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*FINDING AIDS ARE LIKE STREAKERS*

David B. Gracy II

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**F**inding aids are like streakers—they have to be seen to be appreciated. And like streakers, they have come in for considerable criticism. Some persons say there are too many finding aids, others too few; some believe they are too cursory, others too detailed; some demand more publications, others call for a great centralized bank of information in machine-readable form. All agree, though, that finding aids rank among the most important products of archival repositories. Lacking finding aids, one who would use an archives sails an ocean of information without a compass.

Like instruments for navigation, finding aids take many forms. One, a published guide of vignettes describing hundreds of collections, promotes access to the holdings in aggregate of an archives. Another, a card catalog of data assembled at the end of the processing cycle explicitly to illuminate research potential reveals similar items of information scattered through several collections. A third form, a basic control document, like a preliminary inventory, focuses on a single body of material, emphasizing arrangement and organization. A finding aid, then, is any descriptive media, card or document, published or unpublished, that establishes physical, administrative and/or intellectual control over material. Finding aids make it possible for a repository, with grace and dispatch, to meet its two most critical demands: retrieving research material for a patron, and locating for a donor the material he has placed in the

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Dr. Gracy is Archivist of the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University. This article is adapted from a paper he read before the South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference, Atlanta, May 2, 1973.

institution for permanent preservation. "No other aspect of a library's activities is more deserving of staff time or more dependent on a high level of staff skill," Ruth Bordin and Robert Warner assert in their widely-circulated book, *The Modern Manuscript Library*, than the production of finding aids.<sup>1</sup>

Finding aids may be grouped into three categories: 1) those created for internal control of collections, 2) those produced for in-house reference service, and 3) those published for out-of-house consumption. Each one has its own purpose and style, its own priority and scope. A well-rounded archival program will prepare at least one finding aid from each of the categories, and normally produce them in the order of internal control documents first, in-house reference service material next, and reports for external publication last.

The first group, or stage, of finding aids is the document produced by the archives in the process of gaining control over an accession. Whether labeled a worksheet, accession checklist, preliminary inventory, inventory, register, or something else, the document is the repository's first serious effort to describe a collection and can be produced only after the staff has opened and surveyed the record group. (I shall use interchangeably the terms "record group" and "collection," which archivists and manuscripts curators respectively use to identify the same thing.<sup>2</sup>)

The basic control document describes both the structure and substance of a collection, but emphasizes the structure. Thus the control document highlights data on the types of records included--correspondence, legal papers, minutes, photographs and so forth--and illuminates in depth the arrangement and bulk of the collection. A brief note on substance pulls together both information about the records, such as their origin and provenance, and data on the subject content of the group. Though usually short, this latter data may be expanded to point out in which subject areas the material bulks in either quantity or date periods and any notable gaps that exist in the documentation. A third fundamental description made at this stage is that of housing and location. Some repositories create a separate shelf list for use in retrieving their holdings, while others incorporate this information into their basic control document. Generally the more detailed this location information, the more exact a researcher can be in his request for material and the less staff time need be diverted to reference and retrieval.

Among the variety of basic control documents, worksheets and accession checklists usually record on a form with scant elaboration the order and contents of a collection. These are little more than outlines of arrangement--bare tables of contents--or they may be descriptions by record unit that do no more than pull together material related either by type of document or by subject. The strength of the control document, however, lies in the explicitness of its physical description. Its user can tell where in the collection to look for the information he seeks.

Preliminary inventories have followed many styles, being by design descriptions of tentative situations. Nevertheless for most archivists, the term calls up the document produced by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS). This preliminary inventory is produced only after extensive, laborious work has been devoted to a record group to determine its arrangement, contents and quantity. Generally NARS' preliminary inventories provide more substantive information than accession checklists, but omit reference to housing or location. They excel in showing the research potential in the collection and in indicating the relationships among record groups. And like a temporary tax, these preliminary inventories, now printed and indexed, have a very permanent look about them.

