

The American Archivist

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TERRITORY OF NEVADA, EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT.
CARSON CITY, February 19, 1863.

By the authority in me vested by law, as Governor of the Territory of Nevada, I hereby offer

\$1,000 Reward

for the apprehension of

Edw'd W. Richardson,

charged with Murder and Robbery, and

Horace F. Swazey

charged with Murder ; both of whom escaped last night from the Ormsby County jail.

The above reward will be paid upon their delivery into the custody of the Sheriff of said county, at said jail ; or FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS will be paid upon such apprehension and delivery of either of them, and also the expenses of his or their transmission to said jail.

Said Richardson is 22 years of age ; about 5 feet 8 inches high ; dark complexion ; black, bushy hair ; dark blue eyes, weighs about 155 or 160 pounds, large nose, has a wide scar on the right thigh, reaching from the groin to the knee ; an indelible ink ring on one or more fingers on one or both hands, and an indelible ink star on his right wrist.

Said Swazey is full six feet high ; strongly built, rather light complexion, awkward appearance, weighs two hundred pounds ; has powder marks on, and on each side of his nose ; scar on his chin ; two or three back teeth out, caused by pistol shot ; mouth not well yet ; light blue eyes ; about 28 years old.



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On the cover: 1863 Nevada territorial reward poster (from the papers of Effie Mona Mack, Nevada Historical Society, Reno). See "The Beast in the Bathtub, and Other Archival Laments," p. 375.

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The Forum

FROM THE EDITOR:

GLANCING UP AT THE SUPERSTRUCTURE of this 19th-century desk ("ah, you've such a perfect setting for an archivist," murmured the lass), I see that my first issue of the *American Archivist* is dated January 1966, a year and a half after my appointment as Archivist of the University of California. Just inside the cover is a glowing portrait photograph of the SAA president, Dolores C. Renze, with whom, in succeeding years, I would have many a friendly conversation. At the back of this 170-page issue is the Placement Register listing a number of beginning positions in the \$6,000 to \$8,000 salary range. The leading article, by Canada's Dominion Archivist W. Kaye Lamb, is entitled "The Changing Role of the Archivist," the basic change being "that the archivist has ceased to be primarily a custodian—a caretaker—and has become a gatherer of records and manuscripts. His role has ceased to be largely passive and has become dynamic and active."

And here it is, late in 1982, several generations of archivy behind us, and what of the role of the archivist, and need it concern us? Of course it must, and does, at least insofar as we are, each of us, members of the Society of American Archivists. We are practitioners, joined together in a professional

organization, albeit a small one when compared to our medical and legal brethren, and we have, from the beginning, made our mark with our journal, now in its 45th volume. My eastern colleague Eva Moseley has nicely defined the journal's current voyage, "On the Road," and I echo her hope that soon it will be nourished by a permanent bosom. Meanwhile, each "guest" editor, working away in his own cell, brings together a group of articles that, he hopes, reflect current and common concerns in a stylistically pleasing manner. If we achieve this we have done well, for our colleagues and for ourselves.

Sixteen years ago Lamb noted that the profession of the archivist "has now become so broad and varied that no one person can any longer claim to have a detailed knowledge of all its aspects." A glance at the table of contents for this issue underscores that conclusion, for we start off with a bibliographer's account of archival sleuthing, continue with a narrative of the very recent SAA trip to China, follow with a survey of one large group of depositories (colleges and universities), move on to the dark days of the Russian Revolution, turn back to the beginnings of a major historical society on the western frontier, and, finally, come to terms with a

novel storage system embracing bibliographic control. Themes and their variations, occurring over and over in the pages of the *American Archivist*, emphasize the catholicity of our professional tasks. To paraphrase a particularly great president of my university, what we do is to rescue for human society the innate values of intellectual accomplishment, embodied in our historical documentation. And, with Milton, "from the Magistrate himself to the meanest Artificer."

J. R. K. KANTOR
The Bancroft Library
University of California

TO THE EDITOR:

FRANK BOLES, in the article "Disrespecting Original Order" (*AA*, 45 [Winter, 1982]), quotes out of context and misinterprets material from my manual, *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*, to the extent that he misconstrues the meaning of my words. In his lead paragraph, Boles contends that: "Despite hesitancy and some opposition, a general trend among archivists exists to accept the principle of original order as the normative organizing method." (p. 26). To support his thesis, he draws on my manual and writes: "Gracy knows that exceptions to the principle may be made legitimately even today, but for the most part modern archivists 'lean toward 'restoration work,' toward maintaining, or reestablishing, the files as closely as possible to the order in which they were kept by the creator.' Here, clearly stated," he concludes, "is the belief that original order is the normative organizing principle for all historical material." (p. 26-27).

