

Iowa Historical, Memorial and Art Building, Des Moines, Iowa.

ANNALS OF IOWA.

VOL. XII, No. 1. DES MOINES, IOWA, APRIL, 1915. 3D SERIES

PRINCIPLES OF CLASSIFICATION OF ARCHIVES.¹

BY ETHEL B. VIRTUE.

[In pursuing her work as an assistant in the Historical Department, Miss Virtue, who has the responsibility of indexing the Public Archives of Iowa, carried out, at our request, an extensive investigation of the science of administration of Public Archives. From the results of this investigation she prepared this paper for the conference of archivists held during the last meeting of the American Historical Association. Because the proceedings of the Association are necessarily delayed in appearance, and because of repeated requests from many sister states for immediate access to Miss Virtue's paper, we are courteously allowed to publish it in the present number of the ANNALS.—EDITOR.]

The science of archives is indeed a mere infant in the family of modern sciences and her underlying principles are far from being fully developed. In many respects she resembles her sister science of library theory and practice but in others she is very different. Nowhere is this difference more plainly seen than in principles of classification.

The modern library has developed a system of subject classification, which has made the contents of its shelves easily accessible to the average reader. But the close application of a similar system to collections of archives has not met with success. A strictly logical arrangement was tried in the

¹"The Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association is engaged with the preparation of a 'Primer of Archival Economy for the use of American Archivists.' Knowing of the good work that is being done for the archives of Iowa by the Historical Department of that State, the Commission invited Miss Ethel B. Virtue to present a paper on 'Principles of Classification for Archives.' She presented this subject at the sixth annual conference of archivists, held under the Commission's auspices in the Auditorium Hotel, Chicago, on December 31, 1914. She showed that the system in use in Iowa follows the sound principle of classifying the archives with respect to their origin, as advocated and practiced by the best archivists of Europe, where the business of arranging, cataloging and administering public archives is an accepted profession of a high order. Miss Virtue illustrated her able exposition of the technical phases of her subject by a goodly number of charts, which gave a clear idea of the different steps in the process of the Iowa scheme. I am very glad to certify my appreciation of her paper and the value it will have to others who are interested in the subject.

VICTOR HUGO PALTSITS, Chairman,
Public Archives Commission."

New York City,
January 28, 1915.

Swedish Royal Archives some twenty-five years ago, but was later given up and the papers, which had been removed from their original collections, were restored to the same.² A similar attempt was once made in the National Archives of France and this also ended in confusion and failure.³ In our own country we find in the early arrangement of archives that papers have been grouped in special collections such as revolutionary papers, military papers and papers concerning lands. Such an arrangement destroys the original files of the offices, which carried on the processes of government in the early days, hides the gaps in the files and makes it almost impossible to know what kinds of papers are missing. In short the records with which the political anatomy of those days could be reconstructed, have been taken out of their original places and scattered so widely that it is almost a hopeless task to replace them.⁴

It is generally agreed by archivists in both Europe and America that the "summum bonum" to be desired in the classification of archives is that they shall reflect the political organism of their time. Whatever information they may contain upon special subjects or whatever light they may throw upon certain individuals or events, is a side issue and should not be the determining factor in their arrangement. They are the recorded image of the state and should be preserved as such. Special information concerning men and events can be brought out by special indices without interfering with the arrangement.

This opinion regarding the classification of archives has given rise to the principle known as the "respect des fonds," which has been briefly and clearly defined by Dr. Müller, of Utrecht, as "the method of classifying archives according to which each document is placed in the collection and in the series of that collection to which it belonged when that collection was a living organism."⁵

²Amandus Johnson, *The Lessons of the Swedish Archives*, Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1909, p. 366.

³Waldo G. Leland, *The National Archives*, American Historical Review, XVIII, p. 24.

⁴A. J. F. van Laer, *The Work of the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians at Brussels*, August 28-31, 1910, Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1910, p. 285.

⁵Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1912, p. 260.

A. J. F. van Laer, archivist of New York, has defined it in more detailed terms as "a system of arrangement of public archives whereby every document is traced to the governmental body, administrative office or institution by which it was issued or received and to the files of which it last belonged when these files were still in the process of natural accretion."⁶

European archivists are almost unanimous in their support of this principle. The uniform rules and regulations for classification in Belgium read as follows:

"The archivists take as a rule in the work of classification:

"1. To assemble the documents with respect to their sources; that is to say, to form a particular collection of all the titles, which belong to the same body, the same institution, the same administration or the same locality, without mixing the acts of one body with those of another.

"2. To classify the documents in each source according to their nature or contents, arranging the material as the case may be, chronologically, topographically or alphabetically.

