



by

*Emily-Jane Dawson
Information Services Librarian
Multnomah County Library*

[<< issue home](#)



Multnomah County Library's map team: Baron Schuyler, Emily-Jane Dawson, and Ross Betzer. Photo by Jayson Colomby.

Librarians tend to divide ourselves into two camps: those who find weeding satisfying, and those who dread it.^[1] But whether we enjoy it or find it painful, weeding is clearly important for the long-term health of library collections. Materials are superseded, they become dated, and sometimes, they simply wear out. In addition, a collection thoroughly cluttered with the unexamined result of long-past selection decisions is often so overstuffed or disordered that it is difficult to find anything at all. Library collections must be useful and wisely-chosen, but they must also be accessible, and weeding contributes to all these objectives.

For myself, weeding that I have yet to do looms large and doesn't seem fun. It is slow, painstaking, and involves making irreversible decisions with (quite often) very little hard data to back them up. I have a good imagination, and I am maybe a bit of an over-thinker, so while I'm weeding I often find myself considering an imaginary future patron whose specific but unlikely need would be perfectly met *only by the*



item I am about to discard.

So it was with some anxiety that I set out, with a small team of colleagues, to weed my library's long-established and rich map collection. In this article, I'll describe how we planned and carried out this weeding project, and I'll discuss some of our observations about what worked and why. In addition, I will explain why large map collections need weeding, and recommend some basic tools and strategies for doing so.

Advice about weeding maps, per se, is lacking in the library literature. I found a few articles and book chapters about map librarianship more generally, which acknowledge that map collections, too, need to be weeded — though these offered no practical advice at all. After much digging I managed to locate just one article presenting substantive comment on map weeding: an overview of the various activities, including weeding, in an academic library's map collection (Le, 1983). Le's report does outline some informal weeding criteria, but weeding is not discussed in depth.

The lack of written instruction on the topic of map weeding surprised me. This article is my attempt to help remedy our collective omission. My hope is that it will be useful for anyone faced with a map weeding project — but it is especially written for librarians who, like me, come to map librarianship unexpectedly and without experienced colleagues standing by to mentor them.

History

Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon, is a little over 150 years old and has been collecting maps for just about that long. It has been a depository for U.S. federal documents (including maps) since the 1880s. The Central Library in downtown Portland, where most of the library's maps are housed, has always served as a research library as well as a general-interest public library, though its focus has never been an academic one.

Central Library's map collection was mostly dormant for some 10 years, with few new materials added, no weeding, no repair, and no cataloging of arrearage. As a consequence, librarians were loath to volunteer to take care of the map collection's needs — it seemed such a daunting job!



The solution was to bring together a team of three librarians — all generalists with many responsibilities, but eager to work with maps. All of us were brand-new to map librarianship. We were charged with a long list of tasks, including: write a new collection development policy, rearrange and consolidate the widely dispersed maps to make them more accessible to patrons, and of course, evaluate and weed the collection.

Emotions

Weeding is often distressing (Raphael, 2013). The detailed decision-making that is required can stir up considerable anxiety and strain, which leads some people to avoid the work or to judge items based on personal taste alone.

My colleagues and I avoided this set of problems by addressing them head on. Acknowledging our negative emotions, we found, helped us see them for what they were — irrational fears that could be soothed with the application of reasonable rules. Instead of dwelling on the unlikely future patron who would desperately need the map I was about to throw away, I talked with my colleagues about real patrons we serve now, and their needs. We used our library's mission and goals as guides, built more specific tools where we needed them, and resisted the urge to panic.

Recommendation:

Make space for your feelings about weeding. Examine your emotional response and see if there are practical concerns underneath, then address those concerns sensibly.

Teamwork

Different librarians have different weeding styles and weeding philosophies. This was certainly true of the three librarians working in our map team, but we found the diversity of our approaches to be a great strength.

I will say a bit more about this diversity-as-strength idea, because I don't think it is as widely discussed in libraries as it ought to be. We do our work together (we are a team, after all). Sometimes we literally work in concert; other times we work separately, but in harmony. One librarian may take on a task because their individual strengths are needed, or because they are eager to try out that aspect of



the work, or because everyone else is busy. Solo work still requires collaboration and communication, though the exact mechanisms vary with the task.

