

Articles

Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture*

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article établit des liens entre certains concepts archivistiques et la théorie et la pratique modernes en conservation et en muséologie, et illustre ces concepts à partir d'exemples tirés des archives du Manitoba. L'alphabétisation matérielle constitue la capacité de décoder et d'interpréter l'importance de la composition matérielle, de la construction et de la condition physique d'un document concret. Le choix du matériau, de la technologie et du design par le créateur seront influencés par le besoin de communiquer au sein du contexte socio-culturel contemporain. Dès leur création, les documents se transforment à cause de la détérioration naturelle, de l'usure, et d'altérations délibérées par leurs créateurs, les utilisateurs et les gardiens subséquents. Les signes de la création et des transformations font partie de l'histoire du document, et les décisions présentes et passées des créateurs et gardiens peuvent avoir un impact significatif sur l'interprétation future du document. Pendant qu'elles conservent les documents, les archives modifient aussi ces signes au moyen de médiations physiques et intellectuelles. L'auteure se penche brièvement sur la façon dont les pratiques archivistiques tiennent compte des dimensions matérielles des documents, au moment de l'évaluation, de l'examen, de la description et dans les traces de leurs interventions. Dans leur forme originale, les documents peuvent communiquer fortement le sens entre les générations et les cultures, en offrant aux chercheurs un contact personnel et direct avec le passé. En voyant les documents comme éléments de la culture matérielle, on peut reconnaître et évaluer la forme physique comme source majeure du contexte, et par là mieux préserver la signification des documents.

ABSTRACT This paper links certain ideas from archival literature with modern conservation and museological theory and practice, and illustrates some of these ideas with an example from the holdings of the Archives of Manitoba. Material literacy is the ability to decode and interpret the significance of the material composition and construction, and of the physical state, of a tangible record. A creator's material, technology, and design choices will be informed by the need to communicate within the contemporary socio-cultural context. Once created, records start changing through nat-

* I wish to thank all the staff at the Archives of Manitoba who provided their valuable comments during the many states of this paper and the related presentations, and to extend special gratitude to Gordon Dodds for his ongoing support. This paper would not have been undertaken without Tom Nesmith's enthusiasm and encouragement – early and often. He graciously followed its progress with helpful and insightful comments and reviews.

ural deterioration, through wear from use, and through deliberate alterations to the records by their creator(s), and by subsequent custodians and users. Evidence of creation and change are part of the history of a record, and the past and present choices of creators and custodians may have a significant impact on the future interpretation of the record. Archives also actively change this evidence through physical and intellectual mediations during their custodianship. The author briefly considers how the material aspects of records are approached in archival practices for assigning value, examination, description, and documentation of interventions. Records in their original forms can powerfully communicate meaning between generations and cultures, offering researchers a personal and direct sensory engagement with the past. Awareness of records as material culture is required before the value of physical evidence can be recognized and evaluated as a primary source of contextual evidence, thereby enriching the preservation of the meaning of the records.

Introduction

Many archivists have called for a greater awareness of critical work in related cultural disciplines in order to come to a fuller understanding of the creation, use, and significance of records through time. This paper links some ideas from archival literature with modern conservation¹ and museological theory and practice, and focuses on human-readable records² as material culture – as physical manifestations of the culture(s) that produced and used them. While archivists have needed to be aware of the general physical nature of records in order to manage their preservation, the value of the physical aspects of records as a *source* for information has received relatively little attention in archival studies. Improved material literacy can be a means to enrich the preservation of meaning in records and in archives.

Who has never written a love letter? The writing tool, paper, and envelope colour, their texture and size, receive at least some consideration and we may even select a particular postage stamp from among several in the same denomination. Those who send intimate personal messages through e-mail may select a different font style and colour from what they might use for business communication. Even in picking a mass published card, we generally look at

1 This term will follow the usage within the conservation profession: “The purpose of conservation is to study, record, retain and restore the culturally significant qualities of the cultural property as embodied in its physical and chemical nature, with the least possible intervention. Conservation includes the following: examination, documentation, preventive conservation, preservation, treatment, restoration and reconstruction.” The Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC) and the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators, *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice of the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property and of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators*, 3d ed. (Ottawa, 2000), p. 13.

2 In this paper “records” refers to archival records in the broadest possible sense. However, machine-readable records, such as sound, moving image, and electronic records, are not discussed in this paper due to space restrictions and the author’s limited personal familiarity with them.

several for the right combination of image, graphic style, and text to reflect ourselves in relation to the recipient. We are aware we will be judged by our material choices and are concerned about the impression we make. As active participants within our culture, we can send and receive messages through materials we encounter; sorting through daily mail, routine bills, and bank statements can be distinguished from wedding invitations without even reading the return addresses – we recognize them by size, weight, colour and texture, and in so doing, we demonstrate our material literacy: our ability to understand and interpret how meaning can be manifested in materials. Archivist Tom Nesmith has noted that “our understanding of reality is powerfully shaped by the particular forms and media of communications in which we are immersed, and by our efforts to transmit ideas and experiences with them. ... [W]e know what we know through the lens of communication, with all its strengths, biases and limitations.”³

Records are created by individuals and organizations within a society as a means of communicating with the future, whether immediate or more distant. An intention to create something exists for a specific person at a specific time and place, and using specific materials in specific ways. Material culture theory assumes that “human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.”⁴ As creators we know our material choices are significant, but do we become blind to these choices professionally as we deal with records from other times, other cultural contexts?

Choices in Creation

Aristotle identified the four causes of things as “the design, the maker, and the purpose of a thing,” but “his first cause and his first element for comprehending a thing is the *material* cause – the matter or stuff that makes up a thing.”⁵ Two examples from the textual records of the Archives of Manitoba will be used to illustrate some of the ideas presented in this section.

3 Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002), p. 29.

4 Jules David Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture: Fact or Fiction?,” in Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, eds., *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington and London, 1993), p. 1. While a number of archivists have made remarks which are similar in principle, the author has not yet encountered analyses of the materials and deterioration patterns in records as intrinsic to the communication burden of the records. Curator Stephen Lubar analyzed archives as technological creations in “Information Culture and the Archival Record,” *The American Archivist* 62 (Spring 1999), pp. 10–22.

5 As quoted in Robert Friedel, “Some Matters of Substance,” in Steven Lubar and David Kingery, eds., *History from Things: Essay on Material Culture* (Washington and London, 1993), pp. 41–42.

Design – Prevailing Influences on the Maker

The creator of a communication will be influenced by the contemporary social, political, and cultural climate, and by individuals and organizations. Direct influences may include co-workers, managers, and mentors. Indirect influences with material effects may include purchasing agents and suppliers.⁶ A business communication, for instance, also may be indirectly influenced by the expectations of the sponsoring organizations, granting agencies, and competitors. Additionally, the knowledge that records may be destined for archives, may act as an influence on records creators.