Inventories and registers (two names for the same document, the distinction, when it is made, being that an inventory is produced by an archives and a register by a historical manuscripts repository) differ from preliminary inventories principally in that they are admittedly finished documents. They describe collections after nonessential items have been removed and after the final arrangement has been determined. In many places, particularly historical manuscripts repositories, they are the first control document produced, simply because the collections are small enough that final decisions as to permanent historical value, arrangement and housing can safely be made without the need of an intermediate step.

Given the fact that each repository must produce one of the basic control documents, the question becomes, which one? The answer hinges on five considerations. The nature of collections received and the size of the staff are two obvious factors. Third is the primary need, or needs, the document must satisfy. In the Southern Labor

Archives, for example, the inventory serves first as the basic control document. But in addition it acts as a finding aid, as a shelf location document, and as a receipt to a donor for his gift. A large percentage of our donors are organizations still very active and concerned to be able to refer to specific documents in their files. Our inventories are explicit enough that most donors can suggest which box, occasionally which folder, houses the document they seek.

The fourth consideration is the research use the archives experiences. If most patrons are the same people who created the records, the archives may need develop no further finding aid system, since the users, already familiar with the files, will require little assistance. Such well-informed patrons, however, are rare in most archives and historical manuscripts repositories open to the public. Moreover, a diverse clientele can place varying demands on the retrieval capacity of the archives. Scholars tend to study subjects that require in-depth searches of several collections for relevant information. Antiquarians, genealogists, and local historians usually query for specific names, events, places and things. Where a scholar would be concerned with the rise of textile unionism in the South, an antiquarian would want to know the date the first textile union was founded, and the local historian and genealogist would wish to learn the names of the officers and members.

The fifth and final factor to be considered in determining which control document is most appropriate is the breadth of the repository's finding aid program. If the control document is to be the backbone of the program, one of the more descriptive forms, such as an inventory, must be preferred. If, on the other hand, a full subject description is to follow in the second stage of finding aid production, the skimpier accession checklist that accents arrangement and location would be acceptable. The crux of the issue, though, is planning. The archivist, to serve adequately his large, growing, and varied clientele, must map out his finding aid system to draw on the strengths of each of the three groups of aids before him. Hence, he cannot determine finally which of the first-stage aids will be best until he has concluded which of the others he will use to supplement it.

In-house reference finding aids--card catalogs, annotated lists, and a file I call a "nowhere else" file--

focus on the subject content of the holdings, even though they may be grounded into a locator system to speed retrieval. They centralize information from or about several collections, ideally drawing from, but not superseding, the basic control document. From the central vantage point of an in-house reference aid, a researcher can survey extensive holdings for material relevant to his special interest. Indeed, this type of finding aid is analogous to a computer data bank, which a person can probe and search at length to extract the data (or in this case knowledge of the data) he desires.

Some archives strive to accomplish the same end by collecting all the basic control documents into a central file. Large repositories tend to this solution because the sheer quantity of material to reference is so great there is not staff enough to do more--to retrace and refine steps once taken. A few individual archivists follow the practice in order to maintain for themselves an indispensable role in the locating process. At best the substitute for a true centralized finding aid is cumbersome, at worst, inexcusable.

An effective, simple finding aid that can begin to adapt a collection of control documents to a true centralized system is the annotated list. The least sophisticated of the second stage, centralized type, it is merely a list an archivist prepares of collections that bear on a subject of frequent inquiry. The archivist can elaborate on the individual entries on the list as necessary, indicating such data as the extent of appropriate information and its location within a collection.

