

## The Evolution of the Department of Indian Affairs' Record Keeping Systems: 1872-2002

This work was inspired by Terry Cook's essay "Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1889-1958" and Bill Russell's "The White Man's Paper Burden; Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1872-1915" and attempts to complement and add to their research into the relationship between the administrative structure of government departments and their record-keeping systems. As Terry Cook notes,

"this analysis of administrative context is only the first step in studying the history of records. What types of indexing and registry systems were used to control the records? How did these facilitate or retard the aims of the agency? What earlier records were incorporated into new series of records and why? What records were destroyed and why? And what influence did outside developments in the fields of records management and archival preservation have on the agency's care and custody of its own records?"<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses these issues as they pertain to the Department of Indian Affairs.

In 1830 jurisdiction over Indian matters was transferred from the military authorities to the Civil Governors of both Lower and Upper Canada. The Indian Department of Lower Canada was placed under the control of the Military Secretary of the Governor General stationed at Quebec City. Lt.-Col. Napier was removed to the Military Secretaries Office to serve as the administrative head of the Indian Department in Lower Canada with the title Secretary of Indian Affairs. The Indian Department of Upper Canada was placed under civil control under the Lieutenant Governor, with James Givens made Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Province of Upper Canada. Givens holds this post until he retires in 1837 and is succeeded by Samuel Jarvis. It was not until 1829 that the first systematic records keeping system was utilized by Indian Affairs in the form of letter books recording outgoing

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<sup>1</sup>Terry Cook, "Paper trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1889-1958," in *For the Purposes of Dominion: Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow*, eds. Kenneth S. Coates and William R. Morrison, Canada: Captus University Publications, 1989), p. 14.

correspondence.<sup>2</sup> Former DIA Registrar, G.M. Matheson, noted that "from the date of Sir John Johnston's appointment as Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in 1782 up to 1821 there had been no letter book or letter register kept in his office in Montreal."<sup>3</sup> For the most part, departmental correspondence was "mostly irregularly kept, and the account books of the annuities and other funds belonging to the several Indian tribes were without system of arrangement."<sup>4</sup> The haphazard record keeping system mirrored the administrative system at that time. Historian Douglas Leighton observes of Napier that:

aside from a few missionaries in Indian communities who conducted departmental business and a resident at St. Regis under the control of Montreal, Napier had no means of contacting the Indian population of an area which extended from the Gaspé to the Upper Canadian boarder and from the St. Lawrence Valley to an undefined northern limit<sup>5</sup>

Napier, in fact, carried on most of the Department's business in Lower Canada single-handedly.

Chief Superintendent Givens was in a similar position, exercising little or no control over the Resident Superintendents. As a result "it [was] not been the practice to require any periodical reports from them, nor any account of the monies entrusted to them for distribution."<sup>6</sup>

The Bagot Commission (1842-1844) was the catalyst for the reorganization of Indian Affairs record keeping system. The lack of direction in Indian affairs policy was reflected in the record keeping

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<sup>2</sup>Mary Anne Pylchuk, "Original History of Indian Affairs in British Columbia," litigation Support Directorate, B.C. Region, 1990) p. 4 and Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden," p. 53.

<sup>3</sup>RG 10, Vol. 768a, reel C-13491, Indian Department- Historic Sketches on Indian Affairs, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Bagot Commission , Victoria, Appendix T, 1947.

<sup>5</sup>Douglas Leighton, "The Development of Federal Indian Policy in Canada: 1840-1890, University of Western Ontario PhD Thesis, 1975, n.p.

<sup>6</sup>Bagot Commission , Victoria, Appendix T, 1947.

practises of the department. The investigation noted that prior to 1830 "so little of civilian business was attached to it, that until nearly the close of Col. Given's services, scarcely a book appears to have been considered necessary". There was no clerk belonging to the Department, and the correspondence and other business was done occasionally by one of the Secretaries in the Government Office, or by one of the Officers of the Commissariat. Furthermore, it was noted that the secretary's time was occupied with "executions necessary to keep down the urgent demands of present business and neither the leisure nor opportunity afforded him to mature or devise any general plan of improvement in the conduct of official details."<sup>7</sup> In the end the Commission recommended that the office of the Chief Superintendent employ a chief clerk to enter all correspondence of the Department in a book with an alphabetical index, as well as a book-keeper responsible for maintaining for each tribe the account books.

