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The Ambiguous Origins of the Archival Principle of “Provenance”

Shelley Sweeney

Like many principles . . . [provenance] is easier to state than to define and easier to define than to put into practice.

—Michel Duchein¹

Broadly speaking, the word “provenance,” whether used by a rare book librarian, an archaeologist, an art curator, or an archivist, refers to the origins of an information-bearing entity or artifact.² But there the consensus ends. On close examination, the application of the term turns out to be significantly different depending on the field.

With regard to books, *The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science* defines provenance as “information concerning the transmission or ownership, as of a book.”³ *Harrod’s Librarians’ Glossary and Reference Book* adds: “A special binding, bookplate, or inscription may indicate previous owners, collections, or libraries through which a particular book has passed.”⁴ The intent of capturing such information is to provide proof of a continuous chain of custody and therefore authenticity of the work—that the edition of *x* is what it purports to be. Another probably more common reason for securing such information is to highlight the prestige of the copy in hand by enumerating illustrious past owners. Even so, capturing the provenance for rare books is not always considered noteworthy. The authors of the manual *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books)* enjoin catalogers to “make a local note to describe details of an item’s provenance, *if considered important*.”⁵ They do observe, however, that the names of former owners and other “individuals of interest” and their approximate dates should be added whenever possible. John Carter and Nicolas Barker in the *ABC for Book Collectors* state that “the generally laudable attention paid to provenance . . . is occasionally pushed to a length which, if not in itself slightly ridiculous, has in recent years begun to be indiscriminate.”⁶ While the provenance of a rare book may assist in determining an acquisition, it almost never is used for retrieval.

In the museum field of archaeology, provenance (or provenience) is "the place where an object was found or recovered in modern times; the findspot."⁷ This is vital for determining authenticity and dating the remains in hand as well as the objects associated with it. When an item from a dig is written up, the findspot must be recorded in order to obtain maximum information from the artifact.

In contrast to librarianship and archaeology, in the archival field provenance is the basis not only for establishing authenticity and sometimes for dating records but also for their acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and description, and retrieval. Thus, what constitutes provenance is critically important to the archivist. Yet this important concept, developing over centuries of practice, has never been defined clearly. Its origins are ambiguous, and over the years the principle has been introduced, reintroduced, applied in part, applied in full, studied, and debated without end.⁸ While archival theorists continue to disagree about what constitutes the principle of provenance and how it should be applied, they concur that provenance (whatever the word may mean) is a necessary theoretical construct for the functions of archival practice.

With the goal of clarifying the debate and relating usage in the archival to that in the other fields, this essay presents the current definition of provenance in the archival context, considers the somewhat murky origins and subsequent history of the concept, and touches lightly on the contemporary state of archival understanding of the principle and the direction in which the debate is heading.

The Definition of Provenance in the Archival Context

The *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* of the International Council on Archives states that the principle of provenance means that records of the same origin (or provenance) must not be "intermingled" with those of any other provenance. Provenance is defined as being the "agency, institution, organization or individual that created, accumulated and maintained records . . . in the conduct of its business prior to their transfer to a records centre/archives."⁹

The whole of the records created and accumulated by an agency, institution, organization, or individual is known as the fonds of that creator. Many writers refer to the principle of *respect des fonds*—respecting the records of a single creator by not intermingling those records with the fonds of others—as an equivalent of provenance. The dictionary gives the Dutch equivalent of provenance as *herkomstbeginsel* and the German as *Provenienzprinzip*.

The dictionary definition of the principle continues: “[It is] also extended to include the registry principle.”¹⁰ The registry principle is defined as “the principle that archives of a single provenance should retain the arrangement established by the creating agency, institution or organization in order to preserve existing relationships and reference numbers; *sometimes implied in the principle of provenance* and also called the principle of respect for original order.”¹¹ The German equivalent term is cited as *Registraturprinzip*. Other terms commonly cited in archival literature for this part of the principle are *respect de l'ordre original*, *respect de l'ordre primitif*, or, more commonly, original order.

These definitions and word equivalents sum up well the ambivalence of the archival community toward the concept of provenance and its inclusion or exclusion of original order. Given that the principle permeates almost every archival activity, this ambiguity about provenance affects daily practice and has a lasting effect not only on the records but also on all future access to those records.

Origins of the Principle of Provenance

While there is no exact agreement on the origins of the principle of provenance, many writers have proffered various possibilities. As American archivist Maynard Brichford pointed out, keeping records according to the source was a normal, well-established practice in Europe; archivists had kept records according to their origin in chancelleries or treasuries for centuries. He traced the documented origins of provenance to the Maurist scholar and Benedictine Dom Jean Mabillon, whose *De Re Diplomatica*, published in 1681, created the science of documentary criticism and the authentication of documents.¹² Mabillon focused attention on the source of the records by providing detailed studies and comparisons of documents issued by the same chancellery.

