

# American Archival Theory: The State of the Art

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ALTHOUGH AMERICAN ARCHIVAL THEORY is a relatively recent phenomenon, and in some respects an amorphous art, it has some characteristics of American thought and might be viewed first in that context. What are some of the characteristics of American thought? Max Lerner, a perceptive interpreter of American civilization, declares: "In the European sense Americans have had little 'grand theory,' whether of the state, the economy, the society, the culture, Nature, or God." In American intellectual thinking Lerner finds "a rich array of fragments rather than an artfully laid out master plan."<sup>1</sup> He concludes that "American thought is tentative, fragmented, directed at the immediate object," and open to continual change; and although foreign influences have mixed in its main stream, it has been less shaped by these influences than by American condition.<sup>2</sup> Henry Steele Commager refers to "an intense practicality," in American thought, extending to most matters, and asserts that pragmatism can almost be called the "official philosophy of America."<sup>3</sup>

These general characteristics of American thought are relevant in a review and assessment of the status of American archival theory. A review shows that American theory has evolved essentially from Eu-

ropean archival principles adapted to deal with unique characteristics of American record-making and record-keeping practices, from concepts of the democratization of the use of archival materials, and from innovative thinking about archival interest in the management of current and semi-current records. These characteristics of American archival theory can be reviewed and assessed from the vantage of the functions of appraisal, arrangement, description, reference service, and relations with records management.

## *Appraisal*

The ideas of American archivists about the function of appraisal show the influence of European concepts concerning the value of records for administrative purposes and their possible value for scholarly purposes. Among the first and most influential American archivists to discuss appraisal principles at some length were Philip C. Brooks and Theodore R. Schellenberg, leading staff members of the National Archives and Records Service for more than two decades. In a 1940 address to the Society of American Archivists, Brooks called attention to three "categories of value" into which records could be placed. In the first category, Brooks saw the value of rec-

<sup>1</sup> Max Lerner, *America As a Civilization*, vol. 2, *Culture and Personality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 717.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 718, 732.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 7, 97.

ords for the agency of origin in its search for "efficient administration and protection against claims of all sorts." In the second, he envisioned a closely related value of records for the study of the administrative history of the records-creating agency. In the third, he perceived a "broad and indefinable field of 'historical value'." In its sphere of interest he saw not only records concerning conventional history, but also those relating to "everyday events and conditions" and "historical patterns" in social sciences and other disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

Fifteen years after Brooks's seminal statement on appraisal, Schellenberg, in a work that became a principal textbook for American archivists, expounded principles or "standards" for appraisal in terms of similarly perceived values, but in greater detail than Brooks had done. In Schellenberg's view, the principles logically rest upon what he called the "evidential" and "informational" values of records, which exist after the records cease to have current use by their creators.<sup>5</sup>

In appraisal for evidential value, Schellenberg stated that the principal consideration is the extent to which records provide basic documentation or evidence of such matters as how the records-creating agency was organized and operated and what it accomplished or failed to accomplish. Appraisal for informational value, he explained, entails consideration of the extent to which records contain unique and useful data concerning persons, places, subjects, and the like, with which an agency dealt. Such data could be useful not only to historians but also to "scholars in all kinds of disciplines," genealogists, and persons seeking to establish varied legal rights.

Both Brooks and Schellenberg believed that appraisal could not really proceed from fixed principles, since archivists with

different personal backgrounds and institutional interests would inevitably have different views concerning the kind and degree of value in particular types of records. They felt also that the effective application of their appraisal principles required knowledge of such matters as agency administrative history, relationships of groups of records to each other, research trends and methodology, and uses of accessioned records. They recommended the use of experts in evaluating records in specialized fields, where archivists might lack adequate knowledge.

