

January 1976

## Perspectives on the Record Group Concept

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### Recommended Citation

Berner, Richard C., "Perspectives on the Record Group Concept," *Georgia Archive* 4 no. 1 (1976) .  
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On March 1, 1940, a committee was appointed in the National Archives "to make a study of finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records in the custody of the Archivist."<sup>1</sup> Headed by Solon J. Buck, a future Archivist of the United States, the committee the following year recommended the abolition of the divisions of Classification and of Cataloging, those inappropriate legacies of librarianship, manifestations of which continue to plague the archival profession even today. According to Philip M. Hamer, the chronicler of the committee's activity, the concept of the "record group" then became the basic tool for establishing intellectual control over the holdings of the National Archives. "Record group" is defined as: "A body of organizationally related records established on the basis of provenance with particular regard for the administrative history, the complexity, and the volume of the records and archives of the institution or organization involved."<sup>2</sup>

Once registration of the record group was done, the records within it would be described in collective units: "series, groups of series, or parts of series, or such other units [as seem desirable]." Refinement of the various record levels occurred within the National Archives<sup>3</sup> and is reflected most succinctly in Oliver Wendell Holmes's well-known article "Archival Arrangement--Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels."<sup>4</sup> Though Holmes distinguished

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five discrete levels--depository, record group, series, file folder, and item--he expressly limited his paper to the experience of the National Archives.

There has been, as Mario Fenyo observed a decade ago,<sup>5</sup> no further substantial elaboration of the initial impressionistic concept of the record group that grew out of the Buck Committee's study of 1941. Moreover, there has been no attempt in the literature, prior to my recent article, "Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts,"<sup>6</sup> to extend the concept of levels of archival arrangement to the arrangement and description of manuscripts collections. To do so, some modifications are in order. The "depository level"--"the breakdown of the depository's complete holdings into a few major divisions on the broadest common demoninator possible and the physical placement of holdings of each such major division to best advantage in the building's stack area"<sup>7</sup>--can be dismissed as being largely irrelevant. It is an arrangement scheme imposed on the collections by the depository and is not intrinsic to them. Also, the "subgroup" must be given full status as a record level, becoming the key to establishing effective intellectual controls for manuscripts accessions having subgroup characteristics. In the Society of American Archivists glossary, "subgroup" is defined as: "A body of related records within a record group, usually consisting of the records of a primary subordinate administrative unit. Subgroups may also be established for related bodies of records within a record group that can best be delimited in terms of functional, geographical, or chronological relationships. Subgroups, in turn, are divided into as many levels as are necessary to reflect the successive organizational units that constitute the hierarchy of the subordinate administrative unit or that will assist in grouping series entries in terms of their relationships."<sup>8</sup> A common error is confusion of subgroups with series--"file units or documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use."<sup>9</sup>

With respect to provenance--the origin of the records--Holmes, and the profession at large, has failed to discriminate its different relationships to the various record levels. Provenance is a concept relevant only for the record group and subgroup. The other record levels relate



to the order of the records. This distinction is of the utmost theoretical and practical significance. Holmes does hint at it, however, (and provides the theoretical basis for my article in the *Drexel Library Quarterly*) in his statement:

Once all series are assigned to record groups and subgroups so that the boundaries are fairly certain, the archivist looks within the group or subgroups and works out a logical arrangement sequence for the series so assigned.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the main weakness in the formulation of the different record levels by the National Archives staff and by Holmes lies in the failure to distinguish between function, as expressed in the process of record creation, and form, as expressed in the various record levels. Both the record group and subgroup relate to function, personal or corporate, the activity of generating the records per se. Thus, they relate to provenance. The other record levels relate to the form the documentation takes--the filing order. Filing order of course pertains not to the activity being documented, but merely to "filing activity." In other words, the record group and subgroup are of one genre, while the other records levels are of a different one. Only in part are they hierarchically related. Historically, in writing on the subject, that has been practically the only view of their relationship. But there is another view.

Items are filed in folders and the folders grouped into series. Ideally, the series are, or should be, kept with records of the administrative unit which generated them. The administrative unit is the parent of the series, clearly suggesting more than a mere hierarchical relationship. The series and its sub-units are quite simply the way in which the generator of the records chooses to keep them. The generator in the archival schema is represented by none other than the record group and its sub-units. These are corporate entities, while the series represents only the documentation itself and its arrangement.

Another weakness in the formulation lies in the implication (for which the National Archives can be faulted no more than the profession at large) that the concept of record levels applies only to public and corporate records, not to personal papers. How implicit this limitation is can be judged by the definitions of record group and subgroup in

the glossary prepared and published by the Society of American Archivists in 1974 and quoted above.<sup>11</sup> This is the same kind of error of judgment that I pointed out several years ago in the development of cataloging rules for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.<sup>12</sup> It is caused by the reluctance or inability to extend archival principles to the arrangement and description of personal papers.

I wish to demonstrate also that the subgroup concept, when extended to personal papers, provides a precise, consistent, objective and simple method for arrangement and description. Although the subgroup represents a subordinate record level, it is equivalent to the record group in the sense that both terms apply to documentation generated from activity of a given corporate entity. Remember that other record levels--series, file folder, and item--relate only to the form which the documentation takes, not to how and by whom it was generated.

