Archival Principles and the Curator of Manuscripts

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THE THEME of this paper was indicated in Everett O. Alldredge's presidential address at the 1964 meeting of the Society of American Archivists, when he urged the Society's Committee on Manuscripts to work to establish standards for the arrangement and description of private papers.

> As archivists, [he said,] I believe we are coming to some agreement on arrangement along the lines of Oliver Holmes' article on the five levels [see *American Archivist,* 27:21–41 (Jan. 1964)]. The attempt to come to an agreement on description, perhaps by rallying around Dr. Schellenberg's forthcoming book, is surely worth intensive exploration, especially in view of the reliance of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections on good reporting.[1]

During recent years T. R. Schellenberg has been the foremost advocate of the applicability of archival methods to manuscripts. Thus it comes as no surprise that the preface to his new book, *The Management of Archives*, states that he "proceeded on the assumption that the principles and techniques now applied to public records may be applied also, with some modification, to private records, especially to private manuscript material of recent origin, much of which has the organic character of archival material."[2]

Not so many years ago spokesmen for the emerging archival profession were firmly insisting on differences between archives and historical manuscripts. Muller, Feith, and Fruin, the Dutch archival trinity, believed that a sharp distinction should be maintained between archival documents and manuscripts; and they said that even when manuscripts had been presented to an archival institution and the archivists found it necessary to consult the manuscripts fre-

The author, former curator of manuscripts at the Illinois State Historical Library, is studying at the University of Chicago Graduate Library School. This paper was read at the 29th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, New York City, October 7, 1965, at the session "Do Archival Techniques Meet the Needs of the Manuscript Library?"

[1] Everett O. Alldredge, "Still To Be Done," in *American Archivist,* 28:4–5 (Jan. 1965).

[2] Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives,* p. ix (New York and London, 1965).

quently, the manuscripts should nevertheless be housed separately, preferably in a nearby public library. Hilary Jenkinson deplored the readiness with which French and Belgian archivists accept private papers and their penchant for frequent purchases of isolated letters and documents.[3]

Neither Jenkinson nor the Dutch archivists gave any consideration in their manuals to the possibility that archival methods ought to be used for historical manuscripts. At the Sixth Conference of Archivists that met in conjunction with the American Historical Association in 1914, however, Waldo G. Leland distinguished between historical manuscripts and archives, pointed out that the rules for cataloging manuscripts do not apply to archives, and announced his intention of treating the subject in a proposed primer of archival economy.[4]

This primer was never completed, but Dr. Schellenberg presented a similar view in 1956 in his *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*. In a chapter exploring the relationships between the archival and library professions, he wrote: "The manuscript holdings of libraries cannot be differentiated from archives on the basis of their form, their authorship, or their value"; but he said that they do differ because archives "grow out of some regular functional activity" whereas manuscripts do not. Manuscripts might be grouped into collections concerning persons, families, institutions, or organizations, Schellenberg said; but they would still "lack the cohesiveness that archives derive from their relation to activity or purpose." In States where there were no funds for a separate archival institution, he conceded, "the administration of archives may well be combined with that of private papers and historical manuscripts . . . so long as the distinctions among the various types of materials, the methodology that applies to each of them, and the administrative requirements of an archival program are fully understood." Schellenberg, to be sure, did state that methods of arranging and describing manuscript collections and archives are "somewhat similar," and, he indicated, "Librarians and archivists . . . can contribute equally to the development of a method for their treatment."[5]

[3] S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives,* p. 152–155 (translation of 2d ed. by Arthur H. Leavitt; New York, 1940); Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration,* p. 43 (London, 1937).

[4] "Proceedings of the Sixth Conference of Archivists, Chicago, Dec. 31, 1914," in American Historical Association, *Annual Report . . . 1914,* p. 384 (Washington, 1916).

[5] Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques,* p. 18–21 (Chicago, 1956).

