HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHIVAL THEORY AND PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Two distinct archival traditions have developed in the United States, affecting practices in manuscript repositories and public and institutional archives in myriad ways. One is the Historical Manuscripts Tradition, which dominated both collecting practices and intellectual controls from the 18th century until about 1960. The other is the Public Archives Tradition, which gained ascendency in the 1960s as the nature of collecting changed from a concentration on papers of remote vintage to those of the 20th century.¹

The Historical Manuscripts Tradition is rooted in librarianship. It began institutionally with the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791. Many of its practices grew out of Society secretary Jeremy Belknap’s eagerness to “multiply copies” by first binding and then publishing them as the Society’s Collections. Orientation was toward handling the collected materials as discrete items, because each handwritten document was unique and because integral groups of papers and public records were rarely collected or preserved intact. Indeed, the only body of theory and practice for bibliographic control that existed in the 19th century was that of librarianship. Manuscript items were typically classified according to a preconceived subject scheme, as were books, and were chronologically arranged within this scheme. Calendaring and item indexing, in addition to publication by historical editing, were the intended products of this procedure.

This pattern was first codified by Worthington C. Ford of the Library of Congress’s Manuscripts Division for Charles A. Cutter’s 1904 Rules for a Dictionary Catalog (pp. 135-138). In 1913 the
Library of Congress issued the first edition of its manual by John C. Fitzpatrick, *Notes on the Care, Cataloguing, and Arranging of Manuscripts*, which fulfilled the Library's intention of influencing practices nationwide. Fitzpatrick focused attention on "miscellany," dismissing provenance and any discussion of series, and adhering to strict chronological arrangement within subject and form classes.

The Public Archives Tradition, on the other hand, was influenced by European archival developments in the 19th century. It began at a practical level in this country with Dutch-trained archivist Arnold J. F. Van Laer's reorganization in 1899 of the New York State Archives from a subject classification scheme to one based on provenance. More general application of the principle of provenance began with the work of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association. (The commission promoted archival legislation and surveys in many states, and from 1909 to 1936 it sponsored an annual Conference of Archivists, in which archival issues were formally aired.) The principle of provenance was applied in the establishment of the first state archives in Alabama in 1901. However, it was Dunbar Rowland of Mississippi, beginning in 1902, who most systematically elaborated upon provenance for that state's archives. In 1907 Benjamin F. Shambaugh published a classification scheme for Iowa based on provenance. In all of these cases there was respect for the original filing order, if there was one. This implied recognition of the record series as a key element in arrangement.

Beginning with the first meeting in 1909 of the Conference of Archivists, the Public Archives Tradition became more firmly based in archival theory. At that meeting, Waldo Gifford Leland, secretary of the American Historical Association, attacked the practice of applying library principles to public archives. He advocated instead the adoption of the European principle of provenance, coupled with description by progressively refined stages. He was the first person in the United States to enunciate this procedure before a group of his colleagues.

The 1910 Conference of Archivists meeting was especially important because it led to the separation of the two traditions, insulating the Historical Manuscripts Tradition from the influence of developments just occurring in the public archives field.
Rowland gave a paper arguing that state archives must serve their respective administrations primarily, and other users secondarily. Gaillard Hunt, head of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, as commentator for Rowland’s paper, agreed, conceding that historical manuscripts and public archives were so utterly different that they must be treated differently. The two streams, thus separated, were not rejoined until Theodore R. Schellenberg led the way in the late 1950s and early 1960s, establishing a clear theoretical basis for applying practices borrowed from the Public Archives Tradition to the management of integral collections of papers having essentially the same organic characteristics as public records.

Between 1910 and the late 1950s, several developments occurred that contributed to Schellenberg’s success. Grace Lee Nute, curator of manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society, published a manual on the Care and Cataloguing of Manuscripts (1936), and contributed a paper at the American Library Association’s 1939 annual meeting that reinforced the Historical Manuscripts Tradition, considering the “box” as the “main catalogable unit.” During the same decade, however, the establishment of the National Archives (1934) and the Society of American Archivists (1936) and the work of the Historical Records Survey (HRS) strengthened the Public Archives Tradition. Margaret Cross Norton, Illinois state archivist and chair of the SAA’s Classification and Cataloging Committee, led the committee in revising the Illinois State Library cataloging code for use in archival cataloging—primarily from only two years of experience derived from the HRS. Her Catalog Rules: Series for Archives Material (1938) considered the record series to be the main catalogable unit, and elaborate rules were devised for their proper cataloging.