"It is necessary to respect the source, or, as the Germans say, the principle of the origin, and give in the inventory an exact image of the organization or the institution, the archives of which one wishes to make known."⁷

In France the departmental archives are kept in the various departments and carefully arranged and classified in each.⁸ The records in the National Archives "are grouped according to the nature of the public institutions with which they are concerned."⁹

The Royal Privy Prussian State Archives in Berlin are arranged by departments and, for the most part, chronologically within each department.^{9a}

The creed of the archivists of the Netherlands is so heartily in accord with this principle that it maintains that no archivist, who has not studied carefully the organization to which the archives he is working with originally belonged, is fitted to classify them.¹⁰

⁶Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1910, p. 285.

⁷First Report of the Royal Commission on Public Records, London, 1912, I, Pt. II, 129b-130a.

⁸First Report of the Royal Commission on Public Records, London, 1912, I, Pt. II, 134.

⁹First Report of the Royal Commission on Public Records, London, 1912, I, Pt. II, 132a.

^{9a}Learned, M. D., Carnegie Publication, No. 150, p. 17.

¹⁰Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1912, p. 260.

From Italy also comes the word of Signore Pagliai of Florence saying that the "respect des fonds" is "the only scientific and natural principle, which should be followed to render intelligent the researches of the historian."¹¹

Sir Henry Lyte, Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office of England, describes the records of that office as being "kept pretty much according to the courts or offices from which they came, more than according to the subject. They are classified according to the place of origin."¹²

In our own country Mr. Leland, secretary of the American Historical Association, writes: "The principle of the 'respect des fonds' should be adhered to. In accordance with this principle records should be so grouped that they at once make clear the processes by which they have come into existence. Archives are the product and record of the performance of its functions by an organic body and they should faithfully reflect the workings of that organism. No decimal system of classification, no refined methods of library science, no purely chronological or purely alphabetical arrangement can be successfully applied to the classification of archives."¹³

Dr. Dunbar Rowland, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, maintains that "the object to be attained in the arrangement of all governmental archives is to classify them in such a manner that the documents will tell the story, in an historical way, of the progress and development of the state and its people from the beginning."¹⁴

Dr. Thomas Owen, of Alabama, has adopted the source principle in the arrangement of the archives of that state and says that thus far he has never had any question as to the wisdom of this course.¹⁵

Professor Eugene C. Barker of the University of Texas cites the following incident, which shows a decided legal disadvantage which would result from a departure from this method of classification: "We found that in a lawsuit that came up recently, a man wanted to prove a claim by a certain document that had been transferred from the state depart-

¹¹Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1912, p. 260.
¹²First Report of the Royal Commission on Public Records, London, 1912, I, Pt. III, 17, Q. 440.

¹³American Historical Review, XVIII, 24.

¹⁴Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1912, p. 270.

¹⁵Owen, T. M. to Harlan, E. R., October 23, 1913.

ment to the library and before that document could be produced in evidence, the defendant had to prove the history of the document. The judge, in other words, wanted to know how that document came to be in the library; wanted to be perfectly sure that it was the identical document.¹⁶

At the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians held in Brussels in 1910, the following resolution was adopted: "Resolved, that the 'principe de la provenance' (respect des fonds) be adopted for the arrangement and inventorying of archives, with a view to the logical classification of separate documents as well as in the interest of comprehensive historical study."¹⁷

The principle 'respect des fonds' we may say then is the established principle of archival classification today. In "A Report on the Public Archives" submitted to the trustees of the State Library and Historical Department of Iowa in 1906,¹⁸ Prof. Benjamin F. Shambaugh presented the following outlines as leading up to a proper classification of the archives of that state. These outlines are a very simple and concrete illustration of the principle 'respect des fonds' adapted to the archives of Iowa.

Outlines of Classification for the Archives of Iowa.

By B. F. Shambaugh.¹⁹

I—Primary classification for Iowa.

Public Archives	{	State
		Local

II—Formal classification for Iowa.

Public Archives	{	Printed
		Manuscript

III—Historical classification for Iowa.

Public Archives	{	Period of the Territory
		Period of the 1st Constitution
		Period of the 2d Constitution

They present four classifications of the records. The first or primary classification provides for the separation of state

¹⁶Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1910, p. 307.

¹⁷Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1910, p. 285.

¹⁸Reprinted from the ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. VII, pp. 561-91, January 1907.

¹⁹Shambaugh, Benjamin F., A Report on the Public Archives, p. 35.

The fourth or administrative outline practically combines the three classifications just described. You will note here again the separation of state and local archives. The distinction between printed and manuscript records is not made but these may be filed together in the proper series. The chronological arrangement of the series defines the limits of the different historical periods.

