# Archival Principles of Arrangement

By T. R. SCHELLENBERG*

*National Archives*

ALL classification or arrangement work involves a breakdown of a whole into its parts. This can easily be illustrated by looking at what is done while classifying in the physical sciences. In biology, for example, a specimen is dissected in order to classify it; in chemistry a compound substance is separated into its constituents in order to identify it; and the same method is followed in all other physical sciences. The very process of analysis is one of separating anything, whether an object of the senses or of the intellect, into its parts. By this process it is possible to distinguish each of the parts, separately, and to understand their relation to each other and to the whole. The same is also true in the social sciences and in the professions dealing with the materials of social sciences.

In arranging a group or collection an archivist should obtain a general knowledge of its meaning or essential nature and its structure before proceeding to deal with its parts. The arrangement, in a word, should proceed from an understanding of the whole group or collection; it should not be separated on a piecemeal basis. This fact has been ably stressed by Ellen Jackson in an excellent article on "Manuscript Collections in the General Library" in the April 1942 issue of the *Library Quarterly*:

> It is worse than useless—it is extremely dangerous—to try to arrange any portion of a collection without a considerable familiarity with the whole. Even if the papers appear to be completely disordered, breaking up an old file may destroy a clue vital to the nature and original condition of the whole collection. The librarian or assistant who is to handle it can do no better at the start of work than to sit down and begin exploring, like an archaeologist digging in a prehistoric rubbish heap, not looking for anything in particular, but alert for

* The author of *Modern Archives; Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), is well known to our readers. Dr. Schellenberg, a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, is Assistant Archivist of the United States for the National Archives. A Spanish translation of this article, by Gunnar Mendoza L., was published in pamphlet form by the Archivo Nacional de Bolivia, Universidad de San Francisco Xavier, Sucre, in 1960 (Serie Archivistica y Bibliografica, 1), but the article has not heretofore appeared in English.

whatever significant items may meet his eye, always aware that the arrangement of materials may be as significant as the materials themselves.

Three levels of record units may be distinguished: (1) the very large, consisting of either groups of public papers or collections of private papers; (2) the intermediate, consisting of subgroups and series; and (3) the small, consisting of record units composed of individual documents or aggregations of documents fastened together into folders, binders, volumes, and the like.

In this article we are concerned with the principles that should be followed in dealing with record units. There are two basic principles of arrangement that have been developed through years of experience. The first, which is generally known as the principle of provenance, is that archives should be kept according to their source. The second is that archives should be kept in the order originally imposed on them. These principles relate, in a word, to two distinct matters: (a) provenance and (b) original order.

Two things should be accomplished by arranging records. The first is to preserve their evidential values. Such values should be preserved, it should be underscored, in private as well as public papers.

An archivist normally deals with records that have an organic character. This is the case with respect to all records of public bodies, such as governmental agencies; all records of private corporate bodies, such as businesses, churches, learned institutions, and the like; and many records produced by individuals who engaged in extended activities of one kind or another. Perhaps the only records that do not reflect organic activity are artificial collections of private papers brought together by collectors or by archivists themselves.

Records that are the product of organic activity have a value that derives from the way they were produced. Since they were created in consequence of the actions to which they relate, they often contain an unconscious and therefore impartial record of the action. Thus the evidence they contain of the actions they record has a peculiar value. It is the *quality* of this evidence that is our concern here. Records, however, also have a value for the evidence they contain of the actions that resulted in their production. It is the *content* of the evidence that is our concern here.

These added values—values because of their production during action and their evidence of action—will be referred to as evidential values. Let us examine these values a bit further.

