

Setting Priorities for Historical Records: A Conference Report

FOREWORD BY MARY LYNN McCREE AND TIMOTHY WALCH

Archivists, curators, and records administrators generally agree that resources for the preservation and use of historical records are inadequate at all operational levels, in all geographic areas, and in nearly every subject area. There is little agreement, however, on what are the most pressing needs or even on how to go about defining and seeking agreement on ways to meet these needs.

THAT WAS THE OPENING STATEMENT in the funding proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the basis for proposing the SAA project that came to be called the Conference on Priorities for Historical Records. The idea for such a conference grew out of experience reviewing proposals for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and from discussions with various staff members of both organizations.

For some time now, archivists, with increasing frequency and success, have been developing and submitting a variety of project proposals to public and private funding agencies. The National Endowment for the Humanities has been receptive and supportive of a great many of these requests. Most recently, especially since the advent of its records program two years ago, the NHPRC has been another major agency through which archival projects can be supported. Almost all funding agencies get more project requests than they can support. They do establish standards for proposals, and they rely on a variety of reviewers to evaluate proposals. These evaluations, which are the basis on which proposals are funded and which are not, also help funding agencies establish parameters for the various programs under which archival projects are considered.

Yet it seemed that the time was right to open a broader based dialog within the archival profession regarding the program needs. What are the greatest problems in the archivist's world? What and where are the specific needs? What do archivists believe should be the top priority for funding? What kind of projects should the profession encourage? Who should fund these? The Conference, then, was developed as an opportunity for the profession itself to grapple with those questions and, if possible, come to some general conclusions. It was to be the opening conversation in a dialog we hope will continue within the profession and lead to a consensus about the general deficiencies we face and which among them are paramount.

January in Chicago is usually cold and snowy, and this year was no exception. The forty-nine people who gathered at the University of Illinois in Chicago in January came to work. Archivists, manuscript librarians, and records managers met with historians and foundation officials to discuss six major categories of issues: surveys of historical records and manuscripts; intellectual control of historical records and manuscripts; conservation and preservation; networks of archival research centers; wider use of archives and manuscript repositories; and control of non-man-

uscript materials. We—that is, Ann Morgan Campbell, Timothy Walch, and Mary Lynn McCree—chose these categories primarily because they were the most all-inclusive terms we could devise for the major problems facing the profession, and it was within these categories that most of the proposals reaching funding agencies fell. The topics were selected in consultation with the staffs of the NHPRC and the NEH. We realize that we did not deal with all the possible issues, but we simply did not have enough conference time to do so. We could have chosen to consider only one of these topics in more depth, but then that would have defeated the purpose of the Conference, which was to discuss the national archival picture and provide some guidance on those problems that archivists and historians think most pressing.

Also, participants were selected in consultation with NEH and NHPRC. We tried to take into consideration the need to create a representative participating group; so we tried to invite archivists from large, medium, and small-sized organizations, from all over the United States (though we were somewhat limited in this by our budget), and from most of the archival interest groups—state, college and university, church, labor, urban, manuscripts, etc. We tried to achieve a mix of the experienced archivists/administrators and relatively new archivists. We wished also to select from among those individuals who had shown a decided interest or expertise in the areas we had chosen for discussion, who because of their experience would bring a new perspective to an old problem, or who had been working on specific projects associated with one of our identified issues. We wished to keep the conference relatively small so that there could be opportunity for exchange among all. Of course, the selection of participants was highly subjective; someone else planning the conference might have selected a different mix of issues and people. But then, that is a problem with any conference.

We attempted to establish some conference rules. We indicated to all participants that their papers had to be prepared ahead of time and circulated to all attending the conference. Most were. Each session was designed to have a chairman who set the stage and kept order, two or three people who developed major papers, and two or three people acting as reviewers or formal discussants. Those who prepared the major papers were to summarize their positions so that most of the time for the session could be given over to discussion. The audience, composed of all participants, some historians, and funding agency representatives, joined in the discussion which followed each panel presentation. Participants were informed that each complete session would be taped and summarized for publication.

The following conference report, prepared with the considerable help of Joyce Gianatasio and the staff of the Society of American Archivists, begins with a listing of conference sessions, including the names and affiliations of chairmen, speakers, and discussants. We have then included the full text of the opening conference paper presented by Edward Weldon, Archivist of the State of New York. It is the only complete paper we have included in this report. That in no way implies that the other papers were not worthy of inclusion—they were—but we simply did not have the space in this particular issue of the *American Archivist* to include them. We have encouraged all participants to seek publication of their papers, and we hope they will appear in future issues of the *American Archivist*, or one of the regional publications, or through other historical or library journals.

