

Reference *and*  
Access

*for Archives and*  
Manuscripts

**Cheryl Oestreicher**

SAA Preview



**SOCIETY OF  
American  
Archivists**

CHICAGO

**The Society of American Archivists**  
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SAA Preview

## FOREWORD

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# The Evolution of a Book Series



The Society of American Archivists (SAA) first conceived the notion of developing and publishing “manuals relating to major and basic archival functions” in the early 1970s. Charles Frederick Williams (popularly known as C. F. W.) Coker (1932–1983), a former US Marine Corps captain and North Carolina state archivist who recently had been appointed to head the Printed Documents Division of the National Archives and Records Services, edited the initial Basic Manual Series. The first five basic manuals, which appeared in 1977, illustrated the ways in which archivists defined and classified their core concepts at that historical moment:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* by Maynard J. Brichford
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* by David B. Gracy II
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reference & Access* by Sue E. Holbert
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Security* by Timothy Walch
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Surveys* by John Fleckner

The entire series accounted for only 163 pages of text, which included numerous illustrations, graphics, sample forms, charts, and bibliographic insertions. Each 8.5” by 11” softbound pamphlet contained three holes, punched down the left side, for easy insertion into a loose-leaf binder that might be handily referenced at an archivist’s desk. Individual volumes sold for \$4, though SAA members received a \$1 discount.

Archivists operated within a far different cultural, legal, and professional framework during the early and middle years of the 1970s. In 1973, the same year that SAA began work on the Basic Manual Series, IBM introduced the Correcting Selectric II typewriter as its major technological breakthrough, thereby eliminating the need for such popular tools as rubber erasers, correction fluid, and cover-up tape. This revolutionary product seemed destined to alter the nature

of document creation forever. During this period, a few archivists had begun grappling with the challenges of something known as “machine-readable records,” but a bibliographer who surveyed this puzzling development could still confidently conclude in a 1975 *American Archivist* article that “only a few archival establishments” appeared to be “developing programs for accessioning” such materials. Other momentous—and occasionally unsettling—changes appeared on the horizon. A new copyright law, which was enacted by Congress in 1976 and became effective on New Year’s Day 1978, contained significant implications for how archivists would manage collections and serve researchers. Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974 prompted the promulgation of new legislation in 1978 that declared for the first time that presidential and vice presidential records are public documents. Professionally, the archival landscape seemed to be shifting as well. The Association of Canadian Archivists launched an exciting new journal, *Archivaria*, in winter 1975/1976, a development destined to deepen the discipline’s intellectual discourse. Regional archival associations formed, became fruitful, and multiplied in the United States. In addition, a new era in archival education began as library schools and history departments inaugurated archives-based graduate programs in the late 1970s, ultimately resulting in a highly credentialed and formally trained corps of professional practitioners.

Such transformations, and many others too numerous to mention here, convinced the Society of American Archivists that only an active publications program that regularly refreshed the existing literature could provide its membership with easy access to rapidly changing trends and best practices. SAA accordingly published the Basic Manual Series II—a second set of five volumes—in the early 1980s:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* by Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Automated Access* by H. Thomas Hickerson
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings* by Ralph E. Ehrenberg
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs* by Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reprography* by Carolyn Hoover Sung

Over the years, SAA published scores of other titles, each illustrating the rich diversity of archival work: administration of photo collections, conservation, machine-readable records, law, management, a basic glossary, collections of readings on archival theory and practice, and books specific to archives in a variety of institutional settings (i.e., colleges and universities, businesses and corporations, religious and scientific institutions, museums, government agencies, historical societies, etc.). Even with the proliferation of publications, the bedrock of archival practice rested on the core knowledge represented in the basic manuals, which were reconceptualized and rechristened between 1990 and 1993 as the Archival Fundamentals Series:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O’Toole
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Fredric M. Miller
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Thomas Wilsted and William Nolte
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by F. Gerald Ham
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *The Glossary of Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* by Lynn Lady Bellardo and Lewis Bellardo



A second iteration of the seven books in this revamped series appeared roughly fifteen years later as the Archival Fundamentals Series II:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O'Toole and Richard J. Cox
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Kathleen D. Roe
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Michael Kurtz
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Frank Boles
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* by Richard Pearce-Moses

Mary Jo Pugh and Richard J. Cox edited these multivolume compilations, which almost instantaneously became required texts in archival education courses and necessary additions to archivists' bookshelves. The Archival Fundamentals Series I and II differed in scope and scale from the initial Basic Manual Series. For example, John Fleckner's comprehensive treatment of surveys did not appear in need of revision and dropped out of the series. Security became incorporated into a broader manual on preservation. SAA commissioned an introductory overview of the field, added a new book that focused on managerial issues, and developed a glossary with the goal of defining and historicizing key archival concepts. Beginning in the 1970s, both Archival Fundamentals Series I and II incorporated and delineated the evolving descriptive standards that defined professional practice, dissected the contentious debates surrounding appraisal and deaccessioning that enlivened archival discourse in the 1980s, and reflected the growing emphases on an expanding user base and more complex reference services that revolutionized reading rooms and repositories in the late twentieth century.

