

APPRAISAL OF CURRENT PRIVATE PAPERS AND COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

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Appraisal of private papers is the process by which materials are selected for inclusion in the holdings of a manuscripts repository. This process normally is conducted at two levels. The appraiser must first decide whether the collection as a whole belongs in the repository, and must then determine whether specific sub-groups, series, sub-series, or individual items within a collection should be retained. The process of appraisal at the second level is an important and controversial one, and it deserves more study and thought by archivists. This paper will, however, deal chiefly with appraisal decisions at the first level, and especially as those decisions relate to collection development in manuscripts repositories.

Every manuscripts repository should analyze its collecting interests, recommend specific policies to its governing body, and request that this body formally adopt a statement of the collecting policies to be followed. Once this is done, its curators will be able to make considered appraisal judgments at the first level.¹ Mary Lynn McCree wrote in an article published in the *Drexel Library Quarterly* in 1975 that "an institution... is... interested... in complementary, interrelated bodies of consecutive files of manuscripts that provide detailed information on a person, event, organization, period of time or subject."² It should so define its collecting interests.

One way in which the archival profession might assist in resolving the problem of manuscripts repositories that compete for the same collections would be to encourage repositories new to the

collecting of manuscripts to draft collecting policy statements that single out areas in which no nearby institution is already collecting. Certain institutions have crafted statements of collecting interests that leave the staff free to seek almost anything to which expediency may lead them. Such statements should be discouraged by the profession. With the growth in recent years of the number of institutions that are collecting private papers, it should be possible to establish unique areas of collecting that would do much to ensure the preservation of a broad perspective of historical documentation. Yet statements of collecting interests that inevitably conflict with those of other institutions seem to be the rule. Richard Berner, in a review of the SAA manual on appraisals, wrote that

few modern manuscripts repositories are doing effective jobs, because contemporary papers are being relatively neglected. For example, if you were to answer the question "How many metropolitan areas in the U.S. are being documented through materials collected by manuscripts repositories?", the answer would be "Few." This neglect is the result of appraisal decisions and points to a critical problem. . . .³

There are many areas in which unique collections could be assembled by an institution new to the business of collecting private papers. In the article quoted earlier, Mary Lynn McCree has a good example of the process that could be followed by an institution in selecting a collecting area in which to specialize. Richard Maass advises the novice private collector of manuscripts and autographs to choose a unique collecting area unless the funds available are unlimited.⁴ Why should not novice institutions be advised to do the same?

Curators have an obligation to their profession and to scholarship not to waste precious resources in fighting each other for private papers. They need to work harder to publicize their holdings and their profession so that institutions interested in developing collections of private papers can learn easily what the strengths of collections in their area are, and what is not being collected. Within Virginia, for instance, there are some fertile fields of collecting open to any agency that is interested: business records; agricultural records, both of individuals and of the many

organizations generated by agriculture; and the tourism business, to name only three areas.

There is, of course, vested self-interest when an older collecting institution attempts to steer a repository new to collecting into specialities outside its own collecting area. Nevertheless, the profession needs to do more to convince newer collecting agencies that, while imitation is highly flattering, not every institution can expect to assemble collections that will equal those of the Houghton Library, or the Beinecke Library, or the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, or the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas. Resources for manuscripts collecting are limited, and should not be wasted on duplicate efforts.

Once a formal statement of collecting interests has been issued as a statement of institutional policy, the curators are ready to undertake appraisals of private papers. The first step in the appraisal process is to determine whether the collection under consideration lies within the bounds of the collecting interests established by the policy. This decision usually is not difficult, whether the papers be current or older. Some time may have to be spent to determine what, in fact, the collection contains. But once this is known, the curator who is familiar with the repository's collecting policy should be able, in most cases, to decide whether the collection should be added to the holdings.

It is useful for the curator to know the collecting policies of nearby institutions in particular, and of other institutions in general. Should the collection being appraised not fit the collecting policy of the curator's institution, it may then be possible to recommend to the owner one or more institutions that probably will be interested in it. The curator may even go further, with the owner's permission, and contact another institution about the collection.

