ARCHIVAL ACCESSIONING

Edited by

AUDRA EAGLE YUN

SAA Preview

SOCIETY OF American Archivists

CHICAGO

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I am humbled to have the opportunity to create something that I hope will become a bookmarked resource for the practitioner and student-archivist alike. My aspiration is to see this collaborative work spur a conversation about an archival accessioning standard in the United States.

–Audra Eagle Yun

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INTRODUCTION

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While an accession record of itself is not so complicated, its importance is such that I feel we should pay a great deal of attention to it.

—Alice Tyler, 1899[1]

Why a book about archival accessioning?

Imagine you are starting your first week as a new archivist. A visitor enters your work space carrying what appears to be a well-loved cardboard wine box. Instead of wine bottles, you find the box is full of folders, some photographs, a film reel with a peeling label, a handful of 3.5-inch floppy disks, and a printout that says, "I have some email messages that you might want to save. Should I send them to someone?" At first glance, it looks like there may be some materials that your repository might want to accept. The visitor says the box was left outside of the door and notes that this is the third time someone has dropped off materials related to this topic. The other boxes are on a cart in the corner of your work area.

If you have ever found yourself asked to describe a newly acquired collection or an addition to a collection, to take responsibility for a mysterious backlog, or to learn about principles of archives management, then you have good reason to consider best practices for archival accessioning. Accessioning is a foundational part of archival work, impacting every step in archival processing and collections management thereafter. Archivists today understand the value of

exposing hidden collections, yet it can be years between the time a collection is acquired and when it is actually processed. In a profession so deeply committed to access, a book about accessioning is a core reference for archivists seeking to establish control of all holdings. Robust accessioning is the keystone of responsible collection stewardship practice—without it, our profession will continue to struggle to provide equitable access and to meaningfully contextualize our collections. Like a stone arch, good archival collection management is human-made and in a constant state of interdependence. Archival accessioning holds everything together.

Not all of us will have authority to make decisions about acquisitions and archival appraisal, and perhaps fewer will be given an opportunity to do accessioning work. By familiarizing yourself with the principles and practices of accessioning today, you will be prepared to converse with resource allocators, managers, and other leaders to pursue development of or improvements to an accessioning program. Accessioning is not a neutral act. With the exception of archives in minority serving institutions (MSI) like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and tribal archives, accessioning work typically takes place in predominantly white institutions (PWI) or repositories rooted in white historical narratives. Archivists identifying with an Anglo- or white-centered technical services tradition most often manage that work. We will unpack the lack of diversity in archival technical services as a result of systems that have sustained white supremacy in the United States.

I have been fascinated by the boundaries of custody, the definitions of authority, and the inequitable levels of access to information since I was a child. An early memory of bearing witness to an exhibit of historical photographs of anti-Black violence in my hometown led me down my chosen career path as an archivist. In college, I worked nights in an art library where I learned about "restricted" access and locked stacks. I worked a stint in a federal government agency's fellowship program where I sorted and inventoried stereographs depicting racist images of Black Americans; these student jobs kept me focused on the question of custody and stewardship of archives. Then, in graduate school, hearing self-proclaimed "rogue" archivist Yolanda Retter-Vargas describe her work to collect orphaned photographs of Chicanx/Latinx communities and incorporate them into the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center reinforced my scholarly entree to community-based archives—as well as the importance of self-determination and self-representation in archival description. In 2019, my hometown of Newberry, Florida, acknowledged and honored the memory of innocent Black individuals murdered by a white lynch mob in 1916, despite multiple generations of memory-keeping and storytelling about "Lynch Hammock."[2] It was the depiction of this violence that provided archival evidence, carefully collected and cared for in the hands of Black community historians and displayed at the public library, that made this history impossible to ignore. Elevating the perspectives and histories of those who have been marginalized holds great personal significance for me. Moreover, a critical look at accessioning reveals that the archival and library professions are only beginning to reckon with many decades of oppression and erasure in archival systems, collections, and labor. Accessioning is deeply personal, deeply subjective, and imbued with great power. The decision to collect is followed by the impulse to contextualize, and the positionality of the archivist is central to ensuring equity in description from the moment a collection or accrual is registered.

