



A Change Would Do You Good: Transforming Archives with Cross- Sector Perspectives

Policies, Publics, and Patience, aka Sometimes
Being a Jack of All Trades Can Be a Good
Thing

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About me:

- I DON'T HAVE A LIBRARY DEGREE. One of the dying breed!
- Background in museum studies, records management, government records (and a little bit manuscript collections)
- Most of my career: public records with the Kansas State Archives, part of the Kansas Historical Society
- October 2015, move to academic research library overseeing manuscripts processing



Once I legitimately could say, "Back to the salt mines!"




How many people here do NOT have a library degree? While I know it has become more and more common for those of us in the field to get here via library school, there ARE still the public history students, don't forget!

I specifically wanted a generalist Master's, which is why I went to a program with a Public History track that allowed for museum studies, archives administration, AND historic preservation studies. My first professional job was a curator of collections at a local historical society, where I ended up primarily dealing with mining equipment (an awesome but not entirely pertinent to today story). My second job was performing minimal processing on organizational records at another local historical society that had a stronger archives focus.

Most of my career has been in government records, however. From 2008 to 2015 I worked in the State Archives at the Kansas Historical Society as project archivist, government records archivist, and finally as public records program supervisor. I arranged and described state agency records, created and revised retention schedules with state and county agencies, and otherwise helped state and local government entities with their recordkeeping. I also worked a little with manuscript collections while there, including a two-year project describing the Menninger Foundation Archives, the organizational records, family papers, and collected special collections of a major psychiatric institution of the 20th century.

In October 2015, for reasons that don't need exploring at this juncture, I joined the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, part of the University of Kansas library system, to oversee manuscripts processing. Processing is centralized through the cataloging department—I don't actually report to the curators who oversee the collections, I report to the head of cataloging. We have three main collecting areas: regional/local history, university records and the personal papers of faculty & former staff, and Special Collections, which has a wide array of collecting areas.



Three things I want to focus on this morning:



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With all that in mind, there are three areas that I want to discuss this morning that have helped shape how I approach my current work, and they all happily happen to start with P: policies, publics, and patience.

Policies

Items to be weeded for shredding:

- Travel documentation: vouchers, airplane tickets, and related materials
- Unannotated photocopies of secondary sources – articles, book chapters, etc.
- Newsletters and other form materials from professional associations/organizations [check with supervisor if association or organization is Kansas-based; these may be kept by KSRL]
- Routine financial documentation: vouchers, monthly financial statements, invoices [check with supervisor if financial documentation appears to be personal rather than departmental/official]
- Enrollment/registration information: routine correspondence with registrar's office, forms and notes about class scheduling, other routine information including student names and/or grades
- Letters of recommendation for other individuals, students, etc.; resumes and CVs from third parties (not the creator/donor of the collection); promotion and tenure documentation about a colleague
- Student class papers
- Brochures, pamphlets, and other ephemera from vendors, other universities and organizations, and other related materials
- MA and PhD exam information: if the faculty member is still alive, set aside for the curator to return to the donor.
- Correspondence with students: if the faculty member is still alive, set aside for the curator to return to the donor.

DON'T SPEND A LOT OF TIME ON WEEDING, unless you are working at level 2 or 3 with a collection. If it

My background in records management for the State of Kansas has served me well in my current position dealing with two of our three collecting areas. Curators in these areas had expressed frustration about the lack of weeding occurring in collections—canceled checks, duplicate materials, photocopies of secondary material, routine travel documents, 57 tennis balls in one notorious collection (DON'T ASK) all regularly made it through processing and the descriptive process, as well as potentially sensitive and confidential material that didn't even necessarily need to stay in the collection. Having a background in retention scheduling helped both in determining standardized, written-down weeding criteria—with the frequent caveat that processors check in with me, in case I need to check in with the curator—as well as in recognizing what might be sensitive or confidential. While some of this had been written down in the processing manual prior to my arrival—mostly related to duplicates and material that could obviously be discarded—this didn't cover nearly enough of the types of records that frequently appeared in professors' papers, family papers, and organizational records. Additionally, the instructions provided had not been very clear or standardized about what procedures to follow—so, basically, I snuck a really informal retention schedule or two into the processing manual.

Publics

Box 19	Folder 78	"Eye-deep in the mirrored..." ts and ms, 21p, 18pc
Box 19	Folder 79	"Recurrent Landscapes #_" ts, 20p, 14pc
Box 19	Folder 80	"All day a large silver ball..." ts, 38p, 35pc
Box 19	Folder 81	"These nights are obsessed..." ts, 17p, 15pc
Box 19	Folder 82	"On Sutter St. the winter wren..." ts, 38p, 29pc
Letters 1954-1993		
Correspondence from Jonathan Williams to Ronald Johnson		
A variety of pseudonyms are used for salutation and signature.		
Box 20	Folder 1	From [Jonathan Williams] to Frisco, August 11, 1974, TL, 1p
Box 20	Folder 2	From Jonathan Williams to Dr. J, July 27, 1969, TLS, 1p
Box 20	Folder 3	From [Jonathan Williams] to [Ronald Johnson July 2, 1969, TLS, 1pc

I'm deliberately using the plural form "publics" here because, as we are recognizing more and more in the 21st century, we have a lot more than a single audience for our archival materials. Coming from a state government archives, when I wrote descriptions of records series, I knew anybody could be using this material—the state agency staff who created it in the first place, an academic researcher, an 8th grade History Day student, a genealogist doing family history, a local history researcher from Sherman County on the other side of the state. I recognized that our descriptions had to be generally understandable to an intelligent but potentially uninformed audience.

The descriptions I found at KSRL, however, have not always made those assumptions. While staff are now trying more than ever to bring in the first year college students who've never used archival materials, the History Day students, the local history researchers, and others; in the past our academic institution probably, like most other academic institutions, catered more exclusively to academic researchers and scholars experienced in archival research. So we are gradually changing that as much as possible in our descriptions, including explaining what the heck "ts and ms" or "TLS" mean in a finding aid when you are not in fact a manuscripts dealer and have never encountered that jargon before.

Patience



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Patience has never really been my strong suit, I have to admit. Professionally I have grown up on MPLP-get-'er-done-style processing, and I am very used to deadlines governing my work (hello, grant-funded projects and opening a new museum to the public). There were a lot of projects, particularly in the Kansas State Archives, that I would have loved to have devoted more time and more resources to, but it simply couldn't happen. Working now in an academic environment, where I do have more staffing and other resources, I'm developing a more refined and nuanced understanding of the physical work I never got to do and how we can vary how we respond to the physical needs of individual collections, having spent most of my career much more focused solely on the descriptive needs.

Having also spent most of my career working with government and organizational records, I'm used to more collections and records series having more order to them. Having seen some of the family collections and individual's manuscript collections we receive at Spencer, I recognize that there are times we really have to do something before we can make a collection accessible to our patrons.

That said, we need to advocate for more resources for governmental records, so that they also can get the staffing and other resources more typically available in academic environments—even public university environments within the same state with the same unhappy budget situation. (I'll get off my soapbox now.)



Thank you kindly!



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