Unfortunately, an appraisal decision occasionally can be more complicated for the curator than simply determining its suitability for the institution that he or she represents. Curators rarely are administratively independent. They frequently work in libraries where they report to librarians, or they work in historical societies that have directors and boards of trustees, or they report to university presidents. The curator is in a difficult position when one of these administrative superiors decides that the repository

should accept or seek a collection that does not fit within the defined limits of its collecting policy. A university president must seek favor with wealthy alumni, for instance, and may flatter an alumnus with the request that he donate a collection of early New England legal documents to the library of his university—that is located in North Carolina. The curator of the manuscripts collection may learn of this gift only after it has already been settled between the president and the alumnus. Ken Duckett has called this problem “expediency” and has written that it “can rear its head in *any* collecting agency and the curator must learn to accept it or to do battle, whichever is his nature.”⁵

Perhaps the best way for the curator to defend the collecting policy against such independent action by administrative superiors is to involve them in the affairs of the manuscripts repository. Drafts of letters of solicitation, or of thanks, may be sent to administrators with the request that the letters be sent over their signatures. These superiors should be invited into the repository at every opportunity, and should be sent all of its newsletters and publications; they should be educated to the programs and needs of the manuscripts operation. If the curator is a familiar figure to the superior, perhaps he will be consulted before the negotiation with that wealthy alumnus begins. The curator may then be able both to keep the superior happy, and to please the alumnus by helping to locate the proper New England institution to which the collection of New England legal documents might best be donated. All the skills that the curator develops and refines in the process of acquiring collections that *are* wanted for the repository come into play in dealing tactfully with an administrator who wishes to override the stated collecting policy. Defending the collecting policy against the expedient decisions of superiors is part of the appraisal process for the curator, but it is not the most common.

When a curator refers to appraisal, the image that forms in the minds of most archivists is that of the curator opening file drawers, poring over papers, making notes, checking reference books, and preparing a report, perhaps only mental, in which the conclusion is reached either to accept or to reject a collection. In many ways, the appraisal of current personal papers is performed in much the same way as records are appraised before their transfer to an archives. T. R. Schellenberg wrote in *The Management of Archives*:

Most recent private records have the organic quality of public records and are therefore archival in character. This is the case with all records produced by corporate bodies such as businesses, churches, and schools, and all records produced by persons in relation to extended activities. Only small groups of personal papers, and artificial collections brought together from a large number of sources, lack organic characteristics.⁶

Schellenberg and others have written extensively on the evidential and informational values that public records may have, and it is accepted today that these terms also apply to manuscripts collections. The most important characteristic of bodies of current private papers is their informational value, that is, as Schellenberg wrote, the "meaning of their own without relation to their sources or reference to other manuscripts in a collection,"⁷ or, more succinctly, "The only thing that matters is the information that is in them."⁸

It is, of course, the determination of that unique value that is difficult for curators. Margaret Cross Norton composed for an article published in 1944 a statement often quoted since: "It is comparatively easy to select records of permanent value, relatively easy to decide on those of no value. The great bulk of records are borderline."⁹ It is because so many records are borderline that Schellenberg warned, "Any scholar with a little intellectual ingenuity can find a plausible justification for keeping almost every record that was ever produced."¹⁰ The curator must be especially careful not to fall into this intellectual trap. Because many curators were trained originally as scholars in graduate schools of history or allied disciplines, it is especially easy for them to allow their scholarly impulses to overwhelm their training as archivists. The curator must keep in mind Schellenberg's warning that "archivists dealing with modern records realize that not all of them can be preserved, that some of them have to be destroyed, and that, in fact, a discriminating destruction of a portion of them is a service to scholarship."¹¹ Margaret Norton's 1944 article states the problem faced by archivists and curators:

The most difficult phase of the selection of records for preservation and for destruction is to decide whether or not they have present or potential value as source material for the study

of history, biography, genealogy, economics, sociology, or other forms of research. Literature is filled with thrills over the discovery of important facts in the most unlikely places and wails about the attics which were cleaned out just before the authors arrived.¹²

