Archival History
Roundtable Newsletter

Summer, 1997

Archival History and the Archives Listserv

Archival history topics have appeared several times on the Archives Listserv. A questioner asked about the development of state archives and why they started in the Southeastern states. Responses touched upon Thomas Owen of Alabama and his collecting interests; the placement of archives’ functions with state historical societies or state libraries; and the 1850 law passed by the California legislature, “Act Concerning the Public Archives.”

There was also an extended discussion on the definition of records. Many participants delved into the writings of archival theorists such as Miller, Feith, and Fruin; Posner; and Schellenberg. More recently a similar sort of discussion, although perhaps less serious, focused on provenance and fonds.

SAA and Roundtables

SAA has been undergoing a review of its structure. The Task Force on Organizational Effectiveness [TFOE] has presented its report to SAA Council. It attempted to clarify the roles of various components of SAA including committees, sections, and roundtables. The portion dealing with sections and roundtables has presented some difficulty. The current proposal would make roundtables discussion groups which only meet during the annual convention and have no communication among members outside of the annual session. Since this is essentially the role which the Archival History Roundtable fills now, there will be little impact on this group. However, many other roundtables are much more active and serve their members in important informational ways. Therefore there was some discontent with the TFOE report as regarded roundtables. The issue has not yet been settled by Council.

Archival History Bibliography


Archival History
SAA Session Suggestions

Two proposals have been suggested for future SAA conference sessions on archival history topics. One stems from the approaching centennial of state archives which started as separate organizations. Thomas Owen founded the first in Alabama in 1901 followed by Mississippi and Pennsylvania. Speakers might look at the people who founded these organizations; the agencies by state or by region; state archival practices before the establishment of special agencies; etc. One person has indicated an interest in giving a paper on the development of one of the early state archival agencies.

If you would be interested in presenting a paper along these lines, please contact Bruce Turner. At the very least, such a session should be presented to the SAA program committee for the 2001 conference. It was also suggested that SAA might considering meeting in the Southeast in 2001 to commemorate this centennial. Birmingham, AL might be a logical site.

A second program proposal has been suggested by Alfred Lemmon of The Historic New Orleans Collection. I asked him to present his idea:

“In the 1910s and ’20s, the Carnegie Institute funded two projects to further control over materials relating to U.S. history in French and Spanish archives. Roscoe R. Hill was commissioned to prepare a descriptive catalogue of materials relating to the United States in the “Cuban Papers” of the Archivo General de Indias (published 1916). Nancy Surrey prepared a calendar of manuscripts relating to the history of the Mississippi Valley in archives and libraries of Paris (1926). After over eighty and seventy years (respectively) of use by scholars and archivists, they remain essential research tools. The presentations will cover a brief biography of the authors, their methodology, a review of their importance, and subsequent efforts to catalogue U.S. materials in these countries.”

If anyone is interested in working on this proposal, please contact Alfred at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 533 Royal Street, New Orleans, LA 70130 (phone: (504) 523-4662; fax (504) 522-5108; e-mail Alfred@hnoc.org

Australian Interest in Archival History

There is some consideration to organize a Special Interest Group on archival history within the Australian Society of Archivists. This is being led by Bruce Smith, Department of Information Management and Library Studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology [RMIT]. The seventh Australian Library History Forum met at RMIT on 12 October 1996. The forum had sessions on both archival history and recordkeeping history. The following papers were delivered at that meeting:

Michael Piggott: “Researching Australia’s Archival History: Setting the Agenda”

Jock Murphy: “Development of the Australian Manuscripts Collection, LaTrobe Library, State Library of Victoria”

Bruce Smith: “Lost memory: The Paper Drives of World War II.”

Papers from the Forum are being published by Ancora Press, Monash University and should be available latter this year.

As a follow up to the forum, a session on archival history has been scheduled for the ASA Conference to be held in Adelaide in late July. This session will have short presentations on the development of Australian university archive collections and developments leading up to the establishment of the Public Record Office of Victoria.

Ancora Press has copies of papers from some earlier Australian Library History Forums.

