

2020

## Issues of Ownership: Leveraging Accession Documentation and Provenance Research to Improve Collection Access

Kara Flynn

University of Arkansas, kara.e.flynn@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Flynn, Kara (2020) "Issues of Ownership: Leveraging Accession Documentation and Provenance Research to Improve Collection Access," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 7 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/1>

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact [elischolar@yale.edu](mailto:elischolar@yale.edu).

## Introduction

Archivists often focus on the historical records in their holdings and as a result, sometimes forget that they are also record creators. Records created *about* archival materials—including deeds of gift, collection-related correspondence, and other accession documentation—play an important role in archival work, particularly when it comes to providing access and maintaining partnerships with other recordkeepers. This case study will describe a project to review the accession documentation of all collections within Augusta University’s Special Collections and Institutional Archives, located in Augusta, Georgia. As the special collections librarian at Augusta University, I began and managed this project with the help of the special collections assistant and the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society administrator, from August 2017 to January 2019. Prior to August of 2017, collections housed in the Special Collections department were collected in tandem by two distinct institutions—Augusta University Special Collections, and the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society, whose collections were held on deposit and managed by the special collections librarian. The primary objective for this project was to disentangle and identify the ownership and provenance of collections, with the goal of improving ease of access and use of collections. The project’s secondary goal was to strengthen the partnership between Augusta University Special Collections and the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society by working together on the project and involving all parties in each step of the process. This project also serves to highlight the important function that archival accessioning plays in the overall work of archives and to exemplify the lasting impact that accessioning can have on an institution. Many archivists share the challenges of long-term patterns of poor or incomplete accessioning, and it is the author’s hope that this case study may serve as an example of the positive change that can come from addressing legacy accessioning issues, and the important role that archival accessioning work and accession documentation play in enabling archival access and use.

## Institutional Context and Project Background

Special Collections and Institutional Archives is a department of the Reese Library of Augusta University’s Summerville campus in Augusta, Georgia. Augusta University is a four-year, public research university in the University of Georgia system. In 2012, Augusta State University (now the Summerville campus of Augusta University) consolidated with the Georgia Health Sciences University and became Georgia Regents University, later renamed Augusta University in 2015. The Summerville campus of the university serves a majority undergraduate student population of roughly 5,000 students, and the university as a whole, including the undergraduate and graduate programs of the Summerville and Health Sciences campuses, serves a total student population of roughly 9,000.<sup>1</sup>

The Special Collections and Institutional Archives (hereafter referred to as “Special Collections”) was formed in 1977, following the opening of Reese Library on the Summerville campus. The department is staffed by one full-time faculty-level librarian, one full-time staff position, and one student worker. The primary goal of Special Collections is to collect, maintain,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Augusta University Facts & Figures,” Augusta University, accessed August 14, 2019, <https://www.augusta.edu/fastfacts/>.

and preserve archival collections, photographs, maps, and research materials such as books and serials related to Augusta University, the history of the local area, and the university system of Georgia. Special Collections, in partnership with the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society, maintains 6,440 book titles, including the library's rare book collection, and over 600 archival collections. Special Collections plays an important role in supporting and advancing research and teaching in the humanities at Augusta University.

Augusta University Special Collections had a long-standing "gentleman's agreement" with the local historical society, the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society (hereafter referred to by its acronym, ARCHS). As part of this partnership, the Special Collections librarian and department staff were responsible for housing, preserving, and providing access to ARCHS collections, and in return, ARCHS subsidized funding for preservation supplies. The history and parameters of this relationship between Special Collections and ARCHS began in 1977, when Arthur Ray Rowland, who served as both the head librarian and the head of the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society, arranged the agreement. As he held a leadership role in both organizations, he took in acquisitions for both entities simultaneously, and it was often unclear which organization a donation was intended for. The parameters of this relationship were recorded only in the institutional knowledge of longtime library staff, and if there was at some point a written agreement describing this arrangement, it had been lost long before I started in 2017. Successive special collections librarians continued the accessioning pattern established by Mr. Rowland, never distinguishing in the accession documentation between the collections donated to ARCHS and those donated to Special Collections. All collections had been assigned accession numbers, but as they had been accessioned together, with no designations in either the accession numbers or collection numbers to differentiate between collections intended for either organization, it was difficult to determine which organization owned the collections. Further complicating this accession history was the fact that many of the earliest collections acquired by ARCHS were previously owned by the Augusta Museum of History, and deaccessioned and subsequently transferred to ARCHS at some point in the 1970s.

In 2014, ARCHS hired a new historical society administrator, who created a separate deed of gift and began accepting collections and documenting ARCHS acquisitions through it. By 2017, the ARCHS administrator was responsible for all acquisitions on behalf of ARCHS. This included communicating with ARCHS donors and facilitating donations of archival materials, including securing the deed of gift for ARCHS collections. While the special collections librarian was occasionally asked to consult on preservation issues during the appraisal stage of an ARCHS acquisition, the special collections librarian and the Special Collections department were not involved in acquiring collections on behalf of ARCHS. However, copies of the ARCHS deed of gift were not retained by the previous special collections librarian, which meant that although acquisition documentation existed for ARCHS collections accessioned after 2014, the Special Collections department had a series of empty accession files for those collections.

The lack of clarity on the question of collection ownership put a strain on the partnership between the Special Collections department and ARCHS. Individuals from both sides of the partnership, including the ARCHS administrator and Augusta University's head librarian, repeatedly expressed anxiety over the unclear ownership of collections. Specifically, each were worried that if ARCHS were ever to move into their own physical space outside of Special Collections, there would be no way of knowing which collections belonged to them. This may have in part been due to the history of ARCHS itself, originally part of the Augusta-Richmond

County History Museum, which had been split into two separate entities in the 1960s, with some collections at the time being deaccessioned from the museum and transferred to ARCHS. There was also concern that the ARCHS administrator and the special collections librarian had not had open communication in the past, leading to anxieties over whether collections intended for a particular institution were being acquired by the other entity without the intended institution's knowledge. Thus, in conjunction with the ARCHS administrator and the head librarian at the time, I determined that clarifying the ownership of the collections was one of my first and most important priorities.