In the appraisal of massive groups of records, such as are often created in the twentieth century, Schellenberg believed that archivists are obliged to consider limitations in archival space and funding, and thus he recalled the pragmatic considerations set forth earlier by G. Philip Bauer, another NARS staff member. Bauer had presented the view that values of records "must be weighed against costs" of their preservation.<sup>6</sup> This idea and other pragmatic considerations have been reemphasized in more recent years. Maynard Brichford, for example, declares: "In the practical world of budgets and space, the archivist must weigh his financial resources against the prospective usefulness" of the records he appraises. He also recommends that the appraisal archivist consider such characteristics of records as form, time span, and arrangement.<sup>7</sup> Other archivists suggest the need for new considerations in the appraisal of machine-readable records. Charles Dollar, for instance, while conceding that such records can be evaluated by principles applicable to other records, contends that evaluation of machine-readable records should take into consideration such characteristics as the level of aggregation, linkage and validation potential, arrange-

<sup>4</sup> Philip C. Brooks, "The Selection of Records for Preservation," *American Archivist* 3 (October 1940): 230-34.

<sup>5</sup> T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 139-60.

<sup>6</sup> G. Philip Bauer, *The Appraisal of Current and Recent Records*, National Archives Staff Information Circular No. 13 (June 1946), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning*, Society of American Archivists Basic Manual Series (Chicago: SAA, 1977), p. 11.

ment, accessibility, and estimated preservation costs.<sup>8</sup> Then too, some archivists are calling for an approach to appraisal with greater consideration of social relevance that will increase the availability of what Gerald Ham has called "documentation of the day-to-day decisions of lower-echelon leaders and of the activities and attitudes of ordinary men and women."<sup>9</sup>

These recent considerations of appraisal are suggested strongly by the increasing dimensions, complexities, and continual changes in American records, and by new research interests and methodologies. The considerations do not really invalidate or provide theoretical substitutions to the general principles of administrative or evidential value and historical or informational value expounded most elaborately by Brooks and Schellenberg and recently publicized by Maynard J. Brichford (in his SAA manual, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning*). The considerations suggest, rather, factors such as costs or usability, and research perspectives or methodologies to be summoned in applying the principles. They show that appraisal judgments, like most opinions, are conditioned to a great extent by the practical needs and cultural interests of a definite moment or milieu.

#### Arrangement

In American views on the arrangement of records, pragmatic considerations are perhaps even more noticeable than they are in opinions about records appraisal. These views have evolved from recognition that strict adherence to European principles of arrangement was not wise, because records received in American archival agencies tend to be more disorganized than

records transferred to European archival agencies from registry offices which maintained them in their original organizational pattern and filing arrangement. Accordingly, the European principle of provenance has been pragmatically adapted in the record group concept. This concept, formulated in the National Archives in 1941, established "a major archival unit" in a manner described as "somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and the desirability of making a unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and the publication of inventories."<sup>10</sup> Like the concept of the French *fonds* and the English "archive group," the record group concept provided that records of different creating agencies and offices be kept separate and never mixed; but, unlike these European counterparts, it made the volume and complexity of records important considerations for establishing the record group and permitted the group to be created for records of organizational units of varying status and authority in an hierarchical situation.

The record group concept, with some variations in definition, has spread from NARS to many other archival repositories in the United States and Canada. To most American archivists it appears to provide necessary flexibility in the arrangement of archival materials created by different types of organizations. Ernst Posner's evaluation of it two decades ago is still widely accepted. He called it "a concept that has proved to be a most effective means of controlling and making accessible the information in the bulky records of modern administration."<sup>11</sup> Although the record group is accepted as a basic level for ar-

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Dollar, "Appraising Machine-Readable Records," *American Archivist* 41 (October 1978): 423-30. Dollar contends that unaggregated automated data are likely to have more informational value than aggregated data. This contention contrasts with the higher value traditionally given by archivists to summarized data in textual records.

<sup>9</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 9. Ham agrees with Howard Zinn and other historians who contend that the "passivity and perceptions" of archivists "produce a biased and distorted archival record."