This third edition—Archival Fundamentals Series III—contains important continuities and significant departures from its predecessors:

- A new book, *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists* by Kathleen D. Roe, reflects an increased understanding that these functions undergird all aspects of archival work.
- The management volume, *Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs* edited by Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmicheal, has been reconfigured to focus especially on leadership and to provide readers with opportunities to explore their individual managerial styles.
- *Advancing Preservation for Archives and Manuscripts* by Elizabeth Joffrion and Michèle V. Cloonan addresses digital challenges and focuses on such current issues as risk management, ethical considerations, and sustainability.
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Dennis Meissner, *Reference and Access for Archives and Manuscripts* by Cheryl Oestreicher, and *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Michelle Light and Margery Sly may appear familiar topics to readers of the previous two series, but each book illustrates the innovations in thought and practice that have transformed these archival functions over the past fifteen years.
- A general overview volume that I am preparing, *Introducing Archives and Manuscripts*, provides a broad introduction to the historical, philosophical, and theoretical foundations of the profession.

One contribution that constituted a cornerstone of the previous series has been reformatted to maximize its currency and usability. Although not part of the Archival Fundamentals Series III, the *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* ([dictionary.archivists.org](http://dictionary.archivists.org)) will replace *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* and will be maintained and updated as a digital resource by SAA's Dictionary Working Group.

We hope that undergraduate and graduate students, new professionals, seasoned archival veterans, and others in the information science and public history fields will find the seven volumes in the Archival Fundamentals Series III helpful, provocative, and essential to both their intellectual life and their daily work. As Richard J. Cox observed in his preface to an earlier edition of the series, the time has long passed “when individuals entering the archival profession could read a few texts, peruse some journals, attend a workshop and institute or two, and walk away with a sense that they grasped the field’s knowledge and discipline.” This series provides an entry point and a synthetic distillation of a much broader literature that spans an impressive array of academic disciplines. We encourage you, of course, to do a deeper dive into each of the individual topics covered here. But we also remain confident that this series, like its predecessors, provides an honest and accurate snapshot of archival best practices at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

The authors, of course, deserve full credit for their individual contributions. The Archival Fundamentals Series III itself, though, constitutes a collaborative enterprise that benefited from the work of SAA Publications Board members, editors, and interns throughout the past decade. These individuals helped to define the series parameters, reviewed proposals and manuscripts, and shepherded various projects to conclusion. Special shout-outs (in alphabetical order) are owed to: Bethany Anderson, Jessica Ballard, Roland Baumann, Cara Bertram, Mary Caldera, Amy Cooper Cary, Jessica Chapel, Paul Conway, J. Gordon Daines, Todd Daniels-Howell, Sarah Demb, Jody DeRidder, Keara Duggan, Margaret Fraser, Thomas J. Frusciano, Krista Gray, Gregory Hunter, Geoffrey Huth, Petrina Jackson, Joan Krizack, Christopher Lee, Donna McCrea, Jennifer Davis McDaid, Kathryn Michaelis, Nicole Milano, Lisa Mix, Tawny Nelb, Kevin Proffitt, Christopher Prom, Mary Jo Pugh, Aaron Purcell, Colleen Rademaker, Caryn Radick, Dennis Riley, Michael Shallcross, Mark Shelstad, Jennifer Thomas, Ciaran Trace, Anna Trammell, Joseph Turrini, Tywana Whorley, and Deborah Wythe. Nancy Beaumont has been an inspirational executive director for SAA, as well as a brilliant editor in her own right. Abigail Christian, SAA’s editorial and production coordinator, has skillfully shepherded design and layout. Teresa Brinati, keenly insightful and good-humored as always, remains the epitome of competent leadership and has transformed the SAA publications program into a model for professional associations. It has been a privilege and great fun to work with everyone on this project.