By August 2017, collections had received minimal processing—most collections had a title, date range, and brief abstract note describing the materials, but these records provided only the most basic information. Additionally, an initial survey of the collections revealed that much of the description that was present was inaccurate. Processing the collections was one of the primary goals of the department, however, the inability to distinguish between the collections of the university and those of ARCHS due to the relatively recent use of deeds of gift, and the lack of clarity in the existing accession documentation retained by the department, presented some immediate and important challenges with far-reaching implications. Many archival institutions are encountering similar issues related to accession documentation as they attempt to process backlogs of material with minimal existing description. OCLC Research found that in recent years it has become clear that in efforts to process backlogs of unprocessed collections, “many institutions do not have baseline administrative, legal, and physical control, in addition to lacking minimal descriptive control,”<sup>2</sup> as was the case when I arrived at Augusta University's Special Collections and Institutional Archives in August of 2017. The agenda also suggests that projects that have previously been conceptualized as minimal processing projects would be better understood as “retrospective accessioning projects.”<sup>3</sup> While the accession documentation review that I set out to do was not quite “retrospective accessioning,” the project did result in enhanced accession records, ultimately acting as a small-scale act of retrospective accessioning. While processing collections remained a priority for me throughout my time at Augusta University, I decided that I would be better able to pursue processing projects if I first addressed the lack of clarity in ownership between ARCHS and Special Collections, and determined to the best of my ability the provenance and custodial history of the collections.

The resulting project outlined in this case study, which began in August 2017, was motivated by both the department's need to establish baseline control over the collections in order to provide access, and the concerns over ownership expressed by important stakeholders, including the ARCHS administrator and the head librarian. I conceptualized this project as an “accession documentation review,” with goals similar to that of the “retrospective accessioning” approach suggested by the OCLC Research Agenda,<sup>4</sup> and I split the project into four phases. In phase 1, the special collections staff and I, with the help of the ARCHS administrator, conducted a full review of all existing documentation related to each collection's provenance. Once the initial review had been conducted, phase 2 entailed creating new separate, written, accessioning procedures for each organization to be used in the acquisition of all collections moving forward, and a new collection and accessioning numbering system. After all collections had been assigned

---

<sup>2</sup> Chela Scott Weber, *Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2017), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

new prefixes and collection numbers, all physical boxes containing the collection materials were relabeled with the newly formatted collection numbers, and all physical locations of the materials were updated in Archon and in a shelf list spreadsheet during phase 3. Finally, during phase 4, I identified collections where materials had been labeled with a museum accession number in addition to the Augusta University Special Collections accession number, and cross-referenced those numbers with the Augusta Museum of History's legacy card catalog to determine which collections had been acquired by ARCHS following their deaccession from the Augusta Museum of History.

Each member of the project played a variety of roles. As the special collections librarian, I functioned as a project manager and coordinated the various phases of the project, in addition to helping with the work of those phases. I was solely responsible for reviewing any documentation forwarded to the department by the ARCHS administrator, and I surveyed the collections for museum accession numbers in the last phase of the project. The ARCHS administrator was responsible for surveying and identifying boxes of potential accession documentation from ARCHS organizational records before bringing them to Special Collections for review, and she collaborated with me on the accessioning procedures we created for ARCHS acquisitions. The special collections assistant, the department's student worker, and myself all worked together to review the department's accession documentation, assign new collection numbers, label boxes, and scan and add the museum accession cards to our accession files.

### **Why Accession Documentation and Provenance Matter**

Accessioning plays a key role in the work of any special collections librarian or archivist, as it is the first formal step in gaining administrative, legal, physical, and intellectual control over an archival collection.<sup>5</sup> Despite the importance of accessioning, and the negative, long-term consequences of incomplete accessioning, as evidenced by the need for this project, accessioning is often overlooked and a relative lack of discussion surrounding it as a key archival activity in the field persists.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the guidance that archivists are provided on accessioning is often limited in scope and focused more on defining the term itself than offering any meaningful processes.<sup>7</sup> One of the few resources for archivists that offers a more thoughtful approach to accessioning is Christine Weideman's 2006 article in which she advocates that archivists should do minimal arrangement and description at the time of accessioning in order to provide baseline access to archival collections, without further adding to a backlog of unprocessed collections.<sup>8</sup> While the previous special collections librarian at Augusta University had attempted to follow this model by retroactively entering the minimal description provided in the department's accession documentation as a finding aid in Archon, it had ultimately been ineffective due to the inaccurate and incomplete description that had initially been completed in the accessioning process.

---

<sup>5</sup> Fredric M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 37–39.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Searcy, "Beyond Control: Accessioning Practices for Extensible Archival Management," *The Journal of Archival Organization* 14, nos. 3–4 (2017): 153–75.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, *Arranging and Describing*; "Accessioning Guidance and Policy," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning>.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 274–83.

