

# The Archivist as Collector

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SOME ARCHIVISTS AND CURATORS OF MANUSCRIPTS collect records; others (the silent majority) wait for the manuscripts to fall into their laps, never looking beyond their duties as "caretakers." This state of archival affairs has always existed, and doubtless always will; but there are imperative reasons for fresh viewpoints and new procedures if archivists are to keep abreast of current trends in historical research as well as recordkeeping. Simultaneously they will be well advised to hold fast to certain fundamental principles of their profession and to practical considerations, both personal and institutional. In the "one world" spirit of a complex era, the individualism of the archivist and his institution must give way to the rationale of cooperation; but to what degree?

This is the theme of a stimulating essay on "The Archival Edge," by F. Gerald Ham,<sup>1</sup> recent president of the Society of American Archivists. He contrasts the passive custodians of records with their active colleagues continuing seeking records at the source and ever alert to new sources. He contends cogently that the archivist, *au courant* with trends in historical research, should be "out on the edge [where] you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center" (quoting the character, Ed Finnerly, in Kurt Vonnegut's book, *Player Piano*), prepared to acquire the kinds of records hitherto overlooked because they were not considered to be of historical value. Further broadening his perspective, Mr. Ham advocates a national system of coordinated collecting that would obviate needless competition and utilize more effectively the limited financial resources thus far available for this pursuit.

Adapting the aphorism that "each generation rewrites history," it may be said that each generation collects records anew, not replacing what is already in hand but enriching the accretion. As historical writing reflects the viewpoint and prejudices of the historian and the milieu in which he writes, so the archivist susceptible to current issues in historical context moves in new directions to collect sources hitherto unappreciated, whether old or recent. This pursuit, when well motivated and directed, reinforces the argument, long contended, that the archivist and curator of manuscripts should be trained in history, the essential underpinning for archival theory and practice.

Thus "the changing winds of historiography" (to adopt Mr. Ham's apt phrase) open new vistas for collecting manuscript and printed records, exemplified in recent years by such fields as urban and ethnic history, the history of women, of the Negro, and of science. The incentive for these efforts, stemming from historical study, may eventually produce special collections, even new repositories, that bespeak our era of specialization and the fragmentation of history, for worse rather

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<sup>1</sup> *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5-13.

than for better. However, in this commendable quest for “new” primary sources, the archivist, if he maintains his historical perspective, may find himself less of an innovator than he purports to be. He should not overlook the fact that he is merely adding his portion of records to the accumulation of his predecessors. They may have conceived of acquisitions in terms of a society or culture as a whole, in which the general embraces the special, conditioned, of course, by limitations peculiar to each generation. By this means, sources for the history of women, for example, have long been preserved, though not ostensibly as such; and there is something to be gained by perceiving and using the sources in a larger context. Records of institutions as well as of families and persons have long been accessible in research libraries; and, according to Mr. Ham, it is debatable whether the institution or the individual has become more dominant in our latter-day society and therefore its records more important for research.

“The archival edge” is a provocative metaphor. The concept behind it has been translated into practice by countless generations of recordkeepers, by whatever title, each according to his lights, and Mr. Ham has undertaken to inform those of the present generation as to what their lights should be. When he emphasizes factors that “have given a contemporaneous character to archival acquisition,” he seems to imply that the archivist should concentrate on collecting recent records, perhaps since World War II, and eschew the concept of the “man for all seasons” of the past. If, however, the records of the more distant past have something to contribute beyond their own period to a clearer understanding of latter-day society, the more comprehensive view of collecting, in terms of both chronology and subject-matter, should be sustained, even though subject to modifications.

While the archivist as collector may profit from recognizing the shortcomings of his predecessors, a just judgment of the latter can be rendered only in the context of their concepts and objectives and the enduring value of their achievements. Who is so unjust as to blame Lyman C. Draper or H. H. Bancroft for what he did *not* collect, when certain kinds of records were not within his purview of “history,” or so obtuse as to lack appreciation of the timeliness of his acquisitions before they were lost or destroyed? Whatever his bias, Draper’s foresight is commendable, even as his twentieth-century critic’s hindsight is applied unhistorically. What is “new” in documentation does not obviate the “old” (with the false connotation of old-fashioned). Veins of the “new” are not uncommonly found in the “old,” especially when the earlier collecting has not been narrowly circumscribed. There are fads in collecting for history, just as there are in the writing of history. Like all fads, these are infectious, sometimes virulent; and Mr. Ham maintains that the archivists ought to set the style instead of trailing the historians. It is quite possible that the issue is another example of the enigma of the chicken and the egg.

