

# An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach

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ARCHIVISTS VIEW THEMSELVES as intermediaries between the creators and users of records. Critical to this role is the archivist's responsibility to process collections, to impose intellectual and physical control on archival and manuscript collections. Few repositories seem to have resources sufficient to keep up with their growing backlog by processing as intensively or as extensively as is necessary. A project carried out at the Institute Archives of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from October 1978 to September 1981 with funding from NEH was intended to help the Institute Archives process its manuscript backlog. The project gave M.I.T. the opportunity to examine its processing procedures and formulate techniques that would make possible the efficient processing of manuscript and archival collections.

This article is based on the final report of the Institute Archives and Special Collections Department to NEH. M.I.T. position titles and procedures have been

used, but the authors believe that readers will be able to apply to their own departments the methods presented here.

The project proposal called for fairly traditional techniques of arrangement and description to be carried out on each collection. The physical arrangement was to include refolding into acid-free folders and boxes, and preservation was to include the removal of paper clips, staples, and other metal fasteners. Description was to include finding aids containing biographies, scope and content notes, series descriptions, folder listings, and indexes as needed. The collections were to be reported to NUCMC and the NHPRC Guide and publicized in appropriate newsletters and journals.

Two experienced processors began with two of the most significant collections. When we calculated the rate of progress for our first semiannual report to NEH, it was clear that the work was proceeding too slowly. At the same time, the small non-grant staff assigned to

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processing was trying to accession and prepare rudimentary controls for archival records and other manuscript collections, without detailed, and sometimes without even adequate, processing. Two different clocks were running, and the staff was equally unhappy with the insufficient work on the archival collections and the excessively detailed work on the manuscript collections.

We therefore began a complete reexamination and rejustification of our processing procedures, with the goal of establishing procedures that would be applicable to all our holdings but that could be flexibly applied. We started by defining five premises that served to guide our efforts and that now form the basis of our recommendations.

*First*, the ideal level of processing is not the same for all collections. As the intermediary between creators and users of records, the archivist should aim to do only the amount of processing that makes a collection useful to researchers. To do more for the sake of uniform finding aids is wasteful. Our aim should be to insure that the researcher's work can be done systematically and productively.

*Second*, more staff time should be allocated to collections with perceived research potential—those that are, or are expected to be, used more heavily—than to collections of dubious research value. Once we have determined the level of processing that will make a collection useful, we may want to increase the time devoted to its processing if further work will make a heavily used collection easier to use. The needs of both researchers and reference staff enter into the decision.

*Third*, the processor should assume that his or her work on a collection is all that will ever be done; it is unlikely that there will be time and staff to reprocess

collections. As much as possible, therefore, we try not to think in terms of preliminary controls. We aim to reach the desired level of control as soon as a processor is assigned to a collection. Though the immediate needs of donors and researchers do not always make this feasible, this system does prevent the automatic preparation of preliminary controls and permits us to achieve a satisfactory level of control in fewer steps.

*Fourth*, because the processing done on any collection will vary depending on the collection's research potential, the amount of work necessary to make it usable, and the staff time available, all processing work must be decided on deliberately and must be carefully planned and coordinated. No task should be done automatically. Having carried out background research and surveyed the collection, the processor is best qualified to propose the work to be done. The processor's recommendations are reviewed by the Supervisor of Processing and the Institute Archivist, who judge the work plan against other processing needs in the department. Determining an appropriate level of processing requires communication. Among the methods we have found useful are meetings, written work plans, and time goals for completion of processing. Although the increased coordination itself takes time, the checks and balances in this system help assure efficient use of processing time.

*Fifth*, processing is best carried out as a team project. Each processor should be supported by an assistant (in our case an M.I.T. student) who carries out routine tasks, freeing the processor for intellectual work.

### Levels of Processing

The key decision in processing a collection is determining an appropriate

level of control. A collection is "processed" whenever it can be used productively for research. Our system recognizes that it may be desirable to process at the collection level, the item level, or at any intermediate level in the processing continuum. The level of processing may even vary from series to series.

