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Managing Archival Collections

Tracking the History of a Record

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The history of a document can be as important as what is contained on the record itself. The principle of provenance is essential in the archives, affirming this importance of tracking the origin of a collection. Understanding the “life” of the record allows us to better comprehend who created it and why. It speaks to the authenticity of the document and can help the user decipher the role it plays alongside other similar documents. Therefore, the person accepting a donation should ask the donor as many questions as possible to cull the knowledge a donor has about what he is giving. The archivist or other person who is accessioning a collection should always use an accession form and worksheet to record pertinent information as the material enters the repository.

The form you use as a donation is accepted should include the following information:

- The name of the acquisition creator(s) – Also, record the creator’s birth date if possible so that this person will not be confused with another. (For example, does a collection of the personal papers of William Shakespeare refer to THE William Shakespeare or someone with the same name?)
- Record the relationship of the donor to the creator of the records. Did the donor create the records or is he a relative or friend? Perhaps the collection was bought and the donor has no relationship at all to the creator?
- The owner of the copyrights of the material. Copyrights should be signed over to the Archives using the donor form when a donation is made. The person who owns the physical materials is not necessarily the one who owns the copyright. This needs to be determined at the time of donation. (For more information see “When U.S. Works Pass Into the Public Domain” <http://www.unc.edu/~unclng/public-d.htm> .
- Information about the general content of the collection. List the known series within the donated collection. It is not desirable at this point to look through every piece of paper in the donation. However, obvious or important groups of records should be noted.

- The acceptable disposition of the materials. Is it acceptable to discard any materials in this collection? Are all of the records important enough to be retained or will materials be removed during the process of appraisal?
- The full provenance of the materials if possible. Who owned the records before the donor? Where have these records been stored during their lifetime? For example, have materials been stored in the donor's attic or in another institution? Record any other useful information about the creator.
- If possible, when the item is donated, inquire about the life of the record creator. This information should eventually be included in a biographical note within the finding aid and is very helpful to researchers.
- Any other pertinent information about the records that you can. A full inquiry should be made of the donor to determine provenance, biographical information and any other useful tidbits that might spark the interest of a researcher.

Formal accessioning should be completed for a collection before processing work begins. Collections newly accepted into an Archives should be accessioned promptly to ensure quick control over materials and to record / preserve any information given by the donor when the material is accepted into a repository. An accession number should be assigned immediately. The accession number for new donations include four digits for the year the donation was made, followed by a period, followed by the consecutive number of the donation within the year. (Example 2004.1 represents the first donation in the year 2004.)

An accession notebook or database with accession information allows an organization to easily track its materials as they come into the Archives. The accession notebook should include an accession number, a brief title that usually reflects the creator of the records, a brief description of the records, the date the new collection or item was received, the date the material is being formally accessioned, and the name of donor. The accession notebook serves as a resource for the repository staff. Donor information is often sensitive and accession registers should not be shared with the public. Any information in the register that is important to researchers should also be recorded in a manuscript inventory.

Many Archives have established collections without formal accession numbers. When this is the case, it is beneficial to retroactively assign accession numbers that serve as identifying tags for materials similar to the way social security numbers help track people. Research should be performed to gather as much information as possible about the circumstances of the donation.

For more information about accessioning see:

Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives http://www.anla.nf.ca/sample_chpt.htm

Archives Association of British Columbia
http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/msa/3_bringing_material_into_your_ar.htm

