Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States

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National Archives

MORE than a half century ago, at the 1910 International Congress of Archivists and Librarians at Brussels, an American representative called for a "uniform method of classification" for national archives. Deploring the lack of "logical classification," he urged the creation of a "scientific system," which, "though modified to suit local conditions," would, "in its application everywhere, retain a general likeness and uniformity."[1] The history and current status of the attempt in the United States to develop such a system are the subject of this report.[2]

A Frame of Reference

An understanding of any phase of archives administration in the United States requires constant reference to several basic considerations. The first has been the lack of any deep-rooted tradition of methodical recordkeeping by either private organizations or government at any level in the United States. Records were usually regarded as but the means to an immediate end, the conduct of current business, and after they had served this purpose they were simply stored in any available space with no regard for their original order or their relationship to other records of the same agency. To this fact must be added the absence of a fully developed registry system, a pattern of government organization that has always been fluid, and the failure of the National Government to create a separate archival agency for its own records until 1934. These circumstances have posed for the archivist in the United States prob-

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[1] Dunbar Rowland, "The Importance of the Concentration and Classification of National Archives," in J. Cuvelier and L. Stainier, eds., *Actes, Congrès de Bruxelles, 1910,* p. 567, 570–571 (Bruxelles, 1912).

[2] This report was undertaken at the invitation of Wayne C. Grover and Robert H. Bahmer, then Archivist and Deputy Archivist of the United States, respectively, and with the concurrence of the president and Council of the Society of American Archivists. For invaluable advice and suggestions regarding the report the author is deeply indebted to Ernst Posner and Oliver W. Holmes.

lems quite unlike those of his European counterpart, and to a large extent American archival policies and practices are the necessary result of American recordkeeping practices.

A second major consideration is the autonomy and the multiplicity, under our Federal system of government, of depositories for archival material. This autonomy has encouraged a remarkable diversity of archival techniques, and even with regard to government archival agencies it is difficult to make valid generalizations. American archivists have always been highly individualistic in their methods; and, perhaps more than in any other country, the unity of the archival profession in the United States is a unity provided rather by a common purpose than by common policies and practices.

To these considerations must be added the strong influence on archives administration exerted by librarians and manuscript curators. Both these professions antedate that of the archivist in the United States. In recent years the library influence has diminished at the national level, but the principles and techniques of library classification and cataloging continue to influence the administration of archives in many State archival agencies and in semipublic and private depositories. Equally influential have been the techniques devised by manuscript curators for handling what are generally called "collections" of "historical manuscripts"—more properly, groups of private papers.

Any attempt to describe, and distinguish among, the great variety of practices of American archivists, librarians, and manuscript curators in the management of public and private archives would require several volumes. The purpose here is but to emphasize the existence of this wide range of practices, to indicate the circumstances out of which they originated, and also to underscore the importance of one final consideration—the instability of archival terminology in the United States. Most American archivists today are concerned not with the classification of archives but rather with the "arrangement" of archives. Our preference for this latter term and its specialized meaning can best be understood through a brief survey of the evolution of the concept of archival classification in the United States.

To recapitulate, it is only within a context of the lack of a strong tradition in methodical recordkeeping, the absence of a fully developed registry system, the fluidity of administrative organization, the relatively late establishment of a national archival agency, the institutional autonomy and procedural diversity encouraged by a Federal system of government, the strong influences exerted by the

allied professions of the librarian and the manuscript curator, and the lack of a stable terminology that one can attempt to understand any matter archival in the United States. But, regardless of the particular terms used, we share with archivists everywhere the basic problem of control over the material in our custody. If there is much that appears to be novel in our approach to this problem, there is also much that is traditional and that can be recognized as adapted from European principles and practices.

Early Movement for a Uniform Method of Classification

The history of archives administration in the United States still remains to be written, but much information regarding the early development of archival theory and practice is available in published reports and articles. That history had its real beginnings in the activities of the Public Archives Commission, created in 1899 by the American Historical Association "to investigate and report, from the point of view of historical study, upon the character, contents and functions of . . . public repositories of manuscript records." To avoid duplication of effort with a previously established Historical Manuscripts Commission, the Public Archives Commission agreed to restrict its activities to "documentary material of a public or governmental nature, such as is usually classed under the head of archives, public records, or state papers."[3]

One of the stated objectives of the commission was "the unification and improvement . . . of methods of . . . arranging and preserving official documentary material," but at its first session the members decided against proposing "any specific and detailed plan for public record keeping" to the States. "So long as conditions present few points of similarity in any two states," concluded the commission:

> It is hardly practicable to formulate a scheme which will take account of any considerable number of them, while the proverbial reluctance of American Commonwealths to profit by example makes it unsafe to assume that a scheme that has met approval in one state will, because of that fact, be favorably received in another.[4]

The commission therefore devoted its major efforts for most of the next decade to surveying and compiling lists of archival material in the custody of State and local governments.

[3] American Historical Association, *Annual Report . . . for the Year 1900,* 2:5, 6. Hereafter cited as AHA, *Annual Report.*

[4] AHA, *Annual Report,* 1900, 2:10, 24.

