Manuscripts: A Continuum of Description

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The description of manuscripts is the basis for all historical research. Unable to identify and locate primary source materials, the researcher is forced to view the past through layers of interpretation. Though essential to research, the description of manuscripts has often suffered from either total neglect or the misapplication of alien descriptive methods. The variety of forms of manuscript materials and collections, though necessitating special approaches, does not require an infinite variety of descriptive tools.

Finding aids, the descriptive tools for manuscript collections, provide access to the records of the past. They guide both the researcher and the archivist through the intricacies of arrangement and the vagaries of filing systems. Few finding aids are as complete as either the researcher or the curator might wish. There is always additional work that could be done but is neglected for reasons of economy; this is often rationalized as balancing descriptive need against prospective use.

By considering particulars of the various finding aids, their requirements for processing, their capacity for detail, and their flexibility, the archivist should be able to arrange them in a logical progression. By viewing them as progressively more detailed aspects of a continuum of description, he will gain a better conception of the function of finding aids for manuscript collections.

Finding aids are individually tailored to a collection, though all have attributes in common. Since some record more detail than others, finding aids may be arranged and discussed in the order of increasing detail.

One must first distinguish between two kinds of

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detail: the descriptive and the contextual. Descriptive detail may be additional information about the series and sub-series; it may mean access, through a summary statement of contents, at the folder or item level, rather than at the container level; or it may be additional information about the form of the material, whether holograph letters, photocopies, or typescript transcriptions.

Contextual detail, on the other hand, generally results from an examination of sources outside the manuscript collection itself. These may include previous research on a subject, donor correspondence, or merely biographical dictionaries. Contextual detail could be biographical (How do these materials fit into the life of the author, or of the recipient?) or perhaps may be concerned with the provenance of the material (What is the succession of ownership, or in whose attic was it discovered?), or it could throw additional light on a disputed historical event (which requires a review of all previous scholarship on the subject). Contextual detail is a means of illuminating the manuscripts. This often requires considerable research on the processor's part to place things in their proper context, but it is contextual detail that puts the frosting on the cake. Time-consuming work, then, distinguishes one level of finding aid from another.

The point of departure in the progression of finding aids is the inventory, the simplest form of description of a manuscript collection. It, like the collections it describes, does not conform to any set length or size. At its simplest it is merely a container list, a recording of box labels. In its longer forms it may provide additional contextual detail, information about the "author" or the provenance of a collection. The inventory is usually considered provisional or preliminary to further description. In its longer form, however, the inventory merges into the register, an extended, more finished finding aid. Inventories, though usually not considered final, often are.

Registers, developed at the Library of Congress (though similar to the "summary report" of the Huntington Library), appear in two forms, short and long. The short style provides information for a main entry, a title, a brief overview of the papers, their provenance and restrictions, and published accounts or sketches, as well as biographical information and a description of major series. It is mainly an expansion of the contextual details. The
longer form enlarges each of these parts and provides increased descriptive detail, including a more complete container or folder list. In some cases the descriptive detail may extend to the item level.4

One method of increasing access to manuscript collections is the addition of an index to the register. Indexed registers also may take two forms: either an index of the register or an index of the collection. The first, an index of the descriptive apparatus, requires an extremely detailed item list providing sufficient indexable terms to be useful. The second consists of a brief inventory or register of the collection accompanied by an index to the collection itself. In its most useful state this would require complete indexing of each item in the collection. This second form has proved to be a relatively inexpensive method of providing the accessibility of the calendar without elaborate and detailed item description.5

The ultimate in item description is the calendar, the most expensive (in staff time), and extensive (in descriptive detail), form of finding aid. The calendar is a piece by piece description, generally in chronological order, in such detail that often it can be used in place of the actual documents. The calendar provides the greatest amount of descriptive and contextual detail on a single-item basis. Each piece in the collection is described in terms of form, content (often including an abstract), provenance, research use, and the relationship to other items in the collection, in other collections, and in other repositories.

In part because of the increasing bulk of modern manuscript collections, and in part due to a changing cataloging response to this bulk, calendaring is becoming a lost art. A calendarer must have the skills of a librarian, the decisiveness of an annotater, the preciseness of an indexer, the detective skills and judgment of the historical scholar, and the proverbial patience of Job. The lack of qualified calendarers has contributed to the demise of this art.

In an ideal situation, one might consider calendaring as the most completely satisfactory of all forms of finding aids. If the time and the money and the personnel were unlimited, all manuscript collections would be processed to the detail of a calendar. Researchers would
have much more source material available, scholarship would be blessed and peace would reign the world.

But although many consider calendars as ideal, such finding aids are often impossible, financially impractical and usually unnecessary. Few manuscript collections require the detailed analysis of the calendar. Many collections, indeed, need little more description than is provided by the preliminary inventory.

It is an advantage to consider these different forms of finding aids as steps in a progression of detailed tools to aid research in manuscript collections. At the same time, it is necessary to remember that the tool must fit its use, or the result will be more a function of the tool than of the material. It is apparent that we are not considering three separate categories but a continuum of description. The inventory, the register and the calendar are essentially different facets of the same thing, the finding aid.

In the 1940s, the National Archives embarked upon a descriptive program based on a systematic progression of finding aids which included an accession register, a preliminary checklist, a preliminary inventory, and a "final" inventory. Each would be more detailed than the last. Card catalogs and supplemental lists, indexes, calendars and subject guides would also be prepared. The bulk of the National Archives's holdings, and the amount of staff time that went into the preparation of these guides, eventually halted this program, though the publication of inventories resumed in 1970. Assistant Archivist of the United States T. R. Schellenberg strongly stated that no similar program should be attempted in the future, for "such a succession simply results in a regurgitation of ill-digested information." This is an accurate assessment only in so far as the result is just a "regurgitation." Properly handled and organized, the concept of succession provides a useful framework for the organization of a system of finding aids, whether or not the successive steps are completed at a later date.

