

Arranging *and*
Describing

Archives *and*
Manuscripts

SAA PREVIEW



ARCHIVAL FUNDAMENTALS SERIES III

Peter J. Wosh, Editor

- 1** **Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs**
Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmicheal, Editors
- 2** **Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts**
Dennis Meissner
- 3** **Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists**
Kathleen D. Roe
- 4** **Reference and Access for Archives and Manuscripts**
Cheryl Oestreicher
- 5** **Advancing Preservation for Archives and Manuscripts**
Elizabeth Joffrion and Michèle V. Cloonan
- 6** **Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts**
Michelle Light and Margery Sly
- 7** **Introducing Archives and Manuscripts**
Peter J. Wosh

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Dennis Meissner

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**SOCIETY OF
American
Archivists**

CHICAGO

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FOREWORD

The Evolution of a Book Series



The Society of American Archivists (SAA) first conceived the notion of developing and publishing “manuals relating to major and basic archival functions” in the early 1970s. Charles Frederick Williams (popularly known as C. F. W.) Coker (1932–1983), a former US Marine Corps captain and North Carolina state archivist who recently had been appointed to head the Printed Documents Division of the National Archives and Records Services, edited the initial Basic Manual Series. The first five basic manuals, which appeared in 1977, illustrated the ways in which archivists defined and classified their core concepts at that historical moment:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* by Maynard J. Brichford
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* by David B. Gracy II
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reference & Access* by Sue E. Holbert
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Security* by Timothy Walch
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Surveys* by John Fleckner

The entire series accounted for only 163 pages of text, which included numerous illustrations, graphics, sample forms, charts, and bibliographic insertions. Each 8.5” by 11” softbound pamphlet contained three holes, punched down the left side, for easy insertion into a loose-leaf binder that might be handily referenced at an archivist’s desk. Individual volumes sold for \$4, though SAA members received a \$1 discount.

Archivists operated within a far different cultural, legal, and professional framework during the early and middle years of the 1970s. In 1973, the same year that SAA began work on the Basic Manual Series, IBM introduced the Correcting Selectric II typewriter as its major technological breakthrough, thereby eliminating the need for such popular tools as rubber erasers, correction fluid, and cover-up tape. This revolutionary product seemed destined to alter the nature

of document creation forever. During this period, a few archivists had begun grappling with the challenges of something known as “machine-readable records,” but a bibliographer who surveyed this puzzling development could still confidently conclude in a 1975 *American Archivist* article that “only a few archival establishments” appeared to be “developing programs for accessioning” such materials. Other momentous—and occasionally unsettling—changes appeared on the horizon. A new copyright law, which was enacted by Congress in 1976 and became effective on New Year’s Day 1978, contained significant implications for how archivists would manage collections and serve researchers. Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974 prompted the promulgation of new legislation in 1978 that declared for the first time that presidential and vice presidential records are public documents. Professionally, the archival landscape seemed to be shifting as well. The Association of Canadian Archivists launched an exciting new journal, *Archivaria*, in winter 1975/1976, a development destined to deepen the discipline’s intellectual discourse. Regional archival associations formed, became fruitful, and multiplied in the United States. In addition, a new era in archival education began as library schools and history departments inaugurated archives-based graduate programs in the late 1970s, ultimately resulting in a highly credentialed and formally trained corps of professional practitioners.

Such transformations, and many others too numerous to mention here, convinced the Society of American Archivists that only an active publications program that regularly refreshed the existing literature could provide its membership with easy access to rapidly changing trends and best practices. SAA accordingly published the Basic Manual Series II—a second set of five volumes—in the early 1980s:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* by Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Automated Access* by H. Thomas Hickerson
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings* by Ralph E. Ehrenberg
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs* by Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reprography* by Carolyn Hoover Sung

Over the years, SAA published scores of other titles, each illustrating the rich diversity of archival work: administration of photo collections, conservation, machine-readable records, law, management, a basic glossary, collections of readings on archival theory and practice, and books specific to archives in a variety of institutional settings (i.e., colleges and universities, businesses and corporations, religious and scientific institutions, museums, government agencies, historical societies, etc.). Even with the proliferation of publications, the bedrock of archival practice rested on the core knowledge represented in the basic manuals, which were reconceptualized and rechristened between 1990 and 1993 as the Archival Fundamentals Series:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O’Toole
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Fredric M. Miller
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Thomas Wilsted and William Nolte
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by F. Gerald Ham
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *The Glossary of Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* by Lynn Lady Bellardo and Lewis Bellardo