As new departures in collecting beckon the archivist who analyzes, as Mr. Ham has, the problems of recordmaking and keeping of his own generation and seeks solutions for history’s sake, the sense of immediacy, of crisis, of the unprecedented, may distort his perspective in evaluating the inherited records in his custody as traditional in a pejorative sense. From a long-range viewpoint, an earlier period of twentieth-century collecting may be cited to exemplify the relevance of the “old” (then “new”) to the “new” of the present. The historian-archivist of two generations ago, imbued with the concept of social history, was also on the “archival edge,” collecting neglected records with a wide dragnet, some of them of recent vintage. The nature of the manuscript and printed records that were accruing at the

University of North Carolina (its Southern Historical Collection), Duke University, the University of Virginia, and, somewhat later, at Cornell University (its Regional Collection) embodied abundant evidence of the changing winds of historiography. Those acquisitions included records of economic and social organizations as well as personal papers, not rating the one kind as more worthy of preservation than the other. Residues of family archives, which might be designated traditional desiderata, were acquired long before scholars began studying the history of the family; and akin to these were voluminous plantation records, assembled most notably at Chapel Hill by that tireless collector, J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton, historian, not archivist. Among these records were rich sources on Negro slavery, which have been mined by successive generations of historians from widely varying points of view.

The strong winds of the New Deal aroused renewed interest in the common man and uncovered obscure records hitherto deemed unworthy of preservation. Related in a significant manner to this probing at the grass-roots was the work of the Historical Records Survey (Works Progress Administration) inventorying local governmental records in which many a common and uncommon man and woman on relief work turned up long-forgotten documents of value for social history. As the crucial test of historical projects concerned with preservation and accessibility of primary sources is their enduring value, so the assessment or reassessment of them is the task of successive archivists in relation to their own programs, inevitably influenced by the work of their predecessors. How well will the objectives and accomplishments of the archivists of the waning twentieth century measure up to the criticism of *their* successors in the twenty-first?

If, then, the archivist's function as collector is indispensable to the growth of his institution and its service to scholarship, and if archivists are to be persuaded to become more than mere custodians of records, a few pertinent questions are in order: Where is the "archival edge" today? What does it consist of? How far out is it? There are suggestions in Mr. Ham's essay that point toward the archivist as not only a collector but also a creator of records. This intriguing, even startling, possibility harks back to Vonnegut's Ed Finnerty, who was "a chronically malcontent boozier." He refused to consult with a psychiatrist because "he'd pull me back into the center, and I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over." If this is a risk the archivist is taking, he should be forewarned.

It is the oft-sung lament of the archivist and the historian that some of man's activities are well documented, others poorly, and still others not at all. Furthermore, social and technological changes alter the nature of the records, in their content and in their physical properties. Few recent records become readily accessible, hence the frustrations and shortcomings in writing on contemporary or near-contemporary subjects. The archivist must face with some resignation the attrition imposed by Time on the records, and what he is able to collect will conform only partially to predetermined specifications. The "archival edge" proves to be a very irregular, elusive phenomenon in which historico-archival concepts have a critical bearing on the archivist's approach to the records, actual and prospective.

Understandably, twentieth-century records engage the attention of the archivist-collector increasingly although much still remains to be salvaged from previous centuries. With an ever-growing population and more complex society, the quantity of records to be preserved presents serious, though not insoluble, problems. Criteria of quality, however, put to a more severe test not only the archivist's histori-

cal knowledge but also his historical and archival judgment concerning fundamentals. Mr. Ham does not strengthen his case for perceptive programs of acquisition by citing the advice of Archivist Gould Colman, who wants his records served to order. Colman has deplored "the politicalization of our profession," which he obligingly defines as "skewing the study of culture by the studied preservation of unrepresentative indicators of that culture."<sup>2</sup> This ponderous dictum can be deflated by asking why the "unrepresentative indicators" (i.e. records?) are not equally important in evaluating what are "representative"; or why, for certain research, the "unrepresentative" would not be more highly prized. What a superb screening process for depriving the scholar of essential sources!