Most of the members of the Public Archives Commission, including the adjunct members it recruited in each State, were professional historians involved in the teaching and writing of history. It was therefore appropriate that the first known plan created specifically for the classification of public archives in the United States was an outline submitted in 1906 by a professor of history to the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of his State. Several years earlier, as an adjunct member of the commission, the author of the plan had prepared a report on the State's public archives.[5]

The classification plan consisted of four parts: a "primary" classification that distinguished between State and local archives, a "formal" classification in terms of either printed or manuscript material, a "historical" classification based upon significant dates in the State's history, and an "administrative" classification that combined elements of each of these parts. In "administrative" classification the public records would first be divided into either State or local. The State archives would then be divided by office of origin; the local archives, by county, township, or city. The material in each of these subdivisions would be classified according to either physical form or subject matter, and the individual items in them would be placed in chronological order.[6]

This plan was adopted as the basis for the classification of the public archives of the State in which it originated, but it was neither endorsed by the Public Archives Commission nor published until some years later, and it had little immediate influence upon the practices of other States. Of greater potential significance in the development of archives administration in the United States were the contemporary activities of another group of professional historians, associated with the new Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Shortly after the creation of the Public Archives Commission the Carnegie Institution of Washington established a Bureau of Historical Research, which undertook the preparation of a series of guides to materials for American history in the major archives and libraries of Europe. Through this program many American scholars acquired a firsthand knowledge of European archival prin-

[5] The plan for classification was submitted by Prof. Benjamin F. Shambaugh to the Iowa State Historical, Memorial and Art Department; Cassius C. Stiles, *Public Archives: A Manual for Their Administration in Iowa,* p. 21–22 (Des Moines, 1928). See also Shambaugh's "Report on the Public Archives of Iowa," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1900, 2:39–46.

[6] The plan is published in Ethel B. Virtue, "Principles of Classification for Archives," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1914, 1:376–377.

ciples and techniques, and—because of the close relationship among the bureau of Historical Research, the American Historical Association, and the Public Archives Commission—these scholars were able to persuade the Public Archives Commission to reconsider its initial decision against seeking uniformity in archival practices in the United States.

At the first Conference of Archivists, sponsored by the commission in 1909, Waldo G. Leland recommended preparation of a manual of archival practice for American archivists. With respect to classification he proposed that "in general, the principle enunciated by the Dutch, and adhered to in most European countries, the 'herkomstbeginsel,' the 'respect des fonds,' or 'principe de la provenance,' should be adopted." Archives, he explained, "should be classified according to their origin; they should reflect the processes by which they came into existence." In a direct attack upon existing practices he warned that "nothing could be more disastrous than the application of modern library methods of classification to a body of archives."[7]

The Public Archives Commission accepted the recommendation for preparation of a manual and assigned the planning responsibility to a subcommittee. In the following year several commission members and other interested scholars participated in the 1910 Brussels International Congress of Archivists, thus strengthening the potential influence of European experience upon the content of the proposed manual.[8] Opposition was encountered, however, not only from librarians, who were committeed to subject classification, but also from manuscript curators, who insisted that since European problems were not identical with American problems a study of European "plans and conclusions" would not result in conclusions "satisfactory" to American archival activity.[9] This basic disagreement impeded progress for nearly 2 years, but at the 1912 Conference of Archivists the views of the historians finally prevailed. All

[7] Waldo G. Leland, "American Archival Problems," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1909, p. 346; see also Leland, "The First Conference of Archivists, December 1909: The Beginning of a Profession," in *American Archivist,* 13: 109–120 (Apr. 1950).

[8] See particularly Cuvelier and Stainier, eds., *Actes, Congrès de Bruxelles, 1910,* p. 463–467, 565–572, but compare p. 112–117, 660. See also Arnold J. F. Van Lear, "The Work of the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians at Brussels, August 28–31, 1910," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1910, p. 282–292, which reported (p. 285) that the Congress had adopted the principle of provenance "as the basis of arrangement and classification of archives."

[9] Thomas P. Martin, "Control of Manuscripts and Manuscript Collections," in Society of American Archivists, *Proceedings, Providence, R.I., December 29–30, 1936 and Washington, D.C., June 18–19, 1937,* p. 28 (Urbana, Ill., n.d.); hereafter cited as SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37.* See also AHA, *Annual Report,* 1910, p. 298.

archives, declared Dr. Leland at that conference, "are produced in the same way, have the same need for preservation and administration, and meet the same fate if neglected." It was therefore obvious, he insisted, that "the principles of archive economy evolved in European practice" were "applicable to American archives."[10]

The subcommittee report on the proposed manual submitted at that conference called for 20 chapters to be written by various specialists, including a chapter on "Classification: Systematization and Notation." In discussing plans for this particular chapter, the subcommittee chairman asserted that archivists could "learn almost nothing from schemes of library classification made for books" and advanced the principle of provenance as the only sound basis for the classification of archives.[11] The initial controversy had been won by the scholars familiar with European experience, but it should be noted that few of these men were heads of archival agencies.

In the following year, at the 1913 Conference of Archivists, the plans for the archives manual were revised to provide for a less comprehensive "primer" of 10 chapters, but a separate chapter would still be devoted to classification. Drafts of two chapters that had been prepared on other topics were discussed at the conference.[12] At the 1914 conference a paper was read on "Principles of Classification for Archives." After reviewing European experience and citing the recommendations of the 1910 Brussels Congress, the author of this paper concluded that "the principle 'respect des fonds' . . . is the established principle of archival classification today." The 1906 plan of classification previously discussed was then offered as a "very simple and concrete illustration" of the principle of provenance as adapted to the archives of one State,[13] but neither the conference nor the Public Archives Commission took any formal action regarding this plan of classification.

The outbreak of World War I spelled the failure of this early movement to create a uniform system of archives administration in the United States. The war diverted the attention of the Public Archives Commission to the problem of war records, and the commission itself was suspended during the immediate postwar years. When the commission was revived on a limited basis in 1921, most

[10] Waldo G. Leland, "Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1912, p. 265; but compare Martin, "Control of Manuscripts," p. 28–29.

[11] Victor Hugo Paltsits, "Plan and Scope of a 'Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists,'" in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1912, p. 254, 260.

[12] AHA, *Annual Report,* 1913, 1:261–265.

