Defining and Interrogating the Collection File in Archival Collection Management

Audra Eagle Yun
University of California - Irvine, audra.yun@uci.edu

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ABSTRACT

What is a collection file, anyway? This work-in-progress summarizes the results of a sample survey of archivists to better understand the purpose, function, and contents of collection files, how archivists learn to create collection files, and their potential for public access and use. From these results, we can extrapolate a preliminary definition of the collection file, as well as the potential for future study and critical analysis of the practical elements of collection file work, especially in relation to archival accessioning, deaccessioning, and repatriation.

Introduction

What is a collection file, anyway? There appears to be no official definition within archival literature, although most archivists will at one point be involved in the act of documenting information about archival collections, informing archival accessioning and long-term archival stewardship. How do practicing archivists define, create, and maintain collection files? This work-in-progress summarizes the results of a sample survey of archivists to better understand the purpose, function, and contents of collection files, how archivists learn to create collection files, and their potential for public access and use. From these results, we can extrapolate a preliminary definition of the collection file, as well as the potential for future study and critical analysis of the practical elements of collection file work, specifically in relation to archival accessioning, deaccessioning, and repatriation.

Literature Review

In a profession dedicated to contextualization and description, there is very little written about the intellectual, ethical, and practical elements of the extremes within the archival stewardship spectrum. At one end: pre-custodial (fieldwork, donor relations, gift agreements), acquisition documentation (donor files), and accessioning. On the other: reappraisal, repatriation, and deaccessioning. The collection file is a key element of archival accessioning, woven throughout pre-

custodial activities, establishing baseline intake controls, gathering documentation, and maintaining access to that information. However, like accessioning itself, there is scant literature on the practice of creating and maintaining collection files, not to mention how collection files relate to values-driven archival practices.

Arguably, the practice of compiling collection files is rooted in the historical manuscripts tradition, to support solicitation, provenance, and custodial recordkeeping. Kenneth Duckett's 1975 *Modern Manuscripts* is one of the first works that established the concept of a collection file in manuscript repositories, defining it as a place where the accession (or control) record, correspondence, memoranda and field reports, gift agreements, and any other documentation related to an archival acquisition should be kept together. This was followed by Maynard Brichford's 1977 booklet *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* (part of the Society of American Archivists' landmark Basic Manual Series) where he notes that "the archivist may create a collections file for contacts with the office of origin or the donor. The collections file should include correspondence, copies of deeds or certificates, publicity clippings, and photographs."[1]

In the SAA *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, there currently are no definitions for the terms "collection file," "donor file," or "control file."[2] One definition for "pre-acquisition fieldwork" appears in the *Handbook of Archival Practice*, comprising of "information gathered prior to physical or digital receipt," which "should be centralized and made accessible during accessioning and processing, forming the basis of the permanent collection file."[3] Recent works by Daniel Santamaria and Dennis Meissner reference the collection file as part of a holistic archival collections management program.[4] In a chapter dedicated to the establishment of the accessioning program in this author's earlier SAA publication, *Archival Accessioning*, she writes that pre-custodial intervention, of which the archivist compiles administrative information, comprises the beginnings of the collection file. The archivist continuously gathers information throughout the acquisitions process, with the act of completing the collection file coinciding with the completion of the related accession record. In this phase:

1. Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 21.

2. In the SAA Dictionary, the term "case file" appears as a definition for a type of document, not a method for recordkeeping *about* archives: https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/case-file.html.

3. Audra Eagle Yun, "3.12 Pre-acquisition Fieldwork," in *The Handbook of Archival Practice*, ed. Patricia C. Franks, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

4. See Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association Neal-Schuman, 2015); and Dennis Meissner, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2019).

