REACHING OUT:
THE PLACE OF RECORDS SURVEYS
IN ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

JOHN A. FLECKNER

OVERVIEW

Not since the Historical Records Survey of the depression years have American archivists devoted so much time and energy to records survey projects. In recent years they have surveyed materials in Ohio archival repositories and institutional archives; in Atlanta churches, businesses, and local organizations; and in Michigan courthouses and city halls. Aided by funds from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), archivists currently are surveying records of defunct East coast railroad corporations and Pacific Northwest public utility districts. At the same time the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is underwriting surveys of archival sources for the study of women and for the history of American music. Federal support for archival surveys is not confined to the NHPRC and NEH: the National Science Foundation has joined NEH to fund a Survey of Sources for the History of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and the United States Office of Education is backing a survey of sources in American repositories for the study of Russian and Soviet history.¹

This proliferation has been so rapid that very little information about survey projects has reached the professional literature. We have no general discussions of the relationship of the records survey to general archival practice and theory and only a few descriptions of
completed survey projects. Indeed, no one has prepared even a simple list of recent archival surveys.2

In the absence of such writing, several definitions and a brief look at recent archival theory may provide some common ground for discussion. A records survey is a systematic procedure used by archivists, records managers, and others to gather information about records and papers not in their immediate custody. Records surveys, ordinarily, are parts of larger archival projects: to produce finding aids for researchers, to identify new acquisitions, to foster preservation of historically valuable records, or to gather data for program planning. They are not ends in themselves; rather, they are tools which archivists use to accomplish these larger ends. The first consideration, then, in every discussion of records survey projects must be the uses to which the survey-gathered data will be put.

Three types of surveys can be conveniently distinguished:

(1) Records management surveys examine a well defined body of records, those over which the surveyor has administrative authority and responsibility. These surveys are recognized as basic steps in records management procedures and they precede scheduling and disposition of records.

(2) “Repository surveys” describe materials in more than one archival agency or institution. They usually focus on materials in a locality or region or in a subject area and produce published guides describing the materials they locate. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) and Philip Hamer’s Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States are products of national surveys of historical records.

(3) “Non-repository surveys” aim at records with a subject or geographic focus which are not in archival custody. They are conducted by archivists who have no formal records management responsibilities for the materials they survey and who examine materials in many agencies or organizations. The History of Atlanta Project, for example, contacted 2,364 organizations about their noncurrent records and a survey of Wisconsin business records approached some 4,000 firms.

Obviously the availability of outside funds has encouraged today’s wave of survey activity. Records surveys appeal to federal and foundation grants programs for many reasons: survey projects can confidently promise some tangible product at the end of a specified time; survey techniques are relatively simple; surveys can be self-contained,
creating little disruption to other ongoing programs; and survey overhead and operating costs can be kept low. With the exception of the project director, institutions can draw survey staff from the large pool of trained and able, but inexperienced, people willing to accept limited term employment in archival work.

The resurgent interest in records surveys rests not only on the inclinations of today's grant-givers, but more importantly, on basic changes in the professional outlook of American archivists. Many archivists now acknowledge that they must adopt a vigorous role in consciously choosing records and papers for archival preservation. This acknowledgment reflects their growing sense of professional identity and confidence. Equally important, the sheer mass of modern documentation has hastened the transformation of the archivist from a passive custodian of antiquities to an active participant in the process of documentary selection and preservation. An important corollary is the concept of a universe of documentation of which the holdings of the archivist's own repository comprise but a small portion. Archivists must know something of this larger body of documentation if they are to select their archival sample with competence, to provide the fullest assistance to researchers, and to plan sound archival programs.

Closely related to these ideas is another familiar strain in recent archival thinking. Some members of the profession argue that it is the fundamental responsibility of the archivist to select materials which faithfully reflect our culture. The Society of American Archivists 1974 annual meeting, organized around the theme "Documenting American Culture," explored this proposition in an opening plenary session. In that forum, the late Herman Kahn presented this argument for the archivist's responsibility to document culture:

"I have gradually been forced by experience to acknowledge that if the archivist is going to be of maximum use to society, the word 'archives' must be broadened to include any unique record of human experience or thought, regardless of its origins, provenance, or physical characteristics. In other words, reluctantly and uncomfortably one has been forced to accept the fact that if archivists are not to wither on the vine they must learn to embrace within their discipline all unique materials which contain
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a valuable record of human experience, even though such materials are not the by-product of organized institutional activities."3

Traditionally, archivists have focused their concern on records and papers already (or almost) in hand: on acquisitions of discrete series or collections, description, physical storage and preservation, and research use. If, however, the primary mission of archivists is to preserve a representative archival sample — and this is by no means a unanimous professional opinion — then they require a new perspective. This broader view reveals a wide spectrum of documentation about which the archivist must be knowledgeable and from which he or she will choose a small sample for preservation. The records survey is a primary means by which archivists develop this view.

