had ever thought seriously of distinguishing between their respective functions and spheres of responsibility. Called upon to evaluate *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*,¹ one of their most important efforts to assist the research worker, I soon found that my first problem was to try to obtain sufficient orientation to enable me to understand the meaning of what they have done. In some ways I might be compared with an Alice in Wonderland, except that she knew how to ask the right questions.

In my quest for perspective I followed the discussions of a national union catalog back through the files of such professional journals as the *American Archivist* and the published records of professional associations, and in the process I found myself trying to master a new vocabulary. I read about inventories and data sheets; subject classifications and topic headings; card catalogs and dictionary catalogs; measurements in terms of linear feet, cubic feet,

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¹Library of Congress, *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1959-1961* (Ann Arbor, Edwards, 1962); *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1962* (Hamden, Conn., Shoestring Press, 1964); *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections Index 1959-1962* (Hamden, 1964).

boxes, folders, and number of pieces—and I watched with interest as the editors of one professional journal gradually forsook the term “depository” and installed “repository” in its place. Puzzled, I turned to my dictionary and found both words defined as “a place where things can be laid up for safekeeping”; but the inclusion of “burial vault” as an additional meaning for “repository” provided a possible clue. Naturally, dead files would have to go into a *repository*, there to await resurrection, perhaps through the agency of a national union catalog. As my exploration progressed, I found to my surprise that the trail led to an informal conference in 1936 for which I had made the arrangements, but which I did not attend. In November 1936 the Southern Historical Association held its second annual meeting in Nashville, Tenn., and shortly before that meeting Robert Binkley, whom many of you will remember as one of the dynamic figures in the early history of the Society of American Archivists, requested me as the chairman of the committee on local arrangements to provide a conference room where he could meet with any others who might be interested in discussing problems related to the finding and use of manuscript materials for historical research. Among those who responded to Binkley’s invitation were Herbert Kellar, then as always actively seeking to promote more efficient relationships between collectors, custodians, and users of manuscript collections; Douglas McMurtrie, then head of the American Imprints Inventory; and Luther Evans, at that time the National Director of the Historical Records Survey. Out of their collaboration in that conference came a series of suggestions that led in 1939 to the creation by the American Historical Association of a Committee on Historical Source Materials, with Kellar as general chairman and with a group of subcommittees on such subjects as library holdings, manuscripts, archives, business records, and documentary reproduction, in some of which the other three played leading roles.

Meanwhile, the opening of the National Archives, the founding of the Society of American Archivists, and the monumental work of the Historical Records Survey in uncovering and describing the vast store of records in State and county archives and in other local repositories throughout the country brought an increased awareness of the importance of making manuscript materials available for historical research. Consequently Kellar’s subcommittee on manuscripts turned its attention to the problem of obtaining more adequate information about the content of existing manuscript collections and considered the possibility of pooling in one place “what

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is known about all historical manuscript collections which have been processed, and subsequently to supplement this record by adding data about other collections as soon as they can be obtained." As an initial experiment it undertook to compile and publish an annual record of the new manuscript materials acquired by recognized repositories, but "because of the failure of certain institutions to cooperate properly in furnishing the desired information" the plan had to be abandoned after the publication of an incomplete report for the year 1940. Significant also in the light of some of the current discussion was Kellar's comment, "Another difficulty encountered was the inability of custodians to distinguish between archival materials and historical manuscripts."² The coming of World War II soon interfered with the further development of projects of this nature, and following the return of peace the American Historical Association, acting upon Kellar's recommendation, voted to discontinue its own committee on manuscripts and suggested the creation of a joint committee of the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History to take over the major proposals of the Kellar committee, the most important of which by this time was to establish a union inventory of manuscript collections.