In 1764 German history professor Johann Gatterer founded a historical institute in Göttingen to “provide an academic basis for instruction in the disciplines required for archival practice.” Diplomatic manuals used in the institute focused on tying documents to the administrations that created them. Brichford stated that Friedrich Wilkins of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, for example, recommended keeping records according to their source or origin in his proposal for a state history in 1819.¹³ According to Spanish archivist Antonia Heredia Herrera, the principle of *respect des fonds*, as yet unnamed, was practiced in a number of cities and states in Europe such as Halle (Saxony) in 1777, Denmark in 1791, and Naples in 1812.¹⁴

In the Netherlands, régime change after 1795 led to a break in the legal system so that the archives of the former régime no longer were required for legal reasons but instead acquired historical interest. This led in turn to archivists arranging records in subject order. Even at this time, however, archival records that came from various communities tended not to be mixed together. Dutch archivist Peter Horsman stated that the principle of provenance had been applied in practice in the Netherlands in 1826.¹⁵ "Series and separate archive elements were to be left intact."¹⁶ Horsman and fellow Dutch archivists Eric Ketelaar and Theo Thomassen noted that "in the 1880s, the notion that the structure of the archives itself should be considered as the criterion for arranging it rapidly gained popularity among archivists."¹⁷

Despite the many instances of the very early use of provenance and original order in European archives, various authors have noted that there was a strong current of thinking counter to provenance and original order in the 1800s. Many European archivists were accustomed to reorganizing records from different creators using subject classification schemes.¹⁸ This practice was in accordance with the principle of pertinence, defined by the *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* as an arrangement of archives "in terms of their subject content, regardless of their provenance and original order."¹⁹

Archivists possibly borrowed the notion of arranging archival materials according to subject from librarians. Or archivists may have been following scientists of the European Enlightenment who employed classification schemes to prove that their own particular interests, such as chemistry, zoology, and botany, were valid intellectual pursuits.²⁰ Perhaps the encyclopedists of France, with their quest for a complete cataloging of the whole of human knowledge, had an effect. British archivist Michael Roper attributed enthusiasm for subject classification in European archives to the influence of the Archives nationales of France, created in the last decade of the eighteenth century.²¹ After the French Revolution, instead of serving the new government by providing information from the records of the former disgraced administration, the Archives nationales catered to a new clientele: historians. The Archives tried to meet the specific needs of these patrons by arranging records in the subject classifications that most interested them. Canadian archival studies student Alain Giroux believed the replacement of "archivists/administrators" with "archivists/historians" was a factor in the promotion of subject-based arrangement of archival materials.²²

Subject classification battled it out with provenance for most of the nineteenth century.²³ As long as public archives did not look after current

records, it was possible to employ subject classification. Giroux noted: "In Spain, the *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, created in 1866, dealt exclusively with the records of defunct organizations. In England, the Public Record Office, created in 1838, went decades without regularly acquiring new records. In France, under the new Napoleonic regulations, records were to be kept in administration for 40 years before being considered for transfer to archives."²⁴ The weakness of subject classification for records is that it is impossible to maintain a consistent classification scheme for any length of time when records are added.²⁵ Giroux also has pointed out that if archivists misclassified a document employing subject classification, it could be effectively lost. Or, if archivists were inconsistent in their analysis, documents with a common subject could be dispersed within a repository.²⁶ One of the most fundamental objections to subject classification, however, is that records rarely provide information on only a single subject. By classifying documents or even a single document by a single or even a few subjects, one is obscuring other subjects contained in the material. And certainly, by breaking up fonds into subject categories, one destroys the context of the records' creation, thereby negating or eliminating many of the qualities researchers seek in the records. Giroux credited the growth of historicism and the rejection of the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment as the spur for the final break from subject classification.²⁷

French archivists maintain that they were responsible for turning the tide against subject classification in the nineteenth century by introducing the notion of *respect des fonds*.²⁸ The archivist, diplomatist, and historian Natalis de Wailly defined the term *respect des fonds* in a circular of the Ministry of the Interior dated April 24, 1841.²⁹ De Wailly wrote that "all documents which come from a body, an establishment, a family, or an individual form a fonds, and must be kept together."³⁰ This is what French archival theorist Michel Duchein referred to as the external integrity of the fonds.³¹ *Respect des fonds* means, literally, respecting the source, or maintaining the integrity of all the documents that are created or accumulated by a person, family, or organization by keeping them together once they come to the archives.

Giroux argued strongly that the circular implied only that provenance was to supplement pertinence, not replace it, and that records kept in their original fonds were still to be arranged by subject.³² Not until the end of the nineteenth century did new trends and methodologies in historical research demand a historical neutrality on the part of archivists, leading to a movement away from subject classification. Giroux said that at that point, according to Johannes Papritz, the *Verwaltungsstrukturprinzip*

began to be used for the classification of records below the fonds level. This principle employs administrative units of an organization to classify records.³³

Duchain, however, stated that a second principle, *l'ordre primitif*, or original order, emerged following de Wailly's original circular defining the principle of *respect des fonds*.³⁴ Duchain referred to this second principle as the internal integrity of the fonds.³⁵ Original order requires that the order originally imposed by creators on their records must be maintained. According to Duchain, this principle was named by archivists of the Royal Archives of Prussia as *Strukturprinzip* around 1880.³⁶ These two principles together form the basis for the principle of provenance, although Duchain does not state when the word "provenance" began to be used.

Several authors noted that similar instructions were developed in Belgium around the same time the French instructions were drafted by de Wailly. An Order in Council regulating the Belgian state archives in the provinces was issued by Louis Prosper Gachard, dated December 17, 1851.³⁷

American archivist Theodore Schellenberg, in *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*, stated that the principle of provenance was based on *Provenienzprinzip*, which was first published by the director of the Prussian Privy State Archives, Heinrich von Sybel, when he issued regulations written by Max Lehmann on July 1, 1881.³⁸ This agrees with the assessment of archivist Ernst Posner, who worked at the Prussian state archives before coming to the United States. In "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," Posner stated that there was a progression from the French *respect des fonds* to the Prussian principle of provenance.³⁹ Despite Schellenberg's assertion that provenance was based on *Provenienzprinzip*, he agreed that the principle migrated from the French to the Germans.⁴⁰