The character of the evidence in archives has been stressed for many years. As early as 1632 Baldassare Bonifacio referred to it

in his essay "De Archivis." He wrote that "so great is the respect for archives that credence is obviously to be given to instruments produced from a public archives, and they make, as the jurisconsults say, 'full faith.' "

In England, the English archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson refers to this quality as the "evidential value of records." Public records, according to Jenkinson, have a quality that is derived from the way they came into being, a quality that makes their evidence on the matters to which they pertain unusually valuable. In commenting on Jenkinson's views Ian Maclean, the Chief Archives Officer of the Commonwealth of Australia, observes, "The archivist's whole methodology is based on the sanctity of his Archives as evidence. Being records of transactions of which they themselves formed a part, Archives are, in a particular sense, authentic and impartial."

Archives also have an obvious value as evidence of the actions that resulted in their production. One of the basic approaches in evaluating records produced by public bodies is to select for retention those that show the functioning of such bodies. Every governmental archivist, for that reason, will preserve records containing evidence of the actions of the government he serves; every archivist dealing with records of private corporate bodies will preserve evidence of the actions of such bodies.

Records of organic bodies are normally arranged in relation to the actions that resulted in their production. The way they were brought together is therefore significant. According to Jenkinson, "they have . . . a structure, an articulation and a natural relationship between parts, which are essential to their significance . . . Archive quality only survives unimpaired so long as their natural form and relationship are maintained."

The second thing to accomplish by arranging records is to make them accessible for use. In order to do this it is necessary to arrange them so they can be described effectively. Arrangement, then, should also facilitate the description of records.

In analyzing the application of the two basic principles of arrangement I will try to show the extent to which they preserve the evidential values of records, make records accessible for use, and facilitate their description. They should be applied only insofar as something can be achieved by their application.

## Provenance

The principle of provenance stems from the French principle of *respect pour les fonds* first enunciated in regulations issued by

Guizot, French Minister of Public Instruction, in 1839. The principle, which was first applied to the records of the *départements* in the Archives Nationales, simply provides that records should be grouped according to the nature of the institution that has accumulated them. As originally formulated, the principle was not precise in its definition of the kind of organic body, for records from similar types of institutions could be grouped into a *fonds*, nor was it consistently applied after it was formulated.

The principle was made more precise by the Prussian archivists, who in 1881 issued regulations for arrangement work at the Prussian State Archives that provided that public records should be grouped according to their origins in public administrative bodies. The Prussian principle was called *Provenienzprinzip*, or the principle of provenance.

Let us see, first, what bearing the principle of provenance has on evidential values. And let us consider this matter in relation to (1) groups and subgroups and (2) series.

*Groups and Subgroups*

The principle of provenance means that records should be kept in separate units that correspond to their sources in organic bodies. Each unit should be treated as an integral unit. Each unit should be kept intact. Records from one source should not be merged with those from another.

Before the formulation of the principle, archivists often tried to arrange records on a subject basis. They thus arranged in relation to subjects records that were originally brought together in relation to action. In doing this they had to impose an entirely different order on the innumerable single documents that are created in the course of organic activity by any office, no matter how small.

A subject arrangement not only obscures the source of records in organic bodies and organic activities; it also destroys the original order imposed on them. It is thus a violation of both the principle of provenance and the principle of original order.

While the principle of provenance is now generally observed by archivists, it is often violated before records reach the archival institution. This often happens when records within an agency are rearranged after they have served their current uses. Normally they should be kept, insofar as possible, in the order given them by the agency in the course of its official business. If they are rearranged, care should be exercised that their organizational origins will not be obscured. In a word, the evidence of their source in an organizational unit should be preserved; thus records of one office of an

agency should not be merged with those of another, nor should records of various offices be reorganized into a new file.

In the Federal Government of the United States such rearrangements are often undertaken at the hands of official historians, who should be most concerned about the value of the evidence in records. While working with noncurrent records they often rearrange them by the subjects or topics in relation to which they are writing historical accounts. To the extent that they have an influence in regard to such rearrangement projects, archivists should counsel against them, for they seriously impair the quality of the evidence on organization and function.

If historians fail to preserve the evidential values of records by insisting on a violation of the principle of provenance, their action may be attributed to their ignorance of the archival profession, about which they are expected to know very little, and may for this reason be excused. But there is no justification, other than that of professional immaturity or ignorance, for an archivist to sanction or to participate in rearrangement projects that will destroy the evidential value of records.

