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Mark A. Greene
University of Wyoming

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What Were We Thinking?: A Call to Embrace Reappraisal and Deaccessioning

Mark A. Greene

INTRODUCTION

Mark Shelstad at the University of Wyoming has summed up the archival profession's apparent attitude toward deaccessioning by referring to it as "a word never to be uttered aloud." If his observation is true, this article intends to help shatter the silence. I recommend that the archival profession embrace reappraisal and deaccessioning as basic, important, and effective collection management tools—intrinsically related to collecting policies, documentation goals, appraisal, space allocation, processing, and reference. Reappraisal and deaccessioning should be viewed as the archival equivalent of "mom and apple pie."

There has been a skimpy and sporadic, but fierce, theoretical argument within the profession over the legitimacy of re-appraisal. This essay does not re-present or re-analyze that argument. Clearly, embracing reappraisal in practice requires acceptance (at some level) that such actions are theoretically sound.

1 This was the title of Mark Shelstad's paper at the 1996 Society of American Archivists conference.

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Instead, I have chosen to advance the discussion from the theory to the practice (and practicality) of reappraisal.

To accomplish this goal, four aspects of reappraisal and deaccessioning will be outlined. The first seeks to clarify the language used to describe reappraisal, by defining and redefining certain terms. The second sketches the very practical reasons that archivists need to accept reappraisal and deaccessioning as a normal and common part of their work. The third maps out the steps necessary to accomplish an effective reappraisal and deaccessioning project. The fourth briefly presents the origins and results of some specific reappraisal and deaccessioning projects at two institutions.

DEFINITIONS

It will be useful to define some relevant terms before proceeding further. The definition of reappraisal is easy—it means to appraise again. This is a bit misleading, however, because what we call reappraisal is often more accurately “appraisal.” The fact that certain materials are in our collections does not guarantee that they were subject to meaningful appraisal when they were first acquired. Most simply, reappraisal is the application of collecting and appraisal criteria to materials already in the repository.

Deaccessioning is defined by the glossary of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) as “the process by which an archives or manuscripts repository formally removes material from its custody.” If this definition is accepted, each time a duplicate item is weeded from an archival record group, the processor is “deaccessioning.” This defies common usage. A more useful and appropriate archival definition of deaccessioning would be “the process by which an archives or manuscripts repository formally removes a collection or record group from its custody.”

Weeding is the traditional term for removing material below the collection level. Its SAA glossary definition is “removing individual documents or files lacking continuing value from a series.”

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But wait. If deaccessioning means removing an entire collection, and weeding means removing items or folders, what do we call the removal of entire series or subgroups that lack continuing value from a collection? For want of an alternative, please consider a new term, “distillation,” which literally means “to separate or extract the essential elements of.”³ There is good reason for this particular word choice. Judicious removal of series and subgroups no longer considered valuable in a record group can, in fact, result in a concentrated collection composed only of its essential elements.

A central argument, to be developed more fully below, is that weeding—removing material at the document or folder level—is almost never an efficient and effective use of resources in the context of reappraisal. Generally reappraisal should lead to distillation or deaccessioning to be a worthwhile investment of staff time.

NECESSARY EVIL OR JUST NECESSARY?

Most, if not all, archival repositories hold collections and major series within collections that staff members do not want and would never consider accepting now. This is the “stuff”⁴ that causes archivists to shake their heads and ask: “What were we thinking when we took this in?” The materials are in our repositories, in large part, because appraisal is a subjective decision. It is based on a given institution’s assessment of materials relative to contemporary archival practice; the institution’s goals, clientele, and resources at a given moment in time; and the individual personalities and proclivities of any given set of staff.


⁴ I use the term “stuff” advisedly here. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) defines “stuff” as “material not specifically identified,” which aptly describes much of what we find on archival shelves.
Much more could be said about this, and has been; but Maygene Daniels sums up the situation by saying: “Archival institutions . . . should anticipate that judgments will be made that later, in the light of future consideration or new information, may appear incorrect.” That is it in a nutshell—what might have made sense seventy-five, or even seven, years ago may not make sense today.