These remarks, as I understand them, fall somewhat short of statements sometimes heard today to the effect that manuscripts are essentially archival in nature, that library methods developed for printed books are totally inapplicable, that the rules developed for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections are unduly influenced by library methods, that these rules should be abandoned in favor of archival techniques, and in particular that the card catalog is ineffective as a finding aid for manuscripts and should be superseded by the inventory.

The literature on the relationship between archives and manuscripts might remind some military observers of the tactical considerations that govern the gradual establishment of control over additional sectors of occupied territory. Early archivists, in effect, assumed that manuscripts were hopelessly lost to the librarians, and as part of their battle to prevent the same thing from happening to archives they emphasized the differences between historical manuscripts and archives. Archivists had kind things to say about improvements by librarians in the administration of printed materials, but the literature is replete with horrible examples of what can happen when library principles of classification and description are applied to archives. As the years passed, however, and as it appeared that librarians had become relatively docile as far as archives were concerned, and as it became increasingly evident that the traditional methods of manuscript catalogers could not cope with the Mongolian hordes in the form of bulky 20th-century collections, some archivists and manuscript curators began to have second thoughts. Perhaps manuscripts and archives were not so different after all.

The growing belief that archival principles are applicable to manuscripts was reinforced by the fact that many collections of "historical manuscripts" are in reality fugitive archives—the official records of an agency or an organization that had found their way into private hands and eventually into libraries. At the first annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, in 1937, Randolph G. Adams commented on the "tremendous number of collections of papers which are certainly archival in character" listed in published guides to manuscripts issued by the older libraries and historical societies in America. Curtis W. Garrison of the Hayes Memorial Library clearly had in mind the papers of Presidents and other officials who regarded their records as personal property when he referred at the next annual meeting to "the impossibility of separating the private nature of an official from his public nature." Garrison estimated that of about 160 manuscript collections re-

ceived by the Library of Congress before 1932, some 35 contained archival documents.[6]

Recent redefinitions have expanded the proportion of manuscript collections thought to be archival in nature by relying on the concept of "organic" qualities. In an article published in 1956, "Historical Manuscripts as Archives," Lester J. Cappon defined three groups of historical manuscripts, one of which consisted of "bodies of organic papers of persons or families, organizations, or institutions." Cappon concluded that "it is the inherent archival character of most historical manuscripts that is their most important attribute." In his recent book, *The Management of Archives,* Schellenberg has written, ". . . most private records have the organic quality of public records and are therefore archival in character." Among these he included "all records produced by persons in relation to extended activities," as well as records produced by businesses, churches, schools, and other corporate bodies. "Only small groups of personal papers," he wrote, "and artificial collections brought together from a large number of sources, lack organic characteristics."[7]

Our attempts to evaluate the extent to which archival principles and techniques are useful in the administration of manuscripts can hardly be successful unless we keep firmly in mind a few general characteristics of manuscripts, their use in research, and current practices in manuscript departments. This is especially important if we try to formulate standards and press for their adoption by American libraries. I should like, therefore, to submit the following propositions for your consideration.

First, archival theory and practice, at least in the United States, has never consisted of a monolithic codification of principles and rules to which every true archivist owes unquestioning obedience. Although archivists have generally observed the commandment concerning provenance, they have been known to quarrel among themselves about the inviolability of the original order; and practices with respect to inventories and other finding aids have differed considerably from country to country and within the United States from institution to institution. Schellenberg, for instance, has commented on variant practices resulting from the series of rolls in the

[6] Randolph G. Adams, "The Character and Extent of Fugitive Archival Material," in *American Archivist,* 2:88 (Apr. 1939); Curtis W. Garrison, "The Relation of Historical Manuscripts to Archival Materials," *ibid.,* 2:98–99.

[7] Lester J. Cappon, "Historical Manuscripts as Archives: Some Definitions and Their Application," in *American Archivist,* 19:103, 110 (Apr. 1956); Schellenberg, *Management of Archives,* p. 65–66.