While working with research materials historians may discover the organic relations that were destroyed by the dispersal of public records. They may find a map, for example, the identity of which was obscured by being buried in a geographic file that was once one of a series of maps pertaining to the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803-6). Or they may find a letter embodied in a strictly chronological file that was once part of the files of some committee of the House of Representatives. While historians may derive a great deal of pleasure from fitting together the pieces of evidence, just as a child does in fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, it is not the function of an archivist to create a jigsaw puzzle out of the research materials of his nation. It is his function to preserve them in such a way and at such places that their significance will be apparent and that the evidence they contain will be preserved.

Admittedly also, the arrangement of records is affected when an archivist retains part of the records of an agency and discards the rest. The retained records are obviously placed in a different relation to each other from the one they had in their current life. But this does not mean that the archivist while selecting records for retention should merge those of various offices with each other, or those of various activities with each other. If sound archival principles are followed the selected records are retained office by office and activity by activity, and there will thus be no fusion of files, no

creation of new files excepting by archivists who do not understand or who have no regard for archival principles.

The value of public records may also be destroyed by improperly removing them from public custody. Such records often lose their significance when they are taken from the record groups in which they belong. They lose their organic character, their meaning in relation to activities of a particular office. They should not be removed from the record groups in which they were embodied and scattered among various repositories. They should not be made truck in the public market to be hawked about by dealers and collectors.

*Series*

While I do not wish to discuss here the factors that are taken into account in creating record series, I must refer to them to make clear one essential fact. It is that, regardless of what factor led to the creation of a series, it is likely that the series was created in the course of performing a particular kind of action.

If, for example, the series was established because a group of records was arranged according to a particular filing system, such a series is likely to embody records resulting from the actions of a particular office. Or a series consisting of a particular physical type of records is likely to denote a particular class of actions, for physical types are created in relation to classes of actions—reports for reporting, questionnaires for questioning, and so forth. Or a series established in relation to a subject is likely to reflect actions in relation to the particular subject of concern to an office or an officer.

Let us, then, see how archival series should be dealt with.

Since series generally reflect action they should be preserved intact as a record of action. They should not be torn apart to create new series. While the arrangement of the particular record items within a series may not significantly reflect action, the series as a whole does. Each record item in it is thus a part of an organic whole. To separate it from the series in which it is embodied will impair its meaning, for the series as a whole has a meaning greater than its parts, that is, than the individual record items.

Series, just as archival groups and subgroups, should be treated as integral units. They should be kept apart from each other, for to arbitrarily combine series on different kinds of action into one file will confuse the record of action and vitiate the evidence that derives from the way records were brought together in the course of action.

Let me illustrate why series should be kept intact and separate from each other. In the case of the series within an archival group created by some bureau of the Federal Government, for example, one would normally find several kinds of series.

The most important of such series is the correspondence that is organized into a central file containing letters received or sent by bureau officials, copies of memoranda, reports, forms, and other administrative issuances. Taken as a whole the file contains records on every activity of the bureau and has a significance because it contains such records and no others; it contains no records of other bureaus except as they relate to its activities. Its value as a record of the activities of the bureau would be vitiated if it were merged with the central file of another bureau, or, for that matter, if records unrelated to the activities of the bureau were interfiled in it.

Or the series of a bureau may consist of the office files of its chief. Such a series has a significance as a record of his administrative actions, and this significance is obscured the moment the series, as such, is torn apart and the record items within it are merged with another file.