A letterbook⁷ of outgoing correspondence from the office of the Provincial Secretary for 1889–1890⁸ provides an example of how records physically manifest some of these influences (see Figures 1 to 3). The Government of Manitoba was only nineteen years old at the time the copies were made, so its administrative organization and record-keeping methods will have been directly influenced by other jurisdictions within Canada and beyond. The visual look of the correspondence – the cursive handwriting, the size and spacing of the writing – also have been directly influenced by the education of the clerks and their supervisors.⁹ The binding of letterbooks is part of a stationary bookbinding tradition.¹⁰ The eight letterbooks in this record series date from 1870 to 1892. The covers for each year are in different colours and have differ-

6 Ian Hodgkinson has discussed influences on creators of paintings in detail in “Man’s Effect on Paintings,” in Barbara Ramsay-Jolicoeur and Ian Wainright, eds., *Shared Responsibility: Proceedings of a Seminar for Curators and Conservators* (Ottawa, 1990), pp. 54–55. Some similar ideas appear in archival literature; for instance, Tom Nesmith has discussed how provenance and origination of records go beyond the immediate creator to include sponsors, donors, users, and archives. See Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002), p. 34.

7 While letterpress copies could be made on single sheets of copying paper, bound books of this paper purchased from stationers would be more practical for maintaining order for large volumes of correspondence. Letterbooks are common in business records of this period. For a detailed discussion of letterbook technology, see Barbara Rhodes and William Wells Streeter, *Before Photocopying: The Art and History of Mechanical Copying, 1780-1938* (New Castle, DE, 1998).

8 Archives of Manitoba, Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (A 0025), GR 1576, Outward correspondence (13 Feb 1889–15 May 1890), G 10458.

9 For more information about letter writing practices see Nigel Hall, “The Materiality of Letter Writing,” in David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 83–108.

10 Stationary binding is “[o]ne of the two broad subdivisions of bookbinding, the other being Letterpress Binding. By definition stationary binding is that branch of bookbinding which deals with books meant to be written in, such as ledger, record, and account books, and the like ...” Definition from Matt T. Roberts and Don Etherington, *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology* available at <<http://Palimpsest.stanford.edu/don/dt/dt3321.html>>, accessed 31 January 2005.

ent patterns and decoration. Their physical components – covering materials, sewing, paper characteristics, and the presence of an index at the front of the textblock – are largely identical to one another.¹¹ The blank alphabetical index at the front of the book suggests to the user that the contents should be organized alphabetically, the blotters between the writing paper pages of the index suggest use of a pen and ink for the entries is expected, the copying paper is too soft and thin to lend itself well to other purposes¹² – all directly influence the range of practical uses for the letterbook structure. The title “Letterbook” is even gold tooled on the red leather spine label, implying uses and purposes.

Design – Technology

From the range of materials and techniques available to them, creators will select those which meet their needs. A personal letter hand-written in ink onto a single paper support may appear a banally simple construction. An 1885 letter from Louis Riel to his wife Marguerite¹³ provides an indication of the potential depth and breadth of information which may be gleaned from record-making technology (see Figure 4).

All ink will be composed of one or more colourants so it will be visible, one or more adhesives so it will stick to the paper, and a solvent so it can go on as a liquid before drying. Specific inks may contain additional materials to alter their properties such as thickness, glossiness, solvent resistance, mould resistance, light fastness, and smell. The ink in the example is black and probably carbon-based, judging from its colour, thickness, condition, and from the condition of the underlying and adjacent paper fibres. Given the date and urban location where the letter was written, and its consistent colour and texture, this ink was probably store-bought rather than home-made.

The mark-making technology – whether reed, brush, cut quill, or steel nib – may be identified by the way the written lines swell and diminish, the evenness with which the ink is deposited, or the impression of the point on the paper surface. The ink of this letter was likely applied with a quill pen that would provide a flexible expressive line and leave little or no impression in the hard surface of the paper.

11 A 2004 survey by conservator Ainsley Walton of 161 letterbooks from 22 Manitoba government records series dating from 1870–1915 indicated few variations in binding characteristics; stationers’ labels in some of the letterbooks indicate they were made in Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Chicago.

12 For a detailed discussion of copying papers see Chapter 3 in Rhodes and Streeter, *Before Photocopying*.

13 Archives of Manitoba, Louis Riel, P5563 f.12. Métis leader Louis Riel is still a controversial figure in Canadian history. Riel headed a provisional government which negotiated for Manitoba’s entry into Confederation, but was exiled for his role in the 1869 Red River Uprising. He returned to Canada to lead the 1885 Northwest Rebellion in Saskatchewan. Considered a hero or martyr by many, Riel was hung as a traitor on 16 November 1885.



Figure 1 Exterior of letterbook. Note handwritten labelling on spine.
Archives of Manitoba, Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (A 0025),
GR 1576, Outward correspondence (Feb 13, 1889 – May 15, 1890), G 10458.

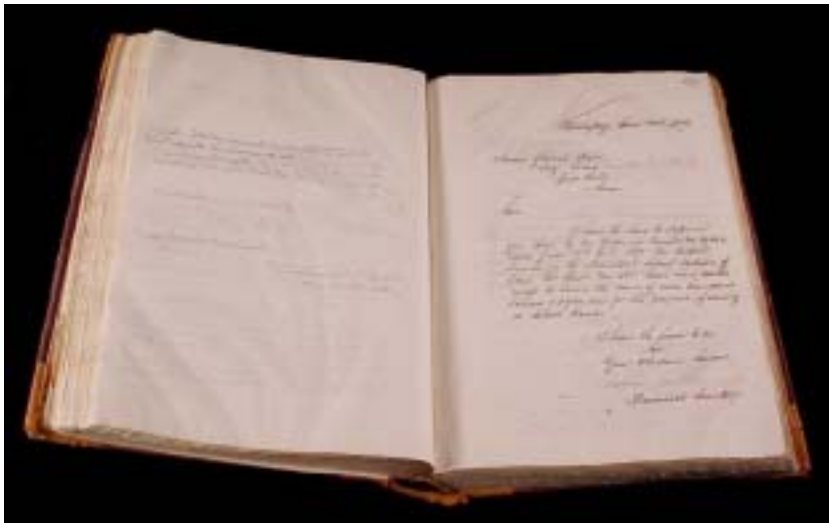


Figure 2 Letterbook: back of page 271 (left side) and page 272 (right).

The paper is machine made, with a laid pattern, and watermarked: “Molino Mexicano/Papel de Hilo.” Plant fibres from diverse sources may be present – the 19th century was a time of great experimentation with alternatives to the traditional linen, cotton, and hemp fibres.¹⁴ The fibres may come in different

¹⁴ The classic general source about papermaking history is Dard Hunter, *Papermaking* (New York, 1978).

Memphis, Tenn June 20th 1889,
 James Garvin Esqrs.
 Secy. Treas. East St. Paul, Minn.
 First Hill.
 Minn.

Sir,

I have the honor to inform
 you that, by an Order in Council No. 29128,
 Dated June 10th N. S. 1889, the School
 Trustees for the Protestant School District of
 East St. Paul, No. 571, have been autho-
 rized to borrow the sum of nine hundred
 dollars (\$900.00) for the purpose of erecting
 a School House.

I have the honor to be,
 Sir,
 Your Obedient Servant,
 J. E. Prendergast
 Provincial Secretary.

Figure 3 Letterbook: page 272, James E.P. Prendergast to James Garvin, 20 June 1889. Note that the addition to the address line appears to be in the same handwriting and ink as the signature.

