

Studies in Documents

Historians, Archival Technology and Business Ledgers

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This article attempts to relate the problems faced in establishing the provenance of a business ledger, and to discuss the much wider implications of the modern technology of preservation for both the archivist and the historian. A lesser theme is the discussion of the Hudson's Bay Company records dealing with the movement of furs to the London auctions.¹

The Problem

In this specific case, the purpose of research was to reconstruct the collection, shipment, and London sales of the wildlife harvest of the Columbia Department of the Hudson's Bay Company, an area consisting of most of present day Oregon, Washington State, and British Columbia. Ideally, the provenance of the individual skin would be traceable, from London back through the transportation system to the post, the trader and/or trapper, and then back to the ecological context of the trapline. Annotated catalogues identify bales of Columbia furs by species and indicate the year in which they were traded at the London auctions.² The shipping process is summarized in the Import Lists, which give total numbers for each species shipped or expected annually, but these are approximations, and do not distinguish between furs produced in the current year and cargo included from previous years.³ Post records of the collection process do contain annual production figures, but some records are missing and others are incomplete. A reliable master ledger of the fur returns of each post became the critical document for the study.

The Business Ledger

In an archive, most documents are preserved as part of a group of papers associated in some manner with their originator. Establishing provenance becomes a problem, however, when documents become scattered and lose this association. A letter may contain clues which can establish its provenance, such as the name and location of the author and addressee, the date of the letter, and its form, whether typed or handwritten, and the text of the letter may also contain clues or references.⁴ Business ledgers present special problems because many of these clues are not present. A ledger is unsigned, often undated and, being so integral a part of the office's documentary

existence, often does not even bear the name of the company. Abbreviations, shorthand references, and industry terminology may be present which, while initially obscuring the document's origins, may also hold the key to its identification. More historians are making use of the information found in ledgers, and the purpose of this study is to show why an awareness of provenance is important. The business ledger used in this study, "Fur Trade Returns for Columbia and New Caledonia Districts, 1825-1857," located in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (PABC), lacked the provenance it would have retained had it been located in the Company's archives in Winnipeg.⁵ The first step in establishing provenance was to determine when, how, and from whom the Provincial Archives acquired the ledger. PABC had accumulated a large body of material before modern accessioning techniques came into use, so that the date of accession is therefore unknown. The ledger cannot be traced to any known collector of fur trade documents, and there is no known reference to it in either the Bancroft Collection of the Company's records. Ian McTaggart Cowan used the ledger in 1938 as a basis for his article on wildlife demographic cycles in British Columbia,⁶ but other than this use there exists little information as to how or when the archives acquired it.

Within the PABC collections, the ledger exists in three physical forms: a conserved original which is in protective storage; a 35mm microfilm copy; and a photocopy for daily usage. The photocopy was the initial source for the project's database. Later examination of the microfilm copy revealed that not all of the information on the microfilm appeared in the photocopy file. The microfilm copy also contained a reproduction of the cover of the ledger, Uplands Farm wool production records for the years 1852-56, and promotion information involving Chief Factors, Chief Traders, and clerks, as well as retirement information about Hudson's Bay Company employees for 1856. Examination of the conserved original revealed further physical information that the nature of microfilm was incapable of revealing. Each new method of copying removed from the document a further layer of information; this process is an area of concern, especially in light of the arrival of new storage media.

Lack of archival information led to an examination of the document as an object. Its style of construction is consistent with Hudson's Bay Company bookkeeping procedures. With the exception of an incomplete listing of Northern Department returns including the Columbia for 1836-38, each entry is for a Columbia or New Caledonia post. The latest entry is for 1857, and the style of the handwriting is consistent for each year recorded. A person's handwriting changes with time, but there is very little change in the penmanship found in the document. It is therefore feasible that one person was responsible for penning the ledger and that it was compiled during a relatively short period of time, perhaps during a winter after the post returns were in and the indents dispatched, rather than filled in annually as the returns were tallied.

This observation leads to the hypothesis that one person compiled the ledger during the winter of 1857-58. Had the document been compiled at any later date, it would be reasonable to expect entries for that year. The preoccupation of the clerk with the western-most posts of the Hudson's Bay Company leads to the conclusion that the document was compiled within that region. An incomplete entry for the Northern Department makes it unlikely that compilation of the ledger had occurred at York Factory.⁷ The outlying posts of the Columbia Department would lack the

information needed to compile such a central register of returns, a fact which narrows the possible locations to Fort Victoria, administrative headquarters of the region. Evidence found in the physical construction of the ledger supported this hypothesis.