In part as a result of this lack of guidance for and visibility of accessioning in the field, OCLC Research published the “Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special Collections, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries” in 2017, which calls for new approaches to accessioning.<sup>9</sup> OCLC Research found that many survey projects undertaken to reveal so-called “hidden collections”—i.e., collections that remained a part of archival unprocessed backlogs—might be better understood not as minimal processing projects, but as “retrospective accessioning projects.”<sup>10</sup> The agenda argues that the collections in these backlogs are more than simply unprocessed, they lack the baseline information needed to begin a processing project, including collection location, the size and condition of collections, provenance, rights, and ownership status.<sup>11</sup> A recent case study by Matthew Gorham and Chela Scott Weber at the Brooklyn Historical Society exemplifies the larger findings of the OCLC Research Agenda on this issue. During a survey of the institution’s backlog, the authors found themselves thinking of their backlog “not as unprocessed collections, but as unaccessioned collections,” because the institution lacked the basic physical and intellectual control over the collections that should have been established during accessioning.<sup>12</sup> Issues like the ones that Gorham and Weber highlighted in their case study, and which the OCLC Research Agenda seeks to address, solidify the importance of accessioning as a form of archival description and access, beyond the simple act of formal transfer of materials from a donor to an institution.

The use of a deed of gift, a document that transfers rights to materials and any restrictions placed on them, has been held as an archival best practice during the earliest steps of the accessioning process since the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Deeds of gift have evolved since their inception to often include information on the provenance of the materials, provenance being “information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, by asking for provenance information within the deed of gift, archivists can retain a record of the archival materials’ creator, as well as how the donor acquired the materials. However, prior to the establishment of the use of a deed of gift as an archival best practice, many archival repositories used other forms of documentation, such as correspondence between the donor and the institution, some kind of non-standardized internal accessioning document created by individual institutions, or a “gentleman’s agreement” similar to that utilized by Augusta University’s Special Collections.<sup>15</sup> Deeds of gift help provide administrative consistency in the archive or special collection, and influence the ways in which collections are processed and made available to patrons, making them an integral part of the acquisitions and accessioning process.<sup>16</sup> Although a standardized deed of gift had been in regular use in Augusta University’s Special Collections department since 2008, the lack of deeds of gift for the earlier collections

---

<sup>9</sup> Weber, *Research and Learning Agenda*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Matthew B. Gorham and Chela Scott Weber, “Creating Access and Establishing Control: Conducting a Comprehensive Survey to Reveal a Hidden Repository,” in *Description: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, ed. Kate Theimer (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Trudy Peterson, “The Gift and the Deed,” *The American Archivist* 42, no. 1 (January 1979): 61–66.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Pearce-Moses, Mark Greene, Laurie Baty, Rob Spindler, and Diane Vogt-O’Connor, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 317.

<sup>15</sup> Peterson, “The Gift and the Deed,” 61–66; Tara Z. Laver, “Do a Good Deed: Deeds of Gift for Manuscript Collections,” *Louisiana Libraries* 68, no. 2 (2005): 23–30.

<sup>16</sup> Laver, “Do a Good Deed.”

acquired by Special Collections and ARCHS presented a challenge in processing and providing access to those materials.

The principle of provenance is another important factor in acquisition and accessioning, and one of the primary influences on the way that archival records are arranged. Traditionally, the principle of provenance dictates that records should be arranged by creator, and that materials with different provenance should not be mixed.<sup>17</sup> Given that the materials in Augusta University's Special Collections had been arranged by various individuals over a period of over forty years, I was less concerned with the influence of provenance on arrangement, as original order had largely been lost many years before I arrived (although reprocessing collections to better reflect the principle of provenance is an option for many repositories). Instead, I was most interested in the context of the records: the history of the creator or creators, and how those records came to be in Augusta University's Special Collections, also referred to as custodial history. More recent understandings of provenance are better suited to address the situation I was facing. Recent scholarship encourages archivists to adopt a wider view of the term, encompassing not only the creator of the records, but the additional influences that shape the records over time, including the historical context in which records were created, and custodial history.<sup>18</sup> As Tom Nesmith pointed out in his 2002 article on postmodernism in archives, various people and institutions "may be involved in the origination of the records because their actions account for the records' existence, preservation, and characteristics when we encounter them in archives,"<sup>19</sup> which was the case at Augusta University. This was particularly true for the collections of the historical society, some of which had been transferred between institutions repeatedly from the time of their creation, which in turn affected the ways in which the records were described and understood. As a result of this complicated custodial history, neither I nor the ARCHS administrator had a good understanding of the provenance of these collections.

In trying to uncover provenance information through this accession documentation review project, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the aspects of provenance that might traditionally be understood as custodial history, and to incorporate that information into departmental accession documentation and public-facing collection records accessed by patrons. The lack of provenance information for the collections in Augusta University's Special Collections was a particularly important issue as it affected our ability to provide access to the collections. It was difficult to fill reproduction requests, address copyright concerns, digitize materials, and use materials in classes and exhibits without knowing any background or ownership information for the collections. The lack of information about who owned the materials also made it almost impossible for researchers to accurately cite collections in their publications. Additionally, the lack of clarity on the question of collection ownership put a strain

---

<sup>17</sup> T. R. Schellenberg, "The Principle of Provenance and Modern Records in the United States," *The American Archivist* 28, no. 1 (1965): 39–41; Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000); Steven L. Hensen, "The First Shall Be First: APPM and Its Impacts on American Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 64–70.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 1–15; Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 24–41; Heather Beattie, "Where Narratives Meet: Archival Description, Provenance, and Women's Diaries," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 1 (2009): 82–100; Jinfang Niu, "Provenance: Crossing Boundaries," *Archives and Manuscripts* 41, no. 2 (2013): 105–15.

<sup>19</sup> Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 35.

on the partnership the Special Collections department had with ARCHS, as evidenced by the concerns expressed by both the ARCHS administrator and Reese Library's head librarian over the unclear ownership of the collections, which extended to concerns over ongoing acquisitions. In doing the accession documentation review, the Special Collections department, in partnership with ARCHS, was able to find more information about the provenance of our collections than we had previously known. This in turn enabled us to improve access to collections, provide patrons with a fuller picture of the materials, and determine to the best of our ability the ownership of the collections, as intended by the original donors.

