Effective Processing: An Archival Reader

A Revised Proposal for a Reader on Archival Processing,
Submitted by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, February 2012

Theme, Purpose, and Scope of the Publication

The reader is intended to be a compilation of formal articles and published guidelines and manuals that comprise the most useful, enduring, and authoritative body of shorter writings that specifically address the physical processing of archives and manuscript collections. One primary purpose of the editors in bringing these writings together is to provide a body of works that, in a single title, supports longer manuals and textbooks on archival processing used in college and university coursework. A second purpose is to directly support the needs of continuing education instructors who need a single title that can supply authoritative background readings for workshop offerings in this area. But a third important reason is simply to provide a single work for archival practitioners that collocates sound advice and thinking on this topic—some new, and some that has accumulated over the years, but which can still be difficult to locate and acquire.

The editors have been deeply involved over the past several years in a study of processing literature and practice. In the course of that research and writing, the existing titles to be included in this reader have clearly identified themselves as superior works of clarity, insight, and sound practical advice. The editors believe that republishing them in this volume will provide an important professional service. They also believe that SAA will benefit from repurposing a body of focused content that dovetails so nicely with needs of archival educators, students, and practitioners, and which can therefore be cross-marketed in a number of ways. These repurposed articles from the archival canon will be augmented by several recent works (some previously unpublished) that either treat unconventional and problematic processing formats or which offer new thinking on the topics of processing methodologies and productivity.

Furthermore, the recent popularity of professional conference sessions that have reported on the editors' research project speak clearly to the receptivity of archivists for writings in this topical area, especially a work of this character. We are therefore suggesting including, not only the 2005 MPLP article, but also the authors' five-year retrospective piece (*Journal of Archival Organization, 2011)*, as well.

Format and Length of the Reader

The editors envision a work of approximately 250 pages, divided into five sections of content, each of which will contain 2-4 works. Those sections will be supplemented by a general preface, by individual chapter introductions, and by one or more appendices that add value to the writings. A good integrated index to all of these works, something lacking until now, will also really benefit access to this content.

Each reprinted work in the reader will be prefaced by a very brief introduction from the editors. These introductions will provide some explanatory context to the articles and suggest their ongoing points of relevance and value.

Annotated Table of Contents

Introduction
A general preface by the editors (ca. 5 pages) will discuss the nature and purpose of the reader, and will assess and contextualize (as a whole) the articles comprising the work. This contextualizing piece will discuss the significance of the works and how they fit into the small canon of processing literature.

Traditional Thinking
> Holmes, Oliver W. "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Options at Five Different Levels." In Daniels, Maygene F., and Walch, Timothy, eds. *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1984): 162-180 (Originally published in *American Archivist* 27 (January 1964).
>> *A seminal writing on archival arrangement, which is both a classic and a work that holds up well today. It reinforces the important notion of hierarchy in archival thinking, and applies that notion to arrangement and physical processing. In so doing, it considers the appropriate extent of the work that we ought to perform in arranging collection materials at five different intellectual levels characterizing archival materials.*

> Schellenberg, T. R. "Archival Principles of Arrangement." In Daniels, Maygene F., and Walch, Timothy, eds. *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1984): 149-161 (Originally published in *American Archivist* 24 (January 1961).
>> *Another classic work that relates the fundamental archival principles of provenance and original order to arrangement, but, in doing so, also offers refreshing practical advice on performing processing activities with economy and good planning. This work is a natural companion to the Holmes article and presages some of the sound practical advice that followed in the 1980s.*

> Thibodeau, Sharon. "Archival Arrangement and Description." In Bradsher, James Gregory, ed.. *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1988): 67-77.
>> *This chapter effectively elucidates the relationship of provenance and original order to modern arrangement and description, as well as strongly arguing for the archival series as the fundamental focus of processing work. While the piece differs from Greene-Meissner in proposing the series, rather than the record group or collection, as the minimum level of arrangement and description, it reinforces the thesis that arrangement and description should be "appropriate, efficient and effective."*

Practical Advice and Guidelines
> Desnoyers, Megan. "When is it Processed?." In Daniels, Maygene F., and Walch, Timothy, eds. *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1984): 309-325 (Originally published in *Midwestern Archivist* VII:2 (1982).

