

Archives: Accessibility for the Disabled

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AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEMS encountered by disabled researchers in the use of archival materials is a topic long neglected in archival literature. As professional archivists, we are responsible for accessioning, inventorying, describing, preserving, and making available the permanently valuable records in our custody. Also as professionals, we seek to insure the widest possible access to the holdings of our institutions within the prescribed limits of security and donor restrictions. However, in spite of our dedication to the principle of accessibility, we archivists have been slow to recognize the special needs of disabled researchers who seek to use our collec-

tions. There are several reasons why we must begin now to address these needs.¹

First, 1981, the International Year of the Disabled, inspired many professions to look for ways to make their services and facilities more accessible to the disabled. The archival profession certainly should be no exception.

The second reason is a compelling one of simple logic and necessity. In 1972 the U.S. Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, which provided that "No otherwise qualified disabled individual shall, solely by reason of his (or her) handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or ac-

¹The following publications were especially helpful in the preparation of this article: Ruth Vellumen, *Serving Physically Disabled People* (New York: Bowker, 1979); Phyllis C. Self and Richard E. Bopp, eds., "Breaking Down Barriers: Information Services for Disabled Persons," *Illinois Libraries* 63 (September 1981): 505-558; Marianna S. James, "One Step At A Time: How Winterthur Approaches Program Accessibility," *History News* 36 (July 1981): 11-15; Alice Hagemeyer, *Deaf Awareness Handbook for Public Librarians* (Washington, D.C.: The Public Library of the District of Columbia, 1975); Lance J. Fischer, "The Deaf and Archival Research: Some Problems and Solutions," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979): 463-4.

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tivity receiving federal financial assistance.”² This law, as well as the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act,³ which required that as much as possible disabled children be mainstreamed into public schools, have served notice on society that the disabled want and deserve the same opportunities and services as do the able-bodied. The years since the passage of these two laws have witnessed an increased activism on the part of our disabled population. As disabled children and young adults matriculate through high school, college, and graduate school, and as disabled adults endeavor to pursue their own interests in history, government and legal research, or genealogy, it is clear that they will be seeking access to archival collections in greater and greater numbers. Archivists should be prepared to welcome them into their facilities.

The third reason it is important for the archival profession to recognize the special needs of disabled researchers is because up to now, we have not. A survey of archival literature reveals a paucity of information about the subject. Although it may be true that each archival institution develops ad hoc ways of accommodating its disabled clients, archivists lag far behind their colleagues in library science and museum administration in making their collections accessible.

Before discussing the special needs of individuals with different types of disabilities, one point must be emphasized. For the disabled, the term accessibility essentially means that “all things available to all other people should be available to those with disabilities.” This is a broad and com-

elling statement and could serve to discourage the archives administrator with even the best of intentions. As one writer stated, however, the legislation requires that programs and services be accessible to everyone in a practical and normal fashion and not that every nook and cranny of a facility must be physically accessible and usable.⁴ This is an important point and strikes a balance between a seemingly unattainable goal and something much more realistic. It is equally important, however, not to use this point as an excuse or an evasive measure for not making accessible something that could and should become accessible.

The remainder of this article will include a discussion of specific groups of disabled individuals whose needs are as different as are their disabilities. This will be followed by some specific suggestions of steps archivists can take to make their collections more accessible.

As with all researchers, there are wide variations in the types of personalities and level of preparation the disabled bring to an archives. Some are extremely well prepared and articulate and require very little assistance or special attention of archives staff. Others are novices in an archives, are unaware of basic research tools and techniques, and are unsure of which records might contain the information they seek. The following are some very subjective observations concerning the special needs of disabled researchers seeking access to archival collections, this author’s opinion as to our obligations to address these needs, and finally some statements of the limitations within which we as archivists must live.

²*Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. Pub. L. 93-112, Sept. 26, 1973. 87 Stat. 394 (29 USC 794).

³*Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*. Pub. L. 94-142, Nov. 29, 1975. 89 Stat. 773 (20 USC 1401).

⁴T. J. Nugent, “The Person With a Disability in American Society—in Our Libraries,” *Illinois Libraries* 63 (September 1981): 506.

