

# UCLA

## UCLA Previously Published Works

### Title

Professional, Institutional, and National Identities in Dialog: The Development of Descriptive Practices in the First Decade of the US National Archives

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zj7s8w8>

### Journal

Information and Culture, 49(1)

### ISSN

2164-8034

### Author

Gilliland, Anne

### Publication Date

2014-02-01

### DOI

10.7560/ic49104

Peer reviewed

**Professional, Institutional, and National Identities in Dialog: The Development of  
Descriptive Practices in the First Decade of the U.S. National Archives**

Anne J. Gilliland

Department of Information Studies

212 GSEIS Building

University of California, Los Angeles

Box 951520

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1520

(310) 206-9393

[Gilliland@gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:Gilliland@gseis.ucla.edu)

## **Professional, Institutional, and National Identities in Dialog: The Development of Descriptive Practices in the First Decade of the U.S. National Archives<sup>i</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

Drawing upon archival sources, this article reviews the historical background and discourse surrounding early descriptive developments at the U.S. National Archives, 1935-1941. It identifies three discursive strands and discusses their implications for archivists today: how local and national differences might temper wholesale adoption of practices employed in other settings; the initial attempt to blend bibliographic and archival approaches at the National Archives; and the conceptualization and subsequent adoption of the record group as an institutional compromise. This compromise embedded conceptual principles identified by European archivists while simultaneously addressing specific pragmatic and physical considerations presented by Federal records at the time.

*[The principles laid out in the *Dutch Manual*] reached the United States around the turn of the century and gained slow acceptance before the establishment of the United States National Archives in the 1930s. The young National Archives not only adopted the principles but developed the archival inventory document from a mere survey to an extensive physical and intellectual description of a record group. So useful has the format proven that it has become the standard for the description of archival holdings.<sup>ii</sup>*

### **Introduction**

In 1977, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) published David B. Gracy's *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description*, the first professionally-commissioned American manual specifically focusing on this aspect of archival practice. In many ways, this manual constituted a bridge between early institutional and organizational efforts to delineate the identity and practices of the emerging American archival profession, and

technologically-fueled efforts to establish national and international archival descriptive standards.<sup>iii</sup>

Although Gracy's work was to diminish in prominence as the American movement toward archival standards came to fruition with the 1983 publication of the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) Format, it addressed a significant void at the time when it was published. Muller, Feith, and Fruin's seminal *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (a.k.a. *the Dutch Manual*) had been published in the Netherlands in 1898 and the principles it articulated were endorsed as fundamental and universal to professional archival practice by attendees (including a delegation of American historians) at the 1910 International Congress on Libraries and Archives in Brussels. It was not, however, translated into English for an American audience until 1941, seven years after the founding of the US National Archives and four years after the establishment of the SAA. Therefore it was not available when it arguably might have had the most significant impact on the development of American descriptive practices. In the absence of American descriptive guidelines, there was disagreement and skepticism in the young American archival field about the extent to which either the approaches employed by European archives or indeed those in use at the time in American historical manuscript repositories might be applicable to the extensive legacy of modern records with which public archives were increasingly coping. Gracy's *Arrangement & Description* acknowledged and identified the differences in approaches between the co-existing "public archives" and the more bibliographically-oriented "historical manuscript" traditions in the United States;<sup>iv</sup> and articulated relevant arrangement and description principles and practices that might address both. The manual eventually went through at least seven printings, an indication of the demand that had built up for such a text in the preceding decades.

This article revisits the historical background and discourse surrounding the early development of American descriptive practices in one particular moment and setting to which Gracy briefly alludes in the introduction to his manual: the first years of the US National Archives. At the time when Gracy was writing, this history would have been familiar to American archivists, but today it has receded from professional consciousness and its relevance might be less apparent.<sup>v</sup> Between 1935 and 1941, the fledgling National

Archives was trying to establish its standing in a national capital that was largely unaware of its existence or role, and to hold its own with regard to the longer-established and more prominent Library of Congress located on Capitol Hill. It needed to determine what might be the most effective, but at the same time archivally-sound practices for managing the massive and disorganized pre-existing volume of inactive Federal records, including those generated by World War I and Depression-era administrations and new audiovisual technologies and media such as film, microfilm, and recorded sound.

Drawing on archival sources, this article highlights several intertwined discursive strands that illustrate various dialogic aspects of this case. Among these strands are sentiments that local and national differences should temper whole cloth adoption of practices articulated in existing texts written with reference to other archival contexts in other countries. Another strand is the initial attempt to blend bibliographic and archival description at the National Archives. Within a few years, bibliographically-oriented cataloging and classification practices were rejected in favor of a more “archival” approach centered around a new, hybrid, yet distinctively American descriptive concept—the record group. A third strand relates to the conceptualization and subsequent adoption of the record group, not with a view to creating a more widely applicable professional model, but as an institutional compromise that embedded the archival principles identified by European archivists while simultaneously addressing specific pragmatic considerations being faced by the National Archives in working with Federal records.

