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## The American Archivist

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MEMBERSHIP AND SUBSCRIPTION CORRESPONDENCE: Judith A. Koucky, SAA Acting Secretary, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48105; phone (313) 764-3482. *Notice of nonreceipt of an issue must be sent to the secretary by domestic subscribers within four months of issue publication date and by international subscribers within six months.*

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## The Forum

### Women in Archives: A Serious Omission

When the *American Archivist* devoted an entire issue to women in archives and/or history, it made a serious omission by leaving out the largest segment of women who can or do contribute to archival management in the United States: Roman Catholic sisters and nuns.<sup>1</sup> The *American Archivist* published in 1970 (33: 135-39) an article by Sister Mary A. Healey, B.V.M., of Mount Carmel, Dubuque, Iowa, entitled "Archives of Roman Catholic Orders and Congregations of Women," which was reprinted with permission in *Review for Religious* (September 1970, pp. 687-92). At that time Sister had made a survey of religious orders and congregations to see just what the status of their archives was and had discovered a rather bleak picture.<sup>2</sup>

In the three years since that article first appeared, much activity has occurred among religious orders and congregations of women which will, I am sure, make a decided difference in Sister's findings. The article alerted superiors or provincial generals to a realization that the documents that were in the office of the secretary had more than internal importance. In other words, it became increasingly evident that the holdings of religious orders and congregations had materials of value not only to historians working in church history but also to researchers in local, state, and national history.

Sister Mary Healey mentioned that many of the religious sisterhoods had their origins east of the Mississippi and spread west from there. But as they spread beyond the states into mission territory, they recorded what was happening, not only to the sisters traveling across the Mississippi, but also to those with whom they worked. Consequently, rich depositories can be found in the houses of religious women, and, if my own experience is typical, the demand for holdings is increasing. Hence,

<sup>1</sup> The term "sister" designates a member of an "active" congregation; "nun" refers to members of contemplative orders.

<sup>2</sup> Members of congregations are usually not cloistered; many orders are.



the archival rule of using archives is true in the case of religious women's depositories.

In 1970, I was appointed archivist for the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia whose archives and motherhouse are in Aston Township, Pennsylvania, although the congregation is better known as the Glen Riddle Franciscans. At that time my chief claim to the position was my experience in the archives of the University of Notre Dame, where for three years I had worked almost daily in research or simply in learning how archives should be organized. Within those three years the secretary of our congregation consulted with me about the proper order of the archives, and we found that she had done a fine job of organizing by topics, much along the line subsequently listed by Sister Mary Healey. Consequently, when the office of the secretary was separated from the archives in our congregation, my job was quite simple.

The next year, to learn more about archival management, I attended a five-week workshop in Denver and earned a certificate for the study. It was somewhat of a shock to me to learn that some archivists (hopefully not all) have little use for historians or librarians who become archivists. Ironically, all but two of the members of the workshop were either historians or librarians, converting to archivists. And equally ironically, most openings in archival management are for those with at least a master's in history and/or library science. Had I not done my doctoral research in about twenty archives ranging from the National Archives in Washington to private archives, I would find my second career extremely difficult.

After reading the article in 1970, I decided that there should be some way to develop a central office in which the holdings of the archives of women religious might be listed. Several contacts—and the names of the contacts are left out in order not to embarrass anyone—proved fruitless. Two of the largest university archives in the United States were definitely interested, but the archivists saw many obstacles before a central listing could be effected. Such an undertaking would take money and time, but foundations are seldom interested in projects with the words "Roman Catholic" in them. Among the persons contacted were several archivists in women's religious congregations or orders. Two were keenly interested in promoting the project if a larger organization could help in the process.

Then in December 1970, the Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP) asked me to speak at two of their panels during the annual convention of the American Historical Association, in Boston. The CCWHP was still in the developing stage and had made me an honorary member of the steering committee because of my interest in the problems of women in the professions. At one of the panel meetings, I met a member from Alverno College who said that perhaps their Research Center on Women, in Milwaukee, might be able to lend assistance. Thinking the members of CCWHP would pursue this matter, I did nothing and very likely missed a golden opportunity to get the project off

the ground. The Society of American Archivists may be impressed with the information that CCWHP thought women religious ahead of the times in keeping materials on women. But the materials are of no use to anyone unless everyone knows where to find them.

At the Boston meetings of CCWHP the women drew up a program which looks almost exactly like Miriam Crawford's "Program for Action" (the *American Archivist*, April 1973), and which has been adopted in great measure by the American Historical Association. Having worked with the women in AHA and in the American Political Science Association, I wonder why each new organization of women must follow the same path in a different professional association. By this time, the leaders in professional organizations must be aware of what the women members want and must get down to the business of doing something about it.