The Deaf

It would be unfair to judge who of the disabled public has the most difficulty using archival materials. I will begin therefore with the group I myself have the most difficulty assisting: the deaf. A reference archivist is the key to the stored treasures of an archives. Even with the most sophisticated finding aids, access to an archives' holdings is made easier and more complete through the discussions and interactions that occur between a researcher and an archivist. That is why for a reference archivist, working with deaf researchers can be both difficult and frustrating. I say this because in such a situation, the handicap is transferred. The archivist all of a sudden is disabled; he or she is deprived of the ability to talk with the deaf researcher. There can be no dialogue, no probing into the researcher's background, preparation, or expectations. The archivist cannot make suggestions or develop a research strategy for the researcher. That all-important reference interview, during which one thought grows from another, takes on a different, much more limited form. Finding out such basic information as what records the person wants to use, what he or she already knows about the subject, or what other collections he or she has used becomes extremely difficult and is limited to writing short terse notes. All this because the ability to communicate and discuss is gone.

What then are our obligations to deaf researchers? The most important one is obvious; that is, we must try to communicate with them. An introductory sign language course can teach the reference archivist the basic signs for asking a person's name, offering assistance, and other very elementary phrases. Although resorting to writing most of the questions and answers is inevitable, the ability to sign even the most

basic of phrases immediately puts people at ease and shows the deaf researcher an awareness and sensitivity that is greatly appreciated by them.

The Blind

The difficulties that the blind and visually impaired have in an archival institution are obvious. Most of our documents are virtually inaccessible to them. Even such miracle machines as the Kurzweil Reading Machine, which translates printed words into electronic speech, or the Optacon, which converts a printed letter into a vibrating tactile form that a blind person can feel and "read," cannot begin to master the challenges presented by hand-written documents. For this reason, archives have very few blind researchers. But that is not to say that we don't have any. As with any disability, there are many degrees of visual impairment, ranging from limited sight to total blindness. Many can and do carry out archival research. But how much should the archivist do for the blind researcher? The following two examples may help to illustrate this troublesome question.

Several years ago, a blind scholar came to the National Archives to research a topic on foreign policy. An experienced researcher, he knew exactly what records he wanted and asked for assistance only to seek advice on additional sources of information on his subject. Prior to his visit, he had arranged for volunteer readers who read the texts of documents into a tape recorder for him. He arrived each day with a guide dog and worked independently in the main reading room. The only special accommodation made for him was that he was seated off to one side so that the voices of his readers did not disturb other researchers. This researcher required very little special staff assistance.

At the other end of the spectrum was

the blind man who came to use our collections for genealogical research. The reference consultant carefully explained the genealogical records in our custody and suggested possible sources of information about his particular family. During the course of the conversation, it became clear that the man wanted our staff to do his research for him. This is an extremely awkward position for an archivist to be in, and it occurs with sighted researchers as well. But when a person is blind, it becomes very difficult to say "I'm sorry, but I just cannot do your research for you." In this particular instance, the archivist spent three hours with the man, explained the records, and, as much as possible, tried to assist him. Finally, he suggested private agencies in the Washington, D.C. area where the man could arrange for volunteer readers at no cost. After this individual had left, my colleague said he couldn't help feeling that his good will and patience had been taken advantage of. How often have we felt this ourselves? Disabled people learn throughout their lives to use all of their abilities and all the resources available to them to achieve certain ends. One cannot blame a blind person for trying to gain as much information as possible from an archives staff member. You or I would do the same. Nevertheless, there is a limit to what we can and should do. When we reach that limit we in effect become barriers to the information sought. We must try to strike a balance between these two positions.

Persons With Limited Mobility

A third group of disabled individuals are those with mobility problems. These people include the non-ambulatory in wheelchairs; the semi-ambulatory who use braces, crutches, canes, and artificial limbs; and the incoordinates, who are ambulatory but have some difficulty in

the finer use of their hands and fingers. The degree of each person's disability results in a different functional level and a different method of coping. In an archives, persons with mobility problems encounter many physical barriers, including lack of wheelchair access to the building, research room, and restroom facilities; reference room tables that cannot accommodate a wheelchair; and difficulty in lifting large volumes or simply turning the page of a document. Their abilities and limitations are as many and as varied as there are researchers. As archivists, we should become familiar with various mobility problems, make whatever structural changes in our buildings are possible, and be prepared to deal with other situations that will inevitably arise. We cannot begin here to describe every possible situation that may occur. It is intended only to suggest that there are many obvious adjustments that can be made to our buildings and research rooms to make them more easily accessible to the disabled. Allocating adequate parking for the disabled, making sure restrooms can accommodate those in wheelchairs, or providing an adjustable table in a research room are all attainable objectives. Other problems, however, are not as easy to remedy and present the archivist with some delicate dilemmas. What, for instance, is an archivist's responsibility when a person with cerebral palsy, who cannot pick up a piece of paper without crumbling it, asks to use original manuscripts? The answer may not be so difficult to discern, but it can be very unpleasant to carry out. The answer lies in our primary responsibility to preserve the records. If use by a disabled person would literally damage the document, then we have an obligation to suggest to that person that he or she ask an assistant to physically handle the documents. It is not our responsibility, however, to provide the assistant from our staffs.

