



Managing Manuscript Collections

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MANUSCRIPTS, like other library resources, create few problems until they—and their tribe of users—increase. But of all the “special” library materials, they tend to get out of hand most readily. Characteristically unique, they observe few rules and stick to no subject. If they relate to one person, they are as likely apropos to two. Their form is often irregular and fragile, their content difficult to classify and decipher, their “date” and “place” incomplete or missing, and their use hedged about with many restrictions.

Nevertheless, manuscripts may be the richest ore among a research library’s collections. They may comprise primary sources in a wide range of subject fields and offer opportunities for original investigation. Their existence may make possible the re-interpretation of studies based upon secondary evidence or the revision of conclusions reached by inferential means. Often manuscripts stand in an intimate relation to thought and action, having played a vital part in their development. When well integrated with other research materials, they comprise prime human records.

Manuscripts are generally most useful when they are concentrated in limited subject fields rather than sprinkled thinly over a wide scholarly terrain. Even when their value per unit is low, they build up to impressive documentary strength in large cohesive collections. But the existence of such wealth is no guarantee of productive use. Organizing manuscripts, providing guides and assistance in use, and making them known and freely available are indispensable preliminaries to an active research program.

Among libraries, methods of managing manuscript collections have varied widely in their details if not in their basic intent. Often policies and practices have grown up with scant reference to experience elsewhere. Similarities in procedures have resulted more from a familiarity with common problems and with standard means of dealing with printed matter than from following a general plan. More recently, in-

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fluences for standardization, such as the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts, set up by the American Historical Association,¹ experience in the National Archives,² publications such as the *American Archivist*, and the preliminary *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging . . . for Collections of Manuscripts*,³ issued in 1954 by the Library of Congress, are doing much to promote useful conformity and an acquaintance with a variety of pertinent practice.

If, in prospecting for trends in handling manuscript materials, a pattern of management can be discerned which will improve library economy, impel librarians to get their manuscripts processed, and provide cooperative copy for a union catalog,^{4, 5} more standardization can hardly be desired. Quite enough ingenuity will always be required to put these unique materials to research use under varying local conditions.

Some general tendencies are visible among present day manuscript depositories. Management principles which have been increasingly applied to collections of books and journals, to government publications, music, micro-copies, and even to maps, are invading the manuscript field in force. They have come both from library practice and from the methodology of the archivist, and the resulting attitudes and procedures have gradually superseded the more craft-like methods of the antiquarian and the lone practitioner. Following what is probably a generally expanding pattern in American research libraries, an interest in acquiring only those manuscripts which are of high intrinsic value in traditional periods and fields, has been expanded to take in recent materials of large bulk and low per-unit value. The presence of these huge acquisitions, and the increasing emphasis placed upon making them available for use, have brought about the adoption of processing means which are rapid as well as useful.

The influx of new material and the emphasis upon use; the tendency to treat manuscripts in groups rather than by piece; the adoption of similar record forms; the development of standard equipment; and the amalgamation of archival techniques of record description with library cataloging procedures illustrate present day trends.

By manuscripts is meant primarily recent historical manuscripts, personal and business records, and, to a lesser degree, governmental archives. Interest is centered in the general manuscript collection rather than in the strictly official archive wherein source of material and the relation of the archive to it, purpose, and use may be highly specialized. Medieval manuscripts, literary works, music, and other notably individual types are not specifically included.⁶ Although the "unit"

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will in general be the collection or "record group" rather than the item, detail in treatment may be pursued to any degree desired, and there is little reason to suppose that the approach and bibliographic forms referred to will not have general pertinence.

The plain objective of collecting and processing manuscripts is to secure and make them available for continuing research use. How they are handled will perforce depend upon their intrinsic value and quantity, the urgency of use, and such local factors as staff and administrative practices. It would be useful if a standard "I. Q.," (using intelligence in the sense of "information"), could be formulated for rating manuscript collections (aggregate research value \div number of items) as a guide in processing and use. Material of high research interest per page would get highest priority treatment. Such detail as might be indulged in while handling a collection of twenty items could not ordinarily be afforded when processing as many lineal feet of papers, although some individual documents in the latter group might be more significant than those in the former. If these two collections comprise the total receipts and backlog for the current period, the library's attitude toward them would be somewhat different than if other material is steadily coming in. When a scholar stands with one foot in the work room door, impatient to have a file placed in his hands, or if students or part-time assistants are depended upon to do some of the sorting and listing, still other influences are brought to bear. Which is only to say that conditions alter cases, and that supply and demand in relation to material, time, and use may have an effect upon procedures quite out of proportion to what they would have in a purely theoretical scheme.

Since a measure of basic processing seems essential before the use of manuscripts begins, either full treatment must be provided at the start, a hasty lick and a promise given, or the work must be carried out in progressive stages from rudimentary to advanced, depending again upon material, time, and use. The user may be kept happy with his material idling temporarily in processing step one or two, and work may meanwhile be carried on in other collections. It may be that the preliminary step is the maximum the manuscripts deserve, but if fuller treatment is intended, management must see that it is not overlooked. At the primary stage, the material has at least been accessioned, sorted and arranged, and sufficiently analyzed to provide an entry and general description in the public manuscript catalog—and union list.

