

# The President's Page

## What's Past Was Future

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ARCHIVISTS HEAR THE VOICES of Plato's Fates every day. Singing of the past, present, and future, Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos are the trio that guide our decisions. As we listen, we know that the songs change. The refrain of the future will soon become that of the present and then join the past. The futurist's dreams and predictions quickly become the accounts of the past. Yet each voice—the needs of the future, the constraints of the present, and the experience of the past—must be heard.

A random sample of a thousand persons enumerated in the 1980 census would produce .00003 archivists—not enough to threaten the national security or skew the gross national product. The small number of archivists affects our relations with other professions. The fact that there are about a hundred administrators, ten librarians, and six historians for every archivist puts us at a numerical disadvantage. We owe much to our colleagues in other professions and have a continuing obligation to explain our work to them. We should also keep a wary eye on them. Our relationships should be based on mutual confidence and provide for the sharing of counsel and assistance. In these relationships, the archivist is like a younger sibling who is provided with both good and bad examples and advice. Whether in the General Services Administration or the offices of the Secretary of State and the Vice President for Administrative Services, administrators are concerned with short-term results and favorable publicity. Librarians can make major contributions in the handling of printed archives and the application of new technologies, but the techniques of collective appraisal, arrangement, and description are foreign to their practice. As users, historians nurtured early archival development; but they have little experience to offer in the key archival activities of appraisal, arrangement, description, conservation, and use.

While usually outnumbered, archivists have two powerful assets. First, we are not divided in our national organization. We have no Association of Research Archives or Special Archives Association. There is no American Archival Association and Organization of American Archivists. The Society of American Archivists includes federal, state, and local archivists; business, religious, and academic archivists; manuscripts curators and records managers; conservationists and information managers; archivists from north and south of our borders—all are welcome in our archival common market.

Our second asset is an openness to innovation. In his 1956 presidential address, Ernst Posner noted "the elasticity of thinking and the dynamism" involved in applying "recent

technical advances" to our work. Our willingness in adopting records management, information science, and automation have contributed to a worldwide respect for American archival practice. We have freely applied new techniques to traditional archival activities. An openness to change will be especially useful as we continue to adapt archival practice to new technologies and uses. As the documentalist, records manager, and information manager have developed new approaches in the last thirty years, archivists have learned much about the records they hold. They welcome the institutions, funding, and technology that will assist them in meeting their responsibilities. Photographic miniaturization and automated records-keeping have come of age in the lifetime of the Society of American Archivists. Systems for the automated manipulation, storage, and retrieval of data provide new challenges for archivists. Added benefits of archival automation are realized in improved administrative control and an increased potential for archival research.

There are both strengths and weaknesses in the public's interest in the past. Americans have a fondness for the past, but it is a conceptualized past. It is a story of political and technological achievement, an ethnic or racial heritage, and an agreed upon national tradition. The strongest ties are often of a personal or family nature. We do not have a strong identification with a common cultural patrimony recorded in a national documentary heritage. The critical examination of the past is an uncomfortable activity for most Americans. While they delight in "future shock," they are not interested in "past shock." They know that their ancestors rejected or forfeited a foreign culture, tend to regard the past as an immutable record, and often doubt that its investigation offers an adequate return for the investment.

Retrospective research in the archives has become a socially respectable leisure-time activity. The "American scholar who presided over our origins" has come to be a small minority among the users of archival resources. Certain archives report 90 percent, 75 percent, or 60 percent of their users are genealogists. Reference archivists are practiced in singling out "scholarly inquiries" and "serious researchers" to distinguish the professional user from the amateur. Even the division of researchers into those who work for compensation in the form of an hourly wage, advanced degree, tax deduction, or author's royalty and those who work for personal pleasure and satisfaction is unsatisfactory. There is no simple way to categorize users, but the amateurs form a clear majority.

The Society of American Archivists is an organization of generalists and specialists, archivists, manuscripts curators, records managers, information managers, and all who are concerned with the quality and retention of documents. This broad professional interest affords an opportunity for affiliation and joint endeavors as well as the possibility of fragmentation of efforts. Americans have demonstrated a special talent in forming new organizations and in seeking federal funding to support them. Maintaining a common bond between the professional groups that maintain society's information or records is a high and difficult calling. Archivists need an ear for the voices of the past, present, and future; a careful concern for our professional colleagues; a sense of organizational unity; an openness to innovation; and a commitment to meeting the needs of the public as a whole.

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