Squaring the Circle: The Reformation of Archival Description in AACR2

STEVEN L. HENSEN

In the aura of excitement which surrounds the MARC AMC format today, it is sometimes difficult to remember that little more than five years ago automation of almost any sort represented terra incognita for most archivists. The bibliographic utilities, developed by the library community to take advantage of the cost efficiencies inherent in shared cataloging, did not encourage archival participation since there was no obvious pecuniary or other advantage to carrying catalog records of unique materials. This presented no problem to most archivists, who saw the bibliographic systems as focused rather too sharply on library-based bibliographic description to meet what they considered to be their own unique descriptive needs. Thus, except for some rather singular early use of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), there were neither archival records, nor place for such records, in these systems.

Today, however, with almost 150,000 catalog records for manuscript and archival materials in the bibliographic networks of both the Research Libraries Group (RLG) and OCLC; with the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) poised to enter RLIN; and with the dozens of cataloging and retrospective conversion projects currently plugged into these and other systems, the situation described above has been radically reversed. Moreover, it is now fully recognized by both librarians and archivists alike that the inclusion of manuscript and archival records is a perfectly natural extension of the research utility of these networks. Systems that carry records for books and serials...
as well as "nonbook" materials, such as prints, photographs, maps, music, videotapes, motion pictures, and machine-readable records, are incomplete research tools without the inclusion of records for manuscripts and archives.

The two principal obstacles to making the quantum jump from reluctance to acceptance were the lack of a MARC-compatible format that fully met the needs of archival description, and conversely, the lack of a system of archival description that was truly MARC-compatible. The relationship of these problems to each other, while obvious now, was not always so apparent. Thus, their solutions were arrived at quite separately and were more a result of fortuitous coincidence than coordinated activity.

When the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the Library of Congress (LC) issued the MARC Format for Archives and Manuscripts Control (AMC) in 1983 after five years of work by the Society's National Information System Task Force (NISTF), a solution to the problem of a MARC-compatible format was apparently finally in hand. Among the many things this format demonstrated was that archivists and librarians had more in common with each other than anyone had believed, and that a library-based descriptive format, indeed, could be adapted to fully support archival description. Considering the historical mistrust between the archival and library communities, it was perhaps even more ironic that the solution to the problems surrounding archival descriptive standards was also precipitated by events in the library world. The publication in 1978 of the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR2) initially, and not surprisingly, caught most archivists completely unaware. Eventually, however, it came to have increasing significance as it forced archivists to come to grips with long-neglected questions relating to cataloging and descriptive standards. Thus these rules came to play an important (albeit somewhat indirect and unwitting) role in preparing archivists for their initiation into the world of automated bibliographic networks by focusing their attention more sharply on descriptive standards. Just as NISTF adapted library-oriented MARC tags to meet archival needs, so too was AACR2 adapted to support archival description in a more useful manner. The publication in 1983 of *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts* (or APPM as it is now known in MARC cataloging source code) was an attempt to address the problems found in AACR2.

To better understand how this came about, some historical perspective may be helpful. In the fall of 1977, members of the staff of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress were first presented
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with a draft of the chapter on manuscripts for the revision of the first edition of *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*. The general response to that draft was not positive. The objections were based largely on the fact that the new rules seemed to ignore standards that had been established in chapter 10 of the original cataloging code (now known as AACR1) for the cataloging of manuscript materials; these standards were the basis of the cataloging practices of both the Manuscript Division and NUCMC. It was very much felt that agreements and understandings about the unique cataloging requirements of manuscripts, as distinct from books, had been lost or overlooked. In response to the revisions, a memorandum from the Chief of the Manuscript Division to the Chief of the Descriptive Cataloging Division outlined a number of specific objections to the proposed rules. At the same time, it was pointed out that the revisions had never been properly circulated in the Manuscript Division for advice and/or comment before they were presented, essentially as a *fait accompli*. In fact, there was no immediate evidence that anyone in the American manuscript community had anything at all to do with the proposed rules; therefore, it was recommended that approval of the chapter be withdrawn until real revision could occur.