Surely the most common in-house, reference finding aid, however, is a card catalog. To some archivists, the term "card catalog" means subject indexes, or selective indexes, either of the control documents or of the collections themselves. The direct collection indexes, needless to say, are the more inclusive of the two, and no other finding aid can provide more detailed, specific information on the contents of any or all the holdings of a repository. To others the term may include a chronological file wherein cards are maintained grouping the holdings by decade or other appropriate time period. Similar files might illuminate autographs or geographical points or outsized documents or photographs. The list, of course, could be expanded according to the specific circumstances of a repository. But no finding aid can improve on the card system for integrating and centralizing the in-house reference service. A computer retrieval program merely does it faster.

A third manifestation of the in-house reference aid is the "nowhere else" file. A honey-coated idea, it is a trap. It begins innocently enough, often in a repository's formative months, as a catchall for those things on which the staff wishes to delay decisions until the direction of the repository has become more clearly established. In one place the file of inventories was mixed in, then ready-reference material was added, and finally small collections the repository's inadequate shelf listing might lose in the stacks were squeezed in too. As it grew, the file took on a personality all its own. It became an archives within an archives, and soon demanded and got its own finding system, which one had to master to use the file itself, which was in turn the principal finding device for the repository's holdings. By the time the file had filled several dozen legal-size cabinet drawers, it had become more obstacle than aid. Such a file is the tail wagging the dog and results from inadequate planning for a well-rounded finding aid system.

When someone remarks that the production of finding aids moves from the general to the particular, the person is speaking only of the first two groups of finding aids and has neglected the third. This final category includes those aids prepared for distribution and use outside the repository and whose principal purpose is to inform the research community of material recently made available to it. Third stage aids include reports to scholarly journals, entries in the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*, reference information circulars, guides, and brochures of holdings.

Every good archivist and manuscripts curator knows that to obtain material of enduring value, even through a records management program, he must be aggressive, must go into the vineyards to keep his purpose and program in the minds of those to whom archival activity is not a principal concern. By the same token, the material he has collected and laboriously processed will be used only if he takes pains to inform potential users of its existence. This, quite simply, is why many archivists utilize not one or two of the third stage aids, but all of them.

Notices in scholarly journals often are billed as accession reports. But they are more likely to be the lists of collections recently processed and opened for research.

Calling attention to holdings not yet ready for research use invites unpleasant consequences. For one, it promotes frustration and dissatisfaction in a user denied access. Or, if the material is opened, the repository courts irretrievable loss of items simply because the agency lacks basic control over them. Finally, hasty opening invites confusion of an arrangement not yet documented. For their part, these notes demand little time to prepare, for they rarely provide more than a sentence or two about any one collection. Furthermore, similar notices are sent to each scholarly journal the archivist thinks might be interested in the information. Though these printed reports may wait months for publication, they are the fastest means open to an archivist to publicize his holdings broadly. From the researcher's point of view, they offer the most comprehensive source of information on recently opened collections. To journals, each printing much the same data, the notices are becoming a costly problem. Hence, the suggestion has been made that one central automated instant retrieval system be created for storing, collating, and distributing this information.

The next most general out-of-house finding aid is the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) published by the Library of Congress. Each entry in NUCMC illuminates an individual collection. Data on quantity and inclusive dates supplements a basic paragraph describing subject content. These vignettes in turn are grouped by repository. Hence the index of NUCMC is the only means of access a person has to the information. The index, though, makes it possible for the researcher to locate data he desires without having to read page after page, as is the case with journal notices. Thousands of collections have been reported, and NUCMC has proven itself invaluable to the researcher seeking material, as well as to the archivist striving to make it known. The wonder is the disgustingly large number of repositories that have not participated.

Reference information circulars prepared by an institution may either expand the NUCMC paragraph describing the intellectual content of a collection or take the form of an enlarged, more sophisticated annotated list. The Western History Research Center at the University of Wyoming in particular issues the former in one or multiple-page descriptions of significant collections. NARS, on the other hand, publishes the latter to describe materials in several record groups that bear on a particular subject.



