

THE ARCHIVIST AND CARTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

BY

WILLIAM A. OPPEN

PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

I. The Status of Cartographic Materials in Archives and Libraries.

When speaking of "cartographic materials" the first associated items that come to mind are maps; however, other materials also form a part of this description and include such graphic representational materials as charts, plans and architectural and engineering drawings. While some of these items do not conform to the meaning of the word "cartographic" they can and should be discussed along with purely cartographic materials owing to their format. Therefore the ideas and theories set forward here apply to all the above related or physically similar materials.

The status of maps in repositories around the world has been one of confusion as to which institutions, archives or libraries, should be responsible for their collection and retention. The result of this confusion has been the duplication and fragmentation of collections as both types of institutions have considered maps their responsibility. The obvious example that comes to mind is the situation in the United States where the National Archives and Records Centre collect current, government produced maps while the Library of Congress collects "archival" or early maps and plans of historical importance. This dichotomy has to be seen as somewhat ludicrous and extremely costly. In France the same situation exists, with the Bibliotheque Nationale collecting all

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manner of early and current cartographics while the Archives Nationales maintains its own collection and competes with the Bibliotheque National in the area of acquisitions. Canada's situation is even more confusing with most collections of early maps residing in the special collection rooms of university and other libraries while certain provincial archives also hold map collections. At the national level one finds the National Map Collection a division of the Public Archives of Canada, collecting the cartographic record of Canada while at the same time, in the same building no less, the National Library feels compelled to amass its own map collection. How did this confused situation develop and why is it allowed to continue?

The basic difficulty arises with the special character and format of maps and other materials like them. Because a map often is printed item, usually having an author, publisher, printer, date and title, it has been the librarian's assumption that cartographic items should be dealt with in the same manner as any other printed work.¹ The fact that some maps do have characteristics similar to books has even tended to convince some archivists that maps belong in libraries. However, as T.R. Schellenberg has pointed out, the librarian, and in some cases, the archivist, has ignored the real character of maps and has overlooked the "... methods of map compilation and the differences between the development of map printing and book printing."² The same situation exists in archives that hold maps. While the archivist often recognizes that a map may have value as a historical document, he does not know how to deal with it as it does not conform to the pattern cut for textual records.³

As a result of this ignorance on the part of both librarians and archivists, the map has become a "step child" in the family of records, never really knowing where it belongs or who should take care of it. When it does find a home it is more often than not treated shabbily and consigned to some dark and dismal drawer in the recesses of the institution. Cartographic materials "... have been considered and forgotten on the basis of their physical form rather than on the basis of their content, purpose and origin".⁴ As Louis De Vorsey has

¹ T.R. Schellenberg, The Management of Archives, Columbia University Press, New York, 1965, p. 303.

² Ibid.

³ Herman R. Friis, "Cartographic and Related Records: What are they, How have they been Produced and what are problems of their administration", American Archivist, vol. 13, no. 2, April 1950, p. 138.

⁴ Ibid.

stated "... it is not entirely surprising to find that maps have often received low priority attention when compared to more conventional documents".⁵

The result of this confusion as to the proper treatment that should be accorded maps has been that archivists and librarians have simply treated maps as they would documents and books, materials with which they are more at home. This is unfortunate as maps, especially the very early ones, deserve a better fate than being ignored or lumped in with totally alien material of another character simply because of a lack of understanding or familiarity on the part of those responsible for their care. Until archivists and librarians recognize the value of maps as historical documents and until they learn that maps are distinct entities dissimilar from books or textual documents the confused status of cartographic collections will continue to be a problem in the field of record retention and administration.

II. The Collection of Cartographic Materials as an Archival Responsibility.

Muller, Feith and Fruin state in their Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives that "there is not the slightest reason to exclude ... maps from the archival collection".⁶ Indeed, there are numerous reasons why cartographic materials should form an integral part of an archival collection. The basic and most important reason is that maps often are documents that contain an amazing amount of historical data. In some cases maps provide more historical evidence than do documents of another nature. William F. Ganong has stated that "Maps are the graphic records of the influence which geography has exerted upon the course of history, of the progress of exploration and settlement, of the evolution of present day political boundaries; and not rarely they contribute new knowledge where other records are wanting and settle questions which without them would remain in doubt".⁷

Maps and related cartographic materials often hold a wealth of important historical information, but because of the archivist's and librarian's ignorance concerning these materials they have rarely been studied in great

⁵ Louis De Vorsey Jr., "The Neglect of Cartographic Sources", paper delivered at the Organization of American Historians Conference, April 12, 1973, p.16.