SURVEYS AND PRIORITIES

From this vantage point we can begin to develop criteria for evaluating new records survey proposals. The following discussion examines, first, some areas in which survey-gathered information is especially needed and, second, some critical elements in designing successful survey projects.

(1) Because they can provide comprehensive data, records surveys may be valuable initial steps in developing acquisition strategies. Information about the quality and location of documentation — both in and out of archival custody — will contribute to informed judgments about collecting in previously ignored subject areas; about areas in which collecting is not likely to be successful; about areas which require immediate action to preserve endangered materials; and about areas which are over-documented. In particular, records surveys can contribute to redressing what Gould P. Colman has called "the studied preservation of unrepresentative indicators of . . . culture."4 With sustained and systematic effort archivists can discover and acquire documentation for those people and subjects which now elude the archival record. Surveys of entire communities, of selected social and cultural groups, and of unfamiliar subject areas are all needed. Finally, in addition to empirical data on which to base collecting programs, surveys also permit firsthand examination and appraisal of potentially valuable materials and an introduction to their custodians and potential donors.

(2) In addition to encouraging transfer of historical records to ar-
chival custody, records surveys may contribute to the preservation of these materials in other ways. Sometimes identifying and reporting poor records storage conditions may motivate custodians to adopt simple, remedial action. In other instances, survey data provide the basis for comprehensive records management procedures. These procedures may be the only means to protect large bodies of corporate records from poorly conceived records creation, filing, storage, and disposition practices which reduce or destroy the informational value and physical integrity of important materials before they reach an archivist’s hands. For example, a major rationale of the survey of Texas County records survey being conducted from North Texas State University is its contribution to developing better legislation, records scheduling and disposition, appraisal policies, and other elements of a records program for Texas counties. Surveys of large bodies of records — for example, those produced by major businesses or large local governments — also may demonstrate that in-house archival programs, not transfer to an outside repository, are necessary. Again, the survey data can aid in encouraging establishment of such programs.

(3) Surveys of records in archival custody are a logical extension of the archivist’s internal descriptive systems (card catalog, registers, guides, etc.). By locating and describing materials outside their immediate custody, archivists can fulfill their fundamental professional commitment to increasing access to research materials. Because of this vital role in producing research tools, the records survey undoubtedly will continue to receive substantial financial support from our cultural agencies. What is seriously debated, however, is the form such support should take.

Some archivists, appalled (or overwhelmed) by surveyors’ demands for information argue for a simple two-level descriptive system for American historical records and papers. This system would consist of intra-institutional finding aids and a national program composed of NUCMC and NHPRC’s repository directories and guides to collections. Proponents of this system claim it will provide research tools cheaply and effectively by using automated data bases, common formats, high editorial standards, and federal money.

The weakness of this approach is that the task is too large and too complex to accomplish entirely from Washington. First, American collections and repositories are far too numerous and diverse to main-
tain direct, regular contact with Washington. Far better to proceed with a carefully planned combination of regional, state, and subject area surveys and to integrate them into a coordinated national descriptive program. This strategy would capitalize on, and enhance, existing strong institutions and current patterns of local and regional cooperation. After initially favoring a two-level descriptive system, the NHPRC seems to have accepted this strategy. At its February, 1977, meeting the Commission recommended funding for a project in the state of Washington which, among other things, would gather data for direct input to the NHPRC’s collection level guide project.

A second weakness of a two-level descriptive model is that it is inadequate to deal with the complexity of archival description. Changing research interests and shifting perceptions of the use of our collections preclude reliance on descriptions which stand forever without re-examination. A strong national descriptive program can strengthen, but cannot eliminate, the need for special subject area repository surveys.

