

“An Angle on Archives: One Researcher’s Perspective”

Comments to the Australian Society of Archivists Seminar, Canberra

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by

Greg Wood

In between earning a living, I have spent much of the past few years in archives. Most particularly I have been exploring whose influence and whose decisions caused this region to be selected as the site for the national capital and the subsequent history of Canberra the capital.

The National Archives has been my first port of call, but I've also been working in the Mitchell and Fisher Libraries, in the National Library (particularly the map and manuscript rooms), the NSW State Archives both in Sydney and Wagga and the Canberra and District Historical Society. As well I have delved into the ACT Land and Planning Authority's very important holdings of historical and cartographic material. Inevitably, I have started to develop views on the operation of archives.

Research Techniques

I have observed with interest the techniques and the protocols that others use to record and recover raw archival information. Personally the first question I now ask of any archive is its attitude to *my* using digital technology. When I started, only the New South Wales State Archives allowed the use of digital cameras. Now all the libraries and archives I mentioned, with the possible exception of the Mitchell Library, do so. As they should.

The technology means that for near zero variable cost a researcher can capture a document, magnify it later on a computer screen, examine it more effectively and accurately than is possible in the archive itself, even with a magnifying glass. You can revisit a document: the archive is recurrently accessible as the jigsaw of understanding comes together or, just as often, falls apart.

Crucially, beneficially, a digital photo, taken in natural light, causes no more stress or damage to a document than the turning of a page, unlike a photocopy for example. It helps ensure a document is preserved.

Digital documents provided by institutions, (at times instead of the original), can be useful. However in important ways they are not as user-friendly because they are not as amenable to systematic filing, cross referencing, magnification and “interrogation” as the photographs I take myself.

So I trust ACT archives has no argument with allowing the reader to use a digital camera, subject to the same stipulations, caveats and undertakings for the protection of copyright as libraries now apply to photocopying.

Archives and Maps

It's one particular category of documents, maps, and archives approach to maps, that I particularly want to talk about. Maps provide the most logical and accessible way to convey information in a wide variety of circumstances, when, for example, the issues involve borders, transfers of sovereignty, land tenure and title, place and location, planning and development.

Some time ago I started to harbour the suspicion that in the world of archives some categories of documents are more equal than others. My hope today is that you can disabuse me of my suspicion, or at least assure me that it's not so, or will not be so, in ACT archives.

I first started to harbour this thought when, during my personal quest, I twice stumbled over one very distinguished, now departed, archivist and historian. Slide XXX. Some years ago I came across a note on a National Archives file which read “maps...on capital sites removed to map drawers”. It was initialled HJG and dated 1950. Later I encountered a similar note HJG signed in 1955.

Possibly my own ineptitude, certainly a cause of profound frustration, but for a very long period I was unable to locate the maps in question. Nor, for a period, were National Archives staff. There was no detailed listing of them and no apparent way of locating them through files or documents of likely relevance. I am informed that I should never refer to them as having been “lost”, though for all intents and purposes they were as good as.

Needless to say I turned my mind to why HJG had removed them from the file. Maps are difficult, physically vulnerable, objects, particularly if they're large. Safe storage and physical conservation are understandable reasons for his decision. Besides which, maps can be monetarily valuable a further source of vulnerability. There have been major thefts of maps from international collections and their value can make forgery an issue, for the collector if not the archivist.

With thanks to Alan Ives, I have since learnt that “HJG” were the initials of Jim Gibbney, archivist, one of the founding fathers of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, himself a learned Canberra historian. It just so happened that as I started to turn my mind to this seminar, I purchased at the Lifeline Book Fair a seven volume Bibliography of Australian Archives, again written by Alan Ives. The first volume immediately fell open at a reference to a 1966 article by Gibbney, in the Canberra and District Historical Society Journal: it's entitled *Archivists and Historical Societies: Friends or Enemies?* I felt I was being haunted and duly tracked it down.

In it, Gibbney is commenting on the different perspectives of the archivist and the historian. As with anything I've read of his it is extremely simple, clear and authoritative but I cavil with his comments about maps. After defining the essential nature of an archive, Gibbney comments that...

“Historical source materials fall naturally into four main classes -- library materials proper, pictorial materials, cartographic materials and archives. The term library materials comprises mainly printed works such as books, pamphlets, newspapers etc. Every unit comprised under this class is more or less an independent entity, is by its very nature freely available to all, can normally be understood completely without reference to anything else and is unlikely to be

unique. The same sort of considerations apply to pictorial materials with one exception. They are very often unique and they require therefore a good deal more care in treatment than books. Cartographic records (by which I mean maps and plans,) are a different case again. Some maps exist independently of each other in the same way as books, some are intimately related in series with other maps, some are unique, some exist in multiple copies. Most maps or plans, however, require some more or less limited degree of technical knowledge for their interpretation....

“Archives differ even more widely from library materials than either pictorial or cartographic materials. In the first place archives are by their very nature unique.... In the second place, even where the document is not in itself physically unique... it almost invariably acquires a unique quality by its relationship to the other papers among which it lies. I can perhaps best illustrate this point by very simple example....

... and he goes on to do so.