The appointment of the joint committee in 1949, with Lester Cappon as chairman, marked the beginning of the chain of events leading directly to the present status of the program. The offer of the Library of Congress, of which Luther Evans was then the head, to assume responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of a national register of historical manuscripts, the formulation of rules for the cataloging of manuscript collections, and the announcement of a grant from the Council on Library Resources are all too well known to require more than passing mention.³ The fact that another 10 years elapsed between those developments and the publication of the first volume of the *Catalog* should afford ample proof that the project was not hastily conceived or executed. And the appearance early in 1964 of a second volume and a cumulated index would seem to provide sufficient basis for at least a tentative evaluation.

² See especially the reports of Herbert A. Kellar as chairman of the Committee on Historical Source Materials, in American Historical Association, *Annual Report for the Year 1945*, 1:41-46 (Washington 1947), and *Annual Report for the Year 1946*, 1:63-71 (Washington, 1947).

³ See Robert H. Land, "The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist*, 17:195-207 (July 1954).

In undertaking to appraise the *Catalog* at this time we must recognize that we are dealing with an unfinished and in some respects an experimental project. Of the three volumes now available, the first, published in 1962 and constituting a record of the work completed from June 1959 to the end of the year 1961, contains descriptive entries for some 7,300 manuscript collections as reported by more than 300 repositories, together with 350 pages of index. The second volume, covering the work completed in 1962, brings the total number of entries to 12,324 and the number of reporting repositories to 398; and the third is a 732-page cumulated subject-name index to the other two volumes. Impressive as this may seem, it leaves more than half of the vast stores of manuscript collections in hundreds of repositories throughout the country still to be reported and cataloged. The well-known Hamer *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*, published in 1961 for the National Historical Publications Commission, lists more than 1,300 repositories, and their total holdings have been estimated at more than 27,000 collections, varying in size from a dozen to a half-million documents. Of approximately 100 repositories listed by Hamer as having at least a million pieces, only 5 (the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Minnesota Historical Society, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the New-York Historical Society, and the Duke University Library) are represented with as many as 500 entries each. Apparently not more than 15 percent (about 450 entries out of a total of approximately 3,000 collections) of the holdings of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress has been reported, and among the major repositories for which no entries appear are the Bancroft Library in the Far West, the New York Public Library in the East, the Louisiana State University Library in the South, and several leading State historical society libraries in various sections of the country. The Massachusetts Historical Society has only three entries (the Adams family papers, the Charles Francis Adams papers, and the Henry Knox papers), and the only entry from the Houghton Library of Harvard is the 500,000-document collection of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. One hundred and forty-four of the repositories represented here have reported only 1 collection each, while 105 others have from 2 to 5 each, and we wonder if we would be safe in assuming that for most of these we have the complete record. Probably not, and for that reason, in part, it is encouraging to know that further reports are

being received from many of them in addition to those coming from repositories that have not previously reported.

It is reassuring also to find evidence in the 1962 volume and the cumulated index of a willingness to make adjustments in form or procedure on the basis of experience. Especially noticeable are the dropping of the list of Library of Congress subject classifications, which appeared at the end of each entry in the first volume, and the disappearance of these vague headings from the cumulated index. However valuable they may be in book cataloging, they are of little help to the researcher who may be looking for specific information in a unique manuscript collection to which he does not have direct access. On the other hand, the compilers have recently announced that after careful consideration of the complaints about the random order in which the entries appear in the first two volumes they have not been able to find a practicable substitute arrangement. At least they have tried, and as long as they provide us with the present type of comprehensive index we can accept their decision to continue the practice of listing the entries in the order of the card catalog numbers without regard to logical sequence of content. Somewhat more questionable, however, was the decision to rule out separate entries for collections having fewer than 50 documents and to suggest that these smaller groups should usually be consolidated with other similar materials to form what would actually amount to an artificial "collection" created for cataloging purposes. Such an arrangement is apparently intended to save space, but unless each smaller group is described or listed within the larger arbitrary unit it cannot be indexed, and thus it simply vanishes so far as the outsider is concerned. The loss may be greater than the gain, and this particular problem would seem to need further study.