A second iteration of the seven books in this revamped series appeared roughly fifteen years later as the Archival Fundamentals Series II:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O'Toole and Richard J. Cox
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Kathleen D. Roe
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Michael Kurtz
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Frank Boles
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* by Richard Pearce-Moses

Mary Jo Pugh and Richard J. Cox edited these multivolume compilations, which almost instantaneously became required texts in archival education courses and necessary additions to archivists' bookshelves. The Archival Fundamentals Series I and II differed in scope and scale from the initial Basic Manual Series. For example, John Fleckner's comprehensive treatment of surveys did not appear in need of revision and dropped out of the series. Security became incorporated into a broader manual on preservation. SAA commissioned an introductory overview of the field, added a new book that focused on managerial issues, and developed a glossary with the goal of defining and historicizing key archival concepts. Beginning in the 1970s, both Archival Fundamentals Series I and II incorporated and delineated the evolving descriptive standards that defined professional practice, dissected the contentious debates surrounding appraisal and deaccessioning that enlivened archival discourse in the 1980s, and reflected the growing emphases on an expanding user base and more complex reference services that revolutionized reading rooms and repositories in the late twentieth century.

This third edition—Archival Fundamentals Series III—contains important continuities and significant departures from its predecessors:

- A new book, *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists* by Kathleen D. Roe, reflects an increased understanding that these functions undergird all aspects of archival work.
- The management volume, *Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs* edited by Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmicheal, has been reconfigured to focus especially on leadership and to provide readers with opportunities to explore their individual managerial styles.
- *Advancing Preservation for Archives and Manuscripts* by Elizabeth Joffrion and Michèle V. Cloonan addresses digital challenges and focuses on such current issues as risk management, ethical considerations, and sustainability.
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Dennis Meissner, *Reference and Access for Archives and Manuscripts* by Cheryl Oestreicher, and *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Michelle Light and Margery Sly may appear familiar topics to readers of the previous two series, but each book illustrates the innovations in thought and practice that have transformed these archival functions over the past fifteen years.
- A general overview volume which I am preparing, *Introducing Archives and Manuscripts*, provides a broad introduction to the historical, philosophical, and theoretical foundations of the profession.

One contribution that constituted a cornerstone of the previous series has been reformatted to maximize its currency and usability. Although not part of the Archival Fundamentals Series III, the *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* (dictionary.archivists.org) will replace *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* and will be maintained and updated as a digital resource by SAA's Dictionary Working Group.

We hope that undergraduate and graduate students, new professionals, seasoned archival veterans, and others in the information science and public history fields will find the seven volumes in the Archival Fundamentals Series III helpful, provocative, and essential to both their intellectual life and their daily work. As Richard J. Cox observed in his preface to an earlier edition of the series, the time has long passed “when individuals entering the archival profession could read a few texts, peruse some journals, attend a workshop and institute or two, and walk away with a sense that they grasped the field’s knowledge and discipline.” This series provides an entry point and a synthetic distillation of a much broader literature that spans an impressive array of academic disciplines. We encourage you, of course, to do a deeper dive into each of the individual topics covered here. But we also remain confident that this series, like its predecessors, provides an honest and accurate snapshot of archival best practices at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The authors, of course, deserve full credit for their individual contributions. The Archival Fundamentals Series III itself, though, constitutes a collaborative enterprise that benefited from the work of SAA Publications Board members, editors, and interns throughout the past decade. These individuals helped to define the series parameters, reviewed proposals and manuscripts, and shepherded various projects to conclusion. Special shout-outs (in alphabetical order) are owed to: Bethany Anderson, Jessica Ballard, Roland Baumann, Cara Bertram, Mary Caldera, Amy Cooper Cary, Jessica Chapel, Paul Conway, J. Gordon Daines, Todd Daniels-Howell, Sarah Demb, Jody DeRidder, Keara Duggan, Margaret Fraser, Thomas J. Frusciano, Krista Gray, Gregory Hunter, Geoffrey Huth, Petrina Jackson, Joan Krizack, Christopher Lee, Donna McCrea, Jennifer Davis McDaid, Kathryn Michaelis, Nicole Milano, Lisa Mix, Tawny Nelb, Kevin Proffitt, Christopher Prom, Mary Jo Pugh, Aaron Purcell, Colleen Rademaker, Caryn Radick, Dennis Riley, Michael Shallcross, Mark Shelstad, Jennifer Thomas, Ciaran Trace, Anna Trammell, Joseph Turrini, Tywana Whorley, and Deborah Wythe. Nancy Beaumont has been an inspirational executive director for SAA, as well as a brilliant editor in her own right. Abigail Christian, SAA’s editorial and production coordinator, has skillfully shepherded design and layout. Teresa Brinati, keenly insightful and good-humored as always, remains the epitome of competent leadership and has transformed the SAA publications program into a model for professional associations. It has been a privilege and great fun to work with everyone on this project.