Typically, the papers of a person are sought for preservation in a repository because of the special activities that person engaged in. Inherently, these activities take on a corporate function. If that person indeed acted for a corporate body and the records of that activity are included with his papers, those, as part of the person's papers, could be subgrouped under the name of that corporate body.

In most registers I have seen, there appears to have been no attempt to utilize the subgroup concept. Instead, the records of each separate corporate activity are scattered among the various series. Stated differently, there is a confusion of subgroups with series. Not only does this mixture of subgroups and series cause diffuse bibliographic control, but it also makes access more troublesome for the user and for those who serve the user. Retrieval is inherently more erratic and uncertain unless subgrouping has been done as a first step in arrangement, following the theoretical model offered by Holmes.

A useful definition of "subgroup" then, beyond that in the Society of American Archivists' glossary, would be: "Records generated from the separate corporate activities of a person constitute the basis for arrangement of those records into subgroups." Unlike subgroups in public and other corporate records, there is no question of subordinacy of activity, merely separateness. In a phrase, subgroups in manuscripts collections are "separate but equal." By applying



the subgroup concept to the arrangement and description of personal papers, a solid basis can be established in a manuscript repository for comprehensive control of its holdings and for prioritization of its processing program.

"Separate corporate activities," the records of which form the subgroups of a collection, can be determined on the basis of whether or not the creator of the papers is acting as the agent of another party. This "other party" is inherently a corporate one. Materials which cannot be subgrouped in this manner automatically will become a "personal papers" subgroup, in effect the residue which cannot be classed under a corporate subgroup.

In examining items and file folders, how does one determine what constitutes "acting in a corporate capacity"? Mere membership in an organization surely does not. To qualify for subgrouping, there must be documentation which reflects the person's actions for, and on behalf of, an organization. Generating such documentation, one typically will undertake committee work, act as an officer, or serve in some other capacity for an organization. Consequently, the obvious clues to look for are (in order of preference):

1. in what capacity a person signs a letter [this is the surest];
2. the letterhead on which the item is written; and
3. key words in text and other internal evidence [this is the least preferred technique because it leads toward item by item analysis and should be employed with caution for that very reason].

Because most persons have engaged in a variety of corporate activities, either in the course of negotiations or upon accessioning the papers it can be verified whether or not there is documentation of these activities. Assuming such documentation to exist, the first step in arranging the material is to establish a subgroup for each of the separate activities. Thus, the records of each of that person's corporate functions will be consolidated in one place within his papers. If this were done prior to shelving the papers and without further processing, the papers nevertheless would be quite accessible for research.

Bibliographical access would be achieved through the catalog and indexes of the repository in the normal way, inasmuch as entries describing the accession would have been made at least for the name of each subgroup and for the person who generated the records. What has been achieved is control to the subgroup level for that one accession. If this procedure were followed for each accession, the repository would have reasonably comprehensive control of its entire manuscript collection.

Another achievement would be the establishment of a more fully rational basis for the repository's arrangement and descriptive program as a whole. Thus a firm foundation would be laid for decisions as to which accessions should be first controlled to the series or file folder or item level and which subgroups should receive prior attention. Further, such a procedure can be applied to family papers, subgrouping according to the name of the addressee, and to records of private corporate bodies, subgrouping according to affiliated bodies, predecessor organization(s), or other corporate arrangements.



NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Philip M. Hamer, "Finding Mediums in the National Archives: An Appraisal of Six Years' Experience," *American Archivist*, 5 (April, 1942), 82-92. See also Donald H. Mugridge's review of *Guide to the Records in the National Archives* in *American Archivist*, 12 (October, 1949), 415-418.

<sup>2</sup>Frank B. Evans, et. al., "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist*, 37 (July, 1974), 428. The Buck Committee's definition was: "A major unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories" (National Archives, *Staff Information Circulars*, No. 15 [July, 1950], 2.)

<sup>3</sup>National Archives, *Staff Information Circulars*, No. 15.

<sup>4</sup>*American Archivist*, 27 (January, 1964), 21-41.

<sup>5</sup>Mario D. Fenyo, "The Record Group Concept: A Critique," *American Archivist*, 29 (April, 1966), 229-239.

<sup>6</sup>*Drexel Library Quarterly*, 11 (January, 1975), 34-54.

<sup>7</sup>Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," 23-24.

<sup>8</sup>Evans, "A Basic Glossary," 430-431.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 430. See *American Archivist*, 38 (July, 1975), 378-381, and the author's Letter to the Editor, forthcoming in *ibid.*, 38 (January, 1976). Maynard Brichford misses this last point in his review and confuses series with subgroups, a common error.

<sup>10</sup>Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," 32.

<sup>11</sup>Attention also should be drawn to the omission of any discussion of "subgroup" by Frank Evans in his article "Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States," *American Archivist*, 29 (April, 1966), 241-263. This is further commentary in support of Fenyo's observation.



<sup>12</sup>Richard C. Berner, "Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist*, 27 (July, 1964), 401-409, and Richard C. Berner, "Observations on Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," *College and Research Libraries*, 29 (July, 1968), 276-280, criticizing the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* which adopted the NUCMC rules.