The Aging

One final group that should not be excluded from this discussion is the elderly. While it is true that not all of the elderly are disabled, we do know that the process of aging usually involves a loss of vision or hearing or both; decreased agility, mobility, flexibility, and tolerance; and a multitude of other symptoms. Archives, particularly those with collections used for genealogical research, are visited by a great many elderly researchers. Some have hearing or sight impairments; others with arthritis experience difficulty using microfilm readers. When making decisions about access to our collections for the disabled, we should keep in mind that anything we do for the disabled will, to a great extent, benefit other researchers, particularly the aging.

Now that different groups of disabled researchers have been identified, we can suggest a few steps archivists can take to help them meet their research needs, keeping in mind the basic dilemma facing most archivists with regard to this issue. On the one hand, as archivists we have a responsibility to accommodate disabled individuals who seek access to our materials. On the other hand, most of us are limited in what we can do because of staff, money, the needs of other researchers, or because the needs of a disabled researcher conflict with our primary responsibility to the documents themselves. The answer lies somewhere in the middle. In spite of these limitations, there are steps we can take to ease the problems of access.

A. The greatest barriers confronting the disabled are the attitudes and behavior of the able-bodied. We either shy away from the disabled or shower them with assistance they may not need. We find ourselves speaking loudly to the blind, and even to the deaf! We un-

consciously turn away from the deaf so that they cannot read our lips; or we avoid looking at someone with severe mobility problems. Most of these slights are not conscious or intended to hurt. They result from inexperience and awkwardness in dealing with situations involving the disabled. Only with an awareness of the characteristics of various disabilities, and with experience in working with disabled researchers, can we begin to overcome some of these feelings. Our first goal should therefore be to educate ourselves and our staffs.

1. Announce to your staff that your institution is embarking upon a program to promote an awareness of the research needs of the disabled.

2. Set up a small collection of articles and books about various disabilities. Encourage staff to browse through this collection as much as possible.

3. Hold a series of staff meetings to discuss ideas involving disabled researchers. Staff members with disabled family members may be willing to contribute some of their own experiences.

4. Invite representatives from local organizations for the disabled to come and share their thoughts with you and your staff.

B. Take stock of your institution.

1. Appoint a committee of archives staff members to evaluate present accessibility, identify problem areas, and establish goals.

2. If possible, seek the advice of outsiders; to aid in designing and implementing a program, add to the committee disabled individuals who may be your consumers.

C. What should the committee look for when evaluating your institution?

1. Are doorways wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair? Are there revolving doors that present a prob-

lem?

2. Are restroom facilities accessible? Are they clearly identified as such?

3. Is there a clear, understandable diagram or floorplan of the building in a prominent position near the entrance? Is it posted also in braille?

4. If you have exhibits, are the labels at a level accessible to a person in a wheelchair? Can the documents be easily seen?

5. Are the tables or desks in the research room able to accommodate wheelchairs? What about the microfilm readers?

6. Do any staff members know sign language or fingerspelling? Are they willing to help interpret whenever a deaf researcher comes in?

7. Is parking available for the handicapped? Is it clearly marked?

8. Are elevators and restrooms equipped with braille indicators?

D. After an initial evaluation of facilities has been made, more specific measures can be identified. The following are just a few suggestions.

1. For the deaf:

a. The best tool for opening the world of archives to the deaf is a TDD—telephone device for the deaf. These devices generally include a typewriting and printing component and a connector that translates the typed letter strike into an electrical impulse that traverses normal telephone wires. By using a TDD, a deaf person can make inquiries of an archives staff member who can immediately respond much as in a normal telephone conversation. Institutions with high reference volume should be equipped with at least one TDD, the access number of which should be widely published in all of the institution's brochures and descriptive literature.

b. In addition to a TDD, reference

service for the deaf researcher can best be provided through a staff member who is fluent in sign language. Becoming fluent in sign language requires intensive training and constant use. For most of us, this may not be possible. But, becoming familiar with the basics of sign language and fingerspelling is very possible and can go a long way toward breaking down the barriers that exist between the deaf and the hearing.

