



J. FRANK COOK

President, Society of American Archivists  
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J. Frank Cook has been director of the archives at the University of Wisconsin, Madison since 1971. He was assistant archivist there from 1965-70. Cook has a B.S. degree in history from East Tennessee State University and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in American history from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He served on SAA's Council from 1974-78, on the Executive Committee from 1977-78, and was elected vice president in 1981. Cook chaired SAA's Task Force on the Revision of the Constitution and Bylaws and the Committee on Regional Archival Activities and has been a member of many others. He served on SAA's Editorial Board from 1978-82 and has taken on the responsibility of caring for the Society's own archives. Cook was named a Fellow of the Society in 1978. He edited the 1973 edition of SAA's *Forms Manual* and the *Directory of College and University Archives* published in 1980. He is a founding member and former vice president of the Midwest Archives Conference and is a member of the Organization of American Historians and the Wisconsin State Historical Records Advisory Board.

# A Time to Take Stock

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AT SAA'S 1980 ANNUAL MEETING the Program Committee suggested that the beginning of a new decade was "a convenient point for taking stock of the past and contemplating the future." We were urged to "take time out ... to ruminate on our profession and our society." The 1980 program was "designed to provide a retrospective and prospective view of the archival profession." The 1981 Program Committee reminded us that "Archivists do share a common interest in the universe of documentation and the selection, preservation, and availability of that documentation to understand and interpret the past. Archivists also share a belief in the cultural value of records and the importance of the archival mission in serving as society's memory." As part of "The One World of Archives," the theme of the 1981 meeting, archivists were urged to "collaborate to develop their understanding of that portion of the universe of documentation that they are called upon

to manage." At this meeting many of us have attended the "core" sessions aimed by the program committee to focus "the attention of the profession directly on the problems and possibilities of the future -- beyond Boston!" Concerned with "what the world of archives might be like in the future" as Ed Weldon said in his statement for this year's program, now is the time for archivists to take stock of our past and prepare for the "challenge of change" Ed spoke of at Faneuil Hall.<sup>1</sup>

In preparing these remarks I reviewed the statement I wrote when nominated as a candidate for the vice presidency. Let me briefly take stock of what I hoped to see accomplished over the last year and then outline what I plan to pursue this year. My statement covered six areas:

(1) Realizing that cuts in the federal budget and general economic conditions would force more reliance on volunteers from within our membership to carry

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<sup>1</sup>Society of American Archivists, 1980 annual meeting program, p. 17; 1981 annual meeting program, p. 3; 1982 annual meeting program, pp. 2-3.

*The author is university archivist, University of Wisconsin, Madison, and incoming president of the Society of American Archivists. This article is adapted from his greeting to the membership of SAA's 46 annual meeting, 22 October 1982, Boston, Massachusetts.*

out tasks that we could not expect the executive office to perform, I pledged to make strong appointments. All appointments for 1982-83 have been made and I have selected the best people—from all segments of the Society—I could find. This list of workers will appear in the November newsletter and I urge you to contact these men and women and offer both your ideas and your assistance. It is just impossible to overemphasize the need for all of us to volunteer our services.

(2) I pledged to seek continued progress in certification of archivists, education and training programs, and repositories. While all of us wish our standards were higher in every one of these areas, I must realistically report that the trend is away from certification because of the financial burden in these hard times, opposition to additional regulations, and the possibility of professional associations being charged with restraint of trade by someone denied certification. The one bright spot is the work of the Institutional Evaluation Task Force which has provided archivists and repositories with a workable plan for analyzing and improving their own performance and operations through a system of data collection and analysis, self-assessment, and peer review.

(3) I pledged to continue “efforts to maintain a strong, politically independent National Archives and Records Service with a budget adequate to fulfill its mandate to preserve the nation’s documentary heritage.”

The Society has relatively little influence with the General Services Administration—a situation that I regret, because I would welcome the opportunity to try to establish a more cooperative and friendly relationship between the archival profession and the GSA. Lacking that kind of relationship at present, many archivists have turned to the Con-

gress in an effort to ameliorate the effect of the Reagan administration’s policy and budget decisions. Our letters to congressional delegates have had an impact. The reductions in staff, funding, and programs would have been even worse without that restraining influence, and I urge those of you who have not already done so, to contact your congressmen and senators to express your views, particularly during this lame duck session, on the bills that would separate NARS from GSA. Personally, I am convinced that passage of legislation giving NARS status independent of GSA is absolutely essential if either NARS or GSA is to adequately meet its responsibilities to the American people. 1984 is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the National Archives. I can think of no better birthday present than a statute severing the NARS-GSA connection, and, with the approval of the Council, I will work toward this goal.