DIAND historian John Leslie noted that "the Bagot Commission failed to resolve the central problem of the Indian Department, which was its lack of cohesion and focus. Too many government departments, groups and vested interests were involved in policy implementation: thus adequate coordination and unity of action was almost impossible. As well, the departments records remained in a chaotic state and departmental financing continued to originate from diverse sources."<sup>8</sup>

Records generated between 1844 and 1872 by the Office of the Civil Secretary in the Province of Canada; the Office of the Deputy Superintendent General as well as and the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs more or less used the same record keeping systems for departmental correspondence as recommended by the Bagot commission. In this records universe, incoming and outgoing correspondence were filed separately. As in the case of the Civil Secretary's correspondence, incoming correspondence was first entered sequentially by number at the front of the register and the docket given the same number. Another entry was made in the letter register which was arranged

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<sup>7</sup>Bagot Commission , Victoria, Appendix T, 1947.

<sup>8</sup>John Leslie, "The Bagot Commission: Developing a Corporate Memory for the Indian Department," *Historical Papers*, 1982, p. 52.

alphabetically by correspondent, which was in turn sub-divided by year. This portion of the register recorded the registration number (file number); the name of the correspondent; date sent; date received; action taken; and the 'subject of letter' which provided a synopsis. Interestingly, the registers show that files were sometimes placed on earlier or later files, not simply filed away numerically. Since the hand writing appears to be different from the records clerk who enter the original material one can only assume this was done at a later date, perhaps post-1873. Nevertheless, the registers are invaluable tools for tracing the incoming correspondence. The original correspondence was then folded and filed away. Copies of the outgoing correspondence were bound together chronologically in letter books containing an alphabetical index at the beginning of each letter book. As Terry Cook noted, this "separation of incoming and outgoing correspondence on any particular subject into scores of separate entries into distinct and internally fragmented systems was hardly conducive to administrative efficiency or to the flexibility needed to cope with complicated subjects that governments increasingly encountered. It was a child of and suited for the passive, small-scaled administration characteristic of the age of *laissez-faire*".<sup>9</sup> As one could imagine, locating the incoming correspondence with the outgoing would have been very time-consuming.

It was not until 1872, with the introduction of a straight numeric filing system, can it be said that the Department of Indian Affairs adopted a central registry filing system, eventually known as the "Red & Black Series, (based on the colour of the registers). Other government departments, such as the Department of Interior adopted the same records-keeping system around the early 1870s. In the case of the Department of Indian Affairs, this system applied to headquarter's incoming and outgoing correspondence exclusively. Under this filing system each letter received by the Department was stamped with the date of its receipt, after which any letters that referred to subjects about which there was no previous correspondence, had a summary of their contents endorsed on a file back to which file book the letter so summarized was attached. The entry was then copied in to the Register. The letter, file back, and the entry in the register, were then all stamped with the same letter registration number.

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<sup>9</sup>Terry Cook, "Paper trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898-1958, p. 15.

The registers recorded the letter registration number, the sender, a synopsis of the letter, date of letter and receipt, and file number assigned to it. Latter correspondence received by the department, regarding the same issue, were registered under a new number in the registry but then placed in the file docket of the original file number. These registers were the contemporary tool of the clerks attempting to locate files that were placed into early file dockets or migrated into later central registry filing systems employed by Indian Affairs. This filing system also utilized a "Subject Extension Register" that grouped letters alphabetically by correspondent or subject. The earliest of these registers was simply arranged alphabetically by correspondent; however, by the 1880s the registers became more sophisticated, registering correspondence not only by individuals, but by subjects such as treaties, timber licences, land grants ect, as well as by Indian agencies and government departments.

The Red Series registers run from 1872 until 1923 (from registration numbers 1 to 588500). The series originally pertained to all central registry records generated by the Department; however, in 1882 with the expanding activities of the department in western Canada, the Department began a "Black Series" register and index system for records relating to Western Canada and the Maritimes. After 1907, Maritimes records were registered in the "Red Series". The Black Series indexes run from 1882 to 1919 (letters 1 to 529438), the Black Series Indexes, oddly enough, run from 1881 until 1923 (letters 1 to 580000). The earliest registers provide a powerful search tool that enables a researcher to link older Departmental records, such as those generated by the Civil Secretary or the Deputy Superintendent's Office, to records within the Red & Black Series. Research has revealed that records from the succeeded filing system i.e. Deputy Superintendent General's records were physically migrated into the new Red Series whereas the records from the older file systems, i.e. Civil Secretary were only cross-referenced in the registers.

