

Who Are the Archivists and What Do They Do?

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Ernst Posner's 1956 Society of American Archivists presidential address harkened back to Michel de Crèvecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer*. In Crèvecoeur's letter on "What is an American," the author had proclaimed that "the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions." Both Crèvecoeur and Posner set out to find a new creation—a new human being fit for a trans-Atlantic Zion. Though they noted problems, they both found what they sought. Many other writers have also laid the basis for an intellectual nativism that has been received by a young nation fashioning its own intellectual tradition from "the unwrought granite" of the New World. Posner, our twentieth-century immigrant, provided a rationale for the new American archivist—a professional who continually devised new solutions to new problems. Though he wrote several articles on the European archival heritage and a book on the archives of antiquity, he never recanted.¹

When Ernst Posner came to the United States in 1939, Europe was in deep trouble. Centuries of nationalism and racism had borne fruit in a holocaust of death and destruction. In "a limbo period" of his life, spent in Sweden before crossing the Atlantic, Posner read the *American Archivist*. Ever the polite optimist, he became a lifelong champion of American archivists. At that time the Society of American Archivists was

five years old—just "preschoolers." Today, they are fifty-year-old "preschoolers." Developing in a mobile society during a period of material prosperity, American archivists have not merely ignored the past and reinvented the wheel, they have substituted pontoons. The profession floats on a sea of its own rhetoric, which has become increasingly concerned with archivists rather than archives.²

Our colleagues in the social sciences like to characterize periods as prehistoric, pre-Christian, pre-Columbian, and prewar. When Posner arrived in the United States, he found scattered bands of archivists living along the east coast in a precustodial society. They cared for records, but they had not assimilated the principles of European archival practice. Some of them had heard the tales of travelers like Waldo G. Leland and J. Franklin Jameson, but they did not believe in, investigate the possibility of, or receive a well-developed body of archival theory and practice from other countries. Hilary Jenkinson's English language manual was not readily available until the 1930s, and Muller, Feith, and Fruin was not translated into English until 1940. Theodore Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* (1956) appeared sixteen years after Posner's arrival and is still with us. Since this work and Schellenberg's *The Management of Archives* (1965), a series of collected essays and readers have been published. Most recent archival works in Europe and

¹Ernst Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" *American Archivist* 20 (January 1957): 3–11; Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957), 40; Nathaniel Hawthorne, "A Select Party," in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1876), 73.

²Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), vii–viii.

America have been collective efforts, such as the French *Manuel d'Archivistique* (1970) and the Society of American Archivists' Basic Archival Manual series (1977–). For many years the standard writings on appraisal (Schellenberg, 1956), arrangement (Schellenberg, 1951), description (National Archives Circular 14, 1950 and Brand, 1955), and preservation (Minogue 1943) antedated Posner's presidential address. Schellenberg's 1951 appraisal guidelines were based on the National Archive's experience in filling the huge building at Eighth and Pennsylvania.³

Posner stated that “we have successfully developed the methods and techniques of archival arrangement and description.” While archivists may have learned some of the basic concepts, these methods and techniques are not static. Archivists may have developed an understanding of them, but they require continuing study, analysis, and improvement. By the time archivists returned to deferred agendas after World War II, they were caught up in the popular enthusiasm for war-born records management programs. The dominant theme, as established in the publications of NARS, was that American archives were unique, different, and the results of innovation. The “life cycle” became our “class struggle”—a shibboleth for the faithful. There was little emphasis on such vital custodial responsibilities as authentication, appraisal, and description. Instead, the American contribution was in management techniques and technological areas such as surveying, warehousing, microfilming, oral history, and automation.