The sometimes-large amounts of “stuff” institutions hold that have no relationship to current missions and collecting policies are not simply mild inconveniences or occasional embarrassments. For most archivists, they are real and sometimes serious impediments to collecting new material that does fit the institution’s mission and serve its clients. The presence of materials in a repository that have not been consciously identified as inappropriate and the lack of a clear collection policy may increase the likelihood of a repository’s accepting more materials having a similar lack of purpose. Valuable space will be required for storage of these unwanted records, space the repository cannot afford to waste.

Conservation staff members can be overburdened by dealing with extraneous series in collections. Few, if any, repositories have sufficient conservation resources, and the potential for wasting those resources on material that is marginal or worse is untenable.

Those engaged in retrospective cataloging projects must devote limited resources to these materials or “leave them behind”

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when migrating information into new catalog systems. It is difficult to rationalize maintaining collections that are not accessible through the current catalog, and it is equally difficult to make collections functionally accessible to researchers when the catalog is bloated by collections that are irrelevant to an institution's mission. Neither researchers nor reference staff are well served by their presence.

In short, the entire archival enterprise suffers when there is no method to reappraise and either deaccession or distill collections in a repository's holdings. A process and a policy to reappraise collections are needed "in order to more effectively cope with space and cost requirements as well as to strengthen and refine ... holdings."7

**IMPLEMENTING REAPPRAISAL AND DEACCESSIONING/DISTILLATION**

Three points need to be made about the execution of reappraisal and deaccessioning or distillation: (1) a repository should have a reasonably defined mission, collecting policy, and appraisal guidelines; (2) the task should be performed in a systematic rather than a haphazard manner; and (3) written policies and procedures are required.

**Institutional Mission, Collecting Policy, Documentation Plans, Appraisal Guidelines.** Reappraisal and deaccessioning only make sense intellectually as concepts if set against clear, formal, and realistic statements of institutional mission, broad collecting policy, and narrower appraisal guidelines. This is not the place for an extended discussion of mission statements and collecting policies—suffice it to say that it is difficult to make intelligent decisions about what to deaccession if it is unclear what should be acquired in the first place.

What does merit additional attention is the concept of appraisals guidelines. Appraisal guidelines identify types of documentation or formats that are especially sought or strongly avoided. Such guidelines are familiar to most archivists, at least in certain guises. For example, a county historical society without access to a computer would not likely choose to collect elec-

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tronic records. If neither its staff nor its clients have foreign language capabilities, a repository in the United States may only accept materials written in English. An archives lacking climate-controlled storage may not accept moldy documents.

More difficult and controversial is the development of appraisal guidelines based on the perceived importance or utility of certain record types or series. The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), for example, has adopted appraisal guidelines that generally exclude financial ledgers and journals for twentieth-century businesses and organizations because their bulk is high and their use is low. Other MHS appraisal guidelines undergird the discussion below of that repository’s distillation of United States congressional collections.

It is important to remember that collecting policies and appraisal guidelines—and any other acquisition or appraisal limits that are developed for a repository—should apply to both appraisal and reappraisal, at least in theory. In practice, for a variety of reasons, it may be inefficient or impolitic to apply them to reappraisal.8

Deaccession Policy and Distillation Procedures. Sensible and cautious archivists will have an institutionally-approved deaccession policy in writing before attempting reappraisal. In preparation for creating a formal deaccession policy, one should review the deaccession sections of the ethics statements of the International Council of Museums, the American Association of Museums, the Association of Art Museum Di-

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8 Although Terry Eastwood, as well as Karen Benedict, abjures applying appraisal criteria to reappraisal, see his “How Goes it with Appraisal?” Archivaria 36 (Autumn 1993): 111-121.
rectors, and the Association of Canadian Archivists. Unlike the Society of American Archivists, all of these organizations have directly addressed the ethics and practice of deaccessioning.

