

The Use of Forms in the Control of Archives at the Accessioning and Processing Level

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THERE are as many control forms used for the accessioning and arranging functions of archival work as there are archival agencies. Each agency responding to the request of the Forms Manual Subcommittee (of the SAA State and Local Records Committee) has its own idea of what is essential or nonessential in control forms.

Archival agencies from 17 States and four Canadian Provinces submitted examples of accessioning and progress forms. If one may judge from geographical distribution, the use of forms at the accessioning and arranging level is primarily a Midwestern phenomena, with the expected use of such forms from the major archival agencies in the Old South, Mid-Atlantic, Pacific Northwest, and the Southwest including our host State. One could rashly conclude that forms for accessioning and arranging are generally not in vogue elsewhere. But, I hastily add, this would be invalid. In studying the multistyled, variously printed, rainbow-hued forms, the most obvious conclusion is a variant of one of Parkinson's laws—simply, that the number and amount of forms used vary proportionately with the funds and personnel available. Consequently, a discussion of forms and forms usage must take into consideration cost, space taken for additional administrative records, and employee time needed to keep such records.

In addition all forms used must meet the same criteria. The essential factors are: clarity, simplicity, readability, suitability and usefulness, flexibility, and relationship—when compared to the records the forms are to describe and to similar forms used by the same agency.

The forms studied in accessioning and arranging usually fell into several well-defined categories. Within the area are such forms as transmittal sheets, gift and loan agreements and receipts, requisition of records forms, accessions records, accessions registers and logs, accessioning and processing forms, work sheets, repair and rehabilitation control forms, labels, and manuals.

The last two classes—labels and manuals—will not be discussed here. The eventual publication of a manual is the goal of the State and Local Records Committee; and my only comment concerning labels is that they

The author, State Archivist, Michigan Historical Commission, and member of the State and Local Records Committee of the Society of American Archivists, read this paper on Oct. 18, 1967, at a workshop sponsored by the State and Local Records Committee during the Society's 31st annual meeting at Santa Fe, N. Mex.

are universally too small and usually unreadable except at direct eye level a foot or two away from a 100-watt bulb. (Are there any such optimum areas in the average archives stacks?)

The other classes can be discussed in the same chronological sequence as they are used. Whenever a new record group or series enters the Elysian field of an archives, the first control form is generally the transmittal record. A transmittal record functions primarily as an internal device—as an expanded label accompanying a record group from its origin to its new location in the archives. Most transmittal forms originate either within a records center or within the agency where the records are created; archives usually do not become involved. It also seems that when used—if used at all—this form is frequently a nonpermanent record, useful almost exclusively as a label to accompany a record group to the processing area. In effect, transmittal forms are like the shipping labels on a package. The essential information contained on the label is the name and address of the sender, date, and perhaps a very brief description of the contents. As a control form, the transmittal record is related to all the other forms created to expedite the movement of records into an archives.

Like transmittals, gift and bequest loan forms are developed to aid both the movement and the disposition of records. The committee received samples of gift and loan forms from 12 States and 2 Provinces. Some forms were excessively simple, and others quite excessive. One form was part letter of acknowledgment and part legal agreement—but not exactly either. Another form was a definite contractual document to be signed by both donor and recipient (the archivist) in the presence of witnesses.

To be effective, a gift or loan form must be lucid in language, explicitly delineating the relationship between the gift of the donor and the obligation of the recipient. Three of the forms studied left no space for any restriction on access or use, nor did they specify the purpose of the gift or loan or establish the duration of any loan period. These, it would seem, are factors essential to the creation of any such gift or loan form. In addition, of course, any gift or loan form or receipt should include space for the name and address of donor and recipient, date, and signatures of both parties.

As mentioned, both transmittal record and gift and loan forms have been created largely to facilitate the physical movement of records. As a result, many archivists view these forms as having limited utility and retain them only for the time it takes to move records or complete the duration of a loan.

The first “permanent”—to use a debatable term—control form used by most archival agencies is the accessions log or register. These are permanent records providing information concerning the receipt of all documents and are related to the forms already discussed in that

their entries must contain all the information given on either a transmittal record or gift or loan form.

It is vital to proper archival control that there exists some permanent record to furnish an immediate commentary on all material received by a depository. In his *Management of Archives* T. R. Schellenberg emphasizes the paramount importance of registering immediately in a log the number or symbol assigned by the archives to each new acquisition, the date, the source from which it was obtained, the terms under which the records may be used, the name of the agency that created them, the place and date of their creation, and the quantity. Without this minimal information, the control of a record group or series is lost. I am sure that each of us has recurrent nightmares of some situation where, because a group or series was not entered into a log, it became "lost," only to be identified quite by accident many months later.

