

What Do We Do with All of This Paper?

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- Craig Robertson, [Granular Certainty, The Vertical Filing Cabinet, and the Transformation of Files](#), 4 **Administrory** 76 (2019).
- Marianne Constable, [The Paper Shredder: Trails of Law](#), 23 **Law Text Culture** 276 (2019).

Anyone who has done archival research has grappled with someone else's file organization—are the papers you seek filed chronologically? By correspondent? By topic? By some other method inscrutable to the outsider? Does the filing system reflect the thinking of your research subject, of a secretary or clerk, or of a later archivist seeking to impose order on chaos? Finally, will the files actually contain the documents you're hoping to find? Two recent articles take seriously the prosaic technologies of file storage, on the one hand, and file destruction, on the other, explicating the history of the tabbed file folder, the filing cabinet, and the paper shredder. These technologies are crucial to the contemporaneous operation of the bureaucratic process, and, of course, silently shape how we write history from those files.

Craig Robertson's article, *Granular Certainty, The Vertical Filing Cabinet, and the Transformation of Files*, examines the role that the tabbed file folder and the file cabinet played in organizing and enabling modern corporate capitalism. As Robertson notes, scholars thinking about bureaucracy and influenced by Max Weber have long considered the development of the circulating case file to be a key moment in bureaucratization. Here, Robertson focuses on how the specific mechanics of the file storage process—office workers collecting loose documents in a file folder, securely storing the folder in a vertical cabinet, and later quickly finding that folder among dozens or hundreds of other ones—contributed not just to business efficiency but also to a conception of “information” as many discrete units rather than as a body of knowledge.

Robertson uses the term “granular certainty” to describe the larger significance of this organization to efficiency goals: “granular signifies the belief that breaking things down into small parts to produce a high degree of detail or specificity would produce efficiency. Certainty indicates the conviction that this increased specificity would reduce individual discretion and increase the certainty that a task would be completed efficiently.” (P. 73.) The ability to find, use, and circulate specific documents allowed workers to specialize in distinct tasks—a hallmark of modern bureaucratic efficiency.

However, as Robertson describes, until the early twentieth century, office workers lacked the actual equipment to organize papers in this way. Sturdy tabbed file folders and vertical filing cabinets made this change possible. Earlier workplaces had relied on bound volumes, or on “piles of paper that were bound by string or leather and stored in bags, chests, cabinets, drawers, or on shelves and occasionally hung from hooks.” (P. 71.) While this made searching difficult, it worked fine as long as a document's significance came from the documents around it.

This filing system worked less well, though, when the cumulative context became less important than the specific document itself. Uniformly sized file folders allowed loose papers of different sizes to be collected together but still remain separate. As Robertson argues, this “gave a material existence to information as a thing that could be detached and repositioned, reordered, and recombined.” (P. 72.) A label affixed to the folder's tab meant that a file assigned a permanent home in a vertical filing cabinet

could later be easily found. Office workers could remove a folder, circulate it to others in the office, and return it to the cabinet for yet others to find again. And this broader filing system organized all information, even as files moved freely among workers. As Robertson describes: “Circulating through the office, papers were expected to manifest the valuable attributes of information as a discrete unit but not to become disconnected from the oversight of the filing system.” (P. 81.)

The adoption of the vertical file and vertical file cabinet was thus an important moment in the history of information, Robertson argues, as “storage is not a neutral practice; the folder and filing cabinet, like other storage technologies, produce specific possibilities for action.” (P. 73). One broader result of ordering paper at the document level and storing it in readily accessible way was that people came to envision information itself as “a discrete thing.... Information, grasped as individual pieces of paper, became malleable, both in its physical shape and its contents.” (P. 76.) The power of this model endures today, shaping the logic of information storage in the digital realm even as the need for actual file folders and file cabinets fades away (for non-historians, at least).

Marianne Constable suggests that “If written records and files make the modern office or bureau go around, then so too does their destruction and disposal.” (P. 288.) Constable’s article, *The Paper Shredder: Trails of Law*, addresses the latter—the technology of shredding machines, and the laws that govern disposal via this particular method of destruction. Historians are accustomed to thinking about silences in the archives, and to looking for information that was not preserved. Here, however, Constable examines the history of the actual mechanics by which documents are intentionally destroyed, and the history of the laws surrounding this destruction.

Constable offers a brief history of the paper shredder, “a machine that proliferates waste and serves as the repository of carefully guarded secrets and confidential records, even as it is designed to eliminate the dregs of bureaucratic culture.” (P. 276.) The machine was patented in 1909 but, as Constable notes, its “legal existence precedes its actual existence.” (P. 277.) It was first manufactured in Germany in the 1930s, when a German man who wanted to destroy some anti-Nazi papers saw fit to construct “the paper shredder equivalent of a Spätzle or pasta maker in his garage.” (P. 278.) The paper shredder had its moments of fame when the Watergate scandal, the Iran hostage crisis, and the Iran-Contra controversy shone a spotlight on the intentional destruction of important documents (and, probably unintentionally, promoted the sale of shredders). It is also closely associated with law and lawyers in popular culture, as Constable demonstrates through a brief analysis of cartoons.

Constable describes one problem of bureaucratization—what to do with all the papers neatly stored in file folders? Should institutions buy file cabinets ad infinitum and keep everything forever? Clearly not, but destruction of federal records, at least, was extremely complicated until Congress in the twentieth century passed laws to manage the exponential growth of paper. Such laws dictated what had to be kept and what could be destroyed—and in some cases regarding sensitive records, *how* they were to be destroyed. As people discovered the hard way, some shredders are better than others, and so additional laws, regulations, and standards were developed to ensure that documents were so thoroughly shredded that they could not be reconstructed. Yet more state and federal laws were passed to dictate how both governmental and non-governmental entities had to protect private parties’ information as these entities stored and disposed of their records.

All of this shredding created another problem, as shredded paper takes up more space than paper in its original form. Here bureaucracy generated more bureaucracy as new organizations sprung up to manage this waste, and private organizations developed their own set of standards for destruction. The National Association of Information Destruction (NAID®), a division of the International Secure Information Governance and Management Association™, accredits document destruction companies, which then make their own certifications that the documents they’ve handled have been securely

destroyed. As Constable argues, “Explicitly and implicitly, written laws and public and private policies at all administrative and organizational levels, support and reinforce development of the international economic system of professional information management and destruction services.” (P. 288.) Destruction, then, is the end of one kind of official activity and the beginning of another.

The role of the paper shredder in destroying knowledge is much more obvious than the role of the file folder and file cabinet in organizing it, but all of these practical technologies of storage and destruction influenced the development of history. They also affect what’s in the archive for historians to look at, and how historians look at individual documents to try to reconstruct a broader context. And they have their own technological and legal histories as well. After reading both articles, one wonders what the legacy of digital records storage will be, and what a legal history of cloud storage will look like.

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