The original document was examined with the aid of PABC's Conservation Division. The microfilm had distorted the scale of the document, so that what was assumed to be a large business ledger was in fact a small hand-made notebook, 7 1/16 inches by 4 3/8 inches. The cover was a single piece of leather, dyed reddish brown on the back and faded to yellowish red on the front. The book contains ninety-two pages of pale blue rag paper, sewn in three places with an unbleached piece of twine. The pages appear to have been cut as a group to fit the cover. Several pages display truncated watermarks, the most important feature being the letters 'R [or B] Munn & Co.' and the letters 'MORB' and the fragments 'EY&' and 'N & Co.'. In some instances there occurred sections of a pattern around the letters. Reference to W.A. Churchill's work on European watermarks⁸ identified two English papermakers of the nineteenth century: Moreby & Co. (1837), and R. Munn & Co., Kent Mill (1838), a possible offshoot of G.R. Munn (founded 1818). Unfortunately Churchill's book does not contain examples of the watermarks, so that patterns could not be checked for a match. However, both brands of paper were of a British manufacture similar to that preferred by the Hudson's Bay Company, the dates of both papermakers are appropriate to the time period, and as the pages were cut down from larger pieces of paper, it would not be surprising if a variety of papers were used to construct the book. A further step, which later became unnecessary, would have been to examine the orders from Fort Victoria for stationery, as the Company was very specific when placing such orders.

The original document contained further information which came to light through an examination of its structure: the pages were lined by hand, and information was entered right up to the gutter, with no change in penmanship. This lack of cramped style in the gutter area, coupled with the rough hand-made quality of the book, meant that the entries were written before being bound. The cover is in good condition, the pages are not dog-eared, and the style of penmanship is clear, neat, and small. All of these facts argue against the ledger being written in the field or used as a travelling or daily reference book. The lack of wear and tear is unusual.

The most likely possibility is that the ledger may have been the work of Richard Golledge.⁹ Golledge worked from 1851 to 1858 as clerk and secretary to James Douglas, the senior Hudson's Bay Company administrator for the region. Douglas was of too high a rank to have involved himself in the time-consuming task of book-keeping or transcription, but he would nevertheless require the information as an aid in making decisions. A comparison of the handwriting styles of Golledge and Roderick Finlayson, who was in charge of Fort Victoria and therefore could have written the ledger, revealed that Finlayson's 'hand' was ornamented by sweeping flourishes which are absent from the document. In the ledger, the number '8' is begun from the right hand side, leaving a small gap in the upper right-hand corner of the top loop. Roderick Finlayson begins his '8' from the upper left-hand corner of the top loop.¹⁰ Samples of Richard Golledge's handwriting are harder to find, precisely because he was so prolific as the pen of James Douglas, making it difficult to distinguish between the two. Golledge did write a number of reports as Acting

Gold Commissioner for Sooke Mining District in 1864, and there also exists a letter which he wrote from Victoria in November 1858.¹¹

Comparison of the letter with a ledger entry for Victoria shows that (Figure 1) the slope of the letters, the number '24' in both examples, and the similarity between the two versions of the word 'Victoria,' all support the argument that the same hand wrote both documents. Allowances must be made for the different natures of the documents from which the samples were taken. The letter is a formal communication, as opposed to the more utilitarian nature of a small ledger, and the 'V' in Victoria in the former is written with a flourish: these are conventions related to the form of the documents rather than variations in the clerk's style or hand. This conclusion is further reinforced by the change found in Golledge's handwritten dispatches from Sooke, which reflect conditions similar to those found in many of the isolated fur posts. Compared to the 1858 sample of his handwriting, the 1864 dispatch is slightly jagged, wider in line, with more pronounced blots and stains. Golledge is known to have begun drinking heavily in 1858, and there is a noticeable change in the style of his hand.¹² At this point in the investigation a number of pieces were beginning to fit. Evidence points to Golledge assembling the ledger for James Douglas in Victoria during the winter of 1857-58. The staff of PABC's Manuscripts Division made a search of holdings for notebooks which were of a similar size or which contained similar paper. A journal of Thomas Lowe's from