The series within a manuscript collection containing records of some noteworthy individual are similar in character to those in an archival group. If the individual, perchance, was a noted writer he doubtless accumulated a separate file pertaining to his literary activities, including manuscripts of his writings, correspondence relating to them, reviews of them, and other similar documents. If he also engaged in politics he doubtless accumulated an office file, which he removed on retiring from office, pertaining to his service on a legislative body. If he was actively interested in a business he doubtless kept records on his financial transactions if for no other reason than that of tax accountability. He probably also kept his personal and family papers apart from those relating to his other activities. His collection then falls into several natural series, each relating to a particular activity. These series have a value as a record of the activities to which they pertain; this value is lost the moment the series are not kept intact—the moment, for example, the various series are merged with each other into a chronological file—and once this value is lost it cannot be recaptured.

This value is something apart from the value of information in individual record items. It is a value derived fom the arrangement of the collection into series, and this arrangement normally is one suited to the needs of the researcher, who is likely to be interested in the activities for which the individual was noteworthy and in relation to which he created the series.

Let us see, next, what bearing the principle of provenance has on accessibility.

Before the principle was formulated archivists, as we have seen, rearranged in relation to subjects records that were originally brought together in relation to actions. Such rearrangement work was very involved, no matter how small the holdings of an archival institution. It was so time-consuming that it normally absorbed all the time of an archivist forever and a day. It was also very difficult work, for the subjects in relation to which the records of any agency should be reorganized varied from one agency to another. The subjects, moreover, could not actually be chosen with finality until a fairly thorough analysis had been made of all the records to be reorganized. Any faulty choice of subjects led to faulty arrangement. And any list of subjects, no matter how carefully chosen, was not likely to cover all the records to be reorganized, with the result that a miscellany was usually left over—a residue of unclassified records.

The principle of provenance supplanted the procedure of arranging records according to subjects. It thus supplanted a completely impractical method of arrangement by a practical one, for arbitrary systems of arrangement cannot be applied to records without infinitely complicating the task of the archivist. It provided the archivist with a workable and economical guide in arranging, describing, and servicing records in his custody.

## Original Order

The second principle of arrangement to which archivists attach importance is that records should be kept in the order imposed on them during their current life. This principle is an outgrowth of the *Registraturprinzip* formulated by the Prussian archivists in 1881 to regulate arrangement work in the Prussian State Archives. The principle stated that "Official papers are to be maintained in the order and with the designations which they received in the course of the official activity of the agency concerned." This principle, which can be applied whenever records are properly arranged in a government agency before their release to the archival institution (as they are in German registry offices), has been the subject of a great deal of discussion among archivists in various countries.

Let us see what bearing the principle of original order has on evidential values. Does it provide evidence on how an organic body was organized or how it conducted its activities? Or on some other matter?

Let us consider this question in relation to (1) the arrangement of series within groups and (2) the arrangement of record items within series.

*Series Within Groups*

Here we are considering the relation of series to each other, not to their source. Obviously all series from a given source should be kept together, but in what order should they be placed?

The question to be answered here is the extent to which the arrangement of a series within a record group—whether a manuscript collection or an archival group—has a significance other than that of making the records accessible for use. I believe a careful examination of all aspects of this question will indicate that the arrangement of series in relation to each other is important mainly from the point of view of their usability, not from the point of view of their integrity as evidence of organization and function. The main consideration in preserving the integrity of records is that groups, subgroups, and series should be kept intact and treated as integral units. They should not be merged with one another: one group with another, one subgroup with another, or one series with another.

But the order in which series within a group or subgroup are placed normally has little effect on their evidential values or on the integrity of the group or subgroup of which they are a part.

Let us examine typical series within an archival group produced by a bureau of the Federal Government to illustrate this point. Such a record group usually includes the following series:

A series of general correspondence of the bureau as a whole.
A series of the bureau chief's correspondence.
Several series of divisional correspondence.
Series of questionnaires, reports, and other forms created to perform classes of actions.
Series of technical and fiscal records, and so forth.

The above series may be placed in any conceivable relation to each other without affecting the integrity of each of them or of the group as a whole. The arrangement, whatever it is, should be one that will contribute to an understanding of the significance of the records and make them intelligible to the user.