The work of Nute and Norton encouraged Augustus F. Kuhlman, chair of the American Library Association’s Archives and Libraries Committee, to expect the development of a national cataloging code that would cover both historical manuscripts and public archives. What evolved instead was a set of cataloging rules for historical manuscripts only. They were developed under the leadership of the Library of Congress (acting as a surrogate for the American Library Association), beginning with production of the Library’s own rules in 1950. They are now represented by the
National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) rules for descriptive cataloging (1955) and by the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (1967, 1978).

One critical element in this process that merits special attention is the separation of description from arrangement that occurred at the Library of Congress. "Cataloging" was done in a workplace that was administratively separate from the Manuscripts Division, by staff members who were not involved in the total process of intellectual control, which includes accessioning, arrangement, and description of the materials being cataloged. As such, the rules represent a technocratic solution to an organismic problem. It was almost inevitable that a vested interest would develop in the cataloging process itself as well as in the catalog card format. Moreover, an understanding of the relationship of the catalog to other finding aids was impaired by this separation. Practices at the Library of Congress became the model for others. It has taken automation to dethrone the card catalog, but not the traditional cataloging process itself.

Meanwhile, some dramatic changes were occurring within the National Archives. Its divisions of cataloging and classification were abolished in 1941. The record group became the basis of arrangement, while the preliminary inventory became the main finding aid. Cataloging was reserved for final inventories, none of which has ever been produced. (One unfortunate consequence of this situation was that the potentially integrative function of the cataloging process was lost, with the result that the finding aids could not be approached through an integrative tool such as a union catalog or cumulative index.) In the course of implementing this program, a number of internal manuals were produced and made available for general distribution, affecting practice at other major repositories. Schellenberg was their principal author, following Leland's lead of 1909. Essentially, they outlined procedures for establishing progressively refined controls beginning at the record group level and proceeding through the subgroup, series, and item levels—the basic hierarchy of controls.

When Solon J. Buck resigned in 1948 from his position as Archivist of the United States, he became chief of the Library of Congress's Manuscripts Division from 1948 to 1951. During this period he radically revised the work of the division, essentially
transferring to the Library of Congress the program he had been instrumental in implementing in the National Archives. The "manuscript group" became the equivalent of the record group in matters of arrangement. The register, derived from the preliminary inventory format of the National Archives, became the principal finding aid for modern manuscript accessions because of the latter's kinship to public records. As at the National Archives, however, the potential integrative function of cataloging was also ignored at the Library of Congress, despite the fact that the concept of a union catalog for books was well established there. But the manuscripts catalog was just one among other finding aids. It did not provide access to the whole array of finding aids in the manner of a union catalog because it did not catalog these other finding aids, in particular the register. Instead, cataloging was done impressionistically from an initial review of the actual manuscripts, and condensed in a scope and contents note that preceded the series listing in the register. All added entries were derived from this limited scope and contents note. The more detailed information in the container list, which contained most of the potential cataloging data, was ignored. Furthermore, in not being used as the source of catalog entries the container list has never been treated as a controlled documentary source, and the potentially integrative function of the catalog—as a union catalog—was never developed. A bifurcated system resulted that remains to this day the model for major manuscript repositories.6

Let us turn now to the metamorphosis of Theodore R. Schellenberg, beginning in 1956 with the publication of his Modern Archives. He had previously been the principal author of various Staff Information Papers for the National Archives, all relating to arrangement and description. No. 18, "Principles of Arrangement" (1951), represents the fullest exposition, in its day, of the hierarchy of controls: record group, subgroup, series, file unit, and item level. In Modern Archives he treated private papers as "historical manuscripts," noting that:

1. They show a more personal contact with the subject.
2. They are the product usually of spontaneity.
3. They accumulate in a "haphazard," not a "systematic," manner.
Schellenberg made only general contrasts between archival and library methodology. Libraries are collecting, not receiving, agencies; they are item-oriented in their collecting, processing, and descriptive practices and are predisposed to classification of manuscripts by pre-conceived schemes.\textsuperscript{7}

Contrast the above in *Modern Archives* with the opening paragraph of his draft manual produced in 1961 at the University of Texas.