The success of any records survey project turns on the manner in which it is executed as well as on an adequate conception of the project’s ultimate goals. Extensive planning before data gathering begins is crucial and two important but often neglected aspects of planning — pretesting and cooperation — deserve special comment.

Pretesting survey forms and procedures is a common feature of social science survey research which can strengthen all records survey projects. As surveyors in the Texas county records program gained experience in local courthouses they modified their procedures; similarly, the results of a small pilot project improved the Women’s History Sources Survey at the University of Minnesota. The pretest can determine if the project will produce the expected level of consistency and comprehensiveness. It also can discover difficulties in editing and compiling returns into usable form and provide a better estimate of the time the project will require. The pretest, of course, should be scheduled to allow sufficient time to modify the project in light of its findings.

Cooperation is a crucial factor in every records survey project. Surveys using questionnaires rely on the willingness (and ability) of the respondents to reply; those using field workers depend on records custodians to permit access to materials. Recent survey projects have demonstrated that cooperation does not come automatically. The
Houston Metropolitan Archives, an NEH funded project with multi-institutional sponsorship, faced many difficulties in gaining access to local government records it hoped to survey. Other projects have been hindered by the refusal of archivists to respond to their colleagues' mail survey questionnaires.

Every survey project must develop ways to secure the cooperation necessary to success. Tactics may range from scientifically designed questionnaire forms to assertiveness training for field workers. At various times generous measures of public relations, good will, professional courtesy, and political influence may be needed. Two approaches, as yet infrequently used, may be of value: the joint project and direct financial incentives. The former involves formal institutional commitments of staff time and, sometimes, money. This requires patient effort to negotiate, but it may permit projects beyond the scope of a single institution and may have lasting benefits for future cooperation. Both the Guide to Historical Resources in Milwaukee Area Archives (available from the Milwaukee County Historical Society) and the Bibliography of Sources Relating to Women (published by the Michigan Department of State) are the products of joint projects. The Newberry Library's project to catalogue pre-1900 maps of the Midwest also is a joint effort, relying on participating institutions representing each state to provide data about maps of their state. The Newberry map project is notable because it provides direct reimbursement on a per-piece-cataloged basis from an NEH grant. Direct financial incentives such as this might convince otherwise overextended archival institutions to participate in a national descriptive system.

CONCLUSION

The use of records surveys will expand as more archivists take an activist view of their profession. For archivists taking this perspective, well designed records surveys can contribute to reaching important goals, particularly in the areas of acquisition strategies, program planning, and intellectual control over large bodies of sources. Such surveys inevitably require careful attention to technical details, but more basically they demand that projects be designed to put the survey-gathered data to productive use. In evaluating proposals for records surveys archivists and records program administrators must
insist that data-gathering not become an end in itself, set adrift from its larger purposes. Only when data-gathering furthers broad archival goals can records surveys merit a portion of our scarce archival resources.

FOOTNOTES

1. The action of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission at its June, 1977, meeting was characteristic of its grants-giving activities since the beginning of the records portion of the NHPRC program. The Commission recommended twenty-five new grants totalling $416,049; surveys of archival materials were a central part of four of these projects and a fifth involved a state surveys of archival depositories. Together these five proposals totalled $103,585.


Records Surveys and a Healthy Collection Lifecycle


*Reviewed by Jordan Jancosek, Archivist, Accessioning and Collection Management, Brown University*

John Fleckner’s 1977 article, “Reaching Out: The Place of Records Surveys in Archival Practice,” tackles an archival practice that is arguably one of the most beneficial tools archivists have at their disposal: a records survey. In his article, Fleckner speaks to the lack of information and theory surrounding records and repository surveys. The piece is divided into two sections: an overview of the aims of records surveys and Fleckner’s thoughts on the mechanics of the surveys themselves. Fleckner shares his insights on the usefulness of conducting these surveys, some of which have continuities that continue to the present. However, in the very beginning of the piece, he aptly notes that little guidance about these practices exists: “We have no general discussions of the relationship of the records survey to general archival practice and theory and only a few descriptions of completed survey projects” (p. 14). Since the publication of Fleckner’s article, there have been a handful of records surveys conducted within the United States, some citywide, some countywide, and some statewide. Examples include “The Texas County Records Inventory Project,” a statewide historical records survey in Washington, and a case study done on a historical records survey in Oklahoma in 1991. While there have been literature and case studies on records surveys since