Robert M. Warner and Ruth B. Bordin have pointed out that the difficulty of selecting current papers is much greater than when dealing with papers that are older:

We understand what records of a hundred years ago merit keeping. We can assess the importance of correspondents; we know which movements played a crucial role in the American scene. When we relegate things to the trash barrel we can have some confidence in our judgment. Recent personal papers are frequently those of living persons, sometimes men or women whose active careers are still in mid-stream.... [C]an the archivist... assess the eventual importance of the public figure himself? Also, what of the people who make up his correspondents, his aides, even his constituents?¹³

There is no easy way to answer these questions. Bordin and Warner note that some archivists have advocated that contemporary papers be stored in their entirety, "leaving the weeding process to future generations."¹⁴ Rather than simply weeding the collection, these archivists believe it would be better to reappraise it at some later date.

In a session at the 1980 SAA annual meeting, Leonard Rapport of the National Archives and Herbert Finch of Cornell University gave interesting presentations on the reappraisal process followed in their respective institutions. Both agreed that the passage of time may bring changes in the standards under which records or manuscripts originally were appraised. Leonard Rapport, while arguing that in the best of all possible worlds, every scrap of paper should be kept, believes that in this less-than-perfect world, archivists must measure the importance of records, especially the evidential value hallowed by Schellenberg. He pointed out that one of the favorite words of archivists, "permanent," does not appear in the Federal Records Act of 1950, which speaks instead of "records of continuing value," an important and useful distinction. Both speakers agreed that archivists should regularly

measure the “continuing values” of their holdings, be they records or manuscripts.¹⁵

Curators who must sometimes accession collections for various expedient reasons may wish to establish tickler files to remind themselves to reappraise certain collections when the political climate will allow. Whenever the appraisal process is carried out, the curator must bring to it considerable skills, training, and possibly the soul of an artist.

Margaret Norton commented in 1944 that “selection . . . calls for exceptional judgment . . . the British call it an art. . . .”¹⁶ Perhaps this statement continues to have merit. Over the years, archivists may have perceived appraisal as an art and hesitated to write about the subject, believing that they were not artists. Certainly, there was very little in the literature of the profession on the subject of appraisal until the past few years. Most of what is there pertains to records of various types.

In the most recent extended discussion on the subject of appraisal that appeared in a manual prepared for the SAA (*Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning*), Maynard Brichford wrote: “The archivist considering the records to be appraised will study their age, volume, and form, and will analyze their functional, evidential, and informational characteristics.”¹⁷ The manual then treats administrative values of records, and then turns to research values. It is in this latter area that the appraiser of personal papers will separate him- or herself from the appraiser of public records. While the appraiser of public records certainly must consider such characteristics, it is less common that the research values of public records will be the single most important factor in an appraisal decision.

Brichford breaks down his discussion of research values under the subheadings of “Uniqueness,” “Credibility,” “Understandability,” “Time Span,” “Accessibility,” “Frequency of Use,” and “Type and Quality of Use,” and his discussion of each is most valuable.¹⁸

To determine research values, the appraiser of current private papers must be in contact with developments and interests in many fields of scholarship, and this obviously is impossible for any single curator. Their training as historians at least allows many curators some confidence in assessing the potential research uses of

collections from the point of view of the historian. But what of the social scientists, economists, sociologists, lawyers, genealogists, political scientists, public historians, specialists in government, demographers, and the multitude of other specialists that are turning to archives and to manuscripts repositories for sources for their studies? How can a curator keep in mind all of these research interests? The curator can read books and journals, talk to colleagues, and attend professional meetings whenever possible. But there is no easy way, especially in a small repository that does not have staff specialists in subject areas, and that cannot afford many journal subscriptions.