The most important factor in determining the overall amount of work to be done on any collection is its research potential, both for scholarly uses and for administrative uses by M.I.T. Other factors include the initial order and physical condition of the papers, the amount of staff time available for processing, the variety of record forms in the collection (oversize maps and charts, videotapes, computer output, and so on), the nature and complexity of activities documented in the papers, the donor's specifications in the gift agreement, and the presence of confidential or sensitive records of any kind.

Trying to build on the collection's existing order, the processor first considers the series into which the collection will be divided and the arrangement of material within those series. How much physical rearrangement is necessary? Must folders be rearranged to restore an alphabetical or chronological arrangement? The contents of folders should be examined briefly to determine whether headings are accurate, but is it necessary to rearrange material within folders? If there are no folders, the loose material must be examined as efficiently as possible to determine logical groupings. Arrangement of individual items is time-consuming, and we have learned to avoid it unless there is a compelling benefit to be derived from such detailed work. Researchers seem to have little difficulty in using a collection in which correspondence was left in reverse chronological order or in which large

clumps of letters were left intact. The most important consideration is a clear arrangement of folders within carefully delineated series.

It should be noted that the intellectual ordering of a collection may not be identical to its physical arrangement. If the collection contains oversize material, audio- or videotapes, computer tapes, or other special material, the medium should be disregarded in planning intellectual access to the collection. For example, if a collection includes a series of speeches in manuscript, typescript, audio tape, and motion picture film, the speeches should be listed in one logical sequence, with the box or folder list indicating record types and the locations of specific items. Similarly, if material must be restricted, it can be listed in its proper intellectual place but physically removed to a separate box.

### Planning and Coordination of Work

One of our first tasks in reshaping our processing procedures was to restructure the department so that we could insure the required supervision and coordination. The Supervisor of Processing, who reports to the Institute Archivist, was to be the direct supervisor of the processing staff. Processors now meet formally and informally with the Supervisor throughout their work. In addition, certain key decisions are reviewed by the Institute Archivist. Formal meetings take place at each of the following key points:

1. *When the collection is assigned to the processor.* Although the control file contains considerable background information, including gift agreements and correspondence, the Institute Archivist takes this opportunity to give the processor additional information about the donors and creators of the papers, the circumstances of the papers' transfer to

the Archives, and the papers themselves. Discussions of how the collection is related to others in the Archives may begin at this point.

2. *After the initial survey and analysis of the collection.* Once the processor has examined the control file, carried out background research, and surveyed the collection, he or she presents to the Supervisor and Archivist the appraisal of the collection and a plan that specifies the level of processing, specific arrangement scheme, elements to be included in the finding aid, work that can be done by student assistants, and the approximate time the processing will take. The processor should also discuss any problems that might interfere with carrying out the processing plan. If the processor presents two or more possible work plans corresponding to different levels of control to be achieved at different costs, the discussion can become especially fruitful.

3. *Before the finding aid is written.* The scope and format of each part of the finding aid must be discussed. The processor should justify the need to write an extensive biography, the use of borrowed material (a biography or bibliography, for example), and the addition of special elements such as genealogies or chronologies.

4. *When the finding aid is in final draft form.* The first draft is given to the Supervisor of Processing for review and editorial comments. The final draft, approved by the Institute Archivist, is circulated to the entire Archives staff for discussion at a staff meeting. In this way the entire staff becomes familiar with all the collections, and other staff members have an opportunity to add information or clarify facts in the finding aids.

To facilitate the decisions about the level of processing and the specific tasks to be performed on any collection, the staff modified the processing record (see Figure 1a and b) so that each task is

listed. After the work plan is approved, the work to be done is indicated and progress is recorded as processing proceeds. The processing record form reflects a philosophy that allows for flexibility and demands justification of kinds and amount of work to be done. No processing task is done automatically.