*Items Within Series*

The order in which individual record items within a series should be arranged in an archival institution depends on two considera-

tions: (a) the possible value of the arrangement in revealing the organic activity that resulted in the creation of the series, and (b) the value of the arrangement in revealing the information that is contained in the series.

*Organic Values*

The question here is: does the arrangement of the items in the series show how things were done? If so, to what extent is this the case?

While the original order of record items in a series is not a sacrosanct thing—something to be preserved at all costs—it may nonetheless be one that reveals the significance of records and makes them usable. Lester J. Cappon, Director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, states that "a *corpus* of manuscript papers, being something more than the sum of its parts, is not susceptible to regimented arrangement without loss of character." A collection of manuscripts, he adds, is more than "the sum of its parts," so that the mathematical formula known to every schoolboy that "the whole is equal to the sum of its parts" does not apply. The added meaning which a manuscript collection or archival group has is presumably derived from the arrangement of its parts, the context in which they were kept, and the way in which, in general, the collection or group was organized during its creation.

The original order imposed on items within a series may show time sequences, personal relationships, or even organic activity. If read in chronological order, for example, the individual item may show how things actually happened, how an idea budded and blossomed into action, or how the thinking of a person developed. Similarly, if read in relation to particular persons under an alphabetical arrangement, the individual items may reveal in a striking way how a friendship developed, or how views were interchanged on sundry matters between two persons who corresponded with each other. If read in relation to an activity, the items may throw light on how an organization was started, on what work it performed, or on what resulted from its work. But normally such facts are obtained because the series, as such, was kept intact, not because of the order given the items within it.

Usually the order in which individual record items within a series are arranged does not significantly reveal how things were done. The order seldom has a presumptive value and usually must be judged strictly on its merits. As a rule it is important only to the extent that it makes the records usable. The single record items us-

ually derive no added meaning from their position among other record items, though a good arrangement may make their meaning more apparent.

To illustrate the validity of this point of view, let us examine how record items are arranged within series.

In current use are various filing systems, in accordance with which record items are arranged as they are accumulated. In accordance with them the individual record items may be arranged alphabetically, chronologically, numerically, or by subject, or under a combination of these various systems of arrangement. From an archivist's point of view, most of these systems are notoriously bad because they do not show how records were accumulated in relation to the activities to which they pertain. A file organized according to the Dewey-decimal system of notation, for example, may be broken down into ten main subject classes that may have little relation to the activities of the government body that produced the file. Nor are the divisions of the main classes likely to bear a relation to activity. While some filing systems are to be preferred to others from an archival point of view, no modern system reflects fully the activities of the body that produced the records organized under it. In a word, the arrangement of the individual record items does not contribute to an understanding of the activity that is reflected in the series as a whole.

Occasionally, however, the order imposed on items may reveal administrative processes. It may show, for example, how a given fiscal or technical operation was performed. Or it may show the sequence of action, or other organic connections. If the original order of the items within a series has any value in showing organic activity it should, by all means, be preserved.

Occasionally, also, the order imposed on items within a series may reflect how things were done in an office. The disorder of files is often characteristic of disorder in administration. And logically, therefore, an archivist, to preserve evidence of how things were actually done, should preserve records in the condition of disorder in which they were maintained during their current life. But this is obviously carrying logic too far.

Occasionally, also, the order imposed on items within a series may show the idiosyncrasies of an individual in filing, but these idiosyncrasies are important only if the individual who did the filing is important. When Thomas Jefferson, for example, who was accustomed to cataloging his library systematically, placed William Wirt's biography of Patrick Henry under the head of fiction it revealed Jefferson's estimate of the merits of the biography, and his

classification therefore had an added significance. But the idiosyncrasies of a file clerk in filing papers are not as a rule significant. Usually they are attributable to a lack of understanding of the techniques of filing and the principles of classification rather than to personal idiosyncrasies.