Usually, the limited staff of small repositories means that the person who appraises new collections also probably will spend considerable time dealing with patrons. When a specialist in a discipline with which the staff is not familiar visits the repository, perhaps the researcher can be persuaded to give a brief talk to the staff about this field. At least, staff members will spend some time with the researcher learning about the specialty in order to determine what among the holdings may be useful, and will thus learn something of the unfamiliar field.

Maynard Brichford devotes considerable space in his SAA manual to the problems of administering a collection of papers, because the costs of administration are an important part of an appraisal decision.

Accessioning, cleaning, unfolding, dating, replacing and labeling folders, removing paper clips and rubber bands, weeding, preparing and indexing finding aids, boxing, labeling, and shelving all require time and money. These costs are weighed against the future usefulness of the records. . . . Although the processing cost per cubic foot of records varies for different archives and types of records, it is a constant and determinable factor in the archival appraisal decision.¹⁹

Added to these factors must be those of preservation costs, microphotography if the material must be filmed for preservation, preparation of safety film from nitrate, and storage and other costs.

Weighing the costs of administering a collection is a relatively new factor to many archivists and curators, although Brichford quotes Philip Bauer's 1944 statement, later published in a

National Archives Information Circular, that “values must be weighed against costs.”²⁰ Most archivists and curators are not as yet acquainted with cost analysis—as perhaps they should be—and they do not tend to think of the costs of processing and servicing a potential collection in monetary terms. But curators are certainly familiar with cost in terms of the time that it will take staff members, student workers, or volunteers to arrange and describe a collection so that it may be used by patrons. Certain collections can be extremely costly in terms of time, and most curators would agree that the papers of persons active in public life in the mid- to late-twentieth century are the most costly because of their volume, if for no other reason.

Appraisal decisions for curators examining large collections of modern private papers, when the cost of processing must be weighed against the research value of the collection, could be eased if more were known generally about the “half-life” of the average office file folder. In other words, how long will that average office manila filing folder, containing twelve to fifteen pieces of correspondence and memoranda written on cheap sulphite paper, survive in usable form before the paper is too brittle to handle without damage? How much longer will the contents survive if transferred to an acid-free archival folder? The difference in estimated years of survival probably will prove to be so slight, because of the poor quality of the sulphite paper, as to make the almost-religious transfer of private papers from their original filing folders into acid-free ones an inordinate waste of time (and money). If modern private papers may be kept in their original folders, curators and their staffs should be able to spend more time appraising the research value of files, destroying useless series and files, and preparing finding aids that would greatly speed the work of the researcher. Archivists should find in the journals they read reports of the results of research into the survival expectancies of paper, folders, boxes, and other materials they handle in their work, because the results of such research can have profound effects on appraisal and other decisions that they must make.

It is reassuring to see archivists and curators who are concerned about the bulk of contemporary personal papers participating in conferences that consider, among other subjects, the appraisal and processing of such papers. The 1979 conference in Washington,

D.C., on the papers of United States senators is a good example. The work that the Midwest Archives Conference and Lynn Wolf Gentzler have done in analyzing the research use of congressional papers and the suggestions that Gentzler has made for potential weeding based on that pattern of use, as well as Eleanor McKay's article in *The American Archivist* concerning random sampling techniques for reducing large collections, are exceedingly valuable reading for all curators who deal with large modern collections.²¹

One of the more useful approaches that has been tried by some farsighted curators in coping with the papers of persons who are still active is to contact those persons to obtain a commitment of their personal papers before they retire. The curators have also arranged for the staffs of their repositories to work with the potential donors' office staffs in surveying the papers, and in preparing recommendations about which series should be retained and designated for eventual transfer to the repositories, and which others may be destroyed as soon as administrative usefulness has ended. There is nothing new about this technique, of course: it is called records management, but it is rarely practiced by collectors of personal papers, and it should be. It eliminates much of the awesome task of attempting an appraisal of great quantities of papers at the time that an election has been lost, a new office is being assumed, or a death has occurred—when time is short, emotions are high, and patience is lacking. Creative records management of this sort allows curators to appraise and reduce collections that are desired for their institutions under favorable circumstances, when proper archival judgments may be made. The process may be difficult if the office staff is not a good one, and if the filing system is poor, but perhaps a better filing system may be suggested—tactfully—by the curator. It would be cheaper to work with an office staff to create a better filing system than to process and weed poorly arranged files later on.