[13] Virtue, "Principles of Classification," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1914, 1:374–376.

of the scholars who had promoted its activities had already become involved in other projects, particularly in the movement for a national archives building and the creation of a separate national archival agency. Several attempts were made to revive the project for the primer on archival practice, but the primer was never completed and the chapter on classification remained unwritten.[14]

Classification on Trial

Except in the area of promoting uniform policies and practices, the efforts of the Public Archives Commission on behalf of the cause of archives in the United States were remarkably successful. As a direct result of its activities many States adopted basic archival legislation, and archival agencies were eventually established in nearly 30 States. The methods adopted by these new agencies for the organization and control of their archival holdings, however, were frequently the result of circumstance rather than of choice. In States where archival responsibility was given to the State libraries subject classification was usually adopted, while assignment of archival responsibility to State historical societies frequently resulted in archives organized on the pattern of historical manuscripts. The subject classification of archives in accordance with library principles requires no explanation, but some discussion of the handling of archives as historical manuscripts may be necessary.

The most widely adapted practices of this type were those of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, which in 1903 had been authorized to select and accept archival material of the Federal Government. These practices, as explained in a manual first published in 1913, were based upon the following premises:

[1] . . . *official* papers transferred to the archive bureau from government files should be papers whose administrative value has disappeared and that are officially dead—i.e., papers that actual practice has shown are no longer consulted for administrative purposes.

[2] . . . *official* papers under the control of the archivist come to him usually with an arrangement and indexing born of administrative necessity, and in no wise competent to answer the needs of the historical investigator.

[3] Experience, and by this is meant not the experience of the investigator or user of the manuscripts, but of the archivist, the actual curator of the docu-

[14] See particularly Paltsits, "An Historical Résumé of the Public Archives Commission From 1899 to 1921," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1922, 1: 152–160, and his "Pioneering for a Science of Archives in the United States," in SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37,* p. 41–46.

ments, who is called upon dozens of times a day to locate and produce individual papers and who alone fully comprehends the difficulties of the task, has demonstrated that the strict chronological arrangement by years, months, and days is the only perfectly satisfactory one.

The Manuscript Division therefore advised that "in arranging a large mass of official papers":

The logical method of a chronological order under the various departments from which they emanate is best. . . . The minuteness of this classification will, of course, depend upon the size of the collection; ordinarily the main divisions only of the three coordinate branches [executive, legislative, and judicial] need be considered.

It further advised that if the volume of material was not too large —"only a hundred or so manuscripts . . . representing almost as many subdivisions and bureaus"—the archivist should "ignore a classification more complex than the material itself and arrange the papers in one chronological order, working out the governmental classification, if need be, in the card catalogue."[15]

A few scholars may have understood the organic character and value of archives, but to many American archivists public records no longer needed for current administrative purposes were but historical manuscripts of official origin. The Library of Congress as the official depository for the archives of the National Government provided the example, and the apparent logic and obvious simplicity of its policies and practices insured their wide adoption by other depositories. Thus, the director of one State archival agency, notwithstanding his earlier participation in the 1910 Brussels Congress, declared:

The object to be attained in the arrangement of all governmental archives is to classify them in such manner that the documents will tell the story, in an historical way, of the progress and development of the State and its people from the beginning.

This object, he insisted, could be achieved "only by a chronological method of classification."[16] And in the State that had adopted the 1906 plan of classification, that plan had been transformed by 1928

[15] The above statements are quoted from Library of Congress, *Notes on the Care, Cataloguing, Calendaring, and Arranging of Manuscripts,* by J. C. Fitzpatrick, p. 4, 10, 13–14 (3d ed.; Washington, 1928). For a case study of the application of these policies and practices to the archives of one State, see Frank B. Evans, "The Many Faces of the Pennsylvania Archives," in *American Archivist,* 27:269–283 (Apr. 1964).

[16] Dunbar Rowland, "The Adaptation of Archives to Public Use," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1912, p. 270.

into "a combination of the subject and chronological systems, with the alphabetical arrangement added."[17]

Archival theory and practice in the United States thus made no discernible progress during the two decades after the outbreak of World War I.[18] The success of the movement for a separate national archives, climaxed by passage of the National Archives Act in 1934, however, revived interest and activity in the field of archives. The establishment of the National Archives was followed by another cycle of surveys, this time of records of the Federal Government in and outside Washington. This "stocktaking" of noncurrent records where they lay was of major importance in the development of descriptive techniques; and, because it attempted to identify and describe records in terms of their agency of origin, it was also important in redirecting attention to the organizational approach to the control of record material.[19] An even broader Historical Records Survey, embracing historical manuscripts throughout the country, had similar consequences, but the influence of subject classification continued to be strong. In the inventories resulting from this survey, offices where "historical records" were located were arranged in a "logical" sequence, and the records of each were grouped under general subject headings, with occasional cross-references between similar subject headings under different offices. These represented, in the opinion of the national director of the survey, "merely a beginning in this matter of subject classification."[20]

[17] Stiles, *Public Archives . . . in Iowa,* p. 24–25; compare Virtue, "Principles of Classification," p. 376. See, however, Waldo G. Leland, "Report on the Public Archives and Historical Interests of the State of Illinois," in *Illinois State Education Building Commission Report,* p. 11–53 (Springfield, 1913); and Theodore C. Blegen, *A Report on the Public Archives* (Wisconsin State Historical Society, *Bulletin of Information* no. 94; Madison, Wis., 1918).

[18] This conclusion is based on a study of available published material. For evidence of the continuing interest in classification, however, see David W. Parker, "Some Problems in the Classification of Departmental Archives," in AHA, *Annual Report,* 1922, 1:164–172, which explained Canadian practices; see also the last two items cited in note 17.

[19] See particularly Philip M. Hamer, "Federal Archives Outside the District of Columbia," in SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37,* p. 83–89; and National Archives, *Survey of Federal Archives; the Manual of the Survey of Federal Archives* (Washington, 1936).

