

INFORMATION PLEASE: FINDING AIDS IN STATE AND LOCAL ARCHIVAL DEPOSITORIES¹

THE primary purpose of all finding aids is to supply information about archival and manuscript records in order to make them available. The basis of all finding mediums should be a comprehensive classification scheme complemented with a card catalogue. With this broad and vague statement I had hoped to evade any discussion on the subject of classification. The chairman of the program committee who, if not the autocrat of the breakfast table, is the autocrat of the program, has suggested, however, that classification should be included.

Past meetings of this society have devoted considerable attention to the problem of archival classification, and a number of papers devoted to that subject have appeared in THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST. Since classification is still in the same condition as Mark Twain's weather, I rather hesitate to add to the discussion. However, it might be well to make a few observations and to pose a few unsolved problems. I think it pertinent to note that the constant reiteration of the phrase *respect des fonds* will no more solve archival classification than the repetition of the phrase "supply and demand" will solve economic problems.

Thus far discussion on classification has been centered on archival classification. Many archival institutions, however, possess not only archives, as such, but also historical manuscripts not necessarily archival in character. In some instances historical societies have the custody of the archival records of the state. Such instances complicate the formulation of classification schemes. We are told that archival collections should be classified on the basis of governmental organization, and not by subject groups. It is true, though, that historical manuscripts are generally arranged by so-called subject groups, such as personal papers, business records, church records, and so on. Naturally a classification scheme can be evolved which is flexible enough to permit the archival material to be classified one way and the manuscript material another—I am merely suggesting the existence of the problem.

¹ A paper read at the fifth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Hartford, Connecticut, in October, 1941.

While on the matter of subject groups let us consider another situation existing in most state archival agencies which has been ignored by the proponents of the principle of provenance. Many institutions already have well defined subject groups formulated out of various fonds of archival material. Thus many of the earlier states may have a collection of Revolutionary War records. In this collection may be papers from various executive departments, the legislature, and even some private papers. Often this collection has been indexed. It would be impossible to return all the papers to the proper file. Another example of a subject group might be the gathering together of all papers pertaining to an outstanding personality or military leader. In Virginia the George Rogers Clark collection has been assembled from a number of different fonds, and it is impossible now to return the material to the fond since identifying data in most cases is absent. Hence as a practical problem many archivists have existing subject groups which violate the principle of provenance. It is obvious that the drawing of papers from various fonds is, today, a bad practice; such a collection should rather be drawn together in the card catalogue. If for any reason it is advisable to bring the manuscripts in different subject groups together physically, this might be done through photographic reproduction of the originals.

Yet it is entirely possible to classify certain broad groups of archival material by subject. The earlier states might have a group of colonial papers while other states might have territorial papers. The papers pertaining to revolutionary and constitutional conventions generally form a group apart. Records created by abnormal conditions often fall more easily into a subject group than any other. Thus the records of the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, or War Between the States, form well defined groups which often violate in part the principle of provenance. Experience alone can tell the best way to classify, so this discussion might be left with the observation that archivists should at least consider the correlation of the principle of *respect des fonds* with subjective and functional classification. There can be no doubt, however, that whatever the approach, the classification scheme implemented with the card catalogue is the best finding medium for archival material.

One of the earliest finding aids and one that is still in extensive use is the memory system. Here the material is located by the simple expedient of going perhaps to the third row from the left and obtaining the bundle of papers which is on top of three books. We all

smile at such a system, but we all practice it. Even librarians have been known to disregard classification markings and unerringly select the right book on the basis of size or color of binding. The fact is, the more we know the collections, the more we use memory as a finding aid. Moreover, most reference workers in archival material are virtually forced to make a card catalogue of their minds. This is particularly true because no formal card catalogue can ever bring out all the pertinent data in a manuscript collection. Unfortunately, memory as a finding aid cannot be passed on to new staff members.

