FROM THE CHAIR

Martha Bace

Happy New Year, everyone! Okay, raise your hand if you find yourself still writing 2017 instead of 2018!

It was a real pleasure to see so many of you in Portland in August. We had a great meeting with several informative reports and updates. We also heard two very good presentations; one from Jackie Dooley (OCLC), Kate Bowers (Harvard) and Alexis Antracoli (Princeton) on the OCLC Research Library Partnership, and the other by Anila Angjeli (Bibliothèque nationale de France, BNF) on the RDA Mapping project pilot for the Interoperable Archival Authorities in France.

Not long after getting back from Portland, Margaret Nichols from Cornell and Diane Ducharme of Yale approached the Description Section Steering Committee about endorsing the new standard proposed by the Bibliographic Standards Committee of RBMS called "Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Manuscripts)," or DCRM(MSS) for short. This new standard addresses a long-standing need for a national standard for the description of single modern manuscripts. Previously, the only standards for single manuscripts were APPM (Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts), now out of print and no longer supported by SAA, and AMREMM (Descriptive Cataloging of Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early-Modern Manuscripts), which only addresses medieval and renaissance manuscripts. As part of a group of DCRM standards (including manuals for rare books, serials, maps, and music), DCRM(MSS) provides useful guidance for archivists, other rare materials catalogers, and general catalogers. DCRM(MSS) is compatible with DACS and can be considered a companion standard to DACS, which does not itself address single manuscripts adequately. I am pleased to say that the Steering Committee did in fact

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endorse DCRM(MSS). If you haven't had a chance to look at the document, I would encourage you to read it over. You can find it here: http://rbms.info/files/dcrm/dcrmmss/DCRMMSS.pdf.

I know it's only January, but the Steering Committee has already received a presentation proposal for our meeting this summer. August will be here before we know it, and we are looking for speakers for the Description Section meeting at the 2018 SAA Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. As I said, we currently have one presentation proposal, but we have space and time for more! Have you been working on a description project that you want to share? Proposals will be accepted through July 31, 2018. If you have a project that you'd like to share, please send a project description (300 words or less) along with a link to the project to me at mabace@ua.edu.

Finally, I would also like to encourage you to consider running for a leadership position in the Description Section. It's a great way to get more involved in the section and the larger SAA organization. So give it some thought when the call for nominations goes out a little later on this spring!

Looking forward to seeing you in DC!!

FROM THE VICE-CHAIR
Elizabeth Wilkinson

Happy New Year! The spring semester has started and hopefully we are all recharged from our winter breaks to gear up again. Students and researchers are back and we are getting busy in our repositories, classrooms, and reading rooms.

I am delighted to be your new Vice-Chair! I am looking forward to working with the Steering Committee to bring you the programming and information you need. This coming year promises to be one filled with lots of activity. The Steering Committee has already started planning for next year's Annual Meeting.

Please consider contributing articles, news items, and announcements to the section newsletter. It is a great way to share the exciting new initiatives and other work that you are doing with your colleagues. In addition, if you have any suggestions for activities or programming that the steering committee should consider, please do not hesitate to email me at ewilkinson@virginia.edu or another member of the section leadership.

I am looking forward to seeing you all in August!

NEWS & NOTES

A Processing Conundrum

Barbara Austen, Librarian II, Connecticut State Library

For more than 15 years, the papers of politician and businessman John Henry Roraback sat untouched on shelves in their brown expansion folders at the Connecticut State Library. There are several reasons for the backlog, with which we can all relate. Part of the problem has been a lack of staff. I was recently re-hired by the Connecticut State Library as a reference librarian within the History and Genealogy Unit, which provides access to the State Archives collections. I was assigned the task of processing the Roraback papers to make good use of my archival skills. I am about a third of the way through the collection, which dates from 1892 to 1937 and currently measures about 9½ cubic feet.

Roraback was a political boss in Connecticut and the unelected chairman of the Republican State Central Committee during the early twentieth century. During this period, the country was facing issues related to women's suffrage, temperance, workmen's compensation, the World Court, child and female labor, and the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Correspondence from political figures and the general public document those issues and Roraback's influence over politics at the state and national level. The collection also details his aggressive acquisition of land for dams and power plants for the Connecticut Light and Power Company, of which he was president.

The challenge with the collection is that it was heavily used in the research and writing of a dissertation about Roraback in 1971, and the researcher rearranged it to meet his needs. He gathered letters and documents together (with now-rusty paperclips) and labeled them with scraps of lined yellow paper. He noted on those scraps information such as the year, whether the letters were personal, political, or business, and if they were internal or external (with no definition of the latter terms). The researcher also added comments such as "not used" on some groups, interfiled more slips of paper with suggestions for further research, and re-foldered the entire collection so any original order was totally lost. A few folder remnants and notes indicate Roraback may have arranged things topically.