The article concludes by contemplating what can be learned from revisiting this period in archival history. In particular, this reexamination underscores how, despite a degree of genericism that exists in the production and nature of public records anywhere, distinctive national and institutional contexts can result in important differences in national archival traditions that standardization, especially international standardization, needs to take into account. It also illustrates how early archivists were practically constrained by physicality in ways that today’s technological capabilities can often overcome; but at the same time how the intellectual considerations that they identified, such as the complexities of provenance, or devising subject headings, continue to

challenge the capacity of descriptive systems in today's increasingly post-physical environment.

### ***Historical background***

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the United States, unlike most major European countries, had little substantive archival tradition, no national archives, and no education programs for the professional preparation of archivists. Although the young history profession was eager to identify national historical sources upon which it could draw in researching American history, there was also an absence of national recordkeeping consciousness. It is essential, however, to contextualize this sweeping statement with a brief review of the unique post-colonial situation of the United States at the time and how this contributed to the circumstances under which government records were maintained and which the National Archives, after it was established in 1934, had to address.

A large proportion of the records relating to the American colonies had ended up overseas in the government archives of England, Spain, and France.<sup>vi</sup> After American independence, active and inactive Federal government records were idiosyncratically filed by their agencies and scattered across multiple storage locations, with no legal means of disposing of records that were no longer current or useful. By contrast, powerful centralized registry and pré-archivage systems within government agencies in countries such as England, France, Spain, Prussia, and the Netherlands ensured a structured workflow in active record-keeping and identified, classified, controlled, and sometimes eliminated the resulting records. These systems were the basis for ideas about the life and description of records underpinning the *Dutch Manual* and the various descriptive approaches being used in European countries and their colonies. Their absence in the United States, therefore, had profound implications for the transferability of European descriptive practices.<sup>vii</sup> Because necessary documentary evidence and description were not systematically created simultaneously with a record-keeping action, it meant that archival description would have to compensate for that lack when the records eventually arrived at the archives.<sup>viii</sup>

Although it remains unclear why the Federal government did not implement registry systems, various speculations can be made. America gained its independence considerably earlier than did most other colonies, and the new nation was at that time only a fraction of its current shape and extent. Moreover, the paper required for records creation remained a scarce commodity for some years after the Revolutionary War when registry systems might have taken root. New states and their citizens tended to be resistant to strong centralization of Federal government and bureaucracy, and it is possible also that registry systems might have been viewed as emblematic of colonial-type administration and control. Certainly, transportation and communication infrastructures were poor and, as a result, records needed to be kept close to where they might be used. Whatever the reasons, this absence of registry systems marked a significant difference between government recordkeeping in the United States and in major European countries and their colonies.

The American Historical Association (AHA), founded in 1884, had quickly recognized that robust descriptive practices were an important component in making it easier for those in the emerging academic discipline of history to locate and use government records and other archival materials that were so necessary to their work. Almost immediately, the relative merits of archival and historical manuscript descriptive approaches began to be championed by different parties.<sup>ix</sup> At the urging of historian Waldo Gifford Leland,<sup>x</sup> the AHA pushed for the development of an American manual on archival arrangement and description that would incorporate the principles laid out in the *Dutch Manual*. Contrary to Emmett Leahy two decades later, Leland argued in 1912 that the fact that these “principles of archival economy” originated in European practice was of negligible import to American practice because they emanated from the generic production processes and preservation needs of bureaucratic records, rather than from the varying “conditions” and “machinery of government” in different countries.”<sup>xi</sup>

In accordance with their modern historical training as well as with methods of information organization that were emerging in many fields, early twentieth century AHA members were also concerned about establishing descriptive practices that were “scientific” in their basis. As Dunbar Rowland, Director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, put it in his address to the 1910 International Congress:

We are living in an age where there is little reverence for principles and methods which will not stand the tests that we apply to the operation of general laws, and every branch of knowledge is feeling the new impulse.<sup>xii</sup>

Rowland expressed his hope that “a great international plan for the concentration and classification of public archives” might be adopted for use by archives in all nations.<sup>xiii</sup> Later in the same speech, however, he took a very different stance from Leland’s own speech to the Congress when he invoked the utility of bibliographically-oriented historical manuscript approaches and the research orientation that characterized American manuscript repositories, drawing overt exasperation from European attendees at the Congress who were invested in the bureaucratic records-based approaches laid out in the *Dutch Manual*.<sup>xiv</sup>

Rowland was taking a similar position to that of the Library of Congress. In 1903, before the establishment of the National Archives, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress (founded in 1897) had been authorized to select and accept materials generated by the Federal government.<sup>xv</sup> To the disgust of historians such as Leland who were versed in European archival practices, rather than employing archival values and collective approaches in appraising this material, the Manuscript Division had selected what it considered to be the most interesting or historically valuable items among federal records, and then cataloged and made them available for research as individual manuscript resources. In 1919, in his annual report to the AHA, Worthington Ford, former Chief of Manuscripts at the Library of Congress, acknowledged the need for definitional clarity relating to archives and manuscripts, but acknowledging how much time could be consumed in this endeavor, declared that “scientific accuracy has its drawbacks; let us avoid them.”<sup>xvi</sup>

