

Lest We Forget: Setting Priorities for the Preservation and Use of Historical Records

EDWARD WELDON

KEEPERS, USERS, AND PATRONS of historical records have an unusual opportunity at this conference to explore their common interests. Archivists will be on their best behavior in hopes of showing the visitors from the big house (the one with the big foundation) that they know how to act and that they are trusty neighbors. The funding agency visitors, for their part, want to find out more about these new people on the block who have made their presence known by increasingly frequent requests for cups of sugar. I trust that we will quickly put down our preconceptions, get to know one another, and learn about respective needs and what each has to offer the other. We all want to see, for instance, more thoughtful and better-fashioned grant proposals, directed toward solving our greatest problems. It is to our mutual interests to keep up the neighborhood. Since we will be discussing intensively our priorities for the preservation and use of historical resources, my task is to provide an introductory overview, offering some speculations on the state of things archival, past, present, and future, and the reasons for a conference like this one just now.

In the first place, events and trends over the past few years have raised the American consciousness toward records and their role in our society. The Pentagon Papers, Watergate, revelations about FBI and CIA surveillance and the files generated on citizens by these activities, knowledge about extensive computer data banks and the threats they pose to personal privacy, debates over the disposition of the Nixon and the Kissinger papers, and other issues, have all implanted in the public's mind assorted new impressions about records and their importance.

Of course, we cannot ignore the most obvious recent popularizer of historical records, the Bicentennial. It gave impetus to a renewed and intensive study of local communities, churches, families, race, ethnic heritage, and the like, as well as leading to the uncovering of sources long neglected or forgotten. The Bicentennial also brought some unaccustomed funds, both local and national, to impoverished records custodians, enabling them to produce needed guides to process collections. The movement to expand the National Historical Publications Commission began among archivists as a Bicentennial project, and 1976 saw the first appropriation, albeit small, to the new NHPRC and the creation of historical records advisory boards in nearly all the states and territories. We look to this program to be one of our most enduring and useful Bicentennial legacies.

Another development that helped advance the cause of historical records was the expansion during the 1960s of the American educational establishment. On the campuses of new or enlarged colleges and universities appeared many new archives and manuscript repositories. Their staffs became a vigorous new interest group in the archives profession until then characterized largely as public records keepers, a few religious and business archivists, manuscripts curators from established

libraries and historical societies, and persons in allied professions interested in the management and use of historical or record materials.

The college and university archivists provided a useful link between the profession and the academic and research community; they helped to bring innovations to archival training and techniques, such as the use of part-time student assistants, networks within university systems, and new archival methods courses in history departments and library schools. Older elements in the profession passed along their experience while the newer (and frequently younger) members contributed a healthy “greening” quality to our craft. This trend shows up in the SAA’s committees and elected officers and Council, as well as in the dramatic growth of regional and state archival organizations—over a dozen new groups in the last six years.

Although quite modest when compared with growth in other sectors of American society, the recent changes in the archival community have been dramatic (and, for some, traumatic) for a fairly staid and inbred fraternity, long dominated by a few major institutions and their administrators. A recent high point was the SAA’s own intensive self-study, which recommended goals and reforms for the 1970s to make the Society more responsive to its membership than volunteerism permitted. Our full-time, paid, executive directorship was the result, and members taxed themselves heavily for the office. I think that few archivists today would return to the old system.

Despite these successes, however, a number of conditions persist that contribute to underlying weaknesses in the system that maintains resources for humanistic research. Education is no longer the growth industry of a decade ago: birth rates have fallen, costs have risen, instructional staffs have been cut, schools have been closed and consolidated. Archival programs affiliated with educational establishments have been competing with more entrenched interests for dwindling fiscal resources. This reversal has been especially hard on new programs and on those in urban institutions. In addition, state and local government budgets have been severely strained, to the detriment of public records programs.

The plight of our partners in scholarship, the historians, is worse. As this clientele group declines in resources and numbers, archives are going to have a difficult time in expanding or shaping services to scholarship. Nevertheless, many historians are rediscovering archives in the optimistic, but mistaken, assumption that these repositories will be a bountiful new source of jobs for their unemployed graduate students who cannot find teaching positions. Maynard Brichford wryly reminds us of the grant requests from historians seeking to set up an archives or a graduate course and promising then to hire an archivist or two if they get the grant.

The historical profession traditionally has been more concerned with the preservation of records rather than with jobs. Historians had a good record supporting archives from the founding of the American Historical Association in 1884 until the Second World War, and subgroups like the Historical Manuscripts Commission (1895), the Public Archives Commission (1899), and the Conference of Archivists (1909) functioned within the AHA in support of state and private preservation activities. During the 1930s historians were heavily involved in the establishment of the National Archives, the selection of the first Archivist of the United States, and the organization of the WPA Historic Records Survey. It was at the 1936 AHA annual meeting that a new interest group was organized and separated, calling itself the Society of American Archivists.