Perhaps the most decided improvement is the change from the separate subject and name indexes, printed in microscopic type, in the earlier volume to a single alphabetical list in a type size that can be read without a magnifying glass. Inasmuch as this cumulated index is the indispensable medium through which the user of the *Catalog* finds the material relevant to his subject, it deserves special consideration. Containing something over 156,000 entries, it guides the researcher to even the most casual mention in the *Catalog* of more than 50,000 individuals, places, institutions, and business firms or other corporate entities and to about 4,000 subject headings. "As in every superior index," a recent reviewer has said, "emphasis is on the specific, with *see* references from the general

to the specific subject."⁴ Numerous double entries and *see also* cross-references afford many different approaches to the subject matter and add greatly to its usefulness for a wide variety of investigators. Considering the massive size of the task, both the catalog and the index have attained a remarkably high degree of freedom from error, and the completeness with which the index covers every subject or person or thing mentioned in the descriptions is especially noteworthy. To quote again from the same reviewer, "The only limitation to this excellent *Index* derives from the descriptions of the collections in the *Catalog*, which the repositories supply." In other words, if the name for which one is looking does not appear in the index it is because it has not been included in any repository's description of a collection; if for every 40 subject entries there are about 500 name entries, this may be considered as a reflection of the relative emphasis given to them by the reporting repositories; if not more than 10 percent of the names carry references to more than one descriptive entry, this may be because the repositories have applied different standards of selection or have not given the same careful attention to details in making their reports.

This lack of consistency in standards or in methods of reporting brings us back to one of the principal problems still waiting for a satisfactory solution. Complete uniformity is of course not only undesirable but—in view of the wide range of differences both in the nature of the materials and in the qualifications of the reporters—impossible to achieve. But some of the criticism would seem to make it advisable to take a closer look at certain aspects of the program. When we are told, for example, that the archivists have permitted the librarians to determine the general character of the *Catalog*, we must try to obtain the perspective to see what this really means in terms of the purpose of the project.⁵ Going back to the earlier stages of the discussion, we find that the initiative came primarily from members of the historical profession and that the body of materials in which they were interested needed special attention because it seemed to fall in a zone lying somewhere between the provinces of the librarian and of the archivist. The Kellar committee pointed out in the early 1940's, for example, that while the holdings of libraries in printed matter could easily be ascertained, and while the contents of archival collections could be determined largely by the character and functions of the official

⁴ Review by Lester J. Cappon, in *American Archivist*, 27:413-414 (July 1964).

⁵ For an adverse criticism of the 1959-61 volume see Richard C. Berner, "Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist*, 27:401-409 (July 1964).

agencies that produced them, there also existed in repositories in all parts of the country a third kind of materials, usually designated as manuscript collections, about which relatively little could be known on a nationwide basis until they had been cataloged. Consisting largely of personal papers and other unofficial records, these collections provided a type of source material that had become increasingly important during the past half-century as the province of the historian widened to include social, cultural, intellectual, and other new fields of interest. The combination of Kellar's training as a historian and experience as the custodian of one of the outstanding collections of such materials enabled him not only to realize the need for developing a national catalog but also to understand that such an enterprise would require the help of the closely associated activities represented by the librarians and the archivists. Hence his recommendation for the appointment of the joint committee, which could be expected to strengthen both the promotional and the developmental aspects of the program.