PETER J. WOSH  
Editor, Archival Fundamentals Series III  
Society of American Archivists

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# Preface

As the nature of archives continues to evolve, so does the need for archivists to keep abreast of who users are, why patrons use archival collections, how to improve access, how to advance reference services, and the skills and knowledge required to be excellent reference professionals. Writing this book about reference and access prompted me to reflect on my nearly twenty years working in libraries and archives. I have worked in a historical society, an art museum, and a public library and have spent most of my career in academic archives. Each institution had different practices, but all were united in the goal of creating access to rare and unique materials. The intellectual stimulation I get from working with patrons and collections increases my desire to aid in the discovery and knowledge found in archives.

Archives manuals tell the story of how reference and access have moved from being a tangential notion for professionals to today's environment in which nearly all archival functions are employed with access as the ultimate goal. Early archives manuals prioritized appraisal, arrangement, and description, with reference mentioned only briefly. Then in 1977, SAA created the Basic Manual Series to advance archival practices and theories as well as to provide fundamentals and standards, including *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access* by Sue E. Holbert. Later, in 1992 and 2005, Mary Jo Pugh authored editions of *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* as part of both Archival Fundamental Series I and II. In the nearly thirty years between Holbert's manual and Pugh's second edition, the value of reference services became clear.

The third edition of this manual continues the established legacy of accentuating the topic's importance, encouraging use and understanding users and their behaviors, and exploring ways in which to provide excellent services. This book outlines the components of reference and access, explores how they fit within other archival functions, and offers strategies and practices that can be modified for any type of institution. The ideas put forth are meant to be part of a comprehensive

overview, with the intent that archivists will learn new ideas, adapt methods to their institutions, and be motivated to advance access for their repositories.

There is a constant influx of new articles, books, blog posts, newsletter articles, presentations, and other discourse about reference and access. I had a strong desire to include everything I read, but that journey is never-ending. Archivists continuously share their experiences to benefit others and to create a shared understanding of the similarities and differences that govern practices. And that is one of the greatest pleasures of being an archivist—the opportunity to develop, share, and advance how access to archives affects both other archivists and society. I encourage archivists to be future-oriented and to think about how all of these ideas can advance future access.

A few housekeeping items to keep in mind when reading this book: I use the phrases “reference archivist,” “reference professional,” “reference staff members,” and “archivists” to encompass anyone who performs reference services, whether as a sole responsibility or as one of many job duties. There are occasions when I offer specific repository types as examples, but the ideas proffered are meant for any repository type. I recognize that not all practices directly apply to all institutions but the text is couched this way for easier readability. Although this book often discusses reference and access with the goal of reaching “the public,” I also recognize that many archives have only internal constituents who are considered the “public.” Last, I use “researcher,” “user,” and “patron” interchangeably, again, to ease readability. The intended purpose behind these uses is not to narrowly define the practices and theories described or present them as the only options but to show that archivists can take and modify those theories and practices to work with all audiences.

As you read this manual, I encourage you to examine existing theories and practices, both at your institution and within the profession. Use this book and other manuals but also talk with your colleagues, consult other professionals, attend conferences, seek educational opportunities, and read additional literature. There are always new ideas and developments about how to bring people into the archives and bring archives to the people—and I encourage you to add your ideas to the conversations.

## Acknowledgments

Through writing this book, I came to appreciate, even more than I already had, the thousands of archivists who have made incredible accomplishments toward access. They established archives, opened up to patrons, advocated for legislation, acquired and processed collections, created standards, and implemented technology, all with the goal of access. Without those archivists, we would not be where we are today.

I must recognize the multitude of people who helped me through the process of writing this book. I thank former SAA Publications Editor Chris Prom and the Publications Board, who invited me to write this book, and series editor Peter Wosh for his unending support and encouragement. Caryn Radick was invaluable for her conversations and feedback. SAA staff members Teresa Brinati and Abigail Christian were always resourceful and helpful, and I am grateful for the work of the copyeditor, reviewers, and all others involved in the book’s production.

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Last, I thank all of the current and future archivists who tirelessly strive to collect, create access to, and advocate for the archival record. Keep up the great work!

CHERYL OESTREICHER

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# Introduction



In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the archival landscape in the United States is vastly different than the concept that emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when colonial governments collected official documents but placed strict limitations on access. Archives now collect materials on virtually every topic, and many archives are open to the general public. Archivists work in historical societies, state and public libraries, museums, historic sites, genealogical societies, religious institutions, medical centers, tribal archives, corporations, nonprofits, governments, community-based organizations, academic departments, and other types of repositories.<sup>1</sup> Further, an archives professional is no longer just a custodian of records but rather, as archival educator Anne J. Gilliland writes, a “highly trained archival expert who advocates for the record and who may also take on roles as a record-keeping systems analyst, metadata architect, digital curator, digital asset manager, videographer, oral historian, ethnographer, or community activist.”<sup>2</sup> As the numbers and types of institutions and professionals grow, so do their roles in society. They enable citizens’ rights to information in a democratic society, empower people to contribute to the historical record, and promote unlimited possibilities for research and advancing knowledge.