<sup>10</sup> National Archives, *Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States* (Washington: National Archives, 1942), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Posner, "Solon Justus Buck and the National Archives," *American Archivist* 23 (July 1960): 265.

ranking archives, other levels are seen as important in the same process. This view was first discussed in detail by Oliver W. Holmes, of NARS, who called for recognition of arrangement as a function entailing five different operations of varying difficulty at five different levels: the depository, record group and subgroup, series, filing unit, and document levels.<sup>12</sup> This idea has recently been promoted and extended to arrangement of manuscripts in the SAA manual on *Arrangement and Description*, prepared by David B. Gracy II. Richard C. Berner has also publicized the idea and has recommended establishing the subgroup as an independent record level in arrangement and description.<sup>13</sup>

A pragmatic approach in archival arrangement is further revealed in American views concerning the principle, first advocated by German and Dutch archivists, that records should be kept in the order imposed on them when current. It is recognized that records usually can be prepared for use more quickly by ascertaining and accepting their original order rather than by attempting to create a new pattern of arrangement. Moreover, it is theorized that the original arrangement had logic and meaning for the records-creating agency and may help to reveal its operating processes. It is believed, however, that original order should not be accepted uncritically. Many American archivists feel that there is justification for changing the agency-given arrangement, when it appears to be unsystematic and lessens the usability of the records. Similarly, usability becomes the principal concern of these archivists, when it seems desirable to devise another scheme of arrangement because the original one has been lost.

### *Description*

American views on principles of arrangement have been related significantly to ideas about description of archives. The record group concept emerged in an effort

to facilitate description as well as arrangement of voluminous and varied bodies of records. Just as the record group has become an important level for arrangement work, it has become equally so for the preparation of finding aids. At this level, the descriptive aid known as an inventory has been developed. As the name connotes, this aid is for stock-taking or listing of records to present information on their character and quantity. In it the character of records is revealed in terms of their administrative and functional origins; physical types; chronological, geographical, or subject-matter coverage; relationships to other records; and arrangement. The total quantity of the records is often given in cubic feet, and the quantity of records in individual series is often shown in linear feet or inches, and, if bound, in number of volumes. Using the principle of provenance, the inventory has proved to be a useful medium for compiling information about the character of record groups of varying size and complexity; hence it has been adopted widely in all types of American archival institutions. The inventory provides the framework into which are placed record series, units on which descriptive work now focuses strongly in American archival programs. Moreover, description by way of the record group and the series has led to wide abandonment of the library theory and practice of item description. This emphasis of librarianship has been replaced by the concept of collective description, which seeks to provide intellectual access to the massive accumulations of twentieth-century archives by series-level descriptions suggesting the series unit location of record items and reflecting the nature and relationships of the series and subgroup units of record groups. Consolidation of these data takes place in the description of the entire record holdings of a repository or the holdings of more than one repository relating to particular subjects. The resultant finding aid known as

<sup>12</sup> Oliver W. Holmes, "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," *American Archivist* 27 (January 1964): 21–41.

<sup>13</sup> Richard C. Berner, "Arrangement and Description: Some Historical Observations," *American Archivist* 41 (April 1978): 169–81.

a guide, like the inventory, is also a product of analysis in terms of provenance. It provides capsule descriptions of all record groups or subgroups in a repository, or of all such units relevant to particular subjects.

For descriptive control of massive accumulations of records, automated technology is gradually coming into use and some thinking is being directed toward the development of a national information storage and retrieval system for archives. More than a decade ago, the computer was hailed as a ready instrument for archivists seeking more rapid and efficient information retrieval. It was predicted that manual descriptive tools could soon be replaced by computers. Visions of such replacement still exist and seem technologically realizable. There are problems, however, in the advance to the use of computers to obtain intellectual control of archives. Richard C. Berner and Richard H. Lytle in recent expositions point out that two central problems are the lack of economical and efficient methods for providing thorough subject access to archives and the lack of standardization of collective description techniques. Lytle does not find completely satisfactory present retrieval methods that link subject queries with provenance information contained in administrative histories or biographies, or methods that match subject queries with terms from an index or catalog. He concludes: "The challenge . . . is to design for archives information retrieval systems which are both powerful in subject retrieval and cost effective."<sup>14</sup>

### Reference

Little can be said concerning American archival theory in another important functional area: reference service. Such theory as is apparent stems largely from the

