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THE HISTORIAN AND ARCHIVAL FINDING AIDS

Michael E. Stevens

Archivists traditionally have been concerned about finding effective means for providing access to archival material. This interest has generated an ever growing body of literature dealing with issues such as the format of guides, systems of indexing, national bibliographic control, and the use of computers to create finding aids. Surprisingly, however, archivists have done very little research on the methods that scholars use to locate relevant archival material, and thus have no gauge of the effectiveness of current finding aids. Since assumptions about research strategies determine the type of finding aids being developed currently, archivists must test those assumptions if they are to create an effective system of national bibliographic control. The purpose of this study, then, is to raise questions about the ways historians--one principal group of archival patrons--use finding aids in their research and to suggest further avenues of inquiry into the problem.

Considering the importance of good finding aids to sound historical research, there ought to exist a considerable body of literature by historians on the subject. Yet, this is not the case. Articles by historians have stressed other points, such as the importance of cooperation between archivists and themselves.¹ The historians frequently relate their own personal experiences, generalizing from them, but

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do not rigorously analyze the ways in which they and their colleagues use finding aids. While personal relationships are important after the scholar has arrived at a research institution, such amenities do not help him locate the repositories where useful materials are housed.

Not all historians have ignored the problem of developing effective guides. Howard Peckham and Frontis Johnston, for instance, have discussed the pros and cons of different systems of indexing, although their comments were based on their own experiences.² Walter Rundell's study of the state of the historical profession, based on interviews with numerous historians and graduate students, showed concern for the importance of finding aids by devoting twenty-six pages of text to the subject. The primary thrust of the work, however, aimed at suggestions for improving existing guides such as the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) and Philip Hamer's A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States. Rundell did not deal with the problem of discovering the relative effectiveness of various guides.³ Although the American Historical Association's Joint Committee on Bibliographic Services to History was concerned with the problem of effectiveness, it included all types of bibliographic guides, not merely those for archives. The report of that committee was based on a survey of fifty historians, half of whom specialized in American history, and concluded that historians really do not know what kind of guides they want. The study, only a first step, concluded that little is known about how historians search for materials.⁴

Richard Berner, archivist at the University of Washington, is one of the few authors who has developed a theory on historians' archival research strategies. Berner sought to identify the type of terms historians use in searching for material and concluded in a number of articles that they approach an archival collection with the use of names rather than subject terms. According to Berner, the historian finds all the pertinent names from reading secondary material and therefore is interested only in personal, corporate, and geographical names when using archival guides. Berner argues also that while historians may claim that they use subject terms, they in fact nearly always use names. "By my own

analysis," Berner writes, "more than 90 percent of the approaches are based on the researchers' prior knowledge of personal and organizational names."⁵ Berner's theory, though interesting, has several limitations. The basic objection is the lack of empirical evidence. Further, Berner's name approach seems biased in favor of biography, and institutional and traditional political history, while seemingly having limited usefulness for writers of intellectual, social, and economic history who often approach the human past in terms of broad concepts. These scholars are more interested in subjects that transcend individual collections and which are not always directly related to the activities that caused the papers to be created.

Since so little data existed on historians' research habits, a questionnaire was devised to acquire information about two problems. First, how are historians led to sources on the national level; and secondly, are the clues used in the search primarily name identifications, as Berner claims, or subject terms? Only American historians were studied since students of non-American history presumably would rely principally on archives outside of the United States and therefore would use a different set of guides. An attempt was made to send questionnaires to all American historians with doctorates who are presently in departments of history at colleges and universities in the state of Wisconsin. By studying scholars in a limited geographical area, the survey included scholars from all sizes and types of institutions with varying emphases on research. By using college catalogs and Dissertation Abstracts to determine fields of specialization, a list of 123 American historians was compiled. The return rate was quite high, nearly 50 percent (see Table 1). The questionnaire itself sought information on the number of archives visited in the last five years, the use and evaluation of finding aids, and the terms used in searching for archival material.

Upon receipt of completed questionnaires, the author categorized the historians by chronological interest (seventeenth-eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century) and by field of research (political and nonpolitical). The nonpolitical category was divided further into diplomatic, economic, intellectual, military, and social history. An additional

Table 1

QUESTIONNAIRES DISTRIBUTED AND RETURNED

	Distributed	Returned
University of Wisconsin-- Madison	21	12
Other University of Wisconsin Schools	83	38
Private Schools	<u>19</u>	<u>11</u>
Total historians	123	61

category for those whose specialty could not be ascertained completed the listing. These classifications were based upon the research interest indicated on the questionnaire and ranged over all areas of American history, although there was a heavy bias toward political and nineteenth-century history (see Table 2). Each of the three chronological eras, however, was divided evenly between political and non-political historians.

