

Literature Survey

Oliver W. Holmes Revisited: Levels of Arrangement and Description in Practice

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Abstract: Oliver W. Holmes propounded the concept of archival levels of arrangement in his 1964 article, "Five Levels of Arrangement," which described practices at the National Archives. Over the years the concept has been elevated to a theoretical construct and has been extended to include description as well as arrangement. However, descriptive systems that actually apply the concepts of levels of arrangement and description have been few and far between. Neither standard reporting to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections nor the development of the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control format have furthered the integration of description at differing levels. Holmes's levels seem to have had little impact on the development of automated archival systems. Has the theory been invalidated or just denied?

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OLIVER W. HOLMES'S SEMINAL article assigning different arrangement activities to five different hierarchical levels first appeared in the January 1964 issue of the *American Archivist*.¹ He presented a framework for the arrangement of archives and suggested that the kind of arrangement undertaken depends entirely on the designated level. He argued that each of five archival levels—Depository, Record Group and Subgroup, Series, Filing Unit, Document—requires a different kind of arrangement. Sometimes the familiar alphabetical or chronological sequences suffice; in other cases hierarchies or record forms may provide the basis for arrangement.

The spread of this statement of practice at one repository to the point where it was adopted as “dogma” by manuscript curators reveals the preeminent role of the National Archives in establishing models of practice for the archival profession during the post-war decades. Through contributions to the archival literature, such as Holmes's essay in the *American Archivist*, through the summer archival institutes, and through Society of American Archivists conference presentations, the National Archives developed and extended both theory² and practice for the archival profession. However, as others approached the lectern and typewriter and the dominance of the National Archives declined, theory and practice took some surprising twists. And Holmes's influential article was in the thick of it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, named after the autocrat and the jurist, was born in 1902 and raised in Minnesota. He received his B.A. from Carleton College in 1922 and a

Ph.D. from Columbia in 1956. Following his graduation from Carleton he worked for the University of Montana, New York Public Library, Encyclopedia Britannica, Columbia University Press, and the Institute for Social and Religious Research. He joined the staff of the fledgling National Archives in 1935 and became a founding member of the Society of American Archivists. He served as chief, Interior Department Archives, 1938-41; director of research and records description, 1942-45; program advisor, 1945-48; chief of the Natural Resources Records Branch, 1948-61; and executive director of the National Historical Publications Commission, 1961-72. After his retirement, he remained active in archival affairs and associations, particularly in international relations. He died on 25 November 1981.³ Walter Rundell, in a memorial published in the *American Archivist*, wrote, “Any archivist would be pleased to have his work cited and quoted as often as Oliver's 1964 article on archival arrangement has been.”⁴

Although not published until long after he had left the ranks of practicing archivists, Holmes's essay on arrangement undoubtedly derives from his earlier work with the records in the National Archives. In fact, Holmes was exceedingly careful in his oft-cited article to warn that, while the concepts presented should be useful to any archives, they had “been derived chiefly from experience in the National Archives.”⁵ Holmes's personal experience, it should be noted, was primarily gained some two decades earlier when he was serving as director of research and records description.

Not for another eleven years, when

¹Oliver W. Holmes, “Archival Arrangement — Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels,” *American Archivist* 27 (January 1964): 21-41.

²“Theory” is used here in an equivalent sense to what John Robert called the “methodological aspects of archivy.” See his “Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving,” *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 73.

³*Dictionary of American Scholars: History* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1978), I:315; *SAA Newsletter* (January, 1982), 10; *Washington Post* (November 27, 1981), B18a.

⁴Walter Rundell, “Oliver W. Holmes,” *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 249.

⁵Holmes, “Five Different Levels,” 21.

