

Invitation to a Bonfire:

Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in an Archives—A Reply to Leonard Rapport

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Abstract: Despite Leonard Rapport's articulate argument for it, reappraisal and deaccessioning of archival records is an inappropriate tool for collection management. Such broad-scale review is warranted only when the generally applied standards of appraisal at an institution are erroneous, when there is systematic error rather than possible misjudgment in applying those standards in specific cases. The proper time for reappraising and possibly deaccessioning records is during the processing of newly accessioned records, which may render old ones redundant or irrelevant to the changing nature of the holdings.

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Little has been written previously on the subject of collection management. Although the archival literature abounds with articles on appraisal, arrangement, and description principles, it is deficient in addressing problems of administration. Leonard Rapport has recently published a provocative article advocating reappraisal and deaccessioning as tools for archival management. Rapport's article is the only one on the subject.¹ Library literature, on the other hand, is filled with articles on collection management techniques such as reappraisal, weeding or withdrawal, and the controversial "zero growth" library concept.² While this literature is instructive, and every archivist should be familiar with it, library solutions to collection management problems do not offer much guidance in dealing with unique documents. When a document is destroyed, it is gone forever. There is no other repository where a copy of the same item, or even another item containing the same information, will repose. Therefore, an archivist must approach reappraisal and deaccessioning as management tools with extreme caution.

Rapport argues that deaccessioning improperly accessioned records would save space, material, energy, and personnel costs. Of course, a program of reappraisal would entail personnel costs of its own. Material and energy cost savings would be marginal at best. Realis-

tically, I think there can be little doubt that the main savings Rapport envisages would come in space, the shortage of which is a constant concern to us.

Rapport's assumption is that every public, and probably every private, institution's archives contains some records that should not have been accessioned and processed in the first place, and consequently should not be kept. This is probably true. Not every institution has sound collection policies and appraisal criteria. Records appraisal requires subjective judgment on the archivist's part, and mistakes in judgment can be made. The problem, as I will argue below, is how to identify them. Rapport is also correct in stating that archivists sometimes accept records of dubious value in exchange for the opportunity to accession valuable records from the same source. It is not so certain, however, that Rapport's proposal to reappraise and to deaccession records on a regular basis is the best solution to the problem. Rather, broad-scale reappraisal and deaccessioning of records should be viewed as crisis management techniques that may seriously undermine an archival program if they are applied.

Rapport ascribes shallow motives to those archivists who do not approve of or practice reappraisal: propinquity—or the "Records are on the shelves and they should remain there" syndrome; ego—or the "Since I determined these records

¹Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143-150.

²For recent discussions of collection development, weeding or withdrawal, and "zero growth" libraries see, for example: J. Gormly Miller, *Collection Development and Management at Cornell* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Libraries, 1981); Barbara Lehigh, *Academic Reference Collection Development: Policy Statements* (Arlington, Va.: Educational Resources Information Center, 1979); Peter Model, "Books at Auction: The Art of Deaccessioning," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 56 (September 1981): 33-38; David Ernest Clarke, *A Survey of the Weeding of Library Books in the U.S.A. and the U.K., 1902 to Date* (Loughborough, England: Loughborough University of Technology, 1981); Daniel Iorrumun Tsaembra, "Weeding: The Professional Practice of Getting Rid of Dead Wood in the Library Collection," *Library Scientist* 8 (May 1981): 49-64; Gary S. Lawrence, "A Cost Model for Storage and Weeding Programs," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (March 1981): 139-147; "Zero Growth: When Is NOT-enough Enough? A Symposium," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 5 (November 1975): 4-11; and Wilfred Ashworth, "Self-renewing Libraries," *New Library World* 78 (March 1977): 47-48.

were worth keeping they should not be disposed of" syndrome; and mystique—or the "I don't understand the contents, I am unsure of their value, so I had better keep them" syndrome.

