Archival value in South Africa

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The article gives a brief outline of how the National Archives of South Africa may be accessed through manual and electronic finding aids.

According to the National Archives of South Africa Act, Act 43 of 1996 (hereafter the Archives Act), the National Archives of South Africa (NASA) is responsible, *inter alia*, for:

- preserving public and non-public records with enduring value for use by the public and the state;
- making such records accessible and promoting their use by the public;
- collecting non-public records with enduring value of national significance that cannot be more appropriately preserved by another institution, with due regard to the need to document aspects of the nation’s experience neglected by archives repositories in the past;
- maintaining a national automated archival information retrieval system in which all provincial archives services shall participate;
- maintaining national registers of non-public records with enduring value, and promoting cooperation and coordination between institutions having custody of such records.

Its holdings are made accessible through both manual and electronic finding aids, which are the subject of this article.

Manual finding aids used in the National Archives

**List of Archivalia**

The *List of Archivalia* is an essential finding aid because it reflects the total content of the archives repository. It enables researchers to identify the sources that are available and serves as a checklist to determine whether all relevant material was consulted. The list is divided into the following categories:

1. chronological list of archives;
2. selected archives (e.g. various offices of the Department of Foreign Affairs);
3. collections (e.g. private collections, microfilms, etc.)

The information within each category is presented in three columns:

- the source code (e.g. MER, usually an abbreviation of the name of the office), followed by the extent of the group and the strong-room it is kept in, as well as the name of the archival group;
- the period that the records cover (from the oldest to the most recent);
- specific finding aids available for a group.

An alphabetical index of the source codes and names of offices appears at the end of the list.

**The inventory**

The purpose of the inventory is to assist the archivist or researcher in locating information in a particular archive. A volume-by-volume description enables researchers to determine exactly what they want to consult. The distinctive feature of the inventory is its synoptic character. It is subdivided into two sections: an introduction section and the inventory proper. Each section is further subdivided, as outlined below.

**Introductory pages**

1. **Title page:** In addition to the full title of the archive and the period that the records cover, it also contains the inventory number, the name of the repository, the source code of the archives, an indication of whether the inventory is updated or revised, the name of the compiler of the inventory, the date when compilation was completed and the place of compilation.
2. **Contents:** a summary of the finding aid as a whole.
3. **Preface:** a standard letter from the National Archivist regarding the mandate pertaining to accessibility and preservation of public and non-public records with enduring value in terms of the Archives Act.
4. **List of abbreviations:** if many abbreviations are used in either the administrative outline or the inventory, they are listed, together with their meanings.
5. **Administrative outline or biographical detail:** attention is given to the reasons and date of establishment of an office; functions and powers of the chief official; the development of functions as sometimes reflected in their filing system; the closure of an office, if relevant, and the reasons for closure. In the case of a private collection, concise biographic detail should be supplied, emphasizing those facets of the person’s life reflected in the records.
6. **Arrangement and content:** this section is divided into the following categories:

- composition of the group (to give the researcher some idea of the main series containing the record residue of the functions, and a description of the physical condition of the records);
• access requirements based either on the conditions set out in the Archives Act (for public records) or conditions set by the donor that must be indicated and adhered to (for non-public records);
• extent (indicated numerically);
• a suggested citation that gives an idea of a possible reference that can be used in the footnote of a publication or a thesis, for example:

National Archives Repository, Archives of the Town Clerk of Ermelo. Source code: MER, volume 1/1/2, reference A4/1, Letter to Mr. Laubscher from the Town Clerk of Ermelo, 12 June 1959

• related material (there may be closely related archival groups or publications that complement the arranged group available in the National Archives Repository);
• a general section where the archivist can add anything pertaining to the group and its arrangement that does not seem to fit in under any of the above-mentioned headings.

7. Synopsis: this is important because it constitutes a bridge between the introductory section and the inventory itself. It is usually compiled after completion of the actual inventory of the records. It indicates the volume number, description, period and page number respectively.

Inventory of records The task of compiling the inventory begins while the archivist is busy with the final sorting and arrangement of records. The main features of the inventory are listed below.

1. First page: includes the heading – INVENTORY, as well as the source code (e.g. Ref: MER).

2. Layout: the inventory consists of three or four vertical columns, depending on the file numbers used. Typical column headings are volume number, file number, description and period.

3. Division of series: the headings according to which the series and sub-series are described are extremely important. Headings are as brief as possible, preferably consisting of only one word, indicating the nature of the contents of the series (e.g. minutes, incoming letters).

4. Numbering: when allocating numbers to records, the archivist must choose the most appropriate of the two systems that are used. If an office no longer exists to create new documents, the records are seen as terminated and there is no need to make provision for further accruals. Such archives are usually provided with volume numbers in consecutive numerical sequence (e.g. 1, 2, 3, etc.). When an office is still in existence (a current office) and there is the possibility of further accruals, a stroke-numbering system is used, so that new material can be added without disturbing the original numbering. The first number indicates the main series, the second a sub-series and a third number the container number, for example:

1 Minutes (series heading)
1/1 Board (sub-series heading)
1/1/1 First volume of Board meetings (used in the columns)
1/1/2 Second volume of Board meetings (used in the columns)

5. Description: the description of each individual item must reflect its basic idea. A volume description is often found on the cover of a record and this can be used as a description. Uniformity is important, and if the descriptions within the same series differ, the archivist must decide which one to use. The volume description is only given for the first volume of each series.

6. Period: dates are always given in the form: year, month, date (for instance, 1929 Dec. 22 – 1932 May 10), but full details are not always available.

7. Annexures: these contain descriptions of maps and photographs and their details are also included (e.g. volume number, description, period and remarks). In the case of books, author, title and remarks are noted. If the records are placed somewhere else, their new location and number can be written into the ‘Remarks’ column.

Footnotes These are mainly used to explain abnormalities and vagueness, such as the actual period inside the volume differing from what had been written on its outside cover. They are not used for historical or other interesting bits of information. Cross-references in the footnotes are very important.

Finalization Once the inventory is completed, it is sent to the head of the office for comments and approval. Registers and boxes are marked with the source code and volume numbers, which correspond with the inventory. The Lists of Archivalia and Inventories can be purchased from the National Archives.

Registers Registers are mainly for stock-taking purposes but may also be used as finding aids. Individual items of collections such as the cartographic, pictorial, microfilm, photographic and private collections are recorded into registers.

The register generally contains the following information: date of receipt, name of the donor/creator/artist, extent/size of the donation, individual descriptions of each item and number allocated to the item in its context. A remark column is included, to indicate, for example, whether the donation is original or a reproduction or whether it was taken from a particular archival group; its original place is also indicated. A large collection of items is arranged according to archival principles and an inventory is compiled.

Division Information Systems in NASA is currently investigating the possible use of the encoded archival description method (ead) and the textual encoded initiative (tei) to make finding aids available on the internet.

Guides Guides are used as more descriptive finding aids for private records, photograph and microfilm collections. They reflect the information described in the (stock-taking) registers. They are, however, computerized and made accessible for researchers’ use in the Reading Room. General information reflected in the guides is: number allocated to the record,
donor, descriptions of the items, start and end dates of a particular group of items. Guides also indicate (in the case of private records) whether a more detailed inventory exists on the group and the extent or number of volumes in the group.

Card catalogues

A card cataloguing system is used in the Reading Room of the National Archives. Card catalogues exist for the library, cartographic and photograph collections. In the case of the cartographic and photograph collections, the cards generally include the following: date, description, remarks, and photo or map number (allocated by the archivist). The cartographic catalogue contains a map section (divided alphabetically by area), and a building plan section (arranged alphabetically). The photograph catalogue is divided into people, places and subjects, each arranged alphabetically. The library catalogue is divided according to author, title, subject and periodicals.

Improvement of manual finding aids

As part of the National Archives transformation initiative, the Committee for the Improvement of Finding Aids (Comifa) was established in 1998, its mandate to:

- investigate and formulate recommendations with regard to the range and appropriateness of the National Archives’ finding aids;
- formulate guidelines for:
  - converting and upgrading the List of Archivalia into a Guide to the Holdings of the National Archives Repository; and
  - improving the National Archives’ inventories.

During 1998, there was discussion on methods of improving the finding aids, standardization, and language and terminology to be used. Until 1994, the policy at the Archives Repository in Pretoria had been to compile all inventories in the language most often used – Afrikaans. To make the information contained in the inventories more accessible it became evident that ‘old’ inventories would have to be translated into English.

It was decided that inventories should help users to decide on the most appropriate records to consult and give infor-
mation such as the language used in most of the records, the extent of the archival group and its accessibility. The format used should be user-friendly. The Canadian Guide Series was examined as a possible example of what could be adopted. The final decision was to adapt the inventories to suit user needs.

After compiling a list of existing inventories, a prioritization exercise was undertaken. The committee made final decisions regarding format at the end of 1998 and involved all the archivists in this in order to get as much work as possible done as quickly as possible. A workshop for these archivists was held at the beginning of 1999, during which an example inventory was discussed and guidelines regarding footnotes and language were given. Using the list of priorities, ‘old’ inventories were issued to archivists for revision and improvement. Each committee member received two inventories to check after they were completed and a meeting set up to discuss issues that had not been anticipated. Minor issues such as the numbering of pages also had to be decided on.

Once all the fine details had been sorted out and the committee was satisfied, a group of four inventories was sent to members of the Directorate for comment. Several questions were asked and clarification of matters such as a standard ‘Preface’ for the inventories, as well as translation issues, were dealt with. The standard format for inventories was accepted and implemented from 1 September 2000. The improvement of existing inventories continues and all new inventories are expected to be compiled according to the Comifa standard. As yet, the format of the Guide to the holdings has not been agreed but it is expected to contain abbreviated information taken from the standardized inventories.

The project is taking much longer than expected. The problems and setbacks encountered relate to the accrual of archival groups since the compilation of the first inventory. Each inventory cannot be merely revised by translating it into English; it must also be updated to include these accruals.

Electronic finding aids used in the National archives

The National Archives maintains a national automated archival information retrieval system (NAAIRS) containing information on public archives housed in national and provincial archive repositories in South Africa. Since 1974, an extensive retrieval system has been built up, enabling users to identify and locate archival material of both public and private origin, irrespective of where it is held. NAAIRS currently comprises almost 7 million computer records. In addition, the National Archives is responsible for maintaining national registers of non-public records in the custody of any institution in South Africa on a voluntary basis. Currently, national registers on photographs (NAREF), manuscripts (NAREM), audio-visual material (NAROM) and oral sources (NAROS) are maintained.

Descriptions of public and non-public information are captured using terminals linked to an AS/400 minicomputer. This is transferred to a mainframe computer, where it is housed in 14 databases (accessed via the website of the National Archives at www.national.archives.gov.za). Guides and lists on manuscripts, oral sources, audio-visual material and photographs are also sold by the National Archives to enable researchers without internet access to identify information in the holdings of the participating institutions.

The data are captured in standardized fields complying with the requirements of the computer programs used. These make provision for the specific technical parameters associated with the particular media, as shown in Fig. 1.

Library

The National Archives Library contains information on archival-related information and history to assist staff members and researchers. It is also investigating the use of the DB Text (Inmagic) software package, which would enable staff to control the contents of the Library and make it easily accessible.

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