Boles might have a leg to stand on if that were all I wrote. Actually, the

paragraph on which he draws and from which the quote is taken is designed to illuminate the different approaches of those who work with organizational records (called "archivists" in the manual) and those who work with manuscript material (called "curators"). To find the words he quoted, Boles had to repeat past the topic sentence: "Nevertheless, their approach to order does strike at the heart of the difference between archivists and curators." And he had to ignore the several sentences that both followed the material he used and concluded the paragraph:

To them [curators], original order that reveals little of the creator's personality and that is difficult for researchers to use should be altered or abandoned. . . . The curator must be prepared to formulate an order, both logical and comparable to the arrangement of collections and groups maintained in their original order. The curator consequently approaches the task of arrangement with a more "creative" view. (pp. 8-9).

Boles concludes, from his selective reading, that I believe that "original order has won the war, if not all the battles," and he then knocks down the straw man with the statement that "Gracy's supposition . . . is open to question" (p. 27). In reality, the question arises only from Boles's misunderstanding of what I wrote. Anyone who reads through the entire paragraph from which Boles draws will see no supposition on my part, or even a foundation for the supposition Boles claims to find there. Mr. Boles will have to come up with another straw man to support his thesis.

DAVID B. GRACY II
Texas State Archives

TO THE EDITOR:

FRANK BOLES (*American Archivist*, Vol. 45, No. 1) PROPOSES usability as a

more fundamental principle of archival arrangement than maintenance of original order. Unfortunately, the word is susceptible of a narrow reading which excludes the safeguarding of evidential value. Though Boles may not so read it, others will, maintaining the fallacy that user convenience and maintaining evidential value are not only two different matters, but in competition.

The proper principle to subsume original order is preservation or recording of contemporary context—hereinafter termed context control. It is quite different from usability, and more important. If it were ever found in conflict with usability it ought to prevail. However, I find such conflict most unlikely, both because context control assists retrieval, and because it is not exclusive of further superimposed aids to retrieval.

As regards the importance of original order, I am in diametric opposition to Muller, Feith, and Fruin as represented by Boles. Received physical order is the only practicable means of preserving context at the intra-item level, and often crucial as evidence of the meaning and significance—even the identity—of documents. However, it is quite inadequate and gratuitously awkward for preserving context at record group level.

At the intermediate series level re-numbering usually falls short of vandalism, but may well qualify as most unhelpful. Boles assumes that all you lose in reordering and renumbering is time. What you may also lose is the usefulness of correspondence registers and subject indexes, not to mention all the incidental cross-references provided by file numbers on documents. To revise filing systems is a prerogative of current records managers, provided they keep old registers duly annotated. To impose a system on non-current material that has none is necessary. But to destroy an old system, however clumsy, makes no

sense.

Which brings me to my point about superimposed aids. What, after all, is to prevent the archivist from cross-indexing—re-organising material notionally—on paper or in the computer—rather than physically? Why is this argument always conducted on the quite false premise that we can't have our cake and eat it?

Such notional arrangement becomes even more significant at the record group level. Indeed, as P.J. Scott and other Australians have argued (e.g. *AA* Vol.29, No.4, 1966) it is often the only way to achieve context control.

Because of administrative change there is often no single original order of record groups, but a succession of orders all equally authentic in their time—a succession of relationships of series to creating agencies and to each other. And there is no way of adequately representing this flux in a single physical ordering.

Scott has divorced shelf arrangement above series level totally from provenance and inter-relation, and devised elegant ways of recording these in his finding aids. Thus, he has liberated himself from a muddled literal notion of original order at the record group level—a notion that is not only creating problems in repository management, but defeating its own subject. Thanks to Scott, Australian archivists are beginning to understand their business as context control rather than original order *per se*, and finding this in no way at odds with ease of retrieval.

COLIN SMITH

*Commonwealth Scientific &
Industrial Research Organization*

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE:

MR. GRACY IS CORRECT in saying that I used his words to make a rhetorical point. It is difficult to admit that the

rhetoric employed in arguing for a position I continue to believe in went beyond fair use, but in this case it did. Mr. Gracy has my apology.

Mr. Smith's comments are interesting and I would hope that they would be expanded, to update Peter J. Scott's "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment".

Both Scott and Mr. Smith appear to be describing a situation where archival controls are very complete, usually control to the item level. As I suggested in my article, original order and usable order frequently coincide. The files of agencies which have taken the time to arrange documents carefully or prepare elaborate indexes are a good example of this. I am in accord with Mr. Smith that such a system be preserved, even if it is clumsy. Usable systems should be preserved. Unworkable ones (not clumsy ones) should be modified to be made usable.

I also agree that archivists should be free to rearrange material on paper or through computers as they will. Usable order, as I wrote, is a minimum standard. Usable order is basic transportation for getting archival records to their ultimate users. Archivists, like automobile owners, are free to add as many amenities to their transportation system as they can afford. The real limitation is cost. Cadillacs, and cakes, are expensive.

Mr. Smith concludes by again referring to Scott's article. Rereading that piece, I am struck by the thought that the relationship between description and arrangement is most complex. A few contemporary archivists, particularly Richard Berner, are working to define this relationship. I hope they will write freely of their efforts to think through this problem.

FRANK BOLES
University of Michigan

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