

The Evolution of the Department of Indian Affairs' Central Registry Record-Keeping Systems: 1872–1984

SEAN DARCY

RÉSUMÉ Cet article présente les pratiques de gestion des documents textuels du ministère des Affaires Indiennes entre 1872 et le milieu des années 1980. Il montre que les changements aux différents systèmes de registre central du ministère reflètent son organisation structurelle ainsi que l'évolution de ses fonctions et de ses responsabilités. La possibilité de comprendre comment les documents étaient organisés, classés et tenus à jour, permet aux chercheurs de mieux naviguer dans l'univers complexe des documents du ministère des Affaires Indiennes.

ABSTRACT This paper is a case study of record-keeping practices for textual records at the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs from 1872 to the mid-1980s. It illustrates that changes made to the department's various central registry systems reflected its organizational structure and the evolution of its functions and responsibilities. A comprehension of how records were organized, categorized, and maintained provides researchers with a powerful tool when attempting to navigate the complex records universe of the Department of Indian Affairs.

This case study examines the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs' (DIA) record-keeping practices: the manner in which it created, organized, filed, and retrieved its textual records. It aims to nurture a deeper appreciation of the records' provenance and to make them more accessible to researchers – the archivist's main objective. It also seeks to encourage new fields of research interest and to add to our understanding of the dynamic relationship among DIA, Canada's First Nations, and other Canadian citizens.

This study is limited in scope, addressing these issues only as they pertain to the paper-based textual records of the DIA's central registry system to 1984. This work was inspired by earlier studies of DIA record-keeping by Terry Cook and Bill Russell and aims to complement their research into the relationship between the administrative structure of government departments and their record-keeping systems.¹

¹ See Terry Cook, "Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898–1958," in Kenneth S. Coates and William R. Morrison, eds., *For the Purposes of*

Administering the First Nations

The lack of direction in early Indian affairs policy was reflected in the contemporary record-keeping practises of the department. Long-time DIA Registrar G.M. Matheson noted that “from the date of Sir John Johnston’s appointment as Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in 1782 up to 1821 there had been no letter book or letter register kept in his office in Montreal.”² For the most part, departmental correspondence was “irregularly kept, and the account books of the annuities and other funds belonging to the several Indian tribes were without system of arrangement.”³

In 1830 jurisdiction over Indian matters was transferred from the military authorities to the civilian Governors of both Lower and Upper Canada. The Indian Department of Lower Canada was placed under the control of the Military Secretary of the Governor-General stationed at Quebec City, where Lt.-Col. Napier served as the Secretary of Indian Affairs. Historian Douglas Leighton observes of Napier that:

aside from a few missionaries in Indian communities who conducted departmental business and a resident at St. Regis under the control of Montreal, Napier had no means of contacting the Indian population of an area which extended from the Gaspé to the Upper Canadian border and from the St. Lawrence Valley to an undefined northern limit.⁴

Napier, in fact, carried on most of the department’s business in Lower Canada single-handedly.

In the Province of Upper Canada, the Indian Department was placed under the Lieutenant-Governor, where James Givens was made Chief Superintendent. Givens held this post until he retired in 1837 and was succeeded by Samuel Jarvis. The situation in Upper Canada was similar to Lower Canada. The Chief Superintendent exercised little or no control over Resident Superintendents: “it [has] not been the practice to require any periodical reports from

Dominion: Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow (Toronto, 1989); and Bill Russell, “The White Man’s Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85), pp. 50–72.

2 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 768a, reel C-13491, Indian Department – Historic Sketches on Indian Affairs, p. 43. G.M. Matheson was employed in the Records Branch of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1888 until his retirement as Head Registrar in 1936.

3 Journals of Legislative Assembly of Province of Canada, 1847, Appendix T, Appendix #1, Report of Committee No. 4 on Indian Department, submitted January 1840.

4 Douglas Leighton, “The Development of Federal Indian Policy in Canada: 1840–1890,” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1975).

them, nor any account of the monies entrusted to them for distribution.”⁵ Haphazard record-keeping mirrored the administrative system. Only in 1829 was the first systematic record-keeping system introduced in the form of letter books recording outgoing correspondence.⁶

