

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

## Understanding and using finding aids

FOR MY FIRST INSTALLMENT OF THE “Out of the Archives” column as archives manager at the Center, I would like to discuss the basics of an important, but often misunderstood archival access tool: the finding aid. If you’ve ever conducted archival research (or even browsed the Center’s website), you’ve likely encountered electronic or paper-based documents known variably as finding aids, inventories, registers, or collection guides. Though its name may differ by institution, the finding aid generally serves the same purpose: to describe a collection’s provenance, context, access and usage guidelines, organization, and interrelated components.

Archivists create finding aids once a collection is processed and usually post them online to aid in the public discovery of archival collections. Staff use finding aids to manage collection materials, while researchers use them to preview a collection’s contents and decide if the collection warrants further investigation. As the finding aid serves both administrative and access functions, it can sometimes be confusing for individuals unfamiliar with archival description. Further complicating matters, descriptions of archival collections can be somewhat complex, because collections themselves are aggregations of often disparate materials with various physical formats, functions, and dates of creation. In this column, I’ll cover the common components of the Center’s finding aids as

well as tips for using them. A shortened version of the finding aid from the recently processed Robert A. Hadley Collection will serve as an example.

### Elements of Finding Aids

There is no universal format for creating finding aids. They can vary in content, descriptiveness, and visual layout depending on the local practices of different institutions and the characteristics of individual collections. Finding aids may appear in various electronic and print formats, including word processor documents, portable document formats, spreadsheets, paper lists, or even index cards.

However, professional organizations such as the International Council on Archives and the Society of American Archivists have come to a broad agreement on what information should be included in finding aids. These best practices make it easier for archives to share collection data, enable researchers to understand collections regardless of local descriptive practices, and help archivists ensure that they’ve noted the most pertinent information about collections.

On the following pages, I have listed and described the common elements used in the Center’s finding aids, color-coded to match screenshots of the pages. Please note that while the major elements provided here are found in finding aids at most archives, each institution generally uses a slightly different format.

### STORY

Adrienne Evans

### PHOTOGRAPHS

Robert A. Hadley,  
Collection of the Center

### Editor’s Note

A simplified version of the finding aid for the Robert A. Hadley Collection appears as four screenshots on the following pages, color-coded to match the corresponding paragraph headings in the text. Visit [www.railphoto-art.org](http://www.railphoto-art.org) to download full PDFs of this and other collections’ finding aids.

Right: View looking east of rail yards in Detroit, Michigan, circa 1935. The Detroit River and the Wabash car ferry *Manitowoc* are visible to the right of the yard. Hadley-01-129-01



**Title Page:** The beginning of the finding aid includes the name of the archival repository that holds or owns the collection, the title of the collection, the name of the person who created the finding aid, and the date the finding aid was last updated. *Tips:*

