Archives Boot Camp: Minimal Processing

PACSCL/CLIR
HIDDEN COLLECTIONS PROCESSING PROJECT
2013-2014
Provide a strategy through which repositories can gain control of their archival backlog, plan for, and begin processing in order to make collections ready for research.
Archivists are ... [I]ntermediaries between the creator of a collection of manuscripts and the present and future users of the papers. Archivists ... are among those charged by society to decide which portions of the enormous quantity of records become part of the permanent historical record of our culture. Our task is to preserve these materials and to make them accessible to researchers who study and tell the stories of our past ... The papers we process will soon become the “stuff” of history. Each one of us is a link in the long chain of knowledge that stretches from the lives of the men and women who created the papers to the eventual users of the manuscripts.”

--University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Strategy

1. Surveying
2. Minimal processing, or “MPLP”
3. The Archivists’ Toolkit
Development of Methodology

The methodologies that are shared here are based on over 6 years of grant funded cooperative survey and processing work completed by PACSCL in and around Philadelphia.

1. PACSCL Survey Project, 2006-2009
2. PACSCL Hidden Collections Processing Project, 2009-2012
3. PACSCL Hidden Collections Processing Project, 2013-2014
What is PACSCL?

Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries

- Cooperative group of special collections libraries with shared goals for their collections
- Founded in 1985 with 16 member libraries
- Today, PACSCL is composed of 36 member libraries
  - 4,000,000 rare books
  - 260,000 linear feet of manuscripts and archival materials
  - 9,000,000 photographs, maps, architectural drawings, and works of art on paper
  - BUT, PACSCL itself, does not own collections
- Long history of consortial work

www.pacscl.org
PACSCL Survey Initiative

- Completed from 2006 to 2009
- Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
- Surveyed more than 2,100 unprocessed or underprocessed collections at 22 area repositories
- Provided collection level records via project website
- Assigned research values to collections, which were used to prioritize processing for the subsequent two Hidden Collections Processing Projects.

http://www.pacsclsurvey.org
Funded by Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)

2009-2012: 27 Month Project

2013-2014: 17 Month Project
PACSCL Hidden Collections Processing Project Goals

1. Process and make accessible 46 collections related to Philadelphia history across 16 Philadelphia-area archival repositories

2. Partner with several non-PACSCL members with relevant collections

3. Continue to refine the experiment with large scale minimal processing or “MPLP” for records ranging from the 15th to 21st centuries

4. Utilize DACS, EAD, and the Archivists’ Toolkit (“AT”) to create discovery tools

5. Refine existing training materials for implementation of minimal processing strategies and use of the Archivists’ Toolkit

6. Use consortial cooperation in order to reveal Philadelphia’s treasures to researchers across the country and the globe
Archives Alphabet Soup

- **Processing**: the act of arranging an archival collection, providing archival quality housing for the collection and describing the collection, or writing a finding aid.

- **Finding Aid**: a catalog of the collection that communicates to users what is in the collection and how to locate specific materials in the collection quickly and easily.

- **MPLP**: Refers to the style of processing discussed in the article “More Product, Less Process,” by Greene and Meisner. AKA “minimal processing”.

- **DACS**: Describing Archives a Content Standard.

- **EAD**: Encoded Archival Description.

- **Archivists’ Toolkit**: An open source collections management database, developed specifically for the management of archives. AKA “A.T.”
PROCESSING
The arrangement, description and housing of archival materials for storage and use by patrons.
Processing Basics

- Provenance
- Original Order
- Arrangement
- Description
- Housing
- Preservation
A fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family or organization that created or received the items in a collection and dictating that these collections be maintained as a unique body and not intermixed with collections of different provenances, regardless of their similarities in topic.
Original Order

- The organization and sequence of records established by the creator.
  - For original order to apply, there needs to be an identifiable and useful order in existence. If there is not an identifiable or useful order (if you cannot explain what the order is), then you will have to impose an order.
  - No order does NOT equal original order.

- There are exceptions to the rule!
Arrangement

The process of organizing material to achieve physical and intellectual control over the materials, while respecting original order whenever possible.