The three librarians in the map team enjoy a good deal of mutual professional respect, and we have high standards for each other. We expect that each of us will form professional opinions and judgements, make arguments accordingly, and take responsibility for sharing these with each other. We also expect that each of us will make listening a major component of our communication practice, and that we will all be open to rational persuasion. This active practice of respectful dialogue not only increases fellowship and professional engagement among the members of the map team, it also allows us to come up with imaginative solutions that no one of us could create alone.

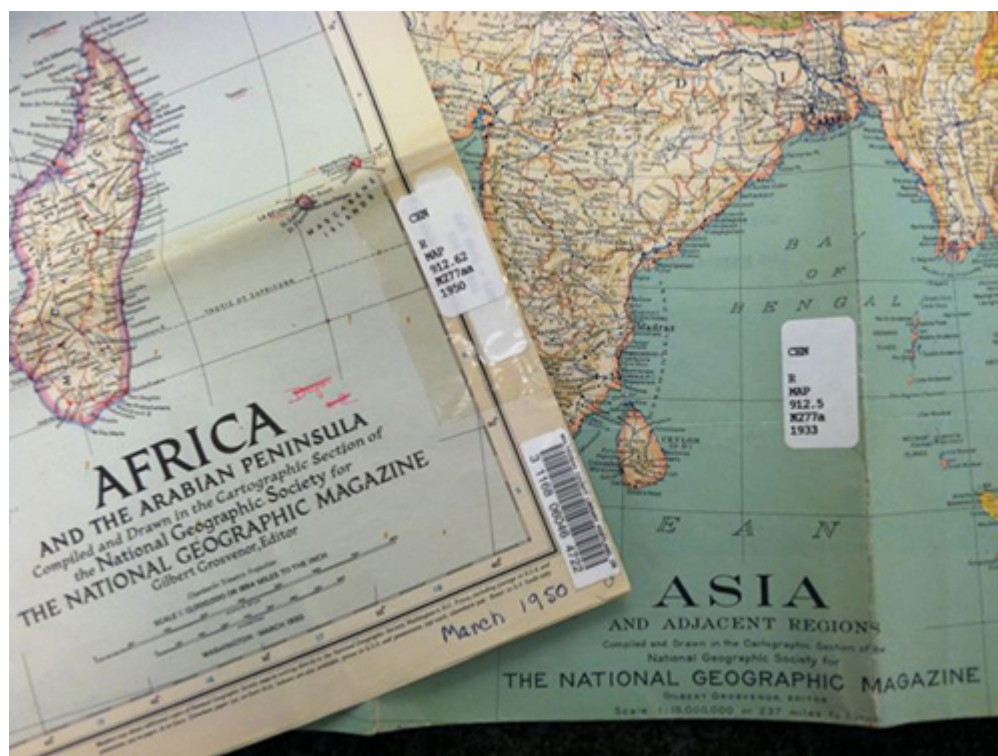
Because our everyday work together includes this discourse, we easily employ these tools to the work of weeding. Discussions about collection priorities and specific weeding choices are focused on elegant, rational solutions that address our core concerns. We all have feelings about the work, of course, but we help each other move from gut reaction to rational analysis. This leads to sound decisions that are easy to articulate, and it leads to greater consistency of practice overall.

Recommendation:

Foster intellectual engagement, listening, and discourse among your colleagues. Even if you must do most of your map collection work on your own, you will find that honest professional support is invaluable. Map weeding can be technically, practically, and emotionally difficult. It's easier if you do not do it alone, and weeding with colleagues works better if you establish your professional relationships on firm ground.

Maps are maps

Weeding maps is not like weeding books. This may seem like a rather obvious conclusion, because clearly maps are not identical to books. But, I think it is useful to outline the specific ways in which maps are unique:



Two of the National Geographic maps we retained during the weeding project.