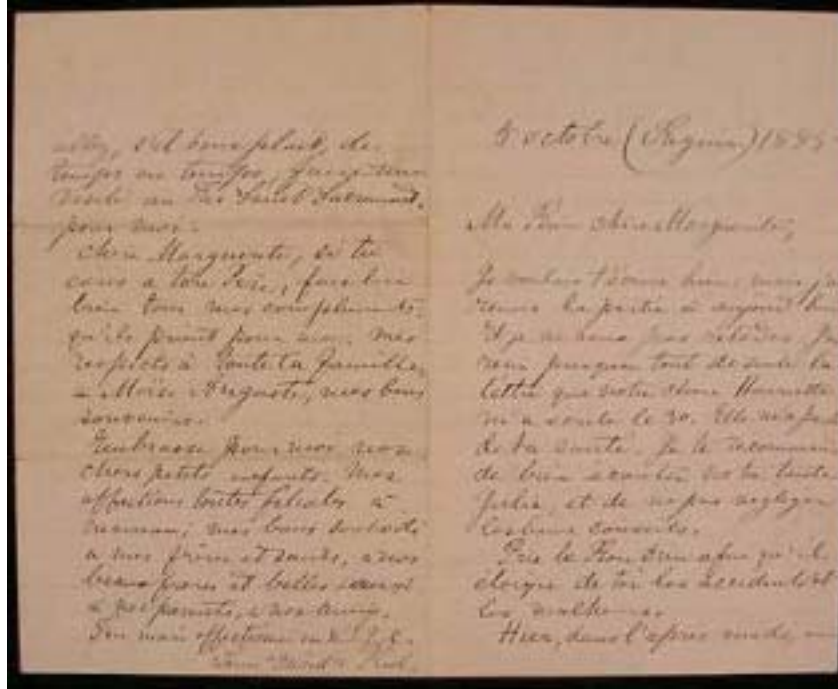


Figure 4 Letter. Louis Riel to Marguerite Riel, 5 Oct 1885, Pages 4 (left) and 1 (right) Archives of Manitoba, Louis Riel, P5563 f.12.

lengths, with different levels of consistency in size, depending on the properties required of the finished sheet. After a paper sheet has been formed and dried, its surfaces may receive further treatment to prepare it for the target market. This paper's surface is mostly even and smooth, but occasional flaws are visible in transmitted light; the colour is quite dark and yellowish, and it has been machine ruled in blue ink. This paper appears to have been manufactured for casual or routine internal correspondence, or drafts. A comparison with other letters from Riel to his wife may suggest the possible significance of such low quality paper relative to his educational and social status – could this choice reflect a rejection of material things; a disregard for his wife; a change in economic status? Paper from a Mexican source is unexpected in a Canadian jail – is it something Riel brought in with him; the standard paper allowed to inmates at that jail, or at all federal jails? Is it similar to, or different from, what the guards or clerks used? Are there clues here about Canadian trade with Mexico, or about hierarchies within prison communities?

The single sheet of paper was folded in half to make a folio before the text was applied, resulting in four pages of text. Once the letter was completed, the

paper was folded twice more, possibly to go into an envelope for mailing, or to be tucked into a pocket for hand-delivery, or perhaps it was folded this additional time after it was received.

Purpose

Choice of materials and techniques are often linked to the record-keeping function of the document. Archivist James O'Toole has noted that as Western Europe moved from an oral society to a literate one, drafts of records start appearing in cheap and deliberately impermanent forms.¹⁵ He has also considered how the purpose of records can be manifested in the way they look, suggesting that there may be "an unspoken connection between the record being made and the way it was made."¹⁶

The letterbooks provide a good example of the relationship between technology and intended purpose.¹⁷ Outgoing correspondence must have been written and signed in a copying ink to enable a copy to be made for internal record-keeping; ordinary writing inks would not be suitable for the creation of these business records. The robust sewing keeps pages securely in place for extended heavy use, maintaining order over time, and making added or missing pages obvious. The heavy covers help hold the approximately 1000 pages flat when they are out of the letter press. The contrasting red and black leather spine labels, gilded and blind decoration, coloured and patterned textured cover papers, and bookcloths fit comfortably into the oak furnishings of the Victorian business office. The use of specific technologies is directly linked to systems of organization for internal business communication.¹⁸

15 James O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *The American Archivist* (Winter 1989), p. 13.

16 James O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *The American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), p. 240.

17 In the archival literature Barbara L. Craig has looked at office practices in the British civil service, including the shifting use of loose and bound letterpress copies, in "Rethinking Formal Knowledge and its Practices in the Organization: The British Treasury's Register Between 1900 and 1950," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 111–36, and in "The Introduction of Copying Devices into the British Civil Service, 1877–1889," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 105–33. Moving to another common type of archival record, Lois Olcott Price has considered, in the conservation literature, how architects working in the United States chose papers "to balance the function, cost and durability required for each phase of the draughting process," in "From Sketch to Presentation: A Study of Drawing, Tracing and Specialty Papers Used by American Architects," in John Slavin et al., eds., *Looking at Paper: Evidence and Interpretation: Symposium Proceedings, Toronto 1999* (Ottawa, 2001), p. 82.

18 See also JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore and London, 1989). Use of letter presses for making copies of outgoing correspondence is discussed on pages 26–28. Rhodes and Streeter (*Before Photocopying*), also discuss and illustrate a variety of office technologies, including letter files and pigeonhole desks as filing methods on pages 92–93.

Maker – Individual Creative Choices

Some scholars have discussed a creator's material choices in their research. Literary scholar Claire Bustarret has looked in detail at the practices of some French writers, noting that "A writer is liable to develop meaningful habits ... not only in choosing the paper, but in using the writing surface, as well as in folding, cutting or gluing it."¹⁹ The creative choices of individuals working within creating authorities will be more circumscribed. Some records must be created following particular procedures, standards, or other controls on the form of the creation of the records to ensure their authenticity or trustworthiness, but opportunities for individual choices such as ink colour, thickness, font type, and size often remain. All the correspondence in the Provincial Secretary's Department letterbooks was written in iron gall inks, but the colours of the signatures are always visibly different from those of the letter body texts which were most likely written by the office's three clerks, indicating a clear division of labour²⁰ (see Figure 3). In some cases the copy impression of the signature is very faint or missing, suggesting the Provincial Secretary did not always use the appropriate ink formulations for copying. Examination of the physical aspects of a continuous body of records, such as these letterbooks, may connect the evidence to its creation environment. Could the missing signature problem be linked to a change in staffing of the Provincial Secretary position? Are some technologies favoured or adopted by some clerks and not others? How much standardization of method was enforced in the office? Was this office an early or late adopter of new writing and duplicating technologies? Letterbooks from other record series contain a much wider range of ink colours, copying and writing technologies, as well as information which does not appear to be business related, such as sketches, doodles, and personal letters.²¹

Knowledge of the range of technology choices available to the creator is necessary before their significance can be fully understood, but cannot provide answers in isolation; the absence of choice can also carry meaning. The

19 Claire Bustarret, "Paper Evidence and the Interpretation of the Creative Process in Modern Literary Manuscripts," in John Slavin et al., *Looking at Paper*, pp. 88-89. Bustarret gives examples of writers who gave thought to their materials and construction of the drafts; those who used the same paper consistently, experimented with different qualities and sizes, or used different types and sizes of paper for different functions.

20 Public Accounts for the year ending December 31, 1869 indicate that the Department paid salaries to a chief clerk, and two clerk/translators, in addition to the Provincial Secretary, and that there were changes in staffing to all but one of the clerk/translator positions during 1869. *Public Accounts of Manitoba: 1885-1890*, (Winnipeg MB: Provincial Treasurer, 1891), p. 62.