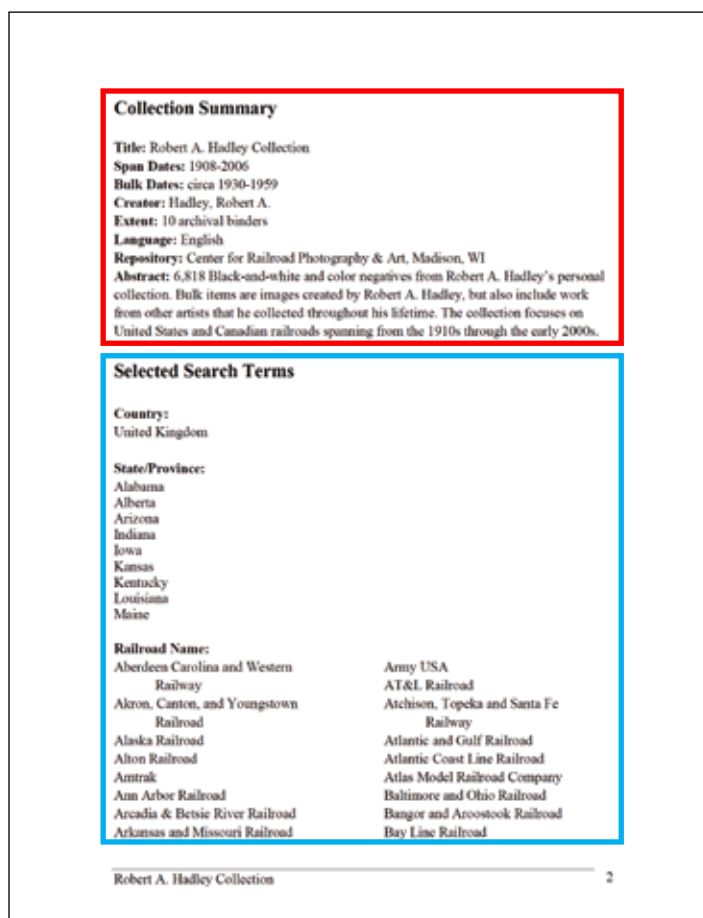
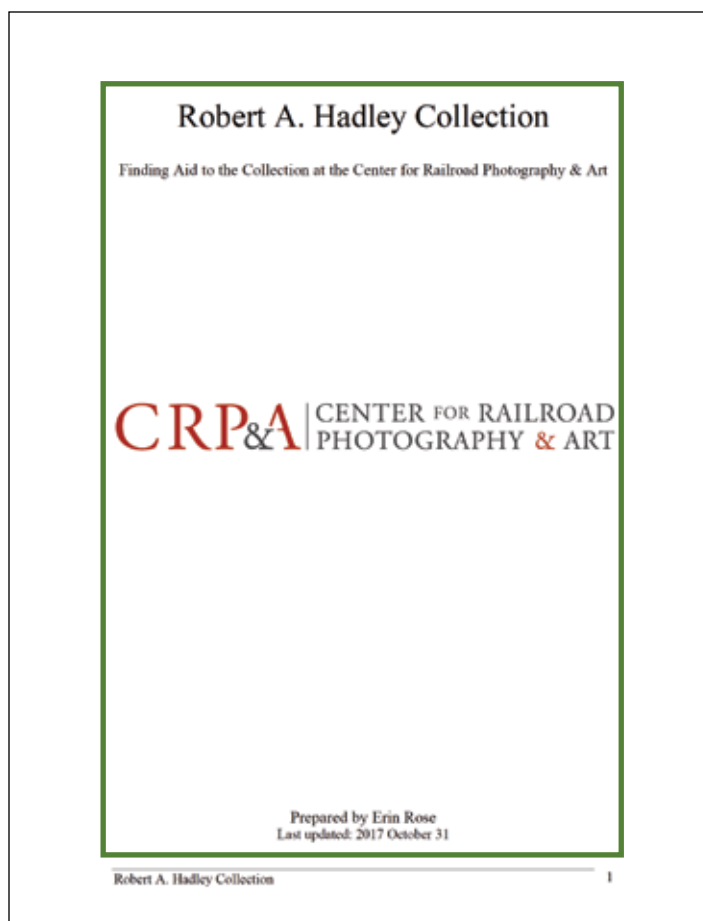
- Information in finding aids is structured hierarchically and becomes increasingly detailed as you proceed through the document. Starting with the title page, proceed through each increasingly detailed section to decide whether the collection's contents will answer your research inquiry
- Use information in this section to answer basic questions such as "What collection is this?" "What institution holds these records?" and "Who produced these records?"

**Collection Summary:** This section lists the collection title, span and bulk dates of creation, the name of the collection's creator, language(s) of materials in the collection, the size and extent of the collection, and a brief description (abstract) of the collection contents. *Tips:*

- Dates apply to the creation of individual materials, not when they were collected. Span dates refer to the earliest and latest dates during which collection materials were created. Bulk dates refer to the time period during which the majority of the collection materials were created.
- The collection extent and abstract provide information on how much material is in a collection and in what form. Considering the Center's collection scope, size and extent are usually measured by archival binder or box and composed of photographic negatives or slides.
- The abstract is a brief overview of a collection's size and content. Consider whether the dates, formats, and subjects listed in the abstract fit your research inquiry before proceeding through the rest of the finding aid.