This documentation can be analog or digital. Ideally, it should be incorporated into the repository's collection management system(s) or tool (s) used to manage accessions data. A collection file is a permanent record of the archival repository that includes all acquisition details; deed(s) of gift (or transfer record[s] or bill of sale[s], etc.); curator or other notes; appraisals; preliminary inventories; donor correspondence; background research; accession records; deaccession records; processing plans; memoranda related to treatment, processing, reformatting, and so on; and any other documentation related to a single collection, fonds, or record group. A collection file can also be broken into subfolders, with special treatment given to original legal and financial documents, correspondence, field notes, preliminary inventories, and the like.[5]

In these more recent works, the collection file becomes a significant element of accessioning work, although it is not mapped out in more practical terms beyond a definition and list of possible component parts. At the time of this writing, there does not appear to be archival literature that delves more fully into the purpose, function, and potential of the collection file within the overall archival collection management enterprise. Deaccessioning literature makes use of the collection file in decision-making, and there may soon be writing about repatriation and reparative archival work informed by the legal, custodial, and financial elements of the collection file.

Methodology

The National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group has several groups, including ones focused on ethics and labor, the pre-custodial phase, and arrangement and description, which aim to address the purpose, elements, and best practices for the collection file in the overarching archival accessioning program. Towards this endeavor, the author designed a collection file survey for participants who were already experienced in archival collection management, especially archival accessioning, in the hopes of grasping a preliminary definition of the "collection file" and begin to consider its boundaries as well as its possibilities. The author solicited interest via the Working Group's general communication channel in Slack, following up with an email invitation to 18 members and affiliates who responded and expressed a willingness to participate.[6] These archivists, reflecting the group's makeup, were predominantly mid-career and working in large departments of academic libraries, representing a cross-section of a profession self-identified as

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5. Audra Eagle Yun, ed. *Archival Accessioning* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2021), 47.

6. The National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group is supported by the Standards Committee of the Society of American Archivists and a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. As stated on the group's website (https://accessioningbestpractices.com/): "The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, on behalf of the Accessioning, Acquisitions, and Appraisal working group of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), will develop

having a strong interest in archival collection management. This sample represents a small percentage of archives workers in the United States, specifically academic archivists working in larger library settings. It does not include archivists working in public libraries, government agencies, corporate archives, community-based archives, or museums.

The email invitation outlined the justification and methodology for the sample survey (see Appendix 1). None of the recipients forwarded the invitation. From this invitation, nine archivists responded directly. The reader may conclude that the small sample size will provide subjective and anecdotal results, and the author acknowledges the limited scale and representative scope of participation and potential for future researchers to conduct a broader, deeper survey to reinforce the summary of findings. While the limited participant pool was asked to consider their experience in a variety of contexts, the responses to this survey are relevant and applicable to archivists in all kinds of archival institutions and repositories, not only large academic institutions. These responses have been summarized and quoted from email responses below. When a direct quote is used, identifying information about the individual respondent or their place of employment has been removed.

Survey Responses

What is a working definition for "collection file", for you?

Among respondents, while the majority used the term "collection file", a few used the term "control file", and one used the term "donor file" as an alternative. One respondent mentioned that at a previous place of employment, collection files are called "acquisition files". These archivists agree that a collection file is a permanent and centralized place to manage legal and administrative information about a collection. A few definitions of a collection file:

> *"A permanent file that documents the history of a collection prior to, during, and after acquisition."*

> *"Systematic and routine maintenance of these files enables [us] to make and be informed of decisions regarding the custody, care, use, and management of our materials."*

> *"A file that contains relevant administrative documentation about an archival collection's provenance, chain of custody, and access restrictions."*

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the first set of best practices for archival accessioning in the United States to help archives across the country strengthen and standardize their own accessioning practices. Working group members will collaborate, incorporate public feedback, and finalize a draft of best practices." The grant proposal "Caring for Collections: Developing National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning" submitted by Yale University can be found at https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/lg-252288-ols-22. The author leads a sub-group focused on arrangement and description in archival accessioning.

