Fall 2005

A Note on Identifying Source Materials

Robert Scott Davis
George C Wallace State Community College - Hanceville

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit

Part of the Digital Humanities Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Reading and Language Commons, and the Technical and Professional Writing Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/273

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
A Note on Identifying Source Materials
Robert Scott Davis

Documentary editing relies on the correct and complete identification of the authorship of documents and imprints.\(^1\) Fraud and misidentification can occur, however, even when authorship is authenticated because a writer can create a document to mislead, such as trying to give the text undeserved authority and credibility or to present an alternative version of a particular event.\(^2\)

One telling example is the late Colin Campbell’s edition of a record by his kinsman Archibald Campbell, ‘Journal of an Expedition against the Rebels of Georgia.’ The chronological account of a 1778–1779 campaign of the American Revolution is preserved in the Campbell family archives. The journal appears to be a handwritten copy of a now lost original record that was created on a day-to-day basis almost as events happened. Research revealed, however, that this account includes incorrect dates for major events and describes situations in the wrong chronological order, even allowing for common errors when recording events from memory. By his own account, Campbell had achieved a brilliant military success. He may have ‘pre-dated’ his memoirs in anticipation of an audit of his accounts. The British government typically made officers accountable for public funds entrusted to them well after the completion of military campaigns, as it would Campbell’s heirs.\(^3\)


Another example is the diary that Cyrena Bailey Stone compiled. On the surface it appears to be an account of her husband as a 'secret Yankee,' a Unionist in Confederate Atlanta, from 1 January to 22 July 1864. Her death in 1868 would seem to support the authenticity of the record itself, yet a close reading of the text indicates otherwise. Stone describes events too vaguely to ring true as a day-by-day journal. With text that is rich in carefully crafted but excessively patriotic phrases, Stone's goal may be to explain and excuse her husband's adventures. Her husband's activities called his true allegiance into question and suggest that Cyrena Stone may have written the memoirs to show her husband and herself had been staunch Unionists rather than Confederate collaborators.4

Authentication of the Stone diary remains elusive. By comparison, Mary Chesnut's famous 'Civil War diaries,' were actually a heavily edited memoir, written between 1881 and 1884, but based upon her actual diaries. This memoir was 'carelessly edited' after her death and before it was first published in 1905.5 Similarly, no one knows why General Edward Porter Alexander never published his memoirs but instead used his reminiscences to write a history of the Army of Northern Virginia.6

A different example is the ongoing controversy over what could be an eyewitness account of the death of David Crockett. The memoir of Mexican officer Jose Enrique de la Pena includes the report of this most famous prisoner of war at the Alamo. Whether the account is authentic or a fraud by the notorious forger John Laflin (aka John Lafitte) likely will never be sorted out to everyone's satisfaction.7 Still another example involves the blending of a legitimate record with a later addition. The newspaper publication concerning the so-called Mecklenburg Resolves, was combined with memories of participants by document thief Milligan Miller. He crafted the Mecklenburg

7James E. Crisp, 'The Little Book That Wasn't There: The Myth and Mystery of the de la Pena Diary,' Southwestern Historical Quarterly 98 (October 1994), 262–98; David B. Gracie II, 'Just as I Have Written It': A Study of the Authenticity of the Manuscript of Jose Enrique de la Pena's Account of the Texas Campaign,' ibid., 105 (October 2001), 254–91.
Declaration of American Independence that does not stand up to careful scrutiny.\textsuperscript{8}

Sometimes misidentifications occur because of faulty archival practices. The haphazard way in which originally loose pages were bound in the 1950s, for instance, caused Robert R. Henry's memoir to be cataloged as the court martial of Archibald Clark. The memoir's true nature was revealed as other portions of Henry's memoir were discovered, which had been cataloged separately in various other archives.\textsuperscript{9} Similarly, it had long been believed that the Massachusetts Historical Society held almost all of General Benjamin Lincoln's papers. In fact, they were broken up in the late 1800s and much of his correspondence survives in dozens of public and private libraries across the United States.\textsuperscript{10} Also, authentification of the diary of early American Baptist minister John Newton proved problematic because of the confusion created by the fact that there were two John Newton's, one an Episcopalian minister and the other a Presbyterian minister. Each kept well-known diaries; the location of Presbyterian Reverend John Newton's diary remains uncertain.\textsuperscript{11}

Documentary editors as well as historians must avoid the reliance on faulty and or fraudulent authentification. As illustrated by the Wilkinson letters, trying to identify misidentified, suspect, and even faked documents often proves difficult or even impossible to do. Clues as to all three types of problems are much the same. Instincts that 'something is wrong' or 'this is too good to be true' often prove correct. Typical warning signs are finding impossible dates, persons, and events in the text. Suspect works often contain suspiciously vague connections to dates and people. Fakes and forgeries are particularly notorious for 'name dropping' famous persons and events. The opinion of someone, even by a person with a highly regarded reputation, should not be accepted as a substitute for documented proof. For

\textsuperscript{8}See William H. Hoyt, \textit{The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence: A Study of Evidence Showing that the Alleged Early Declaration of Independence by Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, on May 20th, 1775, is Spurious} (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Son, 1907).


example, David Ingram’s often discussed account of his journey from Mexico to Nova Scotia during 1568–1569 includes so many obviously manufactured details, such as his encounter with a dinosaur, that even his best defenders are hard put to find anything in his memoir that could refer to a real place (although they have tried to prove that at least some of his details represent his actual experiences).\textsuperscript{12} By contrast, no one has questioned the accuracy of William Lee’s memoirs, which survive only in print. Lee wrote an epic tale of traveling from New York to Florida, then across the Creek Indian lands to Georgia by way of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, between 1768 and 1781. Lee’s book includes a probable account of the story’s provenance and many of the details it provides can be tied to be real places and events. Beyond a mention of seeing the site of Braddock’s defeat years after the battle and a passing mention of George Washington (but not of actually seeing Washington), Lee mentions no encounters with major historical events, places, or persons. In his telling his adventures, Lee describes himself as anything but heroic or farsighted.\textsuperscript{13}

Historians strive for certainty but documentary editors must give complete honest proof the highest priority. Unanswered and unanswerable questions concerning authentification are prevalent, but once in print, errors, however honest, may perpetuate mistakes and fraud indefinitely.

\textsuperscript{12}‘The relacon of Davyd Ingram of Barkinge in the Com of Essex Saylor,’ is Sloan Manuscript 1447 in the British Library. For an analysis and history of this document, see Charlton Ogburn, ‘The Longest Walk: David Ingram’s Amazing Journey,’ \textit{American Heritage} 30 (3) (April/May 1970), 4–13.
