
Metadata Musketeer-Style

by Katherine M. Wisser

*“...the four friends repeated with one voice
the formula dictated by D’Artagnan:*

‘All for one, one for all.’”

Alexander Dumas

The Three Musketeers

Alexander Dumas’ characters in *The Three Musketeers* vocalize late in their story the slogan for which they are now known. Over time, the sentiment has been internalized by our culture: it is best to work together as a team. Individuals need to make contributions to the team in order for it to function. In reviewing the history of the North Carolina Encoded Archival Description (NCEAD) project, teamwork is the most effective framework. While plumed hats and swords have long been replaced by keyboards and the internet, the work of NCEAD exemplifies the construct of teamwork. We are and have been truly all for one, one for all.

Encoded Archival Description, an SGML/XML document type definition for archival finding aids, was released in Version 1.0 in 1998. Created by Daniel Pitti in conjunction with leading archivists and adopted by the Society of American Archivists, EAD underwent a significant national vetting process to ensure flexibility and applicability for widespread adoption. It is a necessarily complex and sophisticated metadata system where the content of the finding aid is marked-up in order to facilitate search and retrieval. It is currently maintained by the Society of American Archivists.

Steven L. Hensen, Duke University’s Director for Planning and Project Development at the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library and author of *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts*, the descriptive standard for archival cataloging, was integrally involved in the creation and vetting of EAD in its early stages. The national involvement by one of the state’s leading archivists provided NCEAD with an valuable understanding of the complexities of the emerging standard and the impetus to work collaboratively on its implementation. In addition, the success of the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) Special Collections group provided a ready-made consortium in which institutions had a history of working together.

The initial structure for NCEAD focused on the TRLN institutions including Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University.¹ The North Carolina State Archives was also asked to participate due to its large holdings, talented professionals, and significant role in the state’s archival enterprise. The objective of this newly-formed group was to bring practitioners together to examine the standard and experiment collectively in its implementation. Each institution had already begun its own exploration of EAD, but the working group intended the collective endeavor to bring common understanding and consistent application and eventually to assist in the merging of dispersed collections in a virtual environment.

As envisioned, the goals of the project included the development of best practices for encoding based on a representative sample of finding aids from participating institutions; the development of tools for effective encoding of finding aids; exploration of technologies for indexing and display of EAD-encoded finding aids; and the creation of a prototype union database featuring the Terry Sanford papers and other representative collections from the participating institutions <http://www.ncecho.org/ncead/archives/ncead_original.htm>. Throughout the life of the consortium, each of these goals has been met in some way, whether the goal was to create best practice guidelines, tools and stylesheets or to examine and adjust the idea of union database structures to a more distributed solution due to the efficacy of the solution. NCEAD has consistently worked to make online finding aids more tenable for institutions to create and to leverage those finding aids in a way that increases access to the state’s holdings.

NCEAD, under the stewardship of Hensen, received generous support from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation to hire a project manager to lead the working group through the intricacies of EAD and facilitate the experimental stage and decision-making process. Stephen Miller became the NCEAD Project Manager in 1999. Miller’s extensive experience with the Historic American Sheet Music and William Gedney photographs and Writings digital projects created at Duke University well prepared him for the challenges of implementing the standard and facilitating the consortium. He also served as a participant on the NEH-funded *American Heritage Virtual Archive*, a collaborative project with the University of California at Berkley, the University of Virginia and Stanford University, and he participated in the compilation of the EAD Tag Library published by the Society of American Archivists. For NCEAD, he successfully adapted the SGML beta version of NCEAD for the collaboration and then engineered the conversion from SGML to the XML Version 1.0 for the participating

institutions. Miller promoted a model of active experimentation by the institutions in NCEAD in order to inform the consortium. He built upon the ideas presented at NCEAD meetings to write the applications guidelines that served as the consortial guidelines.

As EAD evolved, NCEAD kept apace. Joshua McKim succeeded Miller as project manager in 2001. McKim oversaw the general revision of the application guidelines from the SGML version to a strictly XML interpretation. His approach was to visit each participating institution and to review the application guidelines to ensure that individual institutional applications were taken into consideration in the creation of the guidelines. Both Miller and McKim had the enormous task of reconciling years of legacy finding aid structures in order to accommodate a consortial approach to encoding structures.