Posner added some notes of interest regarding Sybel and Lehmann. It seems that Sybel was Lehmann's main professor at the University of Bonn and that, according to Posner, Sybel employed Lehmann in 1867 "to examine, for his history of the French Revolution, the material in the State Paper Office in London."⁴¹ This opens the possibility that Lehmann was influenced by practices in England or possibly in France, depending on whether he also traveled to archives in France in researching his dissertation. However it arose, the acceptance of provenance in German archives did not come easily, as it had to replace the notion of arrangement based on subject matter that was championed by other archivists in the Prussian Privy State Archives. Younger archivists in the

privy archives in Berlin, such as Paul Bailleu, were proponents of the new order.⁴²

Brichford agreed with Schellenberg and Posner that Heinrich von Sybel was responsible for introducing Max Lehmann's theoretical rules, although Brichford stated more clearly that Lehmann's work specified both the principle of provenance and the registry principle, which, as Brichford noted, is the arrangement of records according to source in the order designated by the originating agency.

In the Prussian government original order was based on the central registry system in use, which dictated the order of all documents. Assigned designations of each document were recorded in a central registry. Once the decision had been made in the archives to employ original order, transferring the arrangement of the original office to the archives was a simple matter.⁴³

The seminal Dutch *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archiven* (*Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*) by Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin was published in 1898.⁴⁴ The three archivists referred to German and French manuals on diplomacy by Harry Bresslau and Arthur Giry, and it has been noted that the three writers seemed to be familiar with other German and French writers, although they did not always mention them by name.⁴⁵ Muller evidently had attended a few lectures at the École des Chartes in France in 1873.⁴⁶

According to the authors of the Dutch manual, the Netherlands developed a notion similar to the German *Provenienzprinzip* called *herkomstbeginsel*.⁴⁷ Horsman maintains that the Dutch notion of *herkomstbeginsel* includes both *respect des fonds* and original order. *Herkomstbeginsel* recognizes the importance of the creator of a body of records (one who both creates and receives records) and the organic nature of the accumulation of those records. Dutch archivist Eric Ketelaar points to P. J. Vermeulen, who preceded Samuel Muller as state archivist for the province of Utrecht, as the possible origin of the principle of *respect de l'ordre primitif*.⁴⁸ As early as 1850 Vermeulen wrote that "one of the prerequisites for the scientific arrangement and inventorization [is] . . . to restore the original order."⁴⁹

What was new about the 1898 manual was not so much its introduction of new ideas as it was the application of these ideas to historical records.⁵⁰ We know that the manual was very popular and that German, Italian, French, and American editions were subsequently produced in 1905, 1908, 1910, and 1940, respectively. Duchein credits the manual as well as works by British archivist Hilary Jenkinson in 1922 and Italian archivist Eugenio

Casanova in 1928 as being critical to the elucidation and dissemination of the two principles, *respect des fonds* and original order.⁵¹

English archivist Michael Roper notes that the principle of provenance, although not yet officially introduced in England, was employed as early as 1840 by Sir Francis Palgrave, the first deputy keeper of the public records. Palgrave placed archival records in groups according to their provenance while permitting a parallel "literary or theoretical classification of the Records and their contents according to matters and subjects upon paper."⁵² Thus, the use of provenance in England was often disregarded in favor of rearranging records or regrouping them in different ways. As time went on, however, and more records were acquired, provenance gained predominance, with the series or class as the preeminent point of focus.⁵³

The Italians credit Francesco Bonaini with the development of the *metodo storico* in 1867. Bonaini declared that "documents were to remain in the fonds in which they were created and, within that fonds, in their place of origin."⁵⁴ This principle was made state policy and applied to all of Italy in 1875.⁵⁵

Full international recognition of the principle of provenance came at the Conference of Librarians and Archivists in 1910 in Brussels.⁵⁶ The conference participants agreed formally to endorse the principle of provenance.⁵⁷

Introduction of Provenance to North America and Australia

In the United States the earliest reference to the principle of provenance was made by Waldo Gifford Leland at the first Conference of Archivists held in conjunction with the 1909 meeting of the American Historical Association.⁵⁸ In 1913 his report to the Illinois State Education Building Commission outlined his understanding of the concept of provenance. He emphasized the importance of functions, captured in what today would be considered a type of provenancial authority file: "The first essential is a guide to the public offices and their history which shall show for each office its origin, its functions, [and] the origin of these Functions."⁵⁹ The substance of *respect des fonds*, Leland felt, was that the organization and functions that produced the records would be clearly reflected by the records. Both Leland and New York State Archivist Arnold Johan Ferdinand Van Laer attended the congress in Brussels in 1910, where provenance was ratified as the guiding principle for archivists.

Van Laer, who had learned archival practice in his native Holland, applied the principle of provenance to the New York State Archives.⁶⁰

It was Van Laer who reported on the Brussels conference at a second conference of archivists in Indianapolis in December 1910.⁶¹ Schellenberg credited the annual meetings of the Public Archives Commission for spreading the notion of provenance in the United States.⁶²

By the time the United States National Archives and Records Administration was opened in 1935, a number of state archivists were practicing the principle of provenance in their institutions.⁶³ In the National Archives a variation of *respect des fonds* (excluding original order) was introduced in 1941. Archivists there officially established "record groups."⁶⁴ As Oliver W. Holmes has pointed out, however, this unit was established purely for convenient physical control of the materials: "We thought it better to divide the records of such large 'agencies' as departments into a number of separate record groups, usually reflecting the bureaus within departments and of 'convenient size' for administration."⁶⁵ The National Archives was motivated by practical considerations to alter the principle of *respect des fonds*, as it had been inundated by 800,000 cubic feet of records in a single decade and was looking in the future at even faster and larger accumulations.

