The American Archivist

Volume 50
Number 3
Summer 1987

Published Quarterly by
The Society of American Archivists

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

The American Archivist

Julia Marks Young, *Editor*
University of Southern Mississippi
David Klaassen, *Editor as of 1989*
University of Minnesota
Bill Burck, *Managing Editor*
Phyllis Pittman, *Copy Editor*

DEPARTMENT EDITORS

Dean DeBolt and Joel Wurl, *Commentaries and Case Studies*
Marjorie Barritt and Nancy Bartlett, *The International Scene*
Nicholas C. Burckel, *Reviews*
Bill Burck, *From the Archives*

EDITORIAL BOARD

Edmund Berkeley, Jr., chair (1986–1989), *University of Virginia*
Kenneth W. Duckett (1985–1988), *University of Oregon*
Jacqueline Goggin (1985–1988), *Library of Congress*
Susan Grigg (1987–1990), *Smith College*
Edie Hedlin (1987–1990), *National Archives and Records Administration*
Linda M. Matthews (1984–1987), *Emory University*
Nancy A. Sahli (1986–1989), *National Historical Publications and Records Commission*
Timothy Walch (1984–1987), *National Archives and Records Administration*

The Society of American Archivists

PRESIDENT William L. Joyce, *Princeton University*
VICE PRESIDENT Sue E. Holbert, *Minnesota Historical Society*
TREASURER Anne P. Diffendal, *Nebraska State Historical Society*
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Donn C. Neal

COUNCIL MEMBERS

Francis X. Blouin, Jr. (1984–1987), *University of Michigan*
Paul I. Chestnut (1985–1988), *Library of Congress*
Richard J. Cox (1987–1990), *New York State Archives*
Linda Edgerly (1987–1990), *Consultant*
Anne R. Kenney (1985–1988), *Cornell University*
Eva S. Moseley (1984–1987), *Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College*
Trudy Huskamp Peterson (1984–1987), *National Archives and Records Administration*
Victoria Irons Walch (1985–1988), *Consultant*
Joan Warnow (1987–1990), *American Institute of Physics*

***Cover note:** Margaret Cross Norton, fourth president of the Society of American Archivists, second editor of the **American Archivist**, and a Fellow of the Society. See Michele F. Pacifico's article on page 370, "Founding Mothers: Women in the Society of American Archivists, 1936–1972."*

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

The American Archivist

Volume 50 / Number 3 / Summer 1987

©The Society of American Archivists. All Rights Reserved. ISSN 0360-9081

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

REVIEWS

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

The *American Archivist* is published by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605, four times yearly. Postmaster: send address changes to Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. Subscription: $30 a year to North American addresses, $35 a year to other addresses single copies $8 to SAA members, $9 to nonmembers.

Articles and related communications should be sent to Bill Burck, Managing Editor, Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. Telephone: (312) 922-0140. Advertising correspondence, membership and subscription correspondence, and orders for back issues should be sent to SAA at the address above. Claims for issues not received must be received by SAA headquarters within four months of issue publication date for domestic subscribers and within six months for international subscribers.

The *American Archivist* is indexed in *Library Literature* and is abstracted in *Historical Abstracts*; book reviews are indexed in *Book Review Index*.

The *American Archivist* and the Society of American Archivists assume no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

Typesetting for the *American Archivist* is done by Daamen, Inc., West Rutland, Vermont, and the journal is printed by Kirby Lithographic Co., Inc., of Arlington, Virginia.

The American Archivist is printed on an alkaline, acid-free printing paper manufactured with no groundwood pulp. As such, it substantially meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

©Society of American Archivists 1986. All rights reserved. Second class postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and additional mailing office.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

The Forum

TO THE EDITOR:

I have three general criticisms of Richard Cox's article on "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," which appeared in the Summer 1986 issue of the *American Archivist*. First, he minimizes important differences between the medical, legal, and archival professions. Second, he overlooks similarities between the same three groups. Third, he fails to report the negative aspects of what recent studies have said about the process of professionalism.