After the Boston meeting, a sister member of the SAA wrote to me telling me that SAA was going to form a committee to promote the further organization of archives of women's congregations and orders. Although there is a church committee in SAA, there is a distinct difference between diocesan archives and archives of religious men and women. And my experience in researching American Catholic Church history has taught me that men have organized their archives faster than women. The reason for that could easily be that religious men, like other men, were in times past better educated than women and, therefore, better able to acquire a sense of history. In our own congregation, the pioneers were well educated, but they were so involved in their apostolates and religious life that they had little time to make copies of letters that went out. We are fortunate to have the letters that came in and were saved for posterity.

The sister who wrote to me indicated that the committee, or possibly a subcommittee, would be meeting in Columbus, but a perusal of the minutes and committee activities of the Columbus meeting has not revealed to me that such a committee met. Nor from the list of committee members is there evidence that a sister has been appointed to a committee or subcommittee.

In the last two years five congregations have written here for help in organizing archives; in two cases the communications had been sent to more than our congregation. During that period, SAA and the National Archives have listed many seminars and workshops in various aspects of archival and record management. None, however, has been directed specifically toward congregations and orders of religious men or women. If such seminars and workshops were offered even regionally around the country, SAA would be doing a great service for these organizations; a first step toward a central listing could be made.

A second suggestion, not entirely related to the first but for a service badly needed, is for similar in-service training for college and university archivists. Most of the programs for college and university archivists presume that they already have been thoroughly trained in their work. With one of the statements made in the April issue of the *American Archivist* I must agree: what is being offered by way of course work in

colleges and universities toward training archivists is most inadequate. What is desperately needed is basic work without the technical language; more sophisticated courses can come later.

I had hoped that the 1973 convention of SAA would address itself to the neophyte archivist in at least one of its panels. The program is most disappointing and of little help to a new archivist in, say, the college and university area. No programs offered by the National Archives or by the several universities with archival courses really assist archivists in the two areas cited above: religious congregations or orders and colleges and universities. Too often, archivists being trained for these positions must adjust what they are taught to their particular realm. SAA can be a great service to these archivists by offering regional programs annually; the number of really well-organized archives would increase, and documents in danger of being lost or destroyed through ignorance would be preserved.

The archives of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia in Aston, Pennsylvania, are small but rich in many respects. For example, there is in the collection a document that proves that the land on which the archives stand has been in constant use since before William Penn came to North America. So important is that document that the archivist decided to try to find others of equal value. She discovered that there is a wealth of material in Aston Township, but most of it is in attics or basements of people who do not even know the value of what they own. In many cases, these documents will be lost before an adequate local archives can be created, so a group of interested persons is working diligently to get the project started. Combined with what is in the sisters' archives, the new depository will be a boon to researchers in local history.

Someone noted that national and local archives must work together, and this is true. Many times, local historical societies jealously guard what they have to the extent that all efforts to cooperate with them are impossible. Hence, most important documents remain hidden, inaccessible to the researcher and lost to posterity. Where well-organized religious archives exist, they could be the nucleus of better local archives and a step toward better cooperation with national archives.

SISTER M. ADELE FRANCIS GORMAN, OSF  
*Our Lady of Angels College*

### To the Editor

It seems to us that the review of the first two volumes of *The Booker T. Washington Papers* by Nicholas C. Burckel in your April 1973 issue showed a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of our scholarly enterprise and, indeed, of modern historical editing. We could not recognize our work from the description the reviewer gave. It seems strange, for example, for Mr. Burckel to charge us with contributing to



"elitist" history, when we are engaged in the only documentary project now fully underway that treats the role of black people in American history. He also suggests that we "tacitly sympathize" with "documenting history from the bottom up." Ignoring the semantics of "bottoms up" history, we say that we do not merely sympathize with history of the obscure and even anonymous Americans, we are actually writing it, as the reviewer might have noted if he had thoughtfully read many of the annotations he was rather impatient with.

Throughout, Mr. Burckel's review reflects another apparent misconception. Historical editing is history, not biography. The reviewer seems to demand a constant focus on Washington and complains of "detailed footnotes tangential to Washington's life." It is only through such means that the editors can reconstruct at least part of the milieu in which Washington lived. We seek some understanding of the racial community, the regional community and the times, not merely a more massive hero-image of Washington. The Washington Papers are rich in documentary evidence of the lives of the relatively inarticulate, and these will be selected for inclusion, though not to the exclusion of documents of historical significance from more prominent persons.