This filing system was introduced shortly before the Indian Act of 1876, which for the first time consolidated under one single piece of legislation all legal matters pertaining to Amerindians. Historian John Milloy asserts that through the introduction of this act the federal government obtained "the power to mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on the reserve and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired assimilation, enfranchisement, and as a

consequence, the eventual disappearance of First Nations.”<sup>10</sup> The “Subjects” gradually introduced into the Subject Extension Registers, mirror not only new legislation such as the Enfranchisement Act, but reflect, in my opinion, what Evelyn Wareham, described in her work pertaining to Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, “the cultural dimension of colonization.”<sup>11</sup> Behind this record-keeping system was an attempt to identify the functions necessary to, in the words of Deputy Superintendent Scott, “continue until there is not a single Indian left in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question and no Indian Department.”

The Department of Indian Affairs, unlike any other government department, was mandated to manage all aspects of the lives of those subject to the Indian Act. It reflects a world cosmology, an attempt to identify and create a taxonomy of all activities of First Nations people, from government policy, to personal issues such as band membership, wills, estates, land surrenders down to mundane issues such as sand and gravel and dog licences.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this research has been the discovery that the Red & Black Series were much more complicated than earlier research suggested; it was not a simple sequential numeric system. While beginning as such, the DIA soon attempted to introduce an early subject system that utilized subject file blocks along with a superscript that indicated the agency responsibility codes. By 1902, the Department realized the number of records they were generating related to common subject matters, (ranging from office supplies, cash books, to membership files) would soon make this system too cumbersome. As a result, once the Department reached letter registration number 254000 in the Red Series they adopted a "General Subject System" that assigned subjects to file numbers running from 254000 to 245022. For reasons unknown, the Department waited until 1913 to do the same in the "Black Series". Once they reached letter registration number 269980 they left several blank pages in the register a resumed at registration number 427000 and assigned subjects under the 427000s. G.M.

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<sup>10</sup>John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1896*, (Manitoba: University of Manitoba), 1999, p. 61

<sup>11</sup>Evelyn Wareham, “Our Own Identity; Our Own Taong, Our Own Self Coming Back: Indigenous Voices; New Zealand Record Keeping, *Archivaria*, No. 52, Fall 2001, p. 27.

Matheson, referred to this as the "Sub number Series". Schools were also assigned subject number based, usually on the first letter registered pertaining to a particular school. For example, correspondence pertaining to the Spanish River Day School was filed under file 151725, with a superscript number being employed to indicate the type of correspondence, for example 151725-10 indicated an Admissions and Discharge records of the Spanish River School.

This "straight numeric" records keeping system was the foundation for the successor duplex numeric system introduced in 1923. The department recognized a more flexible filing system was necessary in order to organize and retrieve the large number of records within headquarters, and abandoned the straight numeric filing system in favour of a subject based duplex numeric central registry filing system. Terry Cook asserts that

"the new system did to scattered files what the older system had done for scattered correspondence; brought them together physically and intellectually. Administrators were thus permitted to gain a broad overview of a complicated issue in all its ramifications and to have the consolidated information needed to make national policy and oversee administration operation and such issues in an active interventionist way."<sup>12</sup>

Instead of creating one series, DIA created five new independent subject based file systems that ran congruent until 1949 when the department abandoned this system in favour of a single "modified duplex numeric" central registry system. The five subject series were: "First Series"; "Thousand Series"; "School File Series"; "Land Sale Series"; "and "Engineering and Construction File . Either very little correspondence was generated to document the rationale behind the creation of these duplex numeric series, or it has not survived. The sparse information suggests that the growth of the Department necessitated the creation of these systems. The School Files Series were controlled by the Education Division, responsible for the administration of Indian Day Schools and Residential Schools.<sup>13</sup> All records pertaining to schools from the earlier red and black system were migrated into

