

The Retreat from Standardization: A Comment on the Recent History of Finding Aids

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IN SOME THINGS uniformity is deplorable and rightfully conjures up Orwellian horrors in the mind, but as Walter Rundell has shown recently, few would challenge the need for standardization in the creation of finding aids.¹ Why is it then that in the years since the premature demise of the Historical Records Survey (HRS), there has been a decided retreat from standardization? In 1939 and again in 1941 it was possible for Richard Morris to comment constructively in one long review on the nature and quality of finding aids then being produced in the United States.² The number alone was staggering. Between December 1940 and December 1941, 689 inventories and guides appeared, but there was a standard format to each that made comparisons simple and deficiencies easy to assess.³ Times have changed. Although production of finding aids has slowed today to a mere fraction of what it once was, they present such a kaleidoscopic array of formats and modes of description that a collective review becomes a formidable task.⁴

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¹ Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 250-59.

² Richard B. Morris, review of *Inventories of County Records and Miscellaneous State and Local Archives*, compiled by the Historical Records Survey (Washington: 1937-39), in the *American Historical Review* 45 (October 1939):159-62; and *ibid.*, review of *Inventories of County Records, Federal Archives in the States, and Miscellaneous State and Local Archives*, compiled by the Historical Records Survey (Washington: 1939-40), in the *American Historical Review* 46 (April 1941): 658-61.

³ *Ibid.*, and "Application of the Historical Records Survey for a Grant," made to the Rockefeller Foundation, November 3, 1941, copy in files of the American Historical Association, Library of Congress.

⁴ For example see the guides and inventories cited in note 5 below, and in Edward

One of the major recurring phenomena is the predilection of some repositories to build instant obsolescence into the format of their published guides and inventories. For instance, they key indexes to entry numbers that reflect an alphabetical arrangement of collection titles or some equally archaic order.⁵ They fail to realize that supplements to such volumes are at best cumbersome and that indexes cannot be updated easily. The reason is not that there is a dearth of better models that might have been followed. There is no need to look back to the HRS. The 1970 loose-leaf *Descriptive Inventory of the Archives of the City and County of Philadelphia* is a contemporary classic. It is arranged in record group sequence, and alterations to any section are simple to make. Pages need only be added or deleted at the appropriate point in the binder. For manuscript collections there is the *Guide to the Southern Historical Collections* (1970) and the *Guide to the Manuscript Collections* in the Department of Special Collections, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle. The latter uses the loose-leaf principle where the former could have, but did not. The virtue of the Southern Historical Collection *Guide* is that it offers a practical solution to interfiling, arranging entries by accession or collection number and keying the index to these numbers. Adding new material becomes an easy proposition, although the updating of entries entails a revision of the relevant pages, a task made more difficult by the decision to carry entries over to the next page in order to conserve space in the first edition.

Perhaps one of the major reasons why today there is such diversity among guides and inventories is the absence of any but the slightest national leadership. If organizational flaws are common among recent guides to manuscript collections at the repository level, they are magnified considerably in the *National Union Catalog*

C. Papenfuse, "Finding Aids and the Historian: The Need for National Priorities and a Standard Approach," *AHA Newsletter* 10 (May 1972): 15-19.

⁵ Brian Cockhill and Dale L. Johnson, in their *Guide to Manuscripts in Montana Repositories* (Missoula: University of Montana Library, 1973), arrange collection descriptions alphabetically, throwing public records under the heading "Montana." The indexes provided in the appendixes bear a complicated relationship to the *Guide* but in principle show more ingenuity than the text. Andrea D. Lentz and Sara S. Fuller in *A Guide to Manuscripts at the Ohio Historical Society* (Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society, 1973), and Kermit J. Pike in *A Guide to the Manuscripts and Archives of the Western Reserve Historical Society* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1972), use the entry-number approach, although only the former strives also to place collections in alphabetical order by collection name. Neither guide is organized by collection number. Carolyn Trigg's *Inventory of County Records: Ector County Courthouse* (Austin: Regional Historical Resource Depository Program, Archives Division, Texas State Library, 1973), follows the HRS principle of organizing record descriptions to reflect their location in the archives.

of *Manuscript Collections*, which has just appeared for the year 1971.⁶ As Walter Rundell and others have pointed out, NUCMC has a number of obvious shortcomings.⁷ It could easily have a loose-leaf format with a separate index. Its entries could be organized by state and within states by a repository number under which collections would be described in order by their collection number. For a variety of reasons including lack of funds, and in the face of criticism, NUCMC instead continues to be published with indexes and collection descriptions bound in an unhelpful random sequence, with the awkwardness of the volumes compounded by indexes cumulated over three issues which renders useless one-third of the total number of pages printed.

For all of its deficiencies, however, NUCMC has at least one virtue. It has shown that a small but dedicated staff can establish guidelines for collection description that, while excluding archives and small collections, compares favorably with the editorial achievement of the HRS. They have done so by not allowing contributions to be published that fail to meet NUCMC criteria, and as NUCMC's reputation has grown because of the lack of anything better, a slowly growing number of repositories have conformed. Unfortunately, however, the total number who consistently report remains relatively small because there is no effective way to coerce participation.