### **Phase 1: Performing the Accessions Documentation Survey**

During the first phase of this project, I reviewed any and all collection documentation that we *did* have—this included what my predecessor had called “accession sheets,” as well as correspondence retained by the ARCHS administrator. The accession sheets served as a precursor to the department's deed of gift, which was not in regular use until 2006. Thus, the existing documentation held in the Special Collections department as of the fall of 2017 was comprised of paper accession files, stored in the department, which included a file on each collection, organized by accession number. Files for collections accessioned from 1977 through 2005 either included an accession sheet, or were empty, with no accession documentation. While in theory all files for collections accessioned from 2006 onward should have a deed of gift, a number of collections from the period from 2006 to 2017 were missing one. Despite the acknowledged importance of the deed of gift in the field, many institutions have had similar problems with inconsistent or incomplete accession documentation.<sup>20</sup> This decades-old problem continues to be under discussion as evidenced by recent Society of American Archivists conference presentations focused on creating more effective deeds of gift,<sup>21</sup> and evolving concerns related to the best way to address the accessioning of various formats of materials in deeds of gift.<sup>22</sup>

The accession sheets in use in Special Collections from 1977 to 2005 were intended to record information similar to that recorded in a deed of gift. The forms included sections to record a collection's title, the authors or creators of collection materials, a description of the physical condition of the materials, and the date span and geographic area covered by the collection. They were also intended to record information about the donor, including any restrictions placed on the materials. However, these forms often lacked any substantive information, as they were largely left blank. The majority of the forms only included an accession number, a title, and a date span. Some accession sheets included a donor name, but the majority did not. An additional complicating factor was that these forms were not filled out upon acquisition, but often were created years after an acquisition had been accepted, a detail provided in the documentation and history of the department compiled by the previous special collections librarian. However, the forms did prove particularly useful in differentiating between collections that appeared to have

---

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Becker, “On Deposit: A Handshake and a Lawsuit,” *The American Archivist* 56, no. 2 (1993): 320–28.

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Hujda, “Doing Good Deeds, and the Ethics of Executing Gift Agreements,” presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, August 6, 2019; Sarah Bost, “Transforming the Deed of Gift for the 21st Century,” presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, August 6, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Niu, “Provenance,” 105–15.

been donated to either the Augusta University Special Collections department or the Richmond County Historical Society. The determining factor was that many of the accession forms included a handwritten acronym, “RCH,” for the “Richmond County Historical Society” (an earlier iteration of the name of the historical society) in the upper right-hand corner. While this certainly did not provide conclusive provenance or information on ownership, it did supply a contextual clue that such collections were likely intended for ARCHS.

The other form of documentation available for review was the correspondence relating to collections that had been retained by the ARCHS administrator. Over the course of two months, I went through roughly eight linear feet of correspondence, which the administrator had surveyed and provided to me. In my initial review, I identified correspondence that seemed to relate to a donation of collection materials that might be identifiable as one of the collections held in the department and made a list to revisit again, once I had finished my initial survey of the correspondence. This short list of correspondence was then reviewed and individual letters referencing donations were cross-referenced with the department’s legacy accession forms and any collection descriptions or abstracts provided by the previous special collections librarian. For many of the collections, I was able to determine that the description or author of a piece of correspondence matched the description or donor name recorded in the accession sheets, and I felt comfortable concluding that those collections were intended for and owned by ARCHS.

Following the review of existing documentation from both Special Collections and ARCHS, I determined to the best of my ability the collections intended for each institution, based on the contextual information I could gather from our existing documentation. For collections missing a deed of gift that were acquired from 2006 to 2017 after a standardized deed of gift was in regular use, I pursued retroactive deeds of gift using email correspondence that had been included in the accession file. I was successful in contacting a small number of donors and their descendants, and securing a deed of gift for their collections, with the help of the ARCHS administrator. A few deeds of gift initially thought missing were found during the accession documentation review, misfiled or loose in filing cabinets in the department, and those were added to the appropriate accession file for the collection. For collections accessioned prior to 2006, I created a form letter, explaining that this collection had undergone a review in 2017, and the following documentation was found to have indicated that the materials were donated to a particular organization, by a specific donor or institution. I included this letter, signed and dated by myself, as well as copies of all correspondence or other documentation I found in my accession documentation survey, in our paper accession files. While not having a deed of gift for each collection was by no means ideal, the accession documentation review allowed us to have a better understanding of the provenance of the collection, and to determine the ownership of that collection. Additionally, while it was feasible to contact donors and their descendants to pursue retroactive deeds of gift for collections acquired in the recent past, it would have been difficult if not impossible to do so for many of our legacy accessions. For such collections, I consulted the state laws in Georgia related to museum property.<sup>23</sup> The 2017 Georgia Code, section 10-1-529.4, “Abandonment of property loaned to a museum or archives repository; museum acquisition of abandoned property,” states the following:

---

<sup>23</sup> “2017 Georgia Code,” Justia, accessed September 24, 2019, <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2017/title-10/chapter-1/article-17b/section-10-1-529.4/>

(A) Property loaned to a museum or archives repository whose loan has an expiration date is abandoned when there has not been written contact between the owner and the museum or archives repository for at least seven years after that expiration date. If the loan has no expiration date, the property is abandoned when there has not been written contact between the owner and the museum or archives repository or their successors or assigns for at least seven years after the museum or archives repository took possession of the property.<sup>24</sup>

Using this law as justification of ownership did not help to determine provenance information for those collections for which I was unable to find documentation, but it did help to address the issues of ownership the department faced without any kind of accession documentation as support of ownership. For a few collections that fell into this category, I created a standardized statement on ownership, citing the relevant section of the Georgia Code, which I added to the accession file for each collection, and to the collection's record in Archon.