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Fleckner’s article, they are certainly not as robust as one might expect given the usefulness of records surveys for archival document management and practice. The tagline that can be given to records surveys based on Fleckner’s article would be “useful, but often involved,” which has remained the same today. Fleckner defines an archival/records survey as “a systematic procedure used by archivists, records managers, and others to gather information about records and papers not in their immediate custody” (p. 15). He delineates three separate types of records surveys: a records management survey, or records where the surveyor has immediate control; a repository survey, which includes materials in more than one institution or place; and a “non-repository” survey, which centers on materials with a more generalized or specific focus (p. 15). I would add a fourth type of survey to Fleckner’s list: a collection survey, which is an evaluation of an institution's holdings for descriptive clarity, assessment of material backlog, and evaluation of materials for preservation and access. Wendy Pflug has an excellent piece about systematic approaches to collection surveys, which asserts that although collection surveys are overwhelmingly beneficial for repositories to conduct, the practice of doing them is irregular at best. I conducted a collection survey at the John Hay Library at Brown University in just under four years, and I suspect I could have continued the project forever. I say this to give teeth to something that all the literature I consulted asserted about any archival survey, whether records- or collection-focused, statewide or institutional—these surveys are often a complicated undertaking, and they involve many moving pieces.

For example, in John F. Burns’s piece about the Washington State Historical Records Survey, he goes into considerable detail about the types of staff who worked on the survey (a records management survey as described above), summarizing, “The success of a project is highly dependent on the skill of its personnel. . . . In addition to archival skills, the field workers in a survey that includes records held out of custody must have intelligence, self reliance, durability, and dedication.” Pflug’s assessment of staff for collection surveys is similar, finding that respondents from the case study they conducted noted “an average of two full-time staff members and one part-time staff member working on their collection survey. Assistance from students and volunteers was also used at an average of eight hours per week.” Both of these statements hold true to my personal experience; when I conducted my own collection survey, a variety of staff and students assisted at any given time. Regardless of the type of archival survey, organization and understanding of directions is key. For example, being able to administer a response survey to various repositories to gain information about records is only the first step. The survey must

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4 See, for example, George Mariz, “Multiple Uses of a Survey: Training, Guides, Records Management, and Beyond,” American Archivist 42, no. 3 (July 1979): 301–306, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.42.3.u56283354317333t.
5 Wendy Pflug, “Assessing Archival Collections through Surveys,” The Reading Room 2, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 64–82.
be written in a way that yields an effective and helpful response, and those working on the survey must be trained to extract information in a way that efficiently moves the survey work forward. Fleckner sums this up well in his 1977 piece, asserting, “Surveys using questionnaires rely on the willingness (and ability) of the respondents to reply; those using field workers depend on records custodians to permit access to materials” (p. 19). In my collection survey, we depended on both. We also had the added assistance of modern technology, which made gathering preliminary data from a wide audience quicker (in some cases, instantaneous) and easier. Email, for example, is a markedly faster way to receive information than traditional mail, which was used in many of the pieces that Fleckner references. In the very early stages of my survey, I sent out a Google Form to curators trying to gain documented information about any collection currently under their purview. The results depended not only on the curator themselves, but also the information they retained about a particular collection subject area. Similar to Fleckner’s point about field workers for records surveys, my collection survey’s progress varied based on the availability and interest of the student workers who were hired.

But how are records surveys helpful, and why should we continue to devote time, staff, and resources to them? Fleckner lists three main benefits of records surveys, which are not so dissimilar from Pflug’s findings and my own experience on the usefulness of our modern-day collection surveys. The benefits are as follows: 1) records surveys provide “valuable initial steps” on developing policies, such as acquisitions strategies and documentation (p. 17); 2) records surveys encourage the transfer of historical records to archives and may contribute data to provide the basis for comprehensive records management procedures; and 3) records surveys help further the archival profession’s mission of increasing access by expanding knowledge of materials from other repositories, local or otherwise (p. 18). For non-archivally trained parties involved with records surveys, creating and conducting “official” records surveys helps archivists and archives legitimize the importance of their archival practices. It makes what archivists do, as well as how and why we do it, clear to those outside our archival day-to-day work. Records surveys exist as a vital service for regional, county, and statewide historical records if we are to help preserve them for future use.