Collections are divided into Series and Subseries. A series is nothing more than “a group of similar records that are arranged according to a filing system and that are related as the result of being created, received, or used in the same activity.”
Hierarchical Nature of Archives

- Arranging an archival collection is not hard; if you can make an outline to organize ideas for a paper or presentation, you can organize archives.
- Archival collections are arranged and described hierarchically, with the papers and information organized from the most general to the most specific.

- Collection
  - Series
    - Subseries
  - Folder
    - Item
### Intellectual v. Physical Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual Arrangement</th>
<th>Physical Arrangement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refers to the hierarchical arrangement of series, subseries, folders and items within a collection, and how they relate to each other.</td>
<td>Refers to the actual order of physical materials within the collection.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Physical arrangement or location is typically denoted with box and folder numbers, or volume numbers.</td>
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Intellectual vs. Physical Arrangement

- Intellectual and physical arrangement often mimic each other, but in actuality are not the same.

- Items that intellectually belong together, may not be housed together because of differences in format or size.

- A series is not defined by its physical location, nor do intellectually created series determine the physical arrangement of the collection.
  - Series may span multiple boxes, or a new series may begin in the middle of a box, for example

- Physical location is necessary to help researchers obtain access to material
The process of creating a finding aid, or other access tool, that allows individuals to identify the contents of the collection and determine its relevance to their study.

The PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Project uses DACS.
Housing and Preventative Conservation

- Provide archival quality folders, boxes and other enclosures;
- Typically completed during the process of arrangement and description;
- Removed rubber bands, staples, paperclips and other fasteners;
- Sleeve materials in mylar;
- Interleave photographs and excessively acidic papers;
- Make “preservation photocopies; and
- Unfold and smooth papers.
Minimal Processing / “MPLP”

Introduced by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in an article entitled “More Product, Less Product” in 2005

Very controversial ... loved or hated

Designed for late 20th century institutional records

Arranging and describing archival collections at a less intensive level than is considered standard in order to make the collections available for use.

Generally, no preservation work is completed and arrangement and description within series and folders is limited.
Minimal Processing / “MPLP”

- **Why Minimal Processing?**
  - Backlog (It is everywhere!)
  - Increased size of late 20\textsuperscript{th} century record collections
  - Reduced resources, especially in a recession.

- **Arguments Against Minimal Processing**
  - The finished product is not finished.
  - The finished product does not conform to standards.
  - Processors may never have time to return and finish.
  - Collections that are not fully processed may create additional work for reference staff when researchers ask questions.

- **Arguments For Minimal Processing**
  - What is the point in keeping materials that researchers do not know exist or cannot use?
  - It is not our job to do all the work for researchers, but to make it possible for them to do their work.
Preservation during Minimal Processing

- **Archival boxes and folders**
  - All material transferred to archival boxes
  - All material placed in archival folders
  - Volumes with damaged bindings are tied up and/or foldered and placed in boxes

- **Fasteners**
  - Metal fasteners are not removed unless they are immediately damaging material
  - Rubber bands are removed when they are obvious

- **No preservation photocopies are be made**
- **Folded items are not unfolded**

**DECIDE ON YOUR DEFINITION OF “MINIMAL”**
PACSCL relies heavily on the *Preservation Worksheet*, which is completed for each collection.

- Flag materials that are damaged or extremely fragile.
- Make notes if you see signs of:
  - Bugs and/or pests
  - Mold
  - Nitrate film
  - Red rot
  - Damaged bindings or papers
- Handle “emergencies” immediately
Photographs, slides, audio/visual, computer storage devices, etc.

- In MPLP, the PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Processing Projects have not provided specialized treatment.
- The special formats are organized and described in a similar manner as paper.
- For information on preservation techniques:
  - National Park Service “Conserv O Grams” available online.
Even though the collections are receiving minimal processing, it is important to remember that they are frequently old and always unique.

- Depending upon their storage and the care they received prior to arriving at the repository, these collections may not be in the best of shape.

- We are not paper doctors, but like doctors, our mantra should be: “First do no harm.”
Best Practices for Handling Archival Materials

- When carrying large or oversized materials, hold onto top-right corner and bottom-left corner.

- If you have to unfold materials, be very careful of brittleness (items folded and unfolded many times are weakest at the fold line)

- If items are sticking together, weigh the risks of ripping materials.

- Bound volumes should be placed in the boxes, spine down.