In fact, it is more likely that most archivists do not regularly reappraise their holdings as a standard collection management practice because it is too expensive to be effective. Most of us do not have sufficient staff and budget to go through a regular and systematic reevaluation of the records that have been processed, shelved, and entered into the finding aids. The average institution struggles to process those records that have not yet been made available for users. That step should take precedence over removing records which already have been made available. There are other more compelling reasons to reject Rapport's invitation to a bonfire, however.

Rapport's argument is most persuasive when he speaks of scheduling reappraisal in order to find those materials that were wrongly accessioned in the first place—those without archival value. This argument should be considered with extreme caution. First, it is a serious strategic mistake for the head of an archives to suggest that, to conserve space, the staff should search the holdings for records that can be discarded. An archivist should not voluntarily participate in the dismantling of archival holdings, as to do so would give non-professionals, who usually control the institutions and administer the budgets, the notion that they can legitimately resort to piecemeal dismemberment of holdings whenever there is a need to economize. Second, and even more

serious, an archivist cannot be totally confident that he has found material that was wrongly accessioned; he can only identify that which he now believes to have been wrongly accessioned. This is a disagreement in judgment about archival value. There is some hubris involved in substituting one's own judgment for that of an earlier appraiser, based purely on subjective grounds. The very definition of the archival value of records is "the determination in appraisal that records are worthy of indefinite or permanent preservation by an archival agency" because of their "historical, continuing, or enduring value."³ Thus, unless an institution's collection policies and appraisal criteria were generally unsound, their accessioning defines their archival value; and their policies should be maintained despite the opinion of later evaluators that a mistake was made in a specific case. Since our view of what is of enduring value changes constantly, to permit regular reappraisal (actually rejudgment) is to sanction the destruction of records according to transitory criteria.⁴ To argue otherwise requires the conviction that there is some scientific method of appraisal, which would compel archivists to agree with the results of its application. Yet Rapport himself admits, "Appraising is at best an inexact science, perhaps more an art," and that his proposal would "make the survival of accessioned records subject to changing standards."⁵

Since a sound system of appraisal itself defines what records are of archival value for future archivists, it is totally destructive to an archival program to make reappraisal, collection

³The definition of archival value is taken from Frank B. Evans *et al.*, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 417. The emphasis is mine.

⁴This view is based on the idea of "historical relativism." For the clearest discussion of that idea, see Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (January 1932): 221–236; and Charles A. Beard, "Written History As an Act of Faith," *Ibid.* 39 (January 1934): 219–227.

⁵Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause," pp. 149, 146.

transfer, or destruction of records the accepted professional approach to handling space or budgetary constraints. If the archivist believes that the collection policies and appraisal criteria have been unsound and have led to the accessioning of records of dubious value, then it should be the administrator's highest priority to reevaluate the criteria for accessioning records in the institution. All of the staff should be educated about the importance of carefully evaluating the historical and evidential significance of records and of determining how records being appraised relate to the overall mission of the institution and fit with the current holdings.

Reappraisal does have a place in collection management, however. Space and budget crises do occur under circumstances out of the control of the archivist. The need to reappraise holdings, in the hope that records will be found that may be eliminated, usually arises when an institution experiences severe space or budget problems. If, as is frequently the case, the archives is short of stack space and the bulk of holdings are in hard copy format, then microfilming of the records is a desirable solution. While it is true that undertaking an archival quality microfilming program involves a substantial commitment of personnel and funds, for most institutions the benefits outweigh the costs. To aid the archivist in deciding whether or not to microfilm and to assist in the establishment of a microfilming program, there is a considerable literature in which

the appropriate procedures and standards to follow are outlined. The literature substantiates the claim that the long-range, overall savings in space justifies the expense incurred.⁶

If, on the other hand, hard copy storage is not the main problem, or if microfilming is impossible for lack of sufficient resources, then the archivist may need to resort to crisis management solutions, such as reappraisal and deaccessioning of records or severely limiting new accessions to the collection. Once again, it should be emphasized that crisis management techniques are usually unsatisfactory when scrutinized in relation to overall objectives. They are short-sighted, short-range, and meant to provide immediate results regardless of the long-term consequences of the action.

