

January 1986

From Clay Tablets to MARC AMC: The Past, Present, and Future of Cataloging Manuscript and Archival Collections

Harriet Ostroff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ostroff, Harriet, "From Clay Tablets to MARC AMC: The Past, Present, and Future of Cataloging Manuscript and Archival Collections," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 4 no. 2 (1986) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol4/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

From Clay Tablets to MARC AMC:

The Past, Present, and Future of Cataloging
Manuscript and Archival Collections

Harriet Ostroff

To create a catalog is to bestow power; whoever uses a catalog gains control and access to whatever is being cataloged. Attempts to catalog written material go back to the days of clay tablets and proceed through the preparation of catalogs for medieval monasteries, printed book and card catalogs for libraries, calendars and other finding aids for individual manuscript collections, published guides to repository holdings, and union catalogs to the most recent form: online data bases.

The development of rules for cataloging books and other printed material followed a steady and clearly defined path, although not without controversy. For archival and manuscript material the development of any generally accepted standards was much slower and later in coming. For many years those concerned with books largely ignored manuscript material of any kind, and those concerned with archival material ignored library practices and rules. It was not until the 1980s that the growing impact of improved automation technology revealed to many members of both groups that they had much in common and could benefit from mutual concern and cooperation.

In 1876, Charles Cutter (one of library science's greatest innovators) published the first edition of Rules for a Printed Dictionary Catalogue. It went through four editions, the last published in 1904,

and reflected his extensive experience with library catalogs. A year after its founding in 1876, the American Library Association (ALA) formed a committee on cataloging and turned its attention to rules for cataloging. When the Library of Congress (LC) began to sell printed cards for books in 1901, the need for standardization and cooperation became obvious. A draft ALA code was published in 1902. In 1908, the first Anglo-American code, a cooperative venture of the ALA and the Library Association (of Great Britain), based on LC practice, was published. Dissatisfaction with the omissions of the 1908 code grew during the next few decades, and in 1941, the ALA prepared an expanded draft code. This code generated a great deal of controversy over the level of detail a cataloging code should provide.

Eventually the Descriptive Cataloging Division of the Library of Congress published its Rules for Descriptive Cataloging (1949), and the ALA adopted it as a substitute for the second part of its 1941 draft. Part I of the 1941 draft, dealing with entry and form of headings (now called access points), was also published in 1949.¹ Four and a half pages of the ALA rules relate to choice of main entry for single manuscripts, usually in the form of facsimiles. No rules for description of manuscripts were given in the LC publication. Archives and collections of historical or modern manuscripts were not dealt with at all in either book of rules, both of which served as the generally accepted source of authority for catalogers of printed material until 1967.

The strong impetus for standardization of book cataloging in libraries that was created by the ready availability of LC printed cards, the opportunities for shared cataloging, and the existence of a national union catalog for books had no such counterparts for archival and manuscript material until much later. Unique material in an individual library can be described in any way that suits the particular situation. Furthermore, the cataloger of such material functions in an environment of

cataloging pluralism where there is no clear cut definition of what the most suitable unit for cataloging or descriptive entry should be. In some instances there is a difference of opinion as to whether a book should be cataloged individually or as part of a series, or whether parts of a book should be cataloged separately, but in most cases a book is a book and is the catalog entry. Moreover, there is usually no question about the physical entity of a book, although there may be questions about its physical location.

Manuscript material, on the other hand, can be redistributed, put into large or small boxes, folders, or files. Its extent can be diminished or enlarged and its essence drastically altered. Archival professional literature abounds with advice and guidelines on how to do these things, and there are sound archival practices that should be followed, but there can be no universally accepted code for arranging manuscript and archival collections. Individual repositories of manuscript material treat their collections differently. Some do item level cataloging; others deal only with collections, series, or record groups.

There is a further complication and important difference between the world of single unit and collective level cataloging. The catalog entry usually provides the only direct access to the single unit (particularly for books), whereas for archival and manuscript collections, an intermediary finding aid such as a register, guide, or inventory is usually desirable and often necessary. Advice about the preparation of such finding aids can also be found in the professional literature, and increased uniformity in their preparation in the last twenty years is probably due to the availability of this kind of professional advice. Catalog entries are frequently prepared from the information in the finding aid, are one step further removed from the collection, and by design, provide less information about, and fewer clues to, its contents.

For many years, curators of manuscript material

felt they had much leeway in how the material under their control should be described or cataloged. Setting standards and writing rules in such an atmosphere is not an easily accomplished task. However, if the descriptions or catalog entries of manuscript and archival material are to become part of a cooperative exchange of information or part of an integrated system containing descriptions of other types of library material, some standardization both as to quality and uniformity is necessary.