### Description Short-cuts

Our efforts to adopt time-saving methods extend to the construction of finding aids. Processors are encouraged to concentrate their own interpretive work on the series descriptions and scope and content notes, and to attempt to use suitable existing material for other parts of the inventories. When a good, short, published biography is available, we request permission to use it in the inventory. For current M.I.T. faculty we often use the biographies prepared by M.I.T.'s News Office. When extensive published biographies are available, we include a list of these biographical sources in the finding aid and provide only a brief chronology to guide the researcher through the collection. Several collections have included card indexes to part or all of the material in the collection. We have photocopied them and included them in the respective inventories. In one case the index cards were rearranged into the same order as the folders, and photocopies were made to serve as a folder list; the cards were then refiled in their original order. Bibliographies from published and unpublished sources (including vitae) have been annotated and used in inventories, sometimes doubling as lists for series of writings or reprints. We always obtain proper permission to use work done by others, citing and crediting the source.

### Preservation

One of the hardest lessons of this project has been that we are seldom able to

do all the preservation work that we would like to do. Not even preservation tasks are done automatically. The Institute Archives houses primarily 20th-century collections, which contain large amounts of poor-quality copy paper, thermofax copies, mimeograph copies, and newspaper clippings, with numerous staples and paper clips. Initially we removed all staples and other fasteners, photocopied poor-quality copies onto acid-neutral paper, enclosed or photocopied all clippings, and encapsulated fragile documents when we wished to preserve the originals. All of these tasks are now performed much more selectively. The level of preservation work that is done on a collection is linked to the level of other processing work done. If the collection is not to be rearranged at the item level, it is doubtful that staples or paper clips will be removed. Usually only the most fragile items will receive attention. We hope that housing our collections in acid-neutral materials in a good environment will stabilize their condition until we can carry out such larger, more organized preservation measures as microfilming entire collections or mass deacidification.

### Use of Student Assistants

The use of student assistants has significantly increased the rate of processing.<sup>1</sup> Processors are freed from many time-consuming tasks, including boxing, foldering, labelling, sorting into chronological or alphabetical order, checking for duplicates, verifying entries for the card catalogue, and carrying out simple research on technical and biographical topics. The processor plans and supervises the student's work. In this way the processor is able to work on more than one collection at a time, car-

rying out the intellectual tasks of surveying, appraisal, and more complicated arrangement.


### Two Examples

The John Ripley Freeman papers document the career of an extraordinarily active hydraulics engineer and insurance executive working chiefly in the period 1876-1932. Initially estimated at 50 linear feet, the collection occupied 120 record center cartons once the Freeman family had given additional material and the entire collection had been reboxed. The collection was arranged into five series: personal, biographical, and family papers (5.5 linear feet); correspondence (35 linear feet); alphabetical subject files (27 feet); hydraulic project files (81.5 feet); and reprints and a book (1 foot).

The level of processing varied for the different series. Throughout his life Freeman kept letterpress books of outgoing correspondence and later kept scrapbooks of incoming and outgoing letters. These volumes were arranged in chronological order. The personal, biographical and family papers and the alphabetical subject files were placed in folders bearing headings that were mostly Freeman's own. A few headings were supplied by the processor. These two series were listed by folder; without such a list there would be no way for the researcher to know what subjects were used and which of them might be of interest.

The hydraulics project files comprised the largest series in the collection and posed the greatest challenge for arrangement and description. Freeman was a meticulous worker and had assembled correspondence, data, reports, and photographs into carefully labelled notebooks for each project. The series

<sup>1</sup>Our model in developing team processing was the Manuscript and Archives Division of the Sterling Library at Yale University.



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PROCESSING RECORD

Accession No.

Collection No.

MAIN ENTRY:

TITLE:

Inclusive Dates:

Bulk Dates:

Vital Dates:

Extent: in    cubic ft. or    items; in    rc cartons,    ms. boxes, or

Prominent language:

Other languages:

Donor/Donor Representative:

Creator Generated Lists (type, author, date):

Restrictions:

Circumstances of Transfer (how, when, and from where was the collection moved):

Date Collection Received:

Description:

Figure 1a. Processing Record (front)

| ACCESSIONING AND INITIAL PROCESSING   | Work Done By         | Date Completed       |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assign accession number  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make blue card   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generate locator card  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Establish control file   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generate provisional catalog card  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generate container list  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Label boxes  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Donor acknowledgement  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| Notes:  |                      |                      |
|   |                      |                      |
| FURTHER PROCESSING  |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collection analysis (see attached)                                       | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rearrange (describe in attached memo)                                    | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flag security records  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separate illustrations   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separate minutes   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separate books or technical reports                                      | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Generate finding aid consisting of                                       | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cover sheet / card copy on letterhead                                    |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> biography / organizational history                                       |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> scope and content note   |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> series description   |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> container list   |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> folder list  |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other special list (describe)  |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> index (describe)   |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Write new catalog card based on further processing                       | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| PRESERVATION  |                      |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Re-box: <input type="text"/> rc cartons or <input type="text"/> ms boxes | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Replace folders  | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Remove staples / Replace staples   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flattening   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning   | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Photocopy Thermofax, clippings, <input type="text"/>                     | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encapsulate / Enclose fragile or acidic items                            | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep log of special preservation problems                                | <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/> |

Figure 1b. Processing Record (back)



was arranged geographically by state and within each state alphabetically by name of project. Each project is listed in the finding aid, along with a description of the bulk and types of records that document it. We relied heavily on Freeman's own organization of the project records and left it to researchers to work through the entire record for any particular project. This part of the collection is, therefore, listed only by box and not by folder. Since we retrieve material for reading room use by box and not by item or folder, we considered a box list for this series to be adequate as long as every project was listed.

At the beginning of the work on the Freeman papers, the processor and his student assistant started to refolder everything. It soon became apparent that refolding would add several months to the project, even with the use of student labor. Reluctantly, we decided to leave most of the hydraulics project records in Freeman's binders, refolding only the most fragile and heavily used papers. We did refolder one project: the construction of the Charles River Dam and related studies of the Boston basin, for we anticipated heavy use of the records of that project. As we learn more about the various uses of the collection, we may target other parts for additional preservation work. The finding aid is designed so that it will not need extensive revision when further preservation work is done. Meanwhile, the crucial intellectual control of the collection has been completed.

The Norbert Wiener papers (22 linear feet) presented a different set of problems. The largest and most important series consisted of correspondence, already in a rough chronological arrangement when processing began. Many researchers had used the collec-

tion, and we knew that they usually needed access to letters by specific people. We decided to refine the chronological arrangement and compile an index of correspondents. This exceptional decision required several months to carry out, but the improved access to the collection has already saved researchers and reference staff a great deal of time.

In both instances shortcut description techniques were used. For the inventory of the John Ripley Freeman papers we used the obituary that appeared in the *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* as a biography. The processor put the few additions he considered necessary into footnotes. Several biographies of Norbert Wiener had been published, so we provided a brief list of biographical sources and a chronology of his life in place of a biographical sketch. Because most of the collection is arranged chronologically, the chronology can be used as an additional guide to the papers. A bibliography that appeared in the published edition of Wiener's papers was expanded and annotated to indicate which writings were present in the collection. By using these and similar shortcuts, the processors were able to concentrate their creative energies on synthesizing information and writing series descriptions and extensive scope and content notes.

### Conclusions

The processing strategies described above have been applied to our grant project and all other processing activity in the M.I.T. Archives for the last few years and are recorded in a new processing manual.<sup>2</sup> Although techniques for specific situations continue to evolve, a basic procedural framework has been laid and tested. In many ways it is not an

<sup>2</sup>Copies are available from the Institute Archives, 14N-118, M.I.T., Cambridge, MA 02139, for \$5.00.



easy system to follow. Determining the research potential of a collection is educated guesswork at best, and planning and carrying out varying levels of processing requires successful collaboration among the processor, student assistants, Supervisor of Processing, and Institute Archivist. We spend much time talking about our work, but on the whole the time spent in planning is worthwhile. More collections are processed—and in more effective ways—than would be if we attempted to apply uniform techniques to every collection.

Furthermore, the processors' jobs are

enriched by the intellectual challenges with which they are presented. They must propose and carry out the most effective arrangement and description of records that will do justice to the collection while recognizing the limitations of staff time and other resources. Because of the variations in the methods they use, their jobs are more interesting. The active participation in appraisal decisions enhances the role of the entire staff. As intellectual partners of both the creators and users of records, they help determine the shape and usefulness of our documentary records.