A more practical finding aid is the inventory. In the main the inventory is a preliminary listing of an institution's holdings and is used by the staff as a finding aid, but it is not generally made available to the public. As the classification scheme is the foundation of other finding mediums, so the inventory is the basis of the classification scheme. The inventory consists of innumerable listings describing the material on the shelves; in this respect an inventory resembles the librarian's shelf list. However, the archivist's inventory tries to give a complete description of the records; not only are existing labels or title copies recorded, but also a note is made of any variances and discrepancies in the material not brought out on the label or title. The inventory should seek to describe the material as fully as possible and should give the shelf location of the material. The inventory constitutes the archivist's primary work sheets and should be made carefully and completely. An approximation of a classification scheme can be formulated by combining and arranging the inventory sheets until some coherent order is apparent. It is perhaps needless to warn the archivist that no finished classification can be made on paper alone; he must get his hands dirty and his back aching through actual acquaintance with his records. A group must be shifted here, a gap filled there, and endless study and rearrangements made if a well formulated classification scheme is to result. Until this is done, however, the inventory can be used as a finding aid. If this is the case it will most certainly be necessary to group or index the inventory sheets so that like material will be drawn together. Since most inventories are tentative and are work sheets they should only rarely be made available to the public, and should be handled only by staff members. Naturally the archival inventories compiled and printed by the Historical Records Survey are an exception to this rule.

A finding medium still in use and based on library practice is the

arrangement of material by accession numbers. American librarians have discarded the practice of placing books on shelves by accession numbers in favor of a classification scheme, but books are still arranged in this manner in some European libraries. The British Museum has thus arranged its manuscripts since 1831. Before then the collections were identified by such names as the Cottonian MSS or the Harleian MSS. However, after 1861 the papers are classified as additional manuscripts and assigned a number which serves to identify the collection. Archivists can use this system by entering all material in an accession book or on accession cards and then indexing or cataloguing the entries. The advantage of such a scheme is that it is rapid and a minimum of shelf space is needed, for each accessioned group can be placed immediately after the preceding group on the shelf. Up to a certain point such a plan works very well, and as a provisional way of shelving manuscript material and making it available the accession arrangement has much to commend it. The main objection to such an arrangement is that the archivist unlike the librarian does not accession a single complete unit such as a book. Often one number may embrace a vast fond of papers containing both loose manuscripts and bound volumes. Study of such a fond will often reveal that rather than one integral group of papers there might be a number of groups. It is possible of course to indicate this in the catalogue, but American archivists should follow the trail blazed by librarians and classify the records rather than merely arrange the material on the shelves in order of reception of the material.

One of the simplest findings aids made generally available to scholars is the list. Many archival institutions find a listing of certain types of material extremely useful. Such a list merely describes the material in a sentence or two and gives the beginning and ending dates of the collection. Thus a list of business records might merely be an alphabetical listing of firms whose business records the institution possesses. Or the list might merely set forth the county record books in the collections of the institution by title. The list can be arranged alphabetically, chronologically, or geographically, as best suits the need of the archivist. Since additional accessions are often added to the list it is possible to put the information on a card catalogue. However, there is much virtue in compiling the list in a loose leaf binder which can be kept at the charge desk and consulted there. Most lists are temporary affairs and do not necessarily

need to carry shelf locations or classification numbers since the list generally describes the most used material in the institution.

While the list attempts to describe in the briefest form manuscripts within specific collections, the guide strives to describe specific collections as a group. As of the date of compilation, the guide to the collections of an institution gives a summary description of each integral group of records. An example of an earlier guide is the *Handbook of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress* published in 1918 or the recently printed *Guide to the Material in the National Archives*.² The Historical Records Survey has also done much in this field and an example of such work is found in the *Guide to the Manuscripts in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina*.³ The primary purpose of the guide, which is generally printed, is to supply distant scholars and others a birds-eye view of the range and extent of an institution's collections. As stated by Dr. Connor in his introduction to the *National Archives Guide*, its purpose "is to make known to prospective users of them [the records] their existence and something of their nature, scope and value." Such a guide not only seeks to describe the records by group or collection but supplies additional bibliographical data. This data in various guides tells where the records were received from, the date of acquisition, the range and extent of the collection, and perhaps indicates the availability of indexes, lists, or other finding aids. Most guides to historical manuscripts are arranged alphabetically, although the *National Archives Guide* has been arranged according to the organization of the government. Although the guide strives to describe collections as a group, it is desirable to bring out some of the most important information in each group. Thus the account book of an otherwise obscure merchant, having entries on his ledgers indicating certain purchases made by George Washington, is a fact of importance which could be stressed. The *Library of Congress Handbook* strives to bring out such facts and often mentions the more important letters written by outstanding men. The *National Archives Guide* also gives such information. In order to do this the archivist must become very well acquainted with the individual papers in each collection described. If such specific information is brought out, the guide should be thoroughly and carefully indexed so that all

² *The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science*, xxiv, No. 2 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941).