Subsequent discussion on this matter between staff members of the Manuscript Division and the Descriptive Cataloging Division did not result in suppressing the chapter, as the editorial process was by that time too far along to permit that. However, it was suggested that an alternate set of rules be drafted to be used as a point of departure for discussion and possible future revision of the rules. This was done and a new set of rules—essentially a revision and expansion of chapter 10 of AACR1—was approved in the Manuscript Division and circulated for comment. Apart from the Head of the Manuscripts Section of the Descriptive Cataloging Division (which produced NUCMC), no reaction was received, and there the matter rested for some time.

Meanwhile, the actual publication of AACR2 evoked a general national reaction of disappointment to its provisions for manuscripts and other special, “nonbook” materials. Acting under the auspices of the Council of National Library and Information Associations, a group of special-materials catalogers convened as the Joint Committee on AACR2 (later renamed the Joint Committee on Specialized Cataloging). This group had several meetings in the fall and winter of 1979/80 to discuss problems of AACR2 compatibility with the needs of special-materials libraries. They eventually concluded that several chapters in AACR2 needed extensive modification in order to make them useful,
and that a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) should be sought to help support this work.

At the same time, and somewhat independent of this group’s activities, the Library of Congress was gradually becoming convinced that some of the special-materials chapters in AACR2 were indeed inadequate for the cataloging needs of some of its custodial divisions, and that manuals supplementing and clarifying the rules should be prepared. In fact, the library was already fully cooperating with outside groups in preparing interpretive manuals based on AACR2 for rare books and for cartographic materials.

In June of 1980, the Joint Committee on Specialized Cataloging was successful in obtaining a grant from NEH to assist in the preparation of AACR2-based cataloging manuals for the three areas considered most in need of immediate and drastic attention: manuscripts, graphic materials, and motion pictures. The agreement between the Library of Congress (in particular, the Processing and Research Services Departments) and the joint committee was that the first draft of these manuals would be prepared by members of the LC staff in the respective custodial divisions having responsibility for these materials. It was not altogether coincidental that there were members of the joint committee in each of the three divisions.

Under this grant, initial drafts were prepared by the designated LC staff members, and, after internal review in the library, these drafts were circulated nationally and internationally among concerned professionals for comment and reaction. Revised drafts based on these comments were then prepared and editorial committees were convened for final editing. The result was the publication of APPM.

All of these projects approached the task of writing the manuals with two basic premises: first, that the respective chapters in AACR2 on description (chapter 4: Manuscripts; chapter 7: Motion Pictures and Video Recordings; chapter 8: Graphic Materials) failed to comprehend in some important way the essential “bibliographic” nature of the material and thus provided inadequate prescriptions for its description; and second, that any revisions were nevertheless obliged to adhere to the basic thrust and structure of the whole of AACR2—most particularly insofar as that structure reflected International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD) standards—so that bibliographic records created under these revisions would be compatible with other AACR2-based description.
The Requirements of Archival Description

It is often asked why archivists should care about library cataloging rules. While the basic answer lies in the premise of bibliographic integration, as noted earlier, there is an underlying, more fundamental question of who should be responsible for archival cataloging rules. For too long, archivists simply ignored the question of descriptive standards, preferring local idiosyncratic solutions to any hint of externally imposed standards. Into this vacuum stepped creators and formulators of rules who were more oriented to library cataloging than to archival description. Thus, when AACR2 was published, it should have come as no surprise that the rules did not reflect the needs of archival description.

If the overall approach in APPM to the revisions and expansions of chapter 4 of ACCRZ could be summed up in a single sentence, it would be: “Manuscripts are not books!” Virtually every specific problem in chapter 4 related to a failure to distinguish sufficiently between the bibliographic nature and requirements of published and unpublished materials. This was, in turn, related to some general misunderstandings regarding the nature of archival description. These were reflected most particularly in the failure to place the proper emphasis on the needs of collection or series level description, or to recognize that archival description was not “static” in the same way that bibliographic description was. These problems were present to varying degrees in both Part I (Description) and Part II (Headings) of AACR2.