(4) I pledged to assist “efforts to collect, preserve, and access the records created by technologically innovative information systems.” The work of the National Information Systems Task Force is over and that of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules Revision group is nearing completion. I will work to see that there is adequate review by archivists competent in the field and will support these activities as they relate to, and would benefit, the profession.

(5) I pledged to consider the publication of a proceedings volume of the Annual Meeting provided it would not weaken the *American Archivist*. Preoccupation with the selection of a new editor for the *American Archivist* and the establishment of new structures to better manage the publications program of the Society have made it impossible to consider a proceedings volume until now, but I am still interested in the idea and would welcome your advice on whether, and if so, how, to proceed.

(6) Finally, I expressed support for the concept of meetings being held on campuses. Over the last few years we have conducted an experiment in meeting sites and times. We came from the beautiful Berkeley campus last year to this fine downtown hotel in what, I am sure, is everyone's favorite city in the East. Next year we will meet between the coasts at the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. This meeting will start a day later in the week and conclude on Saturday to reduce the time away from work. In 1984, we will meet in Washington, D.C., on the Labor Day weekend. It would be most helpful to those charged with planning meetings if we could have your reactions to these various arrangements.

So much for the past year's pledges and performance. I want to turn now to some more P's: Planning, Professional Associations, and PAGS.

I have appointed a Task Force on Goals and Priorities for the Archival Profession, chaired by Ed Weldon and charged to consider the long-range needs and priorities of the profession, not just the Society. Council has approved the following mission statement for this task force:

To identify, analyze, and report to the Society of American Archivists and the archival profession on major archival needs and the relationships and relative priority of these needs and to suggest how these needs might best be addressed in a coordinated fashion.

The other members of this task force are: Larry Hackman, Jerry Ham, Anne Kenney, and Helen Slotkin. Here in the home town of the Kennedy clan, it is appropriate to note that these people are among the best and brightest the archival world has to offer. They need your support, however; won't you share with them your reflections on this meeting and your dreams about the

future of our profession?

The "core" sessions at this meeting provide us with both the foundation and the momentum to work on Larry Hackman's "problems and possibilities of the future—beyond Boston." Attending the core sessions was a chastening experience. We were told that we are not at all certain as a profession who our clientele is, what they want, or how they go about finding it. Worse, social and technological changes in the way "information" is created, stored, sold, found, used, and destroyed have shaken our confidence that we even know what it is that we are supposed to be preserving. What is an archivist?

We obviously need *cooperation*, not only with each other, our clients, and those who create the records, but with those who are inventing the innovative systems in which the records are being stored and accessed. If the archives can be erased in the twinkling of an eye, we must have a serious talk with the people selling the erasers.

Archivists, almost alone in our society, are charged with taking the long view. But we are more and more perplexed about how to go about it. We need desperately to recast archival *theory* to fit all the myriad forms in which the stuff of history is being cast and all the manifold ways our society goes about obtaining access to its history. And we do not have the leisure to develop, slowly and deliberately, a body of archival theory suitable for modern records -- we must do it on the fly! The world of information is changing even as I speak to you.

In a year's time a new president will be standing here, but the Program Committee's work will be just beginning to make what will be, and I think must be, a profound change in the theory and practice of our profession. I wish him—and all of us—well as we consider the problems and possibilities of the future.

Some possibilities (to continue this alliteration with P's) already are beginning to emerge out of our concerns with planning for the future of our profession. The Committee on Education and Professional Development is investigating the exciting possibility of the Society establishing an archival institute to provide education and training at the introductory and advanced level and to serve as a center for professional information. Another possibility is the improvement of coordination of advocacy (lobbying, if you will) among archival and other professional groups concerned with history, libraries, and the humanities in general. Careful attention is needed to *unite* our various groups in a common purpose without *blurring* our unique contributions as archivists.