"A file that documents the who, when, and how we came into custody of the collection materials, a description of what we received, and possibly where we store other supporting documentation about the collection that elaborates on the subject, the donor, the relationship, and actions we've taken with the collection."

There were some respondents who mentioned that the collection file was a place for information about processing of a collection, and one respondent expressed concern about the challenge of "tracking down" administrative records into the collection file due to multiple employees' involvement in the accessioning process.

How did you learn about collection files (their purpose, function, and contents)?

Six respondents learned on-the-job in their first archivist or fellowship position, while three learned about collection files in graduate school as part of an internship. No one learned about collection files as part of their formal graduate education. One archivist said, "I remember learning about the institution's 'accession files' on the first day of my first archives job outside of grad school most clearly. I was introduced to where the files were located, what was inside, and while working on a retrospective accessioning project, pretty much referred to them daily from that point on."

A few respondents described their experience of being acquainted with collection files through a supervisor or mentor where they were given limited access to collection files—the specific file for a collection they were processing, or the collection files for one repository within the larger institution instead of all collection files—or not provided access at all ("I wasn't allowed to look at them, but I knew the archivists needed to reference them frequently.") In a few cases, archivists spent time processing archival collections in internships or full-time positions without being provided access to or information about collection files at all. Ultimately, there was some consensus about the potential value of collection files after being taught about them on-the-job. As one archivist said: "I became much more cognizant in my first role when I really needed to answer questions from donors or researchers about permissions or how collections were acquired."

What should a collection file contain (deeds, loan/deposit/purchase records, correspondence with donor, curator notes, donor-supplied info/inventories, accession records, drafts of finding aids, reference questions, etc.)?

Despite the somewhat leading list of potential contents, respondents were clear about what should and should not be included in a collection file. Contents recommended broadly included:

Deeds of gift or records transfer form

Copy of donor acknowledgement letter (if applicable)

Copy of purchase, invoices

Dealer descriptions

Donor-supplied inventories

Donor correspondence documenting decisions (restrictions, digitization)

Memoranda to file documenting decisions

Appraisals and archival appraisal notes

Accession record

Deaccession files

Checklists (accessioning, processing)

Contents recommended more sparingly (or once) included:

Curator notes

Oral history agreements

Processing plans and notes

Old finding aids

Conservation reports

Biographical/research material (obituaries, clippings)

Exhibition documentation

Authority work documentation

Contents considered out of scope included:

Deposit and loan documentation

Finding aid drafts

Routine reference requests

Two respondents indicated a strong preference for accession records and finding aids being kept in existing collection management or discovery systems, not in the collection file.

Should collection files be physical, digital, or both?

Every respondent recommended both physical and digital, with a slight preference for digital files. This seems to be a more recent development to support remote work, and also a response to an increase in digital documentation (including the preponderance of digital signature technology and email correspondence). In the words of one archivist, "only in the last 2 years (since the start of the pandemic) have

I seen my current institution become fully comfortable with digital signatures and digital-only deeds." A number of respondents prioritize paper files for legal records, even with new technology supporting digital signatures. An additional theme among the majority of respondents was a desire to limit the amount of paper files due to space constraints and environmental impact concerns, once again prioritizing legal documents, invoice, and agreements, etc. A few institutions had begun projects to digitize paper-based legacy collection files, but most recognized a general shift away from paper-only documentation practices around 2019. A survey respondent noted:

> "We recently defined what types of documents belong in the collection file and we made a distinction between the physical and digital collection files. A lot of our legal documentation will go into both the physical and digital collection file. However, non-legal documents will only go into the digital collection file. We recently made this change and distinction because we are very tight on physical space and we are about to embark on a collection file review project. We are hoping to weed out a lot of non-legal documents from the physical collection files so that we can have more space in the collection file cabinets for new collection files."

Another archivist noted an unanticipated benefit of digital collection files: "one nice thing about digital files is that I can link them in the accession record as an external document (not published) so that staff members can easily click to get access to that information."