- Do not eat or drink near archival collections.

- Never use pens, ONLY pencils (everything we do should be reversible)
Appraisal and Weeding in MPLP

APPRAISAL

- Appraisal is the act of deciding whether a record or group of records are worth retaining permanently, as directed by the repository’s mission statement and collection policy.
- Make careful decisions!
- Offer records you do not want to another more logical repository

WEEDING

- Weeding is the act of eliminating excessive duplication from a collection or repository.
- Rule of thumb: keep 2 good copies, plus any annotated copies
- Recycle the rest!
Lessons Learned: 2009-2012

- Minimal processing is not just for late 20\textsuperscript{th} century papers
  - Ability to minimally process a collection results more from its order or type than from its age

- Merging “Minimal Processing,” as introduced by Greene and Meisner, with “Maximal Processing,” introduced by Rob Cox, allows us to provide the best possible arrangement and description in the allotted time frame.

- Collections may not be flawlessly arranged; however, better intellectual and physical control of collections is achieved.
Lessons Learned: 2009-2012, continued

- Minimal processing is NOT sloppy processing
  - By creating and demanding adherence to standards, minimal processing can effectively provide physical and intellectual access to collections
- Minimal processing enables access to historic information faster.
  - This is our ultimate goal!
Processing the PACSCL Way
Processing is divided into FIVE basic steps

- Step 1. Familiarize yourself with the collection
- Step 2. Arrange the collection
- Step 3. Describe the collection
- Step 4. Proofread your work
- Step 5. Tie up loose ends
Step 1: Familiarize yourself with the collection
Before you do ANYTHING

Review processing plan and descriptive materials

- Take ½ an hour and read all documentation created by the survey.
- This will give you a good idea of:
  - What or who the collection is about
  - What subject matter is/should be covered in the collection
  - What types/genres of records you will encounter
  - What to look for in your initial review of the collection
  - How to understand and contextualize the records.
Review the Physical Collection

- Compare the physical collection with the descriptive documents
  - Make sure you have all the boxes and accessions included in the collection

- Identify groups of materials
  - Mark the beginning and end of groups of material you identify.
  - Post-its are an archivist’s best friend!
Step 2: Arrange the collection
Establish Intellectual and Physical Arrangement

- Start with the processing plan’s list of proposed series
  - Look at your notes and where you have marked groups of related materials
    - Do the proposed series make sense?
- Rearrange boxes and folders to reflect the intellectual arrangement
  - Physically relocate boxes, make piles, etc.
- Arrange folders within series
  - There should ALWAYS be an obvious arrangement.
    - Usually, it will be alphabetical, chronological or numerical, but it is sometimes more complicated than that.
Establishing Series

- You may decide that you will have to create series

- The series you establish must fit within a larger organized hierarchical structure

- The series should reflect the creative use of the records and mimic, as best as is possible, the original order of the materials
Do Not overcomplicate thing - Let the collection do the talking!
- Look for established record groups
- Look for materials that are obviously the same type of record or are regarding the same topic and group them together
- Look for files that were obviously created or maintained by the same person

For example, if you are processing business or organizational records, you may create one or more of the following general series
- Board of Director records
- President’s records
- General correspondence
- General subject files
- Financial records
- Personnel (or Human Resources) records
- Etc.
Establishing subseries

Subseries are nothing more than a series within a series

Follow the same principals in creating subseries
REMEMBER

In establishing series and/or subseries

- If you create one series, then every file or record within the collection MUST fit within that or another series
- If you create a subseries within a series, all the files within that series must fit into that or another series
Series Exercise
Step 3: Describe the collection
Folder Titles

- In minimal processing, use existing folder titles when possible
  - You will find that existing titles are not always great; you should try to improve whenever possible.

- Folders that you DO title must be accurate, concise and legible. Formatting titles must be consistent throughout the collection.
  - When titling a group of files, imagine how they would sort in an excel spreadsheet.