Cox employs two models of professionalization. One is static and the other dynamic. In comparing archivists, physicians, and attorneys, he mixes the two models. As a result, he compares a relatively immature profession with two that have been intensely involved in the professionalization process over a longer period of time. The result is that archivists compare unfavorably with physicians and attorneys, which is not surprising. The nineteenth century medical and legal professions had weak standards by today's measurements, but they were in part responding to the demands and the resources of the time. The status that the medical professional enjoys today is a twentieth century development.

In addition to the relative immaturity of our profession, there may be differences between archives, medicine, and law that time and collective effort cannot minimize. As important as our mission is, I wonder if the American public will ever deem it as significant as curing cancer or comprehensive tort reform. I can think of no social goals more important than public health and equal justice under the law. Fortunately, many Americans are in a position to take these things for granted, including those of us who have time to ponder the future of the archival profession.

It is true that the medical profession has achieved more autonomy than archivists. To a great degree, physicians have established a direct link between the consumer and the deliverer of medical services. It is also true that, with the rise of health maintenance organizations, the private physician is losing much of this previous independence. Autonomy is an elusive goal for any profession. The process of gaining or losing it is difficult and frequently painful.

Cox claims that archival theory is only partially developed. The same is certainly true of medical and legal theory. The pursuit of knowledge has been considered an on-going process, at least since the end of the Middle Ages.

He also claims that too much of our literature is devoted to descriptions of practices. I agree—up to a point. It is also true that theories are constructed from the bricks and mortar that this descriptive literature provides. Medical breakthroughs are based upon bits and pieces of evidence accumulated over long peri-

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

ods of time. Major legal decisions flow from the gradual shifting of precedents from one direction to another. Every profession needs hewers of wood and drawers of water. Whether they realize it or not, the great theorists stand on the shoulders of these lesser lights.

It is true that most archivists have limited opportunities to engage in pure research. The same is true of most physicians and attorneys. Furthermore, there's frequently a schism between law and medical professors and practicing physicians and attorneys. I have often heard new members of the bar complain that law school did not prepare them for law practice. In medicine, advocates of pure versus applied research often represent diverging viewpoints.

I am not convinced that the medical and legal professions "rigorously patrol and discipline their practitioners," although they undoubtedly do a better job of this than we do. No profession tolerates individuals who persistently discredit their colleagues in the public eye. It is not in their self interest to do so.

Much of the power and autonomy of the medical and legal professions rests at the state level. This is true presently and historically. A thorough comparison of the medical, legal, and archival professions must address this point. The proliferation of state, regional, and other specialized archival organizations, which Cox decries as a scattering of resources, is a product of the very process of professionalization.

Most recent studies of professionalization discuss the negative consequences of this process, whether they're intentional or not. Indeed, this may be the dominant theme of the recent literature, though Cox mentions it only in passing. Progressive Era reforms in medical education improved standards, but they also closed schools that catered to blacks, rural southern whites, and other less fortunate groups. Highly trained physicians refused to practice in areas where they received a minimum return for their investment. Groups that once had poor medical services then had none. The powerful, autonomous medical profession perpetuated strict sexual stereotypes for physicians and nurses. Private physicians ruthlessly eliminated public health officials who threatened their authority and trade. Many reforms in legal education were directed toward night law schools that catered to recent immigrants, large numbers of whom were Jewish refugees from southern and eastern Europe. Institutionalized altruism is a noble ideal, but a profession's claims to it should not be accepted at face value. We may not be able to avoid all the negative consequences of professionalization, but we should not ignore them.

Professionalization is an historical process. When any group reflects upon its own past, there is the danger of viewing history as progress. In nationalistic terms, this produced a vision of United States history as "the flowering of democracy." In the absence of progress, the opposite extreme is "the republic in peril." Cox sees the archival republic in peril, a conclusion that is not without justification. He bases this in part upon an invidious comparison of archivists, physicians, and attorneys. I consider his view overly harsh.

DWAYNE COX
Auburn University

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE:

I welcome the opportunity to respond to Dwayne Cox's criticism of my article, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," and appreciate his comments. My article was written to provoke discussion within the archival community about this important issue. I might also

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

add, in case anyone is wondering, that we are not related despite identical surnames; in other words, this is not an incestuous debate.

First, Cox asserts that I am comparing the "relatively immature" archival profession with older and better established disciplines. I don't deny this. I did this to assist archivists to reflect about the condition of their own profession. I believe it is important for us to contrast our profession with other professions in order to consider where the archival community *is*, and *should* be, heading.