**Subject Terms/Selected Search Terms:** This section includes a list of terms, topics, names, etc., covered in the collection. *Tips:*

- The Center lists geographic locations (by country/state) and railroads documented in the collection in this section. Railroad names are listed as they appeared at the time of each photograph's creation.
- Browse the locations and railroads listed to see if they fit your research topic.



## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The collection was loaned to the Center for Railroad Photography and Art by the Apex Foundation in May 2016. The loan agreement called for the digitization of negatives, and the subsequent return of digital copies to the Apex Foundation, at which point the collection would be officially donated to the Center for Railroad Photography and Art. The original agreement had a one-year timeline to complete this work, and was amended in order to extend that timeline to the end of 2017.

### Processing History

The collection was loaned to the Center in May 2016. Processing began in July 2016 and was completed October 2017. Copies of the digital files were sent to the Apex Foundation in November 2017, at which point deed of gift documents were signed and the Center took ownership.

### Additional Notes

Selected photographs are publicly available on the Center's website, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Instagram.

Robert Hadley also took photographs of selections from various publications, and kept the negatives of these in his collection.

### Copyright Status

© 2017, Center for Railroad Photography & Art.

### Access and Restrictions

For educational use only, please contact the Center for other usage requests.

## Biographical Note

Robert A. Hadley was born on May 10, 1912 to Florence and Frank Hadley in Bancroft, Michigan. Growing up in a railroad family, he had the opportunity to experience train culture firsthand. Robert's grandfather worked for years as a crossing watchman for Grand Trunk Western, and when he was 16, Robert was allowed to work alongside at the GTW depot. He would complete odd jobs around the depot, and this work instilled in him a deep love for railroading that he would never outgrow.

## Scope and Content Note

This collection focuses on United States and Canadian Railroads, with both black-and-white and color negatives. The date ranges from 1908-2006, with the majority of the images falling between the early 1930s through the late 1950s.

Robert A. Hadley Collection

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**Administrative Information:** This section details the collection's provenance, how it was processed at the Center, additional notes about the collection, and guidelines pertaining to its access and use. *Tips:*

- Information in the provenance section details the collection's custodial history, answering the question "Who has held the records since their creation?" Collections that have changed hands frequently are more likely to have been altered, rearranged, or annotated over time.
- Pay particular attention to Additional Notes—this section details where to find collection materials online and in print, and what other creators or photographers are represented in the collection.
- Copyright status as well as collection access and restrictions are also detailed in this section. In most cases the Center owns the copyright for the photographs in our collections. As a non-profit organization with an educational focus, we advocate for fair use of our images and typically offer them for free to other non-profits.

**Biographical Note:** This section includes a short biography of the materials' creator. *Tips:*

- By providing details about the collection creator's life, this section can provide insight into the context in which collection materials were created.
- This section is not a complete biographic sketch; archivists generally keep biographical notes focused on the creator's activities most closely related to collection content.

**Scope and Content:** This section provides an overview of the types of materials in the collection including the subjects, photographic formats, and dates of creation. *Tips:*

- Consider whether the dates, formats, and subjects listed in the abstract fit your research inquiry before proceeding through the rest of the finding aid.
- For the Center's finding aids, the Subject Terms section described earlier lists railroad names and geographic locations, while this section highlights the collection's stylistic and subject matter preferences. For example, if the collection is strong on documentary views of infrastructure or artistic views of railroad workers, we would note that here, in the Scope and Content section of the finding aid.

**Arrangement:** This section informs you how the materials have been arranged. Collection content can be arranged by type of material, format, topic, or some other filing system. *Tips:*

- Generally, the Center arranges materials based on the collection creator's original order.