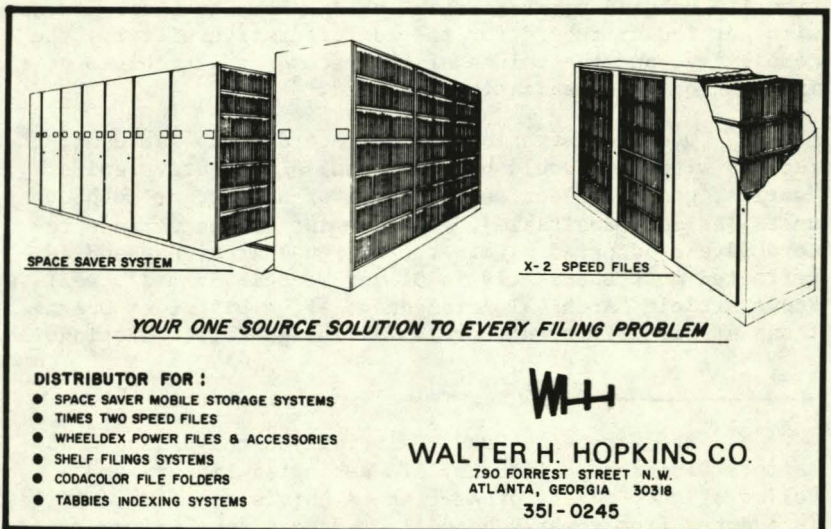
Finally in the third category are brochures of holdings and guides. These exhibit more fully than any other publication the depth and extent of a repository's holdings. Where NUCMC rejects true archival and physically small collections, and journals lack space adequate to list every last accession or opening, a guide, by definition, is all-inclusive. Because so great an investment of time and expense is required to produce a guide, most repositories wait until the descriptions of the collections they hold are extensive enough to fill a book-sized publication. Where a guide is produced only after a repository has come of age, specific circumstances may call forth a brochure of holdings. The Southern Labor Archives issues one of these mini-guides every spring to coincide with an annual labor banquet, the proceeds of which are presented to the archives. This brochure serves as a thank-you to those who help support the archival program through the banquet, doubles as an announcement to researchers of the holdings, and moreover, has proven quite valuable as a tool in the collecting program.

To build an efficient finding aid system, an archivist must exhibit the traits of either a good gardener or a schizophrenic. He must be able, in other words, to distinguish, and work with, both the forest and the trees. On the one hand, his scope has to be broad enough to design a system drawing from, and integrating, all three categories of finding aids. On the other, his sense of priorities must tell him which of the specific manifestations are appropriate for his particular situation. The critical element is planning. Archivists face a great enough task dealing with increasingly large and frequent accessions that they cannot afford to squander energy meeting a never diminishing demand for assistance in using their holdings. Haphazard "nowhere else" files that might once have served the limited needs of a small repository cannot satisfy the requirements of a modern archives. Instead, the production of finding aids must proceed logically and purposefully from control documents, to in-house reference materials, to out-of-house publications, building a pyramid of information about a repository's holdings, which brings us full circle back to the stalker. Having prepared our finest finding aid system, we, like he, have gone the limit to expose those things that distinguish our repository from every other one.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>(New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966), 67.

<sup>2</sup>For explicit definitions of the terms, see Frank B. Evans, et.al., "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist*, 37 (July, 1974), 415-434.



The advertisement features two line drawings of filing systems. On the left is the 'SPACE SAVER SYSTEM', which consists of a long row of vertical filing cabinets with a smaller cabinet at the end. On the right is the 'X-2 SPEED FILES' system, which is a smaller cabinet with a large, angled door that is open, revealing internal shelves. Below the drawings is the slogan 'YOUR ONE SOURCE SOLUTION TO EVERY FILING PROBLEM'. At the bottom left is a list of products under the heading 'DISTRIBUTOR FOR :'. At the bottom right is the company logo, a stylized 'WHH', followed by the company name 'WALTER H. HOPKINS CO.' and its address and phone number.

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