Richard C. Berner's article on arrangement and description appeared in the *Drexel Library Quarterly's* special issue on archives and manuscripts in 1975, was Holmes's explication of levels of arrangement presented as a more general theoretical approach.⁶ David Gracy reinforced this new status two years later with an explicit endorsement of Holmes's levels in his SAA basic manual on arrangement and description. He wrote, "As no grouping, or order, can be achieved without a framework, the most significant section of the definition is the notion of levels of arrangement. Oliver Wendell Holmes of the National Archives first publicized this idea in 1964 and applied it to archival institutions. It is now generally accepted by curators and archivists alike."⁷ Gracy's pronouncement probably had more effect on the profession than did Berner's, for the *Drexel Library Quarterly* issue went out of print within six months, and it was not generally available until reprinted by the Society of American Archivists in 1980.⁸

From Arrangement to Description

The general acceptance by archivists and curators of Holmes's ideas on arrangement extended to the practice of description as well. Holmes had ended his paper with a section on description entitled "Reporting Arrangement Results in Writing," which noted that

these archival instruments serve a double purpose in that, although really produced as control documents to account for the holdings and to show their arrangement, they serve also as finding aids. In one

sense the depository-level document might be said to tell a researcher which way to turn when he enters the depository, the record group statement tells him which threshold to cross, the inventory tells him in which part of the room to look, and the filing unit list tells him which unit to take off the shelf as likely to contain the document or documents he wishes to see. The searcher will not take these steps except in imagination as he consults the finding-aid documents, but some member of the archives staff must take them physically if the documents are to be made available to the searcher in a central searchroom.⁹

As Richard Berner points out in his book on the history of archival theory, "Holmes only implies what the descriptive process might be."¹⁰ Later in that work, during a discussion of Frank Evans's 1966 article on archival arrangement,¹¹ Berner adds that the descriptive program of the National Archives, with "its plethora of unintegrated finding aids," suggests a reason for Holmes's lack of attention to the implications of arrangement on descriptive practices.¹²

Berner first advocated the integration of arrangement and description in his 1969 account of practice at the University of Washington. That practice was strongly influenced by Theodore R. Schellenberg's 1962 teaching stint in Seattle, shortly after his retirement from the National Archives. However, Berner described his single network as a combination inventory and correspondent index that "is not dependent on arrangement."¹³ Accordingly, Berner made no

⁶Richard C. Berner, "Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 11 (January 1975).

⁷David B. Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* (Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 1977), 4.

⁸Richard H. Lytle, "Editor's note," *Management of Archives and Manuscript Collections for Librarians* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

⁹Holmes, "Five Different Levels," 41.

¹⁰Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 63.

¹¹Frank B. Evans, "Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 29 (April 1966): 241-63.

¹²Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice*, 63.

¹³Richard C. Berner and M. Gary Bettis, "Descrip-

mention of Holmes's article, although he was familiar with it, having cited it in the bibliography accompanying his earlier article on unifying the treatment of archives and manuscripts.¹⁴

How did Holmes's concept of levels come to be explicitly attached to description? It was not this author's 1974 essay on a continuum of description for manuscripts, which failed to mention Holmes at all.¹⁵ It was not David Gracy's pioneering arrangement and description manual of 1977 which, while commenting on the close relationship between arrangement and description, fails to specifically mention the possibility of keying differing levels of description to the levels of arrangement. Nor was it his *Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts*, which identifies the five levels of arrangement, but gives no credit to Holmes in the text nor in the bibliography.¹⁶

Richard Berner has stated that "by 1962 we fully recognized the hierarchy of record levels and the need to key our controls to them."¹⁷ But his own contributions to the literature did not make this point until his almost offhand statement in 1975: "The hierarchy of controls, noted above [a list of Holmes's five levels], concerns both arrangement and description."¹⁸ Richard Lytle, in a slightly different context, confirms that it was Holmes's article that "specially" influenced Berner's thinking.¹⁹ In

his article on American archival theory, Harold T. Pinkett noted that "Richard C. Berner has also publicized the idea [i.e., Holmes's five levels of arrangement] and has recommended establishing the subgroup as an independent record level in arrangement and description."²⁰ Pinkett continues, in his discussion of description theory, to assume a direct connection between levels of arrangement and levels of description. Thus, by the summer of 1981, largely through the efforts of Berner, Holmes's five levels of arrangement had become associated with (at least) five levels of description.²¹