All of this is part of the changing nature of archives themselves. Historically, archives were often viewed as elite places for scholars or others interested in historical research. Today, more people see archives as vital institutions and places for reflection and discovery, not just as sites that preserve the historical record. More and more people encounter the power of archives, from researching their genealogical roots, to extrapolating information for scholarly pursuits, to presenting discoveries through public discourse, to exercising their rights as citizens for access to records. Indeed, there is no end to the possibilities that archives can fulfill.

Access and reference services are central to advancing knowledge and offering people opportunities to engage with historical resources. *Access* is the ability to use resources to find information,

and *reference* is how archivists facilitate that ability. Although the ways in which reference and access have been viewed have remained consistent throughout history, the ways in which they are executed continue to evolve. Since Mary Jo Pugh's second edition of this book came out in 2005, many developments—particularly advancements in technology—have transformed both how archivists do their jobs and how researchers locate materials.

The core foundation of services has remained the same since the early days of archives: conducting reference interviews, helping researchers find relevant materials, ensuring proper handling and use of collections, providing reproductions, adhering to copyright and other legal regulations, granting permissions to use and publish, and performing outreach activities to engage audiences. However, the specific functions and activities continually progress. Instead of paper finding aids and inventories, archives offer online portals to finding aids, digital collections, inventories, and other descriptive resources. Instead of calling or writing to an archives to find out information about collections, users search online to find repositories that have materials about their research topics. Instead of waiting for researchers to find collections, archives actively seek opportunities to engage current audiences and bring in new audiences.

All of this culminates in access. Archivists attend to tasks with access as the ultimate goal, from acquisition through processing. Whether prioritizing internal or external audiences, archivists strive to organize collections, create metadata, implement digitization programs, conduct outreach, and promote archives with the intent to bring collections to users.

## Reference and Access: Historical Influences and Innovations

Archivists continually reenvision how to bring users to the archives and materials to the users. Centuries of practice in the United States have seldom altered the overarching concepts of access and reference, yet they are constantly transformed as new technologies, privacy considerations, user-centered approaches, systematic description, and other innovations influence the growth and development of access policies and procedures. This brief overview offers a historical framework that illuminates the changing nature of access policies, reference practices, description trends, and repository clientele.

### Users

The user is central to access, and archival repositories have always grappled with the circumstances of who might use their holdings. Until the twentieth century, the majority of U.S. archival institutions were historical societies, along with a few academic archives. Most historical societies limited access to fee-paying members, though some advocated opening to the general public. Academic archives primarily retained records for internal use, granting public requests or permitting access to outside researchers only occasionally. The overall approach of access to archives was to privilege limited and selective audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Movements to purposely allow public access to archives grew slowly. In the nineteenth century, internal constituents, historians, and patrician hobbyists were the dominant user types in historical societies and academic archives. Not until the early twentieth century, when government archives were founded intentionally to allow public access to their holdings, did this climate shift



significantly. Early state archives, such as that of Alabama in 1901, often combined the functions of public repositories and historical societies, but they augured a new commitment toward serving a broader public. The long movement to open federal records to scholarly and popular use finally culminated in the creation of the National Archives in 1934, but access policies remained somewhat idiosyncratic. That same year, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) was founded, which propelled further discussion about access and users. In his 1938 presidential address at the SAA Annual Meeting, Albert Ray Newsome articulated the necessity of establishing state and local laws to preserve and make available public archives. At that time, thirty-three states had archival agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Opening archives to the public proved to be a slow process, as was expanding the user base. In 1939, pioneering Illinois state archivist Margaret Cross Norton succinctly categorized archival users into three types: government departments (using their own records), historical, and legal. She described research purposes as the desire to obtain internal information, legal documentation, historical background, or genealogical data. Thirteen years later, the National Archives' handbook similarly prioritized requestors as follows: government and congressional employees, people investigating legal rights, those whose work made significant contributions, and others whose needs could only be met by National Archives records.<sup>5</sup> Both of these documents assumed a relatively narrow and consistent category of archival patrons who exhibited limited purposes for reviewing records during the first half of the twentieth century.

