

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS UNION CATALOG OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

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Take 7,300 groups of papers from 400 repositories, describe them in close print at an average of ten to a page, add supporting indexes totalling 350 pages, and you have the first volume of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

But there is much more here than the making known of a considerable quantity of research material. This is the fruit of ten years thorough preparation; of conference, committee work and wide consideration; of pooled experience and patient cataloguing; it is a new venture in the field of manuscript description and of interest to all those for whom this is a concern.

Although the need for a union catalogue of manuscripts in the United States had been voiced for some years before 1951, such a possibility was brought considerably closer when, in this year, the Library of Congress offered to administer and house such a catalogue. From this point the project moved through three distinct phases: first, the drafting of a code for the cataloguing of manuscripts, then the preparation of a union catalogue on cards, and, finally, publication of the catalogue in book form.

A committee appointed in the Library of Congress early in 1952 had as its first assignment the drafting of rules for the cataloguing of collections. After being widely distributed and discussed this received the approval of the A.L.A. in 1954.

Information was sought from repositories in order to estimate the number of entries which might be expected over a five year period, and a careful study was made of likely editorial costs. Efforts were made to obtain financial support and following a grant of \$200,000 from the Council of Library Resources the Library of Congress moved forward to the second stage and from copy supplied by repositories began cataloguing. The first cards of the Union Catalog of Manuscripts were printed and distributed in 1959.

In November, 1962, the third stage was reached with the publication in a single volume of the catalogue cards prepared in 1959, 1960 and 1961.

There are a number of features which stand out when this volume is examined:

1. The unit of description — a "collection", specially defined.
2. The arrangement of the entries numerically by L.C. card number.
3. The supporting indexes, and particularly the Name Index.
4. The actual form and content of each entry.
5. The scope of the Catalog as a whole.

1. THE UNIT OF DESCRIPTION

The unit of description is a "collection" defined in the introduction as follows:

"A large group of papers . . . usually having a common source and formed by or around an individual, a family, a corporate entity, or devoted to a single theme. Small groups consisting of a highly limited number of pieces should not be reported as collections in themselves but should be taken care of by more inclusive reports covering many such groups, either by an entry under an appropriate theme, if possible, or by a general entry for the miscellaneous (residual) collection of the repository. In many instances such small groups can be noted in the description of the scope and content of the larger artificial 'collection' so devised for cataloguing purposes".

A definition of a collection is a difficult and to some extent arbitrary matter at any time, but this points in two opposing directions — exclusion (collections only) and inclusion (miscellaneous or residual material in a repository).

It begins by permitting entries for clear cut collections, those groups of papers "having a common source"; expands to cover "small groups" and finally appears to include virtually anything a repository may hold.

The qualifications are that failing an obvious collection an attempt should be made to group items around a particular theme and, secondly, entries are to be avoided for a highly limited number of pieces. Basically, the direction is to keep the number of entries to a minimum.

The avowed aim of the Union Catalog is "to aid the scholar in his quest for manuscripts that may substantively advance his research". Assuming that his prime interest is therefore in genuine "collections", will he not be confused by the inclusion of miscellaneous material?

In answer to this it can be fairly assumed that the great majority of entries will be for collections, even if some are the result of grouping round a theme. There are also adequate safeguards provided in the Catalog. Sufficient information is given in each entry for an assessment to be made of the importance of any material and in addition, miscellaneous material, collections, and also sub-groups within collections can be distinguished in the Name Index.

2. THE ARRANGEMENT OF ENTRIES IN NUMERICAL ORDER

The first and largest section of the volume consists of entries arranged by L.C. catalogue card number, containing year and running number elements, e.g., 59-261, 60-3346, 61-3688.

Such a break down by year eliminates the possibility of numbers becoming too cumbersome but adds slightly to the delay in referring to an entry. Arrangement in arbitrary numerical order also makes it impossible to refer directly to the entries themselves, e.g., to the papers relating to a particular individual. The supporting indexes, however, provide compensating advantages.

The following is a sample entry :

Lee, Robert Edward, 1807-1870.

Letters, 1830-60.

54 items.

In University of Virginia Library (990 and 1085).

Army officer. Chiefly letters to Lee's brother, Charles Carter Lee. The letters discuss family affairs, business matters, a cholera epidemic (1832), the Ohio-Michigan boundary line, the Mexican War, Lee's activities at Cockspur Island and Savannah, Ga., his service in Texas and as commandant at West Point, and other matters. Other correspondents include Francis P. Blair, George Washington Parke Custis, Henry A. Du Bois, Mary Ann Randolph (Custis) Lee, William Henry Fitzhugh Lee, George Stoneman, Edward C. Turner, and Earl Van Dorn.

Described in the Annual report on historical collections, University of Virginia Library, 1940-41, p. 34-35.

1. Lee family. 2. Cholera, Asiatic - U.S. 3. Ohio - Bound. - Michigan.
4. Michigan - Bound. - Ohio. 5. U.S. - Hist. - War with Mexico, 1845-1848.
6. U.S. Military Academy, West Point. I. Lee, Charles Carter, 1798-1871.

MS 61-2115

Virginia. Univ. Libr.

3. THE SUPPORTING INDEXES

Following the entries themselves are the supporting Name, Subject and Repository Indexes.