21 Ainsley Walton, "Report: Condition Survey of GR Letterbooks," internal report, Archives of Manitoba, 16 August 2004, p. 2.

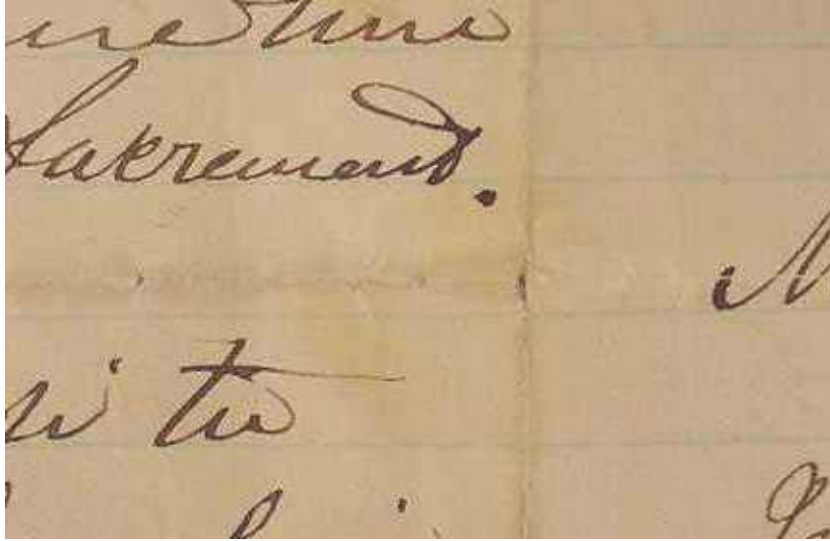


Figure 5 Letter. Louis Riel to Marguerite Riel. Detail showing discolouration, wear, and small tears along fold lines.

material composition of the Riel letter is significant in its insignificance: he almost certainly did not have a choice of ink or paper for his letter, and may not even have been allowed to sharpen his quill with a pen knife, for it was written at the Regina Jail shortly before his execution for treason.

The range of choice available to a creator may be great or small, more or less proscribed, but is ultimately controlled by personal inclination, informed by the individual's socio-cultural context – technology, tradition, and function.²²

Custodial Modifications

Natural Changes

Once created, a record starts changing as a result of the deterioration generally attributed to time: light, pollution, heat, and humidity. Each material present in each component of a record – papers, adhesives, colourants, inks, binding, frame – will deteriorate according to its own chemical and mechanical proper-

²² Jules David Prown has discussed how artifacts come into being through a mixture of tradition, contemporary culture, and personal preferences. See “The Truth of Material Culture,” p. 3.

ties, its thickness, and its abundance.²³ While nothing lasts forever and these deterioration processes are natural, they can usually be accelerated or decelerated through human intervention.²⁴ The type and level of deterioration present in the record provides evidence of previous care and use by custodians. The Riel letter has abrasion and tears from repeated folding and unfolding (see Figure 5) – this is not a letter that was read and forgotten. Surface dirt is light and little discolouration is apparent – the letter was probably stored somewhere dry and dark, with its weight supported – perhaps within a book, or in a box with similar flat objects. This suggests it has not suffered from neglect.

In other examples, patterns of light damage may indicate records which may have been singled out for display. Different discolouration patterns may be present in dark-faded and light-faded colour photographs. Fading and dust deposition may suggest certain orientations of binders on a shelf, which may help in reconstructing an organization system. A combination of pinpricks and insect droppings may indicate a navigational chart was tacked to the wall, while pinpricks and cup ring stains may suggest the chart was tacked to a table.

Human Interventions

Records can also be physically altered through additions and deletions by the creator or by subsequent custodians. A knowledge of all the media and technologies present may be required to assist in recognizing later additions (types of pens and inks, types of erasures or masking, types of mends and mending materials), in recognizing missing components such as seals, ribbons or postage stamps, in establishing the sequence and relative dates of the changes, and in telling the “original” from copies. The physical characteristics of records provide evidence which may also be read in context to support or undermine the purported truth or authenticity of the text.

In the Riel letter a thin blue mirror image appears on the reverse of the signature (see Figure 6), as if the signature had been traced through blue carbon

23 Inadequate understanding of the records manufacture and component materials and the mechanisms at work in deterioration can lead to under-informed preservation planning. In the author’s experience some archivists have interpreted faint ink impressions in letterbooks as “faded” and have advocated microfilming the letterbooks in order to preserve the writing before it “fades” further. Although aniline and other dye-based copy inks have poor light-fastness, they do not fade readily in dark storage, such as in a closed book. Since there was no supporting evidence of light-induced damage to the underlying paper and the same volumes also contained blurred and doubled images, it is far more likely that the impressions were not legible at the time the copies were made. The faint impressions are a symptom of a quality control problem in the creating office, not a modern preservation problem. See also Rhodes and Streeter, *Before Photocopying*, pp. 170–71.

24 Stefan Michalski, “Time’s Effect on Paintings,” in *Shared Responsibility*, pp. 39–52. For a discussion of changing views of agents of deterioration over time see also Hodkinson, “Man’s Effect on Paintings,” 54–68.

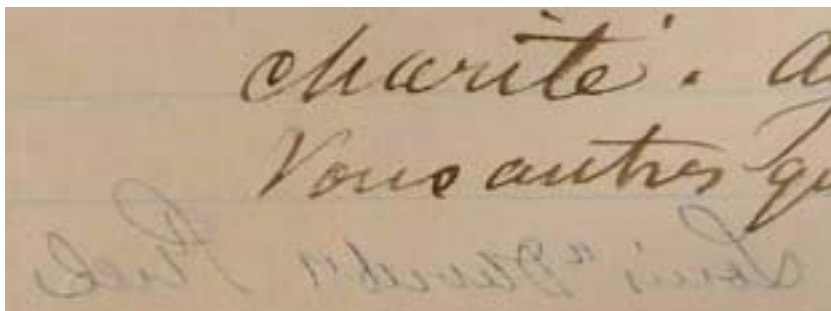


Figure 6 Letter. Louis Riel to Marguerite Riel. Detail showing blue lines on reverse of signature.

paper and the paper had been turned the wrong way round, perhaps because the user was unfamiliar with this technology; under magnification in raking light two impressions imperfectly follow the signature. Certainly Riel's signature had value to his followers – perhaps someone found some personal connection in tracing his signature – a tangible witness to his existence. Less poetically, perhaps the signature was copied onto another item to increase its value through association with Riel.

The creator or custodian may also select only certain records, either for their perceived value, or ability to transmit a desired message. Museologist Susan Pearce has suggested that collections may be a projection of identity, manipulated by collectors and donors, and gives an example of how the widow of Thomas Hardy selected, distributed, and interpreted her husband's papers and property.²⁵

The records available to us today are a mixture of deliberate selection and survival because they were valued by someone for some reason.²⁶ All of a record's custodians have an influence on its physical characteristics; the continuing physical presence and the physical condition of the record may reflect the significance of the record for successive custodians. Conservator Ian Hodgkinson has suggested some reasons for these changes in significance including: "natural" deterioration; passing fashion resulting in a loss of emotional

25 Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Washington, D.C., 1993), pp. 63, 200. In discussing personal archives archivist Catherine Hobbs echoes similar thoughts about how individuals may actively construct their "self." Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections of the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), pp. 129–30.