Nearly thirty years after Albert Ray Newsome's call for legislation to make records available to the public, the federal government finally responded. In 1967, Congress passed the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which codifies the principle that citizens have the right to inspect federal documents.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps more than any other legislative enactment, FOIA set a national precedent that all citizens have the right to access information, and the implications transcended government archives by affecting access policies at other repositories. All public institutions, which include public colleges and universities as well as publicly funded historical societies and museums, necessarily adhere to local, state, or federal laws regarding access. Many other repositories, however, do not fall under that umbrella. Private universities, corporations, museums, religious institutions, and nonprofits typically establish access policies based on their institutional missions, which may or may not include public access.

As a direct result of FOIA, libraries and archives, already brokers of knowledge, did more to develop practices and services that focused on users and their right to information. Simultaneously, academic scholarship shifted from documenting the stories of "dead white men" to chronicling the events and lives of ordinary people. Archives quickly adapted to the changing landscape of users and uses in this new climate of citizens' rights and social history. In the 1960s and 1970s, archivists noted that their patrons included high school students, television newscasters, radio broadcasters, undergraduates, "advertising people," avocational historians, publishers, genealogists, novelists, scholars, journalists, and graduate students. Into the 1980s and 1990s, archivists further noted that there were more "nontraditional" user types whose interests were cross-disciplinary, such as the "administrator, ecologist, urban planner or journalist," as well as international students, archaeologists, and documentary filmmakers.<sup>7</sup>

The broadening of audiences changed how archivists viewed users and, subsequently, how they modified reference practices to address this shift. As the philosophy moved toward access, the user became more central to all archival functions. To further incorporate this attitude, archivists

called for more proactive methods to investigate who users were, explore the nature of research, and evaluate the effectiveness of reference services.<sup>8</sup>

In 1989, an influential study and publication by Page Putnam Miller et al apprised the National Archives of strategies that could transform this administrative agency into a premier research institution. The authors of this report, which was a synthesis of data from interviews with more than 200 archivists and users, prioritized users and their needs, a revolutionary concept at the time. In addition to recognizing the existence of different audience types, the report's authors noted the necessity to serve inexperienced users, scrutinize the usefulness of reference tools, investigate how to conduct successful reference entrance and exit interviews, and examine archivist-user dialogues for efficacy. Overall, the recommendations focused on the importance of the user perspective and the influence of patrons in archival functions, strategies, and priorities.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly since the 1990s, archives have focused more on user experiences. User studies and surveys now analyze the similarities and differences in users' needs to create resources that better facilitate access. Archivists proactively engage their internal and external constituents to broaden their audiences, host events, and promote their collections and services through various outreach activities. As these initiatives have progressed, early practices of limiting access to select users (outside of those who serve internal constituents only) have almost completely dissolved, and many repositories have welcomed the varied publics into their domains.

Technological advancements also transformed access, and the digital age has required archivists to modify access policies in efforts to meet patrons' expectations. By the early 2000s, massive digitization projects and the increasing need for archivists to accession born-digital materials altered the relationship between users and physical repositories. Many researchers believe in the myth that "everything is online," even though archivists understand that only a small percentage of their holdings can be, or ever will be, accessed remotely. Electronic access has introduced new audiences to archival materials, simultaneously creating unprecedented challenges for user education. One special undertaking is increasing the number of opportunities to reach users who perhaps know little about or have never visited an archives. Online research enables archival descriptions or content to appear in search results, leading both new and seasoned users to find and access collections.

Today, the user remains central to archival functions. Collections are processed, metadata created, and digitization projects prioritized with careful attention to the user experience through physical and virtual access. No longer narrowly defined, the population of users is expected to be broad and varied, new and experienced, and continually changing.

## Reference

Archives owe the concept of reference services to early library history. The phrase "reference work" evolved from the term "reference book" (any noncirculating book). The groundwork for the concept began as early as 1876, when librarians started to create indexes, catalogs, and subject headings to use as aids in finding books. Within a short time, articles, presentations, and reports appeared that described the importance of reference books, allowing "free access" to reference books, and implementing cross-referencing for efficient research. Further, several authors emphasized the importance of the librarian-patron relationship and encouraged librarians to be accessible and provide personal assistance to satisfy their clientele and create self-sufficient users. By the turn of the

century, library reference was viewed as a core responsibility that required dedicated and trained personnel.<sup>10</sup>