This book relates to the description of both private and public records. It is written in the belief that descriptive techniques that are applied to public records may also be applied, with some modification, to private records, and that they are particularly applicable to the management of collections of recent origin, many of which have the organic character of archival groups.\textsuperscript{8}

Between the appearance of *Modern Archives* and this draft manual Schellenberg had taught, prepared syllabus items for courses sponsored by the National Archives and Records Service, and written some articles. One of the syllabus items was on “Arrangement of Private Papers.” In it Schellenberg recommended that “large collections” of private papers which reflect “extended activity” should be broken down into series in the same way as an archival group. These series should be formed on the basis of physical type (pp. 3, 9-11). In proceeding directly to series formation he saw no need to apply the public archival practice of grouping the series first according to their parentage. For example: “Most collections of personal papers are divisible into two groups: one relating to purely personal or family affairs and another the activity for which the person... became noteworthy. These groups may be regarded as series” (p. 11).

If he had rigorously defined subgrouping to apply only to record origins, Schellenberg would probably have defined as “subgroups” those record units that in the above quotation he calls “series,” would have recognized the possible existence of more than two such groups, and would have further broken down the records generated from each particular line of activity into series by record type. But in allowing for subgrouping on the basis of function and subject matter as well as administrative hierarchy, as he also did in 1951 in *Staff Information Paper 18*, he provided no
consistent basis for subgrouping even public records. If he had limited the application of subgrouping to record origins, subgroups would then be consistently formed on the basis of record generating source; when applied to personal papers subgrouping would be on the basis of the agency (corporate body, usually) for whom the person acted. (Family papers that often accompany an acquisition of personal papers may be subgrouped also. For letters, grouping should be on the basis of recipient, diaries according to their author, and other items on the basis of other clues that indicate their origin.)

By failing to make this recommendation or to extend its application to family papers, Schellenberg left the way open for series to be formed without regard to their parentage, resulting in the dispersal of subgroups among general series. By 1965, when *The Management of Archives* was published, he had clearly limited the concept of subgrouping to record origins: the "records created by an organizational subdivision of the public agency that created an archival group." But he still failed to see that it was similarly applicable to the organization of private papers having integral record characteristics.

The "personal" element about private papers is what deflected Schellenberg from applying the public archives practice of subgrouping. It also affected his treatment of other problems associated with manuscript collections. His descriptive program for private papers reflects the influence of the "personal" factor in his thinking, unchanged from *Modern Archives*.

Schellenberg recommended that, in developing a descriptive program, a repository should first produce a summary guide to its entire holdings, supplementing this with inventories to particularly large and important accessions. Concentration should be on description, collectively, of accessions and series; but within this framework he recommended that the archivist produce different types of finding aids for different classes of searchers, adapting "his descriptive program to facilitate the special uses to which particular record groups will be put" (pp. 112–114). Notice should be taken that Schellenberg would produce these special finding aids before first describing the records as they are, or fully utilizing the information already available in records that are arranged by provenance.
He is ambiguous in his overall treatment of description, and I believe this is attributable to his handling of the record level hierarchy problem. His discussion leads the reader to seek a uniform level of control for all accessions in a repository, aiming, for example, for series level control of every accession regardless of its informational value (this was the National Archives objective in the 1940s). If, however, each accession were to be considered on its own merits, and if there were recognition that not all subgroups and series deserve elaboration, a different view of the record level hierarchy would obtain—one not entertained by Schellenberg. Given his presupposition, the effect is to give precedence to forms of content analysis before first recording, and then extracting, data by the objective method inherent in provenancially given data.