[20] Luther H. Evans, "Next Steps in the Improvement of Local Archives," in *Public Documents With Archives and Libraries,* p. 283 (American Library Association, Chicago, 1937). See also his "Archival Progress in the Historical Records Survey," in SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37,* p. 90–95; Sargent B. Child, "Status and Plans for Completion of the Inventories of the Historical Records Survey," in *Archives and Libraries, 1940,* p. 12–25; Margaret S. Eliot, "Inventories and Guides to Historical Manuscript Collections," *ibid.,* p. 26–35; Herbert A. Kellar, "An Appraisal of the

The major activity with regard to classification took place in the new National Archives, which in 1935 created a Division of Classification as part of its internal functional organization. This Division was charged with:

> Conducting basic investigations into technical classification methods in institutions of comparable character and size and with analyzing and interpreting such studies as it finds may affect the final classification procedure to be adopted by The National Archives; with determining the chronological duration of all Government departments and independent agencies and their subdivisions and of the archival series created by them; with making a complete survey and analysis of the various classification plans now in use in the different agencies of the Federal Government; with organizing these classification schemes so as to permit their temporary use for general classification purposes; with developing a logical and comprehensive classification plan based upon the foregoing studies; and with devising a numbering system that will positively identify each archival series in the various collections transferred to The National Archives.[21]

After a year of "general consideration" of the problems of classification and study of existing systems, the Division concluded that "since the scheme evolved for any agency cannot by the very nature of things be used for any other agency because of the differences in function and methods of handling and preserving the documents, the work of classifiers of archival material consists of the continuous formation of schemes of classification into which the records can be fitted." The Division nevertheless remained committed to the ideal of a single overall scheme of classification for the National Archives, one that would "present a logical organization of the papers deposited therein" and that would "show their interrelationships and the functional development of the governmental agencies that produced them."[22]

In view of these developments, the National Archives decided that no "detailed cataloging" of its "collections" would be possible for many years. The organization of the Government had simply been too fluid and too complex; the volume of records to be analyzed in terms of organizational relationships was too great; there were too many decentralized files involving a wide variety of classi-

Historical Records Survey," *ibid.*, p. 44–59; and David L. Smiley, "The W.P.A. Historical Records Survey," in William B. Hesseltine and Donald R. McNeil, eds., *In Support of Clio: Essays in Memory of Herbert A. Kellar,* p. 1–28 (Madison, Wis., 1958).

[21] National Archives, *First Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1935,* p. 15; see also p. 21, 28–29. Hereafter cited as NA, *Annual Report.*

[22] NA, *Annual Report,* 1936, p. 45–47; 1937, p. 18.

fication or filing systems; and the materials that had been transferred to the custody of the National Archives were too frequently disorganized. In the meantime its Division of Cataloging would simply catalog all material by accessions as it was received.[23]

The first practical test of the National Archives classification program was made during 1936–37. By this time it had been decided that the classification scheme "for the entire body of records of each agency" would consist of "a brief history of the agency and its records," a listing of "the series of documents in accordance with the organization as determined," and "the classification symbol assigned to each series." The Division of Classification, in accordance with this plan, completed a "classification scheme for each of the forty-odd divisions of the Washington office of the United States Food Administration, which involved the study and arrangement of 2,850 different series." To each of these series was assigned a classification symbol consisting of three parts:

(1) A name or series of letters identifying the agency concerned;

(2) a number indicating the basic division of the agency and, if necessary, a letter indicating the section or subsection; and

(3) a combination of a letter and a number, the former indicating the group of records or the subdivision of the agency and the latter indicating the series of documents within that group.[24]

This system of classification, in the judgment of one European-trained observer, was "wholly unlike the French system of rationalization of the same name."[25] It was equally unlike any other system that had been developed in the United States. In essence it was based upon the exclusive and rigid application of the organizational approach to the control of records, with an agency's organizational pattern used to identify each of its records series through the application of elaborate symbols. It should be noted, moreover, that nothing in this system violated the principle of provenance.

The establishment of the National Archives also helped revitalize the annual Conference of Archivists, and in 1936 the conference was expanded and transformed into the independent Society of American Archivists. In the proceedings and in the papers

[23] NA, *Annual Report,* 1937, p. 18; 1938, p. 24.

[24] See NA, *Annual Report,* 1937, p. 18; 1938, p. 25. See also Roscoe R. Hill *et al.,* "Round Table Discussion on 'Problems of Classification,'" in SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37,* p. 52–53.

[25] Ernst Posner, "The Development and Problems of Archival Administration in the United States," p. 18 (an unpublished translation by Paul Lewinson from *Drei Vortrage zum Archivwesen der Gegenwart,* Stockholm, 1940).

read at the annual meetings of the new Society the long interrupted debate over the classification of archives was renewed among archivists, librarians, and manuscript curators. At one extreme were those who still regarded archives, particularly those of private origin, as historical manuscripts and called for "adoption of chronological and alphabetical principles, in combination with subject or geographical classification," as the most "practical" solution, while at the other extreme were National Archives staff members who insisted that archives should not be classified "by subject, but by . . . agencies and the subdivisions of these agencies."[26] Between these extremes lay a wide range of opinion and practice. All were agreed that archival classification was something different from library classification, but beyond this point there was very little agreement.[27]

This debate over classification again demonstrated the need for some uniformity in archival terminology. The published papers included, among other terms, the frequent use of the terms—intended to be synonymous—"congeries," "groups," "sets," "serials," and "series," and of the terms "archives," "historical manuscripts," "records," "papers," "files," and "documents"; they used the term "classification" with reference to filing systems and to the life cycle of records; and they frequently made no distinction between "classification" and "arrangement" and even referred to "classified arrangement."[28] The Society of American Archivists did appoint a committee on terminology, but it could obtain agreement neither

[26] Herbert A. Kellar, "The Significance and Use of Business Archives," in SAA, *Proceedings, 1936–37,* p. 38; John R. Russell, "Some Problems in Cataloging Archives," in *Public Documents With Archives and Libraries,* p. 288.