If one must reappraise holdings in order to alleviate overcrowding, what criteria should be applied in the reappraisal? Rapport suggests several, but he makes clear that it is not reappraised value alone that should determine whether a group of records will be kept. The main goal should be to balance value against the cost of maintenance, he states; and he quotes with approval G. Philip Bauer's comment, regarding the records of the National Archives, that "the question of what absolute quantity should be retained depends in the last analysis upon how much the Nation is willing to pay for the purpose."⁷ This seems inconsistent with Rapport's basic argument, however, for it converts a search for those records without ar-

⁶Some recent articles regarding the advantages of micrographics programs are "Conversion to Microfilm Proves a Wise Investment," *Office* (December 1981): 92; L.S. Lee, "Converting Paper Records to Micro-media," *Journal of Systems Management* 32 (August 1981): 32-35; (September 1981): 35-41; and (October 1981): 39-42; B. Burnett, "Our Converting to Micrographics Proved a Real Success Story," *Office* (October 1980): 159-160; A. Niles, "Conversion of Serials From Paper to Microform," *Microform Review* 9 (Spring 1980): 90-95; D.D. Thompson, "Comparing Costs: An Examination of the Real and Hidden Costs of Different Methods of Storage," *ASIS Bulletin* 7 (October 1980): 14-15; "Micrographics: The Cost Effective Office Partner," *Office* (January 1983): 151; and "Microfilm Retrieval is Money in the Bank," *Modern Office Procedures* (September 1980): 182.

⁷Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause," p. 143.

chival value into one for those whose value is, in the opinion of the reappraiser, not worth the cost of storage. This makes mincemeat of the search for valueless collections. Moreover, by this criterion a large, space-consuming collection very well might be deaccessioned before a smaller one of less value. There is no escaping the fact that such an outcome damages the integrity of the program. Rapport argues eloquently that archivists have a responsibility to make sure that those who provide the funds do not "pay for preserving what isn't worth the cost of preserving,"⁸ but it is circular reasoning to argue that "it costs too much, therefore it is not worth the cost." Something other than cost itself must determine whether records should be deaccessioned.

In determining the archival value of material upon reappraisal, Rapport rejects most of the criteria presently accepted by the profession. Use of the records, he believes, should be the main criterion in determining value.⁹ Maynard Brichford shares some of his enthusiasm for frequency of use as a measure for the value of records. Brichford says, "The value of archives is wholly dependent upon the existence of persons attaching value to them. Rates of activity may vary depending on the clientele of the archives, the research popularity of the subject matter, trends in methodology, and the availability of other sources, but one of the best indicators of research value is use statistics. As archival resources increase and budgeting, appropriation, and ac-

counting controls are tightened, the citation of research use becomes increasingly important."¹⁰

Rapport's description of this criterion is somewhat ambiguous. He suggests that during the intervals between reappraisal—perhaps twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years—the archivist could "analyze what uses, if any, are made of the records."¹¹ This suggests that past use may be the criterion. Rapport also suggests asking, however, "is there a reasonable expectation that anybody, with a serious purpose, will ever ask for these records?"¹²

The problem with the first version is that frequency of past use is not a valid determinant of the archival or research value of records. This is particularly true when we use a limited time period of twenty or thirty years as the basis for judgment. It is, to say the least, inconsistent to speak of the enduring value of records and then to suggest that enduring value is for only a small portion of one man's lifetime. There are records that will be of great value to future generations, regardless of how much current use we make of them. Look, for example, at Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie's masterpiece of the *Annales* school, *Montaillou*.¹³ If the records on which he based his work had been evaluated by earlier generations of archivists on the basis of their use, as Rapport has suggested, they would have been destroyed centuries ago. It is a-historical and anti-intellectual to determine that, because a group of records has not been used within a limited period of time, those

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 145–149.

¹⁰Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979), p. 9.