26 Sarah Tyacke, "Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives," *Archivaria* 52 (2001), pp. 9–10. Claire Bustarret notes that what comes down to the researcher is only a partial set of records that may have been culled by the author or subsequent custodians according to their appreciation; in Bustarret, "Paper Evidence," pp. 88–94.

and spiritual communication; or subsequent acquisition of spiritual or historical significance. He suggests cultural property is “in a continual state of physical and metaphysical flux which changes [its] significance to the particular society that is interacting with them at any given moment in history.”²⁷ Why and how something is valued is specific to its custodian’s culture. Physically, records may remain substantially unchanged, while their value increases and/or decreases for their custodian through time.²⁸

Historian David Lowenthal has also remarked that:

A sword begins as a warrior’s weapon; after his death it may be transformed into a sacred object for ceremonial use; taken as loot it becomes a token of wealth and a souvenir of conquest; ultimately it is found by archaeologists and put on display. But only its previous retention for military, sacred, and treasure purposes enabled a sword to survive to the museum stage, while less valued objects have rusted, rotted, and vanished from view.²⁹

The personal communication between Louis and Marguerite Riel became a family treasure, then a commodity – we know it was sold through auction at least twice. It later became a cultural and political symbol for the Métis community and its “repatriation” became a priority for the Government of Manitoba.

The physical object is a site of primary physical information which can be interpreted to increase our understanding of past activities. For instance, a record of an accomplishment – which may be as formal as a diploma or commission, or as informal as a letter – might be filed by its modest recipient, then framed by a descendent interested in a visual display of family history. A later descendent may take the records off display, another may remove the frame for convenience in storage or to reuse the frame, another may donate the record to an archives. An examination would likely reveal dirt, droppings of flying insects, light damage from the display, and framers notations and/or discolouration from acidic matting or framing materials. Physical evidence related to the earlier usage remains sited in the physicality of the record; even if the reasons for the changing usage have been lost, they can be at least partially reconstructed from the physical information. Ian Hodkinson has suggested that “... not all [physical] changes must be regarded as damage, or deterioration, with automatic attempts at reversal or restoration. It is suggested that all changes and additions be thoroughly examined to determine how and why they got there and what their current and future significance is, before new intervention takes place.”³⁰ Through these interventions the past and future custodians

27 Hodkinson, “Man’s Effect on Paintings,” p. 59.

28 See Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford, 1979).

29 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985; reprint 1997), p. 289.

This example is discussed in detail by Susan Pearce in Chapter 2 of *Museums, Objects, and Collections*.

30 Hodkinson, “Man’s Effect on Paintings,” p. 59.

engage in additional acts of creation, whether intentional or not – adding or deleting elements to create something different – another communication.

Modifications and Mediations in Archives

As one in a series of custodians of a record, archives' staff also make choices based on the contemporary ideas of the significance of that record, filtered through personal, institutional, and professional theories and values.

Physical Mediation

Archives physically mediate records, beginning with their relocation from the previous custodian's storage area to the archives' work and storage areas. The organization, quality, and condition of storage location and fixtures may provide insights into organizational changes, attitudes toward records management, pressures of space, or shifting financial circumstances. Organizing devices such as colour-coded folders, pockets and ring binders, suggest different ways of keeping order than the standard archives presentation of loose pages in file folders. Decorative elements on bindings, ornate wooden filing cabinets, and whether a record-keeping system was visible to clients, may indicate the value and meaning of the records to the organization and their intended role in communicating with clients; instilling confidence through visible signs of order, neatness, economy, and prosperity.

To suit the storage choices of the archives, the final selection may be boxed or re-boxed; two dimensional records may be foldered or re-foldered, folded or unfolded, rolled or unrolled; bound records may be disbound. Some records will be culled and returned to the donor or destroyed. Records may be rearranged to interfile previously separated material or to separate out certain records to be further processed by another specialty area within the archives. The rate of chemical deterioration of the records may be slowed by housing them in "archival quality" storage enclosures and storing them in cool, dry environments. Archives' researchers wait in research rooms for records to be brought to them – neatly arranged in specialized and uniform boxes and folders, or sheathed in chemically stable plastics. The colours of "archival" supplies are light and neutral, the forms uniform and utilitarian – clinical, orderly, dispassionate, and unbiased.

Improving preservation and accessibility may motivate archives to physically change records, but these interventions also actively change the context of the record, as evidence of previous custodians' relationships to the record may be discarded and the archives' values take precedence. As custodians we desire to project an image of competent stewardship to our clients too.

The Riel letter arrived at the Archives from an auction house. It had been flattened to a single sheet from the original folio, so that the first and last page

are viewed simultaneously, rather than in correct order (see Figure 4). The letter was examined by a staff conservator upon arrival and treated to stabilize tears, then matted and framed for public display at an Archives Open House a week later. The letter was left as a flat sheet to eliminate the stresses on the central fold from opening and closing a folio; preservation of the integrity of the paper sheet has been chosen over returning the letter to the creator's intended presentation.

Assigning Archival Value

Choosing which records have value, which information within the records has value, and which physical characteristics and evidence to retain or alter, is another part of the archival mediation of records. Archivist Sarah Tyacke has discussed the role of the archivist as a gatekeeper to the historical record, judging relative "record-ness" to what is to be preserved for the future.³¹ "Intrinsic value" is usually defined in the archival literature as "qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical format the only archivally acceptable form for preservation."³²

Records with intrinsic value are normally those records that have a physical form that might be the topic of study; for example, they may reflect a technological change; possess unusual aesthetic or artistic quality; have unique or curious physical features, such as wax seals and watermarks; be of a certain age that makes them unique as a documentary source; be useful for exhibitions; be of questionable authenticity, date, or authorship; contain a direct association with a historically significant person or event; or have direct significance as legal documentation for the establishment and continuing operation of an institution.³³

The physical properties of records are not suggested as a primary source of information about the creation and use of the records themselves. The Riel letter would be considered to have intrinsic value because it was written by a "historically significant person," and not because of the physical signs of its value for its custodians, its history of uses, or of the potential significance of its humble materials. For reasons discussed below, archivists would be unlikely to find intrinsic value in the letterbooks of the Provincial Secretary's Department. Without a knowledge of letterbook technology, and contempo-

31 Sarah Tyacke, "Archives in a Wider World," pp. 17–18.

32 National Archives and Records Service, *Intrinsic Value in Archival Material*, Staff Information Paper 21 (1982), as it appears in National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA), *Guide & Resources For Archival Strategic Preservation Planning (GRASP) Manual* (Atlanta, 1990), p. 421.

33 Richard J. Cox, *Managing Institutional Archives: Foundational Principles and Practices*, (New York, 1992), p. 59.

rary business technologies however, assessment of the potential significance of ink impression technologies and of binding technology is impossible. To complicate this assessment, very little information has been published about stationary binding.³⁴

Examination – Looking at What’s There

Choosing which information to record and make available regarding physical properties of the records, as well as physical changes to the records during our custodianship, is another intellectual mediation. In order to see evidence of care for records, indications of their roles and value and shifts in their status – the tangible evidence of intangible events in the history of the records – we need to systematically look for that evidence. Material culture research generally follows art historical, symbolist and cultural history approaches.³⁵ Archival literature appears to reveal little discussion of systematic examination of the physical characteristics of records except in the context of diplomatics, archival physical description, and case studies employing textual scholarship.³⁶

Diplomatic analysis has been used to develop “an understanding of administrative actions and the functions generating them.”³⁷ Historian Leonard Boyle noted that this examination should “take a full and firm account of the substance of the document and of all the circumstances surrounding that document. Only when a document has been examined with all thoroughness, externally as well as internally, can its witness be evaluated properly, circumstantially, and

34 Rob Ridgen, personal communication, August 2004; based on a literature review related to his research into 18th- to 20th-century stationary bindings in the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. A section on stationary binding can be found in Alex J. Vaughan, *Modern Book-binding: A Treatise Covering Both Letterpress and Stationary Branches of the Trade, with a Section on Finishing and Design*, (London, 1996) (facsimile of 1950 edition, first published, 1929). Other common forms of stationary binding in archives include account books and ledgers.