A further weakness in Schellenberg's descriptive program lies in his failure to see the potential role that a union catalog or "combined" indexes could perform as integrative tools. He perceived them as but two forms among an array of finding aids, each of which served a different purpose. Their integrative possibilities did not loom forcefully enough in his thinking to advance him much beyond his contemporaries in this respect.

While Schellenberg's writings and those of others who would elaborate upon them—in particular Oliver W. Holmes, Frank Evans, and myself—represent the ascendancy of an archival mode, there were other major writings during the same period (1960s) that fell midway between that mode and the Historical Manuscripts Tradition. Given the constraints of space, attention will be focused on Lucile M. Kane's Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts. Others in this middle group are Ruth Bordin and Robert M. Warner, Robert L. Brubaker, and Carolyn A. Wallace. Each of them deals with modern manuscripts of the type that have affinity with public archives, and each amalgamates archival and library practice.

Kane systematically takes the reader successively from accessioning, appraisal, and preservation to cataloging, as the last step. The flow of work is crystal clear; there is no cataloging taking place while arranging is in process. "In deciding upon the organization of a group of papers, the first point to determine is whether the group contains more than one catalogable unit. If two or more units are discovered, they may be treated as separate collections or
as distinct sections within one collection, depending upon the relationship of one unit to another." Without recognizing it as such, Kane has recommended what Schellenberg had hesitated to do: establish subgroups in personal/family papers. Although applying the subgroup concept empirically, as a logical method of organization, Kane did not establish it as a principle within a larger theoretical model. For her, in practice, the subgroup first, and series within, are the basic catalogable units.

In developing a "compromise" between group and item cataloging, she incorporates the following elements, which represent a bifurcated system:

1. For group description a register or inventory is used.
2. A "main" or "collection" card and added entries are made and filed in a dictionary catalog.
3. "Special catalogs, indices, calendars, and shelf lists" are prepared to "provide detailed information on particularly important manuscripts or to fill a special reference or administrative requirement."

Kane does, however, like Schellenberg, insist that arrangement and description are inseparable stages of a single process, that of establishing intellectual controls.

During the 1960s, Oliver W. Holmes, Frank B. Evans, and I also continued to elaborate upon Schellenberg’s work. In 1964, Holmes more clearly differentiated the record levels. He distinguished two broad levels of arrangement, the "upper level" being based on provenance while at the "lower level," within the agency, "arrangement becomes the task of determining and verifying the original order." He did not elaborate upon this feature. Holmes emphasized that series must be assigned to record groups and to subgroups, and then be arranged logically within. If we recognize that the record group is the parent agency, and that the subgroups are its subordinate units with their respective series, we can see that by following Holmes’ procedure subgroups will not be submerged within general series of the parent agency. This procedure is now standard in public and institutional archives but is still not practiced generally for personal papers.

In 1966, Frank Evans provided a historical framework in which archival practices had developed in the United States. Lacking any record keeping tradition such as the European registry systems,
practitioners in the United States initially tried pre-conceived classification systems that ignored records provenance—with disastrous results. Under the early leadership of Leland, Rowland, and others of like mind these practices came under attack, leading toward general acceptance of provenance as the basis of arrangement; “arrangement” displaced “classification.” The National Archives led the way after 1941 when it abolished its divisions of classification and cataloging. Evans also elaborated upon Holmes’ recapping of Schellenberg’s early treatment of the record level hierarchy. He concluded that “because of American record conditions, arrangement at [the series] level must be a constructive rather than simply a preservative kind of arrangement.... It is...[the American archivist’s] major contribution in making archives usable while still preserving their integrity.”

Although I elaborated upon Holmes’ “upper and lower” levels in 1975, I had applied it to personal papers as early as 1959 and had established it as a concept at the University of Washington in 1962; i.e., that the record group and subgroup levels relate to provenance, while the other levels of the hierarchy relate to filing order. Thus far, only the University of Washington Libraries’ Manual for Accessioning, Arrangement and Description spells out these procedures and the theory behind them.

