January 1977

Archival and Manuscript Processing Manuals: An Interinstitutional Comparison

Richard Strassberg
Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive
Part of the Archival Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol5/iss2/2
ARCHIVAL AND MANUSCRIPT PROCESSING MANUALS:
AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL COMPARISON

Richard Strassberg

Archivists are inveterate manual writers. Perhaps this propensity is due to the technical nature of our profession or to that constant striving for order and systemization that is so much a part of our daily activities. For whatever reason, the manual has played a central role in the development of our professional literature. The first great modern exposition of archival methodology, published in 1898 by three eminent Dutch archivists, Muller, Feith, and Fruin, was entitled A Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives. Likewise, the first English exposition of archival theory and practice, written some thirty years later by Sir Hiliary Jenkinson, was styled A Manual of Archive Administration.

In the sense that they were technical in structure, didactic in intent, and dealt with procedures established for and by their own communities of archivists, these works were true manuals. They have survived as the cornerstones of our literature not for their specific methodological suggestions, however, which are often irrelevant to the modern archivist, but rather because of the depth and insight with which these authors treated the basic archival theories from which

Richard Strassberg is Director of the Labor Management Documentation Center at Cornell University. This paper was read before the Society of American Archivists, September, 1976.
their suggestions for the application of specific techniques grew.

The manuals with which the following paper will deal are quite different from these early works. Rather than attempting to summarize the corpus of archival knowledge and build upon it, they touch upon theory only fleetingly, preferring rather to instruct in the minutia of the work which has to be performed. They assume a common body of knowledge on the part of their users and are frankly myopic in their viewpoint; but this is as it should be, for they are, by and large, in-house manuals—specifically designed to instruct a single institution's staff.

Given the nearsightedness and singlemindedness of such manuals, do they repay close study? For archivists and manuscript curators contemplating manual writing for the first time, insight into previous efforts in this direction could not help but be rewarding; and even those archivists with sophisticated manuals of their own devising can gain at least a context for their own efforts from a comparative analysis of other manuals. Our profession is still young enough for originality to flourish. Of the seventeen institutional manuals I was able to obtain, no two were exactly alike, almost all offered fresh insights, and all suggested exclusive topics or approaches that might well have been taken into account by the others. Thus a composite view describing the stronger attributes of this sampling may prove useful to many archivists seeking to impose order upon often inherited chaos.

In preparing this study, I contacted approximately forty manuscript and archival repositories, requesting copies of any materials they might categorize as technical manuals concerned with the arrangement and description of records or speaking generally to "processing." Beyond the obvious attempt to include the various types of repositories in the sample, I must admit to being biased in my control group in that I purposefully selected institutions of some age and repute with the hope that I would obtain a substantial reply. In addition to the National Archives of the United States, the Public Archives of Canada, and the Library of Congress, I polled two business archives, four historical societies, four state archives, two presidential

https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol5/iss2/2
libraries, a church archives, seven private research institutions, an international archives, and sixteen archival or manuscript repositories connected to colleges and universities.

Nearly all colleagues to whom I wrote were kind enough to respond. Thirty-seven percent of those answering sent processing manuals. Another 11 percent, four others, forwarded technical manuals which dealt with a single important phase of their operations rather than with a wide range of repository procedures. The balance, 48 percent, could not provide the kind of manuals I required. Among these were the two presidential libraries, the international archives, three university repositories, two state historical societies, and an equal number of state archives. Three of these institutions replied that they indeed had processing manuals but felt that because of their formats and/or condition, they would not prove useful to me. Three other institutions noted that their small staffs made such instructions unnecessary.

The manuals I reviewed were characterized by a variety of goals and procedures described. At Wayne State University the processors are generally graduates of that institution's own extensive training program. In view of that fact, it is understandable that the archival and manuscript departments at Wayne can feel quite comfortable with a simple four-page outline entitled, "Directions for Processing Collections." At my own institution, Cornell, we hire individuals who are generally without previous archival training for part-time processing jobs. This results in the need for extensive on-the-job training with the use of a detailed processing manual as a primary teaching aid.