As an example, the deaccession policy of MHS was drawn largely from the American Association of Museums statement and reads as follows:

Deaccessioning is considered only for an item that meets one or more of the following conditions: (1) it is no longer relevant and useful to the mission of the Society; (2) it cannot be properly stored, preserved, or used; (3) it no longer retains its physical integrity, identity, or authenticity; and (4) it is unnecessarily duplicated in the collections. Deaccessioning can occur only when the item is clearly owned by the Society. Proof of ownership is not required to deaccession items that have negligible market value.

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In disposing of items, the society must balance the interests of the public for which it holds the collection in trust, the donor's intent in the broadest sense, the interests of the scholarly and cultural community, and the institution's financial well-being. The society considers transfer of deaccessioned items, through gift, sale, or exchange, to other public institutions where they will continue to benefit the public and serve the purpose for which they were acquired. Proceeds from the sale of a deaccessioned item are used only for the acquisition or direct care of the society's collections.10

Distillation—the removal of series or subgroups from collections—can be considered a form of deaccessioning or not. An argument can be made for adopting slightly more liberal procedures for distillation because, unlike deaccessioning, distillation (1) does not necessarily remove a donor's gift from the collection; (2) rarely results in transfer of materials to another repository; and (3) rarely results in materials being put up for sale.

*Holdings Review and Reappraisal.* The processes of defining collecting policies and appraisal guidelines involve (among other things) reviewing the repository's current holdings. The review of holdings is necessary, not only for creating the policies and guidelines that are the basis for reappraisal, but because collections that make sensible targets for distillation and deaccessioning can be identified in a systematic way. As noted, reappraisal at its simplest is the application of collecting and appraisal criteria to material already in the repository. The actual decision to apply the criteria—to do the reappraisal and thus to reach the stage of actual distillation or deaccessioning—will be based on several factors. Among these are: (1) the "politics" of reappraisal, which for present purposes can be summarized as whether or not an archivist's administrative superiors are supportive of the process (note, though, that the archivist can exert a lot of influence by developing thoughtful and clear criteria and by making a practical case for implementation); and (2) the cost-benefit analysis, indicating whether implementing a reappraisal project will net a "gain" for the institution that is equal to or greater than the resources put into it. That gain

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may be monetary from the occasional sale of deaccessioned collections, staff time not spent recataloging or providing reference service to irrelevant collections, or stack space increased by deaccessioning or distillation.

At MHS, it was not difficult to convince the administration of the need for reappraisal, but the payoff needed to be big (and the process was not applied to any individual collection that was considered a "political" problem). At that repository, it was informal policy to distill only those collections that could be reduced by 100 feet or more, a relative measurement based on total manuscripts holdings of 38,000 cubic feet. A repository with much smaller holdings could understandably set a lower benchmark.

It is important to note that reappraisal should not be approached originally at the level of individual collections, however. Implementing reappraisal piecemeal, one random collection after another, is highly inefficient, if not downright dangerous. It is inefficient because the internal processes necessary to accomplish deaccessioning or distillation can be "batched"—groups of accession files can be checked for any ownership or other problems that would preclude deaccessioning, or similar series of records in several collections can be reappraised and removed at the same time. It is dangerous because piecemeal deaccessioning or distillation greatly increases the risk that dramatically different decisions will be made from one collection or series to another—this endangers a rational collecting policy and may affect donor relations, if inconsistent reappraisal decisions must be explained. Absolute consistency is impossible, but a measure of consistency is necessary and can only be achieved by considering similar collections as part of a single project. To this end, reappraisal should generally be implemented broadly—if not to a repository's entire holdings, then to defined subsets (such as business records).

**Accession File Review.** Whether deaccessioning or distilling, it is essential to know exactly what rights the repository has for every reappraised collection and what the repository's relationship is to each donor. In general, only collections for which the repository has clear and unrestricted title, and which present no obvious donor complications, should be considered candidates for deaccessioning. If the donor agree-
ment specifies that unwanted material be returned to the donor (or the heirs), the agreement should be honored to the letter. However, especially for distillations, it may be useful to contact the donor in advance, explain the impending procedure, and ask whether the donor still wants the material returned. The donor may choose to forego this step, though if so, the archivist must make every effort to get such an amendment to the agreement in writing.

