



Shonnie Finnegan

President, Society of American Archivists
1985-1986

Shonnie Finnegan has been the university archivist at the State University of New York at Buffalo since 1968 and was acting university archivist during the previous year. She received her B.A. degree from Trinity College and her M.A. degree from Catholic University. She served on SAA's Council from 1978 to 1982 and on the Executive Committee from 1981 to 1982. Finnegan was elected a Fellow of the Society in 1975. Active on numerous SAA committees, she served on the Advisory Committee for the Basic Archival Conservation Program and the Committee on Professional Standards and chaired the College and University Archives Committee and the 1974 Program Committee. From 1980 to 1984 she represented the Society on the National Archives Advisory Council. She served on the New York Historical Records Advisory Board from 1976 to 1985 and is currently a member of the New York Document Conservation Advisory Council and the Board of Managers of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. A past member of the Council and the Executive Committee of the American Association of University Professors, she is a member of the Organization of American Historians, the Association of Canadian Archivists, the Manuscript Society, and several regional archival associations. In 1979 Finnegan received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Librarianship at the State University of New York.

With Feathers

SHONNIE FINNEGAN

I AM TOLD AND DO IN PART BELIEVE that this is the first time that two women will have served in succession as president of the Society of American Archivists. As curious as that may be, the next half-century will surely provide so many such examples that the feminine changing of the guard enacted at this closing ceremony is of passing interest, furnishing Andrea Hinding and me with yet another possible topic of reminiscence when we reach our dotage many years from now, and offering an irresistible chance to depart a bit from convention on this occasion.

From my personal perspective, the honor of succeeding Andrea Hinding as your president brought with it the unexpected gift of crossing paths with this remarkable colleague once again. As Wilbur said of Charlotte in E. B. White's immortal tale of loving collaboration between two very dissimilar creatures, "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer."

Andrea is both. She is also our preeminent archival poet. Like Plato's

philosopher, she seeks the truth, posing eternal questions from a vision of the light that transforms our daily reality. For those of you who remember your *Republic*, it will not come as any surprise that our philosopher-poet is also a brilliant tactician and an extraordinarily gracious presiding officer.

Since it falls to me to serve as your president during a year of transition in our executive leadership—coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the Society's founding—I shall not use this occasion to announce a hitherto undiscovered archival problem which I will then seek to solve during my term of office. Quite apart from the challenges that present themselves all too clearly, I shall no doubt find that a year passes quickly, leaving even the most zealous astonished that so little of what was intended was actually accomplished. In this instance, there are only ten months between annual meetings, a circumstance that my predecessors will readily agree entitles me to feel correspondingly better should I fail to accomplish all I set out to do.

This is the greeting of the incoming president of the Society of American Archivists, delivered at the 49th annual meeting, 1 November 1985, in Austin, Texas.

As I prepared myself during the summer to become the conscientious presiding officer you need and deserve, looking carefully into the Society's programs and leadership, my initial optimism was eventually overtaken by the much stronger sense of hope—a well-founded confidence in the archival community's capacity to shape a bright, perhaps even transcendent, future. I have consequently entitled these remarks after the poem by Emily Dickinson that startles me whenever it comes to mind:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all . . .

You may recall that for Woody Allen, that great comic persona of modern uncertainty and despair, "the thing with feathers" turned out to be his nephew—badly in need of being seen by a Swiss psychiatrist. The Society of American Archivists, however, has abundant reason to affirm Emily Dickinson's metaphor of hope unabashed by difficulty, singing in the gale.

As you might imagine, my two major goals during the coming year are (1) to work harmoniously with my fellow Officers, Council members, the Society's staff, and the leaders of our component groups to ensure a productive transitional year and the successful conclusion of our search for a new executive director; and (2) to assist in planning a fiftieth anniversary celebration that will please, delight, and advance our profession.

The search for an executive director to succeed the incomparable Ann Morgan Campbell is well underway. The Officers and members of Council, who bear final constitutional responsibility for the appointment, have complete confidence in the process. In accordance with a decision made at the January 1985 Council meeting, Bill Joyce was in effect selected by the membership to chair the Screening

Committee by virtue of his election as vice president. The other committee members were chosen, and the search procedures approved, by unanimous vote of Council. Andrea and I have jointly appointed and charged the Screening Committee on behalf of Council to signify continuity of purpose in this extraordinarily important matter.

On commencing a search of such consequence, it would not be surprising if we all were to feel rather like the character in *Henry IV, Part I* who boastfully declares, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep"—to which Hotspur replies, "but will they come when you do call for them?" Council will soon know whether a sufficient number of well-qualified spirits has indeed been summoned. If so, the search is right on schedule; if not, we shall have to renew the call.