At this time NCEAD working group revisited the original goals and objectives of the project. The consortium had successfully implemented best practices and created tools to help institutions in the creation of EAD finding aids. They were now ready to approach the third aspect, the virtual collection. As discussions ensued, participating institutions expressed concern over the union database solution. For instance, they considered the impact that a union solution would have on workflow and potential legacy data issues that might be involved. The working group resolved that NCEAD should seek another solution to the indexing and retrieval of finding aids encoded in EAD. The entire group felt that a critical mass of finding aids needed to be created while a solution was being investigated.

NCEAD Chronology
1998 EAD Version 1.0 released
1999 NCEAD founded
2000 April, NCEAD Guidelines for EAD Encoding released
2001 November, NCEAD Guidelines for EAD Encoding revised
2002 Dec. 17 EAD Version 2002 released
2003 August, NC ECHO and NCEAD merge
2004 February NCEAD Best Practice Guidelines EAD 2002 released
2005 May NCEAD Best Practice Guidelines for EAD 2002 2 nd Edition

In September 2002, McKim approached NC ECHO’s Access to Special Collections Working Group with a proposal for NC ECHO to assume responsibility for NCEAD. With the position of project manager terminating at the end of that month, it was felt that a merger would be mutually beneficial. NCEAD would be able to enhance NC ECHO’s goals, and NC ECHO could provide some sustainability for the project through sufficient leadership.

In December 2002, a new version of EAD was released. McKim and Kathy Wisser, then at NCSU, reviewed the best practice guidelines for EAD 2002 put together by the Research Libraries Group (RLG). They used this review as a basis for the ensuing discussions about the changes to the standard and how NCEAD would interpret the new guidelines. At this time, McKim was no longer serving as Project Manager, but he maintained his leadership role prior to moving out of the state. His contributions are a testament to the impact that individuals have played in the on-going efforts of NCEAD.

NCEAD also underwent some structural changes at this time. The last meeting McKim presided over included almost thirty people. East Carolina University became integrally involved in the consortium, and the increase membership made meetings unwieldy. In February 2003, it was proposed that NCEAD create a tiered structure that dealt directly with the variety of problems the consortium was facing. An Executive Committee formed that consisted of one representative from each participating institution. Two working groups, the Standards Working Group and the Technical Working Group, were also formed to deal directly with those aspects of EAD implementation. This divide-and-conquer approach allowed individuals from participating institutions to participate more concretely in their areas of expertise and interest. It also minimized meeting sizes in order to facilitate more productive meetings. Vikram Ahmed, from East Carolina University, took on leadership of the Technical Working Group, and Kathy Wisser, then acting as leader of the project, took on leadership of the Standards Working Group. The Executive Committee was made up of Lois Fisher Black (North Carolina State University), Ruth Bryan (Duke University), Martha Elmore (East Carolina University), Lynn Holdzkorn (University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill), Druscie Simpson (North Carolina State Archives), and Kathy Staley (Appalachian State University) who was asked to join to represent western institutions. Ahmed and Wisser also participated in the Executive Committee to represent the work of the working groups. When NCEAD became part of NC ECHO, Hensen joined the Executive Committee as a representative of the NC ECHO Access to Special Collections Working Group. This proved fortuitous as Hensen brought institutional memory for the original NCEAD project and provided both national and institutional perspective that enhanced the committee’s understanding of the challenges and innovations with the standard.

One of the most significant contributions of NCEAD over the past six years is the creation and dissemination of Best Practice Guidelines. In the spring of 2005, these guidelines were revised to include the new descriptive standard, *Describing Archives: a Content Standard* (DACS). Peter Hymas, NC ECHO summer intern in 2004 did the groundwork for this inclusion. He carefully compared the new standard with the then existing Best Practice Guidelines. In addition, interpretational shifts, simplifications and expansions were included where needed in the new guidelines. Additional appendices include further information on the International Standards Organization ISO 8601 format for dates, a controlled vocabulary of codes for thesauri and container types, and an appendix entitled “How do I Encode...?” which seeks to provide examples of encoding some less common elements in a finding aid.