After a great deal of discussion and reflection, the archives staff and I decided to retain the researcher's notes in a separate folder but to put the correspondence into chronological order, dividing the collection into series such as Correspondence, Connecticut Republican State Central Committee, Investments, and Financial Records. The researcher's divisions into business, political, and personal correspondence seemed too artificial. In addition, we lacked any definition of his

terms and the letters refuse to fit neatly into any one category. As I continue delving into the collection I am sure other issues will arise, and I may gain greater insight into how Roraback kept his records. However, the end result will be a collection that is significantly more user-friendly.

Two Birds with One Stone: Student-Created Finding Aids

Jaycie Vos, Special Collections Coordinator & University Archivist, University of Northern Iowa

At the University of Northern Iowa's (UNI) Rod Library, Special Collections & University Archives (SC&UA) is updating practices to better serve patrons, improve access to collections, and align with professional standards in a meaningful, consistent way. Finding aids for manuscript and archival collections have been inconsistent and idiosyncratic over time, many collections have no finding aid online or in print, and few students set foot in the reading room. As one approach to address these issues, during the fall 2017 semester I developed an assignment in collaboration with a history faculty member designed to both improve description practices and engage students with the collections that involved graduate students in an introductory historical methods class creating DACS-compliant finding aids for collections that had no existing formal description.

To begin, I created documentation and training materials to implement DACS at UNI for finding aids for new and existing collections. I selected unrestricted collections, each about 2.5 linear feet, from university archives that had no finding aids for the students to explore. The students came to the reading room, many for the first time, where I held a 90-minute instructional session introducing basic archival principles, the DACS elements they would use, and detailed instructions and additional resources for the assignment. Working in small groups, the students selected a collection, and over the course of one month, went through the collections in the reading room and conducted additional research to prepare their finding aids. In addition to handing in a completed finding aid, each student submitted a short reflection paper about their experience.

While the finding aids are not perfect, the results were overwhelmingly positive both in terms of product and what the students and SC&UA gained. In relation to my goal of

DESCRIPTION SECTION LEADERSHIP

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improving archival description, this assignment helped me identify portions of DACS training and general workflow and description documentation that needed fine tuning and clarification. It also provided solid first drafts of finding aids for four university archives collections that otherwise might have remained description-less for years to come. In relation to my student engagement goal, the assignment not only increased the number of patrons visiting the reading room, but student reflections and history faculty feedback indicate that students' archival research skills significantly improved and they feel much more comfortable and confident handling and interpreting manuscripts and archival materials after learning the nuts and bolts of DACS and archival description firsthand. As one student summarized in their reflection:

> This process of putting together a finding aid is so important for history graduate students to learn. It forces them to actually go to archives, learn how to work with primary sources, and talk to archivists; something which many of the people in the class have not had to do before this assignment…There is no better way to learn about them and how to use them than to have us make one…Going forward, archives will be at the top of the list for places to look for potential source material.

Nearly all of the students reported that before the assignment, they did not know what a finding aid was or how to use it. This changed as they completed the instructional session and the assignment; they now feel more empowered as researchers, and they can apply this newfound knowledge in archives beyond UNI. Another student explains:

> As I thought about the assignment more, I realized that the purpose of a finding aid is not to interpret all the evidence. It seems to me, as an amateur historian, that supplying the basic 'who, what, when, where' questions is sufficient for a finding aid and it is the job of the historian to comb through each individual piece and really examine the content and meaning of the material.

Since the assignment, many of the students have returned to SC&UA to conduct research or to consult with me on research queries, and at least two of these students are preparing thesis proposals heavily centered on research they will conduct using the collections. The history faculty member has expressed great interest in continuing this assignment in future semesters, and we are currently developing assignments appropriate for undergraduate students. Though this assignment is only one small step toward improving description practices, it provided an opportunity to work toward these goals in an environment with limited staffing and resources, and the outcomes established avenues for future student success.