Maps are visually complex, and can be hard to find in library catalogs — catalog records are textual in nature, and even at their most elegant they cannot describe maps in terms that are clear to every user. Library patrons don't always think of maps as information sources; these patrons need great signage and “browsability,” and they need the gentle guidance of reference librarians. Maps go out of date easily, but older maps often have significant historical value — considering whether this historical value is relevant to collection goals requires librarians with excellent knowledge of their patrons' needs.

Maps that are judged out of scope might be difficult to replace if they are discarded; should they be retained merely because they are interesting and somewhat useful? Some maps can be easily replaced with cartographic content in atlases, or with digital or digitized online maps, but librarians must consider whether the unique features of the original medium will be retained — and indeed, we must also consider whether these features are actually useful to patrons.

For librarians who find weeding projects stressful or taxing, map weeding can be exaggeratedly so. Maps — even worn maps covered with barcode stickers, hand-



written call numbers, security tags, and library property marks — are often beautiful objects. Librarians who love maps for their aesthetic qualities sometimes find it hard to remove them from their libraries. Maps go out of print quickly, and they can be expensive or hard to procure, and it can be difficult or impossible to produce usage statistics for maps that are reference copies. All of these factors have the potential to raise the stress level for a librarian (particularly an inexperienced one) who is considering discarding a map or group of maps.

Recommendation:

Remember that maps are not books, and they should be carefully and intelligently evaluated on their own terms.

Structure helps

Since MCL's map collection had been mostly untouched for a decade, the entire collection needed weeding. The team's first job was to propose a new collection development policy for maps. Up to this point, the map collection was broadly designed, with the aim of including "representative" maps of nearly all parts of the world. The central feature of the new collection policy was to focus on our own geographic area. This regional focus helps the library fulfill its responsibilities to meet our patrons' needs for information about Multnomah County, Portland and the other cities in the Portland area, the state of Oregon, and the Pacific Northwest in general. Focusing on our geographic region also gives the library the freedom to build and maintain a truly excellent collection — we can ensure that we collect and preserve all or nearly all of the best and most useful maps that illustrate our corner of the world.

[Multnomah County Library's map collection policy, 2014 \[PDF\]](#)

When the new collection development policy was approved by the library's management, we were ready to take our next step: weed to meet the goals outlined in the policy. The library had, at that time, more than 100 large drawers of flat maps, and something like 75 shelf-feet of folded maps housed in magazine boxes or hanging file folders. It was no small task to plan to evaluate and weed them all.

Still, map weeding isn't always hard. My colleagues and I found it relatively straightforward to evaluate and weed the library's circulating maps, and also its large sets of topographical, aeronautical, and military maps. We looked at each of



these groups in light of our new collection policy. We considered whether our patrons could find identical or similar information in other parts of MCL's collection, in nearby libraries, or online. We thought about past usage patterns and created imaginary but typical patrons – the hiking enthusiast, the local historian, the genealogist, the historical novelist, etc. — and then measured the library's ability to meet their potential needs.

One thing that made this process easier was our simultaneous attention to the big picture and the details. The collection development policy is a broad document designed to help staff tend to the needs of the entire collection over a term of many years. But the actual work of maintaining a collection is a steady series of small tasks, for example: design and make shelf labels, determine which specific circulating maps to order, give a brief update to colleagues about new developments in map publishing; or in the case of weeding, examine a map and determine whether it should be retained or discarded. In our daily work with maps (weeding and in other tasks as well), we refer to the collection policy constantly, and regularly ask ourselves if the detail work we are doing is aligned with it or not.

When it came time to weed the library's remaining miscellaneous reference maps, however, we needed a new approach. These maps were not part of large, cohesive sets like the maps we'd previously evaluated and weeded. And unlike the library's circulating maps, they were not intended to serve as a collection of purely up-to-date, current interest tools for the casual user.

This diverse group of reference maps were published over a period of more than 100 years. The maps focus on a wide array of geographical locales, and cover all topics from geology to linguistics to recreation. We had to develop evaluation and weeding criteria specifically for this group of materials, and clearly these criteria had be rooted in the new map collection policy.

After the map team discussed our ideas for weeding the miscellaneous reference maps and agreed on some general principles in line with our collection policy, I was given the task of writing the criteria. My first step was to do a quick literature review — with the idea that although our plans for weeding the collection seemed sound, it would be prudent to see if experienced map librarians before us had left written advice on the topic.