Implicitly, explicitly really, Gibbney is creating a distinction between maps and other archives. There may be circumstances that justify some differentiation, but maps are as integral to an archive as any other document; they often convey information that's unique. Contrary to Gibbney's comment, most maps don't require any particular technical expertise to interpret them, and even if they do this doesn't bear on their archival significance. What they do mandate is thoughtful scrutiny...and a sceptical eye.

Just as a letter will express a personal or official viewpoint, so too will a map. While surveying may be a process of exactitude and precision, cartography is about the depiction of data and ipso facto is inherently selective. Maps are slanted, presenting an idea, perspective or a point of view. Contrary to our usual presumptions, maps can be personal to the point of being demonstrably subjective. Like pictorial records, like any archived paper, they can be unique. For this and other reasons it is essential to preserve the provenance and the linkages between a map and related written and pictorial documents.

Let me illustrate with some of Charles Scrivener's maps. (Slide XXX). In 1910 Scrivener prepared a contour plan to be circulated to the entrants in the national capital design competition, which Burley Griffin won. Scrivener's contour map is in the holdings of the ACTPLA, though the copy I have put up here is from the National Library. Instinctively one assumes that a contour plan must be a factual document give and take the odd hillock. Yes...and no.

Scrivener wanted to ensure that competition entrants considered a clean slate. Therefore he removed from this map, and hence from the awareness of contestants, all existing structures other than St Johns Church. Implicitly he decided that no existing buildings were of such significance that they should be allowed to complicate the capital's design: all evidence of them is erased, knowingly, consciously.

In addition, if you examine this map closely, Scrivener included some personal ideas, to guide competitors. Drawn in is his proposed railway line for linking Queanbeyan to Yass. He also annotated the country, roughly the area of Reid today, as being suitable for orchards, thereby implying this was the desirable land usage. If a contestant took account of the inclusions he pushed the city further north or south or wherever. This map is influencing by exclusion and by inclusion. Scrivener's thinking is apparent from the map itself, and is also outlined in various letters and memos transacted at the time.

Slide XXX. As a point of comparison the 1914 military contour map of the ACT records the then existing roads and structures in detail. You can see the difference between the two. Scrivener's subsequent contour map, also from 1914, is crammed with detail.

To me this is evidence that:

1. a map, on its own account, can convey unique and historically important information;
2. it can be as personal and subjective a document as, say, a letter and is therefore of equivalent archival status;
3. hence, for archival integrity it is essential to maintain a traceable linkage between a map and related documents, just as for any other two papers in an archive. While there may be conservation reasons to physically separate a map from other documents it is crucial to maintain that provenance;

4. in short, a map should be accorded no different status within an archive to any other important archived document.

I would hope that ACT archives would instruct ACT departments with that intent.

Slide XXX. On occasions maps will make a statement not otherwise clearly articulated. Take another Scrivener map, this one from the ACTPLA collection. Why on earth would anyone choose to link “sewerage disposal, water supply, scientific observatories, afforestation, and road location” in the one document?

If you read the related papers, each of these were considerations that determined the practicality of (Canberra as) a site in Scrivener’s eyes. Sewerage and water were about sustaining basic habitability, as, regrettably, we are again learning. Afforestation was less about beautification, more about ameliorating the effects of the westerly winter winds. Roads equalled immediate physical access. The scientific observatory’s purpose, as Scrivener conceived it, was not astrophysics but so that Mr Oddie’s telescope could be used to determine precisely the longitude of Canberra relative to Greenwich, thereby defining the prime meridian, to be a basis for all subsequent surveys of the ACT, and indeed, of Australia as a whole. The map is a distilled treatise on site selection.

Are they really identical?

Maps change. One copy may have very different historical import to another, apparently identical, either at the time, or over time.

Slide XXX. Obviously, once Scrivener's map is used as the template for a design of the capital, be it Burley Griffin's or some other, it is accepted as a different document, by a different author. No one really argues with that: at some point Scrivener's map has not merely been altered but has been transformed, a change widely acknowledged.

However there are many gradations short of transformation. Maps are used as templates and as working documents. Just because two maps may look identical, they may well not be. Multiple copies of an apparently identical map may warrant retention.

Just what annotations and alterations warrant archival retention is a difficult call. Slide XXX. Let me illustrate this, not with a Canberra map, but with a sea chart. I am asking the professionals here to suspend debate on whether its “archive-worthy”. This is the standard chart, used by merchant seaman in the mid-19th century. It's called a blue back chart, roughly the Gregory's Street directory for mariners in 1852. They're now uncommon, verging on rare, but in the course of a couple of years you would come across this one, or something very similar, in the international map market. Physically they are large. Like your Gregory's, they are usually knocked around.

Slide XXX. If you look at the next photo you will see that dozens of voyages are marked in, probably all undertaken by one ship's captain. Given time, you could probably establish the vessels and hence the man. So this particular map carries contemporary data beyond the printed original. On the strength of this data the map certainly could qualify for the archive of, say, a firm, but probably would not warrant inclusion in a national holding.