Following Weldon's paper, included here because it set the tone for the conference, we present each session as a chapter of this report in the order in which they took place. Each is preceded by a brief introduction, in which we indicate our

rationale for including the topic in the conference. There follows an author-approved abstract of each paper, together with a summary of the discussions that those presentations engendered.

In the final and eighth session of the conference, we sought to identify agreements and disagreements, to bring forth themes and ideas that surfaced throughout the conference sessions. The eighth was to be a conference summary session. We were able to identify about thirty-five proposals that had been made during conference discussions and were supported to some degree by those in attendance. These proposals formed the basis for a questionnaire that we developed and sent out to all the participants, each asked to respond to it in light of their participation at the conference. The information we received from all participants is summarized in our conclusion.

As we have said previously, this conference is only a beginning of a dialog that we hope will go on and on and on. We are grateful to the Division of Research Grants of the National Endowment for the Humanities for making it possible. The conference and its findings should be discussed widely. A session at the Society's annual meeting will be devoted to the Conference. We encourage regionals to hold similar sessions. Priorities change as the times change, as the environment changes, as the profession and its members change. Yet we must identify the most pressing problems in any given time frame and begin to work on solutions for them. It is with this in mind that the conference was held and that we present this report to you.

MARY LYNN MCCREE and TIMOTHY WALCH

Participants

- Session I: *Surveys of Historical Records*
 Chairman: John Daly, Illinois State Archives
 Speakers: Francis X. Blouin, University of Michigan
 Andrea Hinding, University of Minnesota
 Mary Pearson, North Texas State University
 Discussant: John A. Fleckner, State Historical Society of Wisconsin
- Session II: *Intellectual Control of Historical Records*
 Chairman: Elizabeth H. Kegan, Library of Congress
 Speakers: Maynard J. Brichford, University of Illinois-Urbana
 John P. Butler, National Archives and Records Service
 Harriet Ostroff, Library of Congress
 Discussant: Richard H. Lytle, Smithsonian Institution
- Session III: *Professional Archival Training*
 Chairman: Philip P. Mason, Wayne State University
 Speakers: Trudy H. Peterson, National Archives and Records Service
 Patrick M. Quinn, Northwestern University
 Hugh A. Taylor, Public Archives of Canada
- Session IV: *Conservation and Preservation of Historical Records*
 Chairman: Clark W. Nelson, Mayo Clinic/Mayo Foundation
 Speakers: George M. Cunha, New England Document Conservation Center
 Frazer G. Poole, Library of Congress

Discussant: Clyde C. Walton, Northern Illinois University

Session V: *Preservation and Uses of State and Local Records*

Chairman: James D. Porter, Oregon State Archives

Speakers: Edward C. Papenfuse, Maryland Hall of Records

David C. Levine, Texas State Archives

Discussant: Charles E. Lee, South Carolina Department of Archives and History

Session VI: *The Wider Use of Historical Records*

Chairman: Ann Morgan Campbell, Society of American Archivists

Speakers: Howard L. Applegate, Balch Institute

Richard H. Brown, Newberry Library

Discussant: Elsie F. Freivogel, National Archives and Records Service

Session VII: *Archival Research Centers*

Chairman: F. Gerald Ham, State Historical Society of Wisconsin

Speakers: Richmond D. Williams, Eleutherian Mills Historical Library

John Kerwood, Montgomery County Historical Society

Margaret S. Henson, Southwest Center for Urban Research

Discussant: Lucile M. Kane, Minnesota Historical Society

Session VIII: *The State of Historical Records: A Summary*

Chairman: Mary Lynn McCree, University of Illinois, Chicago

Speakers: Walter Rundell, Jr., University of Maryland

C. Herbert Finch, Cornell University

Other

Participants: Jane Allen, Rockefeller Foundation

Frank G. Burke, National Historical Publications and Records Commission

Margaret S. Child, National Endowment for the Humanities

C. F. W. Coker, National Archives and Records Service

Nancy Gwinn, Council on Library Resources

Larry J. Hackman, National Historical Publications and Records Commission

J. William Hess, Rockefeller Foundation

Melvin G. Holli, University of Illinois, Chicago

Stanley Katz, University of Chicago

Richard W. Leopold, Northwestern University

Beverley Lynch, University of Illinois, Chicago

Arthur Mann, University of Chicago

Timothy Walch, Society of American Archivists

Robert M. Warner, University of Michigan

Edward Weldon, New York State Archives