[27] See particularly Hill *et al.,* "Round Table Discussion," p. 52–59; Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr., "Essential Functions in the Organization of the National Archives," in *Public Documents With Archives and Libraries,* p. 259; Margaret C. Norton, "Scope and Functions of a State Archives Department," *ibid.,* p. 266–268, "The Training of Archivists (Informal Discussion)," *ibid.,* p. 298–305; Illinois State Library, *Catalog Rules: Series for Archival Material,* comp. by Margaret C. Norton (Springfield, 1938); Evangeline Thurber, "Suggestions for a Code for Cataloging Archival Material," in *Archives and Libraries, 1939,* p. 42–53; Grace L. Nute, "Suggestions for a Code for Cataloging Historical Manuscript Collections," *ibid.,* p. 54–63; Roscoe R. Hill, "Classification in the National Archives," in *Archives and Libraries, 1940,* p. 60–77; Margaret C. Norton, "Classification in the Archives of Illinois," *ibid.,* p. 78–92; Solon J. Buck, "Essentials in Training for Work With Public Archives and Historical Manuscript Collections," *ibid.,* p. 114–122, with discussion by Miss Norton, p. 123–126; Howard H. Peckham, "Arranging and Cataloging Manuscripts at the William L. Clemens Library," in *American Archivist,* 1:215–229 (Oct. 1938); John R. Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," *ibid.,* 2:169–178 (July 1939); Almon R. Wright, "Archival Classification," *ibid.,* 3:173–186 (July 1940); and Ruth K. Nuermberger, "A Ten Year Experiment in Archival Practice," *ibid.,* 4:250–261 (Oct. 1941).

[28] These terms and their various uses appear in the articles cited above in notes 26 and 27.

on a proposed set of devised terms nor on the common use of existing terms.[29] Such agreement still does not exist in the United States.

The debate also revealed basic disagreements regarding classification within the National Archives. In a closely reasoned discussion of classification problems, one staff member concluded that what was actually involved in the National Archives program was not the application of an intellectual scheme to a body of records, but rather "the assignment of names and placement" of record series in accordance with "determinations of objective fact." He therefore proposed a redefinition of classification to mean:

> The objective determination, by the appropriate techniques of legal and historical research (when necessary), of the agency of origin and agency or agencies of custody of a group of records, the similar determination of the functional types of records represented in the collection, and their boundaries, temporally, geographically, or otherwise objectively delimited.[30]

Other scholars on the National Archives staff approached the classification problem in terms of its European background. Several studies were made of policies and practices in both Eastern and Western Europe, and one of these studies, on "European Archival Practices in Arranging Records," was published by the National Archives in 1939 as a Staff Information Circular. Based largely upon an analysis of manuals and of articles in professional journals, this study surveyed archival theory and practice in France, Prussia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and England. It concluded that "beyond doubt" the "rather elementary principle of *respect des fonds*" was "a *first* principle of archival economy," but it then discussed Carl Gustaf Weibull's widely publicized critical examination of some of the "theoretical superstructures" that had been built upon this principle and the responses to Weibull of R. Fruin and Georg Winter.[31] The author of the study then concluded that in view of American archival conditions:

> The principle developed by the Prussian archivists and elaborated by the Dutch, that the original order developed in registry offices must be maintained,

[29] See Roscoe R. Hill, "Archival Terminology," in *American Archivist,* 6:206–211 (Oct. 1943); and Jacob Hodnefield, "Archives—What Are They?" *ibid.,* 7:128–129 (Apr. 1944). See also Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques,* p. 11 (Chicago, 1956); and Oliver W. Holmes, "'Public Records'—Who Knows What They Are?" in *American Archivist,* 23:3–26 (Jan. 1960).

[30] Paul Lewinson, "Problems of Archives Classification," in *American Archivist,* 2:183–184 (July 1939).

[31] Theodore R. Schellenberg, *European Archival Practices in Arranging Records,* p. 1–17 (National Archives, *Staff Information Circular* no. 5; July 1939).

appears to have in the main an academic interest only. While the greater proportion of records developed by European governments are organized in registry offices before their release to archival institutions, the greater proportion of the records of the Federal Government of the United States are left in a disorganized state . . . . The basic condition, therefore, is generally lacking by which the principles of the German and Dutch archivists concerning the preservation of the original order created by a registry office can be made to apply.

After questioning both the need and the advisability of reconstructing the original order even within individual series and pointing out that "if records are organized by recordkeeping units at the present time, it is generally according to a modification of the Dewey decimal system of subject classification which does not clearly reflect the administrative organization or development of the agency that produced them," the author finally concluded:

No archival principles should be "ridden to death," literally to become fetishes which will prevent a common-sense arrangement of records designed to promote the research needs of scholars and government officials. And since European archival principles cannot be applied indiscriminately without becoming fetishes, it therefore may be necessary that there be evolved with respect to the arranging of records rules that will be the result of a cognizance of American record conditions. . . . Since European archival conditions have made necessary numerous exceptions to the application of any principles that were developed, certainly no rigid adoption of abstract principles in the United States, where records are infinitely more complex and disorganized than those in Europe, would be justified without a consideration of the actual record conditions.[32]

Of all of the proposals advanced to meet American record conditions, that of "functional" as opposed to organizational classification proved to be the most important. While conceding that the administrative history of the agency reflected by an organizational classification of its archives "may conceivably be very interesting," one advocate of the functional approach insisted that this exclusive emphasis upon organization overlooked "the fundamental purpose of classification, whether of books or documents, i.e., to make the material available to searchers."[33]

Necessarily it depends upon the unwarranted assumption that the searcher knows as much about the administrative history as did the classifier on the day that he created the classification scheme. Of course, the very fact that

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 17–18.

[33] Those and the following quotations are from E. G. Campbell, "Functional Classification of Archival Material," in *Library Quarterly*, 11:431, 434–440 (Oct. 1941).

this history is usually so obscure that its discovery takes months of detailed research indicates the fallacy of this hypothesis.