"The most pronounced case of skewing," Colman maintains, "is the preservation of vast holdings of government records," presumably a criticism of the National Archives' system of retention and disposal (5 percent retained); yet in this bureaucratic era surely the records of the bureaucracy are significant indicators of contemporary culture. "On the other hand," he declares, "organizations which have a vast impact on culture, most notably families, are poorly documented, and much of the documentation which exists occurs through the aegis of government for purposes of government." Mr. Colman has overlooked the basic point, that the records of government are created primarily for its operation, not for the scholar's use. This inherent virtue of the "innocent document," not designed for history, which characterizes most of the records in and outside archival custody, is a prime factor in the weighing of historical evidence; the document slanted for history is suspect to both the archivist and the historian.

Beyond the walls of the archives and research library are (to quote Ed Finnerty again) "big, undreamed-of things—the people on the edge see them first"; and Mr. Ham points out five factors that "have expanded the universe of potential archival data and have given a contemporaneous character to archival acquisition."<sup>3</sup> Although the archivist will give increasing attention to twentieth-century records, as the demand to use them increases, the factors are not new to the perceptive archivist, nor do all of them apply exclusively to the records of the present century.

The first factor pertains to the institutionalization of society, viz., that the acquisition of records of institutions has been slighted by overconcentration on personal papers, although the main thrust in modern life is by organized effort. Actually such records have long been sought and those of defunct organizations have often been found among personal papers; but the records of living organizations are not easily acquired and few officials are readily persuaded to establish their own institutional archives. As for the substance of such records, that is a matter of appraisal, and sometimes of bulk, the second factor in Mr. Ham's list. The sheer bulk of modern record groups, a concomitant of bureaucratic society, has plagued archivists for half a century. Two well tested methods of combatting it and exploiting the useable contents—retention and disposal, and sampling—still prevail. Again the crux of the problem is appraisal to determine what is worth retaining, in some cases temporarily before microfilming.

The third factor is missing data, which, according to Mr. Ham, quoting an unpublished statement of historian Sam Bass Warner, challenge the archivist to become "a historical reporter for his own time."<sup>4</sup> In this role, Mr. Ham proposes,

<sup>2</sup> Gould P. Colman in "The Forum," *American Archivist* 36 (July 1973): 484.

<sup>3</sup> *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the archivist "can produce oral history, . . . [documenting especially] the day to day decisions of lower echelon leaders and . . . the activities and attitudes of ordinary men and women. He can use photography to supplement the written record and make it more meaningful. . . . And he could . . . create his own mail questionnaires and use other survey techniques to establish a base line of social and economic data." By implementing these expansive ideas the archivist would become administrator of Archives Unlimited with new, unmeasurable dimensions. From his function as collector he would move on to that of creator of records, as documentary photographer and conductor of oral history recordings on an ambitious scale, perhaps emulating Studs Terkel's achievement in *Working*. As for establishing "a base line of social and economic data," they would presumably constitute new records ready-made for the researcher, in contrast with "innocent" historical documents. By these devices archivists presumably would cease to be mere "keepers of the past" and win their rightful place in the vanguard of twentieth-century scholarship, leading the historians and the social scientists.

The fourth factor is concerned with "vulnerable records"—the ephemeral, which every generation produces, whether of transient movements of protest and rebellion or expendable documents of political campaigns with potential historical value for future research. Recognition of the value of such ephemera for social history is not new among archivists with historical perspective, although an abundance of riches may require selectivity in preserving them. The fifth factor pertains to the impact upon the records of changing technology to which archivists in the twentieth century have become increasingly responsive—air-conditioning and humidity control, microfilming and other methods of photo-reproduction, and, more recently, magnetic tape for recordings and computerized records posing new problems of preservation and accessibility. The archivist is learning to adapt programming for the computer to his needs in preparing finding aids just as, two generations ago, he refined the use of microfilm for his purposes.