FEATURE STORY

Sailing to Access!
New Description for the Philadelphia Custom House Records

L. Rebecca Johnson Melvin and Jaime Margalotti, Special Collections and Museums, University of Delaware Library

Special Collections staff at the University of Delaware Library are delighted to announce the completion of an archival finding aid to the Philadelphia Custom House records, a classic "hidden collection" of early American historical significance that has been at the library since 1972. Arranged "roughly" chronologically by unknown hands at some point in the distant past, the collection had no inventories, container lists, or narrative description, but it was available to researchers with staff assistance. In addition to the new finding aid, a new Omeka-hosted exhibit provides illustrated document descriptions to help teach students and researchers about the record-keeping practices and record types found in the Custom House collection. Both description products are the work of Elizabeth Jones-Minsinger, a former graduate assistant and recent PhD in History from the University of Delaware.

In 2016, undergraduate Daniel Thompson humidified, flattened, and ordered documents that had been stuffed into acidic boxes since 1972.

Spanning the dates 1779-1932, the Philadelphia Custom House records document American commerce, shipping, foreign trade, consumerism, and material culture. This collection is significant for Mid-Atlantic regional and national history, from the early Federal period to post World War I when the United States began to emerge as a global power. Cathy Matson, Richards Professor of North American History in the History Department at the University of Delaware, has found the documents in the Philadelphia Custom House records to be a valuable supplement to shipping and private commercial papers in other mid-Atlantic collections. She notes, "Especially for the early period covered in this collection, the records held in Special Collections at UD provide important insights into how merchants, sailors, and insurance brokers assessed their risks at sea, the prices of goods, and the costs of doing commercial business in the early republic."

The Philadelphia Custom House records is an important collection, too, as it reflects record-keeping and administrative regulatory growth in the federal government. The new description tools present archivists and historians with a case study in private ownership of public records and the importance of relating document types to transactional functions in order to understand their historical significance.

Prior to 2017, the collection was housed in document boxes roughly sorted and labeled *by decades*, 1790-1930. In the 1980s, scholars from the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture were allowed to select and microfilm documents related to the importation of ceramics, glass, textiles, and similar material goods. Located in Delaware and founded by Henry Francis du Pont, Winterthur Museum Libraries and Garden (pronounced "winter-tour") is the premier museum of American decorative arts, supported by a research library that serves scholars worldwide. The Winterthur Program in American Material Culture is affiliated with the University of Delaware, which also partners in the Winterthur-UD Program in Conservation. Thus, a very limited but scholarly community was aware of the collection via publications citing the Winterthur microfilm. The collection was also known and used by Special Collections staff in coursework with students and faculty. UD Library's consideration of future digitization of this collection, coinciding with availability of a talented processor in our former graduate assistant, Elizabeth Jones-Minsinger, finally prompted the 2017 processing of the Philadelphia Custom House records, a true albatross from our backlog of hidden collections.

In 2017, history doctoral student Elizabeth Jones-Minsinger processed and described the Philadelphia Custom House records.

In a 2016 pre-processing project, an undergraduate performing service hours for a history class humidified, flattened, and more accurately ordered the collection. In 2017, Jones-Minsinger processed the collection and wrote the finding aid. Jones-Minsinger researched U.S. Custom House collections at other institutions and consulted Douglas L. Stein's classic *American Maritime Documents* (Mystic Seaport, 1992). In the course of processing the Philadelphia records, Jones-Minsinger even discovered what would become two separate collections: The United States Customs District of Maryland records, and the Ships' Bills of Health collection. The resulting Philadelphia Custom House finding aid employs a legacy chronological arrangement, but enhances scholarly access to the content with sub-groups in each year by document type. The contents list with this chronological and sub-arrangement by document type also becomes the framework for future extensible description, if needed, for a digitization project.

A rich scope note explains this arrangement and leverages document types to understand the historical functions of the Custom House. Unique reference links in this finding aid point to an online exhibition, *Selections from the Philadelphia Custom House Records*. This exhibit, also created by Jones-Minsinger, illustrates the document genres

found in the collection and describes how they functioned to support American commerce and maritime travel. Both the finding aid and the exhibit are complementary teaching tools that help us understand primary sources for maritime history.

The introductory historical note provides an important "note on provenance and history of the collection" to explain the collection's complicated background. The finding aid and accompanying exhibit are a gateway for researchers, not only to the Philadelphia records, but also to related custom house resources in other repositories. The bibliographic information in the "sources" field is useful. Use of the fields for "related materials," "related materials in other repositories," and "separated materials" also helps researchers understand the collection and locate other resources.

This new finding aid was created using ArchivesSpace and is presented on the Library's instance of XTF. DACS, LSCH, LCNAF, and Getty AAT are the standards used for archival description and access terms. The contents list of the finding aid preserves the collection's legacy chronological order and Winterthur project identification with new sub-arrangements by document type. This approach was also planned in anticipation of how the contents list might relate to future digitization plans; it is extensible as might be needed to link to digitized items.