The Bagot Commission (1842–1844) was charged in the context of the union of the Canadas to review thoroughly the operations of the Indian department in Canada and to identify necessary reforms to improve the First Nations standard of living while examining ways of reducing expenditures.⁷ It was also the catalyst for a reorganization of the Indian Affairs record-keeping system. The Commission noted that prior to 1830 there was no clerk belonging to the department, “scarcely a book appears to have been considered necessary,” and the correspondence and other business was done occasionally by one of the secretaries in the Government Office, or by one of the officers of the Commissariat. Furthermore, it was noted that time was occupied with “executions necessary to keep down the urgent demands of present business and neither the leisure nor opportunity afforded ... to mature or devise any general plan of improvement in the conduct of official details.”⁸ The Commission recommended that the office of the Chief Superintendent employ a chief clerk to enter all correspondence of the department in a book with an alphabetical index, as well as a bookkeeper responsible for maintaining the account books for each tribe.⁹

The record-keeping systems for departmental correspondence recommended by the Bagot Commission were more or less adopted between 1844 and 1872. In this records universe, incoming and outgoing correspondence were filed separately. Incoming correspondence was entered sequentially by number at the front of the letter register. The docket was given the same number. Another entry was made in the same register in a section arranged alphabetically by correspondent, which was in turn sub-divided by year. This portion of the register recorded the registration number (file number); the name of the correspondent; date sent; date received; action taken; and the “subject of letter” – a synopsis of its contents. Interestingly, the registers show that files were sometimes placed on earlier or later files, not simply filed away numerically. Since the handwriting appears to be different from that of the records clerk who entered the original material, one can only assume this was done at a later date, perhaps post-1873. Nevertheless, the registers are invaluable.

5 Journals of Legislative Assembly of Province of Canada, 1847, Appendix T, Appendix #1.

6 Mary Anne Pylchuk, “Original History of Indian Affairs in British Columbia,” *Litigation Support Directorate, B.C. Region* (1990), p. 4; and Russell, “White Man’s Paper Burden,” p. 53.

7 John Leslie, “The Bagot Commission: Developing a Corporate Memory for the Indian Department,” *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers* (1982), pp. 31–52.

8 Report of Committee No. 4 on Indian Department.

9 *Ibid.*

able tools for tracing the incoming correspondence, which was folded and filed separately. Copies of the outgoing correspondence were bound together chronologically in letter books containing an alphabetical index at the beginning of each letter book. As Terry Cook noted, this

separation of incoming and outgoing correspondence on any particular subject into scores of separate entries into distinct and internally fragmented systems was hardly conducive to administrative efficiency or to the flexibility needed to cope with complicated subjects that governments increasing encountered. It was a child of and suited for the passive, small-scale administration characteristic of the age of *laissez-faire*.¹⁰

One can imagine that locating and linking incoming with the related outgoing correspondence would have been very time-consuming.

It was not until 1872, with the introduction of a straight numeric filing system, that it can be said that DIA adopted a central registry filing system. Other government departments, such as the Department of the Interior, adopted a similar record-keeping system around the same time.¹¹ The system at DIA, which applied exclusively to incoming and outgoing correspondence at headquarters, came to be known as the “Red and Black Series.” These terms were based on the colour of the leather letter books used by the records office to distinguish between eastern and western Canadian correspondence. Under this filing system, each letter received by the department was stamped with its date of receipt, and any letters that referred to subjects about which no previous correspondence had been received by the department were summarized on the file jacket and the actual letter attached to the file jacket.¹² The entry was then copied into the register. The letter, file jacket, and the entry in the register, were then all stamped with the same letter registration number.¹³ The registers recorded the letter registration number, the sender, a synopsis of the letter, the date on the letter and of its receipt, and the file number assigned to it. Later correspondence received by the department regarding the same issue was registered under a new number in the registry but then placed in the file docket of the original file number. These registers were the tools of the clerks attempting to locate files that were placed into early file dockets or migrated into later central registry filing systems employed by Indian Affairs. This filing system also used a “Subject Extension Register” that grouped letters alphabetically by correspondent or subject. The earliest of these registers was simply arranged

10 Cook, “Paper Trails,” p. 15.

11 The Department of the Interior was one of the first federal government departments to adopt this new records-keeping system. See Terry Cook, “Legacy In Limbo: An Introduction to the Records of the Department of the Interior,” *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–88), pp. 77–78.

12 “File jacket” was the term used for what would now be considered a file folder.

13 Letter registration numbers were assigned in consecutive numerical order as they were processed by the headquarters records office.

alphabetically by correspondent; however, by the 1880s the registers became more sophisticated, registering correspondence not only by individuals, but also by subjects such as treaties, timber licences, land grants, as well as by Indian agencies and government departments.