Fundamentally then, these factors outlined by Mr. Ham are not new; it is rather in the degree of their application to twentieth-century records and in his concept of "potential archival data" that second thoughts are required. During the past quarter-century, the number of repositories for research purposes has increased notably, and all these repositories are engaged in collecting records. It is a pursuit that has always been highly individualistic and competitive, but whether these characteristics are for better or for worse is open to argument. Rejecting the archivist's "proprietary" attitude, Mr. Ham would replace competition with cooperation among institutions in similar fields of collecting. The examples he cites of cooperation-in-action are geographically oriented: the Houston (Texas) Metropolitan Archives Center (the city and Harris County); and state-wide acquisition programs in Ohio, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, each administered by the state historical society.<sup>5</sup> It is significant that each of these ventures is focused on a clearly defined area without arbitrary limitations of subject matter. This kind of program has long been in operation by single institutions in these very states and elsewhere. With a common goal and centralized administration (most pronounced in Wisconsin), these cooperating public and private institutions have achieved some initial success which may inspire others to emulate them.

It is safe to predict, however, that the collecting activities of many a well-established research library and archives will persist, despite the development of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11, nn. 12-14.

cooperative projects. If the burden of proof rests with such projects, a caveat is necessary concerning cooperation in theory in relation to actuality, concerning the ideal that promotes artificiality. This kind of hypothesis is illustrated by Warner's argument that "there is insufficient variation among American cities to justify the repetition everywhere of the same sort of collection." Summarizing Warner's argument, Ham continues that Warner "urged historians and archivists to get together and divide up the archival turf. 'San Francisco,' he suggested, 'might establish a business archive, Detroit, a labor archive, Los Angeles, a housing archive, . . . and so forth.' These specialized archives, in turn, would be *linked* with existing local, state, and federal programs."<sup>6</sup> Mr. Ham has described this proposal as a "half-baked product," and rightly so, not to mention Warner's misuse of the word "archive."

Research collections are not generated by superimposed proposals from a national planning office, but rather by the initiative of archivists and historians and interested laymen with specific records in mind and a *local* nucleus of support on which to build. Warner's association of Detroit with "a labor archive" was prompted no doubt by the thriving Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, established in 1960 at Wayne State University. Its purpose is "to collect and preserve the records and papers of organizations and individuals in the American labor movement. The upsurge of interest in labor history . . . plus the unwitting destruction of union records, prompted the Archives program."<sup>7</sup> The rapport which Director Philip P. Mason developed with President Walter P. Reuther of the United Automobile Workers and with local union officials proved invaluable in the expansion of the collection from local to national significance, with its own building funded by the UAW. Thus a "labor archive," already a reality, is more of a refutation than a support of Warner's theoretical proposition, whether or not the Archives of Labor History is connected with any state or federal programs.

On the archival edge the archivist as collector is confronted with certain dilemmas, not inherently new in the later twentieth century, that are insoluble, to some degree, but open to accommodation. On the one hand, the quantity of certain records demands drastic measures, wisely to save and to destroy; on the other hand, the paucity or lack of certain records, attributable to telephonic communication, tempts him to fill the void by creating records for the service of scholarship. The spirit of individualism and competition among archivists does not readily give way to a spirit of cooperation, even in the face of pressing need for more orderly acquisition. The basic need, according to Mr. Ham, is "guidelines and strategies for a national system of archival data collecting."<sup>8</sup> Are data and records synonymous terms in this context? In citing church records as an example, he asks, "Why couldn't archivists determine the documentation needed to study contemporary religious life, thought, and change and then advise denominations and congregations on how their records selection can contribute to this objective?" If archivists were to engage in such procedure, the subjective judgment of the archivist would take priority over that of the historian which would not assuredly be identical; and it bears repeating that the church creates and preserves records for its own operation, not primarily for the convenience of scholarly research. Whatever the implications of "archival data collecting" may be, the prospects of "nationalizing" it are dim indeed.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>7</sup> Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, *Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1971): [1].

<sup>8</sup> *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 12.

Paraphrasing Crèvecoeur, we may ask, "What then is the American archivist, this 'Renaissance man' " <sup>9</sup> envisioned by Mr. Ham? Has he forsaken the records of the more remote past for those of contemporary history? Does he arrogate to himself new functions in the collecting and appraisal of records, potential as well as actual? Does he aspire to become the dominant member in his partnership with the historian? Viewing those "big, undreamed-of things" which people on the edge see first, he must distinguish the dream from the reality that is relevant to his profession and its fundamental historical principles.

<sup>9</sup> "What then is the American, this new man?" Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1782), p. 51.

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