

A Chronological Catalog: Virginia's Approach

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TYPICAL problems brought to members of the staff of the Manuscripts Division of the University of Virginia Library such as "I'm doing a book on the life of ordinary people at the beginning of the American Revolution. I want to see every collection you've got that covers this period"; or "I'm interested in changing attitudes toward slavery after Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831. What do you have pertaining to this?" made us realize there was a serious defect in our system of finding aids. There was no way we could tell a researcher about all the collections containing material that might assist him in collecting information on a research topic centering about a particular time period. Our regular catalog can answer many other research questions, but cannot give an adequate answer to this type.

Because of the interest of a former curator in the national union catalog of manuscripts movements the University of Virginia changed its cataloging system over to the basic NUCMC format when it was perfected. We acquired a professional cataloger for the first time to prepare NUCMC reports and recatalog old collections as necessary. Our catalog originally followed the preliminary rules available in mimeographed form, and now of course depends to a large degree on the rules as available in the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*. Subject headings are obtained from the Library of Congress list (7th ed.) with the variations we find necessary written into our copies for uniformity.

To facilitate the production of cards for the Manuscripts Division catalog, which is maintained separately from that of the main library, we used for some years the multilith duplication service available through the Preparations Division until this was replaced by Xerox duplication equipment in the Photographic Services Division. All tracings for our catalog are typed on the top of duplicates of the first card of the main entry for each collection cataloged. The catalogers' part-time typist orders as many copies of the main entry card duplicated as she will need to prepare all the indicated tracings.

Thus, we knew it would be a simple matter to obtain extra cards for any collections which were cataloged. Our real problems in the development of a chronological catalog were acquiring extra help for the typing of cards and some sort of plan of approach.

Mr. Berkeley is curator of manuscripts and Miss Gordon is chief manuscripts cataloger at the University of Virginia Library. They would like to thank the staff of the Michigan Collection for its invaluable assistance.

We searched the literature to see what other people had done that might be pertinent to our problem but could not find much of immediate use. We then sent letters to a number of institutions to see if any of them had chronological catalogs. We found only one that had a chronological catalog of the scope of our plan although almost everyone who replied was enthusiastic about the idea. We did receive one letter in which the curator of a large southern institution very much opposed the idea of such a catalog, and told us that it would not be useful. After a careful review of our proposal, we decided it would work, and we proceeded with our plan.

The Michigan Historical Collections at Ann Arbor has a chronological catalog, which had been in operation for 3 years at the time of our planning. From Fraser Cocks, assistant to the director, we received a number of useful tips relayed from their cataloging staff as well as some comforting support for our idea. "I quite agree with you on the necessity of having a chronological file . . . We have found that once the decision has been made on what collections to include or exclude in the chronological listing, the actual construction of the file can be carried out by clerical help."¹

We were particularly pleased to know that 3 years' experience supported our belief that we could produce our chronological file chiefly with clerical help. We knew that we could not spare professional help as we had only one full-time cataloger, working chiefly on NUCMC reports, plus the services of the assistant curator on a part-time basis to catalog new accessions of limited size.

We drew up a list of chronological headings. The list began with a century-by-century breakdown from the years A.D. 900 to 1599. We have a number of medieval manuscripts in our collections, and our oldest manuscript is a fragment of a Carolingian document collected and donated to the library by a member of the English faculty at our university who has been one of our most valuable supporters.²

We divided the 17th century into 25-year periods. Virginia was settled at the beginning of this century, but we have only a few early colonial materials in our collections, additions to which are extremely rare now as the prices are usually beyond our reach, and very little is donated.

Beginning with 1700, when our collections begin to increase in quantity and richness, we divided the centuries by decade all the way to the present with two exceptions. The first is the period of the American Revolution for which we have a good many valuable materials. With the bicentennial approaching, and with the surge of interest at the time of the Civil War centennial as an example, we expect to be swamped with researchers working on Revolutionary materials in the next 20 years. Therefore, our breakdowns for this period are year-by-year from 1770 to 1783.

The other period of yearly breakdown is that of the Civil War. This we

¹ J. Fraser Cocks III to author, July 10, 1968.

² A. L. Hench, "How To Make a Poor Man's [Clifton] Waller Barrett Collection," speech notes in the Manuscripts Division, University of Virginia Library, #8952.

have done chiefly because there is a great deal of material in our collections pertaining to this period. Anyone familiar with Virginia and old Virginia families will understand why there is so much material. For this period we have used a year-by-year breakdown from 1860 through 1865, and then resumed the normal decade unit.

We have an exception to the breakdown by year to enable us to handle the collection whose overall date range includes the Revolutionary years, but whose content has nothing to do with the Revolution as such. For such collections, we have separate categories of 1770–79 and 1780–89 into which the card is filed. The same is true for the Civil War years with a range of 1860–69.

The Michigan Historical Collections Catalog varies only slightly from ours: "Because our time span is somewhat shorter than yours—primarily 19th and 20th century—we have broken down the file into five year divisions, (1–5, 6–10)."³

Having determined the chronological headings, we then had to make a number of practical decisions concerning the actual implementation of the catalog. A major decision involved the extremely large collection of Thomas Jefferson materials held by the university that he founded. Because a comprehensive calendar of our holdings to 1950⁴ had been published and because a 20-year supplement is in preparation, we decided not to include Jefferson materials. A single information card was placed in each appropriate time bracket referring researchers to the calendar and its typewritten supplement.