Archival Automation and Levels of Description

Holmes and his generation could not have been expected to anticipate the rapid emergence of automated techniques in archival description, let alone foresee how those techniques might apply the five-levels concept. Theodore R. Schellenberg, Holmes's contemporary at the National Archives, author of the important texts *Modern Archives* and *Management of Archives*,²² and an important influence on Richard Berner, wrote in 1965 that "the use of modern gadgetry cannot supplant the use of proper techniques and principles in describing documentary materials."²³ However, since

tion of Manuscript Collections: a Single Network System," *College and Research Libraries* 30 (September 1969): 416.

¹⁴Richard C. Berner, "Manuscript Collections and Archives—A Unitary Approach," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 9 (Spring 1965): 213–20.

¹⁵Terry Abraham, "Manuscripts: A Continuum of Description," *Georgia Archive* 2 (Winter 1974): 20–27.

¹⁶*Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts* (New York: Special Libraries Association, 1981), 7–8.

¹⁷Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice*, 10.

¹⁸Berner, "Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts," in Lytle, ed. *Management of Archives and Manuscript Collections for Librarians* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 35.

¹⁹Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Prove-

nance and Context Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 73.

²⁰Harold T. Pinkett, "American Archival Theory: The State of the Art," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 220.

²¹See Fredric M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 28, for a recent statement of this association.

²²*Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); *Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

²³Theodore R. Schellenberg, "A Nationwide System of Controlling Historical Manuscripts in the United States," *American Archivist* 28 (July 1965): 409. This prescient statement was accompanied by others in-

then, "modern gadgetry" has increasingly been used to improve access to archival and manuscripts materials.

In 1986, Trudy Peterson analyzed the role of the National Archives in the development of archival theory. Noting the debate over access by arrangement and access by automated description, she suggested that automation has both refined the theory of hierarchical levels and incorporated them in the descriptive materials. Specifically, she remarked on the impact of Holmes's levels on the automation of archival description:

A second development in the area of automated description and the application of archival theory is an evolving sophistication in the use of the concept of levels. As described in the standard literature, the levels of arrangement, with the associated levels of description, lead to a structured hierarchy of records. This hierarchy, in part discerned by the archivist from original order and in part established by the archivist, reflects both a records relationship and an associated bureaucratic structure. With the advent of automated descriptive techniques, the use of levels, hierarchies, and linkages came under intense review. Some archivists, both inside and outside the National Archives, claimed that automation made hierarchies obsolete and unnecessary, that a data base could link a series description to the description of the unit of government that created the series and that was sufficient for most purposes. Increasingly, however, archivists are realizing the dual nature of the records hierarchy. It describes both the links between bodies of records (central files to subunit files, indexes to registers to correspondence, field files to central files)

and the administrative structure of the bureaucracy creating the records. A review of published National Archives records descriptions shows that archivists instinctively described both hierarchies and that the data base design must accommodate both. Although automation is incidental to the theory of records arrangement and description, its application leads to a refinement and clarification of the underlying theory.²⁴

But has archival automation implemented Holmes's five levels as a descriptive device? Tom Hickerson's introduction to automated access, published as part of the original SAA Basic Manual Series, surveyed the early history of automation in archives and listed ten (then) recent developments in archival automation.²⁵ Of those listed, only a few can be said to have attempted to incorporate description at different levels of arrangement. For instance, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History was reported to be using SPINDEX (an abbreviation for Selective Permutation INDEXing) to produce a "comprehensive series-level guide . . . printed in hierarchical archival order (i.e., record group, subgroup, series)."²⁶

Hickerson noted that SPINDEX featured a "hierarchical level indicator [that] allows the same indexing pattern to be used for accessing and associating different archival control levels, e.g. record group, series, folder."²⁷ This capability is not too surprising, given that SPINDEX was created by the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, revamped by the National Archives, and enhanced by the National

sisting that numerical codes should be applied to collections so that "various modern devices for recording and retrieving information" could be used to aid in the access to materials.