Turning now to the heading, state, we find the division into the offices of governor, secretary of state and so on down through all the offices and departments of the commonwealth, the concrete illustration of the classification of records according to their origin.

The records of the governor's office are further divided into the series of commissions, journals, letters, proclamations, etc., divisions which the functions of that office have created.

The following floor plan and pictures of the Iowa Hall of Archives as it is now arranged will serve to visualize this classification.

You will readily see that in general the outlines of Dr. Shambaugh have been followed in this classification. In some of the subdivisions the chronological arrangement has been departed from and a subject or alphabetical arrangement substituted as the series seemed to demand.

The working out of the classification has been largely in the hands of Mr. C. C. Stiles, superintendent of the classification department. A study of his outlines for the office of governor will illustrate the principles which he has found useful in the classification of the records of that office.

TABLE I—GOVERNOR'S OFFICE.

MAIN SERIES.²¹

I. Commissions	Subject
II. Correspondence	"
III. Elections	"
IV. Extraditions	"
V. Legislative	"
VI. Petitions	"
VII. Proclamations	"
VIII. Reports	"
IX. Vouchers	"
X. Bonds	"
XI. Executive Journals	Years
XII. Criminal Records	"
XIII. Miscellaneous	Subject

In Table I we have the thirteen main series of the office, the majority of which represent particular functions of the administrative officer. You will notice that out of the thirteen series, eleven are subdivided according to class or subject and two are arranged strictly by years.

A more detailed outline, such as we have in Table II, will better illustrate this subdivision.

TABLE II—GOVERNOR'S OFFICE.

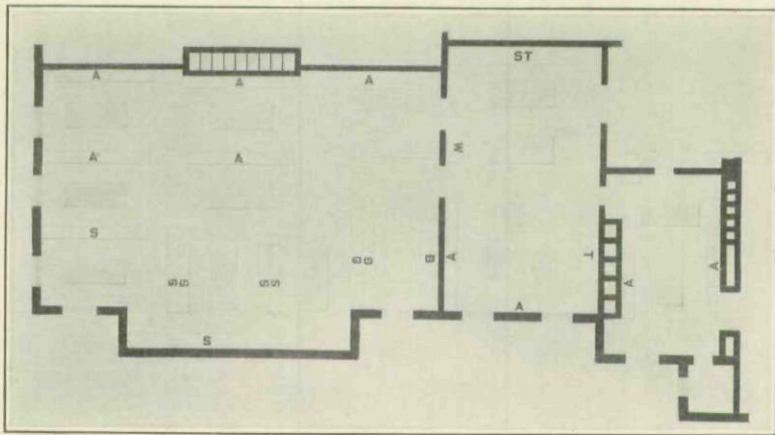
SUBDIVISIONS.²²

I. Commissions..	{ Notarial { 1866 { Officers of State Institutions .. { College for the Blind . { }	Adams, James
		Adams, James

This table represents two typical arrangements of the series of commissions. One of the most important divisions of this series is that of notarial commissions. These are arranged first by years and then alphabetized by the names of

²¹Stiles, C. C., Public Archives of Iowa, ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. X, p. 171, October, 1911. Some changes will be noted in the table above. These have been made since the publication cited.

²²Stiles, C. C., Public Archives of Iowa, ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. X, p. 172, October, 1911.



HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT OF IOWA—Floor plan of Division of Public Archives, showing location of cases containing records of the state officers. A, Auditor; B, Board of Health; G, Governor; S, Secretary of State; T, Treasurer; M, Maps; St., Storage.



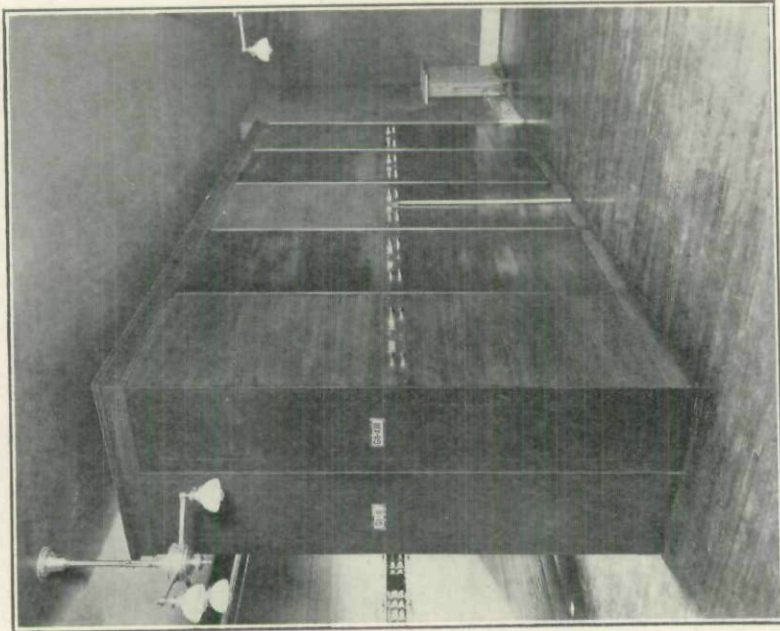
OFFICE AND CATALOGUING ROOM—Cases contain records of the Auditor.