The movement to formalize reference work in archival contexts emerged in the 1930s. Early discussions about archival reference appear in English archivist V. H. Galbraith's 1934 manual; the inaugural issue, in 1938, of *American Archivist's* description of the National Archives; and Margaret Cross Norton's 1939 article in *Illinois Libraries*. These writings describe practices that set standards that are still followed today. Galbraith described the process of patrons filling out forms, gathering in a reading room, requesting items by identifying record group and box/folder numbers, using proper citations, remaining mindful of restrictions, and paying fees. At the National Archives, most requests were handled within the agency that created the records, with nongovernment requests funneled to a separate Division of Reference. Norton specifically contextualized the difference between libraries and archives, describing how the knowledge required of staff differed; while librarians often had broad knowledge of many subjects, archives reference staff benefited from deep knowledge of specific subjects, including local, regional, and national history.<sup>11</sup>

Over the next two decades, reference gained slightly more attention. Both British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson and American archivist Theodore R. Schellenberg, two of the most influential archival theorists of the twentieth century, devoted some attention to reference in their path-breaking works. Jenkinson framed use as the *raison d'être* for archival work. He described creating indexes and descriptive lists to aid patrons and noted that a "Search Room" staffer acts as an adviser and guide, remains current on research trends, maintains an encyclopedic grasp of reference books, and exhibits traits of "intelligence and good nature."<sup>12</sup>

Schellenberg's manual outlined policies related to reference, including taking public interest into account and preventing access to confidential personal information; advocating for equal and free access; basing services on the nature of the request and not the requestor; formalizing procedures for reproductions and loans; presenting proper identification to use collections; and respecting proper handling techniques. He also advocated for a user-oriented approach to reference, urging staff to proactively ask questions and do everything possible to meet researcher needs.<sup>13</sup>

The National Archives was also a leader in advancing reference services as central to the archival mission. In the 1950s, its procedural handbook and code of ethics set standards for the profession. The handbook directed staff to assist patrons in locating and using materials, provided that they completed the required user application and paid reasonable fees for extensive research. Prepared for use in the National Archives Inservice Training Program, "The Archivist's Code" specified the need for archivists to predict future research needs, promote public access, and provide courteous service.<sup>14</sup>

These seminal works were largely procedural. In the 1970s and 1980s, archival literature elevated the importance of the user experience and perspective. Manuals encouraged archivists to share their knowledge and develop relationships with researchers but emphasized the user's responsibility to find relevant materials and conduct research. Further, archivists proposed the importance of studying reference interactions to provide high-quality service, motivating and training staff, and helping users be well prepared for research. There was also recognition that most manuals were written by or catered to government and academic archives. Acknowledging that the core concepts of reference were applicable to most repositories, professionals compiled a 1986 volume with essays from museum, academic, government, business, religious, and other repository types to demonstrate how the execution of services varied across institutions.<sup>15</sup>

As archivists elevated the importance and quality of reference services, the 1990s proved an equally transformative decade. Technological changes advanced the ways in which archives described and produced finding aids, email and virtual reference altered the archivist-patron relationship, and websites revolutionized how users found information about collections. Notably, because so much research occurs in an online environment, archivists lost some of their knowledge about and control over who accessed their holdings. This drastically changed the scope of reference services. Although the user increasingly became more central to archival functions, technology provided ways to more openly and broadly share information about collections. Reference archivists no longer waited for users to seek out archives but actively pursued ways to bring in new audiences and more researchers.

Well into the twenty-first century, reference practices and procedures have become a frequent topic in archival literature. Based on decades of practice, the foundational concepts remain the same: helping users find relevant materials and setting policies for access. Yet the components of those practices and the ways in which they are carried out have changed tremendously and will continue to evolve. Technology will continue to transform how to make information available, how users find materials, what skills are required of reference staff, and, especially, what expectations users have about accessing and using content. Particularly, the exponential increase in born-digital and digitized collections has greatly increased access as well as patrons' expectations of remote retrieval of information. Going forward, technology will be the crux of expanding reference and access.

## Arrangement and Description

Collection information is the key component of reference and access. Since the first archives were established, archivists have recognized that patrons cannot find or use collections without inventories, finding aids, catalog records, or other descriptive information. For nearly two centuries, archives commonly published pamphlets, newsletters, circulars, bibliographies, or printed guides that summarized specific institutions' holdings.<sup>16</sup> Influenced by library practices, archivists believed that more detailed cataloging was the best assistance for patrons searching for relevant materials.<sup>17</sup> As libraries adopted the Library of Congress classification scheme and adhered to the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*, archivists desired similar standardization but experienced difficulties fitting their unique, and often voluminous, collection descriptions within the strict rules meant for published materials. Advancements came when the Library of Congress published *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* in 1983, the same year that MARC-AMC (Machine-Readable Cataloging for Archival and Manuscripts Control) became the first American archival cataloging standard.<sup>18</sup> These standards provided ways to give brief descriptions about collections but did little to address the deeper description required for archival materials.