It is stated in the preface to the Name Index that it :

“ lists alphabetically the names of persons, families, and corporate entities (i.e., associations, institutions, business firms, governmental agencies, etc.) connected with the collections catalogued in this volume. The nature of their involvement varies from case to case. Some are authors, some are subjects, some are addressees, and others are involved more tangentially. Inspection of the entry for the appropriate collection will generally clarify the relationship ”.

The Name Index is a most interesting feature and virtually the key to the whole Catalog, particularly as the Library of Congress proposes to expand this into a name and topic index, eliminating a separate subject index.

The entry (abbreviated) for Robert E. Lee in the Name Index reads :

LEE, Robert Edward, 1807-1870, 59-102, 59-118, 60-80, 60-133, 60-290,
60-688 . . . 60-3329, 60-3332, 61-1348 . . . 61-1972, 61-2021,
61-2115, 61-2284, 61-2493 . . . 61-3673.

Here, in a small space, is a summary for the research worker of all the material relating to Lee described in the Catalog. The principal collections are underlined, the other numbers referring chiefly to collections in which Lee material forms a sub-group.

The Name Index also includes all the correspondents mentioned in the description of the Lee collection above : Francis P. Blair, George Washington Parke Custis, etc. It is of considerable significance that it thus contains more than would be feasible in a card catalogue through added entries. It appears likely that in a card catalogue only “ Lee family ” and “ Lee, Charles Carter ” would have been entered.

The greater flexibility of the Name Index is further illustrated by one entry seen in the Catalog which described a collection of correspondence and other papers and listed 127 individuals as “ persons mentioned ”. All appeared in the Name Index. From the note on the scope of the Name Index it is probable that while some of these individuals may have been correspondents, others were addressees or even the subject of correspondence.

What now appears is an intimate association of the Name Index with the collection entries themselves to form one remarkably effective tool for description and location: an acknowledgement of the importance of the “ name ” approach to manuscript material as contrasted, perhaps, with that through subject headings.

The Subject Index is made up from those headings given at the foot of each collection entry. The headings used are taken from *Subject Headings Used in the Dictionary Catalogs of the Library of Congress* (6th ed. 1957) and its supplements.

A sample entry taken from the Lee collection is as follows :

UNITED STATES

-HISTORY-WAR WITH MEXICO, 1845-1848

Lee, Robert Edward, 1807-1870. Letters, 1830-60.

61-2115

It is significant that “ Lee family ” and “ U.S. Military Academy, West Point ” appear in the Name Index.

The Subject Index performs the same functions as do subject entries in any card catalogue but would repay a close examination if only for the subject headings and sub-headings used.

The Repository Index lists collections under repository, arranging them alphabetically, with a citation to a collection identical in form to that given under a subject heading. The value of this Index will not become apparent until more collections are described and it really becomes an index of repository holdings. When this stage is reached it will also indicate, to some extent, material available in a geographical area; a function at present performed by Philip M. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*.

4. THE FORM AND CONTENT OF EACH ENTRY

Each collection is described according to the *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging in the Library of Congress : Manuscripts* (preliminary edition, 1954).

The arrangement is such that an assessment of the significance of a collection is possible from the first few lines. The parts of the entry are as follows :

Collection name, or main entry : Where a group of papers consists of material written by or addressed to a person, family, government agency or other corporate body, it is entered under the appropriate name. Any other collection is entered under the name of the collector — person, family or corporate body, i.e., entry can be made under the name of a repository. In some circumstances entry can be made under title.

Title : This is the name by which the collection is known or a title supplied. The date coverage of the material is included in this line.

Location : The name of the repository holding the collection is given and at times the symbol for location within a repository.

Scope and content : In the case of personal papers this begins with a very short biographical note — no more than a phrase — and continues with a concise outline of the types and groups of papers in the collection, their subject matter and the principal persons or corporate bodies with whom they have to deal and a mention of any special features of the collection.

Other information : Reference is made to published and unpublished descriptions of the collection, restrictions on access, literary rights and provenance.

Added entries as prepared for a card catalogue, and already discussed, are listed at the foot of the entry.

5. THE SCOPE OF THE CATALOG

This is a catalogue of manuscript material geographically located in the United States. No limit is placed in point of time or place of origin or on the nature and content of collections. Material included is held in public or quasi-public repositories to which research workers are regularly admitted.

On practical grounds and in the absence of sufficient funds, archival material is excluded where it is "self-finding", that is, located where it might rightly be expected to be. But entries are included for private manuscripts found in archival repositories and for archival records found outside an archival agency.

This then is the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. 1959-1961.

It is an achievement in the field of union cataloguing but also a venture in the control of manuscripts which is of great interest to anyone involved in their cataloguing and description.

On first glance and on reflection one of the outstanding features is the arrangement of the Catalog: the division into entries and indexes, and these—particularly the Name Index—functioning in close association to form a flexible and powerful tool.

The separation also makes practicable the cumulation of entries—through the indexes. This the Library of Congress proposes to do, issuing further entries and cumulated indexes in separate volumes.

Select list of references

1. Robert H. Land. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. *American Archivist*, 17: 195-207 (July, 1954).
2. David C. Mearns. To be enduring: The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. *College and Research Libraries*, 20: 341-46 (Sept., 1959).
3. Lester K. Born. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. *Manuscripts*. Spring, 1962. pp. 10-16.
4. Library of Congress *Information Bulletin*. Vol. 21, No. 41, October 8, 1962; Vol. 21, No. 50. December 10, 1962.