It should be noted that there is a wide difference of opinion in re-

gard to the amount of guidance which should be offered to users. By some it is held that the librarian is only to provide order and sufficient clues to suggest where the scholar might search: the reader must be prepared "to dig through a peck of chaff to reach his grain of wheat. That is what constitutes research."⁷ On the other side are those, affected particularly by trends in scientific documentation, who regard research primarily as a study of findings rather than as the exercise required by the hunt, and argue for a maximum of assistance. All direct their efforts mainly toward the competent scholar. Since in most instances libraries are unable to offer more than a minimum of description and listing, the debate over service will likely remain an academic one until cheaper or more effective methods of keying and indexing are developed.

Manuscripts, as suggested, are generally treated as collections or groups centering about a person, family, institution, or subject; separates may be given special handling or be placed in miscellaneous collections. Insofar as possible, the arrangement and inspection of a group is completed in one operation. In any event, sorting, scrutiny, and note-taking should be done with enough care to eliminate repetitive handling. However far the preparation of guides is to be carried (overlooking detailed calendars), sufficient data should be recorded at the outset, or in ordered stages, to make regular recourse to the originals unnecessary for operational purposes. This does not imply that the manuscripts will hold no further interest for the staff member, only that he must not dally with them in the guise of cataloging or he will deprive the scholar of their use.

An adequately trained individual (and subject knowledge should not be overlooked) should always make the preliminary inspection of the collection, investigating contents and observing whatever clues to arrangement and meaning may exist. He must make decisions about the permanent order and perform any acts which require special skill and knowledge. The "professional" job is to recognize and understand, create or restore order, and reveal meaning; the actual arrangement, even the making of notations, and the manufacture of records is very often carried out by others under supervision.

Except for the broad arrangement of collections according to geography, subject, or form, and the inclusion of individual manuscripts in categories provided for books, the subject classification of manuscript collections is hardly typical or practicable. Manuscripts are maintained under closed stack conditions, and their arrangement is strictly geared to administrative convenience. The system should be simple, capable of expansion, and easy to handle by informed staff members.

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In one library, collections are divided between Eastern and Western hemispheres;⁸ in another by linguistic and geographic areas, plus a few subject specializations;⁹ still another into government archives, private papers, and subject specialties;¹⁰ in a fourth, literary manuscripts, historical material in its special field, and all others;¹¹ and a business library, which is in itself a subject collection, classifies by "industry," interestingly enough abandoning the scheme for large collections.¹² One institution in which fairly detailed subdivisions have grown up is expecting to forego all but the broad headings and particularly to give up minute subject detail.

Within such broad categories (if any) the individual collections may be arranged in order of accession number, by title, chronological period, or by other means. One or more miscellaneous groups are usually found, to accommodate separates, a few related documents, or material acquired because of an interest in signatures, for example, instead of in content.

Arrangement within the collections themselves affects the use of the material far more directly, and organization should reveal the scope of the papers and make them most meaningful and accessible. Within large collections there may be sub-groupings by form, such as personal correspondence, business papers, diaries, speeches, etc., by subject or organizational divisions, or by period or place. Within groups of historical material a chronological arrangement is preferred, since this is the order in which they were produced; they may be sub-arranged alphabetically. For literary manuscripts, and even for some historical material, an alphabetical arrangement by name of writer may be desired; in one instance incoming letters have been so arranged, outgoing letters by date, as a useful compromise between the two possibilities.¹³ If a collection comes well bound in a different order or in some other arrangement with an adequate index, the existing scheme might be preserved. No arrangement should be disturbed without due process of examination least a too callous treatment destroy unique contemporary relationships.

Enclosures are filed either with the accompanying documents or in their own proper places, with cross references made. Non-manuscript materials are generally segregated for convenience in handling (carefully recording the transfer), but typescripts, transcripts, facsimiles, and printed papers closely tied to manuscripts by personal or subject relationships or by agreement with donors may be incorporated. Practices in regard to photographing and destroying originals, to the preservation of samples only, and to the discarding of categories of records which are not worth preserving or for which adequate summaries are

available will only be mentioned here as existing; these represent an advanced stage in policy formation but are essential considerations in a mass collecting program.^{14, 15} Neither will routine processing procedures be reviewed, for example, whether correspondence is first segregated by author, for indexing, then refiled by date, although the insight and effectiveness with which these are carried out will affect the program radically.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Several types of records of institutional or public utility have been devised or adopted by librarians in working with manuscripts. First, for pure convenience, it is useful to maintain a docket of information pertaining to each collection, incorporating correspondence and papers which have accumulated in relation to acquisitions, custody, and use. This "case file"¹⁹ may include whatever property lists have been prepared, documents recording terms of gift and restrictions, and information about donors.