NCEAD Workshops

2002 September

Winston-Salem State University and
East Carolina University

2003 March

North Carolina State University (as
part of the Society of North Carolina
Archivist's Spring meeting)

2003 November

University of North Carolina –
Wilmington and University of North
Carolina – Asheville

2004 March

University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill (as part of the Society
of North Carolina Archivist's Spring
meeting)

2004 June

East Carolina University

2005 June

University of North Carolina –
Wilmington and University of North
Carolina – Charlotte

The interpretation and the NCEAD approach to EAD that is apparent within the Best Practice Guidelines can be directly traced to a group of dedicated professionals from the participating institutions. Beginning with Miller's leadership, professionals such as Lynn Holdzkom and Ruth Bryan have contributed directly in the formation and editing of the Best Practice Guidelines. Jill Katte of Duke University joined this effort in the transition for EAD Version 1.0 and EAD 2002, and Valerie Gillispie, a student at the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, also contributed to the examination of the standard. It was this core group, led by Wisser, that created the first Best Practice Guidelines for EAD 2002. Hymas and Jackie Dean, NC ECHO Project Librarian, joined the team for the second edition, published in 2005.

A complimentary component to NCEAD's success has been the creation and dissemination of tools to assist in the encoding process. Rusty Koonts, then at North Carolina State University, created the first set of tools using NoteTab® software. NoteTab was chosen as the consortial software due to its customizability and its low cost. Duke University continued their use of XMetal® providing expertise and knowledge of other software options. The tools created for NoteTab included libraries and parsing mechanisms that increased the ease of implementation for new institutions wishing to implement EAD. In handling these tools, Ahmed made significant adjustments to the tools created by Koonts in pace with the developments of the EAD standard and in response to feedback by the community. In addition, NCEAD provides basic stylesheets for institutions. These stylesheets are customizable but maintain a basic structure for the encoded finding aids. The XSLT stylesheet language is often considered the most complex and difficult aspects of implementing EAD at an institution. By providing stylesheets for institutions, NCEAD seeks to decrease this barrier for implementation.

The final component to NCEAD's success has been an educational program. In July 2002, NC ECHO approached McKim and Wisser about teaching an introductory workshop on Encoded Archival Description. Using the standards and tools created through the project, McKim and Wisser created a curriculum that provides instruction on the basic concepts of EAD as well as hands-on experience in encoding finding aids. An "Area 51 Finding Aid" was written and is still used in workshops today. Part of the workshop structure established by

NC ECHO entails travel around the state; this provided a more direct means for participation and has served to widen the institutional involvement in NCEAD, even if that involvement consists of creating online finding aids. Following McKim's departure from NCEAD, Bryan at Duke University began co-teaching the workshop with Wisser. In total, NC ECHO has hosted nine EAD workshops in locations from Asheville to Wilmington.



In 2004, the Executive Committee discussed the issue of dispersion that was resulting from these continuing education efforts. More and more institutions were deciding to implement the standard, and NCEAD considered that a measure of their success. To allow institutions to self-identify their adherence to the NCEAD Best Practice Guidelines, an NCEAD Seal was created by Craig Fansler of Wake Forest University. This seal is embedded in the stylesheet and available on the NCEAD website. The concept behind the seal is to provide consortial identity. Coupling that effort is the creation of institutional descriptions for those institutions that are participating in NCEAD through the creation of institutional descriptions. These descriptions provide contact information, descriptions of implementations (including software choices) and other relevant information about an individual institution's implementation of EAD to provide institution's interested in starting EAD with an understanding of different implementations and the ability to contact individuals and discuss options.

As a consortium, NCEAD has benefited from working together as well as the strength of contributions made by individuals. At the outset, NCEAD faced the overall mission of creation "a system for creating new finding aids based upon standardization best practices will be created utilizing the technology created for the retrospective encoding process. The focus of this system will be a high degree of user-friendliness, allowing archivists to create finding aids as part of their normal work process without worrying about EAD encoding" ("Building EAD Infrastructure for Multi-Institutional Projects," <<http://www.ncecho.org/ncead/archives/infrastructure.html>>). In order to achieve this, it has been all for one, one for all. It should be noted that D'Artagnan finishes the passage, "That's well! Now let us everyone retire to his own home...and attention! For from this moment we are at feud with the cardinal." While NCEAD has not been at feud with a standard, our collective and individual efforts have helped us to champion EAD implementation within the state.

References

¹ Note that while North Carolina Central University is a fully participating institution in TRLN, they do not have a special collections or archivists within their library and were therefore excluded only on that basis.