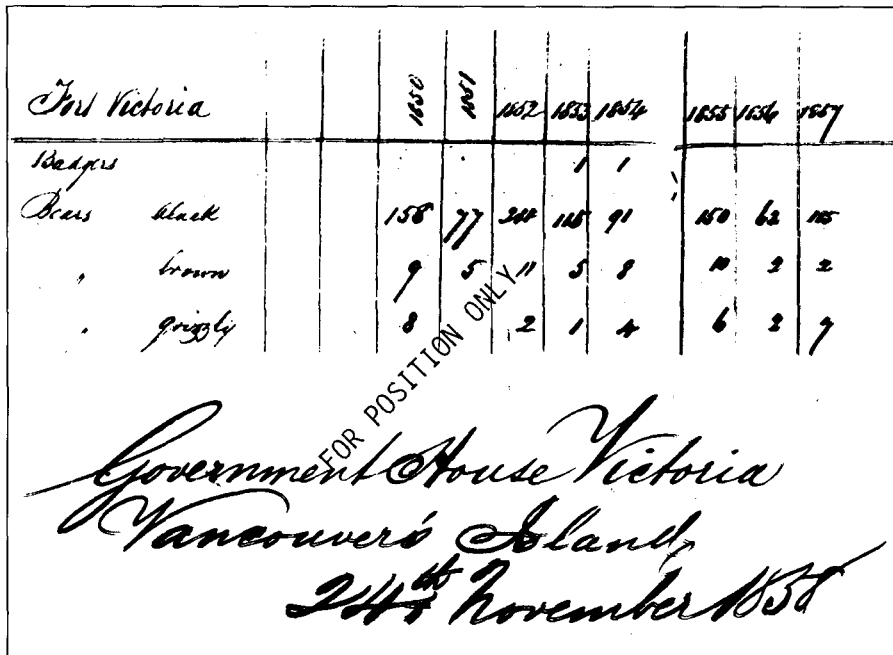


Figure 1: Handwriting Comparison. Top: Fur Returns Ledger. Courtesy: British Columbia Archives and Records Service, A/B/20/V3. Bottom: Richard Golledge to William Bevis, 24 November 1858. Courtesy: British Columbia Archives and Records Service, GR1372, F149/23.

1840 was found to be of a similar size and design, but the paper was completely different. The search then located a matching book among a collection of James Douglas' private papers. The book, a diary of Douglas' trip to Sitka in 1841,¹³ was constructed in the same manner as the fur trade ledger, including the twine sewing. The physical dimensions of the book were an exact match, as were the leather covers and the faded dye on the front cover. The final test was to search for watermarks on the pages which were also pale blue rag paper. Both the lettering and the truncated pattern matched.

The dovetailing of so many details points towards the possibility that the ledger formed part of James Douglas' private papers, which explains the absence of such a document in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. This information made possible the re-examination of the archival provenance through the annual reports of the Legislative Library, the precursor of the Provincial Archives. These disclosed that some of Sir James Douglas' private papers, including the Sitka diary, were acquired in 1910.¹⁴ The account ledger may have been acquired in 1910 or it may have been part of a number of unidentified fur trade journals acquired in 1939.

At this point there appears to be sufficient evidence to justify the acceptance of the document's provenance, given that its nature as an account book differentiates it from more easily verifiable manuscripts such as letters, journals, and diaries. The ledger's contents were compared with a random sample of journals and letters describing the state of trade at a number of posts. The ledger was found to be generally reliable. When correspondence referred to several hundred beaver the ledger entry either exactly matched the figure quoted, or was within ten to fifteen skins. Some inconsistency has been accepted because furs were often damaged in transit or discarded in the sorting process. Human error in the transcription of figures is also possible. In the later stages of archival research, the ledger's veracity was confirmed after the discovery of a series of abstracts for the disposal of the returns for the Columbia Outfits of 1847-1850 in the York Factory accounts.¹⁵

Conclusion

The establishment of provenance is a crucial preliminary step for the historian embarking on a quantitative analysis. The expertise of archival specialists and of several narrowly focussed reference works, established the document's 'authority.' There are also a number of lessons which have relevance for the researcher: the transcription of a document through various media such as microfilm and photocopying can filter out useful information; by viewing a business ledger as an object, 'hidden' information can come to light concerning the ledger's origins and office practices; and the use of isolated business records is possible, although it entails a number of problems that differ from those associated with more traditional sources such as letters, journals, and diaries.