With AHA support, Victor Hugo Paltsits, State Historian of New York and Chairman of the AHA’s Public Archives Commission, began work in 1912 on *A Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists*, the first American effort to delineate archival practices. Paltsits’ manual was never to be completed, however, in large part due to interruptions in presenting chapters at AHA meetings because of World War I.<sup>xvii</sup> The Library of Congress had already staked out its position on descriptive

practices, having published J.C. Fitzpatrick's widely and enduringly used *Notes on the Care, Cataloguing, Calendaring and Arranging of Manuscripts* in 1913.<sup>xviii</sup> Fitzpatrick was the Chief Assistant at the Library. His text delineated a geographical-chronological approach that was criticized by successive archival leaders as not being in accordance with accepted archival principles. However, it was used right up until the adoption of the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) Format in 1983, the latter aiming to reconcile archives and manuscript descriptive approaches.<sup>xix</sup>

American archivists turned to various other texts for guidance. One such text, published in London in 1919, was Charles Johnson's pamphlet, *Care of Documents and Management of Archives*. Johnson followed the principles laid out in the *Dutch Manual* but also drew upon Prussian archivist Franz von Loehner's 1890 *Archivlehre* as well as the first and second reports of the British Royal Commission on Public Records, 1912-1914. His editorial decision would suggest that for the English context, he felt that more guidance was needed than was contained in the *Dutch Manual* alone. Certainly, he noted that not all of the terminology or document typologies in the *Dutch Manual* translated readily into English and into the English archival context.<sup>xx</sup> One might presume that Americans using the *Dutch Manual*, or indeed Johnson's pamphlet, would have encountered the same kinds of limitations and have need for similar kinds of extensions, all the more so because they were focused specifically on modern records.

In 1922, English archivist Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* was published in London, and according to Lester Cappon, became the "guide and arbiter for British and American archivists." It also had the effect of establishing and or confirming the distinctions between the archival science and history, which in America shared an organizational lineage, as professions.<sup>xxi</sup> While also based in the administration of bureaucratic records, Jenkinson's *Manual* departed, as did Johnson's, in various ways from the *Dutch Manual*. In reviewing Jenkinson's *Manual*, Dutch archivist W. Moll praised it and stated that it is:

much more extensive than our Dutch Handleiding... it contains, in addition to many rules, of whose need our Handleiding has long since convinced us, some few opinions differing therefrom and especially a great number of rules and counsels for the material care of archives.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Moll also remarked, however, that Jenkinson’s definition of what is and is not an archive is less precise than that of the *Dutch Manual*, thus again suggesting that while there might be much in common, differences in national contexts might necessitate some differences in archival concepts and practices.

### ***Establishing descriptive practices and terminology within the early National Archives***

The National Archives was finally established in the midst of this archival landscape in 1934 as a result of a lobbying coalition that included military veterans and the Daughters of the American Revolution in addition to the AHA. The coalition illustrated the different constituencies that were in play in descriptive debates as well as in the field as a whole: those who wished to be able to locate and use government records to document veteran rights and government responsibilities, as genealogical resources, and as scholarly source material. The first Archivist of the United States, Robert D.W. Connor, had been a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when he was recruited for the Archivist position by President Franklin Roosevelt. When his staff moved into the newly completed National Archives building in 1935, they were immediately faced with identifying the practices, including descriptive practices, which they would implement in the management of archival holdings.

In the absence of trained archivists, the National Archives staff was drawn from many different fields, including the history and library professions as well as political science and law, and these backgrounds quickly came into play. Following bibliographic precedent, the archives established two divisions, one relating to classification and one to cataloging. In May 1935, Roscoe Hill was appointed as Chief of the Division of Classification. Hill had been a research specialist at the Library of Congress Manuscript

Division and a history professor at various universities. He was known, among other things, for his work in foreign archives, especially in the Archives of the Indies in Seville, where he produced a catalog of records relating to America that was published by the Carnegie Institution. The press release regarding his appointment laid out the daunting challenge he now faced:

In his new position he will have to solve the problem of classifying the archives that will be transferred to the National Archives. This task will involve charting the history and duration of all government agencies and their archival serials to serve as a basis for the formulation of a logical classification and cataloguing system.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Chief of the Division of the Catalog was John R. Russell, who had previously been with the New York Public Library and who would also be appointed in the following month as a member of a new sub-committee of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)'s International Committee of Libraries that had been tasked with promoting uniformity in cataloging rules.<sup>xxiv</sup> Russell laid out his division's goal and challenge to Connor in December 1935:

On the basis of information gained from the government departments and other members of the National Archives staff, the Division of the Catalogue will formulate rules for the general catalogue and index to the government papers. This problem is probably the greatest cataloguing project which has been undertaken in recent years. Rules for the cataloguing of printed books have long been in existence, but no adequate rules exist for the cataloguing of archives.<sup>xxv</sup>

While the cataloging and classification divisions were beginning their work, Solon J. Buck, Director for Publications and Research at the National Archives,<sup>xxvi</sup> directed Archives staff to review archival manuals from other countries such as Prussia, Italy, and Poland for ideas about how to proceed and appropriate archival terminology. Leland responded in December 1935 to a request from Buck on the latter question by

underscoring that what was really at issue were descriptive methods rather than nomenclature—specifically methods that would be appropriate for the description of records rather than of bibliographic items:

At this point, let me urge that it is important to get away from library methods and practice. Archives are entirely different from books, and it would be a real misfortune if the National Archives should endeavor to incorporate library principles, practices, and notions in its procedure.<sup>xxvii</sup>

He continued later in the same letter:

As to a dictionary card catalogue, I confess that I am skeptical. It seems too much like a library device, but simply because I do not quite see how it would work out does not mean that I should be prepared to condemn it. Certainly there must be developed all sorts of devices and contrivances for getting at what is in the archives.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Leland's letter points to two of many considerations facing the Archives. One is whether, or the extent to which to adopt, adapt, or reject bibliographic practices such as those being promulgated by the Library of Congress Manuscript Division. The other is the potential of emerging techniques and technologies for information organization to increase access to archival holdings.

In February 1937, Russell wrote to Connor about the differences between national libraries and archives as part of a discussion about making the National Archives a part of the Library of Congress. He concluded that because the holdings as well as the principles and order of work of a national library and a national archives differ so much, "it can readily be seen that the organization and administration of the two institutions must be along different lines."<sup>xxix</sup> Initially, the National Archives had hoped simply to be able to employ the descriptive schemes that had been applied by the agencies that created the records. If these agencies had employed registry systems, that approach might have been feasible. By the time Russell reported to Connor, however, almost 89,000 cubic feet had

been accessioned by the Archives, and it had become apparent that this approach was not going to work because of the diversity, idiosyncrasy, and incompleteness of those schemes. Connor announced, therefore, that instead the Archives would develop its own classification and cataloging system. The initial result was an approach that blended archival and bibliographic practices.

In December 1938, Russell wrote to Theodore Calvin Pease, editor of the newly established *American Archivist*, enclosing a paper to be considered for publication on “Cataloging at the National Archives” and indicating that other archives in the country were looking to the National Archives as an example: “from the requests for information which come to my office, I believe that archivists will be interested in knowing in some detail about the cataloging work which is being done here.”<sup>xxx</sup> The paper, which was published in July 1939, stated that the National Archives had indeed established a dictionary catalog “that ... combines entries for government agencies, personal and corporate names, titles, and subjects in one alphabet.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The catalog also included “history” cards that summarized the history, organization, and functions of each government agency. Russell clearly articulated how frequent organizational and name changes in an agency could pose problems for this form of cataloging that made “hard and fast rules” practically impossible and necessitate the inclusion of explanatory statements in the cataloging record. For example, “a series may include the records of an agency bearing different names, some or all of which appear in the records, and having different administrative relationships at different points in its history.”<sup>xxxii</sup> He also remarked on the difficulty of devising appropriate subject headings, a problem still faced by archivists today. The Library of Congress Subject Headings, he observed, while they “proved to be very helpful, cannot be followed in detail, especially in the matter of subjects entered under or subdivided by the heading United States”<sup>xxxiii</sup> since the holdings of the National Archives related almost entirely to the United States. In accordance with the principle of collective description, the catalog was primarily designed as a “guide to groups of records, not to single documents,” although the latter would be possible if subsequently considered to be desirable.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The catalog complemented a novel classification scheme developed by the Division of Classification that was unlike any in use elsewhere in the United States or in

Europe.<sup>xxxv</sup> In accordance with the principle of provenance, that scheme arranged accessions under the government agencies and their subdivisions, and thereunder by type of record. Russell remarked, however, that the catalog's "greatest value is in the added entries which bring out the names and subjects that cannot easily be located in the classification schemes without such aid," and which allowed for collocation of materials on the same subject or about the same person.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Cataloging occurred in several increasingly detailed stages that procedurally echoed the principle of hierarchy of description: 1) of the entire accession, 2) of those materials within the accession that originated within a single division or sub-division of a government agency, 3) at the series level, and, if desired, 4) at the item level.<sup>xxxvii</sup> As Russell noted, expediency often determined the granularity of description that actually occurred: "Because it takes much more time and labor than division cataloging, series cataloging probably can never be applied to all the collections in the National Archives, although that procedure might be desirable."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Russell pointed out that cataloging of motion pictures, sound, printed books and pamphlets was also underway but that they warranted a separate discussion because of their own complexities. Nevertheless, he concluded that:

one fact stands out above all others, that plans and rules must be made flexible enough to fit every contingency. Useful as they are for giving guidance, rules cannot take the place of the intelligent study of the material to be cataloged and the application of good judgment in the process of cataloging.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Even as Russell's paper was published, however, it had become apparent that the approach he had articulated was neither efficient nor sustainable in a world where description needed to be manually created and updated for such extensive groups of archival materials as the National Archives was facing. In 1940, Connor tried a different approach to resolving the problems of arrangement and description and convened a Committee to Study Finding Mediums. The committee was chaired by Deputy Director of Operations Marcus Price and charged with making "a study of finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records in the custody of the Archivist."<sup>xl</sup> The other committee members were the Director of Publications, the Chief of the Division of

Reference, the Chief of the Division of War Department Archives, and the Chief of Maps and Charts. The Committee held its first of thirteen meetings in March 1940. Each of the professional divisions, including Cataloging and Classification, was requested to submit reports as well as any papers and articles written by their staff. The committee also studied publications regarding archival description published in the USSR, Poland, Germany, Italy, and France, and the work of Samuel F. Bemis of Yale University on Latin American archives. It met separately with Russell, Hill and other staff of the Divisions of Cataloging and Classification. At the Committee's invitation, Ernst Posner, former staff member of the Prussian Privy State Archives in Berlin made a presentation on finding mediums. Luther Evans, former director of the Historical Records Survey, presented on means for facilitating the use of public records.