Knowing how researchers benefited from detailed inventories, archivists also meticulously arranged collections at the item level and created extensive bibliographic details about individual or small groups of items, now known as "traditional" processing. Though no formal definition exists, this method is generally understood to be highly detailed arrangement, description, and preservation at the item level. Some components of traditional processing include evaluation of each item in a collection, removal of metal fasteners, specific arrangement of items in folders (such as chronological or alphabetical), creation of extensively detailed item- or folder-level descriptions,

encasement of all photographs in protective sleeves, preservation photocopying of newspaper articles or other fragile papers, refolding and reboxing of all contents into acid-free cases, and other aspects that require item-level handling. The purpose of thorough arrangement and description was to precisely inform the researcher of available items and, often, to read materials in the order of creation. The approach facilitated a purposeful reading of most or all documents to determine exact arrangement and description and was believed to be the most effective method for both staff and researchers to find and use materials.

These processes remained standard in some repositories for many decades. In the 1980s, however, at a moment nearly simultaneous with the emerging professional emphasis on users and access, processing methods became a more frequent discussion topic. Arrangement and description practices were called into question as acquisitions increased at a rate faster than processing output and as backlogs grew voluminously, budgets diminished, and the number of users increased. These reasons motivated many archivists to review and implement adaptive methods, though some perpetuated traditional practices. Archivists assessed time and costs spent on processing, promoted the notion that not all collections (or series) need to be processed to the same level, determined priorities based on research potential, implemented strategic work plans, and coordinated team processing.<sup>19</sup>

Some repositories implemented these practices in efforts to facilitate access to more collections, but the challenges of keeping up with acquisitions and reducing backlogs remained. Defining access as a “means to discovery,” a 2003 white paper by the Association of College and Research Libraries noted institutions’ responsibilities to review existing arrangement and description procedures to meet the expanding user base and increased demand for access. It provides an overview of considerations to document hidden and unprocessed collections: exploring various levels of processing and description, dealing with security risks, collecting data to make decisions, examining the effect on public services staff, and establishing workflows to accommodate various approaches.<sup>20</sup>

In 2005, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner wrote a seminal article that directly addressed these challenges: “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing” (MPLP). The authors offered practical solutions scalable to any institution’s size and type to address seemingly unmanageable backlogs and to gain physical and intellectual control over holdings. They favored creating intellectual order over physically rearranging materials, describing at the box level instead of the folder or item level, and skipping any minuscule preservation tasks, such as removing metal fasteners and preservation photocopying. In short, Greene and Meissner encouraged taking a flexible approach to processing that focused on employing a minimal amount of arrangement and description to make more collections available while maintaining scalable techniques to modify processing techniques as necessary or based on demand.<sup>21</sup>

Yale University had already approached reducing their extensive backlog through principles that were similar to those promoted by Greene and Meissner. Primarily, Yale’s archivists implemented an “accessioning as processing” technique. To reduce the amount of time between acquisition and access, they arranged at the series level, wrote box-level inventories, and created collection-level catalog records so that collections did not enter the backlog. Influenced by discussions with, and expectations of, donors, the Yale system made folder-level arrangement and description an exception rather than a rule.<sup>22</sup>

More recently, in his book *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs*, archivist Daniel A. Santamaria has combined many of these practices into an

effective strategy in which the concepts are adaptable to any repository type and size. The goal is to have a “baseline level of access,” meaning minimal descriptions of all holdings. From there, user demand drives processing priorities, hence creating access to collections based on the knowledge that they are of high research value. Santamaria further extends these practices to digitization, whether scanning is conducted during processing or done on-demand, and allows for repurposing existing metadata. He intends that this approach be scalable from small- to large-scale projects. Like Greene and Meissner, Santamaria emphasizes flexibility to ensure that all collections are accessible to users.<sup>23</sup>

These principles and practices are again in flux as they are applied to born-digital records. Traditional arrangement and description focused on extensive or item-level details, often appropriate for collections of electronic records. However, some archivists are developing MPLP and flexible processing methods for digital content, whether digitized or born digital. Following the continuing focus to make as much material as possible available for research, arrangement and description practices are being evaluated and new standards are emerging. Whether these standards mirror or deviate from long-standing practices remains to be seen.

All of these developments are geared toward facilitating access to collections. Archivists now routinely assess workflows, revise practices, and analyze methods in ways that demonstrate how the user, and therefore access, is the focal point of arrangement and description.