In the era of the HRS, the central editorial office had the necessary power. Sargent Child, director of HRS projects, explained the role of his office to Roy Nichols in a letter written in the fall of 1941. He noted that the central staff was authorized to review manuscripts sent in by each of the states in order "to insure the accuracy, the completeness, and the high quality of the work which the Survey has endeavored to maintain."⁸ Inventories that did not meet the standards set by manuals developed or adopted by the central office or inventories that seemed deficient in field work were sent back with a full analysis of their shortcomings. State editors knew that publication of guides and inventories was contingent upon a favorable review and usually submitted acceptable products, but there was more than enough to keep Child's staff busy. Although at one time the central editorial office employed twenty-eight people, by 1941, when guide and inventory production was at a peak, there were but three editors on the public payroll, and

⁶ Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1973.

⁷ Rundell, *In Pursuit of American History*, pp. 238-40.

⁸ Sargent B. Child to Roy F. Nichols, November 29, 1941; copy in files of the American Historical Association, Library of Congress.

only with the aid of two people paid by a one-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation was Child able to maintain the pace he had set.⁹ Still, five editors did produce an amazing number of guides and inventories, and it is not implausible that a staff of similar size could do the same today. The problem is how to make repositories eager to conform to the dictates of a centralized editorial operation. Resurrecting the HRS is not very likely and probably not even desirable. Its power was based upon an executive order; its decisions were often needlessly arbitrary or subject to undue political pressure; and its life, contingent upon needs perceived by the executive, was tenuous. If war had not killed the HRS, a revived economy probably would have, because its reason for being was always relief for the unemployed.

The National Historic Records Program now pending before the Senate as S1293 could be the answer. Offering money on a matching fund or direct grant basis might make repositories more responsive to editorial advice, but it is going to be a long, drawn-out process before any Historic Records Program is instituted, and it could be years before editorial controls over finding-aid production are established. In the meantime, a modified form of private enterprise might be almost as effective. The technology of computer publishing is such that it is conceivable that the Society of American Archivists, the American Association for State and Local History, and perhaps the American Historical Association could offer a guide and inventory publishing service that few repositories could resist. For instance, it is possible to develop a simple description format that is easily keyboarded, processed, and published according to design specifications that could allow for differing visual effects in the final product without altering basic uniformity and compatibility. Such a package deal could be offered to repositories at a low cost and possibly through the beneficence of a National Endowment for the Humanities subsidy for compilation and editorial work, allowing profits from sales to be plowed back into guide supplements, more inventories, or in-depth indexing. Magnetic tapes or discs used in the production of individual guides and inventories could be consolidated at will into a national data bank.

There exist a variety of publishing-oriented formats and programs that could be used, although some, such as the new *Manuscripts: A Marc Format*, are much too complicated—a fact that even the Library of Congress seems to admit when in the preface it disclaims

⁹ Ibid.

any intention of making immediate public use of its offspring.¹⁰ A more likely candidate is the revived SPINDEX program developed by the National Archives, especially as it has been modified by the International Nickel Company and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. It too, however, strives to be a universal system and, as such, may be still too much in the development stage to be an immediately available tool that could aid in the rapid economical publication of standardized finding aids.¹¹ In this respect the computer programs developed for the production of the *American Historical Review's* bibliography, "Recently Published Articles" (RPA), may be a ready answer, especially in the preparation of simple inventories to manuscript collections or in the production of the most general level of repository guides. At the present time, for example, the RPA programs are being used in the arrangement and indexing of an important new collection of papers from the Revolutionary War era. These documents are in no specific order. The descriptions of each item are keyboarded and sorted by the computer into a predetermined sequence that represents the final arrangement of the collection. The same magnetic tapes will also be used for the published guide to a microfilm edition as well as the beginning of a cumulative index to all future collections processed in the same manner. In this way the computer is being used as a tool from the time that a collection is first arranged until a useful inventory and guide is published. The RPA program is a system for which the repository would have only to provide data in conformity with a format that is easy to follow and understand. Keyboarding and editing would be done by a small, experienced staff, and the various stages of production would come quickly and economically.

This is not to say that there are not other, as yet unspecified, systems that could do the job equally as well as the RPA approach and thus could entice repositories into the standardized production of

¹⁰ *Manuscripts: A Marc Format* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1973), p. 1.

¹¹ Reports presented at a "SPINDEX Users Conference," June 11-12, 1973, held at the National Archives. SPINDEX can be used and is being used by the National Archives for the publication of certain specialized and very detailed indexes and guides. For example there is Robert Wolfe's *Guide no. 66 to the German Records Microfilmed at Alexandria* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1973), but even though SPINDEX has enormous potential, it has not reached a point where it can be used generally in the relatively inexpensive publication of guides and inventories. If nothing else the conversion to a successfully running Operating System (OS) will take some time, as anyone who has had to cope with the implementing of one can attest.

published finding aids. What is essential to the widespread acceptance of such a program is a nonprofit, professional organization that is willing to shelter it and to lend both moral and critical support. One point is certain, however. The retreat from standardization that has endured for over thirty years should be brought to a halt as quickly as possible before the remainder of our limited financial resources is completely squandered.

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