As a way to aid in control, record groups were divided into branches based on a broad subject field such as defense or industry or form such as maps or sound recordings. The subject and form orientations sometimes led users to infer relationships that in fact did not exist. Commissions, for instance, no matter where they originated, what function they were to carry out, or by what legislation they were created, were placed together.

Charles M. Gates, writing in 1938 in the first volume of the *American Archivist*, the journal of the newly formed Society of American Archivists, noted that "the principle of preserving the groupings of records according to offices of origin is coming to be observed more extensively, but there are undoubtedly many instances in which the arrangement of records within those main groupings has been changed."⁶⁶ Thus, in writings available to North American archivists, the principle of provenance, although not referred to by that word, included both *respect des fonds* and original order.

As in Europe, in the United States the principle of provenance similarly had rough sailing. Schellenberg analyzed the historical records surveys of 1942 and came to the startling conclusion that "two thirds of the repositories arranged items chronologically, and about one third by subject, though a combination of methods was employed in many repositories."⁶⁷ Schellenberg felt this habit of classification was derived from practices of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.

As American archivist Marjorie Rabe Barritt noted: "Unfortunately, Schellenberg found that thirty years after the adoption of the principle of provenance by the Brussels Congress, most archivists in the United States either ignored or misunderstood the principle and did not apply it to the records in their care."⁶⁸

There were two conditions that made the use of provenance in American archives problematical: the lack of a centralized registry system for the control of current records and the sheer volume of materials coming into American archives after the Second World War.⁶⁹

Canadian archivists were introduced to European archival theory in the 1950s through their contacts in the United States. Although the then Public Archives of Canada followed the example of the National Archives and Records Administration, those who assisted with the implementation were never particularly convinced of its usefulness.⁷⁰ It was not until the 1980s, with the report of the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, the so-called Wilson Report, that archivists began the modern debate over the principle of provenance that rages so strongly today in the pages of *Archivaria*, the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists.⁷¹

In Australia the Australian Archives abandoned the record group in favor of the series in 1964. P. J. Scott's article in the *American Archivist* in 1966 did a great deal to promote the series as the proper unit for description and retrieval worldwide.⁷² Scott's method, however, was and is more suited to handle the large series of records that arise from complex relationships that occur in government. The series system easily accommodates those situations in which one series may be created and continued by a number of different departments as departments, relationships, and names change and as responsibilities merge and diverge. Unfortunately, the series system has a far more limited utility when it comes to the arrangement and retrieval of private records.⁷³

It would seem, then, that at least *respect des fonds* was practiced independently in a number of countries up to and including the first half of the nineteenth century. Even though subject classification was subsequently attempted in England, Holland, France, and Germany, all four countries returned once again to provenance as the basic organizing principle. It is unclear when original order was adopted popularly in France, but it seems to have been a coequal principle with *Registraturprinzip* in Germany and was published as such by the Dutch, the British, and the Italians. When what seems to be a French term, *provenance*, was introduced into the English language is, to date, unknown. Jenkinson in his *Manual of Archive Administration* does not relate the word "provenance" to either *respect des fonds* or original order.⁷⁴ Leland does not use provenance, but

he refers to *respect des fonds*. The English translation of Muller, Feith, and Fruin's manual in 1940 does not use the word "provenance" except in the index at the back of the book, which points to a section concerned with the combining of inventory descriptions, a matter that is tangential to the theory of provenance. Schellenberg used it in 1956 in his text, *Modern Archives*, but that seems rather late for its popular use.

Why is it important to understand how the principle of provenance was introduced? The significance lies in whether the principle includes, of necessity, both *respect des fonds* and original order or whether these are in fact separate. If *respect des fonds* and original order are separate principles, the possibility exists for archival practitioners to follow the first (*respect des fonds*) but not the second (*original order*). The reverse is impossible, for as soon as one mixes the records of two fonds together, the principle of original order is violated. If archivists respect the fonds and make their own arrangements of the material within each fonds, this will affect both the terminology used in description and the levels at which the description occurs. These, in turn, can affect how and at what level retrieval will occur.

There are several other key questions. In considering *respect des fonds*, is the level at which the concept of fonds is applied fluid? Can it or should it change depending upon the institution collecting the records? And if the principle of original order arose from the highly structured environment of the German registry office, does it apply equally to private papers, which have no apparent order? Does it apply to papers in which an order exists but is so idiosyncratic that no one beyond the creator could understand what lies behind it and therefore could not use it? If archivists ignore original order where it exists, how are they to establish their own order? And what does this mean to the process of retrieving information?

No answers to these questions can be derived from what we know today. It is clear that more work needs to be done on the origins of provenance and its introduction and acceptance into archival thought and practice.

The Meaning of Provenance

Now let us consider the meaning of provenance as explained by archival theorists.⁷⁵ Although Muller, Feith, and Fruin in their 1898 manual did not themselves use the word "provenance," they provided two rules that outline the necessity for employing both *respect des fonds* and original order in arranging and describing archival materials.