Equal concern has not been shown for basic archival responsibilities. The archival community was intellectually stunted. Re-

search is required to support this observation, and I have made a quick analysis of volumes 20, 30, 40, and 49 of the *American Archivist*. Omitting news notes, bibliographies, book reviews, and short features, the *Archivist* for 1957, 1967, 1977, and 1986 printed 103 articles containing 1,005 pages. Authentication, appraisal, arrangement, description, and physical protection accounted for slightly more than one-third of the total. The establishment and the use of archives, which included planning, professional and personal development, documentary publication, and outreach, received one and one-third times the attention given to the other five areas of archival responsibility. More troubling than the subject content of the professional journal was the problem of methodology. Though subjective judgments are involved, only about 37 percent of the total gave evidence that they were based on original research, and about 77 percent were primarily statements of the personal experience of the authors. On the other hand, nearly 70 percent of these articles carried footnote citations.⁴

Who are the archivists? The conventional answer to this question has been, “Those who pay their dues.” Since 1956, the proportion of female archivists has increased from about one-third to about one-half. There are more manuscripts curators and fewer historians and state archivists active in the Society of American Archivists. Certain groups such as records managers, documentary editors, oral historians, and government archivists have hived off, or been pushed out. Posner credited American historians as the standard-bearers of the archival movement and stated that archivists should not separate themselves from “the mother body of the historical profession.”

³Theodore R. Schellenberg, “Principles of Arrangement,” National Archives Staff Information Paper no. 18 (Washington, D.C.: 1951), “*The Appraisal of Modern Records*,” National Archives Bulletin no. 8 (Washington, D.C.: 1956), *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), and *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

⁴Posner, “What, Then, Is the American Archivist?” 9; *American Archivist*, vols. 20, 30, 40, and 49 (1957, 1967, 1977, 1986).

Separation has not occurred, but the points of contact at the Loewenheim case (1968–70), New Harmony (1976), Judge Harold Greene's courtroom (1980), and the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (1983) suggest that contacts have become engagements or skirmishes as often as they have been joint operations. Archivists and historians do not march in the same column.⁵

Archivists establish archives, authenticate, appraise, arrange, describe, protect, and provide information. Like colleagues in other professions, they also plan, organize, staff, direct, control, budget, and audit. Due to the modest size of most archival operations, archival administration, in the sense of a specialized activity, is largely derived from general principles followed in other fields. Management activities are carried out in the framework of archival administration.

The forces that have changed the nature of archives and archivists since 1956 include economic prosperity and development and the continued centralization of government authority. Posner posited that "rational administration of the record is bureaucracy's favorite child" and that archives thrived "best in regimented society." Despite the absence of global wars and economic crises, lawyer-driven regimentation and bureaucracy have flourished since 1956. Posner wrote that in "budget, activities and professional outlook, too wide a gulf separates our National Archives from the smaller archival agencies of the country; archivists and manuscript custodians are not sufficiently conscious of the similarity of their tasks." This gulf has been narrowed by the millions of dollars that the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Office of Education

have put into the archival economy. Federal and foundation grants have filled in some of the gaps in state, institutional, and business archives. NHPRC grants to states amount to one-fifth of the total annual budget for state archival institutions. The total of the archival budgets of the fifty states is about one-fifth of that of the National Archives. The deficiencies of state archival budgets were highlighted in *Documenting America* (1983). Another financial "gulf" of similar dimensions exists between state archives and academic archives. The gulf between large and small archival agencies is not only financial; in the past thirty years, we have explored the shores of academic archives and found major differences in user clientele and types of records.⁶

Contemporary archival holdings are more diverse as well as more extensive. With well over four million cubic feet in custody, growth should be slower in the future. The old and persistent problem of mass or volume has led to continuing emphasis on the technological solutions of miniaturization and manipulation by microforms and computers. Both the Hoover (1947–53) and Federal Paperwork (1977) commissions have heralded the savings that would result from paperwork management and information resources management. We have made progress in discussions of national information exchange systems and have sought to use them as an argument to promote and standardize automated systems.

Since 1967, there has been a concern for nontraditional documentation and increasing attention to image-making. The "Committee of the '70s" (1970), the Conference on Priorities for Historical Records (1977), the Task Force on Goals and Priorities (1982), and the Task Force on Archives and Society (1983) have all been concerned with archivists as a professional group. The

⁵Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist?" 7.

⁶Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist?" 6; Lisa B. Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States* (Albany: NASARA, 1983).

dominant emphasis has been on collective efforts to enhance society's perception of archivists. Where has this emphasis on the new, modern, American archivist taken us? Have we benefited from an unremitting emphasis on plans, goals, and objectives at the cost of avoiding serious research and analysis of the bases of our professional duties and responsibilities? Do we have a heightened awareness of our role in society or a tendency to morbid introspection about our professional image? Do we join in a collegial effort to establish minimum standards for practitioners or a lemming-like drive for self-credentialing, self-certification, and self-accreditation?