35 Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876–1976,” in Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, 1982), p. 42. In this paper Schlereth summarizes contemporary ideas and approaches in material culture studies.

36 Codicological approaches have been described by literary scholar Germaine Warkentin in examining the authorship and provenance of a manuscript purported to be by Pierre Radisson in “Radisson’s Voyages and their Manuscripts,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 199–222, and Claire Bustarret has described the use of paper analysis as a tool of genetic criticism for the study of handwritten literary drafts in “Paper Evidence,” pp. 88–94. This approach appears mainly limited to the interpretation of what has already been selected for retention in archives. A rare example of a detailed consideration of the historical antecedents, fabrication and technology, preservation, and physical condition of a document in archival literature – written by a conservator – can be found in Thea Burns, “The Royal Proclamation Charter for the Company of Adventurers,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), pp. 170–93.

37 Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part V),” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), p. 6.

fully.”³⁸ The extrinsic elements of documentary form have been identified by archivist Luciana Duranti as: “the material make up of the document and its external appearance,” that is, “the medium, the script, the language, the special signs, the seals and the annotations.”³⁹ In the author’s reading of diplomatics, the link between the tangible qualities of records and their functions is recognized and valued. Materials and record-making technology are specified for attention, and consideration of the sequence of application of materials and/or of alterations to the records, and of the physical relationship to surrounding materials appears to be within the spirit of the approach. However, the physical evidence of care by custodians or changes in the functions of the records after their creation does not appear to be considered.

Descriptive Standards

Archival description is the main way in which researchers access information about records. The overall principles which inform the *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G))*, the *Canadian Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* and the draft of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*⁴⁰ are generally intended to “promote the understanding of [archival] materials by documenting their context, content and structure.”⁴¹ The use of information from material evidence is not precluded, but *ISAD(G)* and *RAD* specify description of physical aspects of records only within sections identified as “Physical characteristics and technical requirements” and “Physical Description,” respectively. In *ISAD(G)* this section falls under the “Conditions of Access and Use Area,” rather than under the “Context Area.” None considers the physical changes to the state of the records since their creation (other than damage) although these changes may be directly related to the availability, and therefore access, to lost or altered information. The draft version of *DACS* considers the “Nature of the Archival Unit” section under “Identity Elements,” but like the “Physical Description” area in *RAD*, it focuses on extent and dimensions for loosely defined forms such as photographs, diaries, and correspondence. The information from physical evidence is separated from the context of records creation and custodial history, although examples provided in the “Custodial History” area of *RAD* include some descriptions of storage locations and housing of records. Overall, existing archival descrip-

38 Leonard E. Boyle, “Diplomatics,” in James M. Powell, ed., *Medieval Studies: An Introduction* (Syracuse, 1976), p. 76.

39 Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part V),” pp. 6, 7.

40 The author was unable to obtain a copy of the published final version before completing this paper. The draft version was available at <<http://www.archivists.org>> in July 2004, but has since been removed.

41 Canadian-US Taskforce on Archival Description, *The Canadian-US Taskforce on Archival Description Statement of Principles* (April 2002), p. 1; available at <http://www.edncouncilarchives.ca/archdesreport_principles.pdf>, accessed 19 July 2003.

tion structures do not explicitly support recording physical characteristics as evidence that contributes to understanding the records, their creators and custodians, or explain the relationships between the physical information and the other information present, such as text and images.⁴²

The descriptions for the Riel letter and Department of the Provincial Secretary letterbooks currently in use at the Archives of Manitoba predate the adoption of *RAD*. The physical evidence within the Riel letter is represented as: “original,” “4 pages”; the related Purchase and Acquisition file, which is not open to researchers, mainly includes correspondence related to the auction lots, purchase arrangements, and media coverage. “Letterbooks” is the series title given for those records on the Records Transfer List, and the box contents are simply listed by date range.

Documentation

The Association of Canadian Archivists’ Code of Ethics explicitly requires that “[a]rchivists document all actions which may alter the record.”⁴³ No further direction is suggested regarding what constitutes an alteration or the information to be documented. The International Council of Archives’ Code of Ethics also requires that “[a]rchivists should record, and be able to justify, their actions on archival material.”⁴⁴ However, concerns have appeared in the literature suggesting that archivists’ actions and alterations are inadequately documented.⁴⁵ No specific instructions for considering or documenting physical evidence or alterations at any stage other than conservation treatment, has been found by the author in the guides to modern archival methods consulted to date.

By contrast, examination and documentation of physical evidence is highly valued in the museum community and is an ethical requirement in the conser-

42 Some archivists have also critically discussed the limitations of *RAD* in describing the history of the records, notably in Laura Miller, “The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time,” *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), pp. 1–15; and Tom Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts of the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 136–50.

43 Association of Canadian Archivists, *Code of Ethics*: B1, available at <<http://archivists.ca/about/ethics.aspx?id=20>>, accessed 17 February 2004.

44 International Council of Archives, *ICA Code of Ethics*, 5, available at <<http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?pdocid=12>>, accessed 17 February 2004.

45 See for instance: Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 32–34; Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1 (2002), p. 12; David Bearman, *Archival Methods*, Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report no. 9 (Pittsburgh, 1989; reprinted 1991), p. 26; Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), p. 86; and Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate,” p. 146.

vation profession; as a rough measure of importance, documentation has more space in the *Code of Ethics of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works* than any other concept, including treatment.⁴⁶ The documentation enhances transparency, providing the context for the decisions that were made, as well as describing the specific alterations. Such documentation enables retrieval of as much contextual information as possible to aid in the future interpretation of the records.

At the Archives of Manitoba, all conservation, examination, and treatment records, including “before” and “after” treatment photographs, are government records scheduled for archival retention. Records created by the conservators are not usually cross-referenced or integrated into reference tools.

Conservator Miriam Clavier and archivist Terry Cook, respectively writing about museums and archives, have identified the institutions themselves as creators of “cultural meanings” and “social memory”; the holdings are recognized as a “mediated construction.”⁴⁷ Many archival writers have expressed concern that archivists have not adequately recognized the power of their role. Archivist Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook have suggested that:

... the blind are leading the blind, in both directions: scholars using archives without realizing the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded into the records by their creators and by the archivists long before any box is opened in the research room, and by archivists treating their archives without much sensitivity to the large footprints they are themselves leaving on the archival record.⁴⁸

The purchase of the Riel letter at auction was well-covered by the media, and the serendipitous timing of the purchase enabled the Archives to use it as

46 *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works*, available at < <http://aic.stanford.edu/pubs/ethics.html>>, accessed 17 February 2004. Documentation is covered in “Guidelines and Commentaries,” pp. 24–28; treatment is covered in “Guidelines and Commentaries,” pp. 21–23; each Commentary is approximately one page. The documentation is considered a permanent record and the conservator, or the employing institution, is expected to provide for its permanent retention. Archival conservation generally has stronger parallels with ethnographic and industrial conservation than with fine arts conservation, given the emphasis on stabilizing the record for continued use and on maintaining evidence and context over aesthetic qualities.