²⁴Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist Revisited, 1954-1984," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 130.

²⁵H. Thomas Hickerson, *Archives and Manuscripts: An Introduction to Automated Access* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1981).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

Historical Publications and Records Commission.

Another system that seemed to offer promise for archival materials was CO-DOC (for COoperative DOcuments Project of the Ontario Universities Library Cooperative System). It was designed to permit bibliographic control of government documents and featured a code based on governmental hierarchies: "jurisdictions, levels of government, and issuing agency."²⁸ More promising, for archivists, was the National Archives' NARS A-1 system. Designed as a "computer-assisted rather than a computer-centered system," NARS A-1 maintained the originating agency's structure through a "hierarchical numbering scheme" established at the series level.²⁹

Despite their promise, none of the systems described by Hickerson have survived beyond a few early applications. Attention has shifted instead to a library-based system that was given short shrift in Hickerson's pioneering survey. He had slighted the manuscripts format of MARC (short for MACHine-Readable Cataloging) because at that time MARC and its "rule book," the Anglo-American Cataloging Code, concentrated on individual manuscript items and was perceived as more "appropriate for cataloging literary manuscripts."³⁰

The adoption in 1983 of the Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format as part of the library world's automated bibliographic catalogs has given new life to the concept of automating the bibliographic control of manuscripts and archival materials. By providing a set of standard rules that can be implemented in various automated systems, the USMARC AMC for-

mat brings us closer to the goal of a nationwide database of descriptions of archival and manuscript materials.³¹ The promise of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) is being fulfilled as its collection-level records are installed in MARC on the RLIN database. Cooperative efforts between institutions, funding agencies, and library bibliographic systems are bringing this dream nearer to realization with each passing year. MARC has become an essential element of archival automation.

But does the MARC AMC format provide for descriptions keyed to Holmes's levels of arrangement? Yes, according to Nancy Sahlh:

The AMC format is extremely flexible. It can be used to describe and control materials at all levels, although a separate record must be created for each archival unit or subunit being described. For example, if control was desired for each level of a record group consisting of two subgroups, with seven series in each subgroup, a total of seventeen different [MARC] records would need to be created. Linkage between levels is provided by special fields in the format. It should be emphasized, however, that the capability to provide actual automated linkage among records is a property of the software and system being used, not of the AMC format itself.³²

In his codification of guidelines for archival application of the second edition of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, Steven Hensen confirms that AACR 2 (and, by extension, USMARC AMC) can accommodate description of archival materials at several appropriate levels. Without

²⁸Ibid., 36.

²⁹Ibid., 44; see also Alan Calmes, "Practical Realities of Computer-Based Finding Aids: The NARS A-1 Experience," *American Archivist* 42 (April 1979): 167-77.

³⁰Hickerson, *Introduction to Automated Access*, 25.

³¹See Edward C. Papenfuss, "Finding Aids and the Historian: the Need for National Priorities and a Standard Approach," *AHA Newsletter* 10 (May 1972): 18.

³²Nancy Sahlh, *MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: the AMC Format* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985), [10].

elaborating, he acknowledges the five-level hierarchy in the "National Archives model" and explains that "the choice of level(s) appropriate to individual collections or entire repository holdings must be made by each repository based on its own internal needs."³³

In actual practice, however, few repositories have chosen to employ this capability. The reason is simple: computers are wonderful and provide extra services and improved access, but they also are extremely costly in terms of human and budgetary resources. To create Sahli's hypothetical seventeen records on the computer is much more expensive than creating a single collection-level record. Although computer memory costs have diminished in recent years, the human costs of creating, editing, authorizing, and approving a record are still substantial. The effort required to conform to standards necessary to maintain a national database, considerable even for simple records, increases with multiple linked records.³⁴ Where costs for cataloging and data entry are actually charged to the archives unit, AMC-format records for multiple levels of archival materials will be long delayed.³⁵