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<sup>12</sup>Terry Cook, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>RG 37, G Vol. 727, file 72-CI-IA - Report of Organization, Methods and Procedures Survey of Education Division, 1951

this new system and the sub numbering unit used in the former series was carried over and used as the secondary numbers to identify the type of record. One can only assume the same rationale for the creation of the Engineering and Construction Files as well as the Land Sale Series - no information to date has shed light on this. The Thousand Series was a subject system for "main subject," that related to reserves.<sup>14</sup> It reflects the subjects the department considered most important, such as Surveys & Reserves; location tickets; rights of way; surrenders etc. A Thousand Series file consisted of a subject number and the agency responsibility code, for example a file concerning a lease (13000) in the Carleton Agency (107) would be constructed as follows , 13107. The First series were described as subjects of a secondary nature, such as accidents; truant officers; beef; and dog licences. Under this system, file numbers were comprised of two elements, a subject block (e.g. 62 Membership) and an agency code (e.g. 131 - Lesser Slave Lake), thus the file would appear as 62-131. It is interesting to note that files now see as important, ie. membership, were at that time of a secondary consideration.

Let us turn our attention to the responsibility codes for a moment. Until 1923, the Red and Black Series Agency Responsibility codes existed as independent entities. The Red Series had responsibility center codes running from 1 to 100 and the Black Series had responsibility codes ranging from 1 to 66. When the Department adopted the duplex numeric file classification system, it kept the Red Series agency responsibility codes and started the agency codes for the Black Series at 102. Thus the Assiniboyne Agency (Old No. 2) became Agency responsibility code No. 102.

The Department continued to use the Register and "Subject Extension Registers despite the fact that duplex numeric system allowed one to identify both subject and agency in the one number.

Furthermore, the department still perpetuated the East-West split of the former Red & Black series keeping "a set of loose leaf registers... for Ontario, Quebec and the Maritime Provinces, and another set for Manitoba and the Western Provinces."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>RG 32, Vol. 72, file 72-MR-1A, DIA Records Service Operations, 1879-1950  
Memorandum c 1948 - Records Service Indian Affairs Branch - Department of Mines and Resources

<sup>15</sup>RG 10, Vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memorandum 24 October 1930.



Although a substantial number of records from the red and black series, as shown in the registers, were migrated into the duplex numeric series, Red & Black Series records were still being created by the Department as late as the mid 1950s, well after DIA had adopted its subject based file classification systems. This later sequential numeric file registration system was referred to as the "High Red" (East of Manitoba) and "High Black" (West of Manitoba) series and ran from file numbers 600000 to 600582. The series consists of only 582 pieces of correspondence generated between 31 August 1923 to 4 April 1947,<sup>16</sup> with a large portion of the records having been migrated into the First Series. There are also instances where the correspondence was placed on earlier Black or Red series files.

In 1947 a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons recommended that the federal government "proceed with a commission to settle Indian claims and grievances."<sup>17</sup> While the Department did not establish the Office of Native Claims until 1973, from 1947 onward thus prospect of claims changed the manner in which DIAND treated its records. That same year the Chief, Records Branch, DIAND, HQ proposed a "three year program to re-organize the DIA Records Division"<sup>18</sup> This was the genesis of the modified duplex numeric filing systems adopted by the department in 1950. Unlike its predecessors, this records system was to be employed at headquarters and the field offices. The new classification system also anticipated a major change in the activities of department ; its emphasis on geographic responsibility codes combined with more expanded secondary and tertiary numbers reflected the devolution of responsibility for program and delivery of services to the agencies that were a direct result of the 1951 amendments to Indian Act.

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<sup>16</sup>RG 10, Vol. 3406, Reel C-10759, Red Series Register - Quebec, Ontario and Maritimes, 1923/08/31-1947/04/04

<sup>17</sup>Sally Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 37.

<sup>18</sup>RG 10, Vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, memorandum from R.J.L. Grenier, Records Branch to Executive Assistant, DIA, 30/6/47.