A primary file, however, it may be styled, is the familiar accession record. This is the summary of official information for staff use, abstracted from numerous sources. Typed in loose leaf form it may give the customary accessions number (used jointly with a title for identification), title (often having a mnemonic value), date of receipt, source, order number, and cost. It may also include information about access and ownership status, a description of the collection in general terms or in some detail (primarily a description of content rather than of paleographic features), size and contents, information about donors and provenience, and other pertinent data. Since the accession book includes confidential information, the parts which are useful to the public should be carried over into another record or should only be suggested here and worked out in detail for general use.

The more public record is the inventory, register,²⁰ or collections list. This finding aid may also be in sheet form and might include all of the information about the collections which will be essential for future processing. In whatever detail each collection is to be treated, similar categories of information should be provided for all, and it is helpful to enter it under the standard headings in this file: title and number, provenience, size of collection, indication of scope of contents, information about individual or organization which produced or collected it, any restrictions upon use, and a citation of available guides or calendars. To this may be appended a list of the material by group, series, or container, or it may be summarized by group and itemized by container if this is desired. Following this may come a list of persons, or a selection of them, with whom the manuscripts are concerned,

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perhaps giving inclusive dates of correspondence after each. A standard form of record will assist staff members in studying the material and in avoiding omissions which might otherwise occur. This record may also serve as copy for a printed guide to the institution's collections,²¹ which use should then be kept in mind. A copy of the name list might be forwarded to the donor, with an acknowledgment of gift, and much of the information will be raw data for the cataloging process.

The library's policy in regard to public service is perhaps best reflected by the manner in which the collections are represented in the public catalog. Treatment may vary from providing a single card for a collection to a "comprehensive attempt . . . to bridge the gap between the traditional calendar and ideal inventory of the archivist and the general catalog of the librarian."²²

The fundamental card is the collection card, although what has been termed the "describable item"²³ or the "catalogable unit"²⁴ may be either smaller or larger than the accessioned collection. The form of main entry is familiar, being by author or title, which are often supplied in processing. To this may be added the standard items: size of collection, description, terms of use, and available guides. Notes may be added as the collection and conditions warrant: about significant correspondence, single important items, references to particular subjects, relationship to other collections, arrangement, etc. The card catalog, as a finding aid, selects from the register or inventory only those leads which seem of sufficient importance to justify inclusion by name in a general alphabetical list.

According to local need, added entries may be made for personal and corporate names, political and administrative designations, subjects (less generous than in book cataloging and more broad in scope), functions of organizational units, and types of material. They may refer to individual documents or to several items in a collection and give specific date references or inclusive dates for a group. They may appear as unit cards or as analytics, and if numerous name references are provided these may be added to abbreviated unit cards which give only the name of the collection. Sometimes chronological cards are made, as a guide to material by year or by decade. In other instances calendar cards are provided, summarizing contents; calendars as such are likely to be the object of the scholar's disdain and the librarian's despair, being a poor but expensive substitute for originals. The listing of individual names is often restricted to the register sheets, to which an index may be supplied, and most libraries which collect in the

recent period find extravagant the making of card entries for any but the most important names and see the listing of individual pieces as almost beyond their reach.²⁵⁻²⁸

Standard rules for form of entry, added entries, description and indication of scope, size, content, provenience, etc., are proposed in the *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging . . . for Collections of Manuscripts*.³

Cards are generally filed in separate manuscript catalogs, either in dictionary form or in one or more files by collection, writer, archival unit, or chronology. They sometimes also appear in the general public catalog or in departmental files. Catalogs in manuscript divisions may also have union catalog functions for a university campus or may include references to pertinent resources in other institutions.

To assist in returning individual manuscripts to their proper collection, light pencilled notations may be made upon the documents themselves, usually upon the verso, including the number of the collection and sub-collection, and perhaps date, particularly if the original is difficult to decipher. Some objection is made to defacing valuable manuscripts in this way, and marking may be impracticable for material of low per-item value in large collections.

Conservation practices are similarly varied, but the minimum is to unfold and flatten all pieces and to give careful inspection and treatment if there is evidence of dampness or of insect infestation. Documents of sufficient importance are set aside for repairs when required, and of course only materials of sufficient transparency and permanence are to be used in mending. Lamination is expensive and bulky but is useful for material of prime value. Correspondence and other important documents are placed in strong paper folders (of proper chemical stability), put in manuscript containers, and shelved either horizontally or vertically, with provision to keep the sheets upright. Sometimes letters are bound, being tipped to sheets and made into volumes. Air conditioning is desirable where temperature, moisture, and air borne particles require control. Supervision of use is essential in order to maintain a balance between present and future research needs. A wide literature is available in this field.

A survey of some twenty research libraries made a decade ago²⁹ revealed a wide variety of conditions in manuscript collections. Like isolated communities, with their own traditions, mores, and practices, these resources have developed in a variety of milieu, have broadened and developed, made sudden spurts and slow declines, experienced periods of fat and lean, and have reached their present status without much respect to age and position. With present day bibliographic

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knowledge and understanding, alert and aggressive policies of acquisitions and administration, competent personnel, and cooperative programs of expansion and use, an increased trend toward the effective exploitation of manuscripts in scholarly research can be expected.

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