³ *The National Archives Publication No. 14* (Washington, 1940).

the information pertaining to a particular topic will be drawn together.

Hilary Jenkinson states that the calendar "is a précis whose compiler endeavours, while economizing space, to achieve the same end as the Editor of a full text—that of making consultation of the original document unnecessary save in exceptional circumstances. . . ."⁴ Anyone who has used the admirable English *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial* realizes that this statement is in part true. So excellently has this calendar been compiled that many colonial historians have made their citations directly to it. This was particularly true before the Library of Congress transcripts and other copies of this material had been made available to scholars in any part of the country. Nowadays the colonial historian would far rather consult a copy of the original document than a printed abstract of it, no matter how excellently done. Certainly in American archival practice the calendar is not made to supplant the original, but rather to give scholars some idea of what is in the original. The calendar normally gives an abstract of each document within a particular collection. Thus the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the State Department has published calendars of the correspondence of Madison and Jefferson. The Library of Congress has issued calendars of the Van Buren, Crittenden, Washington, and other papers. Many other excellent calendars have been or are being published by the Historical Records Survey. Although the calendar is usually concerned with the papers of an individual it is also possible to calendar papers pertaining to a subject group, such as the calendar of the Kentucky papers issued by the Wisconsin Historical Society, or the various calendars issued by the British Public Record Office. It would seem that a group of papers to be calendared should be as nearly complete as possible. The order of the papers is normally reflected in the calendar—this order is in the majority of cases chronological. Some institutions place the calendar on cards, but in general the purpose of compiling a calendar is to make it available in print. A calendar is not a simple abstract with pertinent names and dates, but is an attempt to present the essence of the document. This can only be done by reading and re-reading the material. In compiling a calendar the question often arises if seemingly valueless papers in a collection should be calendared. Thus the papers of most outstanding public men have such

⁴ *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1937), 131.

trivia as letters of recommendation, letters of acknowledgment, begging letters, receipts, and the like. Naturally if such material is excluded from the calendar, mention should be made of this fact in the introduction.

In order to locate specific information such as the name of an individual on a muster roll the archivist finds the index his most valuable finding aid. The index card differs from the usual catalogue card in that the latter describes a so-called series or a single manuscript volume. The index card, on the other hand, enumerates individual names or items which are covered in the catalogue card. Thus a catalogue entry might be an auditor's book containing accounts for revolutionary soldiers. The index would enumerate each soldier. Since much research in manuscript materials is centered about the names of persons, a great many indexes of archival institutions are necessarily alphabetical arrangement of names whether these be revolutionary soldiers, confederate soldiers or persons listed on a census schedule. If the index is placed on cards the fact must be borne in mind that the card index is not the card catalogue. It is very easy to permit index cards to overflow the cases assigned for catalogue cards. As suggested by W. D. McCain, if all manuscripts were to be thoroughly indexed, "the index would require a larger building than the archives." Indexing the names in any collection is apt to result in the creation of cards by the tens of thousands. Indeed, several institutions boast collections of more than a million index cards. At a thousand cards to a tray we can see that a comparatively small index of a hundred thousand names would take a hundred catalogue trays. This would be indexing the material only by name. If, as is often necessary, the material is not only indexed alphabetically by person, but cross indexed chronologically, geographically, or by subject, we can see that the number of cards and trays necessary to contain the cards would assume staggering proportions. Cross indexing also entails the labor and expense of striking off additional cards. One answer to this problem is the use of microfilm. As a concrete example the proposed index to the records of the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia recently copied by the Virginia State Library might be cited. These records comprise some thirty-three thousand items covering the period from 1796 to 1866. The records give the valuation and description of many notable plantations such as Stratford, Monticello, Mount Vernon as well as other property. A study of the records indicates that they could be

