

While we still have very low infection rates in Thunder Bay, the University is being appropriately cautious, and we're ready to change our procedures throughout the Library should it become necessary.

The first few scheduled, distanced, and very careful research appointments we've offered this Fall have gone well. I hope this remains true for other archives across the province.



Migrating Archival Descriptive Records to AtoM: The Good, the Bad and the Yikes

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It's been more than six months since COVID-related lockdowns and quarantines upended our day-to-day lives, starkly delineating Then and Now. As part of that upending many of us have been forced to reconsider, reimagine and rethink how we work and where it takes place, a reality that has been no different for the team of staff in Special Collections & Archives (SCA) at the University of Waterloo Library. We've taken some time to find our footing, and the truth is that we still sometimes have days (or entire weeks) where we still stumble, but overall SCA staff have been able to forge ahead on a variety of tasks, many of them [AtoM-](#)

related. The related work has prompted us to think more intentionally about where we've been and where we hope to end up.

Initial migration to AtoM

SCA began the process of migrating from more than 100 (not a typo or an exaggeration!) internal Inmagic databases to AtoM in 2016. A service agreement was established with Artefactual to develop a migration script to facilitate the ingest of an initial set of records that predominantly fell into two categories:

1. High-use fonds or collections;
2. Records deemed complete and in line with current descriptive standards.

Combined, the set consisted of more than 180,000 records. Roughly 120,000 were related to the Kitchener-Waterloo Photographic Negative Collection, the department's most heavily-used collection, and roughly 60,000 were tied to private records holdings.

Once we received the migrated files back from Artefactual, more than a year was spent reviewing and cleaning them up to allow for use by the general public. This type of timeline may cause some of you to pause: was there a misstep during the ingestion process? Isn't the work done once the records are migrated? The answer to both of those questions is "no." The truth is that migration work is a long and time-intensive effort that never actually ends in the definitive sense of endings.

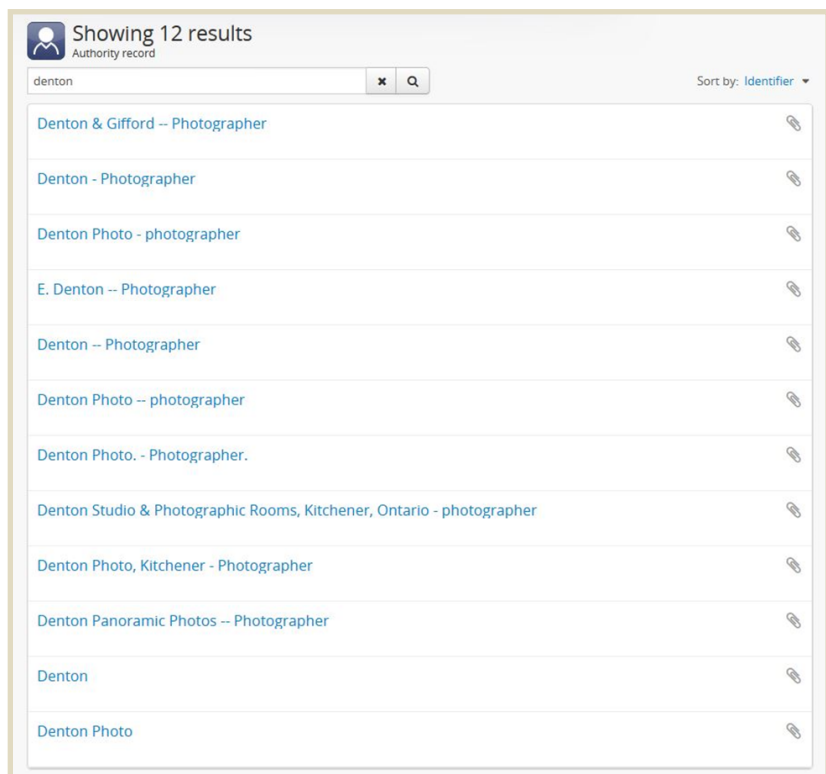
While the descriptive records had been migrated to AtoM, the scripted process had only gotten the data part of the way to where we wanted and needed it to be. The

descriptive records for each fonds or collection needed to be reviewed, and in some cases dramatically revised before it could be made available for public use. In certain cases descriptions in multiple (custom) Inmagic fields had to be collapsed and (lovingly) plunked into the equivalent AtoM field that often only mostly worked as a final destination. The vast majority of our legacy authorities are one example among many.

Historically, while authority access points had been thoughtfully added to descriptive fields, it had been done in such a way that there was no efficient manner to group and point them to the default Name, Genre or Place fields in AtoM. As a result, everything was lumped into AtoM's Genre field during the migration process and needed to be re-assigned or removed entirely after the fact. Further, although the authorities in Inmagic drew from the Library of Congress Subject Headings and the *The-saurus for Graphic Materials*, the applied terms weren't centrally managed, making the data unstructured and unpredictable. Some fonds authorities used big bucket terms, while others consisted of hyper-focused entries that only applied to a handful of records. Finally, I would be remiss not to flag that there was still the issue of non-standard in-house authority work to contend with. The image on the right is a look at the 12 different authorities that existed for the same Kitchener photographer post-migration.