What are the legal and ethical ramifications of providing access to and/or publishing the contents (or inventory of contents) of a collection file?

On the topic of who gets access to collection files, there was no consensus about the complexities and considerations for publishing or sharing the information held within them. Everyone expressed reservations about violating the trust of donors (including personally identifiable information and donor negotiations) as well as the risk of public scrutiny of pricing and appraisal decisions (especially with private individuals). As summarized by one respondent, "Consent is a problem. Donors don't give consent for their private correspondence with libraries to be shared with the public. Also, certain information (such as contracts and contract negotiations) likely falls under records management and privacy concerns which cannot be made accessible." There was some concern about price gouging or the risk of theft if pricing information was openly accessible. However, all respondents expressed a willingness to provide access to at least some elements of the collection file:

> "At [institution], only [our department] staff have access to the collection files. If someone from within [institution], but outside of [our department], needs to access the collection files, they need to get approval from our director."

> "We often answer questions using a file without providing it to the public, but as a state agency, ours are public record and subject to open records requests. We don't preemptively "publish" the files. We do remove PII if provided to the

public and there are exceptions to state open records laws that do protect specifically restricted information in archival collections."

"Even one of my donors who is not well-known asked me if her address would be shared because she did not want random mail from people she didn't know. I think contact information would absolutely have to be redacted in order to share the contents of a collection file, which could be time consuming."

"Some aspects of the control folder I think are fine to share. This includes research collected about a collection, analysis done, and documentation of processing plans. It definitely gets more questionable ethically about sharing the donor emails and the deed purchase agreements and honoring their right to privacy."

Generally, respondents expressed interest in the potential for more open access to collection files, especially donor-supplied inventories. One respondent wrote,

"Understanding custodial history is extremely important, and collection files can be a wealth of information about a collection's custodial and administrative history. In addition, I think transparency about archival labor is extremely important, so having access to things which elevate the processing decisions, descriptive choices, arrangement/rearrangement of collections could have an impact on researchers' understanding of the collections. Therefore, collection files can be powerful research tools in their own right."

Do you share/provide open access to collection files for researchers/users? Why or why not?

Delving more deeply into the ramifications for providing access, archivists articulated that they are frequently impacted by nuanced decision-making about whether or how to provide access to collection files. A few institutions do not provide access at all and consider these private records but will instead, have staff use the collection file to answer researcher questions such as about provenance. One respondent provided a case study of the complexity of donor privacy: an oral history collection where interviewee consent was not included, but the collection was accepted anyway. Correspondence and "gentlemen's agreements" between institutions and donors or booksellers can become fraught: "I have seen unprofessional or inappropriate communications embedded in donor and internal correspondence, which I would be hesitant to allow access to without it serving a specific need." We can imagine instances where donors or booksellers wish to protect their own privacy, while offering materials that visually represent or document the

lives of victimized, traumatized, or otherwise vulnerable individuals.[7] While no institution advertised it, all were willing to review collection files on behalf of researchers, although almost none provided access to the original records themselves.

Bonus question: is there anything in archival studies literature that helps us understand collection files? If yes, what would you recommend?

Nearly all respondents indicated that they knew of no literature on this subject, but felt it was important to define the collection file for future archival practitioners. One archivist noted writing by Meissner and Santamaria, as well as this author, adding, "My perception from my own research is that there is more literature about the kinds of decisions that should be documented (in writing), with the understanding that this documentation needs to be easy to find and retained (in a collection file)."

Conclusion

In defining the makeup and use of collection files, survey responses suggest that administrative records held within collection files can provide not only acquisition history and provenance but contextual evidence in documenting the powers, resources, and people who decide what has archival value and how these records are described and accessed. Documenting the archival accessioning of questionable provenance, donor/seller-based restrictions, and known "secrets" of acquisitions can be a tool toward practicing transparency and providing reparation.[8] At the same time, collection files have the potential to expand conversations regarding ethical acquisition and description practices, supporting the continuing movement toward community-centered or community-driven archival practices in academic libraries.

