SAPHIR: A Review

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The report published below outlines several major problems encountered by researchers using the SAPHIR automated access system at the Archives nationales du Québec (ANQ). Prepared by the Archives Committee of the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française, the report not only discusses the difficulties associated with the initial implementation of the new system, but also offers criticism of the foundations of the system. The problems are specifically those encountered by researchers and do not relate to SAPHIR as an administrative tool for the ANQ itself, although it is presumed that flaws in one aspect of the system will reflect on all other aspects. At a time when many archives are considering implementation of automated access systems, the report highlights the need to consult users of archives at the outset of any such project as well as on an ongoing basis.

SAPHIR was conceived in 1978 and initiated in 1979 with the consolidation of the ANQ collections in the Quebec City region.[1] At the outset, it was hoped that one system could be designed both for use as an archives management tool and as an instrument for better intellectual and physical access to the archival heritage in the custody of the ANQ. Implementation of the SAPHIR system was to be progressive; it was first to include the holdings in Quebec City and later expand to incorporate all records held in the ANQ regional system. It is hoped that an inventory of all archival records in the province of Quebec eventually be included in the network.

Central to the design of the SAPHIR system is a comprehensive classification structure. This grid is intended to bring all records under intellectual and physical control, grouping all records of similar provenance and arranging them according to the principal functions of the creating organization or individual. The ANQ classification system presently contains thirteen classes or record groups. Some classes, where necessary, are further subdivided. Each division/class is organized into series within which elements or sub-elements are identified, sometimes down to individual items. For example, Class C — Judiciary — is made up of eleven divisions, including, for example, CN — Notaries and CS — Seigneuries. Within each division are record groups, such as CN-301 — Notaries,

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1   For a detailed description of the SAPHIR programme, see Michel Roberge, "SAPHIR: La mémoire des Québécois," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 188-200.

Quebec City. These record groups (fonds) are organized by series grouping the papers of individuals, such as 0004 — Papers of Claude Aubert. Each level of organization is represented in the alpha-numeric code identifying each element in the holdings. It is this code which is the key to retrieving and organizing information in the system. An example would be P-301/0000001. (P denotes Private collections; 301 — Record Group 1, Quebec City Archives, 0000001 item number 1, financial files 1912-1920.)

Access to the records is obtained through a system of general guides to the record groups/collections and specialized indexes as well as traditional finding aids. Researchers can find all likely sources of information on a particular subject from the general guides and, through the finding aids and special indexes, determine location and content descriptions of particular series or other items of interest. According to the report which follows, this is not always possible in practice.

The Archives Committee of the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française has identified two problems encountered by SAPHIR users:[2]

> On the one hand, a poor use of archival principles inhibits the retrieval and identification of fonds and collections held by the ANQ. The classification plan does not take into account all the administrative structures through which records are produced. Similarly, the indexing system, principally by subject, is difficult to use because of its lack of accuracy. On the other hand, the present implementation of the system clearly shows a lack of planning in the technical application. The principle of standardizing data is in itself a good one. However, it can prove to be useless, even disastrous, when the implementation of processes and procedures lacks continuity and permits arbitrary actions. Without a standard application on the technical level, SAPHIR will not be of much use.

The authors go on to illustrate in detail problems on three levels: the classification system, the finding aids, and the implementation of the system. The classification system, it is argued, departs from the principle of provenance and ignores in some cases the basic archival tenet of respect des fonds:

> The confusion between collections of fonds (record groups), record groups and series demonstrates how, in certain cases, the rules which are generally accepted have not been followed. This situation complicates the identification of fonds and series and gives rise to a lack of cohesion between the different groups of records.

> A second problem, equally fundamental, is the result of poor planning of the classification scheme, which would reflect the creating structure of the record. However, the links between past and present administrative structures and the classification system is tenuous. Records from the French and English regimes are included with those produced by a contemporary administration, as if they formed an organic continuum.

The problems related to the classification system are illustrated by specific cases. For example, lack of uniformity is illustrated by the records from the Cour des plaidoyers

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2   Editor's note: The following English-language versions of portions of the Institute report have been prepared by Derek Ballantyne. They are offset from the rest of his text.

communs, district de Québec, which are scattered among several series, unlike those of the Prévôté de Québec, which are organized into three distinct series easily identified in the general guide. Although there is no denial that a proper classification system is a necessary framework for both archivist and researcher to work in, several modifications are suggested which it is hoped will correct the present problems:

1) the classification system be restructured to permit more precision in the definition and application of the concepts of record group and series;

2) that this review take into account the present and past organizational structures that have produced or are producing records;

3) that this review take place in cooperation with the various centres in the network so as to standardize the implementation of the different norms and procedures;

4) that the classification plan be modified only after consultation with user groups;

5) that the classification plan be easily accessible to all users.

Similarly, a list of six solutions is presumed to correct the flaws found with the finding aid system, as are several solutions governing the functional application of the SAPHIR system:

In a combined data management and retrieval system such as SAPHIR, coordination and continuity are elements of prime importance. Whatever the intrinsic quality of a system, its value and efficiency are determined by the quality of its implementation. In other words, the system value can be cancelled by a poor execution.

Although the value of SAPHIR is not diminished by the present report, it is felt that proposed changes must be made before it lives up to the expectations of the research community:

Despite the human and material resources invested since 1979, SAPHIR is far from operating satisfactorily. We have, in this report, outlined the primary deficiencies and put forward corrective proposals. However, in the agenda of corrections, it appears to us to be imperative that we start with the restructuring of the classification system, as it is clearly the key to the entire retrieval system. In conclusion, let us remember that the shortcomings of SAPHIR with regard to the needs of users inhibits both the ability to manage the ANQ and the development of historical research.