### **Phases 2 and 3: Assigning New Local Identifiers, Creating Accessioning Guidelines**

Upon completing the first phase of the project, I had created a comprehensive list of all our accessioned collections and which organization owned them: Augusta University or ARCHS. In order to differentiate the collections from each other both physically and intellectually, I created a new set of prefixes to use for collections donated or transferred to the Special Collections and Institutional Archives department. All collections donated to and owned by the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society were assigned the "ARCHS" prefix, as well as a new collection number. These collection numbers fall under the "local identifier" (field 2.1.3) in the second edition of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS), and different institutions have varying internal policies that dictate the format of such identifiers.<sup>25</sup> All manuscript collections donated to Augusta University were assigned an "MSS" prefix to reflect the fact that they were "manuscript" collections and were assigned a new collection number. All university records donated to or transferred from within the university were assigned a prefix of "IA" to reflect that they were a part of the "institutional archives" side of the department.

Creating new local identifiers helped to intellectually distinguish the collections housed in the department, and to provide patrons with a variety of ways to search for and access the collections online through Archon. The local identifiers were used to organize the collections intellectually within Archon, so that a patron could browse in a number of different ways, including by subject, alphabetically by title, or by institution, as all the ARCHS collections, for example, could be listed together using the new local identifiers. Local identifiers also made it easier to intellectually organize the "Institutional Archives," or university archives, into record groups. By providing patrons a wider variety of entry points to the collections, the new local identifiers improved the intellectual organization as well as both online and physical access to the collections.

Having separate collection numbers as local identifiers also helped to intellectually and physically link multiple accessions to one collection. The initial phase of this project led me to

---

<sup>24</sup> "2017 Georgia Code."

<sup>25</sup> *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013), 14.

uncover the fact that a number of collections had a series of accessions by a single donor, and the accession documentation found during phase 1 indicated that the donor had intended for all these accessions to be a part of a single collection. In the past, if a single donor donated a series of accessions, each accession had been processed as a single discrete collection, and no effort was made to link those accessions to each other. While we could have intellectually linked collections through a list of hyperlinked related collections in Archon, this would not have reflected the intent of the donor or creator of the record as outlined in their accession documentation. Additionally, accession documentation revealed custodial histories for a number of collections that had initially been donated as one collection and then been arbitrarily separated from each other into separate collections by departmental staff that predated the previous special collections librarian. A substantial enough number of collections were affected by these types of processing decisions that we decided to create new local identifiers, which allowed us to piece some of these collections back together, or link multiple accessions to one collection number. These changes were then recorded in the custodial history note for each collection's finding aid in an effort to provide transparency about how the collections came to be, while honoring the intentions of the original donor or creators of the records, as far as could be proven through accession documentation.

Although I did not initially intend to create all new box labels as part of this project, I incorporated the step for a number of reasons. Primarily, it aided in the physical access to the collections, the majority of which had been poorly or incorrectly labeled, and often lacked labels entirely. Both the previous special collections librarian and myself had worked to ensure that all collection materials were properly housed in acid-free boxes and enclosures and stored in a temperature-controlled and locked manuscript room. However, the methods for labeling boxes had varied widely during the past twenty years, with some boxes listing only a donor's name, while others had a title and date, and many labels were simply temporary sticky notes. Relabeling the boxes also helped to minimize confusion for the staff and student worker positions in the department, which have historically experienced high rates of turnover. In an effort to gain physical control over the collections, to simplify the process of physical retrieval of collections, and to streamline the process of training future staff assistants and student workers, I determined that it would be worth the time and effort to relabel the boxes during this project.

Creating standardized labels for the boxes improved ease of access to the collections for departmental and ARCHS staff and made the process of finding collection materials much faster and less confusing, as the labels followed a standard format and could be easily linked to their accession file and to the collection finding aid. This in turn allowed the department to provide patrons with access to collection materials more quickly and efficiently and made the process of selecting materials for use in classes and exhibits more streamlined. In addition to the newly assigned collection number and the new format for the accession number, the new labels included a standardized way to refer to the department, a DACS-compliant collection title, and the inclusion of the date span of each collection. Many of the departments collections were not expected to have accruals, so labels for most collections included the number of total boxes in the collection. For institutional records, a total number of boxes was not included on the label, due to the anticipation of future accruals. Standardizing and creating new box labels may not always be a priority for archivists, especially those that have large collections, and I would not advocate for this step unless the institution will benefit in a way that makes relabeling worth the time and effort. Creating new labels and relabeling collection boxes made sense for the Special

Collections department at Augusta University given the relatively small size of the collections, the lack of substantive labels prior to the project, the high turnover of staff and student positions, and because of the new accessioning and collection numbering systems that had resulted from the project.

In addition to assigning new collection numbers, I also created a separate written accessioning procedure for the university's collections and ARCHS collections, which I included in the department's handbook and policies guide for future special collections staff. From 2017 on, collections acquired and accessioned for ARCHS would require that the special collections librarian retain a copy of the ARCHS deed of gift in the accession file, and that all accession files for ARCHS collections be housed separately and differentiated in the accession number assigned, using the ARCHS prefix. All collections accessioned for ARCHS used the following accession number format: ARCHS.year.##, so, for example, the first collection accessioned on behalf of the historical society in 2017 would be given the accession number ARCHS.2017.01. Accession information was then entered into Archon, the software used for accession management and collection description and control. A similar procedure was established for the accessioning of Special Collections materials owned by the university, minus the ARCHS prefix. The department began using Archon's accessions feature beginning in 2017, as a digital record of the paper accessions files. While I decided not to enter all accessions retroactively into Archon, this is something that could be done at a later date, so that Archon's accessions tool could provide a comprehensive digital accession record for all collections in the department. At the time of this phase of the project, the university library was considering migrating to ArchivesSpace, and library administrators were concerned that the creation of so many new accession records would complicate the migration process. However, in an effort to provide more transparency and information regarding acquisition and provenance to patrons accessing our finding aids online, I decided to include information on collections' custodial history and accession number in the "administrative information" section of our existing finding aids. As a result, each finding aid in Archon included the collection's accession number, donor information and provenance, and any restrictions placed on the material. Although I have since left the institution, if the department were to migrate to ArchivesSpace in the near future, retroactively creating digital accession records for all collections would be a worthwhile next step in the project and allow for as comprehensive accessioning as possible in both paper and digital formats.