One of the essential but rarely cited gems concerning archival processing work. Desnoyers offers clear, well-reasoned advice on processing collection materials effectively and economically. This article has been endlessly used by practitioners over the years to train interns and new archivists. It really needs to be pushed more aggressively out to a larger audience.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Libraries. *Processing Manual for the Institute Archives and Special Collections, M.I.T. Libraries* (1981).
> *A work that was published for and focused on training an internal audience, this repository manual has nevertheless influenced a large number of archivists who have been exposed to its clear and pointed advice on the appropriate levels of work involved in archival processing projects. It deserves wider and continuing exposure.*

Northeastern University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, *Processing Manual* (September 2002).
> *Although derived in part from the MIT processing manual, the Northeastern University work still manages to offer its own fresh vision and sound advice on processing materials thoroughly but efficiently. It can offer effective guidance to all students and practitioners and merits exposure to a larger audience.*

Roe, Kathleen D. *Guidelines for Arrangement and Description of Archives and Manuscripts: A Manual for Historical Records Programs in New York State* (Albany, N.Y.: University of the State of New York, New York State Education Department, and New York State Archives and Records Administration, 1991).
> *Another manual intended for a limited audience, Roe's work nevertheless has universal applicability that should be made more easily accessible to a larger community. Well written and carefully explained, Roe's advice in some ways offers a good distillation of the information in her 2005 SAA processing manual.*

Analysis and Criticism of Archival Practice

Erickson, Paul, and Schuster, Robert. "Beneficial Shocks: The Place of Processing-Cost Analysis in Archival Administration." *American Archivist* 58 (Winter 1995): 32-53.
> *This fine article not only offers its own original processing advice, but also effectively summarizes many previously published articles on the same general topic of processing metrics and productivity—how we measure and compare what we do, from cycle to cycle and from repository to repository, so that we can develop more effective procedures. A thought provoking guide to planning.*

Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: . . . ." *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005).
> *Our own article summarizes and critiques the literature on processing, reports on our own survey-based research, and offers our findings and recommendations for rethinking our general approach to processing work, and arguing for higher productivity expectations. It is a useful synthesis of, and context for, many of the other readings in this work.*

Lynch, Karen Temple, and Lynch Thomas E. "Rates of Processing Manuscripts and Archives." *Midwestern Archivist* 7 (1982): 25-34.
> *A good, fairly detailed analysis of the productivity results from 48 NHPRC processing grants that shines a spotlight on our profession's attitudes and practices concerning physical processing in terms of particular tasks and productivity.*

Slotkin, Helen W., and Lynch Karen T. "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach." *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 155-163.
> *Taking off from their work on the MIT processing manual, the authors use its prescriptions as a basis for articulating a flexible approach to processing planning that emphasizes the needs of particular collections, and users, over absolute and arbitrary arrangement and preservation practices.*

Problematic Archival Holdings   *[a working title……]*

Foster, Ann M. "Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections," *Archival Issues* 30 (2006): 107-118.
> *To the best of our knowledge, the only brief published work that attempts to advise practitioners to arrange and describe photo images at something approaching archival scale, rather than as discretely cataloged items. The community would benefit from wider exposure of this content.*

[Chapter on processing audio and moving image materials to be written by Greene and Meissner. This content seems important, and we have not been able to locate, or to successfully commission, practical writing on this topic.]

[Chapter on processing born-digital holdings. Here, again, necessary content that to the best of our knowledge has not yet appeared in archival literature. We are in the process of securing a team of writers in our own repositories who have gained useful experience in this area.]

Looking Forward

McFarland, Colleen. "Rethinking the Business of Small Archives," *Archival Issues* 31 (2007): 137-149.
> *Sound arguments stressing the importance of making processing and other archival functions and programs user-focused and use- driven.*

Meissner, Dennis and Mark A. Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization*, 8 (2011): 174-226.
> *This article's primary value is its updating of the processing-related literature in the five years following the publication of MPLP. It also reemphasizes key MPLP messages that were lost or misinterpreted by some early readers and adopters.*

Audience and Market
As noted several times in this prospectus, the editors believe that educators, students, and practitioners of archival arrangement and description are all solid audiences for such a reader. A one-volume compilation of authoritative works on archival processing can support the needs of educators who need a convenient, well organized, and contextualized set of readings for graduate students and workshop attendees. In terms of cross-marketing potential, a reader could support the development of one or more SAA workshops in archival processing, stimulating that revenue stream. Then, the workshops can further stimulate reader sales by building the title into the course materials. The popularity of the research that the editors have been reporting on testifies to the market among current practitioners.

The editors are confident that, with appropriate marketing, this reader could easily sell 1,000 copies within three years of publication.

Anticipated Schedule
Since most of the content is already acquired, the editors visualize a fairly speedy development and production timeline:

- Acceptance date-April 2006: Acquire republishing rights to all works; digitize non-digital content (editors to do at their own expense)
- September 2011-June 2012: Editors and authors write introductions, new content
- September 2012: Submission and review of final draft
- December 2012: Delivery of final manuscript into production stream

Possibilities of Co-Sponsorship and Outside Financial Support
The editors have not seriously investigated the possibility of subvention. It seems to the editors, however, that a strong market for this sort of reader has already identified itself, and that SAA would not be taking on significant risk by proceeding without additional support.

Graphics and Illustrations the Publication Might Use
The editors do not envision the need for graphic materials or photographs other than those that were published with the original works.