47 Because of the fundamental importance of collections to museums: “The museum, as an institution, becomes a signifier as well as a creator of cultural meanings. ... At the same time, the cultural value of collections can be the product of a circular and self-fulfilling path in museums.” Miriam Clavier, *Preserving What’s Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*, (Vancouver, Toronto, 2002), p. 27. Terry Cook discusses the archival record “as the site where social memory has been (and is) constructed”; he identifies records as “a cultural signifier, a mediated and ever-changing construction.” Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth,” p. 27.

48 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 6.

a publicity tool for an Open House. At the Archives researchers use it as a primary source for their own purposes. The meaning of this item shifts and changes because of the mainly intangible creative acts of its custodians, communicating their messages without changing a word of Riel's text.

Meaning and Material Culture

Physical and Metaphysical

Are records simply physical objects? Perhaps the sense that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is clearest for works of art. In considering what paintings are, conservation scientist Stephan Michalski notes that:

... paintings become their non-physical reality – their creator, their history, their composition, imagery, symbolism, etc., even their market value. All belong to the painting *but are not the thing itself*, not its mortal body. These non-physical attributes essentially rest in the thing as a whole, and only vaguely in its constituent parts ...⁴⁹

Meaning is not created until a person engages with the material culture.⁵⁰ In archives research rooms we can witness the powerful relationship between researchers and the material past, especially where a personal connection can be made through names, signatures, or images. Most people value opportunities for physical contact with items touched by a person significant to them, or items from their own past, such as school records. “[P]hysical relics remain directly available to our senses,”⁵¹ and compress the past and present without the mediating element of photography, or a computer screen, or of a transcription. The physical properties of records are a tangible site for interpretation of information from the many elements present – text, images, appearance, texture, smell, and historical context. In considering family Bibles, James O’Toole has noted that “We make and value these records because of the way they reconstruct the family across time and space.”⁵² Archivist Catherine Hobbs has noted that researchers may use personal archives not “for evidence of actions or facts in an historical sense, as these may be well known” but “to seek out evidence of character as well as the human storytelling and self-narratives with which we all fill our lives.”⁵³

49 Michalski, “Time’s Effect on Paintings,” p. 40.

50 Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections*, p. 219.

51 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 245. Barbara Craig has also observed that archives hold a unique memory that is mediated “only indirectly through research-based cultural products such as books and documentaries.” Barbara L. Craig, “Old Myths in New Clothes: Expectations of Archives Users,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), p. 124.

52 James O’Toole, “Symbolic Significance of Archives,” p. 238.

53 Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives,” p. 133.

In museums, artifacts are recognized as the primary data of human activity, reflecting the society which produced them embedded within their material composition. Nevertheless, “preservation of heritage objects is not an end in itself, but serves to maximize (over time) the access to the information encoded in them.”⁵⁴ Art historian Jules Prown has described an artifact as a “historical event” and noted that “[a]rtifacts constitute the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present. They are authentic, primary historical material available for firsthand study. Artifacts are historical evidence.”⁵⁵

In discussing the planned destruction of the original copies of microfilmed Ontario land records, Archivist Carolyn Heald reported the resulting controversy in the heritage community as an indicator of deeper emotional and social ties to records as historic artifacts:

Primarily, one must understand the content in context: i.e., the words or images embedded within their documentary expression. The whole problem comes down to whether archivists are providers of information or the guardians of the cultural transmitters of information. ... If we are information providers, then content preservation will be seen as a good thing; if we are guardians of cultural artifacts, then it can only be seen as a necessary evil at best.⁵⁶

Archivist Terry Cook has suggested that we shift focus from seeing the record as a physical object to a “conceptual data ‘object,’ controlled by metadata, that virtually combines content, context, and structure to provide evidence of some creator activity or function.”⁵⁷ The physical object is already a conceptual, as well as a physical, “data” object. It is a physical site where a variety of kinds of information reside - the most obvious being the written text and images on the surface of the records - but it also bears information about itself as a record-object, about the text and images on its surface, and about the culture which produced, cared for, and used it.

The Past and the Senses

In regard to memory, archivist Brian Brothman has asserted that “[a]rchivists

54 G.F. McDonald and S. Alsford, “The Museum as Information Utility,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 10 (1991), pp. 305–11 as quoted in Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What's Valued*, p. 28.

55 Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture,” pp. 2–3.

56 Carolyn Heald, “Are We Collecting the ‘Right Stuff’?,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), p. 186. Similar emotional responses regarding the microfilming and subsequent destruction of newspapers and books were touched upon with the publication of Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York, 2001).

57 Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism,” p. 22.

need to see that records are cognitive artifacts as much as evidential artifacts.”⁵⁸ Jules Prown suggests that:

By undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses. Figuratively speaking, we put ourselves inside the bodies of the individuals who made or used these objects; we see with their eyes and touch with their hands. To identify with people from the past or from other places empathetically through the senses is clearly a different way of engaging them than abstractly through the reading of written words.⁵⁹

David Lowenthal has written extensively about ideas of “past” and the shifting interpretations of the past.⁶⁰ To be understood and believed as authentic “relics” of the past, artifacts must conform to present expectations of what “old” things should be like.⁶¹ James O’Toole has also discussed how the appearance of even mass-produced records may refer to the past, and gives as an example mass-produced currency, which follows the conventions of earlier bank notes by bearing signatures attesting to its authenticity.⁶² “Signed, limited edition prints” with runs in the thousands and with mechanically reproduced signatures in imitation of small hand-printed series signed by the artist, also evoke superior “historic” forms and materials. Deliberate misnomers within a record, such as the use of the term “engraving” for an etching, or even “crayon drawing” for a photograph worked over with black chalk or charcoal to mask the photographic, less “artistic” image underneath, may serve a similar purpose. Terms such as “parchment” and “vellum” are applied to paper to suggest particular attributes of the animal skin precursor, such as thickness, stiffness, colour, smoothness, translucency, or value. The new technology is legitimized though its associations with older technology. Even as the growth of electronic communications technology increases, people still desire handwriting in personal communications, such as sympathy cards and love letters.⁶³ David Lowenthal has noted that “[a]long with original relics, our

58 Brien Brothman, “The Past and the Senses that Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring, 2001), p. 79.

59 Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture,” p. 17.

60 Lowenthal’s publications in this area include: *The Past is a Foreign Country*; “Authenticity: Rock of Faith or Quicksand Quagmire,” *Conservation: the Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter* 14 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–8, also available at <http://www.getty.edu/conservation/resources/newsletter/14_3/feature1_2.html>, accessed 17 February 2004; and “The Value of Age and Decay,” in W.E. Krumbly et al., eds., *Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage* (Chichester, 1992), pp. 39–49.

61 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 241.

62 James O’Toole, “Cortes’s Notary: The Symbolic Power of Records,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 50.