⁶ Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith and R.Fruin, Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives, translation of 2nd edition by A.H. Leavitt, Wilson, New York, 1968, p.14.

⁷ William F. Ganong, "A Monograph on the Cartography of New Brunswick", Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Section II, 1897, p.2.

depth. As a consequence, historians have also ignored the use of maps in the study of history. Many have dismissed cartographic records as being "dangerous", or "... too esoteric, too intractable or too endemically inconsistent to merit historical attention".⁸ Certainly some of these limiting factors are evident in maps but surely no less or no more so than in the other forms of documentary evidence which are the daily bread of the historian.

Let us concede that maps are historically important documents that require special care and handling. At present, libraries are collecting early and current maps and are cataloguing and arranging them as books. However, if maps are historical documents, should they not be held by an institution that is historically oriented, and should not the people working with these records have a knowledge of the historical context in which they were made? The answer to both questions should be obvious. What better place for those documents than an archives, who better to critically examine these maps, to analyze them and relate them to the historical development of a region or country than an archivist?

Maps must be seen as tools to be used in the study of history. Combined with written sources, maps become extremely valuable documents, for they not only help a researcher visualize the information retrieved from textual sources but also aid him in achieving a sense of temporal cultural relativism, which is critical to historians. As such tools maps and related items should be held in close proximity to the raw materials with which they can be put to work. Again an archives would seem to be the logical resting place for cartographic records.

As documents in their own right maps possess certain features that make them historically important. In the first place, maps indicate the nature of the area they depict at a certain point in time. This in itself is historical evidence; however maps also reflect the social and political atmosphere of the time period in which they were made. Therefore, maps, plans and related drawings definitely have to be considered as historical documents and as such should be stored in archives where they will be appreciated for all aspects of the historical information they contain. As J.B. Harley has stated "... it is important to recognize that maps conform to the same procedure of analysis as do other historical

⁸ J.B. Harley, "The Evaluation of Early Maps: Towards a Methodology". Imago Mundi, vol. XXII, 1968, p. 73.

sources [and] similarly some of the principles applied to the investigation of manuscripts apply equally to maps, which must be subjected to the same stages of external and internal criticism".⁹ Unfortunately maps have not been accorded this recognition by archivists, which accounts in part for the confusion concerning the collection and retention of cartographic materials. Archives and archivists have to begin to pay more attention to maps as historical sources and must begin to appreciate their value. By doing this, cartographic sources may perhaps be given the respect they deserve and as a result may become more acceptable to historians as tools in the study of the field.

A final note on archival responsibility in the collection of cartographic materials rests on a basic premise of archives; that is, the archival responsibility to compile the total documentary record of a region.

If we accept the fact that maps are valuable historical records, no less important than other sources of evidence, then the record of a province, state or nation is incomplete without them.

III. The Archival Treatment of Cartographic Records

As has been mentioned, cartographic records are presently held by both libraries and archives, but because of the peculiar nature of maps neither institution is quite sure of what to do with them. The basic difficulty lies in the fact that each institution attempts to handle cartographic records in the same manner as they would treat those documents with which they are more familiar.

The librarian, not recognizing the historical value of maps, catalogues, classifies and arranges them much in the same way he would books. Unfortunately this approach is unworkable and when practiced destroys or at least hides the importance of the document, for while some maps possess many of the same characteristics as textual sources they are in essence different and have to be accorded special treatment. The archivist on the other hand often recognizes the historical value and the special status of maps; however, he has not, in most cases, developed the cataloguing, classification and arrangement systems required to deal with the items. The solution to the problem would be for the archivist to blend his knowledge and appreciation of historical

⁹ Ibid.

records with modified library systems so that they could effectively deal with the specialized requirements of maps and related items. This is indeed a difficult problem owing to the archivist's reluctance to accept anything library-oriented. However, it is a necessity if archival cartographic collections are going to survive.