This was a significant description project and we are proud to recognize the work of our young colleague, Liz Jones-Minsinger, for her fine work.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

DACS Principles Revision Process
Submitted by Cassie Schmitt on behalf of the Technical Subcommittee for DACS

TS-DACS began discussing a potential revision to the DACS Principles in 2016 and convened a meeting at SAA's Annual Meeting in Atlanta to discuss if a revision was needed. Based on that meeting, TS-DACS and invited guests met in person in Farmington, Connecticut, in March 2017. This meeting produced a draft of new principles that was shared with the archival community with a request for comments and questions. At the SAA Portland Annual Meeting in August 2017 participants met to review the feedback from the comment period. Based on this review, TS-DACS is working on a further revision to the draft principles and beginning work on creating introductory materials to help explain what the principles are and how they are used. We expect to share this revision with the community in 2018 for another round of feedback.

TS-DACS co-chairs Adrien Hilton and Maureen Callahan will be presenting a workshop: Principled Archivists: How to Make the New DACS Principles Work for You and Your Users at the March 2018 meeting of the New England Archivists.

DACS Change Requests

TS-DACS is reviewing a change request for the "Create License Archival Description Section." The request is to add a new required element to Chapter 8 of DACS for licensing of archival description so that repositories could use this element to declare that they are making the finding aid itself available under a license, such as machine actionable Creative Commons licenses. You can view the change request as well as changes and comments on the GitHub site.

Anyone in the community can put forth a change requests for DACS. The main DACS GitHub site has instructions for how to submit a request. You can also comment on new requests that are submitted by other community members. If you've never used GitHub, the DACS page has instructions for how to create an account and work with DACS as well as the full process TS-DACS takes when reviewing potential changes.

DACS Workshop

The revised DACS workshop launched last year in a "Flipped" format. Lectures and quizzes occur before the workshop with the in-person workshop focusing on coaching, exercises, and working through examples. You can view the lectures and quizzes for free! This year the group has been working on revising the workshop for DACS, Part II. Stay tuned for more information later in the year. In addition, TS-DACS is working to improving supporting materials for instructors to improve the workshop experience.

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Introducing the UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description

Project Background

Recently, four digital archivists from across the University of California (UC) system—Shira Peltzman (UCLA), Annalise Berdini (UC San Diego), Kate Tasker (UC Berkeley), and Charlie Macquarie (San Francisco)—collaborated to develop and release a community-driven UC-wide descriptive standard for born-digital archival material. Born of discussions that began in the UC Common Knowledge Group (CKG) for born-digital content, the result is a set of guidelines for creating and

updating finding aids to include born-digital archival material. The guidelines came about because the authors recognized a gap in existing guidelines and standards (i.e., DACS, ISAD(G), etc.) and saw an opportunity to come together to standardize what were sometimes disparate descriptive practices in this developing area. For example, should the *extent* metadata element refer to storage capacity; number of files; number of media objects, processed or not? We were all using this element slightly differently, and having a difficult time finding existing comprehensive guidance.

Methodology & Process

To create these guidelines, the first step for us was to separate out theory from practice. On the practical side, this meant looking at a range of finding aids from institutions around the world so that we could get a better sense of how much consensus there was in the digital archives community. Tori Maches, Scott Reed, and Patricia Ciccone, Digital Archives Program Scholars in UCLA's Center for Primary Research and Training, assisted with this work by compiling a lengthy list of finding aids from around the world that described born-digital material. A key finding from this exercise was that practically every single institution had their own unique approach. We concluded that born-digital description was being treated as a somewhat boutique procedure across the board, and that this was impacting the accessibility and usability of the material being described.

On the theoretical side, our next task was to look at all the existing descriptive standards and content models out there that touched on this subject. The major takeaway here was pretty much what we expected it would be, which is to say that these standards all had significant gaps when it came to born-digital.

After determining which fields we'd need to address and creating a basic document outline, we began scheduling weekly or bi-weekly conference calls to discuss the document and the work that each of us had completed in between calls. Starting in February 2017, we worked individually on assigned sections and used Google Docs to communicate questions and comments, and to provide suggested edits between meetings. We completed the first draft in May 2017 and submitted the document for review to the UC Born-Digital Content CKG. Members had a month to submit feedback and suggest changes or additions. Following their review, we sent the document out to the UC system, asking our fellow CKG members to alert collection management or processing members at their institutions in particular. We allowed another month for this round of review, and after numerous edits and additions, including the addition of a controlled vocabulary and full sample finding aid, we had a document ready to present to the UC Heads of Special Collections for approval. This was obtained October 2017, and designated the guidelines as UC-official and ready to be implemented across all UC libraries.