Fifty years after Posner discovered the precustodial American archivists, the bands have united into confederations that convene for annual rites and rituals. One bewildered young person attending the recent SAA meeting in New York described the discussion at an open committee meeting as "breast beating." Nevertheless, we have made progress. Among archivists, there is an awareness of the integrity of records; the organic nature of information; the uniqueness of dealing with aggregates, collections, or accumulations; and that theory is based on the development of interrelated processes. Posner made a strong case for the unity of archives and historical manuscripts and stated that we were "bridging that gulf." Since the 1959 debate in Philadelphia, Richard Berner's valiant championship of the idea of two traditions and the automation-driven MARC archives manuscripts cataloging rapprochement indicate stronger ties between archivists and manuscripts curators. This process is due more to the realities of modern manuscripts and archives than to the actions of associations and individuals. Our society has more and larger information systems that are more amenable to archival methodologies than to

item-control techniques developed by historians and librarians.

Posner lamented the American archivists' inattention to standards and training. Since 1973, we have adopted guidelines, principles, and other statements in these areas. Although archivists have discussed archival education for more than fifty years, American archivists and archival employers have shown a consistent and decided preference for institutes, workshops, and other forms of short term, postappointment continuing education. Posner noted that the American archival profession was easier to enter and to leave than that of European archivists. We have tended to lose talented and experienced archivists to administrative positions and new professional specializations, but we also receive talented new recruits from other academic programs. This turnover is not necessarily a loss to a profession characterized by mobility—inquiring minds want to come and go.⁷

A presentist orientation has limited archivists' interest in the history and theory of archival practice. Posner's call for a Society archives has been answered. H. G. Jones (1969), Victor Gondos (1971), and Donald McCoy (1978) have covered most of the National Archives story, and Posner's book on American state archives (1964) met an important need; but, in general, his plea for research on American archival history has been ignored. There is no *Dictionary of American Archival Biography*.

A look at the changes in the past two decades should convince us that continued technological development will lead to new automated access systems. To paraphrase librarian George Jenks's paragraph on the book in the 30 September 1987 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the "archives box is a rather efficient means of storing infor-

⁷Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist?" 9–10; Maynard Brichford, "Margaret Cross Norton: A Tribute," *Illinois Libraries* 69 (October 1987): 537–38.

mation; it is compact, portable, can be accessed immediately to any page, and is usually indexed. It will probably be here for many years to come. What has changed is the means to locate archives. The card or list will disappear to be replaced by computer terminals." This does not mean that archivists will be thrown into competition as information resource managers. As the unique information we hold is authenticated or validated by its origin with an institution or an individual, we do not supply data for the same competitive market as libraries and commercial data bases. There should also be increased acceptance of appraisal as an inductive and objective process based on content, rather than a deductive process proceeding from general concepts of what future uses should be made and leading to a search for documentation to support such research. Appraisal should also draw on the concepts of archival scheduling and intrinsic value. There will be increased emphasis on the more efficient organization of staff in relation to holdings and on that type of personal contact with users that has been termed "archival mediation."⁸

Still, archivists often act like academic librarians frightened by demands that they publish if they are to retain their faculty status. Their first thought is to leave their

workplace and head for the archives or out of town to "do" research. They seldom think that they are best qualified for research in their own work in book selection or archival appraisal, classification or arrangement, cataloging or description, and reference service or use analysis. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 oration on "The American Scholar," he stated that each generation must write its own books for the next succeeding generation, but the scholar should "hold by himself" to see "something truly."⁹ Rather than searching the horizon or renaming the familiar, our professional objectives and research efforts should be directed to those responsibilities that we know best. Perhaps, we do not need to invent a new scholarship or a new archival world. We might look at our inheritance and our experience. We could even consider the past, at a time when archives flourished, and heed an admonition: "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place in which you are standing is holy ground." Or in the Modern Archives Version: "Do not pretend to omniscience or omnicompetence; revere the processes that have produced and shaped archival theory and practice; for your archives is a precious inheritance and a holy trust."

⁸George Jenks, "Technological Gimmicks Come and Go, but Libraries Persist," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 September 1987, 83.

⁹Ralph W. Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1950), 60.