



The National Archives

Washington, D. C.

OFFICE OF THE ARCHIVIST

Memorandum No. A-142

February 28, 1941

To: Heads of Operating Units

SUBJECT: Finding Mediums

Memorandum No. A-122, issued March 1, 1940, provided for the appointment of a special committee to make a study of "finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records in the custody of the Archivist." For the purpose of this study the term "finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records" was broadly defined to embrace: (1) Recommendations on transfer; (2) identification inventories; (3) preliminary reports; (4) identification of series reports; (5) historical summaries; (6) classification schemes; (7) catalogs and indexes; (8) catalog surveys; (9) inventories and lists; (10) calendars; (11) special reports; and (12) guides.

The committee was authorized and directed to consider: (1) The purposes which finding mediums and other such instruments as those mentioned are designed to serve; (2) the extent to which existing finding mediums and other such instruments serve, or fail to serve, these purposes; (3) whether any of them should be discontinued and/or others be undertaken at this time; and (4) means of facilitating their production and distribution.

The committee was further authorized to request from members of the staff such oral and/or written reports on the subject under consideration as it deemed necessary for its study, and all members of the staff were directed to cooperate with the committee to the fullest extent.

The following constituted the committee: The Assistant Director of Archival Service, Chairman, the Director of Publications, the Chief of the Division of Reference (or the Assistant Chief of the Division in the absence of the Chief), the Chief of the Division of War Department Archives, and the Chief of the Division of Maps and Charts. The committee was directed to submit its report to the Director of Archival Service for transmission, with his recommendations thereon, to the Archivist for approval.

The work of the committee was both comprehensive and thorough. Between March 4 and May 22, 1940, inclusive, it held 14 meetings. It received reports from 15 of the 18 chiefs of professional divisions in The National Archives, 14 other reports and articles submitted by members of the National Archives staff, and 5 reports and articles from sources outside The National Archives; and it heard oral statements from 10 qualified witnesses. All the evidence thus made available, as well as the various types of "finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records" that were already in use in The National Archives, was carefully analyzed and studied in terms of their application to the present requirements of The National Archives. On January 15, 1941, the committee filed its report with the Director of Archival Service, who transmitted it with his comments to the Archivist on February 14.

Directions for the Preparation of Finding Mediums

After giving careful consideration to the findings of the committee, I hereby direct:

Section 1. That hereafter all finding mediums prescribed for use in connection with records in the custody of the Archivist of the United States shall be drafted by the personnel of the custodial division to which the records have been allocated, in accordance with instructions to be supplied by the Office of the Director of Archival Service. All such finding mediums prepared by any custodial division shall be transmitted by the chief thereof, in the form of drafts, to the Assistant Director of Archival Service, who, if he finds that they have been prepared in accordance with instructions, shall transmit them to the Director of Archival Service for his approval. Upon approval by the Director they shall be returned to the Assistant Director of Archival Service, who shall arrange for their reproduction. Any of them that are to be processed or printed shall be submitted to the Office of the Director of Publications for editorial revision in accordance with established procedure.

Section 2. That recommendations on transfer and identification inventories shall not be considered as finding mediums and shall continue to be issued in their present form and content in accordance with established procedure.

Section 3. That the preparation of preliminary reports, identification of series reports, historical summaries, and classification schemes shall be discontinued.

Section 4. That cataloging by accessions shall be discontinued and there shall be substituted therefor cataloging by record groups. The term "record group" is defined as a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and

to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories.

Section 5. That the chief of each custodial division shall have made as promptly as possible a tentative identification and registration of each of the record groups in his custody in the form of a separate document for each record group, to be entitled "Registration of Record Group," which shall provide the following data: (1) An appropriate name for the record group; (2) designation of the part or parts of the group in The National Archives, with inclusive dates, statements of quantity, and accession numbers; and (3) such summary information as is readily available concerning parts of the group not yet transferred to The National Archives, if any, with indication of quantity, inclusive dates, present custodianship, and physical location. These documents should, as a rule, be confined to a single sheet of paper, and after editorial revision by the Office of Publications shall be reproduced for internal distribution only.

Section 6. That the chief of each custodial division shall proceed as promptly as possible to have compiled "Preliminary Checklists" of all the material in his custody, insofar as the data called for are not already available in preliminary reports, identification of series reports, classification schemes, and the like. Each of these lists should, as a rule, cover a conveniently separable part of a record group, but in some cases a list may cover an entire group. The records may be described in any convenient preliminary order, and the units of description shall be series, groups of series, or parts of series, or such other units as in any given case may appear to be desirable, depending on the character and condition of the material and the use likely to be made of it. Each list shall have incorporated in its title the name of the record group to which the material belongs, shall open with an introduction containing such general information concerning the history of the records listed and of the administrative units and functions involved in their creation as may be readily available and might be helpful to anyone using the list as a finding medium, and after a minimum of editorial revision by the Office of Publications shall be reproduced for internal distribution only.

Section 7. That whenever the body of material belonging to a given record group in the custody of the Archivist is sufficiently extensive or complete to justify such work, and all of it has been covered by preliminary checklists or similar documents, the chief of the division having custody of the material shall proceed with the compilation of a "Preliminary Inventory" of such material. This will involve the assembling and grouping of all the preliminary checklists and similar documents previously prepared for the records in the group, the preparation of a general over-all administrative history of the agency and its records, and the integration and revision of all this data. These preliminary inventories, after careful editorial revision by the Office of Publications, shall be processed in such form

as to be available not only for internal distribution but also for use by searchers within the building or outside, as circumstances may make desirable.