Although there were tremendous differences in the sizes and breadths of detail among the manuals reviewed, there were important common elements comprising them. For one thing, they could be divided into three classes based upon overall approach and subject coverage. The most limited group was that providing technical instructions on specific subjects. The respective single page "preparing a chronology" and "guidelines for congregational minutes," as well as the four-page "microfilm instructions," prepared by the staff of the Concordia Historical Institute, provide examples of such
specialized directions. Another such example is found in the "Computer Index Guidelines" of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

On the opposite end of the instructional spectrum were repository procedural manuals which covered such broad repository functions as accessioning and reference, as well as specific activities including minutia like typing format instructions for clerical personnel. Somewhere in between these extremes fell the archival and manuscript processing manuals upon which, because I was successful in obtaining a significant sample of them, I have chosen to concentrate my remarks.

There seems to be general agreement that the terms "archival" or "manuscript processing" refer to the arrangement and description of repository holdings. The determination of when such "processing" actually begins is a point of considerable difference among the various programs reviewed. Some archivists believe that the process commences with the arrival of the records at the repository; others maintain that "processing" begins after the initial paper work of accessioning has been concluded and the physical manipulation of the records has actually begun. Whatever beginning and ending points they have selected, most archivists would agree that the physical ordering and description of an accession in preparation for research use is the essence of the processing procedure.

Although most of the manuals examined marched boldly into the mechanics of arrangement without much in the way of preliminaries, some of the authors of the more substantial handbooks felt the need for a few introductory comments. These remarks generally explained the nature of the repository and the part that the processing procedure played in its program. Beyond this basic orientation, several archivists attempted to provide an overall theoretical basis for their processing procedures.

The need to preserve and/or to restore the original of incoming accessions was mentioned in all but one of the manuals included in my sample. The emphasis that this basic rule of provenance was given, interestingly enough, varied widely. One author insisted that "the purpose of arrangement is to restore original
order"; another simply stated that original order was one of a number of alternative arrangement possibilities. Although a majority of the sources studied mentioned original order, surprisingly few of them used the term "provenance," long a basic tenet of archival arrangement. Significantly, only one-third saw fit to deal with the concept at all, inviting some speculation as to why the others did not. It may have been that respect de fonds had been so integrated into the basic work patterns of the remaining institutions that specific mention of it was thought to be superfluous, and that their programs boast processing staffs thoroughly versed in archival theory. More likely, however, the failure to address this touchstone of the profession as a part of their processing instructions resulted from a combination of oversight and a view that one must separate theory from practice in manual writing.

One further theoretical element appeared frequently among the pages of the manuals examined. This is the group-series concept. It had long been my opinion that no two words in the archivist's lexicon suffer from so many divergent definitions as do these. Unfortunately, the present study merely substantiates this suspicion. Manual writers would do well to limit their use of these terms to the conceptual framework developed by Schellenberg and Holmes. Hopefully the widespread use of the standardized definitions in the SAA Glossary will help minimize any uninformed application of these terms. Perhaps, as well, there is a need for further exploration through professional literature of the applicability of the record group and record series concepts and the implications of such applications for the arrangement and description of private as well as public record accessions.

Having discussed to some extent their respective repository's history and approach to processing, some of the manuals touched upon what might be called the "discipline" of manuscript and archival processing. Emphasized here were the needs for accuracy, legibility and completeness in the performing of the various tasks associated with arranging and describing records.

Beyond such overall methodological considerations, most of the handbooks reviewed contained instructions for the preliminary steps the processor must take
before beginning the arranging and describing sequence. The processor was advised to consult accession records for restrictions, biographical data, and the terms of deposit or gift. He was further directed to study the standard biographical tools and specialized reference works in the subject area of the collection before actually proceeding to its physical manipulation. It was also usually pointed out at this juncture that each accession had to be evaluated to determine the extent of processing it would receive. While an outstanding few might merit processing down to an item by item description, most others would be adequately processed following simple refolding and the preparation of a series level description.