The alternative he proposed was classification of archives "in accordance with the various aspects of the function which they severally represent," although he acknowledged that in practice "the administrative approach will be most convenient in designating fonds." Classification would then simply become "a process of determining the functions performed by any given agency, determining the different formal types of records that agency accumulated, then arranging the series in a rational order in groups which will emerge from the pattern thus established." This functional approach was urged as much better suited to the handling of the vast quantities of complex and unorganized records generated by the National Government, as a great timesaving device since it eliminated the need for minute research, and as a means of simplifying the use of symbols, which had become increasingly complicated. Echoing the refrain of earlier critics of the National Archives classification system, the author of this proposal declared that "new techniques must be evolved to meet problems that were not seen by the European theorists."[34]

From Classification to Arrangement

A rigid organizational classification, based on detailed research in administrative history, had been tried by the National Archives and had been found difficult of practical application. In abandoning this experiment in classification, however, theoretical considerations were less decisive than administrative needs. In the original organization of the National Archives, responsibility for preparing different types of finding aids had been shared by five separate operating units—the Divisions of Accessions, Research, Classification, and Cataloging and the Office of the Director of Publications; and by the custodial divisions as well. After 5 years' effort the Division of Classification had produced classification schemes for the records of less than half a dozen agencies, most of them temporary World War I agencies, and the work of the other units had

[34] The repeated references to European theorists reflected the renewed interest in European policies and practices resulting from the publication in 1937 of the second edition of Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1937), and the publication in 1940 of Arthur H. Leavitt's translation of the second (1920) Dutch edition of the manual of Samuel Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin as *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1940). This interest also resulted in draft translations by National Archives staff members of numerous articles in archival journals of both Eastern and Western Europe, and in the compiling of select annotated bibliographies on all phases of archival administration.

similarly fallen behind. In addition, these units had become largely autonomous in their operations. There was need not only to coordinate and supervise their finding aid work but also to use "the knowledge based upon experience in the Division of Reference and elsewhere in attempting to secure information from records."[35]

Early in 1940 a committee of staff members was appointed "to make a study of finding mediums and other instruments to facilitate the use of records in the custody of the Archivist."[36] This study committee "received statements from and held numerous meetings with members of the staff, studied existing mediums, and considered the results of European experience." It submitted its recommendations to the Archivist early in 1941, and these recommendations, which "provided the basis for a new systematic program for the preparation of finding mediums," were issued by the Archivist as "Directions" to the National Archives staff.[37] One of the directions stated simply that "the preparation of . . . classification schemes shall be discontinued."[38]

Apart from detailed instructions on how the new program was to be put into operation, the directions provided that cataloging by accessions would be discontinued and would be replaced with cataloging by record groups. The term "record group" was defined as "a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and the desirability of making a unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and the publication of inventories." All material in the custody of the Archivist was to be assigned to registered record groups. The record groups were to be described by the divisions having custody of them in "preliminary" inventories and ultimately in "final" inventories, and other types of finding mediums were to be prepared "as need arises."[39]

This new program of arrangement and description—the two terms have since been frequently linked in American usage—was

[35] Philip M. Hamer, "Finding Mediums in the National Archives: An Appraisal of Six Years' Experience," in *American Archivist,* 5:85–86 (Apr. 1942). Compare Posner, "Development and Problems of Archival Administration in the United States," p. 14–15; and Hill, "Classification in the National Archives," p. 67–68.

[36] NA, *Annual Report,* 1941, p. 28.

[37] *Ibid.,* p. 28; compare Hamer, "Finding Mediums," p. 87–88.

[38] NA, *Annual Report,* 1941, p. 65. In the report for 1940 the usual section on "Classification" had already been replaced by a section on "Arrangement and Description of Records," but the section on "Cataloging" had been retained; NA, *Annual Report,* 1940, p. 25, 28. The Division of Classification and the Division of Cataloging were both discontinued in March 1941, and their staffs were distributed among other operating divisions; NA, *Annual Report,* 1941, p. 39.

[39] *Ibid.,* p. 65–67; compare Hamer, "Finding Mediums," p. 88–89.

defended on practical grounds. It had obvious administrative values in a large organization; it was based "not on theory alone, but chiefly upon considerable experience and upon careful consideration of the views of many individuals"; it met the "pressing need for immediately available and usable finding mediums" while still providing for the "ultimate preparation, as circumstances permit, . . . of more nearly definitive finding mediums"; it was flexible; and it gave "adequate consideration . . . to the special circumstances of varied nature which characterize record groups and parts thereof." While admittedly "devised to fit the special needs of the National Archives," the program was regarded as "at least highly suggestive to other archival institutions."[40]

The new program was barely launched by the National Archives before the United States entered World War II. The demands of war bore heavily upon its staff and its programs, and the immediate postwar years necessarily were devoted largely to the problems created by the tremendous record accumulations generated during the worldwide conflict and its aftermath. Out of this experience emerged an expanded National Archives and Records Service under a new General Services Administration, and it was not until 1950 that the task of fully implementing the arrangement and description program could be resumed.

Beginning in 1950 a series of *Staff Information Circulars* and (later called *Staff Information Papers*) was prepared for internal use.[41] These papers necessarily emphasized the practical application of principles of arrangement and description to the records of the National Government. With few exceptions, however, the principles enunciated were actually administrative decisions that have since been modified or changed to meet circumstances and needs. The arrangement practices and techniques developed by the National Archives during this period were later provided with a theoretical and practical foundation by Theodore R. Schellenberg in his *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*,[42] but in some respects Dr. Schellenberg's manual has been superseded by his

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 91–92.

[41] National Archives, *The Preparation Of Preliminary Inventories* (*Staff Information Circular* no. 14, May 1950); *The Control of Records at the Record Group Level* (*Staff Information Circular* no. 15, July 1950); *The Preparation of Lists of Record Items* (*Staff Information Paper* no. 17, 1951; revised Dec. 1960); *Principles of Arrangement* (*Staff Information Paper* no. 18, June 1951).