Section 8. That registrations of record groups, preliminary checklists or similar documents, and preliminary inventories shall be prepared as promptly as possible for all material in the custody of the Archivist and also for all incoming material. When new accessions are received consisting of material belonging to any record group that has already been registered and for which a preliminary inventory has been compiled, the registration for that group shall be revised by the incorporation therein of data concerning the newly accessioned material, and the revised version shall be processed and substituted for the old version in all sets of such registrations maintained in The National Archives; separate checklists of the new material shall be prepared; and the previously prepared preliminary inventory shall either be revised or provided with a supplement, as the case may demand.

Section 9. That the chief of each custodial division shall have prepared a priority list of the record groups in his custody with reference to the task of final arrangement and the preparation of final inventories and shall transmit it through the Director of Archival Service to the Advisory Committee on Finding Mediums provided for in section 15 of this memorandum, which shall transmit it with its recommendations through the Director of Archival Service to the Archivist for his approval.

Section 10. That as soon as a project for the final arrangement and inventorying of a record group shall have been included on an approved priority list, the chief of the custodial division concerned shall have a plan for the project prepared and shall transmit it through the Director of Archival Service to the Advisory Committee on Finding Mediums, which shall return it with its recommendations to the Director of Archival Service, who, upon approval by the Archivist, shall authorize and direct the chief of the custodial division to proceed with the project. Such projects will involve the identification of series, the determination of the official title for each series, the evolution of logical groupings of the series, the compilation of an inventory, the assignment of simple symbols, and finally the arrangement of the material itself in the order of the inventory, insofar as that is feasible. The work will require a knowledge not only of the records but also of the technique of organizing, arranging, describing, and cataloging archival material, and, therefore, should usually be done by teams of workers possessing among them all the requisite qualifications for the work.

Final inventories shall begin with an introduction, which shall, as a rule, set forth the history and functions of the agency and its predecessors, if any, that created the record group; the history of the

records themselves; the general character and significance of the records; information concerning the character, amount, and whereabouts of any parts of the group not in the custody of the Archivist and concerning supplementary records or papers; references to indexes, lists, and other pertinent finding mediums; and an explanation of the character of the inventory. If the inventory itself is divided into parts, each part shall, as a rule, have an introductory note containing data similar to those in the general introduction but pertinent to that part only.

The units of description in the inventories shall, as a rule, be series, but may at times be smaller units such as subseries, volumes, or dossiers, or larger units such as groups of series, and these units shall be numbered consecutively throughout the inventory or each major part thereof, and their numbers, with the title of the record group or a symbol therefor, shall serve as call numbers. Each entry shall present as the first paragraph the title of the unit, followed in a prescribed order and format by such formal data as inclusive dates and statements of quantity and arrangement. Descriptive and analytical data shall be presented in a separate paragraph or paragraphs and may include, in some cases, lists of headings of a subject or other classification, or other similar detailed data; cross references to indexes or other material in the group or elsewhere; references to pertinent publications; and the like. When an inventory is completed, revised, and approved it shall be indexed; and, if it covers an entire group or appropriate segment of a group, it shall be printed or processed and be made available wherever it will be useful.

Section 11. That cataloging, other than by record groups, except in special cases specifically authorized, shall be deferred until after final inventories have been completed, and whenever such inventories are completed, projects shall be prepared by the custodial division concerned for the cataloging of the records covered by the inventories. Such projects, which shall indicate the type of unit proposed to be used for cataloging purposes, shall be handled in the same manner as that proposed for the projects referred to in section 10 of this memorandum.

Section 12. That no change shall be made in the present procedure with reference to the compilation of guides.

Section 13. That finding mediums of other types, such as calendars, special lists of documents, ideal inventories of record groups that have been broken up and incorporated in other groups, systematic descriptions (involving arrangements different from those of the inventories), catalog surveys, and indexes, may be planned as projects by the custodial division concerned as the need arises, either before or after the preparation of final inventories, and these projects shall be handled in the same manner as that proposed for the projects referred to in section 10 of this memorandum.

Section 14. That special reports relating to material in any custodial division may be planned as projects by the chief of such custodial division and that special reports relating to material in the custody of more than one custodial division may be planned as projects by the Chief of the Division of Reference as the need arises, and such projects shall be handled in the same manner as that proposed for the projects referred to in section 10 of this memorandum.

Section 15. That all plans and procedures covered by this memorandum and other plans and procedures adopted with reference to finding mediums shall be considered as experimental for the time being. There is hereby established an Advisory Committee on Finding Mediums consisting of the Assistant Director of Archival Service, as Chairman, the Director of Publications, the Chief of the Division of Reference, and two chiefs of custodial divisions to be appointed by the Archivist. This committee shall continuously study the problems connected with finding mediums in The National Archives, shall make through the Director of Archival Service recommendations to the Archivist for such changes in practices and procedures with reference thereto as it may consider desirable, and shall perform such other related duties as may be imposed upon it by the Archivist; Provided, That whenever any specific project is under consideration by the committee, the chief of the division that has the custody of the records concerned shall be called in by the committee for consultation as technical adviser.

R. S. W. Cowen
Archivist of the United States