c. The deaf are accustomed to communicating with the hearing by writing. Do not be afraid to write notes, directions, or whatever you want to express to them. When doing this, however, make sure your phrases are as simple as possible. It is not necessary to write long, elaborate sentences.

d. Generally speaking, the deaf are visually oriented and look for bright, clear signs directing them to research rooms, reference desks, or restrooms. They also very much appreciate anything written, so floor diagrams and pamphlets describing reference procedures, hours of service, or specific records are helpful.

e. Keep an updated list of local service agencies that provide interpreters for the deaf; make the list available to all reference archivists.

f. Slide presentations are helpful introductions to any research facility and can be a good instructional tool for the hearing and non-hearing alike. When developing these, consider the use of captions so that the deaf can easily follow any slide presentation. When writing captions, however, seek the assistance of professionals who work with the deaf so that the captions developed are neither lengthy nor complicated.

2. For the blind:

a. Compile a list of the names and

addresses of local agencies that provide readers for the blind. Have this list readily available to all reference archivists.

b. Consider printing, in large type and in braille, several introductory pamphlets describing the rules and procedures, hours of services, and the limits of the kinds of services your institution is able to offer blind researchers. Defining limitations makes it easier to say "no" if it becomes necessary. In each state, there are a number of volunteer agencies that translate written texts into braille at no cost.

c. Consider developing a tape recording to instruct blind researchers in the use of your research facilities or in certain kinds of research (for example, how to do genealogical research among the records administered by your institution).

d. Consider purchasing enlargers or other types of special reading equipment for the blind. It is not necessary to purchase the latest in reading equipment, especially because it will be used only occasionally. A modest investment in enlargers and magnifying glasses, however, would benefit many researchers.

3. For persons with limited mobility:

Because there are so many degrees of disabilities, it is impossible to plan for all eventualities. The primary question archivists must ask is: Can persons with mobility problems get into our buildings, work in our research rooms, and use the cafeteria and restrooms. These are basic structural questions that may already have been evaluated by your institution; they are the same questions disabled employees would ask. The literature on barrier free design is voluminous and the Center for a Barrier Free Environment in Washington, D.C. is a valuable source of information.

4. For the aging:

Most of the recommendations that have been suggested to meet the needs of the blind, the deaf, and the mobility-impaired would also benefit the aging. In many cases, simple courtesy and patience will solve most problems. Also, when selecting equipment consider how easy that piece of equipment is to use. Many microfilm readers and copy machines are very difficult to manipulate, particularly for those with arthritis. Microfilm readers with vertical (upright) screens are very frustrating for persons with bifocals; models with horizontal (flat) screens are much easier to use. These may be simple points, but they can mean the difference between a satisfied researcher who had a rewarding experience at your institution, or a frustrated, disappointed one.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that we all have an obligation to think about these issues and to make whatever accommodations we can. In so doing, we are simply fulfilling our reference responsibilities. If there is one thought that summarizes the entire subject of access to archives for the disabled, it is that the needs of the disabled should be taken into account. In all of our plans for buildings, equipment, publications, and programs we should remember that our public also includes people with disabilities and that we have the same responsibilities to them as we have to the able-bodied. They ask only to be a part of our plans.

Major Information Centers

Clearinghouse on the Handicapped
Office of Special Education
Rehabilitation Services
U.S. Department of Education
Room 3106 Switzer Building
Washington, DC 20202
(202) 245-0080

Closer Look

Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
(202) 833-4160

National Center for a Barrier
Free Environment
1140 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 466-6896
(800) 424-2809

National Federation of the Blind
1346 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC
(202) 785-2974

National Health Council, Inc.
1740 Broadway
New York, NY 10019

National Rehabilitation Information
Center (NARIC)
The Catholic University of America
4407 Eighth Street, NE
Washington, DC 20064
(202) 635-5826/5884 (TDD)

National Library Service for the
Blind and Physically Handicapped
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20542

Alexander Graham Bell Association
1537 Third Street, NW
Washington, DC 20007

National Information Center
on Deafness
Gallaudet College, Kendall Green
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 656-5109 (TDD)

Registry of Interpreters for
the Deaf, Inc.
814 Thayer Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Selected Adaptive Devices

(For more complete information, contact area rehabilitation or other service agencies.)