Second, Cox believes that it is not fruitful to compare the archival profession to the medical and legal professions because the societal value of our mission is not as significant. Here I will climb far out on the limb and contend that our mission *is* as significant. The preservation of historical records is crucial to much of the work of the medical and legal professions. The management of our documentary heritage is very important to any civilized society. Being healthy and having our rights protected are very important, obviously, but so is knowing who we are and where we came from. I find it difficult to separate preservation of our documentary heritage from social goals of public health and equal justice under the law. I also think it is not a useful exercise for archivists to determine all the things that society values *above* our mission.

Third, he contends that my statement about archival theory being "only partially developed" is minimized by the fact that this is true of other disciplines, and that the "pursuit of knowledge has been considered an ongoing process" for centuries. I don't disagree with Cox. However, I also assume that Cox would agree that archival theory needs to be substantially strengthened. That is my main assertion. The continuing debate about archival theory in our literature and at our professional meetings indicates that this is an important subject, worthy of our serious attention. I concede to Cox's statement, but not to the fact that archival theory needs improvement.

Fourth, Cox criticizes my characterization of archival literature as being too devoted to descriptions of practices, contending that theory builds from the "bricks and mortar that this descriptive literature provides." I agree with this to an extent. However, the archival profession lacks a good descriptive literature, both in quality and comprehensiveness of coverage, and there is only minor evidence that anyone has adequately mined what there is to develop a solid theoretical base for our practice.

Fifth, he suggests that the source of power of professions like medicine and law resides with government. This is an area that requires further analysis, especially as the archival profession has recently committed to an individual certification process. We need to marshal all those national, state, regional, and other resources to ensure that we obtain the control that is necessary to make us a profession strong enough to accomplish our mission and to be entrusted with the care of our fragile documentary heritage.

Sixth, Cox asserts that I have ignored the "negative consequences" of professionalization, which is the "dominant theme" of recent literature on this subject. Yes, a portion of the literature is negative about professions, professionalism, and professionalization. However, this literature is neither "dominant" nor was there much of a consensus among the critics. Besides, my article was intended to raise issues relating to how archivists can strengthen their work. If there are other relevant models that will aid us in doing this, so be it. I challenge Cox and others to provide us these models.

Seventh, and finally, Cox states that my depiction of the present state of the archival profession is "overly harsh." I

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

have heard others say this, but I have also had other colleagues tell me that my comments were too optimistic or positive. Again, the point of my essay was to provide a tool that could be used to strengthen the archival profession, not to criticize it. I am interested in hearing from Cox and others about my suggestions to strengthen the profession that conclude the essay.

RICHARD J. COX
New York State Archives

TO THE EDITOR:

As a professional archivist in the eyes of my peers and society (if not self-confessed as such), I was frankly offended by John W. Roberts' remarks on "archivy" in his article, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," published in *American Archivist*, Vol. 50. His debunking observations on the intellectual strain in our profession are certainly well aimed and lively enough. But why shoot yourself in the foot? Archivists need recognition and encouragement, not the disillusionment and obscurantism of Mr. Roberts.

Perhaps the standing of a parallel profession will make us feel better about what we do. Textual criticism, everyone would agree, has a long tradition of scholarship and intellectual effort behind it while at the same time it can boast having a body of highly wrought ideas and specialized theory to draw on. Great men, even geniuses, have been content to practice textual criticism and call themselves philologists or the equivalent, including A.E. Housman, Cicero, Petrarch, emperors, popes and statesmen through the ages. It is one of a prestigious handful of fields admitted into the pantheon of disciplines represented at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, to say nothing of Europe's academies and institutes. All the marks of professionalism and intellectualism are present.

Textual critics, like archivists, deal with the "practical, how-to, nitty-gritty" aspects of information and act as custodians. Yet none to my knowledge has ever described himself as "a glorified proofreader" or "textual janitor." Many justly pride themselves on contributing to the preservation, reconstruction or interpretation of important documents and works of art that would be lost, marred, forgotten or garbled without their efforts.