Public Record Office, the registry system in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and the self-indexing filing systems generally used in the United States.[8]

This adaptability of archival theory poses some difficulties for our inquiry. We should avoid the mistake of assuming that archival techniques are limited to those now in use in the various State and Federal archival institutions. One of the best recommendations for Schellenberg's *Management of Archives,* in fact, is his freedom from dogmatism and his willingness to accept necessary modifications in archival theory in the chapters concerning manuscripts. Our specific inquiry could become meaningless, however, if we simply conclude that manuscript collections share certain characteristics with archives and then use the label "archival" for any technique that seems to provide effective control over manuscripts.

Second, the dichotomy between "library techniques" and "archival techniques" sometimes encountered in archival literature can be misleading. Discussions based on this dichotomy usually stress the similarities between archives and manuscripts and the differences between both of these and books, state that library methods are useful only for the arrangement and description of individual items, imply that the manuscript curator must choose between either library or archival methods, and conclude that archival methods are obviously the correct choice. Richard Berner, for instance, has stated that the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and most manuscript curators have erred by adopting library methods, and he has urged that a "unitary approach" to archives and manuscripts be adopted.[9]

A more accurate analysis of current practices in major manuscript departments would conclude that they combine and modify both library and archival methods. Grace Nute, for instance, did give some rules for individual item cataloging in the manual she prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society in 1936, but she was well aware that group description is necessary for large collections. At an American Library Association session on archives and manuscripts in 1939, she said that one collection at the Minnesota Historical Society contains over a million items, pointed out that it would take the entire staff a lifetime to index the collection by author alone, and cautioned her audience, "you must accustom

[8] *Modern Archives,* p. 67–71, 78–93, 173–186, 198–214.

[9] Richard C. Berner, "Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist,* 27:401–409 (July 1964); and his "Manuscript Collections and Archives—A Unitary Approach," in *Library Resources & Technical Services,* 9:213–220 (Spring 1965).

yourselves to the idea that the science of manuscript care and cataloging is different from library science."[10] During the last several decades major libraries have relied increasingly on group descriptions for manuscripts, either in the form of a main entry for each collection on several cards in a card catalog or in the form of inventories, registers, or similar finding aids.

Manuscript curators continue to give some attention to individual items, especially in collections containing approximately 10,000 items or less that have high research value and are heavily used. Few libraries, however, continue to prepare a separate card for each letter or document. Entries for major correspondents more frequently consist of one card for each author in a collection, giving the inclusive dates of the letters and the total number of items and sometimes listing the dates of letters.

The control possible through entries for correspondents can effectively reduce the number of hours spent by the staff in reference work and by scholars in futile searches. There is no need, for example, for the researcher to comb through an entire collection before he can be sure that all of the letters by a particular author have been located. As Frontis W. Johnston has observed, this becomes necessary when a finding aid lists the names of major correspondents but gives no information about the dates or the number of letters.[11]

Such entries for major correspondents, it should be noted, take considerably less time to prepare than the earlier systems of individual item cataloging that used one or more cards for each letter or document; less time is consumed because the entries for correspondents need not include information concerning the place where each item was written, the recipient, the recipient's address, the form of the item (*e.g.*, A.L.S. or L.S.), the size, or a description of the contents of each item.

Failure to distinguish between earlier and more recent approaches to control over individual items has vitiated some of Richard Berner's remarks condemning present systems of manuscript cataloging. One would never realize from what Berner has written that group description is possible in a card catalog as well as in an inventory. Even entries for major correspondents can be considered a form of group description, since each card contains information

[10] Grace Lee Nute, *The Care and Cataloguing of Manuscripts as Practiced by the Minnesota Historical Society*, p. 30 (Saint Paul, 1936), and her "Suggestions for a Code for Cataloging Historical Manuscript Collections," in American Library Association, *Archives and Libraries*, p. 58 (Chicago, 1939).