One immediate area of dissension in the committee, apparent when Buck asked Dr. Grace Lee Nute of the Minnesota Historical Society for advice, and a precursor to discussions about instituting record groups, was over the proposed move from "cataloging" by:

accession and by division of other subordinate unit of the agency or by series of records with main entry cards, added entry cards, and subject entries. There is especially grave doubt as to the value of the subject entries. There seems to be a general agreement that cataloging by accession should be discontinued because the accession is not as a rule a logical unit for cataloging; some of us, however, think that cataloging by fond or other large archival group should be substituted for accession cataloging.<sup>xli</sup>

Nute replied that she did not have much experience with state records, as opposed to historical manuscripts, but could not "see any virtue in cataloging by accession, though complete accession records naturally must be kept." She also indicated that while she found subject entries to be quite necessary for historical manuscripts, they had never been utilized for state records, although with unlimited assistance, subject access might well be employed.<sup>xlii</sup>

Settling on terminology was a major activity of the committee, and it reviewed the ways in which different terms such as “inventory” and “calendar” were used within different archival traditions, as well as in bibliographic practice. As already noted, as early as 1935, Buck’s staff had been scouring European publications in order to determine practices and terminology that might be applied by the new national archives. At a meeting of the National Archives Committee on Terminology in 1938, each member was enjoined to “... make note of words which he sees and how they are used by competent scholars.”<sup>xliii</sup> The committee minutes cautioned, however, that:

Articles in foreign languages are of somewhat doubtful value to us since archival terms are not always used accurately or consistently by these authors. A further difficulty is occasioned by the fact that many foreign words have no exact counterpart in the English language.<sup>xliv</sup>

The committee also discussed inconsistencies between how different European countries applied the concept of the fonds, especially in Continental Europe, where a fonds often encompassed a particular registry or filing system, unlike in England, where it referred to an administration that was an organic whole.<sup>xlv</sup> It stated its rationale as to why the fonds would not work in the United States:

Because of the chaotic character of administrative organization and record filing and preservation in this country, it is doubtful if either of these concepts could be rigidly applied in American archival practices with satisfactory results. Nevertheless, some division of the holdings of a large archival establishment into major units, not too large for convenience, is very desirable. It is suggested, therefore, that such units be established somewhat arbitrarily, with due regard to the principle of provenance, and that they be designated as Archival Groups.<sup>xlvi</sup>

In the course of successive drafts of the report of the Committee on Finding Aids, however, Jenkinson’s term, “archival group” gets crossed out and becomes “record group.”

On February 28, 1941, the Archivist issued Memorandum No. A-142 “Finding Mediums” requiring the chief of each custodial division to identify and register the record groups in his custody. Leaving aside scientific precision, a “record group” was defined as “a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit a convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories.” An advisory committee established in June of that year included Paul Lewinson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Philip Hamer, Buck, and Price debated how to circumscribe and operationalize the record group (for example, should size and quantity of records be taken into consideration? what to do with legacy records?), and grappled with the complexities of provenance in dynamic government organizational structures. Buck declared that:

I think I am influenced in part by things I have read and been told about the experience of German archivists. They fell and fell hard for the principle of provenance. At first they were inclined to interpret provenance as a reference to the first agency that ever filed the papers instead of recognizing the fact that records may have three or four provenances, that they could put them in all of them, and that on the whole it is best to recognize the last rather than the first. Many of the archivists, interpreting the principle in that way, set up innumerable record fonds and the result was a complicated situation with a great many small record groups or fonds, which proved to be unsatisfactory. As a result of this experience, they have abandoned that practice and do not set up so many fonds but consider the record as parts of the fonds with which they were associated last. I would be inclined, particularly as we are starting out, not to encourage our people to set up great numbers of small fonds.<sup>xlvii</sup>

A memorandum communicating Instructions Governing the Preparation of Finding Mediums and sent from Dorsey Hyde, Director of Archival Service, to the Chiefs of Custodial Divisions, June 9, 1945, provided additional guidance. In line with the principle of *respect des fonds*, “every item of archival material in the custody of the Archivist shall be included in one, and only one, registered record group.” Five

heuristics, together with examples, were provided as guidance, with no one being considered “necessarily conclusive.” The first of these comes closest to English ideas of a fond: “1. A record group should ordinarily consist of all the records of a single autonomous record-keeping agency of the Federal Government.” The other four addressed different circumstances in which records were accumulated:

2. The records of any agency that has maintained a central file, together with those of any of its subdivisions ... records of an autonomous or semi-autonomous agency that have been deposited for safekeeping in the custody of a filing unit of a supervisory agency but not generally interfiled with its records should not as a rule be treated as part of the record group of the supervisory agency.
3. Records that have been transferred from one agency to another and so incorporated in part or in whole in the records of the latter that they cannot reasonably be segregated should usually be treated as a part of the record group of the agency that inherited them.
4. Records of discontinued agencies that have been in the custody of other agencies for safekeeping, liquidation or reference purposes should usually, together with any papers added to them in the process of liquidation, be treated as a separate record group ...
5. The records originally accumulated and preserved by field officers of an agency should not, as a rule, be considered to be parts of the record group of that agency unless they have been so incorporated with its records that they cannot conveniently be segregated or their quantity is too small to justify separate treatment ...<sup>xlviii</sup>

In 1941, when the committee delivered its report, it recommended substantial changes to and streamlining of the existing descriptive practices. In a confidential memo to Connor in January 1941, Price and Buck (who was to become the second Archivist of the United States later that year after Connor stepped down) had recommended that the committee’s report be accepted and that the divisions of Cataloging and Classification be abolished and their functions relating to finding mediums be redistributed.<sup>xlix</sup>

Classification and cataloging were duly replaced by new ideas about arrangement and description. After World War II, these were to become the basis for two publications by National Archives staff members that would be looked to by the American archival field as the standard texts that had been so lacking in the past: Theodore Schellenberg's 1956 treatise, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*. *Modern Archives*, and Oliver Wendell Holmes' 1964 *American Archivist* article, "Archival Arrangement-Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels." With these publications, the American archival tradition was finally and distinctively framed. As Frank Evans remarked in 1966, following the publication of Holmes' article:

The flexibility of the concept of arrangement as applied at the series level—a flexibility required by American recordkeeping practices—thus permits the archivist to use—either individually or in combination—chronological, organizational, or functional "classification," as that term has been used frequently in the United States. Because of American record conditions, arrangement at this level must be a constructive rather than simply a preservative kind of arrangement. It is this kind of constructive arrangement that characterizes the task of the American archivist, and it is his major contribution in making archives usable while still preserving their integrity.<sup>1</sup>

The term "classification" and its scientific overtones gradually slipped out of the American archival lexicon, today being used primarily only in records management to refer to how records are categorized for filing and ease of retrieval according to a particular scheme. In the draft of the Archivist's Foreword to Leavitt's long-awaited 1941 translation of the *Dutch Manual*, ironically quickly supplanted by Schellenberg's *Modern Archives*, National Archives staff seemed to sum up the conclusions they had drawn from the past several years of practical experiences and debate. The Foreword acknowledged that while the principles and practices promoted by the Manual evolved out of European experiences with "old records" and thus were "not always applicable to the masses of modern records with which American archivists have to deal:"

Yet in such matters as the arrangement and description of archives so as to facilitate their availability for government officials and private investigators—

matters that are the concerns of the present volume—the principles and practices developed in dealing with old records are in the main applicable to those of yesterday. Here, it seems, is one place where time-tried principles can be profitably applied to present day American archival problems; at least they are worthy of serious consideration.<sup>li</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The discourse laid out above delineates the particular post-colonial, disciplinary, and institutional contexts within which early leaders in the field were situated. It also indicates how the eventual adoption of the record group by the new National Archives as the centerpiece of its arrangement and description practices was the result of careful consideration of the nature and exigencies of the records falling under National Archives purview as well as strong awareness of and desire to apply, as much as was practicable, European practices and key principles. While these events took place over seventy years ago (and some over a century ago) and have faded in the memory of the field, especially in the era of standardized and automated description that succeeded Gracy's manual, they can still highlight several points that remain important considerations today.

Pragmatism and conceptualization often interact in advancing professional thinking and practices. Nowhere is this interdependence more apparent than in the area of description. Descriptive schemes in any information management context are idealized distillations and abstractions of actual or desired practices. Their framers almost always develop or invoke a set of guiding principles, devise some sort of conceptual model of reality, and establish precise definitions for terminology that is employed. That reality can be messy and contingent, especially when addressing the description of bureaucratic records. Thus framing descriptive practices, by its nature and of necessity, engages both practical and conceptual considerations and raises questions about the extent to which any standard or overarching set of principles can accommodate local variances. This is well-illustrated in the case discussed in this article, where the on-the-ground realities of how federal records had been created and accumulated presented compelling practical considerations. At the same time, the conceptual considerations invoked are those derived either from European archival practices or from bibliographic practice, neither of which

were grounded in that American public records reality.

Today many professional divides can be accommodated, even reconciled through standardized metadata schemes and structures capable of bridging multiple traditions, organizational histories, and documentary provenances. Indeed National Archives and Library of Congress staff came together as part of the working groups that developed first the MARC AMC Format and then Encoded Archival Description (EAD) that helped to reconcile the inventory and register approaches used in each repository respectively. However, the National Archives case discussed here surfaces several complexities of that reality and those conceptualizations that still persist today, even though various descriptive approaches have come and gone since then. Among the most notable are first, those related to how provenance is ascribed and described.<sup>lii</sup> A second is how subject headings can be devised and assigned in order to address the specificity of the archival holdings, the potential diversity of users and uses, and the effects of time and culture on terminology. And a third relates to the most effective and appropriate ways to move or map between different descriptive practices that might be employed at different institutions or by overlapping professions.