*Informational Values*

An exception to the rule of preserving records in their original order should be made when records are preserved solely for their informational content—without reference to their value as evidence of organization and function. Many modern records are preserved solely for the information they contain on persons or places or on sociological, economic, scientific, or other matters. Such records should be arranged solely with a view to facilitating their exploitation by scholars, scientists, and others without regard to how they were arranged in the agency that created them.

An example of such records is the climatological reports that were received by the National Archives from the Weather Bureau. Under the original arrangement of these reports it was impossible to ascertain what climatological data existed for a given place. They were, therefore, rearranged. The series created by each of the agencies that originally produced the records—the Surgeon General's Office, the Smithsonian Institution, the Signal Office, and the Weather Bureau—were kept intact, but the volumes containing the reports were unbound and the individual reports within them were rearranged by places (States and localities) and thereunder in chronological sequence.

Another exception to the rule of preserving records in their original order should be made when the original order is not ascertainable or is manifestly bad. While most records developed by European governments are organized in registry offices before their release to archival institutions, many records of the Federal Government of the United States are left in a disorganized state. Several attempts have been made to bring uniformity on a national scale in the recordkeeping procedures of Government agencies, but the only result has been the adoption of systems that have tended to complicate rather than to simplify the organization of the records of any particular agency. Few records, even at the present time, are organized with the consideration in mind that they may eventually be transferred to an archival institution. And in the past, when no such institution existed, records were simply allowed to accumulate and, having served their current purposes, were relegated to out-of-the-way storerooms. The basic condition is gen-

erally lacking by which the principles of the German and Dutch archivists concerning the preservation of the original order established in a registry office can be made to apply. The reconstruction of the original order, therefore, is often very difficult and occasionally undesirable. The original order—to use the words of the Director of the Prussian State Archives in describing older registries—is "without system, foolish, and impractical." In such cases, the arrangement to be imposed on the records should be determined by the archivist.

Let us now see what bearing the principle of original order had on accessibility.

The significance of records must, of course, be made known in finding aids, and the way records may be described depends on the way they were arranged. If the records were arranged in a chronological sequence the only descriptive data provided by their arrangement are dates; if they were arranged in an alphabetical sequence the descriptive data are somewhat more complete in that information is provided on the correspondents involved; if they were arranged by subject the descriptive data are still more complete. The production of finding aids is also an important consideration in making records available for use, and the arrangement of individual record items to facilitate their description thus also indirectly facilitates their use.

## Summary

In recapitulation, then, there are two basic archival principles to be observed. While the principle of provenance is basic and inflexible and relates to a matter of the highest importance to the archival profession, the principle relating to the original order of records involves mainly matters of convenience or use.

The principle of provenance relates to the integrity of archives —the preservation of the values that inhere in them because of their organic character. While arranging records there are two things that will seriously affect their evidential values. One is anything that is done to obscure the source of records in a particular body; the other, anything that is done to obscure their source in a particular activity. Both of these actions involve origins—one, origins of records in an organic body; the other, origins in an organic activity.

The principle of original order relates mainly to use or convenience. Normally an archivist should preserve the order given series within record groups and record items within series during their current life, if it is one that permits him to find records when they

are wanted and to describe records effectively. Normally he should try to understand the system of arrangement that was imposed on the records originally rather than to impose one of his preference. But he should have no compunction about rearranging series in relation to each other or single record items within them if by so doing he can make the records more intelligible and more serviceable. The test here is a very practical one of usability.

---

### *Pen Pictures*

. . . First impressions of a country and its people are generally vivid, and if our people would recover from their correspondents the letters which they sent them on their arrival in this remote region descriptive of their impressions and permit the Society to become their custodian, it would be in the possession of pen pictures so graphic as to be of absorbing interest. Carlyle says history is the essence of innumerable biographies.

—Introduction to *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 2:13 (Helena, Mont., 1896). Quoted by permission of the Society.

*Producing*

BOOKS : CATALOGS : PUBLICATIONS

and other types of printing for over

fifty years

Serving some customers for over

thirty continuous years

THE TORCH PRESS

324 3d St., S.E.

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA