

Exploring the “Small World” of Literary Archival Collections: A Pilot Project

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Abstract

Standards in archival description provide the ability to leverage interconnectivity embedded in archival materials. However, research to date examines this embedded interconnectivity. This pilot project is the first step to examining interconnectivity in archival collections represented in archival descriptions – American literary figures. The archival community has long accepted the “small world” of record creators as well as the dispersion of materials throughout repositories has relied upon anecdotal evidence to support this assertion. This pilot project explores the opportunities and challenges to applying social network analysis to investigate the small world.



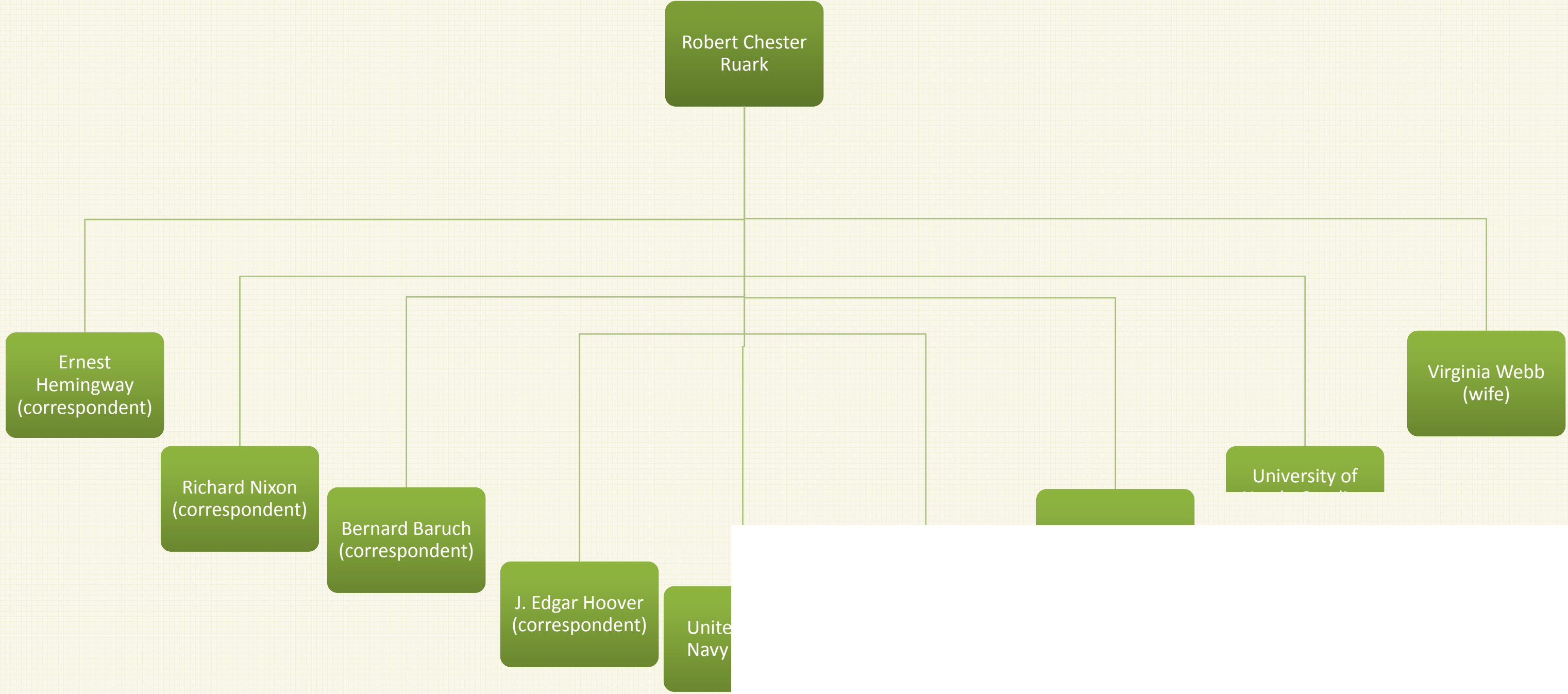
Contextual Data and the Potential of Linking

Encoded Archival Context – Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (EAC-CPF) offers the promise of linking information for entities and resources represented in cultural heritage descriptions. Through three separate relationship types, EAC-CPF is intended to leverage the interrelationship of entities with other entities, entities with functions or activities, and entities with resources.

“Small World”: Social Network Analysis

Entities are either all connected or not at all connected – there really isn’t anywhere in-between.” (Watts, 2003, p. 82) .
Just as adages go, “it’s a small world” is one that archivists, purveyors of personal papers and corporate body records, are familiar with. Archival records are expected to reveal the connectivity of human activity – in work, play, and fun. Social network analysis has made significant advances since Milgram’s experiment detecting our “six degrees of separation,” but does this research help us to understand historical relationships and are the relationships documented?

Analysis example: Robert Chester Ruark



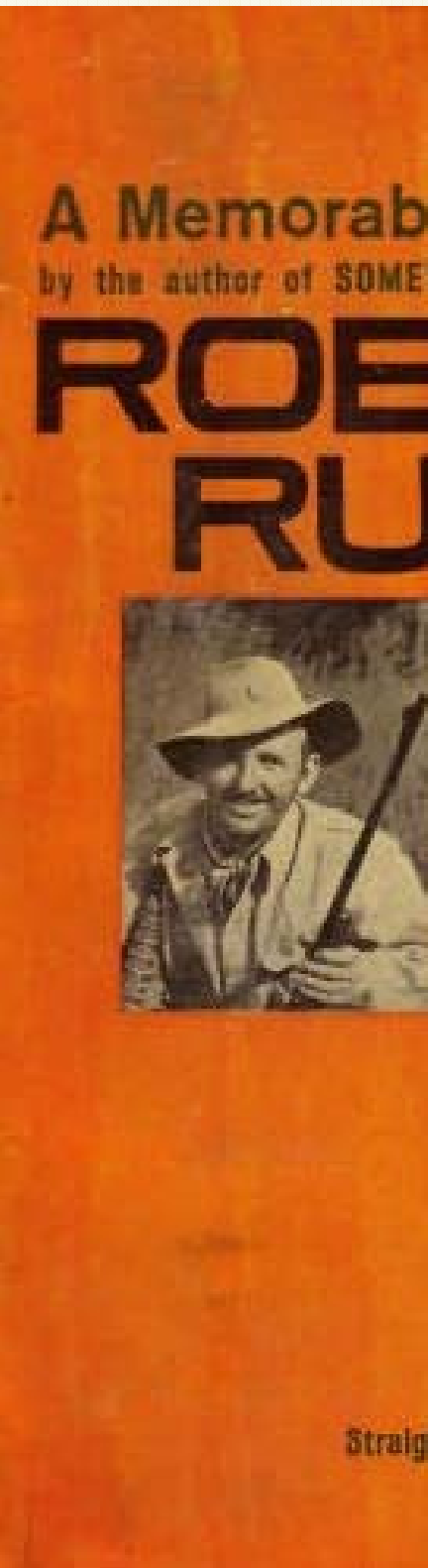
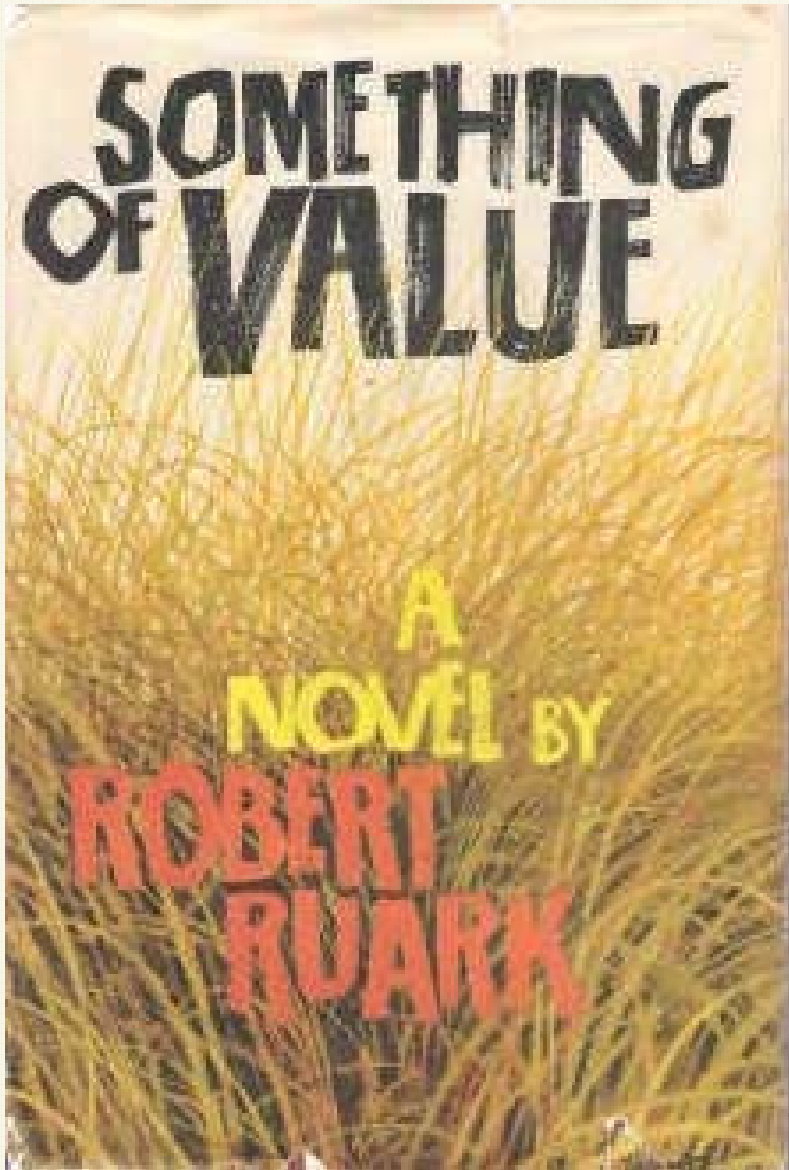
Connections identified in UNC finding aid 1942-1965, #4001, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Relevant Resources: (from

- Robert Chester Ruark papers, 1942-1965, #4001, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- *Grenadine Etching* (1947)
- *I didn’t know it was loaded* (1948)
- *One for the Road* (1949)
- *Grenadine’s Spawn* (1952)
- *Horn of the Hunter* (1953)
- Richard Gaither Walser papers, 1918-1988, #4168 Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Oscar Jackson Coffin papers, 1879-1991, #3907, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Work History:

- Hamlet News Messenger
- Sanford Herald
- Washington Post



Conclusion: What Can Social Network Analysis Tell Archivists?

Social network analysis can be used to determine the degree to which existing archival descriptions will provide the baseline information for creating linked data. Some of the variables will be easy to determine, while others will be obscured by existing archival descriptions.

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