Archivists *qua* archivists also contribute to the advance of knowledge. In fact, their most important role, as indicated by the etymology of the word, is to house and maintain records and source materials that might otherwise be destroyed or neglected. No other discipline, not historians and not even historiographers, has this mission. No one else thinks or theorizes about it in a vocational way, either. It's our job, along with some menial tasks like filing.

In defense of the "intellectual silliness" alleged by Mr. Roberts may I put in a gentle reminder that the word "school" (*schola*, *ludus*) means "play" as well as "educational setting." On the forefront of any intellectual process not everything is perfectly articulated. By the time concepts are clothed in decent language they become jargon. And nobody expects jargon to be pretty, only useful.

In all the current talk of professionalism we seem to have lost sight of our single most important accomplishment, keeping public information from perishing. It's time that archivists stopped being self-deprecating and apologizing for their activities, and started behaving like any other profession in the liberal arts, living up to their responsibilities as the keepers of records and documents and deriving satisfaction from that role. Archivists more than any other profession

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

should live *sub specie aeternitatis*. Gallows humor is OK in the stacks or off the record but it has no place in the pages of a professional publication.

DONALD N. YATES
Miles Corporate Archives
Elkhart, Indiana

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE:

Status anxiety is an unfortunate distraction that bedevils the archival community. I am sorry if Mr. Yates is offended by the article I wrote, but by the same token I am impatient with those who so lack confidence in the archival profession that they must resort to self-conscious window dressing to feel that their life's work is as good as anybody else's.

It all reminds me of the *Monty Python* skit in which a dilettantish sportscaster quizzed an uncomprehending soccer player about "existentialist football" and "Proustian" goaltending. Archival work, like soccer, is valid on its own terms. Neither archivists nor soccer players should feel compelled to pretend they are metaphysicians in order to boost their sense of self-esteem.

Archival work is immensely pleasing to me. It is intellectually stimulating and socially worthwhile, and I make no apologies for being an archivist. Unlike some of my colleagues, I am not so insecure about being an archivist that I need to tell myself that textual criticism is a "parallel profession" in order to stay revved up about what I do. Archival work is *not* silliness, and I never said it was. What *is* silliness is trying to justify archival work through reference to A.E. Housman, Cicero, and Petrarch.

JOHN W. ROBERTS
Federal Bureau of Prisons

TO THE EDITOR:

Max J. Evans's article in the *American Archivist* of Summer 1986 caused me considerable concern. This had nothing to do with his argument, much of which I agreed with, respecting the limitations of the record group concept for arrangement and description, and the use instead of an authority control system.

My concern was that it confirmed an impression I had received from *American Archivist* of recent years, that American writers read little professional literature that does not originate in North America. If true, this has important implications, if only because there are probably many archivists round the world to whom the periodical is a professional lifeline.

What I fear has happened in that the size of the profession in America is such that it is not necessary to go outside North America to get a large and diverse group of people to exchange ideas with.

The particular footnote in Mr. Evans's article that crystallized my reaction was number eleven. This relates to a favourable comment in the text of the article to Peter J. Scott's article in *American Archivist* 29 (October 1966). There is no reference by Evans to any of a series of five articles by Scott and others in *Archives and Manuscripts* in the years 1978–81—Volume 7 Number 3, Volume 7 Number 4, Volume 8 Number 1, Volume 8 Number 2 and Volume 9 Number 1, which in context is very surprising.

There has been a considerable increase in the volume of writing in recent years in my own area of particular interest, appraisal. References in *American Archivist* to English material in this area, e.g., publications of the Society of Archivists Records Management Group, have been rare.

These two examples may not be regarded as proving very much, and in a strict sense this is true. I do not however

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

instance them lightly. I believe they are not isolated exceptions but examples of an issue of general importance.

The value of American publications generally, and the use made of them gives them an exceptional international importance. I believe it is in the better long-term interests of the profession both inside and outside America that American writers make a greater effort to be aware of professional writing outside of America.

BRUCE SYMONDSON
Auckland City Council
New Zealand

TAPE DOCTOR$_{Rx}$
Restores unusable,
problem videotapes
All Video Formats
2", 1", 3/4", 1/2"
- Hundreds of restorations successfully completed
- Free Evaluation

Warren Rosenberg
Video Services, Inc.
308 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10021
212-744-1111

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access