At this point most manuals outlined their arranging sequences. Several gave instructions for a preliminary rough sorting of the accession into its series or physical record types. The purpose of this approach was to give the processor sufficient opportunity to select the optimum means of final arrangement. In those institutions where arrangement style was determined by a supervisor before the processor received the collection, rough sorting instructions were often replaced by a sample of the worksheet which would be used to guide the processor in the actual recording of descriptive data.

To familiarize the processor with the variety of ways records might be organized and thus enable him to identify their original order for reconstruction, the more detailed manuals enumerated the several standard systems of filing currently in use in this country. Chronological and coded files were discussed as were the various alphabetical sequences possible, including arrangement by correspondent name, geographical name, or subject. The various physical forms of records were also often discussed along with their processing peculiarities. Most authors outlined processing procedures for diaries, account books, receipts, bills, and other traditional record forms while a few described those pertinent to a wider variety of record forms, including audiovisual and EDP materials.

Arrangement problems that were likely to be recurrent were described in most of the manuals. Such problems as the proper method of disposing of
unannotated printed matter or memorabilia and what to do about enclosures, envelopes, duplicates, or oversized items were discussed in nearly all the instructions sampled. It should be noted that the several institutions had widely differing methods for handling such materials and that those differences were largely based upon the relationship the repository had with other cultural institutions. If the archives was associated with a library or historical society, it was a simple matter to transfer enclosures that were nondocumentary in nature to the unit responsible for such items. When the repository existed as a separate entity, however, nondocumentary enclosures were often placed in special collections based upon their physical format within the institution. In some cases, such materials were declared nonarchival and were returned to the donor whenever possible.

Beyond these common kinds of arrangement problems, some manual writers recognized and worked to resolve any difficulties inherent in the nature of the records themselves. Two repositories instructed their staffs in the vagaries of eighteenth-century English script, while another provided a similar guide to German script. The significance of a particular historical personality to a third institution inspired its manual writer to produce a short essay on that individual's peculiarities of writing style. Various methods for dating documents were described in detail as were the proper techniques for handling of manuscript fragments. In one case, instructions were given for identifying items of particular interest for displays; in another, the processor was requested to inform his supervisor should he come across materials which might be considered libelous or of a highly personal nature.

The physical preservation of archival holdings is, of course, of paramount importance to all professionals in the field. Thus it is that most manuals touch upon the important, but prosaic, routines of reboxing and refoldering. Some also detail methods for the unfolding and flattening of letters, the removal of fasteners, and the effective cleaning of individual pages. Although in one case processors were instructed in the use of water soluble paper mending tape for the repair of minor tears, most of the manuals urged processors to identify badly deteriorated documents for
appraisal by a senior archivist. Repair work was then directed to a professional restoration laboratory. Some depositories simply replaced the very fragile or damaged materials with photocopies on permalife paper or microfilm. Most manual authors devoted the larger proportion of their written instructions to detailing the techniques to be used for record description. The nature and extent of these instructions vary greatly with the training, composition, and assignments of the repository staff. If the processors had considerable archival training, they were expected to produce a wide variety of finding aids ranging from box label listings and file guides to catalog cards and entries for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC). Instructions for each of these descriptive processes were included in the manuals. In situations where cataloging and the creation of NUCMC entries was the province of professional catalogers, the manuals include instructions for the production of various types of narrative finding aids only, excluding cataloging entirely.

Among the institutions studied, the basic finding aid, be it called register, listing, inventory, or guide, is generally quite consistent in format. Following the covering page which usually includes the collection or accession number, the linear footage, the name of the compiler, and the title of the collection, there is usually an introduction or preface of some sort. This section may include a short history or biography of the record creator, a statement of provenance, a description of property and copyright restrictions, some description of the collection in printed sources, a list of directly related collections held by the repository, and a statement governing the access to and use of the material. Such introductory remarks may also include or be followed by scope and content notes detailing any gaps that may exist in the records, profiling the overall physical organization of the material, and describing any unusual arrangements affecting individual series within the fond.

The corporal body of most repository aids offered flexible, analytical descriptions of the form and informational content of the accession at the series, box, file folder, or, more rarely, item level depending upon its significance. Most manuals provide general instructions for each specific type of aid to be written.
by the processor. If a finding aid were to be particu-
larly large, instructions for preparing a table of con-
tents and/or name and subject index would also be in-
cluded.

