Reappraisal, Deaccessioning, and Accountability: When ‘Doing the Best We Can’ is not Good Enough

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Abstract

The subjects of reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability are rather consentaneous issues in the realm of archival study. Using the 2008 Paper Caper from Newfoundland as a case study, this article will discuss some of the issues surrounding reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability. The case study is used as a window into the way the above mentioned topics are considered within the archival community. Alternative methods of thought are offered in relation to these matters in an attempt to spur discussion as a means of dealing with reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability, with the goal of avoiding a reoccurrence of an incident like that of the Paper Caper.

Introduction

The topics of reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability as they relate to the archival world are unfortunately under examined. This lack of exploration has led to instances of poor execution in regard to reappraisal, deaccessioning, and how this then impacts accountability. Using an example from the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL) as a case study, this paper will explore the concepts and practices of both reappraisal and deaccessioning, in relation to the Newfoundland incident that became known as the Paper Caper, and the fallout in relation to accountability. This paper does not intend to provide concrete solutions to the above mentioned archival concerns, nor is it the
intention to criticize those working at the Provincial Archives during this time. The aim of this particular paper is to elevate the importance of discussion around these topics so as to find solutions and avoid the issues and concerns that are currently inherent in applying methods of reappraisal and deaccessioning to archival records. That is, through examination and discussion, a new process of thought and application may be applied when encountering these issues. Ideally, further discussion will lead to advancement in archival practice in relation to the above discussed concerns. However, before entering into a dialogue around these issues it is advantageous to understand the archival situation within Newfoundland during the time of the Paper Caper incident.

Archives in Newfoundland

While there are many archives of interest in Newfoundland, two major historical/cultural archives on the island, those of the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador and those under the authority of Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), are those that this paper and case study will be concerned with. It is these archival institutions that play major roles in the Paper Caper of 2005/2008. First the Provincial Archives will be explored as to its operating during 2005.

In 2005 “The Rooms Act” was passed. This essentially transferred the responsibility from the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland to the consolidated corporation of The Rooms. As was its previous mission, the archives were to discover, collect, manage and preserve records having bearing upon the history of the province as well as records that are considered of significance to the province. In June of 2005 The Rooms, as the combined archives, museum, and art gallery came to be called, opened to the public. The Rooms offered 8,000 square feet of collections storage and processing space, with state-of-the-art storage facilities. One of the key goals of this magnificent new building was “to enhance the profile and understanding of the value of [Newfoundland’s] documented heritage.” (The Rooms, 2009). The collections currently contain various government records, still and moving images, maps, and manuscripts. Also, there are a number of digital exhibits available via the institution’s website that offer various reference services, including genealogical research for a fee (The Rooms, 2009).

The mandate of The Rooms as of January 2005 was:

The Provincial Archives’ mandate is to preserve those records of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador deemed to have legal, fiscal and evidential or research value, as well as any records from private sources which have enduring value to the history and culture of the province, regardless of their physical form or characteristics. The Provincial Archives holds over 400,000 photographs, some 50,000 maps and architectural plans, records and diaries of colonial secretaries, governors and prime ministers, post-Confederation government records, and merchant and business records of the colony and country.

The Provincial Archives is committed to preserving Newfoundland and Labrador’s documentary heritage in all of its physical forms - documents, photographs, maps, architectural plans and film - for the present and for the
future. It is this rich documentary heritage which forms the foundation upon which our understanding of our culture and our history is built (The Rooms, 2005, ¶ 2-3).

The second archives of interest for this case study is the archives belonging to Memorial University of Newfoundland. The two major archives under this banner are the Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS) Archives and the Maritime History Archives (MHA). It is relevant to note that CNS Archives were created shortly after the Provincial Archives were removed from Memorial University in 1960, following Memorial’s faculty and staff actually founding its creation, locating Newfoundland archival records from around the world, and managing them from the mid 1950s. This move by the provincial government, seen as a slight by those at Memorial University, caused tension between both the provincial and university archives (Baker, 1993). Interestingly as time passed the mandates of the provincial and university archives grew to be similar. The mandate of the CNS is:

The Centre for Newfoundland Studies’ mandate is to collect all published materials relating to Newfoundland and Labrador; to offer [services...] to all members of the university and to the general public; to preserve the collection for future generations; and to prepare bibliographies as its contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador scholarship.

The Centre for Newfoundland Studies, [...] is a special research collection of books, government documents, periodicals, newspapers, theses, microforms, and historic maps reserved for the study of all aspects of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Centre holds the largest collection of published Newfoundlandiana [sic] in the province. Many of its holdings are old and rare; others are as recent as the report of last month’s task force or this week’s community newspaper (Centre for Newfoundland Studies, 2009, ¶ 1-2).