It is ironic that the manuscript materials of the sort traditionally collected by libraries as “primary” sources were not deliberately created to be used as such. The letters, diaries, account books, scrapbooks, and other papers that normally make up such collections were originally written with more quotidian purposes in mind. It is only insofar as these materials provide a record of major and minor historical events that they assume value and interest as tools of research. In order to provide access to this research potential, the manuscripts must be assigned a bibliographic identity. With published materials this identity is prima facie, deliberate, and straightforward, with most of the data that defines this identity provided clearly and explicitly, usually on the title page. With unpublished materials, however, this identity must be created through a process of formulating and extracting the elements of bibliographic description from the content and context of the manuscripts.

When AACR2 instructs book catalogers to rely on the title page of a book as the “chief source of information” for cataloging data, it is
pointing to the major source of bibliographic identity for that work. However, when the instructions in chapter 4 tell manuscript catalogers that the “chief source of information for a manuscript text is the manuscript itself” and to prefer within the manuscript “information found on a title page, in the colophon...and lastly the text itself,” there is inevitably some confusion. While the instructions imply that there will be such elements as title pages, and that they will contain bibliographic data, this is rarely the case. The instructions that follow requiring that all “information taken from outside the prescribed source(s) [be enclosed] with square brackets,” would, if followed strictly, yield a catalog record in which most, if not all, of the data would be bracketed; in most cases not only would there be no information in the prescribed sources, but there would be no prescribed sources. One practitioner has observed that cataloging records created under such requirements would appear to be surrounded by picket fences through which one would have to peer as if into a concealed garden.

Even though the cluttering of manuscript catalog records with excessive and needless bracketing is largely an aesthetic problem, the underlying lack of understanding reflected in these prescriptions regarding the nature of modern manuscript collections is of more far-reaching concern. Instructions to use sources of information for cataloging manuscripts that are not likely to exist is obviously not helpful. It appears that the framers of AACR2 offered these rules as part of an overall parallel structure, wherein general principles established for cataloging library materials are uniformly applied to all materials regardless of format. Thus, principles for extracting (or, more exactly, transcribing) cataloging data from publication details on title pages of printed works were unfortunately extended to materials that have neither title pages nor publication details.

This is not to say, of course, that there is no legitimate source for cataloging data for manuscripts, only that AACR2 failed to comprehend or acknowledge what that source might be. Archivists and manuscript curators have always understood, implicitly at least, that some sort of “bibliographic” identity needed to be created for the materials in their custody (although they almost certainly would not have recognized it in those terms). They cataloged and identified their materials through the preparation of archival finding aids such as inventories, registers, and guides. Whatever particular form these finding aids took, and in spite of their various local differences, nevertheless they nearly always contained similar categories of information regarding the crea-
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tor, nature, source, extent, and so on, of the manuscript collection or record series.

It is probably not altogether coincidental that the various elements of description found in archival inventories had certain parallels with some of the elements of library description. It was only necessary to recognize these similarities and to declare the primacy of these finding aids as legitimate sources of cataloging data. Thus when APPM states that "these finding aids are approached by users as a surrogate for the whole collection... [and] are, in effect the only practical equivalent to a chief source of information," it is acknowledging that the creation of these guides during archival processing is analogous to the gathering of publication details on the title page of a book. It also acknowledges that, for the purposes of cataloging, these finding aids are as reliable and concrete a source of information on descriptive elements such as title, dates, and extent, as the title page of any book. Furthermore, this puts in proper perspective the pivotal role that these finding aids have in the archival description process, in which the cataloging is almost always derived from, and dependent on, the fuller detail they contain.

Related to the primacy of these guides is the importance of collection and series level cataloging. Anyone who has experience with modern manuscript collections knows that it is a rare letter, document, or diary in a collection that is so important that it overshadows the collection as a whole. Even if individual items in a collection deserve special description, this would never be done at the expense of the description of the whole. Most "items" in manuscript collections normally only derive significance from the context they occupy in the entire collection. Simply because individual letters in a manuscript collection may have some sort of topical or autograph interest, it is a mistake to assume that this is the proper level at which to catalog all manuscripts.