A major exception to this general pattern of
finding aid is evinced in three of the manuals inspected.
The institutions which produced them are currently ex-
perimenting with, or have installed automated indexing
systems. One of these institutions, Cornell, has writ-
ten input instructions into its processing manual. An-
other, the South Carolina Department of Archives and
History, has produced separate technical instructions on
the subject. The archivist of the third, the Smith-
sonian Institution, noted in a letter accompanying his
manual that it was largely obsolete due to an opera-
tional computerized indexing system.

Institutions whose processors prepared cata-
log and NUCMC descriptions included instructions for
such activities in their manuals. Even those that did
not expect their processors to catalog generally re-
quired them to be familiar with an institution-wide sub-
ject and name authority listing or card files so that
they could use consistent headings in any subject or
name descriptions they created. These listings were
generally selected from the Library of Congress Subject
Headings or the index entries in NUCMC they compiled to
meet the specialized needs of the individual repository.

After the processing instructions comprising
the main body of the manuals, many repositories included
appendices of one kind or another. Examples of such
added information include the SAA Glossary, perpetual
calendars, bibliographies of standard writings on
archives and manuscripts, lists of standard abbrevia-
tions, and form samples. Potential manual writers must
be warned of leaping too quickly into the fray. Al-
though manual writing is currently the fashion in the
archival world, many fashionable things are expensive to
produce and maintain. It might be well to explore rela-
tionships between production costs and benefits and the
possibility of adapting a previously prepared manual be-
fore embarking upon such a time-consuming and expensive
venture. For archivists considering the creation of a
processing manual, the outline which follows offers a
reliable guide to contents and format. While every
institutions will not need to include all of the sections or topics outlined, most will want to address the elements identified as basic.

AN OUTLINE OF MAJOR ELEMENTS IN AN ARCHIVAL AND MANUSCRIPT PROCESSING MANUAL

I. The History and Purpose of the Repository

II. Basic Principles
   A. Provenance
   B. Original Order
   C. Group-Series Concept

III. The Discipline of Processing
   A. Accuracy
   B. Completeness
   C. Legibility
   D. Confidentiality

IV. Preliminary Research
   A. Departmental Accessioning Procedure
   B. Biographical and Other Specialized Reference Sources Relative to the Collection

V. Processing
   A. Outline of Typical Processing Steps
   B. The Nature of Document Arranging
      1. Major Types of Filing Systems and Methods of Arrangement
         a. Chronological
         b. Coded
         c. Alphabetical
            1) by Correspondent Name
            2) by Geographical Name
            3) by Subject
      2. Physical Format of Documents
      3. Reoccurring Problems in Document Arrangement
         a. Deciphering Documents
         b. Dating Documents
         c. Document Fragments
         d. Distribution or Destruction of Non-documentary Materials
1) Books, Serial Publications, and Pamphlets
2) Broadsides
3) Pictorial Materials
4) Artifacts and Memorabilia
e. Disposition of Enclosures and Envelopes
f. Documents for Display
g. Confidential Documents
h. Oversized Items

4. Preservation and Restoration
   a. Fumigation
   b. Unfolding and Flattening
c. Cleaning Documents
d. Removing Fasteners
e. Replacing and Labeling File Folders and Boxes
   f. Physical Restoration

C. The Nature of Document Description
   1. Title Page
   2. Introduction
      a. History or Biography
      b. Statement of Provenance
c. Statement of Property Rights
d. Descriptions in Print Sources
e. Access Restrictions

3. Scope and Content Note
   a. Description of Arrangement
   b. Notice of Gaps
c. Description of Individual Record Series

4. Various Levels of Descriptive Finding Aid
   a. Collection Register
   b. Box Listing
c. Folder Listing
d. Analytical Guides
e. Computerized Indices
   f. Calendars

VI. Completing the Collection

VII. Appendices
   A. Standard Abbreviations
   B. Glossary of Record Types
   C. Perpetual Calendar
   D. Bibliography of Standard Texts
   E. Form Samples