indexed in three ways: (1) by the name of the owner or assured, (2) by the county or city in which the property was located, and (3) by the name of the plantation. A form covering this information can be mimeographed on a cheap stock master card. These cards are then to be arranged and rearranged as desired, and microfilmed. Over seventeen thousand of these cards can be placed on a hundred foot roll of film. Thus, instead of a hundred thousand cards which would take some hundred card trays, the material could be placed on six one-hundred-foot rolls of microfilm. The saving in space is not the only item, for a hundred thousand cards of a good quality are rather expensive and the labor involved in making these cards is also a tremendous item. The same technique could also be employed in the indexing of other material. Even with material to be indexed in one way the saving in space of filming the cards would pay for itself. Moreover the master card can be of the cheapest quality, and the reverse side can be used for the compilation of another index which is to be microfilmed. Perhaps not the least important is the possibility of making a positive microfilm copy of the index which might be used for inter-library loans, thus giving distant scholars the opportunity of consulting the index.

We have seen that all archival establishments and historical societies need finding aids in order to make the material available. In performing this function we have noticed that finding aids fall roughly into two groups, those used by the staff members of the institution and those made available to the public. We have further noticed that although the matter is complicated by the necessity of making the manuscripts immediately available, finding aids should be based on a fixed and integrated classification scheme. The difficulties one might run into through making finding aids available to scholars and then changing the classification of the material is seen in certain of the British Public Record Office collections. An example which is of particular interest to American historians is the reorganization of the colonial office material. One important group was formerly known as the America and West Indies series. This series has been reorganized so that many of the manuscripts now are in the colonial office series. One example taken at random is the group of papers pertaining to the French and Indian War, 1755-1756, which was under the old classification given the call number A. W. I., 82-83; the present number is C. O. 5, 46-47. In the case of this material it was necessary for Dr. C. M. Andrews to print a

tabulated list of the old and new numbers in his *Guide to the Materials for American History to 1783, in the Public Record Office of Great Britain*.⁵ Thus it would be well for institutions contemplating the printing of finding aids before a definitive classification scheme has been evolved, to indicate that such a finding aid is provisional or to work out a description of a certain collection which will be unchanged. Thus, if a calendar is made of the holdings an institution has of their Washington papers it is probable that the George Washington papers as a group can be manipulated somewhere into a plan of classification.

As has been suggested in the discussion of indexes, microphotography can play an important role in space saving and making certain indexes available to other institutions or to scholars on loan. This is not only true of indexes but lists, guides, calendars and other finding aids as well. A positive microfilm copy of a calendar could easily be made available for a distant scholar who desired to obtain some idea of a specific collection as a whole.

I have not included the transcript in this discussion of finding aids although it is apparent that the index to a printed volume of transcripts constitutes an excellent finding aid in itself.

Since finding aids are closely associated with publication problems, it is gratifying to note that the Committee on Publication Policies of Archival Agencies, under the capable chairmanship of Leon de Valinger, is gathering data on the reproduction of finding aids. Although it may be difficult to compile a manual covering every point it should be possible to formulate certain rules which might be followed. It would be useful, for example, to have the format of printed calendars uniform. If the year is printed on the left hand margin it might be worthwhile to consider if this should be in bold face type and if the month and day should be printed under the year or on the same line. On some calendars we note that the surname of the writer is printed first, in other cases the Christian name appears first. Some study should be given bibliographic data such as indicating the size of the sheets in centimeters, indicating the number of pages, and certainly if the document is the original or a copy. These details could well be made uniform. Questions of policy such as how to abstract the documents and what to exclude from the calendar are more difficult of solution.

Since the title of this paper is based on a well known radio quiz

⁵ (Two volumes. Washington. The Carnegie Institution, 1912, 1914), I, 279-307.

program, this paper can be summed up with the remark that no archivist can answer the \$64 question without having available suitable finding aids.

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