The suggestion that donors be fully informed, even ahead of the actual reappraisal, may seem like folly at first glance. "Is he kidding?" many cautious archivists may ask. "If I let my donors know that we are reappraising their collections, I'll be tarred and feathered.” In fact, extensive experience at MHS with reappraisal leading to distillation strongly suggests that donors—even those who are high-powered with presumably big egos—are more than willing to accept the need for reappraisal if it is presented clearly and as part of a well-conceived, well-planned, overall program. This is especially true when reappraisal can be presented to them as a method of increasing the usefulness and prominence of their collection by focusing attention on its most important elements.

**Disposal.** A written policy should specify what forms of disposition are acceptable once a collection has been deaccessioned or distilled. Shelstad notes the most common forms: "If deaccessioning has been determined to be appropriate, collections may be transferred to another repository, returned to the donor, destroyed, or offered for sale, with sale proceeds to be used for the sole purposes of acquisitions or preservation of other collections."\(^{11}\) Experience at MHS suggests (and the repository’s collection management policy requires) that material be returned to the donor only if the deed of gift requires it. Destruction is entirely appropriate for deaccessioned collections that are duplicated in another repository, physically unstable, illegible, or simply too fragmentary or insignificant to be of use to another repository. Return to donor and destruction should generally be the only options for material distilled from larger collections. The major exception to this would be large

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runs of serials or caches of significant publications that might be offered to a library. Transferring entire deaccessioned collections to another repository can be time-consuming but reflects the best character of the archival enterprise. As a profession, archivists generally pride themselves on preserving materials so that they can be made accessible to the widest possible audience. Selling items, on the other hand, usually consigns them to private hands and relative inaccessibility.

Still, it is difficult for a resource-poor repository to give away a small set of Lincoln letters, for example, when the hundreds of thousands of dollars they might bring at auction would increase the repository’s acquisition budget by a factor of ten (or more). There are some possibilities for “middle ground” when it comes to monetarily valuable and historically significant collections once they have been deaccessioned. One option is to have the material appraised and then to negotiate a direct sale to an appropriate repository, even if for somewhat less than the items might fetch at open auction. Some repositories do have substantial acquisitions budgets or “angels” who will assist with important purchases. A similar approach is to have an auction house handle the sale, but establish specific provisions to give the advantage to repositories as buyers rather than individuals. The New York Historical Society did this when it permitted other New York repositories to pre-empt any final auction bid within fourteen days, at a 3-10 percent discount, plus the ability to pay in installments.

**TWO CASE STUDIES**

Sketching the outlines of rational, efficient, and ethical reappraisal is easier than actually implementing such approaches. This is not, however, simply an intellectual exercise, but a foundation for action. Summaries of two projects at the Minnesota Historical Society will make this clear. The first describes the reappraisal and distillation of United States congressional collections, resulting in the removal of 1,000 cubic feet...
of material from the stacks. The second documents the reappraisal and deaccessioning of collections identified during a retrospective cataloging project, as well as a separate holdings review. This resulted in little gain of stack space, but in considerable goodwill and the knowledge that the institution’s holdings now largely match the institution’s collecting policy.

**Distillation—The Congressional Collections.**

Until 1990 MHS was committed in practice to comprehensively and exhaustively documenting each and every congressperson in the state’s delegation. Short of financial receipts and award plaques, every record generated by every congressional office was sought and retained. This practice resulted in the congressional collection alone totaling nearly 6,200 cubic feet, or approximately 16 percent of the institution’s total manuscript collection. A full 95 percent of this 6,200 feet documented congressional activity since World War II; 82 percent (5,000 cubic feet) covered the period since 1960.

Without disputing the importance of these politicians to the history of Minnesota, it was debatable whether their importance was equivalent to the space and other resources they had traditionally occupied in the repository. As a colleague asked: “Do we really need 116 feet of material to document Congressman Tom Hagedorn’s eight years in office when we keep 110 feet for nearly seventy years of the St. Paul Area United Way?”