For medieval manuscripts, the compilation of Seymour de Ricci's Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada (1935-1940) and its supplements is one example of an endeavor that led towards greater uniformity in cataloging individual manuscripts. From time to time articles dealing with the cataloging of manuscripts have appeared in professional periodicals.² Attention was also given to the cataloging of archival material. The 1936 cataloging code of the Illinois State Library³ was considered a good basis for a national code by the Cataloging and Classification Committee of the newly formed Society of American Archivists (SAA), and attempts were made to revise the Illinois code. However, no formal code was ever adopted by the SAA.

In the early 1950's, the Library of Congress, with the cooperation of librarians in other institutions holding manuscript material and the support of ALA, worked toward the development of rules for the descriptive cataloging of various types of manuscripts. The results of this effort were drafts of rules for cataloging single manuscripts, issued in 1953 and 1954, and the Preprint of Rules for Collections of Manuscripts issued in 1954 and distributed to interested librarians. The rules for collections of manuscripts were intended to serve as the basis of entries in the proposed National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), and it was hoped that they would also serve as national standards for use by individual repositories. When NUCMC did come into existence in 1959, its compilers

followed the 1954 rules. As experience in preparing entries for NUCMC grew, the rules were revised and expanded.

During this same period, criticism within the library profession of the 1949 ALA cataloging rules continued to grow. Under the auspices of ALA and with the cooperation of the Library of Congress and the British and Canadian national library associations, new rules and revisions were proposed and systematically reviewed. In 1967, a new cataloging code, the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR) was published. It combined rules for entry and description and included the rules for special materials developed at LC. Revised versions of the 1954 rules for cataloging single manuscripts and collections of manuscripts were published as Chapter 10 of the 1967 code. This chapter is divided into two parts, the second of which relates to manuscript collections and reflects very closely the practices followed by staff members of NUCMC and by LC's Manuscript Division. There is evidence that other libraries owning manuscript collections began to follow these rules, and a number of manuscript repositories submitted data for inclusion in NUCMC that was already in NUCMC entry form. Archival repositories, however, largely ignored these rules, which, because of their library orientation and quasi-booklike appearance, were considered inappropriate.

Although AACR represents a great deal of hard work and was a substantial achievement, it was also considered a compromise. Not long after it was published, some of its provisions were amended and changed. The main reasons, however, for the desirability of a new edition of AACR were the rapid growth of library automation and increased involvement of international groups such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and its program of International Standard Bibliographic Description. Representatives from the United States, Great Britain, and Canada met in 1974 and began planning for this new edition by

setting up a Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR.

The result of this effort was the publication in 1978 of Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, second edition (AACR 2). Chapter 4 of this work is entitled "Manuscripts (Including Manuscript Collections)" and represents a considerable departure from Chapter 10 of AACR. The general introduction to the volume states that "these rules are designed for use in the construction of catalogues and other lists in general libraries of all sizes. They are not specifically intended for specialist and archival libraries, but it is recommended that such libraries use the rules as the basis of their cataloguing and augment their provisions as necessary."⁴

These words were taken literally by many concerned with cataloging manuscript and archival collections who found that Chapter 4 did not adequately meet their needs. To answer their predicament, the Library of Congress, supported by the Council of National Library and Information Associations and the National Endowment for the Humanities, prepared a manual for cataloging manuscript and archival material.⁵ The preface and introduction to this work supply much useful information about how and why the project was undertaken and make references to the future development of an automated system that would be compatible with manuscript and archival material as well as with books and other printed material.

The years between the appearance of AACR and AACR 2 marked a period of intense growth and development in automated technology and exchange of bibliographical information. The manuscript and archival community participated in the development of SPINDEX (Selective Permutation Index); the librarians developed MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging). SPINDEX was born at the Library of Congress, but never went beyond the experimental stage there. In 1967, it was taken over by the National Archives where it eventually evolved into SPINDEX III. The National Historical Publications and Records

Commission (NHPRC) sponsored it as the means for developing a proposed national data base for archival and manuscript material. It was used in the compilation of NHPRC's Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States 6 and for several regional, state-wide, and local projects. SPINDEX made it possible to provide printed data about a large body of manuscript and archival material in a somewhat standardized format, even when the original information was not at all standardized. SPINDEX's major drawback, however, is that it is not an online system.

Online access to bibliographic information is what MARC does provide. The MARC format adopted by the Library of Congress in 1968 was designed primarily for books, but other kinds of library holdings were not overlooked. In 1973, the Library of Congress published Manuscripts: A MARC Format, which contained specifications for both manuscript collections and single manuscripts. This format, however, was never used by LC or by any other major repository. LC's Manuscript Division developed its own MARC-like format (Master Record II) in a batch processing mode; NUCMC is not yet automated.