63 See Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 61 and Jane Zhang, “Lingering of Handwritten Records,” a paper delivered at the I-CHORA Conference.

inheritance includes a congeries of later imitations and commemorations. Thus impressions of the past reflect all subsequent acts of appreciation and derogation, our own included.”⁶⁴

Archives are important sites for access to primary sources of past activities and experiences, sites for communication of memories – from past to present, from present to past. “Old” may suggest faded, brittle, yellowed, damaged, among those who do not work with authentic old records, but even those who do may have trouble recognizing – remembering – records in a pristine state when used to seeing them in their deteriorated form. The primary experience of unfolding papers, of turning pages, of seeing the “X” mark of the illiterate, can rarely be duplicated by surrogates or transcriptions. The struggle to decipher handwriting, to turn thin letterpress copy pages, necessitates a different speed of communication, but may enable a deeper engagement and deeper understanding of past experience. Archives can contribute to memory through the senses with an immediacy unique among institutions responsible for preserving cultural property.

Alternate Literacies

We know that oral communication includes cultural clues for reading and decoding messages – if we could only read a transcription of an audiotape we would know we were missing part of the communication. Pitch, tone, speed, and placement of pauses can indicate a speaker’s emotional state or attitude toward the subject matter in an aural record; why would we assume any fewer non-textual communications in a written record? The loss of this metadata obstructs some communication and results in the loss of some meaning.

“Bound records that are too large to fit in the deepest drawers, or with deteriorated bindings, can be rebound in post-binding format. ... The record is not altered at any time during this process.”⁶⁵ This passage appears in a relatively recent manual of archival management without any suggestion that the archivist assess and record the information the binding might provide about the creators and custodians of the records; or describe the materials, labels, and annotations prior to discarding it; or consider the binding as part of the metadata of the textual information within. For the author of the passage, the binding is clearly not part of the record but perhaps merely a temporary protective device, now inconvenient and therefore extraneous.⁶⁶

64 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 290.

65 John A. Dyer, “Managing Cartographic and Architectural Records,” in James Gregory Bradsher, ed., *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (London, 1988; Chicago, 1991), p. 101.

66 Joan Schwartz has discussed routine disbinding of albums and separation and removal of photos in name of preservation. “In the process, evidential value embedded in the physical structure of the album, its sequence of pages, the placement of images, the juxtaposition of words

Archivists Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin have noted that all literacy requires understanding conventions and technology of both perception and expression.⁶⁷ Joan Schwartz has written eloquently about the systemic marginalization of photographic records within archivy.⁶⁸ In a logocentric system the graphic is difficult to read – but where text is present the rest of the physical record is usually marginalized. Material literacy is the ability to decode and interpret the significance of the material composition and construction, and of the physical state, of a tangible record. Inadequate visual literacy and material literacy limits understanding of textual records, for every textual record is also a non-textual record.⁶⁹

James O’Toole has remarked that “[i]t is a bias of literate people such as ourselves to suppose that records, books, manuscripts and other materials mean only what the words in them say. Closer examination reminds us that there is usually more to the story than that, that layers of meaning – practical, symbolic, cultural – are embedded in record making and the records made.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Records and the means to produce them are all around us. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the records we create, manage, and consult, we risk underestimating the cultural choices that they manifest. Archivist Hugh A. Taylor has suggested that archives may take the artifactual nature of the records so often “for granted, perhaps because we see the documents we han-

and images, and the larger documentary universe of which it is a part is sacrificed in a misguided effort to ensure the long-term physical stability of individual photographs. The meaning of the album, not simply as a housing for the images, but as a document in its own right, and the information it was compiled to communicate is lost.” Joan M. Schwartz, “Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic ‘Othering’, and the Margins of Archivy,” *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), p. 157

67 Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, “‘Mind and Sight’: Visual Literacy and the Archivist,” *Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 21, no. 2 (1996), pp. 112–13.

68 Most notably in Joan M. Schwartz, “Coming to Terms with Photographs,” pp. 142–71.

69 Archivists Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres have suggested that three forms of knowledge are required for effective work with primary sources: domain (subject) knowledge, archival intelligence, and artifactual literacy. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, “AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise,” *The American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 52. They quote a definition of artifactual literacy as the “practice of criticism, analysis, and pedagogy that reads texts as if they were objects and objects as if they were texts” in Randy Bass, “The Garden in the Machine,” available at <<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/garden.html>>, accessed 19 February 2004. This idea is not developed further in Yakel and Torres’ paper, and the author could find no other instances of use of this phrase.

70 O’Toole, “Cortes’s Notary,” p. 58. Hugh Taylor has commented: “because literacy objectifies and detaches us from what we read, information becomes almost rootless, floating away from the artifact in which it was anchored.” Hugh A. Taylor, “‘Heritage’ Revisited: Documents as Artifacts in the Context of Museums and Material Culture,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), p. 9.

dle as simply providing reliable information in support of other material culture, and therefore materially 'invisible'.⁷¹

The physical properties of a record have little significance in isolation because the physical is only part of the communication, just as the text and/or image is only part of the communication. This paper assumes that it is the meaning of the records that archives wish to preserve, in order to enable their continued use for the ongoing production of knowledge. Records are material culture and their meaning may be physically manifested in their materials and in signs of change. Evidence of creation and change are part of the history of a record, and the past and present choices of creators and custodians may have a significant impact on the future interpretation of the record. It is impossible to preserve either physical evidence or meaning unchanged, but the physical information and related meaning can be preserved through enhanced documentation of the physical states, uses, interventions, and other changes through time. The recognition and interpretation of this information contributes to the context in which we understand records, their creation and use, and their authenticity. Changes to the records and to their meaning is ongoing, for as David Lowenthal notes: "artifacts are simultaneously past and present; their historical connotations coincide with their modern roles, commingling and sometimes confusing them The tangible past is in continual flux, altering, ageing, renewing, and always interacting with the present."⁷²

It is clear that many archivists recognize and value records as material culture. However, current archival practices do not appear to support the systematic examination of physical evidence in records as a primary source of information, or the documentation of the evidence and the current understood significance of this evidence. If this information is not recognized and documented, it may not be available for communication and interpretation by future archivists and researchers. Ian Hodkinson reminds us that "[w]e are the temporary custodians of the [cultural property], and our actions will greatly influence [its] *future significance*. ... Faced with the need to use and interpret [cultural property] for the present generation, we can lose sight of our moral obligation to pass it on to the future, with its physical and metaphysical significance undiminished at least, and enhanced at best."⁷³

Records in their original forms can be powerful communications between generations and cultures. David Lowenthal has remarked "Memory, history,

71 Hugh Taylor, "'Heritage' Revisited," p. 9. More recently, Ciaran Trace has remarked that "[i]t is perhaps the record's very embeddedness in what appear to be routine processes and mundane practices that creates this difficulty. The record has become naturalized and thus invisible, an assumed backdrop rather than active agent." Ciaran B. Trace, "What is Recorded is Never Simply 'What Happened': Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 159.

72 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 248.

73 Hodkinson, "Man's Effect on Paintings," p. 60.

and relics offer routes to the past best traversed in combination. Each route requires the others for the journey to be significant and credible. Relics trigger recollection, which history affirms and extends backward in time. History in isolation is barren and lifeless; relics mean only what history and memory convey.”⁷⁴ Recognizing records as material culture enriches the ability of archives to meet the three challenges posed by David Bearman: to select the record (and shape heritage); to preserve the record (and shape memory); and to “assure use of cultural evidence in the continuing construction of the culture.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 249.

⁷⁵ David Bearman, *Archival Methods*, p. 2.