The archivist is concerned not so much with provenance, which in itself is part of the daily workings of an archive, but rather with a technological issue. In a world with an expanding heritage of information, increasing constraints on the cost and capacity of suitable storage facilities, and budgetary constrictions, the archivist is increasingly faced with critical choices: the maintaining or expanding of older technologies, or the acquiring of newer technologies for information storage and

retrieval. In the discussion of the relative benefits of differing technologies, the question to be considered is: what hidden information is being lost?, and what weight should be given to its cost?

Notes

- * The true 'detectives' in this case are Frances Gundry, Manuscript and Government Records Division, and Barry Byers, Conservation Division, Public Archives of British Columbia. The author is also indebted to his teachers, Dr. Peter Baskerville and Dr. James Hendrickson of the Department of History, and Robin Skelton, Creative Writing Department, University of Victoria, and Dr. Chad Gaffield, Histoire/History, University of Ottawa.
- 1 For related work on the movement of goods from London to Hudson's Bay Company posts, see Ruth May, "The Cycle of Commerce: York Factory Records of Hudson's Bay Company Supplies for the Northern Department, 1843-1845," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 47-68; Arthur J. Ray, "The Early Hudson's Bay Company Account Books as Sources for Historical Research," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-76), pp. 3-38. For a management perspective on Company operations, see Elizabeth Mancke, "Hudson's Bay Company and the Management of Long-Distance Trade, 1670-1730," (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986), and the author's "Any Ordinary Degree of System: The Hudson's Bay Company and the Harvesting of Wildlife, 1825-1849," (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1988).
 - 2 Auctions often consisted of the harvest of two or three years, and in one extreme case that of five years' trade. Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Series I, A.54, Auction Catalogues of Fur Produce.
 - 3 HBCA, Series I, A.53/1, Fur Trade Importation Book, 1799-1912.
 - 4 This discussion is rooted in the lectures of Robin Skelton on the problems of verifying literary correspondence. Both his and Jean Tener's discussion in *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984) on acquiring literary archives may also be of interest.
 - 5 PABC, A/B/20/V3, Fur Trade Returns for Columbia and New Caledonia Districts, 1825-1857.
 - 6 Ian McTaggart Cowan, "The Fur Trade and the Fur Cycle: 1825-1857," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, II (1938): 19-30.
 - 7 A hypothesis that the ledger was produced as part of the preparation of the Company's case during the 1857 Select Committee inquiry into lands managed by the Hudson's Bay Company was suggested, but an examination of the testimony and submissions to the Committee revealed no evidence of any use of the sort of returns information contained in the ledger.
 - 8 W.A. Churchill, *Watermarks in Paper* (Amsterdam, 1935).
 - 9 He was born in West Ham, Essex. At the age of twenty-one, Golledge arrived in Fort Victoria on the brig *Tory* in 1851 as an apprentice clerk. Until 1858, he worked as clerk and secretary to James Douglas. The later period of his life was marked by allegations of conduct unbecoming his station: drinking, gambling, and playing euchre with a prostitute while acting as Gold Commissioner for Sooke. He married Juliana Charbonneau on 26 September 1871. He died in Victoria at the age of 55, and was buried on 8 September 1887. See Hartwell Bowsfield, Editor, *Fort Victoria Letters, 1846-1851* (Winnipeg, 1979), p. 182n; HBCA, Series I, B.226/2/2, fos. 254-255, Richard Golledge to his Father, 5 March 1854; James E. Hendrickson, Editor, *Journals of the Colonial Legislatures of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, 1851-1871* (Victoria, 1980), v. 1, pp. 152-164, and 180; PABC; Vertical File: "Golledge, Richard"; and also 'Municipal Police Court,' *Victoria Colonist*, 24 May 1879, p. 3, and 'Fallen So Low,' *ibid.*, 31 July 1884, p. 3.
 - 10 PABC, GR 1372, F14/21, Roderick Finlayson to Alexander Caulfield Anderson, 23 December 1860.
 - 11 PABC, GR 1372, F149/23, Richard Golledge to William H. Bevis, 24 November 1858.
 - 12 PABC, GR 1372, F647/3A, Richard Golledge to the Colonial Secretary, 3 August 1864.
 - 13 PABC, A/B/40/D75.4, James Douglas, "Diary of a Trip to Sitka, 6-21 Oct. 1841."
 - 14 *B.C. Sessional Papers*, Report of the Provincial Archivist, 1910. [E.O.S. Scholefield], (Victoria, 1911), pp. N1-N19.
 - 15 HBCA, Series I, B.239/h/1.