Collection files can be a key source of information for tracking provenance, particularly for collections in academic libraries where acquisition histories are questioned or challenged. This could be especially valuable for Indigenous and/or tribal communities following protocols set out by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the Society of American Archivists' Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM) and its newly-formed Archival Repatriation Committee, where demonstration of a paper trail is essential to

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7. The custody fight between Harvard University's Peabody Museum and Tamara Lanier and the Lanier family, descendants of an enslaved man named Renty and his daughter Delia, whose images appear in daguerreotypes held in the Peabody's collections, is documented in: Jarrett M. Drake, "A Vision of (In)Justice: Harvard Archives Bear a Strange Fruit," *Medium*, May 29, 2019, https://medium.com/@jmddrake/a-vision-of-in-justice-harvard-archives-bear-a-strange-fruit-30e645643df6.

8. Chip Colwell, "Curating Secrets: Repatriation, Knowledge Flows, and Museum Power Structures," *Current Anthropology* 56, no. S12 (December 2015): S263–S275.

illustrate a narrative on the disposition of objects of cultural patrimony, including archival records.[9] Collection files in turn have the potential to assist in deaccessioning, including towards the repatriation of visual and archival representations of people impacted by anti-Black, anti-Indigenous institutions, such as civil rights and human rights abuses, records about the US slave trade, records of and by people who have been incarcerated, and documentation of traumatic events.

Based on survey responses, it is apparent that there is a dearth of literature on the practical work related to collection files, including consistency in format and contents, as well as considerations for providing access to non-employees. The museum field has made great progress in repatriation and transparency in the recordkeeping of acquisitions, reckoning with extractive, unethical, or even illegal custodianship of cultural heritage. Further research would be helpful in extrapolating potential discrepancies in archival practices related to administrative documentation regarding archival acquisitions. However, the survey's findings on the collection file, its definition, contents, boundaries, and possibilities, have relevance to archivists working in a variety of institutional settings in and beyond academic libraries.

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9. See Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (https://www.blm.gov/NAGPRA), Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/), and SAA's Archival Repatriation Committee (https://www2.archivists.org/governance-manual/archival-repatriation-committee).

Appendix 1: Email Invitation

Dear colleague,

During the course of writing Archival Accessioning, I ran into another area of archival practice that we seem to take for granted: the collection file (aka the donor file, control file). I came up with a definition for "collection file" in the book but it seems we need more investigation/research into its origin and potential.

You are an expert in archival collection management and am writing to ask if you might participate in a mini survey on your experience and perspective on the collection file in archival practice. I plan to use disaggregated responses to this mini survey as part of an article on the history and potential use of collection files.

COLLECTION FILES—MINI QUALITATIVE SURVEY

- What is a working definition for "collection file," for you?

- How did you learn about collection files (their purpose, function, and contents)?

- What should a collection file contain (deeds, loan/deposit/purchase records, correspondence with donor, curator notes, donor-supplied info/ inventories, accession records, drafts of finding aids, reference questions, etc.)?

- Should collection files be physical, digital, or both?

- What are the legal and ethical ramifications of providing access to and/or publishing the contents (or inventory of contents) of a collection file?

- Do you share/provide open access to collection files for researchers/ users? Why or why not?

- Bonus question: is there anything in the archival studies literature that helps us understand collection files? If yes, what would you recommend?

This mini-survey should take about 20-30 minutes to complete. Your responses can be as short or long as you would like; blank responses are fine, too. Please let me know if you would be interested in a phone/Zoom conversation in lieu of an email.

Your consideration and response would be greatly appreciated by Friday, July 29, 2022. Please feel free to share this mini-survey with others you think may have ideas to share (cc me). Thank you so much for your time and consideration.