Archival records, certainly, and most manuscript collections, are generated or created as a mass of papers which collectively document the activities or lives of some organization or person. This mass has a kind of organic unity which traditionally has ordered all archival description. Unfortunately, chapter 4 of AACR2 fails to recognize this principle. While providing some general guidelines for collection level description (which are insufficient and incomplete), nowhere is there an explicit acknowledgment of the importance of the collection or series level approach. Furthermore, most of the elements of description given in the chapter, together with their supporting examples, are specifically
oriented to the description of individual manuscripts rather than to collections.

Related to differences in the fundamental philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of bibliographical and archival description is another element of the conflict—the so-called "Paris Principles." These principles, forming the very foundation of modern bibliographic description upon which AACR2 is based, establish the library catalog as an instrument of bibliographic description in which the functions of the catalog are defined purely in terms of "ascertaining whether the library contains a particular book specified by (a) its author and title, or (b) if the author is not named in the book, its title alone, or (c) if the author and title are inappropriate or insufficient for identification, a suitable substitute for the title; and (a) which works by a particular author, and (b) which editions of a particular work are in the library." Such an approach, of necessity, places more emphasis on physical characteristics and title page information than on intellectual aspects and content. The impetus behind this was an altogether laudable and understandable desire on the part of the international library and publishing communities to remove cataloging from the realm of the analytical and subjective and to establish it once and for all as a fundamentally practical discipline. An extension of this focus on physical aspects was a catalog record prepared on the "perfect copy" approach from which any institution holding that item could then derive its own catalog record. This provided the basis for all subsequent programs of shared and cooperative cataloging.

Unfortunately, the Paris Principles contain instructions (in the general "Statement of Principles") that "the word 'book' should be taken to include other library materials having similar characteristics." Thus, by mistakenly assuming that manuscripts have characteristics similar to books, these particular principles are thrown into conflict with the fundamental realities of manuscript and archival cataloging. The basic library concepts of author and title have essentially no meaning in the archival context. The "authors" of manuscript collections and archival records are significant as indicators of the origin or focus of the materials, but this relates more to archival notions of provenance than to the rather more deliberate creative responsibility of authors of books. The "titles" of most manuscript collections usually consist of cataloger-supplied titles based on form or content, and as such, are often utterly without bibliographic significance—for example, "Papers," "Records," "Diaries." Furthermore, beyond questions of sheer extent and preservation, the physical characteristics such as height
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and number of pages of manuscript materials are generally of little interest to either their custodians or their users. Consequently, the cataloging of these materials traditionally has been chiefly a matter of providing intellectual context and access, that is, the catalog functions as a very distinct tool of reference. Add to these considerations the fact that cooperative “perfect copy” cataloging cannot be applied to the unique, “only copy” nature of manuscripts and archives. Therefore, it is not surprising that catalogers of manuscript and archival materials, knowing something of the Paris Principles, would be suspicious of the utility of AACR2.

Considering the nearly complete and utter alienation between the foundations of manuscript and library cataloging that was just described, it is fortunate that most of these conflicts ultimately proved to be more theoretical than real. In actual practice, reconciliation was achieved on the one hand by providing more emphasis and detail in those areas of description relating to content and analysis (principally the notes), and on the other hand, by deemphasizing or redefining those areas that were less pertinent to manuscript and archival description. For example, chapter 4 of AACR2 provides for seventeen different note areas. Of these, nine were considered to be either irrelevant or too item-focused to be of real use to most modern manuscript catalogers, or were, in fact, actually parts of other notes. APPM, however, provides for sixteen note fields, relating more directly to traditional archival descriptive needs and including notes for “Relationship Complexity,” “Biographical/Historical” information, and “Provenance” which meet genuine archival concerns not touched on at all in AACR2.