The Maritime History Archive, established in the 1970s, has been collecting documents related to sea-based activities, primarily those in and around the North Atlantic. The MHA is mandated to “collect and preserve documents relating to the history of maritime activities in Newfoundland and Labrador and throughout the North Atlantic world” (MHA, 2009).

Archives in Newfoundland

In 2005 the PANL commissioned the destruction of some 200 boxes containing various documents (Gillingham, 2008a). The contracted shredding company, after leaving the boxes sitting on their warehouse floor for approximately four to five months (Gillingham, 2008b), sold the boxes to a local antiques collector for $500 (Gillingham, 2008a). The local collector in turn attempted to sell the boxes to the Memorial University Maritime History Archive, but the archivist found the collector’s story of how he obtained the documents to be somewhat dubious. The archivist contacted police regarding the documents, charges were laid against the collector and a trial followed in 2008 (Gillingham, 2008b). Over the course of the trial it was revealed that the documents within the boxes contained information that held great
cultural and historical relevance to the province; included in these nineteenth-century documents were land deeds, documents related to local shipping disasters, information regarding a riot in a community (Gillingham, 2008d), as well as papers relating to a murder that led to legislation outlawing the Newfoundland tradition of ‘Mummering’ (Gillingham, 2008c). The MUN archives were prepared to pay $122,000 for the boxes, and appraised the entire collection to have an approximate value of $200,000 (Gillingham, 2008c). When the Provincial Archives was questioned about why these documents, deemed to be of such value to the province on both a monetary and cultural/historical value, were to be shredded, the archives responded saying the documents were in poor condition; due to animal, bug, and mold infestations that made them a possible health threat. Interestingly, the archivist at Memorial University found the records to be in rather good condition (Gillingham, 2008c), hence the institution’s willingness to pay over $100,000 to acquire them. Following the trial the documents were returned to the Provincial Archives where they are currently available for public use (Gillingham, 2008d).

**Records Examination**

Possibly the most glaring issue in relation to these records was that of the monetary worth attributed to the records and the condition in which they were found. While the PANL contended the records had been ravaged by beasts and mold, the MHA rebutted with an offer of $120,000 and a statement that the records were in good condition. This disagreement across appraisals in itself raises various questions, which will not be dealt with in this paper. However, the willingness of MUN to pay such a large amount of money for these records is likely an indication that the records were not in deplorable condition. Also, one may wish to consider that the records are again being preserved at The Rooms. As such, this paper will move forward on the understanding that the records were returned in a condition that allowed for their further preservation and use.

While the 200 boxes contained various records, some of which may have been of little value to an archives or the public, there are clearly records mentioned in the case the have a great deal of historical and cultural relevance to the province; in particular the records of shipping disasters, as the whole livelihood of the island revolved around the shipment of various goods to Europe since the 15th century. Furthermore, the records related to ‘Mummering’ have a great cultural importance to the province. ‘Mummering’ was a Newfoundland tradition that took place over the 12 days of Christmas. During this time, people would dress up in strange clothing and outfits to disguise their identity. These disguised people would then visit a neighbour, friend, or family member at their home and be invited in for a drink. While in the home there would often be music and dancing, and part of the fun involved the homeowner attempting to guess the true identity of those in disguise. Following this, homeowners would then dress up likewise and the group would move on to another house. In one instance a group of men dressed as
mummers entered a man’s home and proceeded to rob and murder him. The records in the above case study are related to the trial and consequent legislation that outlawed the tradition of ‘Mummering’ in the province.

**Reappraisal**

Reappraisal is defined in the Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives’ (ANLA) Resource Binder for Small Archives as “the process of reevaluating holdings of an archives to determine which items should be retained and which should be deaccessioned” (ANLA, 2002, p. 20). It was not until the 1980s that the idea of reappraisal became acceptable in the archival community, whereas before that the idea of reappraising records with the intent to possibly remove them from the archives was considered counter-productive to developing a collection and viewed as barbaric (Ham, 1993). Since then, insufficient literature has been dedicated to the topic of reappraisal, and in most instances it covers a very small section of archival texts with few comparisons drawn outside the scope of appraisal to other topics of relevance such as archival arrangement and description. It is evident that reappraisal is an uncomfortable topic for archivists. Certainly, one can understand this discomfort, as who are we to say that our predecessor’s decisions were wrong or that ours will be any better? Nevertheless, reappraisal has become a necessity due to the volume of record creation and issues of space and money. The main focus often espoused by those that discuss reappraisal is that it is mainly intended to rid the archives of records that do not fit their mandate or should likely never have been accepted into the archives in the first place. Often times these records/series were accepted due to political pressure placed on the archives or simply to keep a donor happy in the hopes of being rewarded with relevant/valuable records at a later date (Ham, 1993). Unfortunately, this leads to an “is the widow dead yet” form of reappraisal (Craig, 1992, p. 178), which, though comical, is certainly not preferable.

A change in mandate is yet another relevant reason to reappraise a collection. There are a number of “checklists” provided by various sources, including the ANLA binder, which allow for a systematic approach to the reappraisal process. The most extensive is offered by Behrnd-Klodt (2008), which will be applied to the above mentioned case study based on the evidence given during the court case:

“Do the records support the archives’… mission, scope and collecting policy and do the records help meet that archives’ collecting goals and objectives?” (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008, p. 64)

Clearly, based on the above provided mandate of the Provincial Archives from 2005 and the information provided regarding the records themselves, the records in question do meet the mission, goals, and objectives of The Rooms.

“Do the records have sufficient historical, intrinsic, legal, exhibit or other value to warrant their retention?” (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008, p. 64)

Again, the historical value of the records in discussion is quite evident. Interestingly, if one considers the arrangement
of The Rooms the exhibit value for these records could be rather high. Many records are not necessarily visually appealing on their own, but if combined with illustrative elements, carry a great deal of informational clout. The example here should be of prime use to The Rooms Corporation. Being that it encompasses both the Provincial Museum and Archives of Newfoundland, the main focus of which is to exhibit materials that relate to Newfoundland history and culture. Developing an exhibit about ‘Mummering’ in the province seems a natural choice, and the records showing the beginning of the end of ‘Mummering’ on the island would be a logical element of the display. A similar argument could be made regarding the records of shipping disasters around the island.

“If the originals have been reformatted so that the originals are redundant…warranting [no] continued retention?” (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008, p. 64)

There is mention in the newspaper reports from the court case of microfilming some records, but it is unclear as to which were microfilmed and which were not (Gillingham, 2008c). Also, there is an inherent value in the idea of the original, especially if one considers the exhibit value mentioned above. It is unlikely that a microfilm reel would have the same visual impact as the actual record.

“Have the records so deteriorated as to lack research or other value…[and not] permit use? Do the Materials require more care, conservation…than can be effectively provided by the archives?” (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008, p. 64)

This issue has been discussed above and does not bear repeating.

“Do any other reasons, such as considerations of public sentiment…or public reaction to deaccessioning and disposal warrant either retention or disposal?” (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008, p. 64)

It seems apparent that this was not a consideration during the reappraisal process. The question itself, however, brings up an interesting point that will be discussed later in this paper regarding the relationship between reappraisal and accountability.

While these were not the types of questions asked or the sorts of reflective answers provided in Newfoundland, they do afford points for further discussion. However, in terms of the case study discussed, the next stage after the reappraisal process was deaccessioning. Following the decision by the PANL to no longer preserve the records, focus then shifted to how to deal with or what to do with these materials.

Deaccessioning

Once a successful reappraisal has taken place, and records have been chosen for removal from the given institution, the focus of the archivist then shifts to deaccessioning, defined by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) as “the process by which an archives, museum, or library permanently removes accessioned materials from its holdings” (SAA, 2009). Like reappraisal, deaccessioning is a rather vexatious topic for archivists. Once the decision has been made to remove records from an archives the attention then converts to how to deal with the removal of these records. Again, this is obviously a discomforting situation for the archivist; one could conceivably
forsake records that no longer “fit” within an institutional outlook, yet which still have value to society. Similar to that of reappraisal, there are a number of checklists that an archivist can employ to ensure they have covered all the areas of deaccessioning systematically. There are a number of such checklists. This paper will examine the ANLA Deaccessioning: Options (2002) mainly because of its level of description, and because it is a resource one might expect a Newfoundland archives to reference while undertaking the act of deaccessioning.

*Transfer to a More Appropriate Archives* (ANLA, 2002, p. 22)

The ANLA resource binder explains that if materials are no longer part of the purview of a given archives then contacting an institution with complementary holdings is an all together preferred option, a point echoed in the other literature around deaccessioning. Given the nature of the records and the mandate of the archives housed under the MUN banner this would have been the ideal solution for the above discussed records, especially the shipping records in the collection. However, residual tension between the two institutions may have played a role.

*Return items to donor or successors* (ANLA, 2002, p. 22)

This does not apply in this case as The Rooms is the “owner” of the records as they are the government record repository. As such there was really no donor or successor to return the materials. For example, the records regarding the murder case would not be returned to the local court because it clearly belongs to the Provincial Archives as per the legislation laid out in The Rooms Act of 2005.

*Sale* (ANLA, 2002, p.22)

While the sale of deaccessioned records is mentioned in the ANLA binder, it is treated as a taboo in the archives world. Behrnd-Klodt (2008) points out that often professional ethics prevent the sale of deaccessioned records. When asked about this option in regard to records of the Paper Caper the provincial archivist at the time of the incident replied, “It’s not the policy for any archive to go and have flea markets or sell records” (Gillingham, 2008c, p. A3). Interestingly, one can look to a number of archives in the U.S. that have sold various deaccessioned documents, using these funds to further the care of the records they do keep (Doylen, 2001). While this is generally not done in Canada and Britain, it begs the question, why not? If there is no institution interested in taking these records why not sell them to the highest bidder? What is one person’s junk may become another’s treasure, and this is arguably a better alternative for the records than their being destroyed.

*Destruction* (ANLA, 2002, p.23)

The ANLA resource manual suggests that after one has exhausted all the above options, then records destruction can be considered. Interestingly, the binder suggests using the records for exhibitions or school tours as a penultimate alternative, which is rather novel amongst the other deaccessioning literature. A wonderful outreach tool for archives could be showing deaccessioned records to those that have little or no idea about
what an archives is or does. While destruction should be the last solution on any archivist’s list, The Rooms saw it as the only option. The reason for the destruction was deplorable condition, yet Memorial University was willing to pay so much for the materials clearly believing them to be worth preservation (like the current Rooms administration).

Deaccessioning is a controversial issue within the museums field, yet they seem to have a much better handle on the subject than archivists. It appears that museums are much more comfortable in dealing with the various aspects of deaccessioning, especially the idea of sale, than the archival community (Miller, 1997). One could possibly attribute this comfort to the amount of literature that surrounds the topic in their field of study; an example is the actual existence of a deaccession reader in the museum field’s literary canon (A Deaccession Reader, 1997). While this will most certainly be a controversial suggestion, perhaps archives should reconsider the sale of certain records as more viable option then they currently do. This is not to say that all records should be sold, but those that are at least similar to the ones discussed in this case study fall under the salable category, which may be preferable to destruction in some cases.

**Accountability**

There are generally two forms of accountability discussed in the archival realm: one side focuses on the use of records to hold creators accountable for their actions, and the other applies accountability to the archival institution charged with the preservation of records relating to a given period of history. The majority of the sparse literature focuses on being able to use records to hold others accountable for their actions, as is evident in John Dirks’ (2004) *Accountability, History, and Archives: Conflicting Priorities or Synthesized Strands?* Terry Cook’s (2002) “A Monumental Blunder”: *The Destruction of Records on Nazi War Criminals in Canada* deals with the issue of institutional accountability. However, the main focus is again on the use of records to hold others accountable, while the discussion of institutional accountability applies to retention schedules and initial appraisal, not the concerns of reappraisal and accountability. Accountability as it relates to reappraisal is inherently different than that of initial appraisal. In initial appraisal an archivist decides if the record is worth taking into an archives, while reappraisal is the focus of removing a record previously deemed relevant to a given archives. The public perception is that the records in the archives are safe as they have been approved for preservation. In Cook’s (2002) example the records were appraised to be preserved for a given amount of time, and due to financial restraints were retained longer than initially intended. It is important to be accountable for all records—not just the ones of evidentiary value that may be useful for future persecution—but also those that have an innate historical and cultural value. Essentially the non-evidentiary records, in the sense of use in court, should be considered as essential to an archives. This paper is interested in the accountability as it relates to the institution and archivist, as the records in the case study have no evidentiary
value in the sense of being able to hold a certain person or organization accountable for actions recorded. As Schaffer (1992) points out, North Americans generally do not care about the preservation of their documented history. This, however, does not hold true in Newfoundland, where the call for a provincial archival repository was made by the general populace in both 1890 and 1927 (Baker, 1993). Also, the public reaction to the Paper Caper bears witness to the passion that resides in those of the island, especially considering the records in question which, though culturally and historically significant, were certainly not pillars of Newfoundland’s recorded history.

While this is not a “monumental blunder” in the way described in Cook’s article (2002), it was certainly a misstep by the Provincial Archives. However, the provincial archivist at the time did not equate the attempted destruction of the materials as accidental or inadvertent. The archivist defended her decision on the destruction, wherein she believed she had done what was best for the archive. Nobody believes that these actions were meant to be to the detriment of the archives or population. She clearly believed in her decision regarding the destruction of the records. It is here that one begins to see there is possibly nothing inherently wrong with the current practices in dealing with reappraisal and deaccessioning, but more there is an issue in the way archivists view the processes that are involved in deciding to reappraise and deaccession, and therefore the accountability related to these decisions.

**Methods of Thought for Reappraisal, Deaccessioning, and Accountability**

The method of thought that appears to be applied to these particular aspects of appraisal is rather linear, I would contend that this ‘linear’ mode of thought is part of the problem with these three interconnected concepts. The above is discussed in a linear, step-by-step fashion, to intentionally mimic the prevalent line of thought that is evident in the deficient discussions on the issue. Below, in figure 1 is a model depicting the linear thought process predominant when dealing with these concepts.

![Figure 1: Linear Model.](image)

It appears through the above mentioned discussions on the topic that one concept is dealt with and then there is progression onto the next concept. Thought is applied in a departmentalized fashion. The above discussed Paper Caper of 2008 clearly shows a fragmented view of the process, almost giving little thought to anything after the reappraisal decision; and certainly not considering possible deaccessioning options other than destruction. If our thought process is the problem in dealing with the ideas of reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability, the question then becomes how should we consider these issues? Below, in
figure 2 is the first model of thought that may be of use.

Based on Schellenberg’s Life Cycle of a record, as depicted in Shepherd and Yeo (2003), this model brings a level of connectivity to the concept that is not present in linear model. Most notability the Cyclical Model demonstrates that decisions made over the course of these processes revert back on themselves. Thus, the decisions and thought process going from reappraisal to deaccessioning and to accountability will impact the reappraisal process. While this model is preferable to the Linear Model its inadequacies in actual use quickly become apparent. The most glaring issue is that the Cyclical Model is still a step-by-step one, moving from each step to the next until the process is complete, then arriving back at the original step for consideration. Essentially, this model does not allow for the interconnectivity that is required to fully deal with and understand the consequences related to each stage. However, building off of this concept, as it does have some redeeming qualities and is certainly a step in the right direction in relation to the Linear Model, we see a better representation of the relationships between each stage. Figure 3 presents a more complete visual representation of thought that could be applied to the above discussed processes.

The Spirograph Model, named so due to the resemblance it bares to something that a spirograph drawing toy might create, clearly demonstrates the interconnectivity and relationships between the three stages. Each activity is connected to the other, each having a bearing on the other. Therefore, when considering the reappraisal one should also simultaneously be considering the possible deaccessioning options discussed above. The options for deaccessioning should have a bearing on the reappraisal process. Obviously, if records are valuable (not necessarily in a monetary sense) but can no longer be housed at a given institution due to reasons of space or mandate change for example, it is not a reason for destruction and should be considered in the reappraisal process. This then would also have an impact on the issue of the archives accountability. While there are any number of scenarios that could be take place at a given archives the point of this method of thought, as
is demonstrated in the diagram, is that each stage influences the other both forward and backward. This allows for reconsideration of values placed on a given record at each stage. When considering these values at a given stage they may impact the values attributed at a previous or later stage, and an earlier stage may need to be revisited with the values discovered being considered in this earlier stage. While this process can certainly lead to a great deal of back-and-forth work and rethinking, it allows for a better examination of records in relation to the processes of reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability; with the hope of avoiding incidents like that of *Paper Caper* by simply rethinking the way in which these processes are approached and considered by an archivist.

**Conclusion**

Archival discussions seem to constantly be trying to move the profession toward the next big idea, theory, or method. Maybe a shift in focus is needed; why constantly look at huge overarching ideas? What is needed is to actually apply and refine the theories and methodologies already developed before creating something new. What is available may do the job quite well if only the time were to be taken to properly implement and consider these current methods; stop looking for the answer before spending adequate time to understand the whole equation. Instead of trying to constantly push the profession to new heights through the establishment of new and more elaborate theories and methodologies, why not level off and stabilize before beginning to climb again?

This paper does not purport to have the answers or to provide solutions to the issues surrounding reappraisal, deaccessioning, and accountability. The hope is rather that it will spur discussion around these issues. It is not necessarily the individual processes that need adjustment but rather the way in which archivists approach and consider the larger picture in relation to these concepts. The three diagrams employed are simply ideas and thoughts in relation to these concerns, they are not meant to be concrete solutions, but hopefully they may be used to initiate discussion around these issues/concerns in a new way; the goal is for further discussion but in a different vein. Will sending the discussion and thought process in a different direction be any more fruitful than the current mode of thinking in archival practice? This I cannot say, but it is worth exploration and consideration for it may actually provide the answers we seek.
References