## Technology

There is no question that technology has transformed all aspects of archival functions and practices. Early on, some skeptical archivists thought computers were a fad, while others predicted the benefits of collecting and disseminating information via computer-generated and machine-readable records.<sup>24</sup> Today, it is nearly impossible to imagine accessibility of collections or reference interactions without using some form of technology. Software to produce description and finding aids, online platforms and websites to share information and content, options for virtual interactions, and the explosion of digitized and born-digital content have affected, and will continue to advance, reference services.

The computer’s capabilities toward reference and research were documented as early as the 1940s, when the archives profession discussed the effect of technology on historical research. In that era, an advancement in technology was the punch card system, which coded information for quicker retrieval. Soon after, in the 1950s, archivists started to examine the effect of computers on recordkeeping. Many archivists contemplated how to handle collecting machine-generated records and experimented with automating description. Proponents emphasized systemization and continuity and also encouraged archivists to rethink “old” practices and embrace the potential for new and more efficient ways to move forward.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1960s, archivists lauded the capacity for computers to automate, enhance, and accelerate information retrieval. Over the next two decades, archivists endeavored to automate finding aids and cataloging through applications. Indeed, while acquisition, preservation, and arrangement of electronic records were crucial, archivists knew the key component was description. Records could not be found and used for research without adequate description.<sup>26</sup>

The revolutionary breakthroughs came in the 1990s. As automated access became increasingly central to archival functions and services, archivists searched for ways to better promote and



share collection information and incorporate the researcher perspective. Two 1993 developments forever transformed the user experience: the advent of the World Wide Web and the creation of Encoded Archival Description (EAD).

Early on, archivists recognized the web's potential to disseminate collection information and publicize holdings.<sup>27</sup> Creating websites that offered information about the repository, hours, and lists of collections paved the way for today's robust sites that are portals to digital collections, finding aids, audiovisual materials, and remote reference interactions. Perhaps the most significant development was the ability to share finding aids online, thereby making collection information more broadly available and searchable.

EAD allowed institutions to move beyond the constrictive structure of basic MARC and catalog records and toward a configuration that permitted the inclusion of detailed inventories. Further, searches take place across collections, among multiple institutions, and in networked environments.<sup>28</sup> Although EAD was purposely created to facilitate sharing and searching via the web, presenting finding aids was not, and still is not, limited to this output. Repositories use Word documents, PDF files, websites, searchable databases, and other means to provide access to collection inventories.

To ease implementation of EAD and enhance consistency among finding aids, archivists then created collection management systems tailored to archives. The first open source systems were the Archivists' Toolkit (AT) and Archon, which in 2015 merged to become ArchivesSpace, although AT and Archon remain in use by some repositories. The premier benefit of these applications is that they produce EAD-encoded finding aids without the need for knowledge of coding. Both Archon and ArchivesSpace also have an online public interface, enabling repositories to immediately publish collection information, whether accessions, collection-level records, or full finding aids. While a focal point of these systems is to create more consistent description, the option of using the public interface was transformative for smaller repositories because they no longer required extensive staffing and resources to build a technical infrastructure to produce and share collection information online.

Since the early twentieth century, archives have endeavored to broadly share not just information about collections but their contents as well. Early reproductions were provided in the formats of microfiche or microfilm, which were usually available for loan or purchase. This type of reproduction remained in practice for decades until scanning equipment and technology made possible searchable electronic facsimiles of items on disks or hard drives.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1990s, archivists were rapidly implementing tools and software to share materials through various electronic means. These early initiatives quickly evolved into the robust systems available today that support sharing of reproductions online with searching capabilities.

Also during this time, discussions about electronic records proliferated. Although extensive efforts started in the 1980s and 1990s, common practices and standards in preservation, collection, processing, and accessibility of born-digital content are still in development.<sup>30</sup> Archivists are continually challenged to corral obsolete media, software releases, file types, systems, and voluminous production of records. Confronted with constantly changing electronic forms of communication that have replaced written forms, such as texting, voicemail, email, and social media, archivists strive to keep abreast of all the different modes of electronic records. How to address collection-, folder-, and item-level metadata and description; whether to allow for any user to download and manipulate files; continual migration to adapt to technological changes; and the creation of systems

for access are only a few of the issues still in development. While access is always the eventual goal, archivists wrestle with the conundrum of how to properly preserve born-digital material in a way that will enable future research.

## Conclusion

This overview describes how access has grown in importance to become the crux around which archival functions are centered. Archival developments in the past few decades are indicative of how access—and reference in particular—are paramount to a repository's success.

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