Another problem faced by the archivist develops when he attempts to apply the golden rule of "provenance" to cartographic materials. When dealing with maps this principle and that of "respect des fonds" usually have to fall by the wayside owing to the areal nature of maps. The National Archives and Records Centre in the United States arranges its maps by provenance; each group of maps from a particular government agency is given its own record group according to archival tradition. This system, however, was developed with no regard for the researcher who more often than not wishes to see maps of a particular area rather than all the maps produced by a particular government agency. The fact that maps of the same area are scattered through unnumberable record groups must cause extreme problems for the researcher. Maps produced in series by an agency can and should be held together under provenance; however, non-series maps from government agencies and disparate items received from other sources should be classified by area rather than by provenance.¹⁰

The transfer of maps from within manuscript records is yet another problem to be faced by the archivist dealing with maps. The transfer of these documents is necessary for one reason alone - conservation. Most maps within textual records are folded or are in several sections and as a result their chances for survival are slim. These maps should be transferred to the map division of an archives or properly restored and held in special map storage equipment so that their life expectancy may be lengthened.

Many archivists feel that to transfer such material from a set of records immediately reduces the value of that material. However, transferral of items is a principle of archival science. Muller, Feith and Fruin state that "It is even permissible if the character of the documents requires it to store in different places documents which originally were combined in one file".¹¹ Section 68 of their manual also states:

¹⁰ Schellenberg, The Management of Archives, op.cit., p.309.

¹¹ Muller at al, Manual for the Arrangement . . ., op.cit., p.157.

"Formal documents and maps found in a dossier may be withdrawn from it and kept separately for their better preservation, provided an explanation that the original has been removed and stored elsewhere is put in their place".¹² Unfortunately most archivists are not adhering to this principle, as a recent survey by Richard Berner and Gary Bettis points out. Berner and Bettis found that 37 of 48 archives transferred printed, non-annotated maps from within manuscript materials. When it came to printed, annotated maps, however, 28 institutions retained the maps with the manuscript material and only in 15 cases were they transferred. Manuscript maps were transferred by only 13 archives while 32 retained them.¹³ Berner and Bettis' own conclusions were that it would be impossible to reconcile the transfer of manuscript maps from within the accompanying documentation.¹⁴ Obviously the basic argument for transfer of items is being misunderstood. A manuscript map, plan or drawing is usually the only extant copy and as such its loss through improper handling, theft or whatever, would be far more serious and irreversible than would be the loss of a single copy of a printed map. Manuscript maps and annotated printed maps are the first items that should be transferred, with photostatic copies left in their place. Relatively current, printed maps can be left with manuscript material if other copies of the map are readily available.

These are but a few of the problems confronting the map archivist. The list is endless - conservation, reference services, filing procedure, classification, equipment and other aspects of archival management - but all have to be adapted to the peculiar nature of cartographic records. The archivist himself must adapt to meet the needs of cartographic records. He must re-think his theories of archival science and must tailor his actions to the specific nature of the material.

The problem of cartographic collections in archives is a thorny one, yet it is a problem that has to be resolved if these valuable records are not to be lost. Archives and archivists everywhere must become aware of maps and related material as historical documents and must accept the fact that they are in many ways no less important than other archival material. It must also be realized that the peculiar nature of cartographic records

¹² Ibid, p.158.

¹³ Richard C. Berner and M. Gary Bettis, "Disposition of Non-Manuscript Items Found Among Manuscripts", American Archivist, vol. 33, no. 3, July 1970, p.279.

¹⁴ Ibid.

requires quite a different approach to their handling and use. Perhaps when archives and archivists accept these two prerequisites the problems presently afflicting cartographic records will be resolved.

WORTH REMEMBERING

To renounce the pains and penalties of exhaustive research is to remain a victim to ill-informed and designing writers, and to authorities that have worked for ages to build up the vast tradition of conventional mendacity. By going from book to manuscript and from library to archives, we exchange doubt for certainty, and become our own masters. We explore a new heaven and a new earth, and at each step forward, the world moves with us.

Lord Acton.

(from an unpublished essay by Lord Acton as quoted in Josef L. Altholtz and Damian McElrath (eds.), The Correspondence of Lord Acton and Richard Simpson. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press. 1971. p.xi-xii).