I think the Society of American Archivists should seek a closer relationship with other professional associations; not just liaison for the sake of liaison --we have too many groups now. Rather, we should concentrate on projects of mutual benefit while making sure that each profession understands the other's point of view, priorities, and approaches to problem solving. Specifically, I want the SAA to seek a better relationship with the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators. Perhaps the Society has been so worried about the National Archives that it has not paid adequate attention to the needs of state archives. I believe that NASARA and SAA should establish a more cooperative relationship. Our common profession is too small to withstand fragmentation, but I want to emphasize that cooperation—not domination—is the goal. I spent several days this July at the NASARA meeting in Nashville and I think that other archivists not in the public records field would benefit from a closer association with their colleagues who work with state records. The groundbreaking for

the Massachusetts Archives and State Records Center during this annual meeting is a symbolic reminder of the need for all archivists to break new ground in expanding their relations with various interest groups in our profession and in the Society. I hope a number of you were able, as I was, to attend the groundbreaking and to visit the John F. Kennedy Library nearby. Frankly, in a time of retrenchment it is exciting to see good programs growing and expanding. As a beginning step in a better relationship with state archivists, I would like to see NASARA and SAA explore the possibility of sharing program sessions at the meetings of both groups.

And now the final "P": the Professional Affinity Groups have been a special concern of mine as vice president. On Monday afternoon several members of Council and I met with the PAG chairs to discuss future plans for the PAGS.

As a result of the meeting, we should all feel more positive about the future of the PAGs. I came to that meeting expecting nearly unanimous support for abolishing the PAGs in favor of either a return to the committee system or the development of a new system based on the "section" concept found in other organizations such as the American Library Association. Instead, there was general agreement that, as one PAG Chair put it, any structure can work if you work at it.

We will work at it. A committee chaired by Vice President David Gracy consisting of three council members and three PAG chairs will work on developing better communication: between the PAGs, with Council, and with the membership—both of the individual PAGs and the entire Society.

Already, specific proposals were considered by this committee when it met yesterday. For example, the committee discussed how a PAG could establish



task forces from within its membership to work on problems of particular concern to that PAG or for which that PAG membership's expertise could provide advice to Council and other groups within the Society.

I intend to consult PAGs on relevant issues that will be coming before Council. The notion that PAGs are to "be" and not to "do" is dead. Each PAG will be asked to prepare a mission statement and to develop as an active group serving the professional and collegial needs of its own members and the members of the Society as a whole. A year from now, I predict you will not see the old, passive PAGs around. Even the name "Professional Affinity Group" will probably be replaced by a more palatable term, such as "group".

As we take stock of the Society, I must tell you, frankly, that we simply have too many committees, task forces, liaison groups, and PAGs for efficient management by Council. The bureaucratic inertia that has resulted from the rapid expansion in the number of groups within the Society is frustrating to both the members interested in working on projects of service to the profession and to those charged with overseeing the activities of the SAA. In an effort to streamline reporting procedures, Council has formed itself into three sub-committees on: PAGs (headed by the vice president), task forces (headed by the treasurer), and standing committees and representatives (headed by Council's member of the Executive Committee). New reporting forms are being prepared to help Council better understand both the needs of the members and the projects in which they are engaged on behalf of the Society.

If we are to respond to new initiatives that may result from our long-range

planning, it may be necessary to consolidate or eliminate some of the existing functions and groups. Would you please share your wisdom with Council, as we *all* prepare for the future, by considering the value of restructuring the current organization of the Society? In some circles talk of management efficiency is seen as a threat to employees or, in volunteer groups such as the SAA, as an undemocratic tendency. I mean neither of these things. My concern is that the members of this Society be provided with the type of structure that will best enable them to both contribute to and benefit from their professional association.

The key to accomplishing this goal is communication. I will be a better president if you are a better member. As some of you know, I have written a number of letters to those who hold positions of responsibility in the Society asking them, in effect, what they would do if they were president. I received many excellent ideas (in fact, whatever good ideas are in this talk are probably someone else's!). Won't you take the time to share your thoughts and reactions with me? I pledge to listen and do my best to assist your work.

The time has come to leave Boston. Some, probably most, will not think about the next annual meeting until the program arrives next summer. Some of us, however, are only too aware how short a year is as we prepare to serve the members. The time is short and our abilities are limited. Still, we were elected and we will serve to the best of our abilities. I am all too aware of my shortcomings as I assume the presidency. You could have elected others with more ability, but you could not have elected someone who loves the Society more. So, with my heart and your head we will meet the archival challenge beyond Boston.