But sadly, I found nothing. If seasoned map weeding advice is out there, it eluded me. So, in the absence of specific guidance from peers, I gritted my teeth and wrote



a simple set of criteria.

[Criteria for weeding Multnomah County Library's miscellaneous reference maps.\[PDF\]](#)

I did find aid in the professional literature about weeding reference materials in general. In particular, Mary Francis's "Weeding the Reference Collection" (2012) affirmed mine and my colleagues' instincts about tying weeding criteria to formal collection goals.

Recommendation:

If you don't have a map collection development policy, write one. Once you have one, use it to structure your work. If your policy isn't specific enough to direct your weeding project, use its principles to build specific criteria for weeding.

Flexibility

My colleagues and I made these map weeding criteria firm, but not *too* firm. We wanted to leave room for adjustment as we weeded. This sounds odd coming from a group of librarians who embrace rationality and order as we do, but there was a method to our madness.

We felt fairly sure of our ability to plan our weeding project. We are very familiar with our collection. We had written the new map collection policy together (not a small job of work, in terms of philosophical and intellectual effort) and stood behind it as a guiding document. And, all three of us are experienced reference librarians who work with library patrons every day, so we know our users and their needs. But even with all the weight of these advantages, we knew we could not think of everything ahead of time, and we hadn't personally examined every map in the collection! And we were right to leave a bit of room to innovate.



The three Paris maps, all more than 100 years old.

During our first few weeding sessions, we came across three beautiful street maps of Paris, France and its environs, published c1852, c1901, and c1910. Although the maps were out of our geographical scope, and we had initially judged that they did not meet our criteria for usefulness or uniqueness, one of our team made a very cogent argument for keeping them.



He pointed out that the older a map gets, the less likely it is to be readily available in multiple library collections. Therefore we should discard especially old maps only with care. Some old maps show geographical features that have changed dramatically in the years since they were drawn — such as railroads, streets, forest cover, buildings, or population characteristics. This information, which may be quite hard to find elsewhere, is of great interest to historians, city planners, and novelists — all of whom are regular patrons of our library in general and the map collection in particular. And lastly, some old maps are lovely and valuable artifacts of their time — not just objects of history, my colleague pointed out, but objects of artistry.

This argument was persuasive, so we kept the three Paris maps and added a date criterion to our weeding guidelines. Afterwards, when we encountered a map which was roughly 100 or more years old, we stopped and carefully considered if the map has broad appeal to our users (regardless of whether it met our other criteria for inclusion in the collection).

We used this flexible approach again, when we began to consider the library's modest collection of maps which had originally arrived with the library's subscription to *National Geographic*. The library didn't have every map that came with the magazine, and most of them were well out of the scope of our new collection policy.

Despite this, I argued that we should keep a selection of *National Geographic* maps for their potential use to patrons researching their genealogy — many family historians face a challenge locating the towns or villages their ancestors lived in, particularly when international borders have since shifted or the *lingua franca* has changed. These large, folding maps would be more convenient for genealogy researchers than historical world atlases (though MCL has quite a good selection of atlases). They would be more convenient, for some, than the maps in the library's digital *National Geographic* archive. My colleagues agreed and a selection of the *National Geographic* maps we judged most useful for family history research were retained and moved from a closed stack area to the reading room with the other genealogy materials.

This adjustment didn't require that we rewrite our weeding criteria; in this case, we decided that the *National Geographic* maps met the usefulness criterion, because they could be so valuable to genealogy researchers, who make up a significant minority of our library patrons.



Recommendation:

Allow some flexibility and adaptability in your work. As you evaluate and weed, you will make new observations about your collection and its strengths. Consider these observations carefully, and formally or informally incorporate the soundest of them into your weeding practice.



The circulating map collection's new quarters, after weeding.



Weeding is keeping

Most often, librarians characterize weeding projects by discussing what needs to go. That makes sense; after all, the outdated, worn, or superseded materials are cluttering up the collection and making it difficult for patrons to easily access the wonderful stuff they need.