As mentioned, prior to 1950, no standard filing system was employed by DIA staff in the field offices. As a result, valuable records were lost through poor records management practices. Moreover, it was almost impossible to determine what records had been created or lost since no registration system existed in the agencies. As Bill Russell noted, "In lieu of such filing system, agents seemed to have created their own arrangements which usually meant a combination of Letter books for copies of outgoing correspondence and omnibus Shannon files for broad subject categories of incoming letters.. as for records disposition in the field, the policy well past the period under examination here was to destroy nothing. When offices were closed, all records were routinely sent to Ottawa. As late as 1927 agents were being told to keep all records." <sup>19</sup>

By 1961 a system of Master Index Cards for headquarters records was being verified "against each file in the current, closed, and dormant, and archival categories" <sup>20</sup> in order to map the disposition history of the records. At the same time, a project was initiated by headquarter's Central Registry Branch to identify all pre 1915 records held by the Agencies offices in order to transfer them to Ottawa where they would select the records to be transferred to the NA. As late as 1961 the Chief of the Central Registry office in Ottawa noted that in the Office of the Indian Commissioner, British Columbia continued old records keeping practices stating:

"At the present time the procedures followed in respect to correspondence receipt and handling is haphazard to say the least. Incoming letters in the majority of cases, are directed to one person, Mr. Rhymer, who screens and either dictates the reply or passes the case to one of the other officials. This method has been used for many years." <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Bill Russell, *The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914*, *Archivaria*, p. 71

<sup>20</sup>RG 10, Vol. 13832, file 1/1-6-2, pt. 5, Methods and Procedures - Filing System, 1964-1965, Letter from A. Goulet, Acting Chief, Central Registry Office to Senior Administrative Officer, re: Rehabilitation of Indian Affairs Records,' 10 January 1963.

<sup>21</sup>RG 10, Vol. 13832, file 1/1-6-2, pt. 4, Methods and Procedures - Filing System, 1961-1962, Letter from P.F. O'Donnell, Chief, Central Registry to Indian Commissioner's Office, British Columbia, re: Records Procedures Indian Commissioner's Office, Vancouver, 5 February 1962

Many agencies, were at a lost to explain where these pre 1915 records had gone. Nevertheless, the surviving records were transferred to Ottawa.

To their credit, Indian Affairs, faced with the possibility of claims against the Crown, attempted to identify, gather and ensure the preservation of DIA records which they recognized possessed great historical significance. This is especially significant given the fact that the department could have disposed of a large portion of their common administrative records under the GRDS in force at the time. The department pointed out that:

"It was also agreed that the existing definitions of housekeeping records, as contained in the *General Records Disposal Schedule* and as distinct from operational records, do not satisfy the requirements of the department and the Archives in identifying and segregating for retention all documentation of continuing value. In view of the spacial nature of the administration of Indian affairs in Canada, much of that described in the GRDS as housekeeping should , in fact, be considered operational in its application to Indian and Northern Affairs records schedules."<sup>22</sup>

As a result, a moratorium on destruction of any Indian Affairs records was agreed upon by the NA and DIA lasting from 19 May 1973 to 1967.

The fact that the modified duplex system was geographically based responsibility code filing system made it unsuitable, if not at least, very inconvenient to maintain as Agencies were amalgamated into District Offices in 1966 and in 1969. The amalgamation of records under the new responsibility codes required much work on the part of the departmental records staff and made the retrieval records time consuming. In 1969, when the suggestion was made to adopt a subject based system that placed geographic codes within the tertiary numbers it was rejected on the basis the recently tabled White

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<sup>22</sup>RG 10, Accession 2003-00021-6, box2, file 1/1-6-3, pt. 4, Methods and Procedures (Disposal) - Destruction of Record, 1974 to September 1978, Letter from Jay Atherton, Chief, Public Records Division, Public Archives of Canada to Records Management Division, DIAND, re: Moratorium on Destruction of Indian and Eskimo Affairs Records, 1974.

Paper indicated the Indian program would soon be phased out. It was not till 1984 that the current block numeric system utilized today by DIAND was up and running.

As Bill Russell argues, "if we are to do justice to the records charged in our care today, we must understand the relationship between the structure and organization of the creating agency and the records created, and integrate a knowledge of the records-keeping process into its understanding of the record." p. 51. While this work sheds light on the nuances of the evolution of records keeping by DIA, its conclusions are isolated, awaiting further research by others into the records keeping systems of other government departments in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of government records keeping. As Dr. Johnson quipped 'all criticism is comparison.'