For the society to have the ability to aggressively document communities of color, major Minnesota industries, women’s groups, and all the other aspects of Minnesota history it wishes to see adequately represented in the manuscript collections, it was necessary to revise the traditional “take anything” approach to congressional papers. The most important steps taken were (1) to reject constituent correspondence and casework files from representatives and (2) to accept these

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series from senators only if the records were microfilmed or could be sensibly sampled.\textsuperscript{15}

Having established these appraisal standards, MHS diverted internal funds and assigned a project staff position to six collections of representatives' papers. Working on six collections in direct sequence permitted the project archivist to build a level of expertise quickly and helped ensure uniformity across the reappraisals. The six collections represented a total of seventy years of congressional service. Before the reappraisal project, the collections totaled 1,536 cubic feet. After applying the new appraisal guidelines, 982 cubic feet—64 percent—of that total were removed and destroyed. In addition, by reducing the size of a typical representative's collection from 120 cubic feet to about 20 cubic feet, the processors were able to provide a much better level of arrangement and description to the collections.

Have relationships with donors been damaged? Has the quality of the collections been compromised? Todd Daniels-Howell answered those questions in an article analyzing the project:

Experience so far tells us that we can safely answer no to both of these questions. Of the six collections that have been reappraised, the two largest did not have donor agreements allowing the Society to dispose of un-

\textsuperscript{15} Constituent correspondence—also called issue mail—deserves some specific comment because it is far and away the bulkiest and most common material in the papers of late twentieth-century representatives and because our decision to reject it has caused the most controversy within archival circles. Several factors counter the wisdom of retaining the huge bulk represented by this series of records. First, even the most dedicated historians admit that no one can or wants to read all the letters received on a specific issue; most scholars use this series to find quotable examples. Second, neither historians nor the congressional offices themselves rely on issue mail as an indication of the strength of popular opinion on a specific issue; district and statewide polls, not mail or phone calls, are the means by which offices judge voter opinion. As the chief of staff of one of Minnesota's congressmen noted, while their mail ran 60-40 against gun control, polls in their district consistently showed 70 percent voter approval of gun control. In addition, he added: "Most of the letters we receive are inane, and so are most of the responses we send out." See Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Records at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," \textit{Archival Issues} 19, no. 1 (1994): 35-36.
wanted material. Before we could proceed, therefore, we had to contact the two former congressmen . . . to inform them of our intentions and to seek permission to destroy the material weeded from their collections. In both cases we sent copies of our appraisal guidelines and told them of our belief that this process would make their collections more accessible to researchers. Both men quickly gave consent to the destruction of unwanted materials and indicated that they completely trusted our judgment in these matters. The thoroughness of the appraisal guidelines conveys competence and thoughtfulness to donors, both past and present. And while there have been from the beginning those on the Society’s staff who worry about researchers from the past returning to collections to find that what they once used, or cited in a publication, no longer exists . . . , at this admittedly early date, there have been no complaints whatsoever about the new shape of these collections.

[W]e believe strongly that the Minnesota Historical Society appraisal guidelines, and in particular our reappraisal of collections using them, [have] made these collections stronger because of their greater accessibility and higher concentration of historically valuable materials ... 16

The MHS project has served as a model for the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, which is beginning the analysis necessary to consider distilling sets of collections relating to economic geology and transportation. The center’s consideration of congressional collections will begin shortly. It is not preordained that the resulting decisions will mirror those at MHS, however, because the mission, resources, and audience at the center are different.

**Deaccessioning.** Since approximately 1972, the Minnesota Historical Society has deaccessioned 370 manuscript collections. Approximately 200 of these deaccessions occurred in

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the period between 1990 and 2000.\textsuperscript{17} Though this may seem a large number, when set against the total number of manuscripts collections at MHS—roughly 4,000—it is not quite so substantial. The deaccessions in this ten-year period came through two processes: (1) retrospective conversion of catalog records into an OPAC and (2) the collection-by-collection review of holdings completed in 1996 for the re-definition of a documentation plan and appraisal guidelines for business records.