- Always use DACS compliant dates! (1975 June 25)

- DO NOT use abbreviations or acronyms (example: SEPTA)

- Physical folders should be labeled consistently throughout the collection.
Labeling Essentials

Processing makes reference work and the use of archival materials possible. Think like a reference archivist and a researcher while processing!
Labeling Essentials

Labeling needs to be legible, complete, and informative on boxes AND folders

Boxes must contain:
- collection name and number
- container number

Folders must contain:
- collection name and/or number,
- box number,
- folder number
- folder title
- folder date

There are NO exceptions to this rule.
The collection is not finished until boxes and folders are properly labeled
Folder Title Exercise
• **Biographical Note (About the Creator)**
  ○ This is written when the creator of the collection is a person or persons. It should include items such as birth dates and location, family, education, occupation, reason for importance (or lack of “importance”), historical context (what was the world in which they lived and worked like?), death dates, etc.

• **Historical Note (About the Creator)**
  ○ This is written when the creator of the collection is an institution, a business/corporation, or an organization. It should include items such as dates of incorporation/organization, location, type of work conducted, reasons for importance, context, etc.

• You should have the beginning of a biographical note from the survey, but you should always enhance it as you learn more about the creator during processing.
NOTES: Scope and Content

• About the Collection
• Written for all collections at the collection level, and often, at the series or subseries levels.
  ○ Types of records (genres)
  ○ Topics and subjects
  ○ Inclusive or bulk dates
  ○ Highlights and/or concentrations
  ○ Outliers—things that ARE there that you would not expect to find
  ○ Things that ARE NOT there that you would expect to find.
NOTES: Scope and Content

• You will not be able to talk about everything, so you need to decide with the most important and useful things in the collection or series are.

• Ask yourself these questions:
  ○ What’s in the majority of the collection and/or series?
  ○ Does the collection fully tell any story? Or does it only partially tell the story? Or, does it merely fill in gaps of a bigger story?
  ○ Does it inform any unexpected or not immediately apparent topics?
  ○ Could you write an article or a book on any topics covered by using this collection alone?
  ○ Is it a first stop for researchers or a last stop, etc.?
Basics for a Scope and Content Note

- The scope note must be narrative, but it can be very straightforward.
- The collection should be described in the same order that is arranged, with the most important and relevant information first.
  - Describe the collection overall
  - Discuss the arrangement of the collection
  - Describe each series individually within the scope note
  - Explain who may find the collection to be useful and why
The abstract is a brief and tidy statement that sums up the collection in a few sentences.

It provides researchers with the most essential facts about the collection. It is often the gateway to the collection.

The easiest way to write the abstract is to combine the first paragraph from the biographical/historical note with the first paragraph from the scope and content note, and then tweak the text.

Make sure to include:

- Who or what the collection is about
- Date span of the collection
- What is contained in the collection (list the types or genres of records)
- Important keywords (especially those that may be Google searchable)
A Note about Notes

• Notes should be honest and unbiased: you may love or hate the subject of your collection, but the researcher should not know that.
  ○ This does NOT mean that your notes have to boring. Feel free to let the personality of the creator shine. If you find a quote in the papers that is relevant, incorporate it. Don’t forget to cite it.

• Your notes should be based upon what is in the collection. This is technical writing, not creative writing.
Other Notes

- Conditions Governing Access
- Conditions Governing Use
- Immediate Source of Acquisition
- Preferred Citation
- Related Archival Material
- Sponsor (if someone has provided you with money for processing, give them credit!)
Box and Folder Basics

Regardless of processing method (traditional or minimal):

- Boxes in any given collection should be numbered consecutively from 1 to however many boxes there are in the collection.

- NEVER start renumbering boxes at the beginning of a new series.
  - A collection should only have one “box 1”. This ensures that researchers and staff will be able to find material within a collection—and equally important, easily return that material to its right place, so that it can be found again!

- Every folder within any given box should be numbered from 1 to however many folders there are in the box.

- ALWAYS start each new box with a new folder 1
  - If you make a mistake, you will only need to renumber folders within ONE box, not the entire collection.

