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Interfiling in the Widener Catalogues

SCHOLARS from other institutions who have used the Harvard University Library not infrequently speak of the relative ease with which they found what they were looking for in the Widener catalogues. One reason for this is that from the beginning Widener made extensive use of a simple alphabetical succession of headings in its catalogues, whereas most other libraries have varied the alphabetical sequence with a greater number of classified arrangements. The filing rules of the American Library Association recommend alphabetical filing only for small libraries. But Widener for many years has demonstrated its value for the large library.

There has been a notable exception to the alphabetical system of filing. For words that commonly appear in two or more forms and frequently for names, one spelling is preferred, with a reference from the others. Thus all entries that begin with 'catalog' or 'catalogue' are interfiled as though they were spelled 'catalogue'; 'inquiry' is the form selected for titles that begin with either 'inquiry' or 'enquiry'; and 'labor' comprises 'labour' for filing purposes.

Similarly certain of the more common surnames that occur with variant spellings are interfiled. The largest group of these consists of names that sometimes add a final 'e.' Thus Browne is interfiled with Brown, and the short form is likewise preferred for names such as Clarke, Fiske, Forde, Greene, Meade, Monroe, and Smythe. The rule has not been pushed

to an extreme, for many names have been filed as they are spelled, e.g., Cunningham and Cunnigham. The criterion has apparently been the number of cards involved, for when there are comparatively few cards for a surname with variant spellings, the entries are filed separately. The more numerous the entries are, the more likely they are to be interfiled. This is almost invariably the case when there is a tray or more of cards under a single surname; in such cases the label on the outside of the tray can bear the variant spellings.

Names with a final 'es' and 's,' as well as a final 'ey' and 'y,' have been treated similarly. Andrewes is interfiled with Andrews, Brookes with Brooks, and Weekes with Weeks; not, however, Burrowes with Burrows, Gibbes with Gibbs, or Wilkes with Wilks. Similarly Baily is interfiled with Bailey, Beverly with Beverley, Chauncy with Chauncey, and Mutphey with Murphy; but not Bayly with Bayley or Sweeny with Sweeney.

Double consonants have frequently been interfiled with single consonants. The surnames Abbot, Eliot, Phillips are the most notable instances. Abbott has been interfiled with Abbot; Elliott with Eliot, as well as Elliott with Elliot (but the four have not been reduced to a single form); and Philipps with Philips, as well as Phillipps and Phillipps with Phillips (again without reducing the five forms to one); whereas Hoffman, Hoffmann, Hofman, and Hofmann are all filed separately.

The Library staff agrees that words like 'enquiry' and 'labour' should be interfiled as though they were spelled 'inquiry' and 'labor,' with references from the spellings not used. The staff has some misgivings about the inter-filing of surnames with variant spellings, and has been debating whether to continue the system, extend or curtail it, or give it up altogether. Extension would be based on judgment rather than formulas, for rules do not seem practicable. Rose and Ros would interfile if the final 'e' were disregarded consistently, and a rule for interfiling single and double consonants would bring together Ros and Ross; no one favors the mingling of Rose and Ross that would follow.

In considering the effects of inter-filing, it should be kept in mind that proportions vary from name to name; if the ratios in Widener's catalogues resemble those in the *Catalog of Books Represented by Library of Congress Printed Cards*, there are approximately five hundred cards under Eliot for each one under Elliott, five under Brown for each one under Browne, and eight under Kauffman for each five under Kauffmann. When he approaches one of these interfiled pairs, the user of the catalogue may find himself in any one of four basic situations:

I. *He may know the full name of the author he wants.* If this name is John Mason Brown, the Brown-Browne file will be twenty per cent longer than a plain Brown file would be, but this should hardly slow him down perceptibly; the extra cards would be much fewer in the case of an Eliot, but numerous enough to cost perhaps a few extra seconds in locating a Kauffman. If the quarry

is Joseph Greengrass Maximilian Browne, the user who forgets about interfiling may make a false start in the Brownb-Browne tray (in some cases, such as Brookes and Brooks, a tray or more of other cards will separate the normal positions of the two interfiled names). At any rate, it will take longer to find the right Browne in an interfiled series that is six times as extensive as a straight Browne file would be; there would be nearly three times as many cards in a Kauffman-Kauffmann file as there would be under Kauffmann alone, and each Elliott would be buried among five hundred Eliots.

II. *He may be sure of how to spell the surname but know only the initials that go with it.* If J. M. Brown is wanted, there will be hundreds of J-Brown cards to attack, and a reduction in their number, though by only one sixth, would help. If J. G. M. Browne is the objective, interfiling will have buried it amid more than six hundred cards, whereas strict alphabetical filing would have confronted the searcher with only perhaps one hundred.

III. *He may not be sure how the surname is spelled.* If so, interfiling means that he need look in a single file instead of two, and this may cut the time required in half under some circumstances, though the saving will be considerably less than that if only initials, rather than forenames in full, are known. It might appear that the user would normally start by looking under Brown and that, without inter-filing, the odds would be five to one that he would find his card there, so the practice would save time in but one case out of six, but this would be so only when the catalogue lists what

is wanted; whenever the searcher is looking for a book the library does not have, interfiling will save him from going to a second file.

IV. *He may be mistaken about the spelling of the surname.* If memories or sources are at fault, interfiling can save the user from deciding that a book is not at Harvard when it is, or from taking a considerable amount of time to verify his reference or recollection and to discover the error.

Opponents of interfiling emphasize that it is always disadvantageous, at least slightly, for one who knows how to spell the surname wanted; they maintain that the disadvantage can be considerable when forenames are not known, and that situation II is much the most common one in which users of the catalogue find themselves, for lists and sources of all sorts usually spell surnames correctly but very few of them give complete forenames. As most of the interfiled names are relatively common ones, the practice may cost many hours per year. Cross-references, according to interfiling's foes, are enough to serve those who are uncertain, and any list or bibli-

ography that confuses Brown and Browne will make so many errors of other kinds that one can hardly feel sure that any item in it is not at Harvard until one has verified the entry.

Those who like the practice believe that uncertainty and mistakes are numerous; they argue that, whether or not other libraries agree, Harvard's forty years of experience with interfiling have indicated that on the whole it helps those who use the catalogues. The protection from mistakes, they maintain, more than makes up for the little extra time that it occasionally costs.

There is no unanimity of opinion on the library staff. Cataloguers tend to favor interfiling; reference librarians are inclined to oppose, though they admit that it is sometimes helpful when one is answering a telephone inquiry. There would be no serious technical difficulties in either extending or abandoning interfiling, and all concerned would be glad to do whatever is in the best interests of the public; the problem is to determine which course that would be.

News of the Libraries

MEETINGS

THE Harvard Library was host to the National Association of Autograph Collectors during part of its annual meeting held in Cambridge and Boston May 5-7. A special exhibition of literary manuscripts, letters, and association volumes was presented in the Houghton Library, Mr Metcalf and Mr Jackson

were speakers at a luncheon served in the Naumburg Room of the Fogg Museum on the 5th, and the business meeting of the Association, followed by a panel discussion, took place in the Forum Room of the Lamont Library that same afternoon.

On May 9-10 the University acted as host to the New England Conference of Renaissance Studies, holding

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