Contents of UC Guidelines

The [UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description](#) present recommendations for describing born-digital content in an archival finding aid, using 12 standard elements such as Scope and Content, Processing Information, and Organization and Arrangement. The document offers guidance on determining an appropriate level and method of description of born-digital components, establishes a minimum standard requirement for finding aids in the UC system, and includes a metadata fields crosswalk, a sample finding aid, and links to additional resources. It also contains a comprehensive controlled vocabulary for born-digital source media and other born-digital terms, developed by Courtney Dean, Margaret Hughes, Kelly Kress, and Shira Peltzman at UCLA.

Screenshot of the 12 descriptive elements covered in the UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description, which can be found here: *License: CC-BY-SA*

We're excited to see that these guidelines are already helping to grow and sustain digital archives programs at each of our institutions. The task of analyzing each of the descriptive elements prompted critical thinking and discussion among multiple staff

members, and investigating these questions has helped us clarify procedures and provide practical solutions. With the backing of the UC Common Knowledge Group and the Heads of Special Collections, the guidelines can also be used as an authoritative resource by individuals or units who need to advocate for new digital processing workflows.

We hope that the UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description will serve not only as a practical tool for UC archivists, but also as a useful illustration of UC-wide practices and as a set of instructions which can be easily adapted and adopted by our professional community.

Where you can access the Guidelines

The UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description can be found on <u>GitHub</u>. While the formal comment period has ended, we welcome feedback, suggestions, and questions. Please take a look and let us know what you think.

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UPCOMING CONFERENCES & WORKSHOPS

2018 Western Archives Institute
Ellen E. Jarosz, Associate Administrator, Western Archives Institute

The 32nd annual Western Archives Institute (WAI) will be held at San Diego State University from **June 10-22, 2018**. WAI is an intensive, two-week program that provides integrated instruction in basic archival practices to individuals with a variety of backgrounds, including those whose jobs require a fundamental understanding of archival skills, but who have little or no previous archives education; those who have expanding responsibility for archival materials; those who are practicing archivists but have not received formal instruction; and those who demonstrate a commitment to an archival career.

The Institute also features site visits to historical records repositories and a diverse curriculum that includes history and development of the profession, theory and terminology, records management, appraisal, arrangement, description, manuscripts acquisition, archives and the law, photographs, preservation administration, reference and access, outreach programs, and managing archival programs and institutions. Dennis Meissner has agreed to serve as the 2018 Principal Faculty Member. Mr. Meissner recently retired from his job as Interim Deputy Director for Programs at the Minnesota Historical Society, and is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (SAA.) He has participated in a number of SAA and international efforts focused on the arrangement, description, and management of archival materials, and presently

serves on the board of the SAA Foundation and on the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

Meissner has worked closely with the design, delivery, and management of electronic finding aids to archival collections, and has participated in numerous U.S. and international working groups in the development and delivery of collection descriptions and the standards that underlie them, including chairing RLG's EAD Best Practices Working Group and serving on the Encoded Archival Context Working Group. He has consulted and presented workshops on archival processing and description and has published largely in those areas, but also in the area of business records management.

In 2003 he and Mark Greene (American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming) were awarded a yearlong NHPRC Archival Research Fellowship to study archival processing expectations and backlogs in U.S. repositories and to recommend changes to existing practices. That research led to an article in the American Archivist, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," which has since enjoyed a strong uptake within the archival community.

Tuition for WAI is $725 and includes a selection of archival publications. Other non-negotiable fees include program transportation and facility fees. Housing and meal plans are available at additional cost. To assist in tuition payment, a WAI Scholarship is available. For more information see http://calarchivists.org/Awards_Scholarships/WAI.

The application deadline is **Friday, February 16, 2018.** For additional program information, see http://calarchivists.org/WAI, or contact:

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Telephone: (916) 653-7715
E-mail: ArchivesWeb@sos.ca.gov

The Western Archives Institute is co-sponsored by the Society of California Archivists and the California State Archives. The application is available on the Society of California Archivists website at http://calarchivists.org/WAI and on the California State Archives website at http://www.sos.ca.gov/archives/admin-programs/western-archives-institute/.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

**SUMMER 2018 ISSUE OF
*DESCRIPTIVE NOTES***

**Do you have a photo, article, or
announcement to share?**

We'd love to hear about your
projects, anecdotes, news items,
workshops, feature stories, and all
things description!

Contact the newsletter editor:
cherijcrist@gmail.com

Deadline: June 22, 2018