

The State Archivist and the Academic Researcher—"Stable Companionship"

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A UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN, attempting to define his relationship to the scholar, used the simile of a "stable companion." A stable companion, he explained, is that "smaller and inferior" animal as a result of whose company a thoroughbred "remains happier and performs better."¹ Apart from the question of whether custodial responsibilities necessarily imply inferiority, the simile applies well to the relationship of the archivist to the academic researcher.

Our colleagues in stable companionship, the librarians and the manuscript curators, have long recognized and have frequently written about their responsibilities to scholars.² Several historians are also on record in our professional journal with their ideas about ways in which archivists can serve them.³ To my knowledge, however, not one archivist in the broad field of public records has seriously concerned himself with this matter. Even T. R. Schellenberg's admirable treatise on *Modern Archives* offers only broad generalizations concerning the problem, although with repeated

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¹ Wyman W. Parker, "How Can the Archivist Aid the Researcher?" in *American Archivist*, 16:233 (July 1953).

² See particularly the article cited above, p. 233-240; Howard H. Peckham, "Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections," in *American Archivist*, 19:221-228 (July 1956); and Lester J. Cappon, "Tardy Scholars Among the Archivists," *ibid.*, 21:3-16 (Jan. 1958).

³ See the following articles, all in *American Archivist*: Boyd C. Shafer, "Lost and Found," 18:217-223 (July 1955); Frontis W. Johnston, "A Historian Looks at Archives and Manuscripts," 19:229-233 (July 1956); Bell I. Wiley, "The Role of the Archivist in the Civil War Centennial," 23:131-142 (Apr. 1960); and Philip D. Jordan, "The Challenge of Medical Records," 23:143-151 (Apr. 1960). See also John A. Munroe, "A Brave Man—or a Foolish One," in *American Archivist*, 26:151-160 (Apr. 1963).

emphasis upon the archivist's responsibility to provide information from or about archives.⁴

Since in the service we provide we should live up to our responsibilities, I submit what I consider to be major areas of archival responsibility to the academic researcher.

1. *To spend less time in providing information from records and to spend more time in providing information about records.*

We cannot and we should not attempt to do a researcher's work for him. Not all research requests we receive are so obviously unreasonable as was the mimeographed form, circulated by a university professor, that asked for a listing of all documents dealing with the Emancipation Proclamation and provided blank spaces in which the archivist was to evaluate the references as unfavorable, neutral, or favorable. But blanket requests for "all information" dealing with specific subjects are increasingly common, and not all such requests come from graduate students.

I submit that the fault does not lie wholly with the inquirer. Unless an academic researcher has some information about the records in our custody, he is not likely to spend his valuable time and limited funds investigating blind alleys. And unless archivists spend more time in making available information *about* their records, they are ill prepared to refuse blanket requests for information. If the archivist has no comprehensive guide or description of his holdings, he has failed in his chief responsibility—not only to preserve valuable records, but to make these records accessible. Accessibility entails much more than the mere announcement of the hours when an archives building is open.

2. *To cooperate as far as possible with scholarly editorial projects.*

Obviously there is no better assurance for the archivist that researchers in years to come will have the greatest possible access to carefully edited documentary materials than for him to assist these projects. The research the archivist and his staff must undertake to meet the needs of these documentary publications is fully justified.

3. *To provide photocopies of records at reasonable cost in response to every reasonable request.*

If an archival agency lacks the necessary equipment, it should

⁴ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives; Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956). See especially p. 8, 149-160, 224-236.

make arrangements with some other governmental agency or, if necessary, a private firm to provide this essential service.

4. *To spend less time worrying about electronic data processing and information retrieval, and more time learning the research needs and trends in the fields of modern American history, political science, and economics.*

The growth of government at all levels as a regulatory and social welfare agency has too long been neglected by most academic researchers. Unless we preserve the documentation of these developments in the 50 State laboratories of our Federal system, we shall fail in our basic responsibility. And unless, through personal and professional contacts, we inform historians, political scientists, and economists in our own States that records of this type are available for use, the records will not be used.

5. *To become thoroughly familiar with the history and government of the jurisdiction that the archivist serves.*

The academic researcher expects the State or local archivist to have a good general knowledge of American history and to be particularly conversant with all phases of the history of the State, county, or municipality that he serves. Without such knowledge the archivist cannot possibly appreciate the needs of the academic researcher or evaluate responsibly the records that require his approval for destruction. The archivist who is not a historian as a result of either formal or informal study is, at best, a manager of inactive records.

Recently William T. Alderson, the chairman of the State and Local Records Committee of the Society of American Archivists, wrote: "It has been several years since we have given much attention to the ultimate use of these records we so carefully preserve because of our preoccupation with the tremendous job of just keeping up with the modern volume of records."⁵ He recommended that we should not hesitate to give our personal opinions on the subject and that we should advance ideas even when we know they may meet widespread disagreement. It is within this context that I have made the above observations, and I look forward to the expression of other views on the neglected art of stable companionship.

⁵ Dr. Alderson to Frank B. Evans, Sept. 5, 1962.