Although we considered abandoning the legacy authorities and starting over in AtoM, the type of metadata cleanup that would have been required before the migration was deemed unrealistic if we wanted to migrate before the end of the decade—which decade I'll leave for you to figure out.

In certain cases the names of people associated with records (think photo identifications or letter writers) were absent from the scope and content field and only listed in the authorities (not a typo or an exaggeration!). If those authorities had been abandoned we would have been leaving behind essential descriptive information for thousands of records. Further, we simply didn't have the staff or resources available to undertake careful data cleanup ahead of the migration process in an efficient and fo-



The need for standardizing in-house authorities post-AtoM migration, illustrated by this example for Kitchener-based photographer Ernest Denton.

cused manner. The management of archival descriptive records is but one of the department's many responsibilities and pushing forward the availability of web-based access to those records, in all of their imperfect glory, was deemed more of a priority than aiming for clean and precise data beforehand. After all, the data may be messy, but at least it's messy in a newly consistent and structured manner.

Where we've been and where we're going

A milestone on the post-migration front took place in the summer of 2019 when a beta version of SCA's AtoM instance, branded as the "[Archives Database](#)," was quietly made public. We drew attention to its availability later in the Fall by way of campus-wide communications and have continued to simultaneously clean up migrated records and introduce new ones for the first time. Sometimes these additions are newly revised, re-described and/or rearranged legacy descriptions, and in others they are the end result of newly processed acquisitions. Although this type of work has been on-going for the past several years, the six months since lockdown have afforded us the opportunity to prioritize some of the longer-term desired improvements that continued to get pushed down our collective To Do list.

Thematic Area improvements

It was decided early on that as part of public launch preparations, SCA would [follow McMaster's lead](#) and tag our Archives Database records with relevant collection areas to facilitate browsing. Falling in line with navigational language already in place on the SCA website we settled on "Thematic Areas" as a way to refer to those collecting areas. Although they were available as a

browse option as soon as the site launched, what was missing were current and reliable overviews for each of those Thematic Areas, a legacy omission that hadn't clearly surfaced until we grouped everything in a browsable menu. The new overviews help researchers understand the scope and nature of our collecting areas, facilitate instruction and outreach efforts, and act as useful points of reference for new and reestablished donor relations.

Newly available fonds/collections

Along with the immense effort that continues to go into post-migration review and clean up, the past six months have allowed us to begin zeroing in on fonds that, for various reasons, weren't deemed (post-) migration priorities. The progress we've been able to make on this front is a particular point of pride for the team as we've begun to meaningfully provide online access to descriptive records that were previously only available internally as print finding aids or as incomplete legacy descriptive efforts. Some of the fonds with records available for the first time online as part of the Archives Database include:

- [Central Ontario Art Association fonds](#)
- [Dr. Stanley Francis Leavine fonds](#)
- [Frances Kathleen Montgomery fonds](#)
- [John Ivan Rempel fonds](#)
- [Rotary Club of Kitchener fonds](#)
- [George Pattinson Woollen Mill fonds](#)

Expanded and newly-created biographical sketches

As part of the post-migration clean up SCA staff have been working to create and expand the content of various authorities tied to families whose papers we hold. Of equal importance, however, has been authority work related to people, particularly from a

local history standpoint, whose names cut across multiple fonds whose papers we don't hold. These people and their lives were always present in our holdings, but the manner in which AtoM allows for centralized tracking of myriad points of interconnectedness has more readily surfaced their presence. Put another way: there's a reason the linked authorities are one of our favourite AtoM features.

In addition to surfacing people who may have otherwise been overlooked, updating biographical sketches has also been an opportunity to put SCA's [recent language in archival descriptions updates into practice](#). Once example is intentionally removing biographical sketch notes commenting on whether or not a woman married or had children. The immediate reason is rooted in equitable description: those caveats rarely, if ever, get noted when it comes to men. There's also, however, the aim of accurately reflecting historical realities. Women actually couldn't get married if they wanted to have or keep their careers. Women couldn't get married if they had same-sex partners. Women also couldn't get married if they found themselves, willingly or not, in caretaker roles looking after war-wounded siblings or disease stricken parents. And perhaps more importantly, women don't have to get mar-

ried or have children to live notably meaningful, fulfilling and well-rounded lives, yet so many archival finding aids encode suggestions that they do by needlessly commenting on what their lives lacked. There's room for improvement on that front and we're on the lookout for it.

While I'm loath to conclude this reflection of the AtoM migration process by doing anything close to veering into pandemic productivity cheerleading, I absolutely am going to pat myself and the rest of the team on the back for staying the course during a particularly turbulent moment in time. I'm also going to remind myself (and all of you reading) that while the management, creation and migration of archival descriptive records never actually ends, there's value in taking

stock of what's been accomplished and acknowledging that change leads both to renewal and improved migration preparedness in the future. Doing so has helped the SCA team put the past year into perspective and begin to shape how we might imagine the next 6-1,000 months of our careers (give or take depending on where you fall on the migration and/or pandemic optimism spectrum).



Screenshot of the SCA's [Archives Database](#) front page with Thematic Areas on the left.