Another professional problem brought about by the bulk of modern private papers that also relates to appraisal and collection development is that of stack space. Few repositories have unlimited stack space. Should a curator accession a few, large modern collections of private papers that fall within a particular area of the collection development program, knowing that these few collections will occupy nearly all of the available stack space and

thereby make it impossible to add materials in its other stated collecting areas? Again, there are no easy answers. In some instances, the decision to seek the few large collections will be the correct one because careful appraisal will reveal their importance to the repository's collecting program. Expediency can also enter into such deliberations, and the curators concerned must assess their circumstances very carefully.

Most curators working with private papers have more trouble with the second level of appraisal, that of determining whether particular sub-groups, series, or sub-series of collections should be retained, or, in the case of small collections, whether individual pieces should be destroyed. Bordin and Warner argue that "only the professionally trained person can make an intelligent judgment,"²² and both Leonard Rapport and Herbert Finch concurred in their presentations at the 1980 SAA annual meeting.

Decisions about retention within the collection or separation either to the trash or for return to the donor must be made, and not avoided. It is a professional responsibility to make such decisions. The same process must be followed to reach a decision about retaining, destroying, or returning part of a collection as was followed in determining whether to accession the collection. An added factor is determining the importance of the part to the whole. In some cases, it is easy, just as it often is not difficult to know that a particular collection is valuable—or worthless. But Margaret Norton was correct in writing that the "great bulk of records are borderline." The curator learns quickly that a difficult professional decision is required: does a series of papers have enough potential research value to justify the expense of further professional attention, processing, storage, and so on? Experience and knowledge of the holdings of the repository again are big aids in reaching second-level appraisal decisions. Consultation with one's archival colleagues often is useful, as can be contact with experts. But it is the curator who finally has to say that one series will be retained while another one will be sent to the trash, and a third will be returned if the donor wishes to have it.

Appraisal for the curator of a repository for private papers means today far more than the process of decision about the acquisition of a collection, or the retention within a collection of a series or a single document. It is a process that involves many

aspects of the modern profession of archivist, and that may involve the archivist-curator in some of the most difficult decisions of a professional career.

FOOTNOTES

1. Since this article deals with the appraisal of private papers, the term "curator" has been used to distinguish this specialist in the general field of archives.
2. Mary Lynn McCree, "Good Sense and Good Judgment: Defining Collections and Collecting," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (January 1975): 23.
3. Richard C. Berner, review of Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning*, from a preprint in the possession of the author. The review was later published in *Easy Access* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1978), and in a modified form in *Midwestern Archivist* 4, no. 2 (1979): 105-107.
4. Richard Maass, "Specialized Collecting," in Edmund Berkeley, Jr., ed., *Autographs and Manuscripts: A Collector's Manual* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), pp. 203-210.
5. Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual For Their Management, Care, and Use* (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), p. 58.
6. T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 65-66.
7. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 141.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
9. Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival & Records Management* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), p. 240. Hereafter cited as *Norton on Archives*.
10. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p. 152.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Norton on Archives*, p. 242.

13. Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library* (New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1966), p. 70. Hereafter cited as Bordin and Warner.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
15. Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143-150; C. Herbert Finch, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Donated Materials," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, October 2, 1980.
16. *Norton on Archives*, p. 239.
17. Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), p. 2.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
21. Lynn Wolf Gentzler, unpublished report on Midwest Archives Conference seminar on subject access and control of large collections with analysis of Western Historical Manuscript Collection's papers of twentieth-century U.S. congressmen and senators, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, April 28, 1976; and Eleanor McKay, "Random Sampling Techniques: A Method of Reducing Large, Homogeneous Series in Congressional Papers," *American Archivist* 41 (July 1978): 281-290.
22. Bordin and Warner, p. 72.

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