[42] See particularly p. 17–25, 52–64, which use the term "classification" in reference to the management of current records, and p. 168–193, on "Principles of Arrangement."

later writings or should be supplemented by other writings published by National Archives staff members.[43] The essence of the concept of arrangement is its flexibility, and there is every indication that out of need and experience will emerge still further modifications as it is applied to archival material at other levels of government and to private papers.

The "basic principle of arrangement" is still *respect des fonds,* in the sense that "every document will be traced to its origin and will be maintained as part of a group having the same origin." In practice it "requires that the records of different creating agencies and offices be kept separate and never mixed."[44] This principle is basic to the concept of the record group, but the application of the record group concept also involves consideration of the volume and complexity of the pertinent records. These usually determine the organizational level within the agency at which record groups are established, and it is this flexibility which permits adaptation of the record group concept to the archives of every type of records creator.

Within the record group a second principle is applied—*respect pour l'ordre primitif.* Since in the United States record series are not usually given a designated order by a registry office during their current use, the principle of respecting the original order can be applied directly only to the filing units within series. Our series are more easily identified than defined, but essentially they are composed of "similar filing units arranged in a consistent pattern within which each of the filing units has its proper place." With very few exceptions the original order of filing units within the series is preserved if there is an original order, and obvious displacements within that order are corrected.[45]

The concept of arrangement, however, is much broader than this relatively simple application of two basic principles. The current meaning of the term is best summarized in a recent article by

[43] See Theodore R. Schellenberg, "Arrangement of Private Papers," in *Archives and Manuscripts,* [1]:1–20 (Aug. 1957); and his "Archival Principles of Arrangement," in *American Archivist,* 24:11–24 (Jan. 1961). See also Kenneth W. Munden, "The Identification and Description of the Record Series," *ibid.,* 13:213–227 (July 1950); and Sherrod East, "Describable Item Cataloging," *ibid.,* 16:291–304 (Oct. 1953).

[44] *Staff Information Paper* no. 18, p. 2; Oliver W. Holmes, "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," in *American Archivist,* 27:25 (Jan. 1964). The summary of the current concept of arrangement included in the present report is based largely upon this article by Dr. Holmes.

[45] *Ibid.,* p. 23, 30; compare Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," p. 23–24.

Oliver W. Holmes as involving "five different operations at five different levels." These operations include:

1. *Arrangement at the depository level*—the breakdown of the depository's complete holdings into a few major divisions on the broadest common denominator possible and the physical placement of holdings of each such major division to best advantage in the building's stack areas. . . .

2. *Arrangement at the record group and subgroup levels*—the breakdown of the holdings of an administrative division or branch (as these may have been established on the first level) into record groups and the physical placement of these in some logical pattern in stack areas assigned to the division or branch. This level should include the identification of natural subgroups and their allocation to established record groups.

3. *Arrangement at the series level*—the breakdown of the record group into natural series and the physical placement of each series in relation to other series in some logical pattern.

4. *Arrangement at the filing unit level*—the breakdown of the series into its filing unit components and the physical placement of each component in relation to other components in some logical sequence, a sequence usually already established by the agency so that the archivist merely verifies and accepts it.

5. *Arrangement at the document level*—the checking and arranging, within each filing unit, of the individual documents, enclosures and annexes, and individual pieces of paper that together comprise the filing unit and the physical placement of each document in relation to other documents in some accepted, consistent order.[46]

These operations involve the records themselves, apart from their containers, but they "establish the order of sequence in which records ought to be placed in containers and in which the containers ought to be labeled and shelved." Only with the completion of all of these steps, concludes Dr. Holmes, may it be said that the archival holdings of a depository are under control. "This control may never be established completely (sometimes arrangement at the filing unit or document level may never be fully carried out), but it must be established to an acceptable degree before records description work is possible because finding aids have to refer to specified units in an established arrangement."[47]

This exposition of the arrangement function postulates a general archival agency holding the unorganized archives of many different records creators—the usual situation in the United States. Arrangement and the resulting control then proceed from the depository level down to the individual item level. Institutions holding both

[46] Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," p. 21, 23–24.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 24; compare *Staff Information Paper* no. 18, p. 3.

public records and private papers should obviously first separate their holdings of each of these types of materials and keep them separate. The entire arrangement program requires a maximum of flexibility. At the depository level, for example, arrangement in the sense of apportioning record groups can be done chronologically or hierarchically (according to major government organizations), or on the basis of levels of government (such as central or local), or any combination of these. Frequently, "the size and arrangement of storage areas, the physical nature of the records themselves (often necessitating special areas in the case of technical records such as maps, pictures, and film), the reference activity of the records, the degree of security to be given them, and the number and caliber of personnel needed to work with them" will influence the actual division that is made.[48]

In arrangement at the record group level, the National Archives usually unites records of subordinate offices under their superior offices up to the bureau level. To avoid creation of an unmanageable number of record groups, the records of diplomatic and consular posts, for example, or those of smaller and often temporary agencies performing similar functions, such as claims commissions, are grouped together into "collective record groups." From its holdings in 1943 the National Archives initially established 206 record groups, and as a result of further studies and accessions it now has about 350. The flexibility and administrative value of the record group concept are demonstrated by its successful application to such holdings as gift motion pictures and private papers. A record group may be variously defined by different institutions, concludes Dr. Holmes,

> so long as the definition is applied consistently throughout the establishment. Some such concept is needed in all archival depositories having the care of records created by many different agencies and organizations. Once established, record groups are usually the basic units for administrative control; that is, for arrangement, description, reference service, and statistical accounting and reporting.[49]

Under the record group concept any particular unit of records can belong to only one record group. Each new accession is allocated to its proper existing record group or, if it is not part of an existing one, to a new record group. With the exception of special

[48] Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," p. 25; see also *Staff Information Paper* no. 18, p. 4–7.