In writing these procedures, I consulted the resource portal of the Society of American Archivist's museum archives section, available on the society's website, which includes guidance on all aspects of archival work.<sup>26</sup> Within the guide's appraisal and acquisition/accession section, I consulted the "Accessioning Manual, 5th edition" by the J. Paul Getty Trust,<sup>27</sup> which I found to be a useful model for my own accessioning procedures, which I tailored to fit Augusta University's collections and collection management systems. The

---

<sup>26</sup> "Museum Archives Section Standards & Best Practices Resource Guide," Society of American Archivists, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section/standards-best-practices-resource-guide>.

<sup>27</sup> "J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives Accessioning Manual, 5th edition," J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives and the Society of American Archivists, accessed July 17, 2019, [http://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Getty\\_Accessioning%20manual\\_5thEdition.pdf](http://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Getty_Accessioning%20manual_5thEdition.pdf).

accessioning procedure I created provided step-by-step instruction on the physical management of accessioned collections and the creation and retention of accessioning documentation, with the goal of creating consistency in the creation of accession documentation. This consistency would also ensure clarity of ownership of the collections of ARCHS and Augusta University Special Collections moving forward.

Creating a new written accessioning procedure for each organization was an important step in making the collections more easily accessible. Prior to this project, each time a patron requested collection materials, or the Special Collections department wanted to digitize materials or use materials in a class or exhibit, the Special Collections department staff would have to consult information in multiple places, and that information was often lacking in detail, as in the case of the legacy accession forms. After the conclusion of the survey of documentation, and the move to include that information in the finding aids in Archon, departmental staff could easily find most if not all of the information they needed to make informed decisions regarding access and use within the collection's finding aid.

#### **Phase 4: Further Provenance Research**

The initial outline for this project had included only the survey of the accessioning documentation, the creation and assignment of new accession and collection numbers in both paper and electronic files, and the creation of a standard label for each collection to reflect the new accessioning procedures and new collection numbers. However, as often happens in the archives, I made an unexpected discovery during this project that led to further and more conclusive provenance research than that which I had been able to conduct through the initial phases of the accession documentation survey.

According to the Reese Library institutional history relayed to me by longtime library staff, the Augusta History Museum had previously owned a number of collections now owned by ARCHS, and deaccessioned and transferred those collections to ARCHS at some point in the late 1960s or early 1970s. There was no written documentation of this transfer in the Special Collections department by 2017, if indeed, there ever was any such documentation. As I worked my way through the survey of collections, reviewed the accessioning and other provenance documentation, and created a final inventory of the collections with new accession and collection numbers, I stumbled upon some hints that pointed toward the transfer from the history museum. First, on a number of the "accession sheets" created by past special collections librarians and staff, a few listed the Augusta-Richmond County History Museum under the "donor" section. Additionally, I had noticed when rehousing some of ARCHS's earliest accessions that many featured a number in black ink either directly on a document, or on a sticker on the document that did not follow the format of any of the previous numbering systems used in the Special Collections department.

These discoveries led me to contact the museum's registrar, to ascertain if there were any records of deaccessions or transfers to ARCHS during the late 1960s or early 1970s, with a numbering format similar to that which I had found on our collections. After doing research into the museum's collection files, the registrar was not able to find any documentation of deaccessions or transfers dating back to the 1960s or early 1970s, but she did identify the numbers as the museum's accession numbers, recorded on index cards in a card catalog. Through this

connection with the history museum's registrar, my assistant and I were able to pursue more provenance research than we had initially thought possible by reviewing the museum's records.

Before arranging a visit to the museum, I identified all collections that were likely to date to the period of the transfer from the museum based on the accession documentation the department had, and performed a physical survey of all collection materials to record the museum accession numbers. To do this, I created a spreadsheet with a column to record each collection's current collection and accession number, and then a column to record any museum accession numbers found on the items during the physical survey. Using this spreadsheet, I completed a physical survey of the collection materials to identify all materials marked with the History Museum's accession numbers. Then came the time-consuming process of going through the physical materials in the collections to record each item with a museum accession number. For some collections, this was a relatively straightforward process, as many of the earliest collections donated to ARCHS by the museum were bound items that received a single accession number per volume. For other collections, this process proved more time intensive, as some collections that were comprised of loose documents received a different accession number for each document. While it was time consuming to review the physical collection materials for the museum accession numbers, this survey was feasible for the department given the relatively small number of collections involved and the small size of those collections. Additionally, the museum accession numbers and card catalog provided the most conclusive provenance information available, and it was thus deemed worth the staff time it took to review the materials.

After compiling the spreadsheet linking the collections to the museum's accession numbers, the special collections assistant and I arranged to visit the museum and make copies of the accession card catalog there. While the museum registrar could not help us with the scanning herself, she did provide the computers and scanners used to perform this step in the project. It took about four hours for the two of us to copy 264 cards using the flatbed scanners provided to us by the museum. After scanning the cards as PDFs, we were able to save them to our institutional cloud-based storage account. Once we had returned to the Special Collections department, we also printed copies of the cards and added them to our hard-copy paper accession files housed in the department. These cards proved especially fruitful in terms of provenance research, providing more detailed provenance information than we had previously had access to. They included the name of the creator of the materials, as well as the name of the donor who originally donated the materials to the museum, with donations often dating back to the early 1900s. Cards listed how the donor had acquired the materials, ranging from purchases at auctions and yard sales to inheriting the materials from family members. These cards also provided evidence of the deaccession by the museum and the transfer to ARCHS. Deaccessions were indicated on the cards with a large "D" stamped or handwritten on the card, with a typed note, usually in the upper right corner of the card, which stated that the collection had been transferred to the Richmond County Historical Society (an earlier iteration of ARCHS), with the date of the transfer.