The reviewer's coupling of our work with the *Papers of James Madison* under its former editorship and his complaint of our lengthy annotations in volume 2 also seem misplaced. Any thoughtful comparison of our work with the published Madison Papers will show that we are at the opposite pole of editorial philosophy—in selection, avoidance of cross-referencing, avoidance of elaborate bibliographical references, and general approach to the relationship of man and times. We do not believe that Booker T. Washington's lack of militancy should discourage the presentation and elucidation of historically significant documents in his papers. We see ourselves, however, not as monument builders or promoters of an out-moded "great man" theory of history, but as part of the general scholarly effort in the humanities to unearth the hidden history of our people, including a minority that has not had fair treatment in the court of history. We hope to show evidence not only of white oppression but of black survival and the living in many cases of adequate and satisfying lives in spite of oppression. Why such a scholarly enterprise should provoke Mr. Burckel's criticism is, frankly, beyond us. As in digging a well, we find it hard to dig "from the bottom up," but we do try to get to the bottom of things.

Finally, it is a canon of book reviewing that the reviewer should review a work for what it is, rather than insist that it should have been a hypothetical work on another subject in the mind of the reviewer. Mr. Burckel suggests that we should be editing the papers of other black leaders, not less "elite" but "more militant" than Booker T. Washington. In point of fact, the principal editor of the Washington Papers has for years encouraged and promoted the initiation of editorial projects on the papers of both Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, both of

which will probably be fully launched by the end of this year. For his own most appropriate work, however, the biographer of Booker T. Washington has "cast down his bucket" where he was, in the rich treasure of American cultural and social history he knows best.

LOUIS R. HARLAN

STUART B. KAUFMAN

RAYMOND W. SMOCK

*The Booker T. Washington Papers*

### Reviewer's Response

It is unfortunate that Mr. Harlan and his assistants felt unfairly treated in my review. Much of the problem is of interpretation and emphasis: mine of their work, and theirs of my review. I think this will become obvious as I respond to the questions they raised.

What seems to annoy the editors most is that I accused them of writing elitist history, and they feel that that charge is particularly ill-placed considering their efforts to edit the papers of Booker T. Washington. What raised the question in my mind was that until very recently the selection of persons whose papers should be published has been a reflection of white middle-class consensus. Although Washington was a black man, his lack of militancy has, perhaps, as much affected the vote of historians, consciously or not, as has his prominence, influence, or association with the black community. My comment, therefore, was not about the editors so much as it was about the choice of Booker T. Washington as the first and most important black person to be selected for a project.

As for criticizing the work for what it is or is not, I think my remarks were legitimate, especially since these are the first volumes of an ongoing project. Where else is it more appropriate to discuss a project, its goals, and ultimate value, than when the first fruits of that project are available for public consumption? I suggest merely that the obvious talent of these historians, and the institutional support given their enterprise, might better have been directed along another course; not that what they did, they did poorly. In this respect my review was much more favorable than Levy's review of *The Papers of James Madison*, although I do think, like Professor Levy, that it is valid to question the priority of the project. I applaud, on the other hand, Harlan's assurances that projects on Douglass and Du Bois will be fully launched by the end of this year.

The statement by the editors that they not only "sympathize with history of the obscure and even anonymous Americans, [but] are actually writing it," still seems unconvincing to me. Many of the short biographical annotations in the book give no more than a two or three sentence sketch of the person, which is all that is necessary, but that is hardly a history of the less articulate, non-elite. What prompted my observation about "detailed footnotes tangential to Washington's life," in

volume two was, as I stated in the original review, the "first few items." They included, for example, census data and an inventory of the estate of James Burroughs, Washington's white master. The first document occupies half a page with large print while the accompanying annotations account for nearly three times that length in smaller type. The ratio in the second document is one to six. I feel these items could have been deleted and the important information in the footnotes incorporated in the introduction.

Finally, I do not criticize, but strongly endorse the editors' efforts "to show evidence not only of white oppression but of black survival and the living in many cases of adequate and satisfying lives in spite of oppression." This, as much as the papers of prominent men, is "part of the national heritage" archivists and historians should preserve and publish.

Responses and rejoinders to reviews often degenerate into *ad hominem* arguments that offend rather than enlighten. I can only hope that the exchange between the editors of the Washington Papers and this reviewer proved the exception.

NICHOLAS C. BURCKEL  
*University of Wisconsin, Parkside*