Rule number one, for instance, delineates the fonds: "An archival collection is the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials." Rule number eight articulates *respect des fonds*: "The various archives groups placed in a repository must be kept carefully separated." Rule number sixteen captures the idea of original order: "The system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it."⁷⁶ Horsman pointed out that since the entire contents of the manual were considered dogma, it is clear that both rules were meant to be followed.⁷⁷

Hilary Jenkinson considered provenance in his *Manual of Archive Administration*, originally published in 1922. He interpreted provenance very narrowly, as "the place from which Archives come."⁷⁸ His words regarding arrangement, however, prove that he followed the school that places *respect des fonds* and original order together as part of the principle of provenance, since further on he stated that the archivist was to study the administrations concerned, their history, and their organization (*respect des fonds*) and to establish, or reestablish if necessary, the original arrangement of the documents (original order). He continued by referring to the first step of arrangement as organizing records into fonds.

Jenkinson discussed how one should determine what constitutes a fonds. He stated somewhat obscurely that the French definition narrowly limits the "true 'autonomous' fonds somewhat rigidly by the nature of the Archives it contains." He felt that Muller, Feith, and Fruin defined a *fonds d'archives* as the records of an organization whose creating administration, when active, "constituted the final authority for executive action." He posed a definition of his own for the fonds, or what he termed "archive group": "the Archives resulting from the work of an Administration which was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without any added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it."⁷⁹ Jenkinson felt that the adherence to "provenance" (though he did not use the word), not intermingling records of different archive groups, was important for preserving certain qualities that he felt were inherent in the records. Papers without the context provided by provenance, for example, would lack the qualities of authenticity and impartiality. Authenticity means that the records are free from the suspicion of tampering; they are an authentic record of the person or organization that created them. Impartiality refers to the fact that records, by being

drawn up in the course of daily activity, are an impartial testimony to the actions they represent. They were not drawn up in the interests of posterity, he emphasized.⁸⁰

Two American archival theorists who dealt with the concept of provenance were Margaret Cross Norton and Theodore Schellenberg. Norton followed Jenkinson's lead, often directly quoting him. She felt that *respect des fonds* and original order were both inherent aspects of the principle of provenance. She stated: "By provenance, archivists mean that the records of each department and of each of its subdepartments should be kept together and that the main groupings or files of records, generally called series, as set up by these departments of origin shall be retained." In regard to the importance of provenance to maintaining certain qualities in the records, Norton agreed with Jenkinson. She limited her notion of records as "evidence," however, to a strict legal definition of the term—that is, records needed to be provable as authentic by archivists in order to qualify as evidence in a court of law.⁸¹

Schellenberg, considered to be one of the most influential archival thinkers in the United States, introduced several new aspects to the definition of archives that had a profound effect on the concept of provenance. In 1956 he introduced the extremely important archival concept that archives have evidential and informational value.⁸² Although he was not the first to note that records are evidence of actions (Jenkinson introduced the notion of evidence), he augmented the idea of evidence by delineating the quality of information in a record. Every record must be evidence of some action (e.g., a fishing license, the granting of permission to fish; a letter, the written evidence of a person corresponding with another entity, etc.). According to Schellenberg, every record additionally has the potential to offer information about some topic, and this is the record's informational value.

In addition to the qualities of evidential and informational value, Schellenberg proposed that archival records had primary and secondary uses. "Primary uses" meant that records were useful to the original creators of the records. "Secondary uses" meant that records were useful to persons other than the records creators. Thus, according to Schellenberg, in order to be considered "archives," records "must be preserved for another reason [other than for the creator's benefit] to be archives, and this reason is a cultural one. They are preserved for use by bodies other than those that created them, as well as by their creators." Thus, Schellenberg foresaw the preservation of certain records for their informational content and not their evidential value. This meant that records could be reorganized "in whatever order will best serve the needs

of scholars and government officials."⁸³ Obviously, Schellenberg did not consider that meeting the needs of current scholars might hinder retrieval for future scholars interested in different topics and different aspects of the records.

Michel Duchein added a historical dimension to the principle of provenance when he noted that in order to appreciate a document "it is essential to know exactly where it was created, in the framework of what process, to what end, for whom, when and how it was received by the addressee, and how it came into our hands." He also discussed the maximalist and minimalist levels of assigning the fonds. As an example of the maximalist level, the French theorist pointed to the gigantic Soviet State Archival Fonds, which treated the entire country as a single fonds. A minimalist level would treat a department as a fonds. In extending the definition of fonds, Duchein proposed an extensive list of qualities that a body must possess in order to qualify as a fonds, including having legal status, a structured known organization regulated by an organizational chart, and so on.⁸⁴

Adolf Brenneke (1875–1946), director of the Prussian Privy Archives in Berlin, proposed that provenance be thought of as a functional principle. "The principle of provenance for him meant that records could be brought into such an order as to show how they emerged from actual businesses."⁸⁵ He posited that three structures needed to be made visible for researchers: "the structure of the organization, the structure of its tasks and functions, and the structure of the paper records."⁸⁶ A number of modern writers have picked up on the role of function in provenance.⁸⁷

Archival Thinking about Provenance Today

Currently, archivists in English-speaking countries have applied the concept of provenance in real-life situations unevenly in their arrangement and description of records. Even *within* each country the concept has been applied unevenly.

While Anglo-Canadian archivists were slow to get involved in applying provenance to the records in their care, now that they are engaged they have pursued the meaning and application of provenance and original order vigorously. Debra Barr, for instance, argued effectively that the accession is the meaningful unit for maintaining physical and administrative control and that inventories should demonstrate the connections of records to as many creators and other records as is appropriate.⁸⁸ There is absolutely no doubt that accessions must be maintained in order to

respect original order. When records are acquired, in what order and with what other records can be critical factors in determining conditions under which the records were created, accumulated, and used.