The retrospective cataloging project meant that the processing staff was reviewing all pre-1980 accessions. This review is, necessarily, very cursory; however, it has identified a number of collections which were clearly out of scope—from journals of a pre-Revolutionary Virginia general store to letters sent home from a Civil War soldier in a New York regiment. The holdings survey done by the two manuscript curators for the business records reassessment project identified three additional categories of potential deaccessions: (1) collections that lay not quite so far outside MHS's collecting area (for example, in Iowa and Wisconsin), (2) copies of material the originals of which (or other copies) were accessible in other repositories, and (3) material so marginal in content as not to warrant retention.

The identification of all these collections was based solely on their catalog descriptions. As candidates for deaccession were identified, they were put in a holding file until there were about two dozen of them collected. This “batching” allowed an assigned volunteer to review the actual collections, which did not always match their catalog descriptions, and check the accession files for any red flags. Restrictions, unclear titles, and identity of state or country to which the collection seemed most related were discovered and recorded through this process. The manuscript curators then reviewed the volunteer's work and did a separate examination of anything that was unclear or unusual. All of this was completed before sending a formal request for deaccessioning to the MHS acquisition committee, usually for twenty to thirty collections at a time.

Once the deaccessions were approved, the manuscript curators determined which collections were worth offering or sending to another repository and which should simply be

\textsuperscript{17} Corresponding to the decade of my tenure at the society.
destroyed. The curators assisted the volunteer in identifying likely repositories for the former group, drafting transmittal letters, and shipping the material. It was surprising and gratifying to learn how frequently acknowledgments were received from the repositories, expressing delight in receiving the material. At times the donated materials connected directly to collections already in the receiving repository. Since these repositories were not necessarily expected to respond, the expressions of gratitude were considered genuine. Certainly it reinforces the contention that deaccessioning is not only a good collection management tool for the reappraising repository, but a useful tool in the broader archival mission of making historically valuable material accessible to those who would value it most.

During the period between 1990 and 2000, about eighteen collections were discovered that fit MHS’s institutional criteria for deaccessioning and were thought to have significant monetary value. A very few of these collections involved material that have monetary but not historical value, and therefore it was expected that the administration would agree to have them consigned to an auction house for sale. The others, which have monetary and historical value, were left in abeyance. The manuscript curators favored offering to transfer them as outright gifts to appropriate repositories. Failing that, the curators suggested offering them at a steep discount to another repository before putting them up for public auction. In the end, however, that decision will be made by higher administration.

The process of deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, first sketched by Mark Shelstad,18 continues to the present, though at a slower pace. The staff is currently researching approximately seventy collections—from “archival” collections relating to United States government agencies, which may be solely government publications, to those which are probably out of scope, such as the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange—in preparation for making deaccession recommendations.
CONCLUSION

Reappraisal should be seen as “an essential, necessary and useful part of collections management”¹⁹ for archivists, as it long has been for museum curators and librarians. It should be applied thoughtfully but willingly, knowing that, like appraisal itself, it cannot be done perfectly or in such a way as to escape all criticism. “The goal of the appraiser is to make an informed decision, not an enduringly and infallibly correct one . . . ,” Gerald Ham wrote about appraisal, but it applies equally to reappraisal. “Above all, archivists should not worry once the decision is made. Remember, . . . all appraisal is a ‘calculated risk.’”²⁰ With sound policies in place, and based on thoughtful and deliberate consideration, reappraisal, distillation, and deaccessioning are risks well worth taking.

Mark Greene is the director of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. He was curator of manuscripts acquisitions at the Minnesota Historical Society for ten years. He has published articles on archival appraisal, access to records, congressional papers, business records, and research use of archives. In 2002 he was named a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.

¹⁹ Mark Shelstad, “Switching the Vacuum into Reverse,” 18.

²⁰ F. Gerald Ham, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 79.