This leads to one final point. The case illustrates how early U.S. archivists were practically constrained by physicality in ways that today's technological capabilities can often overcome. Moreover, because they were not working with registry systems and because they were physically overwhelmed with the volume of unorganized records, those physical constraints had a greater impact on the development of a descriptive scheme than arguably should have been the case if they had been focusing more directly on actual characteristics of records, their genesis, relationships, and use. This concern underlies Peter Scott's famous argument for the abandonment of the record group in Australia (whose new National Archives had looked to the U.S. for a model) in favor of what was to evolve into the more ontologically robust Australian Series System.<sup>liii</sup> Today, when U.S. archivists are being exhorted by the More Product, Less Process (MPLP) approach to minimize archival description, this case should not only remind the archival field of the importance of both the physical and the intellectual aspects of archival description but also provide them with a warning about how

responding to exigencies in the present can often constrain the utility of description in the future. Regardless of whether they are manually or digitally implemented, descriptive schemes that are predicated on recordkeeping workflow, that account for the complex lineage of records and provenance, and that are not primarily driven by expediency or physical constraints such as backlog, lend themselves better to robust, consistent, complete, and enduring description that can map to ancillary descriptive standards and migrate more graciously into new descriptive frameworks as those emerge.

i Anne Gilliland

Anne Gilliland is Professor and Director of the Archival Studies specialization, Department of Information Studies, and Director of the Center for Information as Evidence, at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Her teaching and research interests relate to the design, evaluation, and history of recordkeeping; cultural and community information systems; metadata creation, management and archaeology; and community-based archiving and social justice concerns. Ongoing and recent funded research activities include the Building the Future of Archival Education and Research initiative (AERI), Strategies for Archiving the Endangered Publications of French India (1800-1923), and the InterPARES 1&2 Projects. She is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.

## NOTES

The author would like to thank Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau for her assistance with locating records relating to the development of descriptive practices at the National Archives and Records Administration.

ii David B. Gracy II, *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 3.

iii These efforts were initiated shortly after the manual's publication and include both the suite of ICA ISAD(G) standards and Encoded Archival Description (EAD). For an extended discussion of the development of American and international archival descriptive standards, see Anne J. Gilliland, *Conceptualizing Twenty-first Century Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, in press).

iv See Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54 (Spring 1991): 160-175, and Ciaran B. Trace and Andrew Dillon, "The Evolution of the Finding Aid in the United States: From Physical to Digital Document Genre," *Archival Science* 12 no.4 (2012).

v Certainly Evans lays it out based on his own National Archives experience in 1966. See Frank B. Evans, "Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 29, no. 2 (April 1966): 241-63.

vi This situation prompted multiple efforts to inventory or copy records in overseas archives, e.g., *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina* series, whose first publication was in 1886, the Carnegie Institution-sponsored *Guide to Materials for American History* in the early twentieth century, and the Virginia Colonial Records Project initiated in the 1950s.

vii Emmett Leahy, writing just after the 1939 publication of his study of European archival administration by the National Archives, noted that the registry system had important consequences for understanding the contents, and, by implication, the description of administrative records:

Lacking as we [i.e., Americans] do the salutary effects of intelligent centralized control and responsibility for accumulating official documents, achieved in Prussia by the traditional and effective Registraturen, our archivists and historians are confronted with sprawling record masses to which there is no satisfactory introduction.

Even when Federal agencies employed locally devised centralized filing systems, Leahy argued that these would be less likely to capture the same evidence of work processes as would be found in a registry system:

The registry, essentially, provides a centralized control over and custody of the current or semicurrent official records of the whole or a major part of a single administration or bureau. It differs from our average central files principally in degree of control and extent of custody over records of the agency maintaining it ... it may so centralize, arrange, and prepare inventories of modern records that similar work to be done later by the Archivist is greatly facilitated.

Emmett J. Leahy, Review of *Aktenkunde* by Heinrich Otto von Meisner, typescript, July 29, 1939. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck, Box 1. RG 64 National Archives and Records Administration.

viii Indeed, the problematic consequences of a pervasive absence of systematic, life-long control have continued to be experienced right up to present-day digital recordkeeping in the United States, since most international records management standards and digital recordkeeping software and approaches have been formulated around registry-based approaches.

ix Evans, "Modern Methods of Arrangement."

x Leland had spent part of his early career developing finding aids for American colonial materials located in European archives as part of a Carnegie Institution initiative and also was one of four AHA members who attended the 1910 International Congress.

xi Waldo Gifford Leland, Draft address to AHA, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xii Dunbar Rowland, "Importance of the Concentration and Classification of National Archives," typescript address to the 1910 International Congress on Libraries and Archives, pp.1-2. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xiii This has arguably only begun to be a reality with the development over the past two decades of the World Wide Web and international standards and protocols for developing and exchanging archival descriptions. See Rowland, "Concentration and Classification of National Archives," 1-2. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xiv "The administration of archives should be based upon the theory that their preparation for public use is the end aim of their preservation. When properly classified, bound, calendared and indexed, they are in reality nothing more than manuscript libraries, and should be made just as accessible and usable as the printed volume. In fact, in archive administration, very many library methods could be used to advantage. The card index system could be applied to volumes of manuscripts just as to collection [sic] of books. An index to a manuscript volume is not more difficult to prepare than one to a printed book, and tables of contents could be furnished with equal ease. In other words there is no reason why the improved methods of library administration should not be applied to archives collections." Rowland. "Concentration and Classification of National Archives," 9. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xv See John C.L. Andreassen, "Archives in the Library of Congress," *American Archivist* 12 no.1 (January 1949): 20-26.