Later, as we worked on the catalog, we found that we held so many materials of James Madison and of Henry Clay that the same procedure used for Jefferson was followed, and cards already in the files were removed. We intend to follow this procedure in the future for any person or archival unit for which we hold many items. In 1969 the library with the assistance of the National Historical Publications Commission published on microfilm the *James Monroe Papers in Virginia Repositories* which included all our Monroe holdings, making them readily available to the researcher, and references to Monroe papers were also removed from the chronological catalog.

Legal documents such as wills, deeds, and inventories and compiled genealogies and genealogical charts were also eliminated from the chronological listing. We felt that these materials were used almost exclusively by genealogists who generally approach research materials by name or locality, both of which were well-covered in our main catalog. Also eliminated were prints and photographs for which we maintain a separate self-indexing file, and museum materials of little research value except to specialists such as bank notes, coins, stamps, medals, and cannon balls. These were also adequately controlled by the main catalog. Secondary

³ Cocks to author, July 10, 1968.

⁴ C. E. Thurlow and F. L. Berkeley, Jr., *The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia* (Charlottesville, 1950)

materials such as offprints, dissertations, and theses were eliminated as being little used by most researchers and covered in the main catalog.

By eliminating these major blocks of materials, we felt that we had reduced the chronological catalog to manageable size, yet kept in it all materials useful to a researcher with a historical topic, whose main interest was in primary sources. Assisting the researcher in the reference use of such sources is one of our chief duties.

Fortunately for our plans, the Manuscripts Division was granted an extra part-time typist in the 1968-69 budget, and we were able to begin work on this catalog. Rather than proceed through the alphabetical arrangement of the main catalog, as Michigan had apparently done, we decided to use our shelf list of main entry cards which is kept in order by the accession number assigned to each collection upon arrival in the library.

At first our new typist worked very closely with the cataloger to eliminate any problems. One of the immediate irritations was the realization that many of our old catalog cards, prepared before the adoption of the NUCMC-AACR system, were totally inadequate. This meant that some of the collections had to be recataloged. A very few were done right away, others being deferred until the cataloger had time to deal with them. Many borderline cases were left untouched because we knew we could not recatalog them at that time. As we work back through the accession books to report materials for NUCMC, these collections will be recataloged when necessary and brought up to standard. The inadequate cards will be pulled from the main and chronological categories and replaced with new ones.

As the typist checked each shelf list entry, she determined whether the card should be used in the chronological catalog. She then referred any questions about the quality of the entry to the cataloger for decision. For those deemed usable, she determined the number of duplicates needed to file in the chronological catalog, retyped the main entry card to NUCMC standards, and had the cards duplicated. When they were returned from the duplicating process, she typed the chronological date ranges on the top of each card, and then filed the cards into the catalog. The cards are filed alphabetically by main entry heading within each date range.

This procedure is slowly taking care of the backlog of collections already processed and cataloged. The typist⁵ makes notes for the catalogers of any missing main entry cards, and these are checked in the accession books to determine what the materials are. Once this is known, the main entry card can be found in the main catalog if the collection has been cataloged. If it has not been, it is added to the cataloger's list of collections to be cataloged. At this time, the chronological catalog has reached accession number 3250 and about 10,750 cards have been filed into the chronological catalog. As we have about 12,000 individually numbered collections of

⁵ This position was upgraded to full-time in July 1969, but only about half of her time is spent on the chronological catalog.

over 6,300,000 items, we have a good deal of work to do to catch up with the present acquisitions, but at the present rate, we hope to eliminate the gap within 1½ years.

The chief problem with the work being done by the typist is that it is not critical of the usefulness of the materials. A professional's judgment would be required to determine this, but we cannot recheck each collection to make that judgment. Thus we are aware that we are creating a catalog with a built-in fault in some cases, but since we will put in cards for every period, the researcher will be aware of all the collections. The typist does check small collections of a few letters and enters cards only for the exact dates of the letters rather than for the inclusive dates of the collection.

When a collection is being cataloged for the first time, as with a newly acquired collection, an old collection previously uncataloged, or one that is being recataloged, the professional preparing the catalog cards will exercise critical judgment and eliminate and chronological periods in which the material is of no consequence.

With the system for the chronological catalog established and working, the catalogers⁶ indicate to the regular typist (a separate half-time position) how many cards to have made for the chronological file at the same time that the main entry catalog card is duplicated. Having carefully studied the collection to prepare the main entry card and tracings, they can also determine exactly what headings to choose for the chronological catalog. The main entry, all the tracings for the regular catalog, and the entries for the chronological catalog are prepared and filed at the same time. Thus the chronological catalog is growing at both ends from an effort to enter all our old materials and a routine of entering all new acquisitions as they are cataloged, as well as in the middle from the work of our NUCMC cataloger.

We are interested in the SPINDEX II project as its program apparently would allow chronological searching of the stored finding aids. But there is no possibility of computer use in this division of the library in the foreseeable future. We cannot wait for the benefits it may bring, and we will use our chronological catalog to assist our researchers in the meantime.

The chronological catalog is too new and as yet too small for us to make any profound judgment about its usefulness. It has been used by a number of researchers who have commented favorably on it with the accompanying hope that we will finish it as soon as possible. We plan to do this and believe that this additional finding aid will prove to be increasingly useful to researchers.

⁶ An additional full-time cataloger joined the staff in July 1969.