Again, we cannot go into the details of the way in which the resulting cooperation led to the establishment of the NUCMC on its present basis. It is important, however, to point out that from the beginning the historians and curators emphasized the fact that because these manuscript collections were more complex and more refractory than the materials with which the librarians and archivists were concerned they would require a special type of cataloging procedure. The joint committee report of 1951, for example, said:

The field of manuscripts presents special difficulties in bringing essential information under control because of the very nature and diversity of the materials. The scholar wants to know whether certain records are in existence; if so, where they are located; and then, having located them, he asks first what period they cover, how extensive they are, and what information is readily available on the nature of their content.⁶

And it adds that while the descriptive paragraph must be concise and condensed, it should include a selected list of names of correspondents. Elsewhere it has been pointed out—and correctly, I think—that because researchers normally approach these materials through subject references and perhaps most often through names of organizations and persons, one of the first objectives should be to reveal these elements. The user will expect to find them by

⁶ "Report of the Joint Committee on Historical Manuscripts," in *American Archivist*, 15: 176 (Apr. 1952).

way of the index, but unless they are there to index he cannot be made aware of their existence.

To me, one of the most disturbing features of the *Catalog* is the extent to which it has failed to gain compliance with these suggestions. As nearly as I have been able to determine, the descriptions in these two volumes seem to fall into three general types. First, a commendable proportion of the repositories (just how large a group I am not prepared to say) obviously took the suggestions seriously and reported fully, apparently on the basis of inventories or registers prepared as part of their normal routine of processing. An especially impressive illustration might be cited in the entry for the Tayloe family papers from the manuscript division of the University of Virginia Library (no. 60-81). Here one finds references to the business interests of an important Virginia family through two centuries, including specific enterprises, institutional and corporate names, and the names of 133 persons whose correspondence appears or concerning whom information is to be found in the collection. Among other major repositories for which this type of description is the general rule, special mention should be made of the William L. Clements Library, the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina, the Duke University Library, the Cornell University Library, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

A second group, of which the Historical Society of Pennsylvania may be cited as a typical example, usually provides rather full subject matter information susceptible of being indexed but seldom includes names of persons. A striking illustration of the difference between the first and second groups appears in the way the Clements Library and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania describe their respective collections of the papers of Anthony Wayne. For the Clements Library collection (no. 60-713) of about 900 documents we have an enumeration of such of Wayne's varied activities as are represented and a list of 34 persons ranging from high government and military officials to obscure individuals; for the Pennsylvania collection (no. 61-521) of about 6,500 documents we have a somewhat longer list of Wayne's activities, but the only personal name is that of his grandson, and it is not indexed. To carry this particular case a step further, the cumulated index contains 22 other references to Wayne items distributed among collections in 17 different repositories ranging from Georgia to Wisconsin and from Kentucky to Massachusetts. This was made possible, of course, only because these other repositories also included names

of correspondents in their descriptive statements. And how many other Wayne references have been missed because of the failure to include lists of names, we have no way of knowing.

The third and by far the least satisfactory type of descriptive paragraph, which unfortunately seems to appear more frequently in the 1962 volume than in the earlier one, contains an extremely brief statement, often only one or two lines long. Here, for example, are three successive descriptive statements from the same repository:

John Russell Papers. 1 box.

"Farmer and politician of Iowa. Correspondence, receipts, and other papers." (No. 62-2750)

Eliphalet B. Ruckman Papers. 1 box.

"Farmer and politician of Marion Co., Iowa. Correspondence and other papers." (No. 62-2751)

Benjamin S. Roberts Papers. 1 envelope.

"Army officer and lawyer. Correspondence, addresses, passports, and invitations." (No. 62-2752)

Inasmuch as these descriptions tell us nothing that is usable for indexing purposes, and since we are not told how many documents are in a box or an envelope, one wonders if the so-called collections really deserve a place in the *Catalog*.

But this sort of comment is bringing us too close to petty caviling, and the project as a whole is far too big and too valuable to justify an implication that it has fatal flaws. It can be said without qualification that although these three volumes represent only the beginning, they constitute the most important step ever taken in this country toward providing concisely and in conveniently available form 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. What has been done affords ample justification for whatever will be required to continue the catalog to the nearest possible complete coverage. To the sponsoring agencies, the vision and faith of the early promoters, and the dedicated services of the staff of compilers we already owe a debt of gratitude that we shall never be able to repay.