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Accessioning is more important than ever as archivists strive to meet the demands of our users, manage the expectations of donors and resource allocators, and articulate the value of our intellectual, physical, and emotional labor. While this work must be done in consultation with stakeholders, your familiarity with the methods introduced in this book will facilitate strategic conversations and assist you in advocating for a holistic collection management program. Accessioning forms the basis for all descriptive practice. With the growing application of extensible processing[3] (defined as an iterative approach to achieving a baseline for access), archival accessioning is an ideal means for archivists at all levels of experience and in all types of repositories to expose collections broadly and efficiently. This book can help you develop an integrated accessioning program to consistently provide access to all holdings in an archival repository.

Archivists typically learn the practice of accessioning "at the bench" using a local set of rules. This knowledge is often passed from one archivist to the next through arcane procedural manuals and templates. Professional networks and a lack of national guidance on accessioning contribute to a sense of mystery and exclusivity in the acquisition and custodial enterprises. *Archival Accessioning* combines principles, good practice, and real-world examples in a handy, forward-thinking guide for archivists to apply in a variety of institutional settings. In this book, we will tackle both the physical and descriptive aspects of accessioning practice. You will learn how to set a baseline to establish an accessioning program; read firsthand professional perspectives to help you improve or modify your existing accessioning practices; and, for archivists-in-training, learn the core components of archival accessioning, all illustrated with real-life examples to foster critical analysis of this essential practice. Remember: archives are not neutral, nor is the work of accessioning.

We break down major concepts and explore best practice in part 1 of this book. In chapter 1, we work through the primary objectives of accessioning: intake, receipt, record of transfer, and the requirement of a published accession record. We define key terms, map out goals, and parse the differences between approaches to articulate a central set of principles. The chapter draws on the literature, history, and theory of archival practice, providing a more in-depth exploration of accessioning in relation to other core archival functions within archival collection management, including collection development, appraisal, arrangement and description, and access. This chapter provides the theoretical and historical context for the rise of archival accessioning as a central archival practice and analyzes the changing values of the archival field.

A solid archival accessioning workflow is the keystone of a functioning archival collection management program. In chapter 2, we focus on the core components of a successful accessioning operation. This chapter articulates the baseline of essential practices for accessioning, including intake, appraisal, receipt, arrangement, and description. This chapter aims to instill confidence in the archivist to enter the accessioning function at any point in the collection management cycle. It places special emphasis on the key functions and principles of archival description, as crystallized in the Society of American Archivists–endorsed standard, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS).

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Chapter 3 focuses on the challenges and opportunities of providing access to and use of unprocessed accessions in an archival repository, the natural progression for a repository that has described every collection, including unprocessed materials. This chapter discusses how archivists can expose accession records and preliminary inventories; evaluate user-initiated requests for access and the impact of this on archival processing priorities; manage use of accessions in the reading room; and approaches to helping users understand and use accessions. This chapter also clarifies some general differences between practice areas, including institutional archives, special collections, and records management, as well as special considerations for corporate, religious, and museum archives (more detailed distinctions are covered in part 2).

To close out part 1, chapter 4 references and summarizes the Society of American Archivists' *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*, with a focus on unprocessed accessions (accruals that are inaccessible due to a lack of intellectual, administrative, and/or physical control). Harkening back to the core concepts of an archival accessioning program introduced in chapter 1, this chapter addresses how archivists can recommend materials for reappraisal and consideration for deaccessioning. The tenets of good archival stewardship at the point of intake and appraisal are reinforced.

But how does an archivist implement best practices, ethics, and standards for accessioning in the real world? Part 2 of *Archival Accessioning* brings you the perspectives of expert practitioners representing different types of accessions and repositories. Contributors from across the United States share innovative solutions, special questions and considerations, templates, and exercises to help archivists at all levels expand and enhance their accessioning practice. These perspectives and exercises will allow you to put yourself into the archivists' shoes in specific scenarios, with all of the challenges and questions that come along with them. The "Exercises and Perspectives" include sample workflows, accession records, and templates that could be used in a classroom or workshop setting.

Are you ready to take control of **ALL** of your archival holdings? Then read on!

NOTES

[1] Alice Tyler, "Accessioning. Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting, the Ohio Library Association," *Public Libraries* 4, no. 8, https://perma.cc/NB3Z-N7PF, 383.

[2] Cindy Swirko, "Historical Marker Denoting the Newberry Lynching of 1916 Unveiled Saturday," *The Gainesville Sun*, April 28, 2019, https://perma.cc/47DV-DXUX.

[3] Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2014).

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