**Container List:** This is a box-by-box, or binder-by-binder listing of collection materials and where they're stored in the collection. *Tips:*

## Arrangement of the Collection

This collection is arranged by Robert A. Hadley's original order, which included negatives within sleeves further nested within larger sleeves. These sleeves were all numbered, indicating the numerical order of negative sleeves within folder sleeves. The collection is housed in archival plastic sleeves within archival binders.

## Container List

Binder	Page	Contents
Hadley-01	001-137	1932-1991, United States, Canada and United Kingdom. Black-and-white and color negatives.
Hadley-02	001-159	1925-2006, United States. Black-and-white
Binder	Page	Contents
		and color negatives.
Hadley-03	001-150	1930-1992, United States, United Kingdom. Black-and-white and color negatives.
Hadley-04	001-150	1931-1994, United States and Canada. Black-and-white negatives.
Hadley-05	001-150	1908-1975, United States. Black-and-white negatives.
Hadley-06	001-151	1916-1959, United States. Black-and-white negatives.
Hadley-07	001-154	1916-1999, United States, Canada, and Germany. Black-and-white and color negatives.
Hadley-08	001-154	1931-2000, United States. Black-and-white and color negatives.
Hadley-09	001-155	1918-1959, United States and Canada. Black-and-white and color negatives.
Hadley-10	001-203	1923-1966, United States and Canada. Black-and-white negatives.

Robert A. Hadley Collection

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*(Container List, continued)*

- This section provides more granular information about each box or binder in the collection. Box or binder numbers are recorded in the leftmost column of the Container List, the center column lists the number of pages or smaller containers found within the box or binder, and descriptions of their contents are located in the right column. Content descriptions include the contents' dates of creation, their subjects (such as locations or railroads depicted), and their photographic format
- The level of detail in this section may vary—finding aids at the Center generally describe materials by box or binder rather than by individual item.

### Using the Center's Finding Aids

The Center posts PDF finding aids for our processed collections to our website. Currently, finding aids are available for the John F. Bjorklund, Robert A. Hadley, Leo King, J. Parker Lamb, and Fred M. Springer collections. We anticipate adding a finding aid for the Donald W. Furler Collection in the coming months. To navigate to a specific finding aid from our homepage, click the Collections tab and scroll down to the collection you wish to view. When you reach that collection's page, click the Finding Aid tab on the right.

If you'd like to view the contents of a particular box or binder described in a finding aid, send an email to [info@railphoto-art.org](mailto:info@railphoto-art.org), and we can send you electronic image files to review. Our collections are also open for on-site research during regular business hours. Please contact us to arrange an appointment.

### Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

Our Madison office recently bid farewell to Erin Rose, graduate student intern. Erin was instrumental in processing the Robert A. Hadley Collection and much of the Donald W. Furler Collection. Jordan Radke, archives manager emeritus, will be posting selections from the Robert A. Hadley Collection to our website and Flickr accounts within the next few months. Volunteer John Kelly continues metadata entry from our Fred M. Springer Collection so we can post more of it online. At Lake Forest College, Colleen O'Keefe, associate archivist, continues to edit and enter metadata for selections from the Fred M. Springer Collection. In addition, Colleen has picked up where Erin left off processing the Furler Collection. For my first processing task as archives manager, I have taken on the processing of J. Parker Lamb's color slides. Keep an eye on our social media accounts and website for new selections from the Lamb Collection. You can view highlights and galleries from many of our collections at [www.railphoto-art.org](http://www.railphoto-art.org), and we post more selections each week to our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr.

What topics would you like to see covered in future installments of "Out of the Archives"? Get in touch with us at [info@railphoto-art.org](mailto:info@railphoto-art.org) and let us know. •



Left: Westbound Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad locomotive no. 5380 hauling an empty coal train through Steamboat Springs, Colorado, in December 1992. Hadley-04-021-06

Below: Pere Marquette Railway steam locomotive no. 718 departing Detroit, Michigan, with passenger train no. 7, circa 1946. Hadley-03-117-04