An area of description that perhaps best exemplifies the tension between archival realities and the demands of AACR2 is in the “Title and Statement of Responsibility Area.” There is nothing more central to library-based bibliographic description than the title of the work that is being cataloged. Authors can be absent, obscure, or nonexistent and physical description can be inexact or undetermined, but without a title, there is no catalog record. This, no doubt, explains why the title page is the principal focus of all library cataloging. However, as stressed previously, there is nothing quite so foreign to the world of manuscript collections and archival record series as title pages and formal “Titles proper.” Thus it was particularly important that the instructions in APPM for recording and, more importantly, supplying titles be made as clear and as consistent with archival perceptions as possible. Traditionally, archivists refer to their collections by descriptive names such as the “Felix Frankfurter Papers” or the “National Urban League Records.”
Since they are unused to making author-title distinctions, it is clear that these “titles” are really creations based on a combination of “author” and supplied title. The cataloging done by NUCMC as well as the instructions in chapter 10 of AACR1, made it clear that assigned titles based on the form of the materials (for example, “Papers,” “Records,” “Letters,” “Diaries”) were acceptable for use in the title area of the catalog record. This practice assumed that the comprehension of the full title of the material being described required combining the author/main entry and form title.

What was first required in APPM was a legitimation of assigned titles. Making the archival finding aid the “Chief Source of Information” was the most important step in this regard. This not only removed the title from the ignominy of the brackets, but also restored the finding aid to its proper place in the descriptive process. Second, instructions needed to be supplied for the formulation of assigned titles. The actual assignment and definition of the various archival forms used as titles was something with which most archivists were familiar. It was essential that these procedures be recognized and defined as part of the formal title-supplying process.

Establishing the date as an integral component of the title was perhaps equally critical. To be sure, chapter 4 of AACR2 permitted the addition of date-of-writing to certain kinds of supplied titles, although the inclusion of a date to all titles was not uniformly recommended or illustrated; by also providing a separate date area, the role of dates as a part of the title became somewhat ambiguous. This was particularly true since, on examining the parallel sections in the other chapters of AACR2, it became clear that this area was structurally a part of the “Publication, Distribution, etc., Area,” technically making the date area offered in chapter 4 function as a date of publication. Since manuscripts per se do not have publication dates, it was obviously inappropriate to use this area. It was, therefore, necessary to cancel 4.4 of AACR2 and require the date to be entered as a component of the title.

In the physical description area, it was only necessary to provide archivists a means for recording the size or extent of the collections. The recording of other physical details relating, for example, to type of paper, illustrations, seals, stains, ink, and handwriting, are all related to item-level description—a school of bibliographic analysis that is not consistent with modern archival practice. While physical notations may have some antiquarian and artifactual interest, there is neither the time nor inclination to ferret out such details during the course of archival arrangement and description. Moreover, details of this sort are usually
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only of interest to a small group of textual scholars and are largely irrelevant to the concerns of most historical research. Consequently, APPM provided for item-level description of physical details within the structure of the rules, but did so with disclaimers in order to shift undue emphasis away from the physical aspects and more toward content-related elements.18

The Future of Archival Description

While AACR2 offered prescriptions for choice and form of access points and headings in chapters 21-24, there was little information that was pertinent to archivists. Chapter 21 provided guidelines for choosing access points for all library materials, from monographs and serials to such nontraditional formats as art works, liturgical music, sound recordings, and spirit communications. Unfortunately, manuscript and archival materials are not mentioned at all in this chapter. Furthermore, in chapters 22-24, in the rules for forming headings there are many conflicts with standard archival principles and practice. These difficulties are all explained at some length in APPM.19 What APPM does not provide, however—beyond some generally avuncular advice—are useful guidelines for coping with the particular problems presented in these chapters.

At the time APPM was drafted, it was not at all clear that there was, or ever would be, archivally acceptable solutions to the problems represented in these chapters. It was one thing to recast only those chapters on description in AACR2 that involved describing archival materials. It was an altogether more serious matter to tamper with rules that applied to all library materials. After all, the headings and access points provide the common frame of reference in library catalogs for the persons, places, and things, by and about which the materials were created. Without uniform headings, searching through these catalogs would be chaotic. Consequently, there was no attempt to deal substantively with interpretations and expansions of the rules for headings and access points; the hope was that archivists and manuscript catalogers would eventually find ways to cope with these rules through their experience of using them.