[49] Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," p. 27. See also Ernst Posner, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist," in *American Archivist,* 18:211 (July 1955).

physical types of records, all records belonging to the same record group are kept together in the stack area. The subgroup concept is used to distinguish among, and to control the records of, the subordinate offices that have been united to constitute the record group.[50]

Arrangement at the series level, in the sense of working out a logical order of series with relation to each other, is the most difficult part of this program. Under American recordkeeping practices the originating agency rarely establishes a set order for series within a record group. It is at this point that the archivist must have a knowledge of the administrative history of the agency and of the records themselves. He must first determine what are the series in any given record group and subgroup and then must give these series a "meaningful" physical order. Because of our system of recordkeeping there can be no "one perfect arrangement sequence" for series. Whenever possible the Dutch rules regarding "backbone" and correspondence series are applied. Agency-created indexes or other controls or finding media are placed close to the series to which they apply, and series of operating or substantive records are usually placed before series of housekeeping and facilitative records.[51]

In arriving at an arrangement for substantive records, "functions and the sequence of action within functions" are frequently the determing factor, but in large record groups series may be grouped "according to chronological periods, by major breaks in the filing systems, or on a functional basis." The final arrangement of series should be "not only logical but revealing of any agency's history and accomplishments."[52] The flexibility of the concept of arrangement as applied at the series level—a flexibility required by American recordkeeping practices—thus permits the archivist to use—either individually or in combination—chronological, organizational, or functional "classification," as that term has been used frequently in the United States. Because of American record conditions, arrangement at this level must be a constructive rather than simply a preservative kind of arrangement. It is this kind of constructive arrangement that characterizes the task of the American archivist, and it is his major contribution in making archives usable while still preserving their integrity.

Arrangement at filing unit level has already been discussed, but

[50] See *Staff Information Paper* no. 18, p. 7–10.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 10–12.
[52] Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," p. 29, 32.

it should be noted that physical rearrangement "to serve more efficiently . . . longterm reference demands" is permitted when it does not essentially violate the integrity of the records, or when "records have been so badly disarranged that the original organization cannot be fully restored with confidence unless excessive time is spent in research." The final level of arrangement, of documents within filing units, is usually practiced only in connection with the flattening of folded records and in connection with microfilming.[53]

This is the current concept of arrangement as developed by the National Archives to meet the particular requirements of the archives of the National Government. The term "arrangement" dates back to the original Public Archives Commission, but the concept today is sufficiently flexible to be applied to the archives of any records creator, public or private. This concept is taught in academic courses in the administration of modern archives and in the summer institutes inaugurated by Ernst Posner as a cooperative venture of the National Archives, The American University, the Library of Congress, and the Maryland Hall of Records. These institutes, whose previous directors have included Dr. Posner and Dr. Schellenberg and whose guest lecturers include Dr. Holmes and other National Archives staff members who helped to develop this concept, have been attended by practicing archivists in every field of archival activity and by manuscript curators and librarians. The institutes, the publications of the National Archives, and the quarterly journal of the Society of American Archivists, the *American Archivist,* represent the most recent and by far the most successful method of achieving the degree and kind of uniformity in archival policy and practice that is appropriate to a country with no centrally directed and controlled archival system.[54]

The future of archival "classification" in the United States? In

[53] *Ibid.,* p. 35–37. See also *Staff Information Paper* no. 18, p. 12–14; and Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," p. 19–23.

[54] The most authoritative and convenient source for the current practices of archival agencies at the State level is *American State Archives,* by Ernst Posner (Chicago, 1964). For the influence of the concept of arrangement on the handling of private papers, see Katherine E. Brand, "Developments in the Handling of Recent Manuscripts in the Library of Congress," in *American Archivist,* 16:99–104 (Apr. 1953); the same author's "The Place of the Register in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress," *ibid.,* 18:59–68 (Jan. 1955); Dorothy V. Martin, "Use of Cataloging Techniques in Work With Records and Manuscripts," *ibid.,* 18:317–336 (Oct. 1955); Richard C. Berner, "The Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts," *ibid.,* 23:395–406 (Oct. 1960); and the same author's "Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," *ibid.,* 27:401–409 (Oct. 1964). See also Nathan Reingold, "Subject Analysis and Description of Manuscript Collections," in *Isis,* 53:106–112 (Mar. 1962).

launching its program of arrangement and description the National Archives indicated that its "preliminary" inventories of record groups would eventually be replaced by "final" inventories that would include "the assignment of simple symbols" to record series.[55] No such final inventories have yet been prepared, but it is not unlikely that when this stage of the program is reached the debate over classification will again be revived. Perhaps at that time another report will complete this account of how U.S. record conditions have necessitated modifications in archival policies and practices within the broad framework of the principles that are basic to our common profession.

An Explanation

Although this report incorporates observations and study of current archival practices throughout the United States, it is based upon the conviction that it is of less value to know how many depositories practice each type of classification or arrangement, and where they are located, than to understand the reasons for the still existing diversity and the nature of the efforts made to develop a practical degree of uniformity. Only in terms of this background and of the basic considerations indicated at the beginning of this report would any survey of current practices be intelligible. And in the final analysis it is not this diversity but the increasing influence of the concept of arrangement throughout the United States that is of true significance. It is within this concept that the "modern methods of arrangement of archives in the United States" are to be found.

In the light of his own experience, Dr. Schellenberg once wrote that "an American archivist going abroad is well advised to proceed cautiously and humbly; for American ways of doing things are not necessarily better than those of other countries; they are merely different."[56]

[55] NA, *Annual Report,* 1941, p. 66.

[56] T. R. Schellenberg, "Applying American Archival Experience Abroad," in *American Archivist,* 19:33 (Jan. 1956).

Could or Should?

No historian could commit a single word to paper without the assistance of archivists to guide him through the manuscripts committed to their care.

—Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party,* p. vii (New York, 1964).