

# The American Archivist

Published Quarterly by  
The Society of American Archivists

Volume 38  
Number 3  
July 1975

## The American Archivist

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## The Forum

### TO THE EDITOR:

The article by F. Gerald Ham entitled "The Archival Edge," in the *American Archivist* for January 1975, on page 7, contains a quotation by the former New York City archivist, reprinted from a 1969 issue of the *New York Times*, to the effect that the only papers, aside from the mayoral collections, that are saved from destruction in New York City are those needed for legal purposes.

Although I have not spoken to the former director of the New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center about this quotation, I would have to assume, fortunately, that a policy of this kind was not actually followed over the years. We do have in our custody about 15,000 cubic feet of archival material going back to the seventeenth century, and much of this material was accessioned during the years the former director was in control.

At any rate, let me state for the record that the present policy of our organization is to appraise all city documentation, generated either in the past or the present, to insure that all records with research or historic values are saved from destruction and preserved, under proper conditions, for use by the academic community.

CARLYLE R. BENNETT, *Director*  
*Office of Communications Service*  
*The City of New York*

### TO THE EDITOR:

Although silence in this matter might be more appropriate, it has been concluded that the inaccuracies and misinterpretations in the review of the Cornell University Libraries' *Manual of Archival and Manuscript Processing Procedures* that appeared in the April 1975 issue of the *American Archivist* must be protested.

Throughout her review, Barbara Fisher committed a basic error in criticizing the *Manual* as one designed for general application beyond the Cornell situation. If Ms. Fisher had taken the time to read its preface carefully, she would have observed that it was prepared exclusively for Cornell's part-time nonprofessional manuscript processing personnel. To quote from the first paragraph of the *Manual*:

The principles underlying the instructions which follow have, for the most part, evolved over the past thirty years in response to conditions peculiar to two of three of Cornell's manuscript departments. They are codified here to maintain continuity with past practices. Although conforming broadly to basic archival



principles, these instructions have not been specifically designed for application beyond the audience of manuscript processors at Cornell. They also presume the availability of a supervisor who is a trained Archivist.

Much of Ms. Fisher's review is therefore devoted to criticizing our work on the basis of what it did not, in fact, set out to do. What she did not misinterpret, she simply misread. We are told, for example, that "in the introduction, Strassberg suggests that the *Manual* will not treat the matter of manuscript procedures; the greater part of the *Manual*, however, relates to handling manuscript items, rather than archival series or record groups." What the preface said was that "the subject of manuscript cataloging has been intentionally excluded from this work. Manuscript cataloging procedures at Cornell are currently under revision and will be the subject of instructions to be published at a later date."

The reviewer states that we presume that our processors have a body of knowledge "including an understanding of accessioning, historical documentation, inventorying, series analysis, and preparation of finding aids." Although it is quite true that accessioning and inventorying are not dealt with in the *Manual*, this is for the reason that our full-time staff members, and not our student processors, handle such matters. Nevertheless, all the workings of the department are explained to the processors as part of their orientation—the *Manual* concerns itself only with those tasks for which our processors are directly responsible.

It is said that we do not make a distinction between archives and historical documentation and do not explain inventory, series accessions, and record groups. It would have been kind of Ms. Fisher if she had thought to mention that our students' manual includes the *SAA Glossary of Basic Terms for Archivists* as Appendix E—a fact noted in both the table of contents and in a footnote on page 1 of the work.

According to Ms. Fisher, the manual lacks "well ordered progress, sequence of definition," and is "an abrupt shower of processing details." In reality, the *Manual* discusses, in order, the supervisor's analysis of the collection, our manner of work assignments and the way a processor should conduct his preliminary research before beginning his actual processing. It gives instructions for the arrangement of manuscripts and non-manuscript documents; for the establishment of document dates and for the removal of extra copies, non-archival documents, and unrelated publications. It discusses our procedures for the removal of fasteners, repair, and reboxing. It gives detailed descriptions of four different types of finding aids, including a listing that is compatible with coding for SPINDEX II.

We do admit to a certain curtness of expression and do place a large part of the decision-making process on the shoulders of the supervising archivist, where it belongs. Were we writing a textbook for the novice archivist as Ms. Fisher mistakenly assumed we were, we certainly would have spelled out our instructions in greater detail. A 93-plus-page processing manual, however, is more than enough to fulfill our purpose. A point-by-point rebuttal of the reviewer's other comments could easily

be made, but we would contend the foregoing is sufficient evidence of Ms. Fisher's lack of skill in balanced criticism.

Let me conclude by reiterating a statement I made in the review of the Howard University processing manual, which just happened to appear in the same issue of the *American Archivist* as the Fisher review. It is a potentially dangerous tendency on the part of compilers of manuscript processing manuals to generalize on the basis of their own experience. We took pains to avoid that pitfall. On this basis, all criticism that assumes such culpability on our part must be rejected.

RICHARD STRASSBERG, *Associate Archivist,  
Cornell University*

#### TO THE EDITOR:

When I first met Herman Kahn in 1966 he was assistant archivist for presidential libraries, the first person to hold that position. I had joined the staff of the Kennedy oral history project with no intention of becoming a career archivist, indeed with no understanding of what an archivist is. "A strange little fellow with a big cigar" was my first impression of Herman Kahn and that is largely the way I thought of him while he remained with NARS before moving to Yale.

It was only as the years passed and I began to read the *American Archivist*, attend professional meetings, and find evidence of Herman's hand in the early planning and shaping of a Kennedy Library program that I started to appreciate the sound and informed judgement he brought to his decisions and the clear voice with which he spoke to all of us. He was especially helpful to those of us at the Kennedy Library as a member of the advisory committee for President Kennedy's papers and on other matters when we turned to him for advice and assistance. But most of all my admiration grew as I observed how often the members of our profession, its sons and daughters as well as its founders, turned to Herman Kahn to speak for us or to us regarding our most important problems. And always, whether we agreed with his position or not, we could be certain of the clarity with which it was presented and proud of the deep professional and ethical values from which it stemmed.

As, on the night before he died, I read Herman's piece in the current issue of the *American Archivist*, I thought how much my "third generation" of archivists owes to the first. That thought is especially poignant on this day. We miss them, I think, more than many of us would have thought and more than, in their humility, they would ever have supposed.

LARRY J. HACKMAN  
*John F. Kennedy Library, NARS*

June 6, 1975