Let me interject a word here about Bill Joyce. After some slight acquaintance, Bill and I first got to know each other on a two-propeller flight that I hope will not prove prophetic of the year ahead. Subsequently, our terms overlapped on Council and Bill served as the Council representative on the Executive Committee when I returned last year as vice president. As a result of our association, Bill and I enjoy a bond of affection and respect that should get us safely through the coming year, however turbulent.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Society's founding next year offers an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate our heritage, to pay tribute to those whose dedicated efforts have brought us to this promising juncture in our history, and to consider the legacy that we shall leave to our successors. It is a time to affirm our love of our work and our corollary responsibility for organizing ourselves and engaging the support of others so as to advance that work. It is a time to plan and above all to dream, to tell each other stories of what has been and what

might be, remembering the bold Aristotelian precept that probable impossibilities are always preferable to unconvincing possibilities so far as stories are concerned. It is a time for visionary as well as rational perspectives on the archival mission in society, a time for pragmatic poetry, for singing the tune without the words.

The 1986 annual meeting planners promise a festive and intellectually rewarding program and a gala golden anniversary evening event that you will not want to miss. So bring your long gown and black tie if you are so inclined; or come as you are if dressing up gets you down at home. Vintage clothing would be quite in order. Or you may want to dress according to your archival orientation, whether hi-tech or antiquarian; "the archivist as destroyer" (Maynard Brichford's pungent phrase); or "the impotence of virtue," about which we have heard so much at this annual meeting. The possibilities abound. Come to think about it, one can even imagine that important but ungainly term "adequacy of documentation" receiving creative expression in costume, especially as the evenings remain warm in Chicago at that time of year.

Our golden anniversary celebration is a fitting occasion to pay tribute to our outgoing executive director, whose creative enterprise since taking office in 1974 has brought about a transformation in the Society's programs and resources far exceeding the most extravagant dreams of those far-sighted colleagues who worked for the creation of a full-time, paid executive position. So far, the object of our gratitude has resisted every suggestion of events in her honor at the 1986 annual meeting. But this extraordinarily strong-minded woman has met her match. If she won't submit to praise, we'll stage an Ann Morgan Campbell roast instead and see how she likes that!

The process of considering what we ought to be doing and debating as SAA approaches fifty can assist us all in perceiving and planning a better archival future:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time
future,
And time future contained in time
past.

.....
What might have been and what has
been
Point to one end, which is always
present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not
take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden. My words echo
Thus in your mind.

(T. S. Eliot, "The Four Quartets")

As the executive director has reported, the Society is engaged in an unprecedented number of new and ongoing initiatives of great importance for us all. Together with my elected and staff colleagues, I hope to offer effective moral and political support to our Sections, Task Forces, and Committees. They carry forward much of the work on which the future strength of the profession depends. The dedication, vision, creative energy, and expertise of their present and emerging leaders are among our most impressive resources. I shall mention only two of the many ventures needing our encouragement and support.

The Task Force on Archives and Society, which was founded by former President David B. Gracy II and is now chaired by the equally enthusiastic Jim Fogerty, has captured the imagination of large segments of SAA and the regional archival organizations. It has gained momentum and elaboration at this annual meeting that will be sustained and translated into programs of value to archivists and archival institutions everywhere.

The newly-formed Committee on Goals and Priorities (C-GAP) is the successor to the task force of the same name that was so ably chaired by F. Gerald Ham. Under the benign leadership of John Fleckner, C-GAP represents a significant part of our stake in the future. Although not the most euphonious of acronyms, after close study of the committee's plans the name begins evoking images of insight and vision, of discoveries and voyages—possibly fraught with danger—to unknown destinations.

Now C-GAP was not designed to function as an archival law-and-order squad descending upon unwary archivists like Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition. On the contrary, its purpose is that of a catalyst, a midwife, if you will, in the intellectual, political, and I think also emotional process of achieving what Jerry Ham has called "a clear and shared vision of what we need to do to meet the challenges of the future."

After all the discussion at this annual meeting of the Levy report on perceptions of archivists, it occurs to me that Monty Python tactics may well be appropriate for the Task Force on Archives and Society. The following scenario springs to mind as a possible example:

Archival resource-allocator, seated in comfortable office, condescendingly pats head of virtuous archivist while

regretting that he cannot provide any additional resources.

Archivist (to self): It's the same old story—the impotence of virtue! What would it take to jar his complacency?

Suddenly the door bursts open and there appears Jim Fogerty, cloaked in scarlet! (Closely followed by Gracy and others in similarly assertive attire.)

Archival Resource-Allocator: Oh, no! It's the Task Force on Archives and Society! (I wasn't *expecting* the Task Force on Archives and Society.)

Fogerty: Nobody *expects* the Task Force on Archives and Society!

I for one am going to think of C-GAP as "the thing with feathers," by which I mean Emily Dickinson's image of hope—and certainly *not* Woody Allen's crazy nephew!

As you prepare to leave this stimulating annual meeting and this great and hospitable city of Austin, your bags packed and waiting in the hall,

. . . fare forward, voyagers.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first
time.

(T.S. Eliot, "The Four Quartets")