Slide XXX. If you look in more detail there are further handwritten annotations. This one I find chilling. You probably can't read it but what it says is:

“Man overboard, can't save him: ship running 11 knots, impossible to bring to; the same today, bad luck.

Another man overboard, can't save him, bad weather hard gales.”

If the decision was being made at the time whether or not to archive this document the reference to a man overboard would have would not have weighed in the decision. Probably it would have been seen as a routine occurrence. Today, 155 years later, the annotation provides a history lesson in 28 words: disconcerting, informative, in my view warranting retention. In other words, apparently identical maps may differ as a record. More difficult still, with maps as with any other document, today's presumptions provide unreliable guidance as to what will be seen as historically relevant in future.

Missing maps

In which vein let me come back to my “missing” maps. If any documents make the case for maintaining the integrity of an archive, these do. Three are of particular interest.

Slide XXX. One, from 28 March 1906, identifies sites in this region with national capital potential, notwithstanding Federal Parliament's 1904 decision in favour of Dalgety. Link it to other documents and the Chief Surveyor of the NSW Public Works Department, Arthur Lloyd, is, alone within the NSW or any government, expressing the view that sites K and J, ie today's Canberra, are ahead of all others. To establish this it's essential to have the historical context, the linkage of the map to other documents, the date of the map, the title of the map plus Lloyd's signature as the "cartographer".

Slide XXX. The second map, dated a few days later, is signed by a New South Wales engineer LAB Wade. It is the first document of any kind, to attach the name "Canberra" to this proposed capital site. Lady Denman formally named Canberra in 1913, but it seems it was Wade who first tagged the site with that name. Again, the map contains information available from no other document.

Slide XXX. The third map is signed by Lloyd and the New South Wales government architect Walter Liberty Vernon. It is the first stand-alone map dedicated to a national capital site called Canberra. Like the others it is based on a NSW county map of the era, the hand coloured additions transforming it.

The maps augment all other available documentary records and are central to the history of the selection of Canberra as the site of the seat of government.

Other Lost Maps

It is particularly of concern to me, as we approach Canberra's Centenary, how much of the cartographic record has been lost. Numerous maps, plans, tracings, lithographs, have disappeared, possibly permanently. For example, the oldest existing map describing Charles Scrivener's ideas for the boundaries of the ACT is in a newspaper. His original tracings appear to have been lost both by the New South Wales and the Federal Governments, most probably the inadvertent consequence of being separated from their original files.

Maps of historic importance are being recurrently generated now and will be into the future. I would hope that ACT Archives would emphasise the importance of their retention, conservation, and the maintenance of clear archival provenance.

ACTPLA

It was HJG who led to my first encounter with ACT Archives. Conscious that the National Archives had shared its cartographic holdings with the ACT Government I had sought permission to inspect ACTPLA holdings. It was with my head buried in map drawers out at Pickford's Repository at Mitchell that I first encountered Elizabeth Estbergs, there with similar intent. The ACTPLA holdings are as important a historic holding as any, possibly the best. Certainly some are unique.

Many maps of particular importance are held at the Authority's offices in Dickson, in the Plan Room. Like everywhere else in government, those working in the area are under pressure from their day-to-day obligations and can devote limited time to members of the interested public like me. I am very conscious that when I impose on Gary Travis and his colleagues I'm adding to their workload.

The maps at Pickford's have been carefully listed if not fully catalogued, and have protective interleaving. Currently they are inaccessible in that the repository does not offer a way of viewing them in a totally safe, clean environment. Requests to do so are likely to grow as the ACT Centenary approaches.

My suggestion would be that they be moved to some safe haven desirably another archive or library, assuming the ACT government is not in a position to host them. I am conscious of pride of ownership, but the organisation which now best strikes the balance between public access, safekeeping and preservation is the National Library. My own hope is that rather than retaining ACT government maps at Pickford's they be loaned to, and lodged with, the National Library as a distinct and separate subset of the library's own collection, at least until such time as ACT archives have their own building and specialised facilities.

ACTPLA also holds the surveyors notebooks, some of which go back as far as 1909. These do require expertise, beyond mine anyway, to interpret. Slide XXX. This, for example, is a page from one of Charles Scrivener's personal notebooks. They are important, overlooked, historical documents, currently posing a problem at ACTPLA given the shelf space they occupy.

Digitalisation Again.

Let me return to digitalisation. I am both an advocate of today's technology and conscious of its limitations. As I mentioned my preferred method for researching is to myself take a digital copy of the document. Particularly with maps the digital copies online, for example those provided by the National Library, can't be effectively downloaded. They allow the rough identification of the map but not the detail, hence are of poorer utility to a digital photograph. If an archive is concerned that recurrent usage will damage a rare map, then a high-quality paper scan, a photographic forgery in effect, provides a better public access than an on line digitalised image. I gather the equipment involved is costly, but it is available in Canberra.

As another issue I personally would be very happy to provide ACT Archives with a CD containing copies of any image I take of an ACT archived document, map or other, if it is of assistance to do so. I am conscious that this could create its own problems of organisation and classification, but it would provide backup digital copies of some of your holdings. Personally, I have no problem if you make such an arrangement the quid pro quo for my archival access.

Greg Wood
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