¹¹Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause," p. 145.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹³Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Land of Promised Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

records are valueless and should be disposed of by the institution holding them.

The lack of use by researchers may be due to poor finding aids or a lack of knowledge of the records on the part of the reference staff rather than the intrinsic value of the records themselves. Keeping statistics on the use of records is important. The importance is not in the evaluation of the records but in the evaluation of the quality of the institution's guides to its holdings and the quality of the finding aids for the individual record groups or manuscript collections, as well as the familiarity of the reference staff with the holdings. If a researcher is unaware of the existence of a group of records or is not informed that the records contain information that will contribute to his research, then those records will remain unused despite their significance and value.

If it is reasonable expectation of use that is to be the criterion, one is faced with the same problem discussed above—simply substituting the judgment of a later appraiser for an earlier one. Once again, changing notions of significance guarantee deaccessioning based on transitory standards.

Initial sound appraisal standards will eliminate the need for a large-scale program of reappraisal and deaccessioning in an institution. All repositories should periodically review their appraisal criteria to assess their validity. Also, to avoid the processing of records of doubtful value, there should be periodic internal reviews of how the appraisal standards are being applied by staff members.

Although the large-scale reappraisal and deaccessioning of records already among an archives' holdings should be used only as a last resort, in a crisis, there is a limited but important role for them as an integrated part of the process of initially appraising records which

have not yet been accessioned, a process which can provide guidelines for the reappraisal of previously accessioned records. When a record group or series of records is being evaluated for inclusion in the holdings, one appraisal criterion that should be applied is an assessment of the relationship of these documents to others that are already held. It is at this stage that the archivist should have a thorough knowledge of what other records among the holdings pertain to the records being appraised. The archivist can then select for retention those series of records that have the greatest research value and perhaps eliminate those that are of more limited value and are no longer necessary as documentation. If this sort of reappraisal in terms of the complementary value of records for research is a regular and systematic part of the appraisal process, then the bulk of nonarchival materials that, over the years, have crept into collections can be identified and eliminated. In a crisis, the same criterion should be used; but the search for duplication must be inaugurated separately from the appraisal of new records; and a large staff must be committed to the crash program. Only after that, and with full recognition of the violence done to archival principles, should an archives undertake a true reappraisal—the reevaluation of the judgment of the original appraiser.

Concluding his article, Rapport surmises that "there wouldn't be all that much difference" between a world in which all documents had been saved and were available and one in which all records had been destroyed a century earlier. Of course, if he really believes that, then by his value-compared-to-cost criterion, all records more than 100 years old should be deaccessioned. As Brichford says, "The value of archives is wholly dependent upon the existence of

persons attaching value to them.” Evidently Rapport agrees, but he seems to think that only those who use the archives attach that value to them. What they do with the information does not “make all that much difference.” Our society does place a value upon the maintenance of the records of its institutions, and that is what makes the archivist’s job significant. Society feels that it is not the amount of research con-

ducted in archival records that determines their value but rather the contribution to human knowledge and to the public good that result. We need to keep this uppermost in our minds. We have a responsibility to identify and to preserve the records that will afford researchers, not only in our lifetimes but in the future, the widest opportunity to conduct the studies that will enrich and benefit society.

The Fellows’ Posner Prize

For the past several years, the Society has had but one award for writing, the Waldo Gifford Leland Prize, given for the outstanding separate publication of the preceding year. Article-length contributions to archival scholarship, however outstanding, received no special recognition or incentive. Consequently, the Fellows of the Society have offered, and the Council has accepted, the establishment of a new award: The Fellows’ Posner Prize. Honoring one of the most outstanding archival scholars and teachers of the 20th century — Ernst Posner — it will reward the best article published in the preceding year’s volume of the *American Archivist*. The winning article will be selected by a subcommittee of SAA’s Awards Committee. The cash prize will be awarded at the annual meeting. The first award, for an article published in volume 45, will be presented at the annual meeting in Minnesota in October.