xvi Worthington Ford. Typescript report to the American Historical Association, "Manuscripts and Historical Archives," 1919. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xvii See Margaret Cross Norton, "Victor Hugo Paltsits, 1867-1952," *American Archivist* (1953): 137-140 and Robert D. Reynolds, Jr., "The Incunabula of Archival Theory and Practice: J.C. Fitzpatrick's *Notes on the Care, Cataloguing, Calendaring and Arranging of Manuscripts* and The Public Archives Commission's Uncompleted 'Primer of Archival Economy'," *American Archivist* 54 (Fall 1991): 466-482.

xviii The development and impact of Fitzpatrick's *Notes* in the second two decades of the twentieth century as well as early AHA efforts to develop a manual of archival description are laid out by Reynolds in "Incunabula."

xix For example, see Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) and Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).

xx Among the examples Johnson cites are national differences in the ways that fine distinctions are drawn between types of drafts of documents and also between the final authentic document, distinguishing drafts, documents in the preliminary stages, and copies; as well as the official usage in Great Britain of the term "charter," which, unless it were a royal charter, might be described as deeds or letters patent. Charles Johnson, *Care and Management of Archives* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919), 48, typescript. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xxi Lester J. Cappon, "What Then is There to Theorize About?" *American Archivist* 45 no.1 (Winter 1982): 22.

xxii W. Moll, Review of Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration*, typescript. Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xxiii National Archives Press Release, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1935, Division of Cataloging, General Subject Files, 1935-41, Accessions, Correspondence (Foreign), Box No.1. RG64 National Archives and Records Administration.

xxiv Division of Cataloging Records.

xxv Report from John R. Russell to R.D.W. Connor, December 3, 1935, "Problems of the Division of the Catalog," 1, Division of Cataloging Records.

xxvi Buck, who went on to become the second Archivist of the United States, was previously a professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh and before that superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society.

xxvii Letter from Waldo Gifford Leland to Solon J. Buck, December 16, 1935, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xxviii Letter from Leland to Buck, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xxix Russell to Connor, "Problems of the Division of the Catalog," 2-3, Division of Cataloging Records.

xxx Letter from John R. Russell to Theodore Calvin Pease, December 3, 1938, Division of Cataloging Records.

xxxi John R. Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1939): 171.

xxxii Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 175-176.

xxxiii Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 177.

xxxiv Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 169.

xxxv Evans, "Modern Methods," 11.

xxxvi Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 169.

xxxvii Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau, "New Descriptive Formats at the National Archives," presentation to the National Archives and Records Administration, April 1988, Division of Cataloging Records.

xxxviii Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 170.

xxxix Russell, "Cataloging at the National Archives," 178.

xl Report of the Committee to Study Finding Mediums, January 1941, Division of Cataloging Records.

xli Buck to Grace Lee Nute, August 19, 1940, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xlii Letter from Nute to Buck, August 23, 1940, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

xliii Minutes of the Committee on Terminology, March 17, 1938, Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, 1789 - ca. 2007, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

xliv Minutes of the Committee on Terminology, Records of the National Archives and Records Administration.

xlv The influence of this work is evident in 1940, when Buck, ever the advocate of terminological precision, includes the following prefatory note to “Some Thoughts on Archival Finding Mediums” that he prepared for the Committee on Finding Mediums:

... the word ‘fond’ will be used as a noun in approximately the sense in which the French use the word “fonds”; the Germans “bestand”; the Dutch “archieff”; the Polish, “zespól”; and the Russians “fond.” Jenkinson has proposed the use in English of the term “archival group” for this concept, but it has not received general recognition, and American archivists have tended to use the French word “fonds.”

Solon J. Buck, “Some Thoughts on Archival Finding Mediums,” August 2, 1940, Division of Cataloging Records.

xlvi Minutes of the Committee on Finding Mediums, Division of Cataloging Records.

xlvii Division of Cataloging Records.

xlviii “Instructions Governing the Preparation of Finding Mediums, “Memorandum from Dorsey Hyde to Chiefs of Custodial Divisions, June 9, 1941, Committee of Finding Mediums, Division of Cataloging Records.

xlix Solon J. Buck and Marcus Price, Memorandum to Robert Connor, 15 January, 1941, Division of Cataloging Records.

l Evans, “Modern Methods,” 261.

li Draft of the Archivist’s Foreword, Subject Files of Solon J. Buck.

lii For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Anne J. Gilliland, “Contemplating Co-creator Rights in Archival Description,” *Knowledge Organization* 39 no.5 (September 2012): 340-346.

liii See Peter Scott, “The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment,” *American Archivist* 29 (October 1966): 493-504.