Several authors have stated that the fonds is a theoretical construct and that what eventually comes to the archives is not the whole of the records created and accumulated by the creator.⁸⁹ Likewise, as Canadian archival theorist Terry Cook noted, provenance becomes a concept that focuses on the “functions and business processes of the creator that caused the record to be created,” and original order becomes virtual, being linked back to multiple creators.⁹⁰

In 1986 Max Evans of the United States proposed something with which librarians are very familiar: authority control. He stated that archivists should describe records creators and their administrative histories or biographical sketches separately from the records those creators have created or accumulated and that those administrative histories should be linked with *all* records associated with that body.⁹¹ With the more recent development of Encoded Archival Context (EAC) in the United States, an XML coding that allows descriptions of creators to be kept separately from descriptions of records, the separation of creators from records with multiple links to records as appropriate is becoming more frequent.

The term “provenance” is like a railroad train that picks up and discharges passengers at stations as it rumbles along its circumscribed path through the countryside. During the more than three hundred years since a name was given to the archival concept of maintaining documents in association with the administration that produced them, the term has both acquired and shed meanings. What seems unmistakable is that the term is of Western European origin, primarily during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, since the concept was honored in practice generally before it was named, the claims of several separate origins all have airs of legitimacy. By contrast, the need to attach a term to the concept has its origin in two specific instances. One was the need for terms to facilitate identifying and discussing aspects of documents whose genuineness had been questioned. The other flowed from the establishment of instruction in archival work.

In the case of provenance, history tells us that so many concepts and nuances have been associated with the term through the past three-plus centuries that to argue on behalf of one privileged meaning is fruitless if not counterproductive. Essential, instead, is clarifying the concept of provenance as it is applied to archival practice; the definition will flow from there. Only when one examines the history of the concept in detail is one able to parse the concept.

Finally, as the information age and computerization move the once-separate fields of archival enterprise, library science, and museology closer together, so utilization of concepts in the history of the term "provenance" stand to inform and enrich the vocabularies and understandings of all of these fields individually and together.

Notes

1. Michel Duchéin, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 64.

2. Provenance is French, "from *provenant*, present participle of *provenir*, to originate, from Old French, from Latin *provenire*: *pro-*, forth; see *pro-* + *venire*, to come" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. [2007], s.v. "Provenance," <http://www.answers.com/topic/provenance?cat=technology>, accessed August 31, 2007). The *Grand Larousse de la langue française* (1976), s.v. "Provenance," provides an early version of the word "provenance" from 1801 that refers to the place of origin of an object or phenomenon.

3. Heartsill Young, ed., *The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science* (Chicago: ALA, 1983), 181.

4. Ray Prytherch, comp., *Harrod's Librarians' Glossary and Reference Book*, 9th ed. (Hants, England: Gower, 2000), 595–96.

5. Bibliographic Standards Committee, Association of College and Research Libraries, *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books)* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2007), 146, emphasis added.

6. John Carter and Nicolas Barker, *ABC for Book Collectors* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2004), 178.

7. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology* (2003), s.v. "Provenience," <http://www.answers.com/topic/provenance?cat=technology>, accessed August 26, 2007.

8. As part of the study of provenance there have been books and entire conferences devoted to the subject. See Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), and Kerstin Abukhanfusa and Jan Sydbeck, eds., *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance* (Borås, Sweden: Centraltryckeriet, 1994), among others.

9. Peter Walne, ed., *Dictionary of Archival Terminology: English and French with Equivalents in Dutch, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish* (1984), s.v. "Principle of Provenance," s.v. "Provenance."

10. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Principle of Provenance."

11. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Registry Principle," emphasis added.

12. Maynard Brichford, "The Provenance of Provenance in Germanic Areas," *Provenance* 7 (Fall 1989): 56.

13. *Ibid.*, 56, 63.

14. Antonia Heredia Herrera, *Archivística general: Teoría y práctica*, 5th ed. (Seville: Publicaciones de la Exma. Diputación provincial de Sevilla, 1991), quoted in Alain Giroux, "A Theoretical and Historical Analysis of Pertinence- and Provenance-Based Concepts of Classification of Archives" (MAS thesis, University of British Columbia, 1998), 41–42. The date of 1791 for Denmark is also

reiterated in Raimo Pohjola, "The Principle of Provenance and the Arrangement of Records/Archives," in Abukhanfusa and Sydbeck, *The Principle of Provenance*, 87. Horsman noted that the principle of provenance had been applied in practice by the Germans as early as 1816. Unfortunately, he gives no citation to back up this statement, and this date does not seem to appear anywhere else. See Peter Horsman, "Taming the Elephant: An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," in Abukhanfusa and Sydbeck, *The Principle of Provenance*, 53.

15. Horsman, "Taming the Elephant," 53. See also Herrera, *Archivística general*, 33.

16. Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar, and Theo Thomassen, "New Respect for the Old Order: The Context of the Dutch Manual," *American Archivist* 66 (Fall–Winter 2003): 252. Series are a lower level of arrangement than fonds. Series are numbers of files deriving from a common function or containing a common type of record such as ledgers. They are sometimes naturally occurring and named by the creator(s) or not, or they are artificially arranged. Both naturally occurring and artificial series can be identified and named by archivists.

17. *Ibid.*, 254.

18. T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1956), 173; Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Ken Munden (1967; Chicago: SAA, 2006); Brichford, "Provenance of Provenance"; Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 19.

19. Walne, *Dictionary*, s.v. "Principle of Pertinence."

20. Duchein, "History of European Archives," 19.

21. Michael Roper, "The Development of the Principles of Provenance and Respect for Original Order in the Public Record Office," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh Taylor*, ed. Barbara Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 134–54.