War intruded and the professions drifted apart. In 1947 the AHA Subcommittee on Public Archives was abolished, and by 1950 all AHA committees on archival materials were gone. Only recently has there been restoration of formal liaison to explore matters of mutual concern, most often charges by historians that their access to needed materials is being impaired by the policies or practices of some repository. It is revealing that the Joint Committee of the AHA, the OAH, and the SAA is called the Joint Committee of Historians *and Archives*, not Archivists.

One explanation for the weakened relationship between archivists and historians is the way that World War II affected historiography, scholarly use of archival resources, and consequent support for records preservation. Depression-era research had concentrated on social, political, and economic institutions and conflicts, but much postwar scholarship—influenced by wartime propaganda studies, motivational psychology, and the new sociology—plumbed social attitudes, covert drives, and soft-core forces; conflicts became sublimated during the Eisenhower age. After Richard Hofstadter, for instance, it was hard not to find within American reformers of all eras a driving fervor of status anxieties. Frequent sources used for these studies were the popular press or other contemporary printed evidence of what people might be thinking about or perceiving. Walter Rundell's excellent survey of scholarly research and training, *In Pursuit of American History*, documents the low use made of original source materials during the 1960s. A generation of historical scholars, at a time of the greatest expansion of their craft, did their research to a large extent outside archives. Today they are rediscovering archives.

Faced with declining enrollments, history departments have done an imaginative job of packaging new courses, forging new and fashionable alliances with related disciplines, and introducing new techniques. An editorial in the *Washington Post*, December 31, after the 1976 American Historical Association meeting, referred to it as a "smorgasbord of sessions" and warned that "the 'new history' could be swamped by triviality, confusion over methods and a self-defeating desire for 'relevance'." The *Post* saw "a real danger that history could become a discipline adrift, thus losing both its audience and its identity as an exacting humanistic art." The way history drifts, however, will depend upon the availability of sources to help chart accurate courses in the new seas. Archivists are under pressure to preserve increasingly varied materials and to make them more widely known and accessible to students.

The roots of the new scholarship go deeper than mere occupational self-interest, however. They come in part from the dissatisfaction one generation has with inherited theories and interpretations, a frequent dialectical pattern. The new scholarship requires new evidence to test earlier theories. In addition, trends in scholarship usually reflect prevailing contemporary social issues and intellectual trends, and, in this instance, the liberation movements—national, social, sexual—have their counterparts in ethnic history, women's and gay studies, and a wide variety of local community research. Understanding is sought in the interaction between individuals and their groups and the self interacting with other selves through informal organizations and institutions. Records produced by these institutions and groups, and *about* these individuals, are essential to understanding their roles, and archives become once again more central to current research needs.

Another trend that will affect archival repositories is the shift of academic policy away from full-time doctoral programs to the adult education market which includes part-time and terminal master's degree students. Related are the so-called

“adult independent learners,” who are often older, more widely experienced, more mobile, and perhaps more strongly motivated than students to whom we have been accustomed. These new patrons, frequently free to fashion their own research programs, want a variety of sources, and they often need on-site introduction to archival research methods. To accommodate this trend, many institutions like museums, historical societies, and archives are either introducing educational programs of their own or are entering into cooperative agreements with established schools. Ivy League institutions like Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Dartmouth, and most recently Columbia, have introduced continuing education programs in competition with community colleges, and others abound. A recent issue of the *New York Times*, for instance, carried twelve pages of ads for continuing education offerings, a deluge that will surely have an impact on our research repositories and their services.

Technology, too, has enhanced the importance of archives to research. A record is, after all, nothing but a material base with impressions upon it, and a record can include magnetic tape, microfilm, motion pictures, video tape, sound recordings, and the like. The modern record is machine-made and often solely machine-perceivable. It assembles images and impressions, and it aids in their analysis and interpretation. In our almost post-literate society, where half of America's 216 million people are thirty years old or under, sensationalism rules. Audio and visual impressions motivate and influence people; and researchers, themselves products of this culture, value highly these machine-made sources in their efforts to understand their society. It is the task of the archivists to appraise, preserve, and make accessible to users these sophisticated, expensive, and ephemeral sources. Researchers, too, are employing the modern electronic tools and seeking new aggregates of data amenable to manipulation and quantification, requiring them to consult large and uniform series. They have adopted the team research techniques of the physical and social sciences, making obsolete the image of the solitary scholar poring over a manuscript—just as the popular notion of a graying, dusty, smock-coated old clerk is ill-suited in stereotyping the archivist of today.