In addition to adding the copies of the cards to both our electronic and paper records, the special collections assistant and I also added the information acquired through the cards to the collections' finding aids in Archon, as a custodial history note under the accession information. This allowed both departmental staff as well as researchers accessing our finding aids online to have a fuller picture of the history of the collection.

## **Project Outcomes**

While this project took a significant amount of time on the part of departmental staff, the project has had wide-ranging impacts on the way the department processes collections, grants access to materials, uses materials in exhibits and programming, and in the way in which we work with our other institutional partners. One of the most important impacts of conducting this project was the improved access to collections. Having performed the accession documentation review and provenance research to determine, to the best of our ability, the ownership of the collections, departmental staff can more confidently grant access to collections without fear of misappropriating the collections when citing them. Additionally, by creating new accession and collection numbers and using those numbers on standardized box labels, the department was able to gain more physical control over the materials, to successfully link multiple accessions intended to function as a single collection back together, and to enable the department staff to find and pull collections for patron use more efficiently. The project has also made for easier use of collections in both physical and digital exhibits, as well as in classroom use.

Another important outcome of this project was that it allowed for some level of consistency and contingency planning in the face of high turnover rates in departmental staffing. Many institutions face challenges related to consistency between archivists or special collections librarians and other departmental staff. As longtime members of these institutions retire, they often take with them institutional knowledge, especially if this institutional knowledge has not been documented within the department in some way.<sup>28</sup> Following their departure, many institutions face regular turnover, making it even more difficult to ensure continuity for the department over time.<sup>29</sup> By determining ownership between Special Collections and ARCHS, creating more substantial accession records that document how those determinations were made, relabeling boxes, and creating written accessioning procedures, the project enabled us to plan for a time when longtime library staff with the institutional knowledge of how collections came to be housed in the department will have retired. In doing so, we were able to set the department up for future success that was not dependent upon a specific person or position, which was especially important due to the high rates of turnover among special collections staff and student workers. I left my position at Augusta University in the summer of 2019, and this project allowed me to leave the department in a position to continue moving forward with the processing backlog. I also hope that the outcomes of the project will free up more time for future special collections librarians and staff to devote to other archival functions, such as teaching and outreach.

The foundation laid by this project will continue to have a positive influence on accessioning and processing that will extend into the coming years. Having new separate, written, accessioning procedures will ensure that clarity of provenance and ownership will be preserved as the department continues to acquire and accession new collections moving forward. The provenance information gathered from the museum accession records had already begun influencing

---

<sup>28</sup> Naresh Kumar Agarwal and Md Anwarul Islam, "Knowledge Retention and Transfer: How Libraries Manage Employees Leaving and Joining," *Vine* 45, no. 2 (2015): 150–71; Karl G. Siewert and Pamela Louderback, "The 'Bus Proof' Library: Technical Succession Planning, Knowledge Transfer, and Institutional Memory," *Journal of Library Administration* 59, no. 4 (May 2019): 455–74.

<sup>29</sup> Siewert and Louderback, "The 'Bus Proof' Library," 455–74.

processing decisions as early as February 2019, and will continue to inform the arrangement decisions of departmental staff as the department continues to increase processing efforts. While I had initially been overwhelmed by the number of unprocessed or incompletely processed collections in the department, the issue of poor and incomplete accessioning made the department's backlog of unprocessed collections that much more unwieldy, as others in the field have noted with similar backlogs.<sup>30</sup> The description we were able to add to our newer accession records and to some of our finding aids as a result of this project will enhance and accelerate the processing of the department's backlog moving forward.

In addition to the positive impacts that this project had on the day-to-day activities of Special Collections, the project also served to strengthen the relationships between Special Collections and their community partners. While the department had a long-standing agreement with ARCHS, the partnership had become strained due to concerns about the unclear ownership of collections, and the lack of communication between the two organizations when it came to issues related to maintaining a record of ARCHS's accession documentation within the Special Collections department. By actively engaging the ARCHS administrator in the process and maintaining regular communication on the progress of the project, the special collections librarian was able to build upon the existing relationship. Aside from creating a stronger partnership, this also led to creating an advocate for Special Collections, as the ARCHS administrator has proven to be an important campus advocate for the department since being involved in the project. The project also resulted in the opportunity for a new relationship with the Augusta-Richmond County Museum, which, while still in its infancy, now has potential to grow.

### **Takeaways and Applications for Archivists**

While not all archives or archivists may face the same issues, practitioners share many challenges across the field, especially when it comes to incomplete accessioning and a lack of clarity surrounding collection acquisitions. The project outlined in this case study can be scaled to fit the needs and collections of other institutions. While Augusta University performed a full-scale accession documentation review of all their collections due to the collecting history of the department, other institutions may want to focus exclusively on certain problematic collections that lack accession information, or for which accession documentation has been lost over time. Some institutions may also want to review their processing backlog to determine whether the collections are truly unprocessed, or if they are in fact an unaccessioned backlog and an initial survey and accessioning project will need to be undertaken prior to the start of any processing efforts, as the OCLC Research Agenda suggests.<sup>31</sup> Performing a similar accession documentation survey and enhancing the accession records for unprocessed collections may result in more expedient processing projects, or institutions may find that the level of description done through an accessioning survey or documentation review provides enough for a collection-level finding aid, minimizing the need for additional processing work.