If David Gracy’s basic manual on arrangement and description is any indication, this distinction between upper and lower levels is still not shared generally. For Gracy, “subgroups are not finally established until the series have been confirmed.” He also confuses subject series with subgroups by allowing function and subject matter to be a basis for subgrouping, rather than limiting it to parentage; he does not recognize that every series has a parent. In addition, no clear articulation of a descriptive program is presented by Gracy as a means of providing access to the finding aids.

Although there is broad agreement now on the existence of a hierarchy of record levels and on the need to establish progressively refined controls that are keyed to these levels, the Historical Manuscripts Tradition has persisted as a resistent strain. Recent writings in this tradition are best exemplified by Kenneth W. Duckett’s Modern Manuscripts and by the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules as they apply to manuscripts. Duckett deals with the
entire control process, while the AACRs consider only the descriptive aspect, and only a limited part at that.\textsuperscript{18}

Since Duckett's work was examined extensively in my 1978 article on arrangement and description,\textsuperscript{19} only a brief recapitulation will be made here. His settings seem to be manuscript collections within special collection units of private and academic libraries, as well as collections of state and local historical societies. He accepts provenance as the basis of arrangement. He does not, however, address the problems of controlling integral accessions of recent origin. Cataloging occurs while arranging papers and is done from the manuscripts themselves, not from the finding aids. Both the concept of series and the inventory, as means of control, are at the periphery of his discussion. There is no reference to a hierarchy of record levels nor to the need to establish progressively refined controls; he would establish item control at the outset while arranging the papers. All of this reinforces a bifurcated finding aid system with no single point of access to an entire manuscript collection.

The \textit{Anglo-American Cataloging Rules} ignore the Public Archives Tradition altogether. They were derived from the NUCMC rules for descriptive cataloging,\textsuperscript{20} one of whose purposes had been to establish national standards for cataloging manuscripts at the repository level. The AACRs have as their goal the inclusion of all types of non-book materials in a central catalog that also includes references to standard library material.\textsuperscript{21} For manuscripts they devise two methods of description: one for items, following rules for book cataloging, and one for collection level description, the level of our concern.\textsuperscript{22}

Establishing the main entry is straightforward. Trouble begins with the handling of added entries. Most writers on the subject consider added entries for proper names and topical subjects to be the most essential need in the catalog, although parsimony has been followed as a rule in making them. AACR2 simply recommends that "if added entries are required under headings and titles..., make them." AACR1 was more explicit, recommending that "an added entry may be made under any person or corporate body that has a significant relationship to the content or origin of the collection, including a donor, former owner..."\textsuperscript{23} Missing is any specific reference to "major correspondents" or proper names
generally—although "significant relationship" might imply that
to the experienced manuscript librarian—and there are no in-
structions for identifying the primary topical subject character-
istics. Yet it is through added entries for proper names and topical
subjects that multiple access points are given to an accession and to
the repository's entire collection. Without this integrative func-
tion, the catalog is of questionable value.

Although other finding aids can be referred to in the main
catalog entry, the relation of cataloging and of the catalog to them
is ignored. In AACR1, "it is recognized that descriptive cataloging
is not the only method of making library materials accessible, and
that, in dealing with some types of them, guides, calendars,
indexes, inventories, etc., may be preferable."24 In other words, the
catalog does not integrate the other finding aids by using them as
the source of cataloging information, but stands independently
and co-equal with them. AACR2 does not compensate for this
deficiency. For the "source of information," AACR2 advises the
cataloger to "treat the whole collection as the chief source."25 The
implication is that the information should be derived from the
actual manuscripts and not from their finding aids, producing
highly subjective entries and randomness of description.