Of all the archival automation systems, only SPINDEX achieved explicit provision

for the inclusion of description at all of Holmes's putative five levels of arrangement. Products of SPINDEX, such as the guides prepared by the Washington Historical Records Project, clearly demonstrate the ability to provide access at the different levels in the arrangement and description hierarchy in one descriptive system.³⁶ They also included the ability to create indexes to names and subjects. One of the reasons SPINDEX did not continue as the main thrust in archival automation was that "the effort was tied to the SPINDEX computer programs, which . . . were certainly inadequate to the idea of a national data base."³⁷ Its other liability was getting caught with batch-mode processing in an increasingly online age.³⁸

SPINDEX's hierarchical organization is no surprise, given its origins. However, the fact that archivists have, in general, given little or no consideration to maintaining integrated levels of description suggests that the concept, as theory, should be reconsidered. The Research Libraries Group's Seven States Project, creating MARC records of state archival materials and agency histories, is in the forefront of changing archival descriptive practice; undoubtedly changes in theory will follow.³⁹

As Frank Burke noted, "the Holmes article on the five levels of arrangement was not the clarion call of some new theoretical

³³Steven Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989), 6. The first edition of *APPM*, published by the Library of Congress in 1983, was prepared independently of the development of the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control format. In subsequent years the two became closely linked through the rapid development of automated cataloging.

³⁴See the special sections on "Standards for Archival Description" in the Fall 1989 (52:4) and Winter 1990 (53:1) issues of the *American Archivist*, which presented the efforts of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description.

³⁵Sara Harwell, "The MARC Format in the Library Setting," *Academic Archivist* 5 (April 1987): 6-8, reports library cataloging departments charging the archives \$30 to \$40 per record.

³⁶In particular, *Historical Records of Washington State: Guide to Records in State Archives and its Regional Repositories* (Olympia: Washington State Division of Archives and Records Management/Washington State Historical Records Advisory Board, 1981).

³⁷Lawrence R. Stark, "The MARC Format, the Library Systems, and National Information Systems for Archives" (Paper presented to the Northwest Archivists, Spokane, Washington, April 1987), 2.

³⁸Richard A. Noble, "The NHPRC Data Base Project: Building the 'Interstate Highway System,'" *American Archivist* 51 (Winter and Spring 1988): 99.

³⁹David Bearman, "Archives and Manuscript Control with Bibliographic Utilities: Challenges and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 26-39.

concept, but rather the synthesis of current usage in the National Archives."⁴⁰ As Burke elucidates in his article, American archival theory is so intertwined with practice that the two are indistinguishable. The transplantation of the five-levels concept from practice to theory occurred, not in a theoretical arena but in a very practical one: identifying the hierarchies of archival arrangement and description in the course of processing.

The profession's response to Holmes's article has demonstrated that practice is the engine that drives archival theory. His delineation of five levels has been a useful tool for the construction of finding aids and inventories, but "modern gadgetry," as

Schellenberg referred to new technologies, has, for the most part, not incorporated the concept into the development of internal or interinstitutional databases.

Both the form and the content of free-wheeling discussions on electronic-mail networks reveal a willingness to tinker with conventional wisdom. For example, one participant in a BITNET-based discussion rejected provenance as a basis for arrangement and description in favor of automated information systems and then concluded, "I think we are re-writing archival theory here."⁴¹ We may anticipate, then, that future changes in archival practice will produce alternate theoretical constructs, perhaps dislodging the Holmesian five-levels concept from its current dominant position.

⁴⁰Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 41.

⁴¹Marcy Goldstein, LISTSERV posting, 20:00:00 EDT, 24 July 1991, Archives & Archivists list (ARCHIVES@INDYCMS.BITNET).