Table 2

FIELDS OF SPECIALIZATION

	N	Percent*		N	Percent
Political	24	39	17th-18th	8	13
Social	8	13	19th	31	52
Intellectual	5	8	20th	21	35
Diplomatic	5	8			
Economic	3	5	N=60 (1 unknown excluded)		
Military	2	3			
Unknown	14	23			
N=61					

*Percentages do not always total 100 because of rounding.

The survey provides a rough indicator of the amount of archival research being done by American historians (see Table 3). Each historian was asked a question concerning the number of archival institutions he visited in the last five years. While failing to measure the amount of research, it does reveal a considerable degree of interest. Nearly half of the historians in the sample visited more than five research institutions during the five year period.

Table 3

ARCHIVAL VISITS PER FIVE YEARS

Number of Archives Visited	Number of Historians	
	N	Percent
0-5	31	51
6-10	17	28
11-15	9	15
15 or more	<u>4</u>	7
	61	

One of the basic purposes of the survey was to discover how historians learn of the existence of the documents they need. To resolve this question, the participants were asked to rank six sources in the order of their usefulness. The six were: references in secondary sources, suggestions from colleagues, suggestions from archivists, accession lists in historical journals, NUCMC, and Hamer's Guide. The first three categories represent an informal system of information dissemination, an unorganized and unsystematic means of obtaining knowledge about the location of manuscript collections. The latter three are the core of the national formal system of information dissemination.

Thirty-six of the sixty-one respondents actually gave numerical ratings to the sources, and of these, many found only several of the sources useful. The results showed that the formal system is relatively ineffective in providing information to historians. Historians overwhelmingly indicated that the most useful sources are other historians, either in secondary works or by word of mouth. Of the formal

Table 4

RANKING OF SOURCES--TABULATION I

	Mean	Median	Mode	
Secondary Sources	4.83	6	6	
<u>NUCMC</u>	2.97	3	0	
Colleagues	2.53	3	0	N=36
Archivists	2.42	3	0	
Historical Journals	2.11	2	0	
Hamer's <u>Guide</u>	1.72	0	0	

sources, only NUCMC received a high rating, although it did not approach the use given to secondary sources. The other two formal national sources, Hamer's Guide and historical journals, trailed the list.

The source rankings were also counted in another way, using the entire sample of sixty-one. This tabulation produced results similar to the smaller sample. Once again, the formal system is ranked at the bottom (see Table 5). Also of interest is that over half of the historians failed to mention Hamer's Guide at all.⁶

Table 5

RANKING OF SOURCES--TABULATION II

	Number of Times Mentioned	Percent of N	
Secondary Sources	51	84	
Colleagues	39	64	
<u>NUCMC</u>	38	62	N=61
Archivists	35	57	
Historical Journals	35	57	
Hamer's <u>Guide</u>	27	44	

These findings, while tentative, do indicate some trends and suggest areas for further inquiry. First, they call into question the effectiveness of the national level finding aids that are now being used. Since NUCMC and Hamer's Guide are products of the last fifteen years, it is not surprising that word of mouth and the work of other scholars seem to be the most common means of disseminating information. For many years, historians had to depend on the works of their colleagues to find manuscript material. They also relied heavily on studies such as Justin Winsor's Narrative and Critical History of America. Yet NUCMC and Hamer's Guide are not so new to have received such low ratings. If historians lacked knowledge of their existence, then part of the problem may exist in graduate education, with young scholars not being informed about basic bibliographical tools. Such a hypothesis probably would require verification.

While inadequate knowledge of the existence of guides may be part of the problem, the relative usefulness of accession lists in historical journals and Hamer's Guide can also be questioned because of the low ratings that historians gave to them. Both have certain internal limitations due to their formats, with accession lists being the more difficult to handle. These unsystematic lists can be useful only by reading through pages of titles with limited descriptions; and the scholar who uses them will generally find material related to his topic only by chance. Neither do they serve as a convenient permanent source in that it is easier for a scholar to use the index of NUCMC rather than leafing through several years' issues of journals. Editors ought to poll their readers on their use of accession lists and depending on the responses reevaluate the advisability of devoting valuable space for that purpose. Questions also must be raised about Hamer's Guide since so few historians rated it as useful. Due to space limitations, Hamer's descriptions must be brief and cover only a smattering of an institution's holdings. Hence it is of limited utility to most scholars, who seem to be interested in detailed information on specific collections rather than incomplete summaries of the holdings of libraries. If a scholar is interested in a particular collection, he can consult NUCMC; if he is concerned with a particular repository, then he can consult its guide or write to its archivist. If

Hamer's Guide has any utility, it undoubtedly derives from its comprehensive list for the traveling scholar of all archival institutions in an area. It is also a published source for those institutions that do not print guides. However, its low ratings indicate that a format such as that of NUCMC is more useful to historians than a single volume guide.

