

The State of Historical Records: A Summary

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Establishing specific priorities for historical records is a difficult and time consuming task. Although the conference explored a wide range of archival issues, a great many others were not discussed. Walter Rundell and Herbert Finch reviewed the conference papers and discussed some of the archival topics not covered within the context of the conference. In order to gain a precise understanding of the views of those in attendance, the conference staff formally surveyed the participants to assess their opinions on general archival projects. The results of the survey conclude this report.

WALTER RUNDELL, JR.:

The aim of this conference has been to highlight problems connected with the preservation and use of historical records as well as to set priorities for solving these problems. Each of the participants has had an opportunity to reflect on areas related to his expert knowledge and experience and to offer suggestions for rectifying deficiencies. What follows is my own set of personal priorities related to the original sources for historical research.

First, what is needed throughout higher education is a genuine archival program. This would entail records disposition schedules for all units of an institution—academic departments, administrative offices, student organizations, athletic activities, and the like. Under the present conditions, a researcher's chances of finding any systematic information about an institution from its own records are uncertain at best. How much more systematic and reliable such research would be if genuine archives existed.

The second priority concerns the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Since it is so central to the research of historians, every effort must be made to make it as usable as possible. Computerizing the index and issuing cumulative index volumes is an obvious place to start. The suggestion for expanding the utility of NUCMC by including holdings of certain archival agencies also deserves serious consideration. NUCMC should also be expanded to include the holdings of more repositories. A funding agency should make a sizable grant to the Library of Congress to enable NUCMC to identify and help those agencies unable to report. NUCMC might then award small grants to repositories so that they could arrange and report their collections. Or it might consider employing a field staff to visit and assist repositories.

A third priority concerns several major sets of printed documents which were published without adequate indexes. Possibilities should be investigated for working through the NHPRC, NEH, or some private foundation to secure funds to undertake a computerized indexing of some major sets of printed documents. The NHPRC could also seek specific appropriations to publish a series of guides to the public records of the revolutionary generation (1706–1832). Such projects could be

in continuing celebration of our Bicentennial.

The fourth priority is the preservation and use of municipal records. Money is necessary to inventory such records as well as to preserve them. In connection with the NHPRC's national records survey, methods for preserving municipal records should be sought, as well as means of reporting such collections to NUCMC. Perhaps a regional project of reporting unused records to NUCMC could be developed.

The fifth priority concerns archival scholarship. Foundations should always encourage scholarship on the part of curators by making grant money available to support their research, just as is done for historians. The scholarly curator is a better curator because of the deepened understanding that research and publication bring to his task. Thus he is better able to serve the needs of history, as well as his own institution. Grant money to aid scholarly pursuits of curators will therefore benefit doubly. The records of the nation's past and the scholarship necessary to interpret and understand that past are surely worth the investments that funding agencies should be called upon to make.

C. HERBERT FINCH:

History has public value, and is worthy of public support, only after, and to the extent that, it leaves the hands of professionals and enters the public consciousness. This argues for the establishment of funding priorities which reverse the order of these sessions. The wider use of archival materials through research centers, through intellectual manipulation of finding aids, and through public education programs must have the highest priority. The physical preservation of archival materials must have second priority. Technical matters such as surveys, creation of finding guides, or processing of collections should have the lowest claim. Archivists should not expect outside funds to support our basic functions.

Having stated a debatable conclusion on the general theme, I have some specific concerns which were not dealt with adequately by this conference. First, no pleas were heard for new types of documentation or for new areas that need documentation. We are apparently so pleased with ourselves for having plunged into ethnic documentation, women's studies, labor records, and a few other areas that we are not willing to set any goals for such things as environmental or leisure-time documentation. Another obvious area is the computer generated record. Is there a priority for dealing with the impact of electronics on archival theory? Second, there has been no discussion of our methodology except for one oblique reference to the possibility that the resurgence of the survey may reflect our increasing recognition of social science method as opposed to historical method. It may also reflect a more sophisticated management ability. Third, there has been no call for the publication of records. There have been some references to the cost of publication of finding aids, but is this to replace the publication of documents themselves? All of this is to ask, "Are any of us thinking about what comes next?"

As the papers were read and discussed, a few basic themes and tensions have seemed evident. There seems to be a growing awareness that others are out there both as potential users of our product and as potential allies in solving our problems. There are tensions about what archivists should be doing. Should we devote our energies to *basics* or should we be more political and entrepreneurial? Are we willing to learn about subject access or should we only describe the administrative context of record groups? What and how much should we expect

from individual repositories, and where should we try to develop networks and consortia? We are not yet to a consensus on the quality we should expect in archivists and how we can obtain it. Should we certify individuals, or accredited institutions, or both? There seems to be agreement on the need for both academic experience and practical experience, but we do not agree on how much, where, or when. When will we be ready for archival education to focus on teaching others as well as improving ourselves?

In terms of the planning process, perhaps we came too soon to priorities. Ideally, we would have grappled first with an inclusive mission, analyzed our strengths and weaknesses, stated some overall objectives, and then tried to set priorities.

SURVEY RESULTS

The final session of the conference was devoted to establishing specific funding priorities for historical records, and all participants agreed to complete a five-part questionnaire based on conference discussions. Completed questionnaires were returned by the chairman, speakers, and discussants of each session. Following is an analysis of the results of the questionnaire.