PETER J. WOSH

Editor, Archival Fundamentals Series III
Society of American Archivists

The Context and Significance of Arrangement and Description



Its Purpose

A summary overview

This book is intended to be a very practical manual. My goal is to explain the principles and mechanics of the work that archivists commonly refer to as arrangement and description—also referred to as processing—so that students and nonarchivists can understand and appreciate this fundamental and ubiquitous work, and so that novice practitioners (and rusty professionals) have a practical guide at hand for actually performing the work. Basic concepts, functions, and history foundational to archives will be introduced briefly when they are particularly important for understanding the function of arrangement and description. Beyond that, I will happily refer the reader to more authoritative sources for that information.

Let's begin with some basic definitions to establish the scope and focus of this manual. What do we mean by the terms *arrangement*, *description*, and *processing* when we apply them to the work performed by archivists? This manual will hew to the standard definitions penned by Richard Pearce-Moses in his authoritative glossary.¹ Leaning on many archival thinkers before him, he characterizes *arrangement* as

1. The process of organizing materials with respect to their provenance and original order, to protect their context and to achieve physical or intellectual control over the materials. - 2. The organization and sequence of items within a collection.

In this manual, I will treat the complex function of arrangement as the entire set of activities—some intellectual and some physical—that focus on organizing, structuring, and sequencing the contents of a collection so that the context and circumstances of their creation and management, as well as their intellectual content, are preserved and demonstrated as clearly and fully as reasonably possible.

The *Glossary* defines the function of *archival description* in this way:

1. The process of analyzing, organizing, and recording details about the formal elements of a record or collection of records, such as creator, title, dates, extent, and contents, to facilitate the work's identification, management, and understanding. - 2. The product of such a process.

I will stay close to the spirit of this definition, dealing with description as both an intellectual representation for the user of the collection's arrangement, as well as a guide for discovering, identifying, and gaining access to relevant materials in the collection.

Finally, the *Glossary* economically defines *processing* as

1. The arrangement, description, and housing of archival materials for storage and use by patrons.

Again, I will stick closely to this usage of the term, emphasizing that, although *arrangement and description* and *processing* are frequently used interchangeably, the term "processing" also pulls in important related activities, such as conservation treatment actions, and housing and storage of collection materials. This manual will always try to maintain that distinction between the two concepts.

Let me also preface what follows by acknowledging a few prejudices that cannot help but influence everything I have to say in this manual. The first of these is my belief that arrangement and description—and especially arrangement—lie at the very heart of the archival endeavor. While all archival functions are crucial and interdependent, it has always seemed to me that the upstream functions like acquisition and those downstream such as reference are enabled and realized through the arrangement and description work that occurs in the middle. In the acts of arranging and describing an archival collection, we archivists perform the most significant value-adding work.

Second, I do believe that in their relationship to each other, arrangement is the hand and description the glove. The most important intellectual work takes place when we arrange materials in the way that optimizes their accessibility to the people who will use them. Description, although it requires technical ability and good judgment, is nevertheless a *reflection* of arrangement and not a thing in and of itself.

Finally, I believe quite strongly that archival units and manuscript collections are more alike than not. So, although most of the principles of our profession derive from the nature of archives, they apply well, or at least can be easily adapted to, the arrangement and description of manuscript collections. For that reason, I will rarely if ever distinguish between the two in any of the advice in this manual. In the same vein, digital archives do not differ intellectually from nondigital archives. The technologies associated with preserving, managing, and affording access to electronic records disrupt many of our traditional approaches to arrangement and description—sometimes constraining us, but more often creating tremendous new opportunities. Nevertheless, this manual is intended to apply equally to digital records.