Of the logs studied for this discussion, some left inadequate space, two omitted the donor's name, another left no space to describe the quantity of the incoming records, and three had no provision for even a short description of the records. Two had no space showing the place of origin or future location of items, and one accessions log seemed to be more of a transmittal label following records during repair and lamination. The conclusion reluctantly drawn is that, although the accessioning log or register should be a permanent record of administrative and legal control, the creation and use of this form definitely affords an area for improvement within the profession.

The accessions log used by the North Carolina Department of Archives and History is among the best. In its form, on large ledger-size sheets retained in a ring post binder, there is adequate space for date, name and address of donor, explanation of type of holding (such as gift or loan), description of records, assigned symbol or number and location, and additional remarks.

A log then functions as a permanent register of entries. It also provides an immediate description for reference and generally is the first written statement establishing the relationship of the new group to all others in an archives.

In the next step the accessions form, as a control device, establishes the precise relationship of one document to all others in the group. Here too, the accessions forms currently used by archival agencies do not fulfill their basic function. Of the 11 forms studied, less than half had space for accession numbers and the forms from 2 archives had no space for a description of the nature of the records. Three others were unsatisfactorily arranged.

The best accessions forms are the simplest, just as the best control forms are those that relate to and follow a record group through all the steps of its organization and its final shelving. All accessions forms, whether registers or logs or accessions work sheets or repair forms,

contain similar information. All are concerned with providing a record of provenance as well as evidence of professional preservation and organization of a record group before shelving. The minimal information essential for such forms is: accession number or symbol, title of record group and/or donor's name, description, list of work accomplished and remaining to be completed, and dates of work completed.

So-called formal work sheets contain similar information but also serve as work and repair sheets. These detailed forms, however, relate only to specific parts of a group and function the same as the rough notes normally made during processing that are the basis for the final arrangement and inventory. As a result, one concludes that many work sheets now used are highly refined but nonessential.

Forms exist to make work easier, not to add to it. Consequently the best form for accessioning or processing is one that contains all information on a single card or sheet. A combined accessioning/processing form—or A and P control form—provides space for accessioning symbols or numbers, name of donor or record group, a brief description of the records, and details of work done and remaining to be done. Samples of such combined A and P forms were submitted by archival agencies in North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The form for North Carolina provides all necessary information and also provides for such meaningful refinements as a check space to record whether or not a letter of acknowledgment has been sent and the date on which it was mailed. The North Carolina form is printed on regular correspondence-size bond paper; the advantage of this is that such a form can be filed conveniently in a regular file folder or cabinet.

The form used in Ohio is, on the other hand, of Kardex-card size and is, I understand, an adaptation of the card used in Wisconsin. In both cases the face of the card is for the accession and the verso is designed for a permanent processing record. In both cases, the combined accessioning/processing form functions as *the* main control card for all incoming material. In Wisconsin the card is initiated immediately following a disposal authorization by the Committee on Public Records. When the record group is transferred to the archives this card becomes an accession form. Once the final organization of a record group is begun, the verso of the card becomes a processing form. Upon completion of the organization of the record series, the card is placed in a permanent card file. And, at the end of each fiscal year the completed card serves as a ready source for annual statistics.

A single accessioning/processing card serves several control functions: as a transmittal or authorization control, as an accessioning and as a work-in-progress control, and as a permanent record of work completed. This form is the best of some 80 control forms submitted to the subcommittee in the area of accessioning and processing. All the basic

criteria—clarity, simplicity, utility, relationship and flexibility—are met. In addition the cost of such a form and the time spent in completing it are within reason.

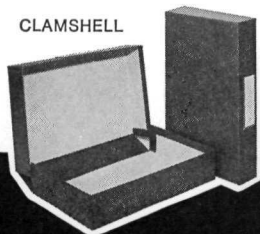
In summary, the control forms currently used for accessioning and arranging record group are many. Essential forms can be reduced to transmittal records—as well as gift and loan forms; an accessions log maintained as a permanent archival record to provide control over new acquisitions; and finally, a combined accessioning and processing form—the ideal device for the permanent control of record groups as they are organized.

Whether you use these forms exclusively, or whatever other forms you adopt, bear in mind that simplicity is paramount; and that forms exist to make work easier, not to add to it.

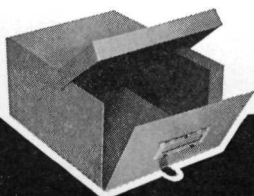
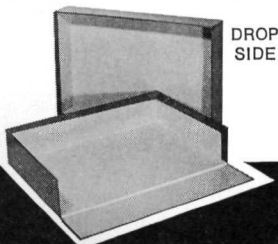
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