[11] "A Historian Looks at Archives and Manuscripts," in *American Archivist*, 19: 230 (July 1956).

about all the letters by any one writer in a collection. It is interesting to note that Schellenberg has recommended that libraries should prepare inventories for preliminary control over manuscript collections but that the information in the inventories should later be transferred to catalog cards. "Every manuscript repository," he writes, "should prepare a catalog of its manuscript collections for its own use and for use in cooperative cataloging projects. A catalog is the only type of finding aid that facilitates a pooling of information about the documentary resources of a nation."[12] One suspects that Berner might feel that Schellenberg has been associating too much with librarians and has fallen from a state of grace.

Third, some kind of comprehensive index to the holdings of an institution or a nation is more essential for manuscripts than for archival materials, because (a) manuscript collections generally have less unity than archival groups, (b) there are generally many more manuscript collections in a major manuscript depository than there are record groups in an archival institution, and (c) a sizable proportion of manuscript collections consists of the papers of individuals or families who were relatively obscure but who corresponded with someone of importance or whose records contain information of value on various activities, localities, historical developments, or other subjects.

Government agencies, businesses, and private organizations are usually established to accomplish some specific purpose. When someone writes or inquires about something irrelevant to this purpose, the person is usually referred elsewhere. This procedure gives the records of such agencies and organizations a unity that is rarely found in the papers of an individual or a family.

No matter how "extended" the activities of an individual may be in politics, literature, a science, or some other vocation, he is likely to have a still broader range of other interests. Anyone studying the development of higher education in the Midwest during the late 19th century, for instance, might be expected to find his way to the private papers of an influential university president. But suppose that the president's son wrote home about his service under Theodore Roosevelt in the Spanish-American War, or suppose that a niece worked with Jane Addams at Hull House, or suppose that a former classmate wrote of his experiences as a physician and first president of the medical society in a western State. How can a researcher be expected to find his way to this collection for such subsidiary subjects unless there is some kind of comprehensive

[12] *Management of Archives,* p. 270.

subject index or catalog? The problem is intensified when one takes into account the number of collections in a major institution. As Schellenberg has pointed out, the National Archives has only about 380 record groups whereas a large manuscript department may have thousands of manuscript collections.[13] A researcher can hardly be expected to skim through a thousand unindexed inventories from about as many institutions in order to be sure that he has found all the pertinent collections.

Fourth, any attempt to develop standards should keep in mind the possibility that some libraries may eventually be able to develop automated finding aids for manuscripts that would replace both the card catalog and the inventory.

The recent report on *Automation and the Library of Congress* stated that the Manuscript Division and several other divisions were not included in the survey because they contain materials that differ markedly from the central library collection and because many automated functions could not be applied without extensive modification. The possibility of automated finding aids for manuscripts, however, is sure to receive further consideration at the Library. Russell M. Smith, the new head of the Presidential Papers Section, has specialized in the use of automatic equipment to produce indexes, and he recently represented the Manuscript Division at a colloquium on "Information Retrieval for Historical Materials" sponsored by the Drexel University School of Library Science.[14]

It seems reasonable to suppose that major university libraries will automate more and more functions during the next three decades but that most historical societies and smaller libraries will be unable to do so. It also seems probable that departments of manuscripts or special collections will be among the last to be automated. Once computers and other necessary equipment are available in a library, however, it may be possible to apply automation to manuscripts, perhaps by devising machine-readable inventories. Develop-

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 269–270.

[14] Library of Congress, *Automation and the Library of Congress*, p. 38 (Washington, 1963), and *Information Bulletin*, 24:410–411 (Aug. 2, 1965). Since the present paper was prepared the Manuscript Division has "inaugurated one of the major phases of a comprehensive system that may soon give it the most completely automated records of any reference division in the Library of Congress. Punched cards have now been put to use as call slips in the Manuscript Division Reading Room and are serving a variety of record-keeping purposes in the division. . . . A related program, still experimental but showing great promise from a series of tests that have been made, is aimed at automatically indexing the finding aids to some 500 of the division's collections . . . ." *Information Bulletin*, 25:389 (July 14, 1966).

ment of such a system, of course, would require curators who are knowledgeable not only about historical research and the nature of manuscript collections but also about automation and information retrieval.

