

TIS The Independent Scholar

A peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal

www.ncis.org

ISSN 2381-2400

Volume 11 (forthcoming 2024)



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EDITORIAL BOARD

Joan Cunningham (Ph.D. Public Health: Epidemiology) is a cancer epidemiologist, recently retired from the Medical University of South Carolina. She holds an MSc (Biology: aquatic eco-embryology) from the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada and Ph.D. (Public Health: epidemiology) from the University of Texas School of Public Health (Houston). Her work focuses on racial disparities in breast cancer, and non-pharmacological mitigation of cancer treatment side effects. She also gives invited lectures on cancer epidemiology to the graduate program at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, Texas.

Amanda Haste (Ph.D. Musicology; Dip.Trans.) is a British musicologist and academic translator whose research interests include identity construction through music and language. She is a Chartered Linguist and taught courses in Translation and in English for Specific Purposes at Aix-Marseille University, France until 2022. As well as publishing widely in peer-reviewed journals, she co-edited *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization* (Ex Modio, 2015), *Global Cuisines: A Scholarly Cookbook* (NCIS, 2022) and the *NCIS Guide for Independent Scholars* (NCIS, 2024), and recently published her first monograph *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism* (Routledge, 2023). Her awards include the Louise Dyer Award for research into British music, and the Elizabeth Eisenstein Essay Prize (2018).

Jordan Lavender (Ph.D. Spanish Linguistics) teaches Spanish and Latin American History at Pomfret School in Pomfret, CT and has conducted research on the use of minority languages on Twitter in Spain, bilingualism in the linguistic landscapes of Azogues, Ecuador, and forms of address in Ecuadorian Spanish, based on ethnographic research in both online and offline contexts.

Annie Rehill (Ph.D. Modern French Studies, MFA) specializes in the literature and history of Francophone Canada, focusing on intercultural expressions and implications. Most recently she has studied Métis literature and art. Previous work in ecocriticism centered on representations of the Canadian *coureur de bois* figure, and on Francophone Caribbean writings. Her publications include "Le Travail dans la nature canadienne: L'Équilibre (et le déséquilibre) humain tel qu'il est représenté par Louis Goulet et Joseph-Charles Taché" (2018); "An Ecocritical Reading of Joseph-Charles Taché's *Forestiers et voyageurs*" (2018); *Backwoodsmen As Ecocritical Motif in French Canadian Literature* (2016); and "Inscriptions of Nature from Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Martinique" (2015).

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies), the General Editor of *The Independent Scholar*, served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication, and was Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut* from 2012 to 2021. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.



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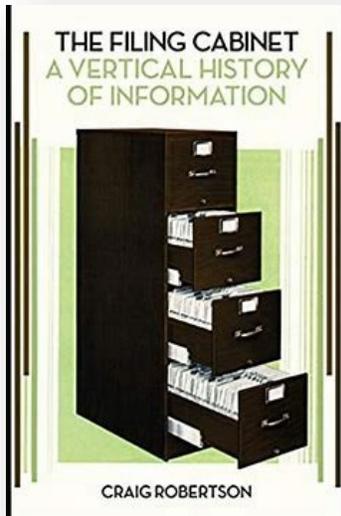
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The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information

Craig Robertson

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021

ISBN 978-1-5179-0946-8

259 pp + Acknowledgments, Notes, Index. Illus, B&W.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Filing-Cabinet-Vertical-History-Information/dp/1517909465>

Review by Shelby Shapiro. Review was first published online 26 March 2024 and will appear in Volume 11 of *The Independent Scholar*.

In *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*, Craig Robertson demonstrates what can be done when something taken-for-granted is examined, and examined minutely, or to use Robertson's phrase, with "granular certainty." He places this piece of office furniture within the context of the growth of corporate capitalism in the United States, placing it alongside books such as Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982) and Olivier Zunz's *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (1992). He uses the term "granular certainty" to denote the aim(s) of those who devised filing cabinets and their systems: this term does not refer to a specific fact or document, but rather on location: where and how to specifically find it. When efficiency met "information" ("information" being the general term, as opposed to particular items of knowledge), "granular certainty" was born, a child of Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management. Taylorism focused on breaking down processes into ever smaller discrete movements in the interest of speed and efficiency.

The book is divided into two parts: "The Cabinet" and "Filing." The first part examines the filing cabinet as an object in and of itself, in three dimensions: Verticality, Integrity and Cabinet Logic. "Filing" looks at the inside components of the filing cabinet (Granular Certainty, Automatic Filing, the Ideal Filing Clerk, Domestic Storage).