The descriptive program of the National Archives, though unsuccessful as originally envisioned, did provide the concept of each finding aid as one part of a larger continuum of description.
One aspect of the program designed by the National Archives was the production of a card catalog from the registration forms. From hindsight, this can be connected to the present efforts of the Library of Congress in producing the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC). Their common features are readily apparent: registration forms supply information to be processed onto catalog cards. The difference is merely that the cards prepared by the National Archives were for internal use as a guide to the total holdings of a single repository, while NUCMC offers information on many repositories for general distribution.

The use of a form of card catalog in manuscript collections began with, but did not parallel the growth of, the library card catalog. Other and more detailed forms of description tended to diminish their use. However, many repositories use the card catalog for control of single items, very small collections, and material that is not suitable for more lengthy and detailed finding aids. In some institutions the card catalog has been used in place of inventories for large collections. As archival techniques have expanded in manuscript repositories, this practice has fallen into disfavor, for the separate inventory provides a more comprehensive view of the total collection, as well as access to individual items.

The card catalog, or some variation, can be used as a comprehensive guide to the total holdings of a repository. All collections, large or small, can be found by name, subject, geographic location or chronology, depending upon the access points required by the repository. In addition to access to single items and small collections, the catalog guides the researcher to those finding aids that can, in turn, provide avenues to the larger collections. This secondary level of access to the contents of a manuscript collection does not, as it may seem, impose a barrier between the researcher and the papers. In fact, it eases his task. Instead of examining a large number of lists, plus some form of catalog of small holdings, he finds all materials gathered together under the appropriate headings in one comprehensive guide to the collections. The card catalog provides a single access point to all the large collections, through their container lists, as well as to the small collections. Ideally, the format of the cards in this catalog would be similar to those of the NUCMC cards.
In 1954, the Library of Congress, in cooperation with a number of institutions, developed rules for the cataloging of manuscript collections. These were immediately hailed by institutions and individuals across the country as being remarkably similar to the rules which they had independently devised and were using at that moment. Robert H. Land, in an article in the American Archivist, detailed the search for, the response to, and a summary of, these rules. The description of manuscript collections, according to these rules, consists of title, form, physical description, repository name, scope or contents note, and references to guides, restrictions, provenance and literary rights.

One function of these rules was to provide information that was adaptable to a catalog in accordance with the general library cataloging rules in force at that time. This was because the Library of Congress was to print cards from this information, publish them in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, and make the cards available to interested libraries. These rules became the basis of the form used to report information to NUCMC and were also used as the basis for Chapter Ten of the Anglo-American Cataloging Code of 1967.

Standardization of minimal information on manuscript collections will, as NUCMC has demonstrated, prove beneficial to researchers and to processors. The minimum information required for smaller manuscript collections would surely be that required for reporting to NUCMC, whether or not the collection is so reported.

For large collections the first step is, of course, the preliminary inventory. Cataloging the collection according to NUCMC should be deferred at least until the preliminary inventory is available. The preliminary inventory should not be deferred at all. Not only is undescribed material like so much garbage expensively stored, but for legal protection of the repository a preliminary inventory should be made immediately upon arrival of the material.

When need dictates, and time and finances permit, the preliminary inventory may be superseded by a more complete container list or register. Publication of the register increases the accessibility of the material to scholars and is a very effective public relations device, appearing, as it does, in non-manuscript catalogs and
bibliographies. The one drawback is that publication tends to freeze the finding aid into a permanent form, which can inhibit more detailed processing at a later date. Unpublished registers are nearly as effective, for they can be duplicated or referred to in aiding reference and research requests. And calendars, of course, can be prepared in extraordinary circumstances.

There are, then, three basic types of finding aids for manuscript collections: the inventory, the register, and the calendar. On another level of description, the card catalog serves as a guide to the entire holdings of the repository. By going full circle, so to speak, a repository can gain the prominence the National Archives was attempting to reach by its new system of the 1940s. What may have been impossible for the National Archives to accomplish with its immense holdings then (and the problems have not been obviated by time) may be entirely feasible, with a slight change of emphasis, now, for a sequence or progression of finding aids provides several immediate benefits. It gives a unifying concept of description which can be maintained in spite of changes in processing personnel. It allows the processor to plan out and project his time and effort for a collection after an initial survey of the material, as, for instance, in preparing the preliminary inventory. The completeness of the processing generally can be determined in advance, and still the material will be amenable to further and more detailed processing. With some material it may be best to determine the level of usage in order to evaluate the degree of detailed processing required. The progression of finding aids establishes this as a recognized procedure and as a goal of the processor.

Manuscript description will long remain more art than science, but the standardization of techniques and the expansion of theory will do much to aid processors, students and scholars. Each collection has its own unique features which tend to reflect themselves in the finding aids. The immense variety in collections, in finding aids, and in institutions tends to bewilder the researcher and hamper his effectiveness. The diversity is more than just confusing, for it conceals as well as misleads. Just as the researcher cannot expect the archivist to do his research, there is no reason to expect the user to follow the maze created by archivists.

2 Schellenberg, The Management of Archives, 221.


6 Schellenberg, The Management of Archives, 222; Sherry Cunningham, "The description program of the National Archives" (Typescript, University of Oregon Institute in Archival Librarianship, 1969), 3-5.