The Red Series registers run from 1872 until 1923 (from registration number 1 to 588500). The series originally pertained to all central registry records generated by the department; however, in 1882, with the expanding activities of the department in western Canada, the department began a Black Series register and index system for records relating to Western Canada and the Maritimes. After 1907, Maritimes records were registered in the Red Series. The Black Series Indexes run from 1882 to 1919 (number 1 to 529438); the Black Series Indexes, oddly enough, run from 1881 until 1923 (number 1 to 580000). The earliest registers provide a powerful search tool that enables a researcher to link older departmental records, such as those generated by the Civil Secretary or the Deputy Superintendent's Office, to records within the Red and Black Series. Examination of the earliest indexes, cross-references, and the early correspondence indicates that records from the previous filing systems used by the Deputy Superintendent General's office were physically migrated into the new Red Series, whereas the records from the older file systems employed by the Civil Secretary were only cross-referenced in the registers.

This filing system was introduced shortly before the *Indian Act* of 1876, which for the first time consolidated under one piece of legislation all legal matters pertaining to Amerindians. Unlike any other government department, DIA was mandated under the *Indian Act* to manage all aspects of the lives of those subject to it. Historian John Milloy asserts that through the introduction of this act the federal government obtained "the power to mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on the reserve and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired assimilation, enfranchisement, and as a consequence, the eventual disappearance of First Nations."¹⁴ The "Subjects" gradually introduced into the Subject Extension Registers mirrored the introduction of new legislation such as the *Enfranchisement Act*. It reflects a world cosmology, an attempt to create a taxonomy of all activities relating to First Nations people, from government policy, to personal issues such as band membership, wills, estates, and land surrenders, to mundane issues such as sand and gravel and dog licences.

The Red and Black Series were much more complicated than earlier research suggested: they did not use a simple sequential numeric system. While beginning as such, DIA soon attempted to introduce an early classification system that used subject file blocks along with a superscript that indicated the agency responsibility codes. By 1902, the department realized the number

14 John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1896* (Winnipeg, 1999), p. 61.

of records it was generating related to common subject matters (ranging from office supplies and cash books to membership files) would soon make this system too cumbersome. As a result, once the department reached letter registration number 254000 in the Red Series it adopted a "General Subject System" that assigned subjects to file numbers running from 254000 to 254022. The department waited until 1913 to do the same in the Black Series. Once they reached letter registration number 269980 they left several blank pages in the register, resumed at registration number 427000 and assigned subjects under the 427000s. G.M. Matheson referred to this as the "Sub number Series." Schools were also assigned a subject number based usually on the first letter registered pertaining to a particular school. For example, correspondence pertaining to the Spanish River Day School was filed under file 151725, with a superscript number employed to indicate the type of correspondence. 151725-10 indicated an Admissions and Discharge record of the Spanish River School.

The addition of agency responsibility codes to this straight numeric system reflects not only the expanding volume of correspondence generated and maintained by DIA, but the increased presence of new DIA agencies across the country. Early Red and Black Series file numbers did not use agency responsibility codes until the early 1880s; nevertheless, it is apparent that increased departmental activity necessitated that headquarters incorporate into the existing system a tool whereby records generated by specific agencies could be retrieved without necessitating the reorganization of those records together physically by agency. Furthermore, by the mid-1880s the Subject Extension Registers were actually cross-referencing correspondence under agency headings. All headquarters Red Series records pertaining to the Manitowaning Agency, for example, were referenced under the heading "Manitowaning Agency."

The introduction of agency responsibility codes was characteristic of the manner in which the DIA's central registry system evolved. The department constantly re-adapted old systems to suit operational requirements up to the point that they became too cumbersome to maintain. The older system was then abandoned; however, certain elements were selected to be carried forward as the foundation for the successor system.

This "straight numeric" record-keeping system was the foundation for the successor duplex numeric system introduced in 1923. The department, recognizing that a more flexible filing system was necessary in order to organize and retrieve the large number of records within headquarters, abandoned the straight numeric filing system in favour of a subject-based duplex numeric central registry filing system. Terry Cook asserts that:

the new system did to scattered files what the older system had done for scattered correspondence; brought them together physically and intellectually. Administrators were

thus permitted to gain a broad overview of a complicated issue in all its ramifications and to have the consolidated information needed to make national policy and oversee administrative operations and such issues in an active interventionist way.¹⁵

