



The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information

Craig Robertson

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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 alphanumeric finding tool made for granular certainty. The alphanumeric 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 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.

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