In this time of historiographical flux, technological change, fiscal restraint, inflation, fragmentation of holdings, and increasing demands for services, where do archives turn for help? I was impressed by Trudy Peterson's point about archivists always being part of a bureaucracy where we are faced with the need of explaining our programs to our institutional or agency administrators, showing how our clientele coincides with theirs (even when they do not quite), and how effective we are in delivering our services. Within these bureaucracies we often feel alone and somewhat unarmed in defending or extending our turf.

Outside our own bureaucracies, we have turned for help to three general sources: federal agencies like the National Archives and Records Service and the Library of Congress; grant-making agencies and foundations; and colleagues in our own professional organizations. If these sources had been adequate to the task, we would not be here defining priorities.

The Library of Congress, as Harriet Ostroff describes in her paper on NUCMC, has assisted repositories and researchers with coordinated information services on processed manuscript holdings. But, as she points out, much more remains to be done. The Library of Congress also has done significant research in the preservation field, especially with books and water-damaged materials, and it generously shares services and experiences. Its prime constituency, however, remains the library community.

The role of the National Archives and Records Service, under the General Services Administration, essentially has been to serve as housekeeper for the federal government's own records. It has failed to broaden its support to state and local archival institutions. Certainly some practices like records management innovations, records center operations, and microform applications developed for federal agencies have trickled down and been adopted. NARS also has supported the SAA editorial office, and NARS staff members personally have played important roles in the profession. But much of a national and cooperative nature remains to be done, tasks too great and not wholly within the mission of any of our own bureaucracies. We need new standards for records selection and appraisal, especially for machine-readable records and for large series of case files. We need a thorough analysis of sampling and of the reliability and limitations of various methods. We need to study the ethical as well as legal environments affecting privacy and confidentiality and the extent to which these rights may be abridged in balancing them with rights to access. We need help with computer applications to intellectual control and to internal management of archives. We should look to our national archival establishment for coordination and leadership in areas such as these.

It has been only with the recent records program of the NHPRC that direct assistance to specific nonfederal repositories has been formally provided by the agency. The procedures of the NHPRC have encouraged the development of historical records advisory boards in participating states and required that state archivists play a leading role. The NHPRC promises for next year a computerized guide to repositories across the nation, a network with the potential for becoming a much more elaborate information system. However, the NHPRC, with a mere \$2 million annual authorization for records (and only half that appropriated last year), is in danger of becoming just another federal grant-making agency cultivating a few friends in the field to be harvested at budget-hearing time, if it cannot stimulate truly national and coordinated reforms in the preservation and use of historical records.

We are grateful for the bounty that the National Endowment for the Humanities has bestowed upon numerous repositories, enabling them to process holdings, prepare finding aids, and otherwise assist us in serving the cause of humanistic studies. And especially we appreciate the realization that there are inadequacies and that the problems are greater than can be solved by a series of beneficences to various research centers and that a brain-picking, working conference is needed.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not reiterate the obvious and point out that a system of grants, as essential as they have been for many repositories and researchers, holds potential dangers. Programs often become skewed, or are even created, to fit the objectives of the grant-makers, or what the applicant thinks those objectives to be. There is the threat, too, that internal budgeting will become dependent upon imported grants, or that activities appropriate for internal funding will be frozen out while waiting for the ship to come in. Symbiotic relationships are not the most satisfying ones to have.

So we turn to our third source of inspiration and support in our occupational isolation, our infrequent and informal liaison with colleagues in similar circumstances. The vehicles here are our own professional organizations: the Society of American Archivists, the National Association of State Archivists and Records Administrators, the American Association for State and Local History, and our numerous state and regional associations whose motto often is "ad hococracy, not bureaucracy." Through these ties we develop standards; gather statistics to measure

needs or performance; conduct seminars for advanced staff and introduce novices to the basics; share information about holdings or innovations in technique; and build a body of knowledge and informal networks to help us overcome distance, survive in our bureaucracies, and otherwise serve the cause of research. In effect, archivists are attempting to build a profession themselves in a field of service where there is but little institutionalized coordination and support; there are no powerful organized economic interest groups; where the training is unstructured and the entry requirements vague; and where underlying permanence, ironically, is elusive. It is a nice play on words when archives and archivists are looking for foundations.

And as we review possible priorities, let us remember that the highest priority is to help an emerging profession to help itself. Collectively, archivists serve as the caretakers of our civilization's memory. The direction this civilization takes is conditioned by this memory: by the information archivists determine to keep, by the quality of care they can give it, by the facility with which they can recall it, and by the reliability of their trusteeship. Lest we forget, let's set our priorities straight.

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