I. Participants were asked to rank the seven topics discussed at the conference in order of overall importance to the profession. "Intellectual Control" was considered by the participants to have the greatest overall importance for the profession. This was followed by "Professional Archival Training," "Conservation and Preservation," "Surveys of Historical Records," "State and Local Records," "Wider Use of Archives," and "Archival Research Centers."

II. When topics were ranked according to funding priorities, "Conservation and Preservation" was judged to be the most deserving of outside funding. This was followed by "Intellectual Control," "Surveys of Historical Records," "Professional Archival Training," "State and Local Records," "Archival Research Centers," and "Wider Use of Archives."

Combining the results of the above, it seems apparent that conference participants considered the conservation and intellectual control of historical records to be the most important priorities for archivists.

III. Participants were asked to assign a "high," "middle," or "low" priority to thirty-five specific projects which had been suggested during the conference. The proposals were grouped into five categories: Surveys, Intellectual Control, Archival Training, Conservation and Preservation, and Archival Communication.

National, Regional, State and Subject Surveys. Among these, state surveys were viewed as having the highest priority, followed by regional surveys, subject surveys, and national surveys. The project given lowest priority in this category was an evaluation and review of the WPA Historical Records Survey.

Intellectual Control of Historical Records. The project given highest priority was an evaluation of current systems of control and the development of standards for future systems. Second priority was given to the development of an inexpensive finding aids system, followed by a project which would compile and publish

national finding aids. Fourth priority was given to the compilation and publication of a bibliography of archival finding aids. Development of computer assisted controls of historical records was next, followed by the development of acquisition models, the standardization of terminology, and the creation of a national information storage and retrieval system.

Archival Education and Training. Of the ten proposals suggested by the participants, the one ranked highest was an assistance program for small organizations interested in preserving their records. The second priority was the establishment of an archival consultant service to assist small repositories, followed in order by a model curriculum for archival training, a continuing archival education program, a certification program for archivists, a scholarship and fellowship program for archival education, the development of management techniques for archival administrators, an accreditation program for archival repositories, a grantsmanship education program for archivists, and a survey of current archival training programs.

Conservation and Preservation of Historical Records. Conference participants rated experimentation with mass conservation treatment techniques as the highest priority, followed by a proposal for the establishment of a network of regional conservation centers. The third and fourth priorities were placed on the establishment of a national conservation program and a formal training program for professional paper conservators. The lowest priority in this category was placed on a conservation education program for archival administrators and a study of the conservation uses of microfilm.

Archival Communication. Participants ranked highest a proposal to improve the exchange of information *within* the archival profession, followed closely by a proposal to hold conferences on a regular basis to discuss critical archival problems and possible solutions. Third priority was given to a proposal for promoting the wider use of archives, and fourth to the establishment of an archival research institute to address theoretical problems. Last in this category were proposals to expand and publicize the work of the AHA/OAH/SAA Joint Committee on Historians and Archives and to link together the various data bases in state archives.

A comparison of the priorities listed in the first three sections of the questionnaire gives a clear indication of the views of those attending the conference. Proposals for the intellectual control and conservation of historical records are considered to deserve highest priority, especially projects to evaluate current control systems, and to develop inexpensive finding aids. Equally important are projects to experiment with mass conservation techniques and to establish a network of regional conservation centers. The next highest priority is placed on education and training with a strong recommendation for the establishment of a training and assistance program for small repositories. Participants indicated that projects to be considered in the near future should also include state surveys of historical records, the creation of a national conservation program, and the improvement of the exchange of information within the profession.

IV & V. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on the conference itself and to suggest the next steps for establishing priorities for historical records. A

majority of the participants recommended holding conferences on a regular basis to discuss specific archival problems. Although it was agreed that the priorities conference had stimulated fresh thought, many participants argued that too much was discussed in too short a time. Thus, they suggested that the next conference should focus on only one of the seven topics considered by the January conference. Most participants also stressed the need to publicize the work of the conference and to encourage comments from the SAA membership, interested foundations, and professional organizations.

A number of participants added other reflections. Richmond D. Williams stressed that "archives is a service industry—much of what archivists should do depends on what other people want done." He reiterated the fundamental questions of the conference: "Who decides what is *needed* in archival administration? Is it archivists, researchers, foundation officials, or a combination of all three? Is a consensus of opinion possible?" Maynard Brichford addressed the same questions: "It is fine to talk of cooperation and joint committees," he noted, "but archivists need to be freed from a co-opting service ethic. They should relinquish some types of projects to research beneficiaries and state a strong claim to basic research on archival problems."

Several participants expressed concern about the participation of foundations in setting priorities for historical records. John Daly observed that "too many archivists seem to think that grant officers exist in a vacuum in which there are no repercussions from the decisions they make. This may be too delicate an issue to raise in open discussion, but I believe it must be recognized clearly if future conferences of this kind are to produce worthwhile results." John Kerwood argued for greater cooperation between the Society of American Archivists, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to "formulate a master plan designed to bring about the implementation of priorities for historical records." Francis X. Blouin spoke for many participants when he concluded that the next step should be to stress more systematic thinking about the problems and challenges articulated at the conference. He added that the priorities discussed at the conference "offer foundations an opportunity to nurture the archival profession at a critical stage of its growth."