Most archives will not need to assign new local identifiers or collection numbers to their collections, as I did in this project. However, for those inheriting a collection that is more

---

<sup>30</sup> Gorham and Weber, "Creating Access," 38; Weber, *Research and Learning Agenda*.

<sup>31</sup> Weber, *Research and Learning Agenda*.

backlog than processed collections, or for lone arrangers facing entirely unprocessed collections at smaller institutions, assigning local identifiers can help to provide access to previously inaccessible collections, and will allow the institution's staff to gain some level of initial physical control over the records. If, like me, you wanted to be able to draw certain intellectual ties between collections comprised of multiple accessions, or to create record groups to differentiate between different collecting areas, such as university archives as opposed to local manuscript collections, assigning local identifiers may prove useful for you.

The issue of consistency between archivists or special collections librarians has been well documented in the field, and having a solid record of your institution's accessions and a well-defined accessioning procedure can help to alleviate some of the stress put on institutions due to turnover or retirement. As longtime members of these institutions retire, they often take with them institutional knowledge, especially if this knowledge has not been documented within the department. Following their departure, many institutions face regular turnover, making it even more difficult to ensure continuity for the department over time.<sup>32</sup> For institutions that do not have a history of clear policies on accessioning or a long history of accession documentation, performing an accession review like the one outlined in this case study can have a lasting impact on ensuring that the department will have a level of continuity across different archivists.

This project and its outcomes serve to highlight the important function that archival accessioning plays in the overall work of archives. Without descriptive accession records, processing collection backlogs becomes much more difficult and time-consuming. Without written accessioning procedures, accession records may vary widely in quality depending on the individuals creating them, which poses a real issue for a field that experiences both high rates of turnover and increasing numbers of longterm staff reaching retirement. The information collected in the creation of accession records provides important context for how collections come to be in archives and how they have changed over time, which influences not only processing decisions, but also issues of ownership, copyright, collection restrictions, and information available to researchers accessing those collections. Clear, descriptive accessioning lays the foundation for all other archival functions, and contributes to the long-term success of archives and special collections.

## References

- “2017 Georgia Code, 10-1-529.4: Abandonment of Property Loaned to a Museum or Archives Repository; Museum Acquisition of Abandoned Property.” Justia. Accessed September 24, 2019. <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2017/title-10/chapter-1/article-17b/section-10-1-529.4/>.
- Agarwal, Naresh Kumar, and Md Anwarul Islam. “Knowledge Retention and Transfer: How Libraries Manage Employees Leaving and Joining.” *Vine* 45, no. 2 (2015): 150–71.
- Augusta University. “Augusta University Facts & Figures.” Accessed August 14, 2019, <https://www.augusta.edu/fastfacts/>.

---

<sup>32</sup> Siewert and Louderback, “The ‘Bus Proof’ Library,” 455–74.

- Beattie, Heather. "Where Narratives Meet: Archival Description, Provenance, and Women's Diaries." *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 1 (2008): 82–100.
- Becker, Ronald. "On Deposit: A Handshake and a Lawsuit." *The American Archivist* 56, no. 2 (1993): 320–28.
- Bost, Sarah. "Transforming the Deed of Gift for the 21st Century." Conference presentation presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, August 6, 2019.
- Describing Archives: A Content Standard*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013.
- Gilliland-Swetland, Anne J. *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment*. Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000.
- Gorham, Matthew B., and Chela Scott Weber. "Creating Access and Establishing Control: Conducting a Comprehensive Survey to Reveal a Hidden Repository." In *Description: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, edited by Kate Theimer, 35–52. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014.
- Hensen, Steven L. "The First Shall Be First: APPM and Its Impacts on American Archival Description." *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 64–70.
- Hujda, Kathryn. "Doing Good Deeds, and the Ethics of Executing Gift Agreements." Conference presentation presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, August 6, 2019.
- J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives and the Society of American Archivists. "J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives Accessioning Manual, 5th edition." Accessed July 17, 2019. [http://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Getty\\_Accessioning%20manual\\_5thEdition.pdf](http://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Getty_Accessioning%20manual_5thEdition.pdf).
- Laver, Tara Z. "Do a Good Deed: Deeds of Gift for Manuscript Collections." *Louisiana Libraries* 68, no. 2 (2005): 23–30.
- Millar, Laura. "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time." *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 1–15.
- Miller, Fredric M. *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990.
- National Archives and Records Administration. "Accessioning Guidance and Policy." Accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning>.
- Nesmith, Tom. "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives." *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 24–41.
- Niu, Jinfang. "Provenance: Crossing Boundaries." *Archives and Manuscripts* 41, no. 2 (2013): 105–15.
- Pearce-Moses, Richard, Mark Greene, Laurie Baty, Rob Spindler, and Diane Vogt-O'Connor. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.
- Peterson, Trudy. "The Gift and the Deed." *The American Archivist* 42, no. 1 (January 1979): 61–66.
- Searcy, Rachel. "Beyond Control: Accessioning Practices for Extensible Archival Management." *The Journal of Archival Organization* 14, nos. 3–4 (2017): 153–75.
- Schellenberg, T. R. "The Principle of Provenance and Modern Records in the United States." *The American Archivist* 28, no. 1 (1965): 39–41.

- Siewert, Karl G., and Pamela Louderback. "The 'Bus Proof' Library: Technical Succession Planning, Knowledge Transfer, and Institutional Memory." *Journal of Library Administration* 59, no. 4 (May 2019): 455–74.
- Society of American Archivists. "Museum Archives Section Standards & Best Practices Resource Guide." Accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section/standards-best-practices-resource-guide>.
- Weber, Chela Scott. *Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2017.
- Weideman, Christine. "Accessioning as Processing." *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 274–83.