The questionnaire also attempted to discover the type of terms that historical researchers look for in using guides. Did they primarily use names or subjects in searching the indexes of guides and card catalogs/inventories? In addition they were requested to list the terms most recently used in their research. The purpose was to test Berner's theory that historians nearly exclusively use names in their search of manuscript material instead of subject terms. Many of the historians had severe misgivings over generalizing about the type of terms that they use. Over 20 percent left the item blank or wrote in that they used the two terms equally. Table 6 provides a summary of the responses which indicates that most historians use names the majority of the time.

Table 6

SUBJECT--NAME PREFERENCES

Term Claimed Most Frequently Used in Guide			Per- cent	Term Claimed Most Frequently Used in Inventories			Per- cent
	N				N		
Names	32		52	Names	34		56
Subjects	22		36	Subjects	14		23
Equal	2		3	Equal	6		10
No Answer	5		8	No Answer	7		11

Their preference was then compared with the type of terms that they listed. This author classified the terms as either subjects or names. This involved some difficulties, for some terms such as Republican Party or Cherokees could be either subjects or names. The criterion used for classification was if the word was the name of a person, place, or corporate group, it was considered as a name. Thus both Republican

Party and Cherokee Indians were classified as names, while Indians in general or the Mexican War was placed in the subject category. Table 7 shows the actual number of terms listed by each group. The

Table 7

NUMBER OF SUBJECTS AND NAMES LISTED

	No. of Terms		No. of Terms Listed by Group Claim- ing Equal Use	Totals
	No. of Terms Listed by Group Claim- ing Primary Use of <u>Names</u>	Listed by Group Claim- ing Primary Use of <u>Subjects</u>		
Guides				
Names	70	24	5	99
Subjects	13	56	3	72
Inventories/Card Catalogs				
Names	63	15	18	96
Subjects	14	31	7	52

findings indicate that historians use both names and subjects, even if they claim that they tend to use one more than the other. Names predominated over subjects, suggesting that historians probably do use names more often. Nonetheless, a considerable minority also listed subjects, far too many in fact to claim that historians nearly exclusively use names. Thus to exclude subject terms from guides would cause difficulties for a number of scholars. The results are limited, of course, in only showing how historians believe that they do their research. In reality, they may use a different ratio of names to subjects. The problem is that we have so little hard evidence about historians' research methodologies which underscores even further the need for more investigation into this area. If we are to index guides that will be lasting,

then it is imperative that we learn how historians use them.

This study raises more questions than it answers. For instance why do historians make such heavy use of the professional grapevine rather than formal sources? Is the problem in graduate education or is it something intrinsic in the guides themselves? Why is Hamer's Guide rated so low? Do historians really use subject terms as frequently as they claim they do? What type of indexing will be the most helpful to scholars? All these questions need to be answered. The purpose of a system of formal guides is to rationalize the process of searching for needed archival material, yet evidence indicates that the present system of formal guides is not achieving its goal as well as one could desire. Hopefully this study will be only a beginning of research into this problem, for only when archivists study the research strategies of scholars can effective finding aids at the national level be developed.

NOTES

¹For examples see Philip G. Jordan, "The Scholar and the Archivist--A Partnership," American Archivist, 31 (January, 1968), 57-65; Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "The Historian and the Archivist," American Archivist, 32 (October, 1969), 369-74; Boyd C. Shafer, "Lost and Found," American Archivist, 18 (July, 1955), 217-23.

²Howard Peckham, "Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections," American Archivist, 19 (July, 1956), 221-28; Frontis Johnston, "A Historian Looks at Archives and Manuscripts," American Archivist, 19 (July, 1956), 229-33.

³Walter Rundell, Jr., In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970), 234-59.

⁴Dagmar Horna Perman, ed., Bibliography and the Historian: The Conference at Belmont of the Joint Committee on Bibliographical Services to History (Washington, D.C., 1968); "Computers and Bibliography for the Social Sciences," American Archivist, 32 (January, 1969), 15-20.

⁵Richard C. Berner, "Manuscript Catalogs and Other Finding Aids: What Are Their Relationships," American Archivist, 34 (October, 1971), 370. Berner's ideas on subject vs. name indexing can be found in several articles. The clearest statement of it is in Richard C. Berner and M. Gary Bettis, "Description of Manuscript Collections: A Single Network System," College and Research Libraries, 30 (September, 1969), 405-16. His criticism of subject indexing can also be found in Richard C. Berner, "Observations on Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections," College and Research Libraries, 29 (July, 1968), 276-80 and Letter to the Editor, American Archivist, 16 (July, 1963), 432.

⁶The ranking of sources was also correlated with type of historian and while the percentage of each group (political vs. nonpolitical) that rated the source as useful varied, the sample was too small to be significant. In general political historians tended to check off all of the sources, while the nonpolitical historians checked off the informal sources and neglected the formal ones. This difference is something that should be reexamined in a larger survey since the variation in the type of sources used indicates that the groups have different archival research strategies or that the indexing of the formal sources is biased toward political historians.