1. *Turntable Desks*, Extensions for Independence, P.O. Box 3754, Downey, CA 90242, (213) 862-2704. Turntable desks are designed to increase the reaching capability of the user by means of rotating services. Several designs available.
2. *Touch Turner*, Touch Turner Incorporated, 443 View Ridge Drive, Everett, WA 98203, (206) 252-1541. This model provides the capability of turning pages both forward and in reverse direction. The sensitive switch that activates the turning action can be triggered with the movement of the chin, cheek, or any minimum movement of finger, elbow, etc. \$285-\$380.
3. *Adjustable Wheelchair Tray*. Fits any size wheelchair; has rim on three sides.
Cleo Living Aids, C-396, \$25.
Everest & Jennings, 2045, \$48.
J. A. Preston Corp., PC-626, \$28.65.
4. *Mobile Wheelchair Work Table*. Will fit over any wheelchair. Hinged in front and adjusts to any angle.
J. A. Preston Corp., PC080, \$267.
5. *Tilt-Top Adjustable Height School Desk*. Height is adjustable from 27" to 32" for individual positioning and space for wheelchair clearance.
J. A. Preston Corp., PC4522A, \$267.
6. *Directional Markers*. For use by blind persons in locating public facilities such as elevators, restrooms, public telephones.
 - a. *Braille Plaque/Plate*. Braille or raised letters or numbers are embossed on stainless steel with

- epoxy or permanent adhesive backing.
Diversified Enterprises, \$2.50–\$5.00/plate.
Permaplate Corp., request price quotation
Truxes Adhesives and Chemicals Company, \$1.50–\$2.50.
- b. *Brailletters*. Heavy plastic braille characters can be mounted into a clear plastic track (chase) to form any desired legend.
Scott Plastics Company, request price quotation.
 - c. *Braille Tapewriter (labeler)*. Includes 45 braille characters. Uses ½" vinyl, magnetic labeling tape. Can also be used as a standard alphabet labeler.
American Foundation for the Blind, BTW400, \$33.95; with alphabet dial, \$39.90.
7. *Low Vision Aids*. Designed to magnify printed material electronically. Their major components are a mounted camera, a self-contained light source, a lens capable of magnifying print to various sizes, and a monitor (tv screen).
 - a. *LVA 500*. Equipped with a self-supporting table, 14" monitor, and horizontal camera.
Pelco Sales, Inc., \$1595.
 - b. *Visualtek's Commuter*, Visualtek Inc., 1610 26th Street, Santa Monica, CA 94040. Has 9" monitor, \$995.
 - c. *Portareader*. Has 12" monitor and typewriter capability. Apollo Lasers, 5100, \$1100.
 - d. *Visualtek's Microviewer*. Allows visually handicapped persons to view microfiche and microcards through enlarged images. Visualtek systems are also sold by Science for the Blind, Inc. \$695.
 8. *Magnifiers* (Obtain through low vision clinics, ophthalmologists, and optometrists.)
 - a. *Rectangular Reader*. Varying sizes and degrees of magnification. 2" by 4" lens.
Bausch & Lomb, \$8.50.
McLeod Optical Co., \$32.
John Tworoger, Inc., \$16.
 - b. *Illuminated Hand-Held Magnifier*. Various models with batteries or bulbs. Prices range from \$4.50 to \$30.75. Various suppliers.
 9. *Reading Devices*. Sophisticated electronic machines; probably not feasible for most archives.
 - a. *Reading Machine*. Kurzweil Computer Products, Inc., 33 Cambridge Parkway, Cambridge, MA (617) 864-4700. Converts printed materials to synthetic English speech which is understandable after a short period of familiarization. \$20,000 (approx.).
 - b. *Optacon*. (OPTical-to-TACTile CONverter) allows a blind person to read print by converting the image of print into a vibrating tactile image which can be felt with a finger. Tele-sensory Systems, Inc., \$2895.
 10. *Devices for the Deaf*. Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD). Crown Research Inc., 10331 West Jefferson Boulevard, Culver City, CA 90230 (213) 552-6767. Permits hearing-impaired individuals to use existing telephone system. Prices range from \$300 to \$600.

Sources

Reference Circular: "Reading, Writing, and Other Communication Aids for Visually and Physically Handicapped Persons." National Library Service for

Blind & Physically Handicapped.
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
“Architecture & Technology: Their Im-
pact on the Handicapped,” resource

material presented by Jim Kay, Califor-
nia Department of Rehabilitation.
Society of American Archivists, 45th
Annual Meeting, Berkeley, Calif.