American traditional view that public records or records in a public repository should be available for use to the maximum extent consistent with the public interest. Albert R. Newsome, the first president of the SAA, declared that in the interest of democracy and scholarship, American archivists had responsibilities for increasing the availability and use of archives.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Philip C. Brooks maintained that the custody of valuable documents, whether supported by taxes or private means, is "a public trust" and that archival responsibility goes beyond custody to an obligation to inform searchers concerning the documents and to guide them in the use of the materials.<sup>16</sup> Intellectual support in the archival community for increasing the accessibility of records has been bolstered in recent years by federal and state legislation providing for freedom of information. Meanwhile, however, American archivists realize that the maximum accessibility rationale has to be balanced by them with concern for individual rights and legal safeguards for personal privacy and public security. The Council of the Society of American Archivists has recognized the conflicting rights to freedom of information and to privacy; it has supported the view that there should be openness and equality of access in archival reference service, but also that there should be vigilance in protecting privacy and confidentiality in accordance with individual rights and law. Cognizant of the important research value of archives, the Council also endorses the idea that archival sources should be made widely available through reproduction programs, to the greatest possible extent.<sup>17</sup> This view suggests that in America there has been substantial abandonment of an old proprietary attitude of archivists toward their records holdings.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; and Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 64-75; *ibid.*, 43 (Spring 1980): 191-207.

<sup>15</sup> Albert R. Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," *American Archivist* 2 (October 1939): 223.

<sup>16</sup> Philip C. Brooks, "Archivists and Their Colleagues: Common Denominators," *American Archivist* 14 (January 1951): 43.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of the Council of the Society of American Archivists, *American Archivist* 37 (January 1974): 153-54; *ibid.*, 39 (July 1976): 411.

### *Records Management*

Beyond traditional concern for appraisal, arrangement, description, and reference service as they relate to noncurrent records, American archival theory broke new ground in the 1940s in an extension of archival interest to the management of semicurrent and current records. This extension evolved from the recognition by several government archivists that they had justifiable concern for how records are created and maintained in government agencies prior to their possible transfer to archival custody. This concern was heightened in the search for economical and efficient methods to destroy massive accumulations of valueless records without destroying valuable records. To accomplish such disposition, Philip C. Brooks declared that archivists must recognize that the "selection of records for preservation and the consequent choice of those to be disposed of are the obverse and converse of the same problem and cannot properly be separated." Accordingly, they should look upon current records as future archives and provide advice on how they can best be handled. Thus Brooks contended that "the earlier in the life history of documents the selection process begins, the better for all concerned." With these considerations in mind he later enunciated the "principle that the whole life history of records is an integrated continuous entity" and "no period in that history can be ignored."<sup>18</sup> This concept led to important thought and action in the establishment of records-management programs, first in government agencies and later in other organizations, and in development of techniques in records-scheduling and facilities for intermediate storage, known as records

centers. These results, in the opinion of Ernst Posner, showed that American archivists had brought to the process of selection and retirement of records "a degree of attention and systematic thought that is unparalleled in the history of archives administration."<sup>19</sup> The rationale for their interest in this process, which has general acceptance today, was set forth by Schellenberg when he explained that the quality of archival material is "determined by the way records are produced and maintained in current use, and by the way records are disposed of." He declared, further, that the "way records are kept for current use determines how accurately record values can be assessed" and "how easily the valuable records can be segregated for retention in an archival institution" and made usable for research and other purposes.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, it should be noted that American archival theory does not exist as a systematically formulated body of ideas. It is essentially an aggregation of ideas drawn from well-tested and widely accepted European archival principles, and of pragmatic concepts developed to meet special needs of American archival administration and democratic traditions. All of the ideas have not been set forth at length in any *magnum opus* or single systematic treatise. Though scattered in American archival literature, they represent a group of principles that provide a firm foundation for current archival practice. As this practice lengthens and moves in new directions, perspectives in the application of the principles are inevitably changing. Thus the lenses through which the principles are viewed are being refocused and doubtless will continue so from generation to generation.

<sup>18</sup> Brooks, "The Selection of Records for Preservation," pp. 221, 226; "Current Aspects of Records Administration: The American Archivist's Concern in Records Administration," *American Archivist* 6 (July 1943): 164.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Posner, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist," *American Archivist* 18 (July 1955): 210.

<sup>20</sup> Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p. 26.