- Remember! The box and folder numbers are simply locations; they have no baring on the intellectual arrangement of the collection.
Name and Subject Authorities

- Authorities provide researchers with the absolute most basic indication of what is in the collection.
- If you decided to assign an authority to a collection, make certain that there is enough information in the collection to warrant the authority.
  - Ask: If you were a researcher and you traveled to a repository to use this collection because it indicated that a certain topic was in the collection, would you be happy with the amount of information on that topic?
  - If you would not, don’t make it an authority ... you can still mention the topic in a scope and content note.
Online Authorities

PACSCL uses

- Library of Congress Authorities for:
  - Creators
  - Names (People, Businesses, and Organizations)
  - Subjects
    - Topical
    - Geographical

- Art and Architecture Thesaurus for:
  - Genre/forms
Compañía Veterana de Policía in the capital, who is accused of embezzling 199 pesos from company funds. A native of San Luis Potosí, Gómez is thirty years old, married, and a silversmith in civilian life. The evidence against him is inconclusive and circumstantial, except for two confessions in which he states that he needed the money to maintain his station in life and that he lost a portion of it gambling. The case is sent to higher authorities for disposition.

GONZALEZ, J. 1815 October 8-1816 May 29, [106 pages] To protect the honor of a lady, Elvira Vargas, a caballo segundo in the Regimiento del Comercio, lied rather than tell investigators how he received a gun wound. After he was shot, however, and it became clear even to Vargas that he was dying, he made a complete and truthful statement. He had been sleeping in bed with Mercedes Barquilla at her house when González, Mercedes’s usual bedmate, arrived. Because González was a policeman, he was arrested, and he drew his saber and ran the naked Vargas through. González was found guilty of homicide and sentenced to ten years at Veracruz, but Viceroy Calleja issued a pardon and reinstated him as a police officer. The documents include a printed genealogical form not found in Medrano’s La Imprenta de México.

GONZALEZ CALDERON, Francisco. 4 documents Mexico City, 1818 January 13-15, [4 pages] The audience confirms a power-of-attorney that Francisco swore out in Bologna in 1817 to empower his sister, Barbara Calderón, the widow of José Serrano and a resident in Mexico City, “to collect and administer his interests” in the capital.

GUADALUPE Y AGUILERA, Frink. 4 documents Mexico City, 1819 May 7-8, [4 pages] Don Frink, both the titles of Conde de Castromorto and Marqués de Sosa. In this brief series of documents, the audience confirms a power-of-attorney that he gave in Badajoz to don José Davila, Governor of Veracruz, and to the Conde de la Cortina. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 1, p. 409, states that don Frink did not receive his commission until 6 July 1820. This document shows he used the title a full year earlier.

GUADALUPE. Salamanca 6 documents, (1 incomplete), Mexico City, 1790 December 17-19, 15 pages All the documents on these pages are.

AMS 462/25, Pt. 17, 60 New Spain

AMS 462/25, Pt. 17, 40 New Spain

AMS 462/25, pt 14, 45 New Spain

AMS 462/25, pt 14, 45 New Spain

AMS...
Finding Aids: The World’s Window to You

- A finding aid is
  - An archives’ primary public product, therefore quality is extremely important
  - How a researcher determines whether or not a collection will be useful to him or her
- Spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors are embarrassing and can actually prevent researchers from finding pertinent information
Initial Proofing

- The Archivists’ Toolkit does not currently include any form of spell check.
- Follow instructions in PACSCL’s Archivists’ Toolkit manual to export finding aid
- Copy and paste the HTML into a Word document
  - Find spelling and grammatical errors
  - Fix errors in AT, not Word!
- Re-export the HTML and check again.
Ask someone with good writing skills to proof the finding aid.

- A fresh pair of eyes sees amazing things
- Make certain that notes and folder titles actually make sense to someone who has not seen the collection
  - Remote researchers who are trying to decide if they want to use the collection will be in the same situation.
Step 5: Tie up loose ends
Oh, those loose ends ...

- Every collection has them, and they are different within each collection
- Make sure that edits are completed
- Create box labels
- Fill out worksheets
- Use the checklist to make sure everything is finished!
PACSCL Worksheets

- Minimal processing is fast ... the worksheets are a way to record your actions and your suggestions for further work.
- Take your time and think about the worksheets—they may help you to write a better scope and contents note; and they may help staff write grants and plan for future processing projects.
  - Processing Worksheet
  - Preservation Worksheet
  - Digitization/Exhibits Worksheet
  - Research Value Worksheets
Remember that the only reason to do all this work is to make certain that these collections are USED by researchers.

The best way to provide access is to create really good tools that will point researcher to the materials relevant to their study.