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Waifs: The Single-Item Manuscript

Terry Abraham
Washington State University

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In a modern manuscript repository, the single-item manuscript is rather an anomaly and a waif. Most manuscript materials received today are collections of records or papers—aggregations of material—not single items. These masses have required new techniques, many derived from archival practices, to cope with the problems inherent in large bodies of paper. Yet single items still manage to struggle into repositories, either as culls from larger manuscript groups, as gifts, or through purchase. For repositories whose systems have been designed to handle mass collections, incorporating the single item can create difficulties.

In the not too distant past, manuscript description concentrated on the single item to the detriment of the relationship between one piece and another, or between separate files of material. One early method often used in institutional card catalogs was the description of each item on separate cards, all interfiled in one alphabet. Unfortunately, this destroyed the concept of an organic whole, or fonds, which was developed for archival material. These archival techniques were in time borrowed for manuscript use. And since, as one authority has put it, "Item description, with rare exceptions, is justifiable only

Mr. Abraham is Librarian, Manuscripts-Archives Division, Washington State University Library, and is a former contributor to GEORGIA ARCHIVE.

"... the real waifs of the manuscript population, unable to boast of membership even in a group of autographs" --William Jerome Wilson, "Manuscript Cataloging," Traditio, 12 (1956), 527.
after comprehensive control has already been established for the collection as a whole,"¹ single items have frequently been overlooked.

Not only has the modern trend of manuscript processing tended to shortchange the single item, but, perhaps in reaction to previous practices of overdescription, this development has been encouraged by the literature. T. R. Schellenberg, for instance, strongly advises:

Individual record items do not ordinarily deserve the attention required in the catalog process, which is rather slow and difficult. They are generally too insignificant for cataloging, unless they comprise a highly important collection. To give each of them the full cataloging treatment, which has acquired complexities through years of refinement, results in waste of energy and effort, and is likely to divert the staff of a repository from more constructive work.²

The single item and the problems of its description will persist, however, unless some coordination is made in that middle ground between the excesses of overdescription and total neglect. The single item in the context of an organic manuscript group, of course, seldom needs individual description. It is the waifs of the manuscript world which need an "orphanage" of descriptive access and to which this paper is addressed.

Three descriptive systems for single-item manuscripts follow. The first, and most extensive, is that employed in the Washington State University Library for the past five years. The other two methods, briefly described, are essentially variations of the first system, based on experiments in providing specialized access to some large collections. They are proposed in order to illustrate alternate ways the basic descriptive needs of the researcher and manuscript archivist can be accommodated. Once the parameters of a descriptive system have been established, each repository must adjust that system to its own needs.

Examining the description of single-item manuscripts apart from the requirements of large manuscript groups, several descriptive elements can be isolated.³ These are: author, title, date, subject, form and location, plus a number of supplementary notes relating to provenance and restrictions.
The author of a manuscript is an alien concept in many repositories. Manuscript groups seldom have an author, for they are either an individual's collection (say, of twelfth century medical manuscripts) or those papers received by the individual in the course of an activity, a profession, a hobby, or an occupation (which would be his "Papers," "Records" or "Personal Archives")). These last may contain materials "authored" by the individual, especially if there was a secretary and carbon paper available, but often they contain only materials received by the individual. For these reasons, such an individual may be considered, for purposes of description, as the "main entry" or, in the terminology of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), the "Principal name around which the collection is formed." (An integral part of this main entry is whatever is known of the birth and death dates of the author.) As used by NUCMC, this is a different element of description than the "Name of collection." 4

In single manuscript items, the matter is not this complex. A letter from John Doe to Richard Roe is authored by John Doe. A letter to Richard Roe with the last page lacking and the signature missing has an unknown author. In ordinary library practice, an item without an author would be listed under title. Thus some thought must be given to the differences in practice and theory between library, manuscript and archival processes.

As larger and bulkier manuscript collections accumulated in repositories, a shift toward archival techniques of description occurred in order to handle their increasing bulk. This was coupled with a turn away from the descriptive methods of librarianship, which have never been able to deal satisfactorily with problems of multiple authorship or subject.

Within their own domain, however, librarians have managed to develop descriptive techniques that persist in having application to work with manuscripts. One early attempt to incorporate manuscripts in library procedures was Charles A. Cutter's Rules for a Dictionary Catalog (4th ed., 1904) which contains Worthington C. Ford's "Cataloging special publications and other material: Manuscripts." More recently, both the American Library Association and the Library of Congress have published rules for the description of manuscripts. 5
The reason for this, of course, is that basically librarians do for books what manuscript processors do for manuscripts. Both, at the most fundamental level, provide information which will identify and give access to the material, whether it be book or manuscript. Book cataloging has, over the years, developed an extensive set of rules and procedures, such as the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, which attempt to standardize this effort for the convenience of the library staff and the public. Without going into these rules too deeply, processors should recognize that many of the elements common to book cataloging are also factors in manuscript description. Primary among these concerns is the question of entry. All catalogs, indexes, bibliographies and lists require a determination of the entry, the key-word by which the list is arranged. Librarians have opted for the author, in general, as that key-word. It seems reasonable enough for use with single-item manuscripts as well. (Most of the complexities in cataloging rules result from the exceptions, the rules themselves are quite simple.)