Having divulged a few prejudices, I would also like to put forward some basic assumptions that underlie my own views about arrangement and description:

- *Serving users is the paramount objective.* Processing is a resource-intensive activity that can only be justified as a user-service function. We therefore need to evaluate our approaches and methods based on their efficacy in serving the requirements of users. Work on collections that does not ultimately benefit our users should be questioned.
- *Users may be machines.* The descriptive metadata that we share online may be discovered and reused by computer systems on its way to reaching expanded audiences of human users. We therefore need to utilize information standards and technologies in our descriptions that make it as simple as possible for machines to process our descriptive metadata.
- *Description is data.* We have a long history of producing our finding aids as prose documents. But such documents are inflexible and difficult to repurpose, and are hard for networked information systems to understand, parse, and share. Archival description is at heart structured metadata, and we should always apply our standards and technologies as vigorously as possible in capturing, managing, and sharing descriptions.
- *Arrangement is an intellectual exercise.* It is more important to establish and express the intellectual structure inherent in a collection—via our descriptions—than to sequence the physical materials themselves. If we can effectively guide the user from the intellectual arrangement, expressed in a finding aid, to the appropriate collection materials, we can often relax our fixation on physical ordering, especially at very granular levels.
- *Economy of effort is beneficial.* We are frequently tempted to expend unnecessary time and effort in arranging and describing materials. Many collection components do not require intensive physical or intellectual work to make them usable. Reducing our efforts, whenever appropriate, allows us to accumulate resources to get more work done. We should target our efforts at achieving the most beneficial outcomes.
- *Archival principles are tools.* Long-honored concepts like provenance, original order, and records hierarchies should be treated as useful tools to guide our work, rather than as sacred verities. Processing is very often an exercise in creative problem solving; we should be sensitive to optimal user outcomes, rather than slavishly adhering to absolutes. Digital archives, especially, will test many long-standing assumptions.

One other thing to note is that this manual may offer less specific and granular treatment of finding aid creation than did its predecessors. Years back, it may have been easier to identify the form that a finding aid should take (a catalog record, a multilevel narrative finding aid), and then to walk through its parts and pieces, advising how to create the information that belongs in each section. But things have grown more complicated over the past ten years or so. The information we are recording is no longer sequentially organized prose, but rather metadata structured and parsed. The functions of data capture (composing, writing) and data transformation (finding aids as products) have been effectively separated. And the varieties of metadata-capture mechanisms, transformation processes, and output artifacts have expanded greatly. Therefore, it makes more sense for this manual to focus on the standards that explain how to form and capture descriptive metadata, and on the platforms and technologies we might use to capture, transform, and publish our descriptions.

In closing this introduction, I wish to emphasize that this manual, although it treats the topic fully, should not be seen as eclipsing previous manuals written on the same topic and, indeed, bearing the same title. The SAA arrangement and description manuals written by Fredric M. Miller² and Kathleen D. Roe³ contain perspectives, insights, approaches, and information that have certainly not all been transferred wholesale into the current volume. I have leaned on them for sound advice, but I have not replicated them. The reader is advised not to disregard them in seeking a fuller understanding of the important work of arrangement and description.

Why do archivists arrange and describe their collections?

Arrangement and description are (or ought to be) a straightforward set of tools and practices that help people use archives effectively and efficiently. In a nutshell, we do this work so that we can connect users with valuable archival resources better and more easily. All the other phases of work in the archival continuum—acquisition and selection, preservation, public services—certainly focus, these days, on serving the needs of researchers. Each of them advances that goal in their own way. Acquisitions archivists ensure that archives retain the most useful collections, that they are unencumbered by nonarchival dross, and that legal custody and access provisions are established through written agreements. Preservation staff work to make sure that collection materials, physical and digital, endure by maintaining a sustainable preservation environment as well as by performing treatment actions on the most vulnerable materials. Reference archivists and other public services staff work closely and directly with users of archives to make certain they find all materials relevant to their work, they understand and can use descriptive metadata effectively, and they can navigate any impediments to access and use of the materials themselves. Every stage in the archival continuum adds value to a collection.

So, what value is added by the archivists who perform arrangement and description? I like to think about this by way of an analogy to electrical energy. Electrical utilities generate energy, transform it into a practical version that we can use in our homes, and then transmit it directly to our homes where we can engage it via access portals like electrical outlets. However, all of that energy that is always available at the outlet is only *potential* energy. It does not become practical and usable until we actually plug an appliance into the physical outlet. At that point, potential energy is transformed into actual energy. Similarly, all the rich materials received in an acquisition only have *potential* value until they are transformed into a product that users are able to discover, to identify and understand, and to access. We can think about arrangement and description as the suite of activities that together transform that potential value into practical, usable value for researchers.

The value added during processing—creating or restoring a helpful arrangement, explaining the nature of the creator(s) and their relationship to the collection materials, explaining the content and location of all the records in the collection—is that a corpus of archival materials is transformed into a resource that can be discovered, appreciated, and used. This is the function of archival processing and the important role played by the archivists who perform this work. The point of this volume is to help them, and others, understand that work and perform it well.