The comparison of past records surveys to the modern-day collection survey is strikingly similar. Although modern collection surveys exist to serve the singular repository versus the widespread record survey that Fleckner’s piece references, the priorities of both are much the same. In the collection assessment survey from Pflug’s piece, respondents shared that “unknown collections were identified, processing projects were planned, items were earmarked for preservation, and publishable collection metadata had been created as result of the survey.” 8 In my own collection survey experience, I had the task of working with the eight floors of published materials that the library keeps on site, along with any straggler collections that my colleagues and I came across in the stacks. My main objectives

8 Pflug, “Assessing,” 75.
were as follows: 1) to survey roughly 85 percent of our published holdings for metadata discrepancies (barcodes, cataloging issues, etc.); 2) to assess the existence and accuracy of MARC catalog records and locating devices (e.g., barcodes); and 3) to evaluate items for conservation and preservation treatment.

Whether a survey is internal to a single repository or more geographically widespread, it is important to document the stages of the survey and make this documentation available upon its conclusion. Collection and record documentation is the single most important tool we have as archivists, but we perhaps do not use it as frequently or generously as we should. Interestingly, Fleckner asserts the importance of documentation several times within his piece, describing the archivist as an active participant in documentary selection and creation (p. 16). The documentation that Fleckner refers to, however, is seemingly the documents themselves. One could argue that the way we view documentation today versus how the archival field viewed it in 1977 is very different, and that most modern archivists today define documentation as a roadmap—they are documents that are handed down within an institution or a position that provide context about policies and practices and guidance for the future. Pflug was able to gather data about lack of archival documentation through their assessment, reporting that a “common challenge for the respondents [of the survey about collection surveys] was the very little or non-existent provenance information on the collections.”9 A participant in Pflug’s study even stated, “Complexity of and incorrect information recorded for many collections, and messy accession information have slowed this all down.”10 I think, therefore, it is difficult for the modern-day archivist to consider participation in a regional or statewide records survey (as described by Fleckner), when our own in-house documentation often needs cleanup and organization. Archival documentation can and should exist in all aspects of collecting and stewardship, whether the materials in question are small or large, uncomplicated or complex. Our documentation selections should align with our collecting policies, and our documentation should guide us in the future on what and what not to collect.

Routine records and collection surveys can help archivists maintain healthy and ethical collection ecosystems. Years removed from Fleckner’s article, his observations still help us reevaluate our collecting practices, confirm current holdings, check for appropriate cataloging and metadata, and plan for future collection and space management of materials. Records surveys can exist as collective efforts to gain extensive information about records from a regional area or group of repositories, or they can exist in the form of a collection survey to work on surveying materials in-house. Fleckner builds on these fundamentals in his piece, as do a few other published pieces from the late 1970s and early 1980s,11 and this continues to the present day with Pflug’s piece on collection surveys. The aims

11 See aforementioned footnotes of George Mariz’s piece on uses of a records survey, and John F. Burns’s piece on lessons from a statewide records survey.
described through this scholarship should assist archivists with collecting followed by records surveys today. We should take care to walk before we can run, evaluating our own materials for current relevance to our own collections, creating their findability through deep and inclusive description, and confirming we are housing materials safely for long-term use and storage. If we are vigilant and successful in working on our own in-house surveys, that information and documentation can more easily be spread and shared through wider records surveys. This will help to fulfill the momentum of collective widespread archival information sharing that Fleckner describes throughout his piece.

So, how do we continue to prioritize the archival survey, both records and collections based, and where does it fall within our day-to-day work? The reality is, as archivists we are probably conducting a series of mini surveys as part of our daily work. But as Fleckner’s piece asserts, the evaluation of our materials and gathering of archival data should be viewed as a necessary and crucial part of collection upkeep, not a fleeting need or practice that should be funded by competing grant applications. By making routine collection surveys part of our archival practice, we will help others to recognize the benefit of information sharing in wider records surveys. The records survey can assist with internal needs, and sharing of that data can provide a connection with other repositories. How that takes shape should be left up to interpretation. A local finding aids central repository... shared conservation practices... a conversation about descriptive practices—the possibilities a records survey can provide are endless.