Having determined to enter the manuscript under the name of the author, the next element to be considered is the title. This, like the question of author entry, does not seem to apply to manuscript description, for manuscripts generally have no titles. As some do, and as the purpose of this paper is to consider general principles, let us assume a title element. In a few cases this element will be the title from the manuscript itself: "Early telephones in Lincoln County." In other cases, where the item otherwise does not have one, the title, as an expression of the subject of the piece, will be supplied by the processor, such as "Reminiscences of the Civil War." "Reminiscences" is both a subject and a form designation, however. A title can be both or either.

The title element is followed by a date element. This may be specific to the very day, or only as specific as possible: ca. 1920. The initials "n.d." indicate that the date is not known. Dates can be written either in normal order--January 27, 1892--or inverted for ease of arrangement--1892 January 27. While the normal month-day-year sequence is illogical, and thus not adapted to machine use, most researchers and repository support staff are so accustomed to it that even a relatively complex chronological filing system, by year, then by month, then by day, is completely comprehensible even though it requires mental transposition.
In many instances the location of the writing of the manuscript is of some significance. If known, this should be placed following the date.

As a summary of the first four elements, examine the following:


Acme Hardware Company. Ledger, 1899-1901, St. Louis, Missouri.

Untold stories of the Interstate Commerce Commission, ca. 1925, Washington, D. C.

In most cases these four elements—author, title, date and place—are sufficient to describe the material in terms of what it is. They are not sufficient, however, to describe what it is about. While some items are self-evident, such as the S. J. Roe one, others are not. For them it is necessary to describe the content, or subject, of the material. In most cases this will be resolved in a brief explanatory phrase: Letter, January 27, 1901, New-Bedford-on-the-Hudson, N.Y. to Alex Gillies, New York City, concerning transportation rates on the Erie Canal. Should the title be in some way inappropriate or unclear, the explanation can resolve the ambiguity: Reminiscences of the Civil War, ca. 1870, Richmond, Virginia, an account of Reconstruction life in Virginia by the wife of Col. Edward L. Roe, U. S. Army.

The greatest care must be taken by the processor at this point to ensure that the description applied to the material is truly descriptive. It also should be concise and free from subjective value judgments.

Having thoroughly described the form and content of the item, the processor then turns to its physical description. For most manuscripts this is a question of its quantity, size (in centimeters, height first), and character. Describing the quantity, or bulk, of an item, "l" and "p" indicate "leaf" and "page" respectively. A leaf is one piece of paper, while a page is but one side of the paper.
The initialisms A.L.S., L.S., A.D.S., D.S. (A. - autograph, L. - letter, S. - signed, D. - document), once commonly employed to describe the character of an item, have fallen into disuse. More common, outside of sale catalogs, is "holograph" for an item in the hand of the author, "manuscript" or "typescript" to indicate form, and an indication by "signed" that the author did in fact sign it. The physical description of a letter, then, could be:

1 1. holograph, 18x12 cm
2 1. manuscript, 9x12 cm
4 p. typescript, 28x21.5 cm

In addition, note should be made of significant physical characteristics which may influence its use, such as its fragility. It is also necessary to indicate if the item is a facsimile, a photocopy or a transcript. For items in this form, the description should give the location of the original manuscript.

There are four categories, often connected, of supplementary notes essential to adequate description of manuscripts. These are: provenance, publication, restriction, and literary rights. Provenance, of course, is an account of the item's previous circumstances. In most cases this is merely a statement of how the repository came by the item--gift or purchase--and the date.

If the item has appeared, in whole or part, in published form, or if some significant mention of it has been made in a publication, a complete bibliographical citation should be given. Such information is particularly useful to researchers distant from the repository who must decide whether a trip to view the item would be worthwhile. Of course, the development of clear and inexpensive photocopies has somewhat lessened the need for this information. Nevertheless, the object of description is to provide researchers with sufficient data to reduce the unnecessary handling of material.

Restrictions on use or quotation of the material should be noted so as to prevent researchers from traveling to see documents closed to them. Similarly, basic questions concerning the ownership of literary rights and copyrights should be answered by the description. The phrase "Open to investigators under library restrictions" generally refers only to those common restrictions concerning circulation, the use of pens, and eating in the reading area. "Open
to investigators under restrictions accepted by the repository generally refers to donor-imposed restrictions. This, of course, is the clue to the researcher to inquire into the extent of the restrictions. It may be that only a small portion of the collection is restricted, or that a pro forma authorization is needed.

The location device of an item in a library is the call number, which reflects a subject analysis of the contents of the item cataloged. Classification and shelving by subject is an excess of complication in dealing with manuscript material. Subject access can be treated more successfully through proper and extensive cross references in the catalog. Therefore, most manuscript repositories employ a simple sequential number, often an accession number.