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The History of the Concept of
"Provenance" As it Relates to the
English-Speaking Archival Community

Shelley Sweeney

Although archivists would agree that the principle of provenance is important to many key archival functions, they do not agree on what constitutes the principle. Some of the confusion in the definition may be attributed to the differing traditions that spawned the principle. There are many conflicting claims, however, as to who originated it. American Ernst Posner in 1950 claimed that the German Max Lehmann codified the principle of provenance in 1881 (Munden 1967). But Posner refers to this as Registraturprinzip, and it seems clear that he really meant the principle of original order, based on the Prussian registry system. American Theodore Schellenberg agreed with Posner about the critical role of Lehmann, but called the principle “Provenienz-prinzip,” and identified it as “The principle of provenance” (Schellenberg 1956). Fellow American Maynard Britchford traced the origins of provenance back to the Maurist scholar Jean Mabillon in 1681, although he agreed with Posner and Schellenberg that Lehmann was responsible for actually introducing the principle (Britchford 1989). In 1992, however, Frenchman Michel Duchelin claimed that Natalis de Wailly in France defined provenance in 1841 (forty years before Lehmann) when he issued regulations about the notion of “respect des fonds,” with fond being documents which come from a body, an establishment, a family, or an individual (Duchelin 1992). “Ordre primitif” Duchelin said, emerged shortly after; German archivists in the Royal Archives of Prussia identified original order as “Strukturprinzip” (Duchelin 1992). Two years later, Peter Horsman of the Netherlands claimed that the Germans applied the principle in 1816, calling it “provenienz prinzip”, and the Dutch developed it independently of the Germans later on in 1826, referring to provenance as “herkomstbinsel”.

Not only do we not know who developed the notion, and what the original principle may or may not have included, but we do not know precisely how what seems to be a French term, “provenance”, entered the English archival lexicon. Jenkinson in his 1922 Manual does not relate the word provenance to either respect des fonds or original order. The English translation of Muller, Feith and Fruin’s seminal Manual in 1940 likewise does not use provenance except in the index, and that term points to a concept that is entirely tangential to the concept. Today the Dictionary of Archival Terminology of the International Council on Archives states that the principle of provenance means that the records of the same provenance must not be intermingled with those of any other provenance, with provenance defined as being the agency, institution, organization or individual that created, accumulated and maintained records in the conduct of its business (Walne 1984, 134). The definition continues: “Also extended to include the registry principle” (Walne 1984, 130). The Dutch equivalent is given as herkomstbeginsel, and the German as Provenienzprinzip. The registry principle is defined as: “The principle that archives of a single provenance should retain the arrangement established by the creating agency, institution or organization in order to preserve existing relationships and reference numbers”; sometimes implied in the principle of provenance and also called “The principle of respect for original order” (Walne 1984, 143-144). The German equivalent term is cited as Registraturprinzip. This seems to sum up nicely the ambivalent nature of the archives community towards the principle. Why is it important to know when, where and how the principle of provenance entered into the English-speaking archival world? It is important to determine if the original creators meant the principle to be a single one encompassing both respect des fonds and original order, or two separate principles. If it was two, the possibility exists to obey the dictates of the first (respect des fonds), but not the second (original order), although the reverse is impossible. As soon as one mixes two separate groups or fonds together, one violates the principle of original order. Such considerations affect both terminology of description and the level at which description occurs. They also affect how the concept of the group or fonds is applied. It is clear that more work needs to be done to solidify our understanding, and hence our application, of the principle of provenance.
The History of the Concept, continued from page 4

Reference:


Archival History Roundtable 1996
Meeting in San Diego

Approximately twenty-five people gathered for the AHRT meeting as part of the SAA conference in San Diego. Several potential SAA session proposals were advanced. Presentations by two speakers constituted the major portion of the meeting. Mary Robertson, Chief Curator of Manuscripts at The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, spoke about that institution. Dr. Robertson reviewed the origin of the Library and how collection policies had changed over time. The second speaker was Shelley Sweeney who is on leave from her position as Archivist at the University of Regina. She is pursuing a doctorate at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas - Austin. Ms. Sweeney presented a paper on the origins of the concept of “provenance” in the English speaking archival world. A synopsis of her paper begins on page 3 in this newsletter.