In 1977, a growing concern in the archival community regarding exchange of information on a national level led the SAA to establish the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF). Members of its working group included representatives from the National Archives, Library of Congress, Research Libraries Group (RLG), and participants in NHPRC data base projects. One of its first activities was the compilation of a data element dictionary (issued in 1982) to provide standard definitions for data elements used by any repository holding archival or manuscript material. After much study and discussion about the nature of and requirements for a national information system, NISTF proposed that the MARC format be revised and expanded in order to make it more suitable for archival and manuscript collections. Accordingly, during 1981 and 1982 work proceeded along these lines.

While NISTF was doing its work during 1981, RLG also organized a task force of archivists and manuscript curators to develop user requirements for entering information on archives and manuscripts into its automated data base, RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network). There was some overlapping membership in both task forces, financial support for both by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and participation in both by the Library of Congress. These cooperative efforts made possible a joint proposal by NISTF and LC for a new MARC format for archives and manuscripts. In January 1983, MARBI (Machine-Readable Form of Information), the American Library Association's committee that advises LC on MARC formats, approved the proposal, and the new MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format came into being. In 1984, it was formally incorporated into Update 10 of the MARC Formats for Bibliographic Data, published by the Library of Congress.

Although the Library of Congress is the agency responsible for the maintenance of MARC, it was agreed that no changes to the AMC format would be made without the approval of the Society of American Archivists. After NISTF came to an end in December 1982, the society in March 1983 appointed a standing Committee on Archival Information Exchange, which has as one of its missions the joint management with LC of MARC AMC.

The reception given to the new AMC format by archivists and manuscript curators was markedly different from that given to the 1973 MARC manuscripts format. This time the climate had changed radically: automation was a reality; the need and desire to exchange information were pressing; and archivists and librarians had cooperated in a joint venture that appeared to be both acceptable and successful. When RLIN implemented its AMC file in January 1984 with three repositories, the new format became an actual means of exchanging information about archival and manuscript collections. Since then, increasing numbers of repositories, including both libraries and

archives, have begun using MARC AMC.

The SAA has done its share towards fostering use of the format by appointing a special program officer for the Automated Archival Information Program, sponsoring a series of workshops entitled "Understanding the MARC Format for Archival and Manuscripts Control" to be held in four locations during 1986, and making available two works that offer guidance to MARC AMC users. One is a report of a conference of MARC users held in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1984,⁷ which lists the AMC fields followed by descriptions of the local practices of nine of the repositories represented at the conference. The other is a guide⁸ to the format itself, containing definitions, examples, and other pertinent information, and it includes the Data Element Dictionary prepared by NISTF in 1982.

The MARC AMC format is an increasingly popular topic at professional meetings. Sessions at recent SAA conferences which included explanations of MARC AMC and its applications have been well attended. Use of the MARC AMC format, the SAA manual by Nancy Sahli, and the LC cataloging manual by Steven Hensen by a wide variety of repositories will make possible a hitherto unattainable degree of uniformity and a viable method of exchange of information about archives and manuscript collections. This is not to say, however, that absolute uniformity will be the result. Both the AMC format and the LC manual allow many options, particularly as to the level of cataloging, the determination of the unit to be cataloged, and the provision of access points to the catalog entry.

As more and more manuscript and archival repositories gain access to automated systems, the desire to take full advantage of this advanced technology as a medium of exchange is growing. The format appears to be well on its way to becoming the accepted vessel into which information about manuscript and archival material is to be placed. However, there is somewhat less agreement about how the "pigeonholes" of the format are to be filled.

Although repositories are learning the numerical designations for the different fields, interpretations on their application differ, resulting in variant practices. Consistency in the formulation of access points also remains some distance in the future. Complete uniformity in how the fields are used and in the provision of access points is probably neither attainable nor desirable, but greater cooperation in these areas in order to facilitate the exchange of information for professionals and researchers is an achievable goal. The development of accepted thesauri for such access points as form and genre terms, agency functions, occupations, and subject headings that are particularly relevant to manuscript and archival collections are appropriate and logical next steps for such profession-wide cooperation.

Harriet Ostroff is editor of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and head of the Manuscripts Section, Special Materials Cataloging Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. This article is an outgrowth of a talk on "Standards and Rules for Cataloging Manuscript and Archival Collections" given at the Tennessee Archivists/Society of Alabama Archivists Fall Meeting, November 1984.

NOTES

1 A.L.A. Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries, 2d ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1949).

2 William Jerome Wilson, "Manuscript Cataloging," Traditio 12 (1956): 457-555; Dorothy K. Coveney, "The Cataloging of Literary Manuscripts," Journal of Documentation 6 (1950): 125-139.

3 Illinois State Library, Catalog Rules: Series for Archival Material (Springfield: Illinois State Library, 1938).

4 Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, 2d ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1978), 1.

5 Steven L. Hensen, Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries (Washington, D.C.: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 1983).

6 Washington, D.C.: General Services Administration, 1978.

7 Max J. Evans and Lisa B. Weber, MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: A Compendium of Practice (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985).

8 Nancy Sahli, MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: The AMC Format (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985).