In avoiding reference to other finding aids as the information
source, AACR2 also avoids the requirement of establishing pro-
gressively refined controls and of linking catalog entries to the
specific level from which the information was derived. Proper
construction of such hierarchical controls demands future con-
centrated attention. Thus far, only the inventory provides a dis-
ciplined control device for establishing controls at different record
levels. If, for example, a proper name or topical term is abstracted
and entered from a series description or from a file unit in the
series, the added entry will refer the user to that specific series or
file unit as described in the inventory. The inventory, in turn, will
show the relationships of that added entry (or index entry) to the
accession as a whole. However, a catalog entry that is derived
randomly will only refer to the item or clusters of selected items,
and is incapable of showing the wider range of information
relationships and the relevant clues that occur in a normal search
process. Because one of the objectives of AACR2 is to ease the
transition toward automated catalogs and toward on-line access to
them, its incapacity for hierarchical searching of archival finding aids is a definite handicap. It is incapable of providing for access below the collection level, and thus inevitably reinforces a bifurcated system of finding aids instead of an integrated one.

Let us now turn quickly to Richard H. Lytle's recent articles in the *American Archivist*, in which he crystallizes the two basic methods of intellectual control. He distinguishes two basic methods of subject retrieval, interpreting "subject" to cover practically everything with a name or title: the Provenance Method and the Content Indexing Method. In the framework of this article, we can link the Provenance Method with the archival mode, and the Content Indexing Method with the Historical Manuscripts Tradition rooted in librarianship. Lytle considers the two methods to be complementary, with the Content Indexing Method picking up where the Provenance Method leaves off. The latter exhausts all leads provided by arrangement, and by the arrangement's reflection in the finding aids. It is an inferential method: in depending upon it, the user can anticipate in what places the information s/he seeks might be located—but it might not actually be there. The Provenance Method capitalizes on the self-accessing character of arrangement by provenance. It is most effective to the level of series descriptions, but it can incorporate information from useful file folder headings in the inventory as well. These headings are the main source for catalog/index terms and they are objectively derived. Effectiveness of a search depends on how well the finding aids system is constructed, particularly how good the inventories are.

The Content Indexing Method focuses on analysis of file units that make up series, and upon items. Unlike the Provenance Method, its index terms are explicit and certain; they tell the user that what s/he seeks is actually there. Index terms are gathered by examination of the records themselves. The system must accommodate users by anticipating their demands—this is the task of the indexer. The Content Indexing Method has its historical counterparts in calendaring and item indexing, both of which have almost disappeared from general practice because of the exorbitant expense of compiling them.

With this in mind, it might be well to give top priority nationally to making the Provenance Method maximally effective
before proceeding with the Content Indexing Method on an extensive basis. And for maximum effectiveness there must be agreement on what finding aid should be the primary source of catalog/index information. The inventory seems to be the most suitable format, but if it is chosen there must be corollary agreement as to its structure and content. Automation, if it is to be effective, would seem to depend on these basic considerations as well.  

FOOTNOTES

1. The author’s manuscript, Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: An Historical Analysis, to be published in 1982 by the University of Washington Press, discusses these traditions in considerable detail. The book represents a modification of his article, “Arrangement and Description: Some Historical Observations,” American Archivist 41 (April 1978): 169–181. For citations in the literature the reader should consult that article, but it should be noted that the book is based on a much broader bibliography.


3. Illinois State Library, Catalog Rules: Series for Archives Material (Springfield, Ill.: Secretary of State and State Librarian, 1938).

4. See: American Library Association, Archives and Libraries, which are the annual proceedings of this committee, 1937–1940.


6. A bifurcated finding aid system is one in which each type of finding aid (catalogs, inventories/registers, shelf lists, special indexes, etc.) is co-equal and in which no single point of access is provided. In this system, the catalog and cumulative indexes are denied an integrative role. “Proliferated” system is more accurate, but bifurcation better conveys the sense of division. See Berner, “Arrangement and Description” and “Manuscript Catalogs and Other Finding Aids: What Are Their Relationships?” American Archivist 34 (Oct. 1971): 367–372.


10. Ibid., chapter VII, "Character of a Descriptive Program," especially pp. 112-116; and pp. 268-279.
12. Kane, p. 16.
13. Ibid., p. 54.
22. AACR2, chapter 4, pp. 110-124.
23. AACR2, p. 322; AACR1, p. 267.
24. AACR1, p. 189.
25. AACR2, p. 111. For parallels refer to the discussion above of the Library of Congress system.
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