However, instead of creating one central registry series, DIA created five new independent subject-based file systems used from 1923 until 1949, when the department abandoned this system in favour of a single "modified duplex numeric" central registry system. The five central registry subject series were: "First Series"; "Thousand Series"; "School File Series"; "Land Sale Series"; and "Engineering and Construction Files." Either very little correspondence was generated to document the rationale behind the creation of these duplex numeric series, or it has not survived. The sparse information available suggests that the growth of the department necessitated the creation of these systems. The "School Files Series" were controlled by the Education Division, responsible for the administration of Indian Day Schools and Residential Schools.¹⁶ All records pertaining to schools from the earlier Red and Black system were migrated into this new system and the sub-numbering unit used in the former series was carried over and used as the secondary numbers to identify the type of record. One can only assume the same rationale for the creation of the Engineering and Construction Files as well as the Land Sale Series – no information to date has shed light on this question. The "Thousand Series" was to be used for correspondence related specifically to reserves, such as surveys of reserves, location tickets, rights of ways, surrenders, etc. A "Thousand Series" file consisted of a subject number and the agency responsibility code. For example, a file concerning a lease (13000) in the Carleton Agency (107) was constructed as follows: 13107. The "First Series" was reserved for correspondence concerning all other non-reserve specific subjects primaries such as accidents, truant officers, beef, and dog licences. "First Series" file numbers were comprised of two elements, a subject block (e.g., 62 – Membership) and an agency code (e.g., 131 – Lesser Slave Lake). The file would appear as 62-131. It is interesting to note that files now seen to be important, e.g., membership, were at the time of a secondary consideration to departmental officials.

Let us, for the moment, turn our attention once again to the Indian agency responsibility codes. Until 1923, the Red and Black Series agency responsibility codes existed as independent entities. The Red Series had agency responsibility centre codes running from 1 to 100 and the Black Series had responsibility codes ranging from 1 to 66. When the department adopted the

¹⁵ Cook, "Paper Trails," p. 25.

¹⁶ LAC, RG 37, Series G, vol. 727, file 72-CI-IA – Report of Organization, Methods and Procedures Survey of Education Division, 1951.

duplex numeric file classification system, it kept the Red Series agency responsibility codes and started the agency codes for the Black Series at 102. Thus the Assiniboine Agency (formerly No. 2) became agency responsibility code No. 102.

The department continued to use the “Registers” and “Subject Extension Registers” despite the fact that the duplex numeric system allowed one to identify both subject and agency in the one number. Furthermore, the department still perpetuated the East-West split of the former Red and Black series keeping “a set of loose leaf registers ... for Ontario, Quebec and the Maritime Provinces, and another set for Manitoba and the Western Provinces.”¹⁷

Although a substantial number of records from the Red and Black Series were migrated into the successor “Duplex Numeric Series,” the department still created Red and Black Series records as late as the mid-1950s, oddly, well after DIA had adopted its subject-based file classification systems. This later sequential numeric file registration system was referred to as the “High Red” (east of Manitoba) and “High Black” (west of Ontario) series and ran from file numbers 600000 to 600582. The series consists of only 582 pieces of correspondence generated between 31 August 1923 and 4 April 1947, after a large portion of the records were migrated into the “First Series.”¹⁸ There are also instances, contrary to general record-keeping practice, where correspondence was placed on earlier Black or Red series files.

In 1947 a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons recommended that the federal government “proceed with a commission to settle Indian claims and grievances.”¹⁹ While an Office of Native Claims was not established until 1973, from 1947 onward the prospect of such claims changed the manner in which DIA treated its records. That same year the headquarters Records Branch, proposed a “three year program to re-organize the DIA Records Division.”²⁰ This was the genesis of the “Modified Duplex Numeric” filing system adopted by the department in 1950. Unlike its predecessors, this records system was to be employed both at headquarters and in the field offices. The new classification system also anticipated a major change in the activities of the department. The emphasis on geographic responsibility codes at the beginning of the file number, combined with more expanded secondary and tertiary numbers reflected the devolution of responsibility for programs

17 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memorandum, 24 October 1930.

18 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 3406, Reel C-10759, Red Series Register – Quebec, Ontario and Maritimes, 1923/08/31–1947/04/04.

19 Sally Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy in Canada: The Hidden Agenda, 1968–1970* (Toronto, 1981), p. 37.

20 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memorandum from R.J.L. Grenier, Records Branch to Executive Assistant, DIA, 30/6/47.

and delivery of services to the agencies – a direct result of the 1951 amendments to the *Indian Act*. Under this system file numbers were comprised of two elements, a responsibility centre code (e.g., 157 for Queen Charlotte Agency) and a subject code (e.g., 25-1, Indian Education – General). Thus a file pertaining to Indian education in the Queen Charlotte Agency was constructed as: 157/25-1.