A final facet of the location information is identification of the institution in which the item is located. This is especially important if the entry is to be included in a union list.

The following is a sample of a completed description of a single-item manuscript. Although the provenance is apparently unknown, and the size is not indicated, it includes the main elements of the description:

VF Holland, Josiah Gilbert, 1819-1881.

The thoroughness of this descriptive approach reduces the handling of the original manuscript material and, perhaps more important, records information in a standardized format that will remain useful despite changes in personnel or techniques. Many institutions rely on a very simple catalog supplemented by the collective memory of the staff. Such a system of description is subject to the human frailties of memory and the problems of staff turnover. The increasing use of machine systems for record keeping, which one day will knock on all our doors, will be facilitated by the thoroughness of the cataloging.

There are, to be sure, problems with the kind of thorough description outlined above. One is that a single item as described in the catalog or guide appears to be equal in size and importance to a larger and multi-faceted
collection. In addition, the preparation of this full cataloging devotes a disproportionate amount of time and staff to the single item. Large collections are concisely described in the catalog where reference is made to a more complete description in the container list, register or other finding aid. In some cases, as in a calendar, this additional description may extend to the item level.

This imbalance suggests a different treatment for the handling of waifs. Rather than cluttering the card catalog with individual descriptions of hundreds of single items, it would be more economical to create an artificial open-ended collection for these exceptions.

It is already the practice in some institutions to create artificial "Miscellany" files, usually on a broad subject or occupation basis (e.g.: Transportation Miscellany Pioneer Miscellany) for this purpose. These seldom appear to be part of an overall scheme for the handling of manuscript waifs. In fact, they are often created by breaking up small collections of letters and dispersing them into a subject arrangement, a practice to be avoided.

Approaching from another vantage, the parameters of NUCMC exclude collections smaller than fifty items. These smaller units, including single-item manuscripts, are incorporated into the NUCMC system through the description of an artificial collection. "It is suggested that repositories owning very small groups of manuscripts or significant single items ... consider combining them, either physically or simply for the purposes of description, using an individual, area, subject, or period as the basis for so doing." Caution must be exercised, however, or appropriate indication made that the collection is artificial, that it was created by the repository for its convenience and does not imply any relationship between the individual items. In collections received as an organic whole, the relationship among individual items is of course of prime importance. The integrity of the original order has assumed such proportions that it must not be implied where nonexistent.

An artificial, open-ended "miscellany" collection would expedite the handling of the truly miscellaneous single-item manuscripts. Each item would be numbered sequentially as added to the collection. This number would be used to key access to the material. Each item would be described in the collection's container list in sequential
order. An open-ended description of the "collection" as a whole would be made for the general catalog providing information as to the existence of the "collection" and its container list. Subject and author tracings, plus the miscellany sequential number, would provide access to the container list, then to the item. A card containing such information might appear as follows:

416 Manuscript miscellany: a collection of individual items acquired from various sources. Unpublished container list in the library.

The Holland manuscript, described earlier, would be added to the descriptive mechanism by giving the item a sequential number at the end of the previous entries. (The 416 above would be the accession or location number for the miscellany collection as a whole.) In the container list, the manuscript would be described in complete detail as in the previous example. The description would also include a list of the required tracings. From the stock of main entry cards for the miscellany collection, enough cards would be withdrawn to provide the appropriate number of cross references. In this example these would be:

Authors, American - Correspondence, reminiscences, etc.
Autographs
Holland, Josiah Gilbert, 1819-1881.
Whittier, John Greenleaf, 1809-1892.

Each added entry would be followed by the Holland item's sequential number within the collection, thus providing immediate access. In all probability, the first of these would already be in the file, and it would only be necessary, therefore, to add the sequential number to the previous numbers on the card.

It can be seen that this system affords the integration of the separate descriptive mechanisms for both single items and large manuscript groups. It permits too the handling of single items within the framework of a descriptive mechanism designed to provide access to large bodies of material. In addition, it provides economies in processing time with little loss of information to the researcher.
As in so many other areas, one must attempt to balance the effort with the results. The trade-off between improved access and the processor’s time must take into account the expected level of usage. Since the larger proportion of individual items rely on their author, rather than their content, for significance (particularly when acquired for their autographs), another alternative would be to establish an artificial collection arranged alphabetically by author. This would require less effort at the time of processing and a correspondingly greater effort at the point of reference.

These alternatives for the handling of single-item manuscripts range from the fully descriptive to the minimal access. Each is adaptable to specific circumstances and, as well, none is exclusive. A repository may have use for all three, depending on the kind and uses of its material. The important point is to ensure that the single-item manuscript be rescued from its designation as a "waif" in the modern manuscript repository.
FOOTNOTES


3 The elements of description do not necessarily correspond to the points of access to the material. Access is a function of the retrieval mechanism and is keyed to a limited number of the descriptive elements. Machine systems promise access at a greater number of access points which may mean a closer parallel between the access points and the descriptive elements.

