

A Nationwide System of Controlling Historical Manuscripts in the United States

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THE National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, which is being produced under the aegis of the Library of Congress, may serve as a point of departure for discussing a method of developing a nationwide system of controlling documentary source material. For several years manuscript repositories of the United States have described collections in their custody in accordance with instructions issued by the Library. From these descriptions the Library has compiled catalog entries, which it has reproduced in volumes of the *Catalog* so far published. This enterprise marks the high point in collaborative effort in the manuscript field in the United States.

Several observations about the use of automation in controlling documentary source material may be made in reference to the union catalog project.

1. *The use of modern gadgetry cannot supplant the use of proper techniques and principles in describing documentary material.*

Shortcuts to the control of such material can be found in mechanical, photographic, or electronic devices only after the material has been organized and interpreted by conventional methods.

2. *Documentary material can be controlled on a nationwide basis only after descriptive techniques have been defined and standardized.*

Repositories must first describe their own material before they can make information in regard to it available for a union catalog, and they must describe it according to standardized procedures. The importance of this was recognized as early as 1865 by Thomas C. Amory, Jr., librarian of the Massa-

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chusetts Historical Society. Amory said that his "Society can better take the initiative in requesting the co-operation of similar institutions and individuals in the preparation of a general index to all the manuscript treasures of an historical character in the country" once it has produced a catalog of its own holdings.

3. *While describing a manuscript collection, a repository should analyze its relationships to the elements that are most important to its use.*

These elements provide the keys to a repository's control of manuscript collections in conventional catalogs and guides, and to a nationwide control by means of mechanical, photographic, or electronic devices. The nature of such elements may be clarified by referring to a 1953 survey of 360 map libraries in the United States, made by the Special Libraries Association. This survey showed that 74 percent of the requests for maps were by area, 24 percent by subject, and 2 percent by title, publisher, scale, date, and the like. Ninety-eight percent of the requests, in a word, can be handled if information is available on the existence of maps for a given area and a given subject.

4. *The elements that provide keys to the use of manuscript collections relate to (a) geographical area, (b) chronological period, and (c) subject.*

If he knows what he is about, a scholar can specify the place, time, and subject to which his inquiry relates. If it has made a threefold analysis of the relationships of its collections by place, time, and subject, a manuscript repository can indicate which collections are pertinent to the inquiry of the scholar; and it can do this in fairly specific terms. It can, for example, identify the collections that relate to military affairs in Virginia between 1800 and 1830, provided, of course, that the collections were analyzed in relation to the chronological period mentioned; in relation to place, by States; and in relation to subjects, by military affairs. This threefold analysis of collections by place, time, and subject, it should be emphasized, is merely intended to guide the user to particular collections that may interest him. The detailed analysis of the collections will be found in the descriptive entries that pertain to them.

5. *A reporting form, or worksheet, for the description of manuscript collections should be used on which the multiple place, time, and subject relationships can be indicated.*

Such a form, the use of which I discuss in my new book, *The Management of Archives* (Columbia University Press, July 1965), can be devised easily. The threefold relationships are simply indicated by checkmarks or entries in appropriate boxes.

The geographical areas in the United States, in reference to which manuscript collections should be analyzed, are obvious: they are the 50 States of the union.

The chronological periods should span the time for which records exist that pertain to the United States. The periods should vary in length according to the amount of records that exist at various periods. During the first century

of United States history, they may cover a half century; during the last, a decade.

The subject heads, in reference to which manuscript collections should be analyzed, should be derived from an analysis of the major fields of activity that result in the production of records. The concept of functional (or activity) heads is somewhat alien to the thinking of persons working with historical manuscripts, who usually select subject heads from library classification schemes and cataloging lists.

While it is difficult to identify the major classes of activities that result in the production of records, the following are some of the more important ones: agricultural, business, diplomatic, educational, governmental, military, political, religious, scientific, and social. These activities, expressed in their nominative form, indicate the broad subject heads that should be used. While the following heads will cover the holdings of most manuscript repositories, a more comprehensive list should be compiled for a nationwide system of controlling manuscript collections:

Agriculture	Foreign Affairs	Religion
Business	Government and Politics	Science
Education	Labor	Social Affairs
Fine Arts	Military Affairs	Travel and Exploration

The use of activity heads may be justified on both theoretical and practical grounds. While existing bibliographic categorizations are suggestive in compiling a list of subject heads for records, the subject heads used in respect to publications are likely to be inapplicable, if not misleading, because they are keyed to classes of human knowledge, not classes of human activity. Since source material—historical manuscripts and public archives—is always the result of function, it should be arranged and described in relation to function. This is in accord with the principle of provenance, which should govern arrangement and descriptive work with private as well as public papers. From a theoretical point of view the broad subject heads in relation to which collections are identified thus should be chosen consciously to reflect human activity. From a practical point of view this is the only course to follow, for it is possible easily to identify the fields of activity that result in the production of collections; it is very difficult to identify the innumerable subjects to which they relate. The activity heads, as a matter of fact, will usually reveal the major subjects to which collections relate.

6. *Geographical, chronological, and subject heads should be used in guides and catalogs to reveal the elements most important in the use of manuscript collections.*

In a guide to the holdings of a manuscript repository such heads should be used to prepare a table of contents, which should be arranged first by place, then by major subject, and then by chronological period, as follows:

VIRGINIA
Foreign Affairs
1700-1750
[Numbers of pertinent collections]

1750-1800

[Numbers of pertinent collections]

Other chronological periods

Other Subject Heads

WEST VIRGINIA, etc.

In a catalog to the holdings of a repository, such heads should be reproduced on guide cards, followed by pertinent card entries.

7. *Code numbers should be assigned to geographical, chronological, and subject heads for use in mechanical, photographic, and electronic devices.*

Separate digits should be assigned to each type of head, as follows:

Alabama	—01	pre-1492	—01	Agriculture	—01
Alaska	—02	1492-1550	—02	Business	—02
Arkansas	—03	1550-1600	—03	Education	—03
California	—04	1600-1650	—04	Fine Arts	—04
Colorado	—05	1650-1700	—05	Foreign Affairs	—05
etc.		etc.		etc.	

8. *The code numbers should be used to identify, by means of mechanical, photographic, or electronic devices, the particular collections that relate to a specific place, time, or subject.*

Using the code numbers listed above, the code number for a collection relating to agriculture in Alabama between 1650 and 1700 would thus be: 01-05-01.

By the use of various modern devices for recording and retrieving information, it would thus be possible to identify, or to obtain copies of the descriptions of, all collections pertaining to fairly specific matters. In the Bureau of Ships, for example, correspondence is coded and filmed; and copies of correspondence items pertaining either to specific dates or to specific subjects or to specific places are reproduced automatically from the film by using the proper code numbers.

A similar method, when applied to descriptions of manuscript collections (such as those prepared for the Library of Congress union catalog), would enable a scholar, if he provides information on the place, time, and subject to which his inquiry relates, to obtain descriptions of all manuscript collections pertinent to his inquiry.

For an Announcement of the Publication of Schellenberg's

THE MANAGEMENT OF ARCHIVES

See the Publisher's Advertisement on p. 349.