Fortunately, for the most part, this has been the case. Even though archivists may not consider the heading “Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945” to be as straightforward or archivally “pure” as “Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 1882-1945,” the advantages to being able to integrate archival records into systems using this heading
far outweigh the disadvantages of using headings that are occasionally unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the application of the principle of establishing persons not primarily known as authors from reference sources has been a satisfactory means by which to establish most of the name headings occurring in manuscripts and archival records.

Subsequent rule interpretations and modifications made by the Library of Congress to these chapters in AACR2 have also tempered their effect on archival practice. For example, it is now permissible for archivists to add qualifiers to personal and corporate names, not only to resolve conflicts, but also to provide location, occupation, and other information to help clarify the heading. Thus geographic qualifiers can now be added to corporate name headings of a local or geographically ambiguous character, and phrases like "Carpenter, of Milwaukee" can be added to personal name headings to give a more complete identification to largely unknown individuals. In addition, through their participation in the Library of Congress Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO), NUCMC is currently adding hundreds of headings to the official Library of Congress name authority file. While these headings are being constructed according to ACCR2 rules and rule interpretations, this is nevertheless being done with more sympathy for archival principles. Since the name authority file is the ultimate source and authority for name headings used by all catalogers, it is fortunate that these "archival" names are becoming increasingly available for use by manuscript and archival repositories. Moreover, with authority files becoming more interactive with their attendant bibliographic files in automated bibliographic systems, the archival form of many names will still be available through the cross references under the established form.

Experience has shown that, while the problems in the chapters of AACR2 on access points and headings areas are more open to correction than was formerly believed, it is still an area requiring careful negotiation and interpretation. Consequently, the forthcoming revision of APPM will have to carry more specific instructions for choosing and forming access points and headings. Only through the experiences of the many archivists who have successfully navigated RLIN and OCLC to enter AMC records are further revisions possible. What seemed intractable several years ago, is now possible, and the job must be finished.

The general success and acceptance of the APPM rules has been gratifying. The Library of Congress, through both the Office of Descriptive Cataloging Policy and the MARC Standards Office, considers cataloging prepared according to these rules to be essentially AACR2
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cataloging. In addition, both of the major bibliographic utilities consider APPM the standard to be used for bibliographic description of manuscript materials. It is hoped that in the future an even broader base of acceptance can be established through improved communication and cooperation between the Society of American Archivists and the American Library Association (ALA). In particular, archival representation on the ALA’s Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA), and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries would do much to ensure uniformity of practice in areas of mutual interest. Both of these groups should be natural partners on questions of cataloging code revision and descriptive standards for manuscript material.

Conclusion

Considering the many fundamental differences between archives and libraries and between bibliographic and archival description, it is difficult not to wonder why archivists would willingly subject themselves to the bibliographic angst of reconciling their practices with AACR2. After all, in many respects it would have been so much easier for archivists to ignore it all and continue to go their blissfully separate ways. However, the pressures and dawning realizations of the “information age” made this position increasingly untenable. The mistake all along was to assume that the common element in archival materials and books lay in their form—that is, “words on pages.” However, archives and manuscripts are not basically bibliographic in nature and it was not until it was realized that the similarities between published and unpublished materials lay in their features as tools of information and research, that the benefits of their natural alliance could be exploited. The presence of tens of thousands of APPM/AMC cataloging records in the bibliographic networks is testimony to the truth of that alliance.

References

4. These individuals included: Elisabeth Betz, Prints and Photographs Division; Wendy White and Harriet Harrison, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division; and Steven Hensen, Manuscript Division.

5. ALA, Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2d ed., 4.0B1, p. 111.

6. The limited exceptions to this would include, not surprisingly, those manuscripts which are more book-like in nature, for example, literary manuscripts and codices.


8. Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts, p. 3.


10. Ibid., pp. 91-92.

11. Ibid., p. 91.

12. It should be noted that the MARC AMC format has approximately 25 note fields (depending on how these things are counted). A planned forthcoming revision of Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts will establish more congruity between the cataloging rules and the format.


16. This confusion has continued in some uses of the MARC AMC format, where the dates of manuscripts collections are occasionally showing up as a subfield of field 260, Imprint.

17. Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts, 4.1B5, p. 13.

18. Ibid., 4.5, p. 17.

19. Ibid., p. 6.