In the course of any inquiry it eventually becomes necessary to try to give a direct answer to a direct question. Precisely how useful are archival techniques to the manuscript curator?

For some collections archival techniques are obviously the only possible answer. It takes little to convince a curator who is faced with a 300,000-item collection of the papers of a Governor or U.S. Senator that the original order is satisfactory and that description by series will do quite nicely. It is one thing, however, to have a dozen or so collections for which preliminary inventories are the only available finding aids and quite another to be dependent on unindexed inventories for several thousand collections.

Richard Berner's suggestion that a comprehensive index could be prepared to all of the inventories in an institution seems to me to have considerable merit.[15] Apparently no archival institution has ever prepared such an index; so it is a moot question whether or not this is an archival technique. But mere labels, after all, are comparatively unimportant. Such an index could consist of cards that list the names of major correspondents and subjects and refer the researcher to the appropriate inventories for more detailed information.

The card catalog can be equally satisfactory for small collections. Many collections, after all, can be described adequately in a main entry consisting of two or three cards. It takes no more time to prepare a subject or correspondent card referring the reader to a main entry than it takes to prepare a card referring him to an inventory. Possibly main entries could be combined in one alphabetical catalog with index entries to the main entries and to the inventories for larger collections.

Even when series do not already exist in a collection it will often be advisable to create them. Most researchers are primarily interested in correspondence, diaries, speeches, and similar materials. When financial, legal, and other miscellaneous papers are included in one chronological series with correspondence, the researcher simply has to go through larger quantities of chaff in order to find pertinent information.

Description by series alone will usually be inadequate for correspondence, although little more may be necessary for series of

[15] "Manuscript Collections," in *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 9:213.

account books and similar materials. This point, however, seems to be conceded in recent archival literature.

Manuscript curators are likely to find much that they can agree with in Schellenberg's *Management of Archives,* partly because the administration of manuscripts has already been greatly influenced by archival principles during recent decades and partly because Schellenberg has effected further modifications in archival theory that bring it in line with what manuscript curators are now doing.

There are two major points, however, on which I feel compelled to disagree with Schellenberg. First, he gives little or no attention to control over major correspondents in his chapter on "Description of Manuscript Collections." In the previous chapter he does recommend that the preliminary inventory list the names of all important persons, corporate bodies, and places mentioned in a collection. For reasons given above, however, I believe that a mere list of the names of correspondents without further information about their letters gives inadequate control. Second, Schellenberg recommends the use of 12 broad subject headings subdivided into subtopics or specific topics. This seems to me to be regression rather than progress. Participants at the workship on the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections at the 1964 meeting of the Society of American Archivists considered the combined index for 1959–62 to be an improvement over the previous index because the new index refers to specific rather than general subjects and contains a much wider variety of subject headings. It seems to me that the same is true for subject cataloging.

With these exceptions *The Management of Archives* is a remarkable achievement, and it will justifiably have great influence on the administration of both archives and manuscripts. Whether or not all the procedures that Schellenberg proposes are embodied in formal standards, the book deserves first place in any required reading list for well-informed curators.

Public Vagueness

Quite a lot of staff time in dealing with enquiries is spent in explaining the methods of using the Record Office. A recent example which springs to mind of public vagueness on this subject is that of the gentleman who wrote to ask that certain bundles of records be sent to him for examination. More publicity is obviously required to enlighten the public . . . .

—E. H. SARGEANT, *Twenty Second Report of the County Archivist . . . 1965–66,* p. 14 (Worcester, England, 1966).