22. Giroux, "A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," 28.

23. A number of authors have argued that when archives were decentralized, they followed the principle of provenance because each government department or organization kept its own records. See, for example, Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," in Munden, *Archives and the Public Interest*, 25.

24. Giroux, "A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," 42–43.

25. *Ibid.*, 38.

26. *Ibid.*, 46.

27. *Ibid.*, 54.

28. Peter Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or the De-discovery of the Archival Fonds," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002): 9; Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development," 31.

29. In a paper delivered at the International Congress of Historical Studies in London in 1913, however, British archivist Charles Johnson used the term *respect des fonds* and referred to French classification schemes of the 1790s. Since this was the period after the Archives nationales was founded, when subject classification was rampant, it is hard to know from where Johnson would have gotten this information (Roper, "The Development of the Principles," 145).

30. Duchein, "History of European Archives," 19. De Wailly was head of the administrative section of the Archives départementales at the Ministry of the Interior when he issued his circular regarding *respect des fonds*.

31. Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," 75.

32. Giroux, "A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," 54.

33. Johannes Papritz, "Méthodes modernes de classement d'archives: Documentation écrite d'avant 1800," quoted in Giroux, "A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," 12.

34. G. Desjardins, *Le services des Archives départementales* (Paris, 1890), 30, quoted in Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," 64–82. See also Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 172. Schellenberg maintained that Natalis de Wailly justified the principle during a meeting of the newly minted Archives Commission on June 8, 1841.

35. Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," 75–76.

36. Duchein, "History of European Archives," 19.

37. Lawrence D. Geller, "Joseph Cuvelier, Belgian Archival Education and the First International Congress of Archivists, Brussels, 1910," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 26–34. Ironically, Gachard, a historian, is said to have had no regard for the principle of provenance. See Erik Aerts and Lieve De Mecheleer, "Le César des archives: Archivistiek en historiografie in de eeuw van Gachard" *Bibliotheek- en archiefgids—Vlaamse vereniging voor bibliotheek-, archief-, en documentatiewezenen* 79 (2003): 24–35.

38. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 174. Interestingly, in both *Modern Archives* and in an article, Schellenberg attributed the origins of the principle of provenance to regulations issued by François Guizot, French minister of public instruction, in 1839. This is likely an error, since Guizot was not minister of public instruction in 1839. See T. R. Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," *American Archivist* 24 (January 1961): 11–24. The date of 1841 for the issuance of the circular, however, is probably correct, and, as Schellenberg himself noted, the minister who issued the circular was Charles Marie Tanneguy Duchâtel, minister of interior in 1841. The biographical sketch for Fonds Duchâtel confirms that Duchâtel "déposa et défendit le projet d'organisation des archives publiques." (Archives nationales [Paris], "Charles Marie Tanneguy Duchâtel," BORA Archives Privées, http://daf.archivesdefrance.culture.gouv.fr/sdx/ap/fiche.xsp?id=DAFANCH00AP_2AP&q=sdx_q0&n=11&x=rsimple.xsp (accessed September 1, 2007).

39. In his article Ernst Posner confusingly referred to provenance not as *Provenienzprinzip*, as Schellenberg referred to it, but *Registraturprinzip*. In a footnote Posner stated that the "'principle of the sanctity of the original order' would be more to the point." The farther one gets into his article, however, the more it becomes clear that Posner felt that keeping records according to their creating agency, or *respect des fonds*, was part of "original order" ("Max Lehmann," 37, 36).

40. Paragraph 2 of Max Lehmann's regulations states that *Provenienzprinzip* was "based upon the French principle of *respect des fonds*." See Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 174.

41. Posner, "Max Lehmann," 39.

42. Posner stated that Paul Bailleu, in a paper read before the 1902 meeting of German archivists, did not attribute the changes of arranging material on the basis of agency provenance and registry classification to Max Lehmann.

Posner attributes this to the fact that Lehmann had alienated his colleagues at the Privy Archives (*ibid.*, 42).

43. *Ibid.*, 40.

44. Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archiven* (*Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*) (Groningen: Erven B. Van der Kamp, 1898).

45. Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen, "New Respect," 257. See Harry Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (1912), vol. 2, pt. 1 (1914), vol. 2, pt. 2, ed. H. W. Klewitz (1931), all reprinted 1958, with separate index; and Arthur Giry, *Manuel de diplomatique* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1894). Section 19 of the manual refers to both German and French practices and thinking.

46. According to Peter Horsman, Muller is the author of the comments in section 15 of the manual stating: "One example, which used to be cited continually by a professor at the École des Chartes in Paris (where 'le respect des fonds' is always insistently preached) will make this clear." Muller's lecture notes are kept in the Library of the National Archives in The Hague. See Horsman, "Taming the Elephant," 61; Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1968), 50. See also Marjorie Rabe Barritt, "Coming to America: Dutch Archivistic and American Archival Practice," *Archival Issues* 18 (1993): 44; and Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen, "New Respect," 260.

47. Muller stated of the *Provenienzprinzip*: "It was just in the air at any place. . . . The principle is not a new one, nor is it Dutch, as the German name testifies." See Horsman, "Taming the Elephant," 53. According to Horsman, the Dutch name of *herkomstbeginsel* for provenance and its definition were written by Muller in 1908 (*ibid.*, 61).

48. Eric Ketelaar, "Muller, Feith and Fruin," *Miscellanea Carlos Wyffels: Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique* 57 (1986): 256, quoted in Barritt, "Coming to America," 44.

49. Ketelaar, "Muller, Feith and Fruin," 257, quoted in Barritt, "Coming to America," 44. Barritt notes that the translation from the Dutch is Ketelaar's.

50. Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen, "New Respect," 258.

51. Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration Including the Problems of War Archives and Archives Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922); and Eugenio Casanova, *Archivistica* (Siena: Lazzeri, 1928).

52. Roper, "The Development of the Principles," 138.

53. *Ibid.*, 148.

54. E. Lodolini, *Archivistica: Principi e problemi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1984), 129, quoted in Duchein, "History of European Archives," 20. Some authors have quoted Baldassare Bonifacio's essay *De Archivis Liber Singularis* (Venice, 1632) as introducing the notion of order in archival science. While Bonifacio did say that "order itself is something divine," a closer examination of his ideas reveals that he had an order in mind to be imposed by the archivist, first dividing up "by location, then affairs, and finally times." See Lester K. Born, "Baldassare Bonifacio and his Essay *De Archivis*," *American Archivist* 4 (October 1941): 221–37.

55. Colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin have pointed out that an early version of provenance existed in the Spanish-speaking world. It is unclear

at this date, however, that the Spanish development had any direct effect on the English-speaking archival community.

56. Congrès de Bruxelles, 1910, *Actes* (Brussels: Siège de la Commission permanente des Congrès internationaux des archivistes et des bibliothécaires, 1912). According to American archivist Anne Gilliland-Swetland, the congress took place at the 1910 World's Fair in Brussels. It would explain partially why the congress took place when and where it did. Unfortunately, she does not give a citation for this. See Anne Gilliland-Swetland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000), <http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub8gabst.html>, accessed August 26, 2007. The French edition of the Dutch manual was published in time for the International Congress and would have been available to participants. See Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen, "New Respect," 266.

57. T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 44.

58. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 179; Rodney A. Ross, "Waldo Gifford Leland: Archivist by Association," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 267.

59. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 180.

60. Schellenberg, *Management of Archives*, 43; James Corsaro, "Arnold Johan Ferdinand Van Laer, New York State Archivist: Some Biographical Notes," *Society of American Archivists Archival History Newsletter* (April 1990), n.p.

61. Barritt, "Coming to America," 48.

62. Schellenberg, *Management of Archives*, 43.

63. Nancy Bartlett, "France's Archives: The Library's Counterpart," in "Primary Sources & Original Works," special issue of *Bibliographical Foundations of French Historical Studies* 1 (1991): 234. Ethel B. Virtue presented a paper at the 1914 conference of American archivists that confirmed *respect des fonds* as the guiding principle for archival classification and provided examples of its use in the archives of Iowa. Thus, at least at the state level, the principle was beginning to be employed in America. See Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 180.

64. National Archives of the United States, *Archivist's Memorandum* no. A-142, February 1941, quoted in Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 181.

65. Oliver W. Holmes, "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," *American Archivist* 27 (1964): 26.

66. Charles M. Gates, "The Administration of State Archives," *American Archivist* 1 (July 1938): 139.

67. Schellenberg, *Management of Archives*, 33.

68. Barritt, "Coming to America," 50.

69. Angelika Menne-Haritz, "Ernst Posner's *Archives and the Public Interest*," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall–Winter 2005): 323–32.

70. Tom Nesmith, ed., "Introduction," in *Archival Studies in English-Speaking Canada and the North American Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 1–28.

71. Francophone colleagues noted in 1987 that *respect des fonds* was the cornerstone of archival theory. See Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau, *The Life of a Document: A Global Approach to Archives and Records Management*, trans. David Homel (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1987).

72. P. J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 493–504.

73. Canadian archivist Laura Millar has advocated capturing relationships between records and between records and agencies and not getting "hung up on 'series' versus 'fonds'" ("An Unnecessary Complication": International Perspectives on the Record Group, the Series and the *Fonds*," unpublished draft, March 28, 2007).

74. Jenkinson, *Manual of Archive Administration*, 80. In a report to Congress E. Wiersum observed that the notion of not intermingling records of different provenance evolved from daily practice throughout Europe before it was articulated by the French ("Het herkomstbeginsel," in *Actes [du] Congrès International des Archivistes et Bibliothécaires 1910*, ed. J. Cuvelier and L. Stainier [Brussels, 1912], 135–43, quoted in Horsman, "The Last Dance," 6.)

75. For a partial list of writings about *respect des fonds* and provenance see Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 1–15.

76. Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual*, 13, 33, 52.

77. Horsman, "Taming the Elephant," 53.

78. Jenkinson, *Manual of Archive Administration*, 80.

79. *Ibid.*, 83, 84.

80. *Ibid.*, 12, 11.

81. Thornton W. Mitchell, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival & Records Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975), 28, originally published by Margaret Cross Norton, "Archives and Historical Manuscripts," *Illinois Libraries* 25 (December 1943): 399–402.

82. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, on "evidential values," 139–48, and "informational values," 148–60.

83. *Ibid.*, 14, 193.

84. Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," 67, 69.

85. Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde* (Leipzig: Köhler & Amelang, 1953), quoted in Menne-Haritz, "Ernst Posner's *Archives and the Public Interest*," 325.

86. Menne-Haritz, "Ernst Posner's *Archives and the Public Interest*," 327.

87. See, for example, Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–63.

88. Debra Barr, "The *Fonds* Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–88): 163–70, and "Protecting Provenance: Response to the Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 141–45. Inventories with file lists that do not follow physical order, however, tend to enrage researchers, as it is exceedingly difficult to jump from accession to accession to follow individual files as opposed to large series.

89. Horsman, "The Last Dance," 21; Millar, "Death of the Fonds," 6.

90. Cook, "Past Is Prologue," 48.

91. Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986): 249–61.