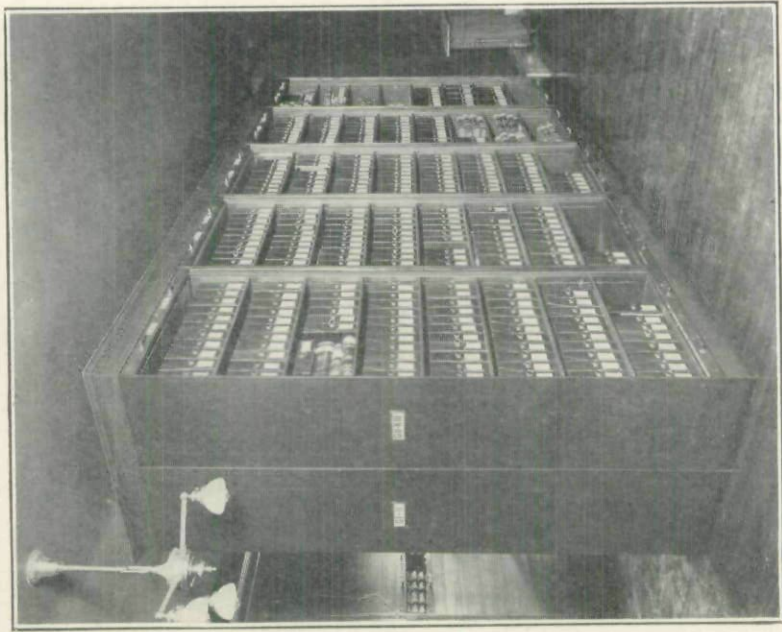
WORK ROOM—Cases contain records of the Auditor.



FILING ROOM—Cases, from left to right around the room, contain records respectively of the offices of Governor, Secretary of State, Auditor.



Records of the office of Governor—case closed.



Records of the office of Governor—case open—showing the filling of boxes of manuscripts side by side with bound volumes.

the commissioners. Here we see, then, first a subject or class arrangement (notarial), then a chronological (1866) and lastly an alphabetical (Adams).

In the second subdivision of commissions we have those of the officers of state institutions. These commissions are arranged first by the name of the institution (College for the Blind), and then by the name of the commissioner (Adams). No account is taken of the year of appointment.

The largest series in the governor's office is that of correspondence. This series in Iowa has been arranged first by subject and the further subdivisions run by subject, year or name as the material seems to require. Table III illustrates four typical classifications of this series.

TABLE III.

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

SUBDIVISIONS.²³

II. CORRESPONDENCE	}	Appoint-ments	{ Commissioner of Deeds	{ Ala-bama	{ Adams, James
		Criminal Cases	{ Adams, James		
		Trans- porta- tion	{ Railroads	{ 1856	
			{ Waterways	{ 1851	
Temper- ance	{ 1858				

Under the subdivision of appointments we find the most detailed type. This correspondence is arranged first by the office, in this case that of commissioner of deeds, second by the year of appointment, then by the state for which the commissioner is appointed and lastly by the name of the commissioner.

In the subdivision of the correspondence concerning criminal cases, we have a purely alphabetical arrangement by the name of the criminal, all papers pertaining to each case being kept together.

²³Stiles, C. C., Public Archives of Iowa, ANNALS OF IOWA, Vol. X, pp. 179, 187, October, 1911.

Correspondence concerning transportation is divided into two subject headings of railroads and waterways, each of which is then arranged by years.

All letters concerning temperance are arranged by years and alphabeted under each year by the name of the writer.

Turning to Table VII and series XI, that of Executive Journals, we find the simplest classification possible, that of a straight chronological arrangement.

TABLE VII.

XI. Executive Journals, 1857
1858
1859
etc.

This series consists of bound records only, and any other arrangement is practically impossible. A separate series has been made of criminal records as soon as they have become bulky enough to be bound in separate volumes, and the earlier criminal records in the executive journals are listed on the index cards of the journals.

These tables have presented to you all of the types of the classification of subdivisions used in the archives of Iowa. The reasons for the adoption of these different forms of classification will be best brought out, I think, in the discussion of the same.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.