Prior to the filing cabinet, records were stored in books, whether inscribed or physically placed—a domestic version of this was within family Bibles. Those who have done land title research (as this reviewer did) will be familiar with Tract Books, large volumes with separate pages for particular land plots. Documents related to each real property are inscribed and updated. This is a finding tool; to see the actual deeds or other documents you would have to go elsewhere, such as a filing cabinet. Nonetheless, going over the Tract Book gave the researcher a general history of the parcel. Assuming that newer documents were posted in a timely fashion, the researcher could learn its present state. Tract books might be stored vertically, but to use



them you would remove them from the shelves and open them on a flat or tilted surface. Robertson dates the change from horizontal storage to vertical to 1905 when Elihu Root became Secretary of State. Exasperated with the cumbersome copybooks, Root ordered a vertical filing system; four years later, the filing system began using decimals (pp. ix-x). A company called Library Bureau claimed to be the inventor of the filing cabinet; the founder of the Library Bureau was none other than Melvil C. Dewey, inventor of the Dewey Decimal system used in libraries. This kind of storage combined with the alphanumerical finding tool made for granular certainty. The alphanumerical designation for a particular book referred to a particular volume as it fit into the outline of knowledge used by the System.

The biggest innovation of the filing cabinet was to file separate sheets of paper standing on their end, encased in files rather than in flat stacks. Storing vertically, drawer on top of drawer, was fully in line with the vertical nature of the corporation. Advertisements with a filing cabinet placed next to images of skyscrapers emphasize the connection. This method of storage contrasted sharply with the pigeonhole desks of an earlier era. Robertson also gives a short presentation on the development of the desk as it went from the elaborate to the simple and streamlined. One of the advantages of the new-style desks was a reduction in the amount of dust

Robertson takes the reader on a journey of the filing cabinet: the changes and challenges in construction: everything from the casing to the connective, whether to be welded or screwed. He discusses the mechanics of devices to keep files upright and compressed. One of the engineering challenges concerned the drawers—how to keep them from tipping over when open. Two illustrations, one of a man in a suit jumping into an open drawer (p. 11) and another with a similarly dressed man doing a pull-up exercise on an open drawer while below a young girl opens a drawer by pulling on a silk thread (p. 13) exhibit the challenges faced by designers and manufacturers while at the same time noting some of the gendered aspects of filing work. Actually extracting a file or paper from a pile was female labor; dealing with the cabinet itself as a gross physical product was in the male sphere.

The second half examines what is inside the drawers: the files themselves, their arrangement, locating

devices such as tabs, and the logic behind them. What factors entered into devising a system that combined speed with accuracy? He delves into all aspects of files and filing, including the materials involved, and presents alternatives.

The Integrity chapter looks at the physical aspects of the cabinet: materials used in construction and those later eliminated (such as asbestos for fireproofing), the elimination of dust (p. 82), drawer slides and stops. We learn that in Germany paper sizes became standardized in 1922 (p. 123)—something which occurred much later in the United States. This had implications for file folders which held these papers.

Throughout Robertson provides fascinating pieces of information, such as the origin of manila files:

“Manila paper was thicker than paper made from wood pulp. It was produced from abaca fiber, which came from a species of banana unique to the Philippines; the material was known colloquially as Manila hemp because it had arrived in the northeastern United States by way of ‘grass rope’ on Filipino ships. A product of the circulation of objects and use structured by capitalism and empire, manila paper was patented in 1843.” (p. 126)

Robertson pays particular attention to the gendered nature of office work. Male executives needed to know the contents of a particular item; women clerical workers need know only where to find the document(s). One of the few problems with this book is Robertson’s assertion that there “an assumed heteronormativity/ played a critical role in determining the kinds of jobs available to young women” (p. 202) and that “efficiency depended on gender and sexuality to lower labor costs” (p. 203). “Heteronormativity” and female sexuality are nowhere shown to be a factor: nowhere is it shown that lesbians would or would not be good, efficient workers. Nowhere are there assertions about imaginary management principle(s) along the line of “lower costs from lesbian labor” or “straighter is greater.”

Throughout, Robertson points out how today’s machine of information technology—the computer—employed the principles of the filing cabinet as a template: hence we use “documents” and “files” in discussing where we have stored particular items or sets of items on our “desktop.” From the computer desktop we end up where most computers reside: in



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the home. Robertson notes how file cabinets and file cabinet organization became transformed in domestic spaces.

Robertson has filled the book with illustrations, most from advertisements, emphasizing all aspects of this excellent book. Impressively researched, this is the kind of book that compels readers to see the familiar with new eyes.

*Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point*, the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication, and was Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut* 2012-2021. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.*