In our long project of weeding MCL's map collection, we talked a lot about materials that needed to be discarded. But we also looked carefully at the maps we kept, and this allowed us to keep our focus on the positive outcomes of weeding, rather than on the stress the process sometimes brought on.

An example is the circulating map collection. Current interest, circulating maps had long been kept in hanging file folders, which were housed in large drawers. The maps themselves were almost invisible to patrons, and the hanging folders made them hard to browse. We weeded this group of maps heavily, and were able to move them to a set of open bins, marked with large labels. They are now readily visible to patrons and staff alike.

Recommendation:

The act of weeding requires you to focus on materials you are discarding — but don't lose sight of the fact that weeding refreshes the materials you are keeping.

Evaluate & celebrate

As my colleagues and I completed each stage of our weeding project, we took time to evaluate our work and celebrate our achievements. This assessment felt particularly important to us, because we knew that as soon as we'd completed our big, comprehensive map weeding project, we'd need to begin planning in earnest for how we would continue to evaluate and weed the map collection in the future. Weeding work is never done.

Evaluation does not have to be rigidly structured to be useful. We try to include a little time for reflection and evaluation in every meeting or discussion. Questions we might ask are: What have we accomplished? Has our work uncovered new tasks we hadn't anticipated? What problems did we encounter, and how did we solve them?



What surprised us? Did the work generate new ideas? Do our plans for the future still make sense, or do they need to be adjusted?

Recommendation:

Plan ahead. When you have completed a successful weeding project, use what you learn to plan for future collection work. And remember to celebrate your accomplishments and acknowledge the good work you have done!

Conclusion

Multnomah County Library's map collection is much better for having been weeded — the collection's focus fits our patron's needs better, the materials are better housed and in a smaller number of physical shelving locations, and the library's reference staff are more aware of the map collections' contents and its strengths.

And, I say this in all humility: I am a better librarian for having done this work. I am more intimate with my library's map collection, braver about the entire concept of weeding, and more adept at the everyday work of professional conversation and communication.

I would like to thank Ross Betzer, Lee Catalano, Jayson Colomby, Baron Schuyler, and Kristian Williams for their assistance. Without their support and counsel, I could not have written this article.

*Emily-Jane Dawson
Information Services Librarian
Multnomah County Library
801 SW 10th Ave.
Portland, OR 97205
ejd@multcolib.org*



Bibliography

Francis, Mary. "Weeding the Reference Collection: A Case Study of Collection Management." *The Reference Librarian* 53 (2012). Print.

Midway through the map weeding project, I was fortunate to read Mary Francis's "Weeding the Reference Collection" (2012), in which she describes her library's very structured, critical approach to weeding their reference collection. In particular, Francis recommends several elements: design goals for the collection, write a collection policy, use the policy to create weeding criteria, evaluate after weeding, plan for the future. Francis's discussion of her library's weeding work is detailed, her analysis astute, and her advice sound.

Le, Loan, "The Map Collection in a Small Academic Library: Scarborough College." *Bulletin: Association of Canadian Map Libraries* 46 (1983). 12-15. Web. Accessed 3 February 2015. <<http://collections.mun.ca/PDFs/acmla/ACMLA046.pdf>>

A thorough orientation to recent (c.1983) developments in the map collection at Scarborough College, University of Toronto — including a section discussing selection, acquisition, and weeding of maps.

Raphael, Laura, "Killing Sir Walter Scott." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. 24 July 2013. Web. Accessed 18 January 2015.
<<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2013/killing-sir-walter-scott-a-philosophical-exploration-of-weeding/>>

Pointing out the elephant in the room, Raphael outlines and analyzes the reasons that weeding can be — for some librarians — heartbreaking, difficult, and miserable.

^[1] And librarians do seem to enjoy classifying ourselves and each other along these lines. Several years ago at my own library, staff who were part of the team that visited branches for big, comprehensive weeding projects made "weeding locusts" t-shirts, embellished with "keeper" and "tosser" badges, to mark the predilections of each weeder.

[<< issue home](#)



[next feature >>](#)

Citation Author: Emily-Jane Dawson