As we have seen, no standard filing system was employed by DIA staff in the field offices prior to 1950. As a result, valuable records were lost through poor records management practices. Moreover, it was almost impossible to determine what records had been created or lost since no registration system existed in the agencies. Bill Russell has noted:

In lieu of such a filing system, agents seemed to have created their own arrangements which usually meant a combination of Letter books for copies of outgoing correspondence and omnibus Shannon files for broad subject categories of incoming letters ... as for records disposition in the field, the policy well past the period under examination here was to destroy nothing. When offices were closed, all records were routinely sent to Ottawa. As late as 1927 agents were being told to keep all records, although one suspects that a few agency offices were kept warm over long winter nights, thanks to a supply of old papers for which storage space had simply been exhausted.²¹

By 1961 a system of Master Index Cards for headquarters records was being verified “against each file in the current, closed, and dormant, and archival categories” in order to map the disposition history of the records.²² At the same time, a project was initiated by the Central Registry Branch at Headquarters to identify all pre-1915 records held by Agency offices in order to transfer them to Ottawa where they would select the records to be transferred to the (then) Public Archives of Canada. As late as 1961 the Chief of the Central Registry Office in Ottawa noted that in the Office of the Indian Commissioner, British Columbia continued old record-keeping practices, stating:

At the present time the procedures followed in respect to correspondence receipt and handling is haphazard to say the least. Incoming letters in the majority of cases, are directed to one person, Mr. Rhymer, who screens and either dictates the reply or passes the case to one of the other officials. This method has been used for many years.²³

21 Russell, “White Man’s Paper Burden,” p. 71.

22 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 13832, file 1/1-6-2, pt. 5, Methods and Procedures – Filing System, 1964–1965, Letter from A. Goulet, Acting Chief, Central Registry Office to Senior Administrative Officer, re: Rehabilitation of Indian Affairs Records, 10 January 1963.

23 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 13832, file 1/1-6-2, pt. 4, Methods and Procedures – Filing System, 1961–1962, Letter from P.F. O’Donnell, Chief,

Many agencies were at a loss to explain where these pre-1915 records had gone. Nevertheless, the surviving records were transferred to Ottawa.

To its credit, DIA, faced with the possibility of claims against the Crown, attempted to identify, gather, and ensure the preservation of records it recognized to possess great historical significance. This is especially significant given the fact that the department could have disposed of a large portion of its common administrative records under the General Records Disposition Schedules in force at the time.²⁴ The department pointed out that:

It was also agreed that the existing definitions of housekeeping records, as contained in the *General Records Disposal Schedules* and as distinct from operational records, do not satisfy the requirements of the department and the Archives in identifying and segregating for retention all documentation of continuing value. In view of the special nature of the administration of Indian affairs in Canada, much of that described in the GRDS as housekeeping should, in fact, be considered operational in its application to Indian and Northern Affairs records schedules.²⁵

As a result, the Public Archives of Canada and DIA agreed to a moratorium on the destruction of any Indian Affairs records from 19 March 1973 to 31 March 1976.

The amalgamation of agencies into district offices between 1966 and 1969 illustrated the problems associated with migrating and retrieving records based on geographic responsibility codes. The amalgamation of records under these new district responsibility codes required much work on the part of the departmental records staff and made the retrieval of records often time-consuming. In 1969, when the suggestion was made to adopt a subject-based system that placed geographic codes within the tertiary numbers, it was rejected on the basis that a recently tabled White Paper indicated the Indian program would soon be phased out. It was not until 1984 that the block numeric system still used today by the department was up and running.

Bill Russell argued that “if we are to do justice to the records charged to our care today, we must understand the relationship between the structure and

Central Registry to Indian Commissioner’s Office, British Columbia, re: Records Procedures Indian Commissioner’s Office, Vancouver, 5 February 1962.

24 The *General Records Disposition Schedules* were created to allow federal government departments to dispose of common administrative records that were not of archival or historical value.

25 LAC, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, Accession 2003-00021-6, box 2, file 1/1-6-3, pt. 4, Methods and Procedures (Disposal) – Destruction of Record, 1974 to September 1978, Letter from Jay Atherton, Chief, Public Records Division, Public Archives of Canada to Records Management Division, DIAND, re: Moratorium on Destruction of Indian and Eskimo Affairs Records, 1974.

organization of the creating agency and the records created, and integrate a knowledge of the record-keeping process into an understanding of the record."²⁶ While this work sheds further light on the nuances of the evolution of record-keeping by DIA, its conclusions are isolated, awaiting further research by others to obtain a more holistic understanding of government record-keeping. As Dr. Johnson quipped, "all criticism is comparison."

²⁶ Russell, "White Man's Paper Burden," p. 51.

