Research Articles

On the Idea of Permanence

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Abstract: This essay explores the changing understanding archivists have had of the idea of permanence as it applies to the records in their custody. Though it seems to be an absolute, archivists have in fact used this word to denote very different ideas and concepts, ranging from permanence of the information in documents to permanence of the physical objects themselves. Today, archivists are increasingly reluctant to employ the idea at all, and the essay concludes with some speculations about the future of archives without permanence.

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"In time, the Rockies may crumble,
Gibraltar may tumble;
They're only made of clay. . . ."

Ira Gershwin

LIKE THE PRACTITIONERS OF most other professions, archivists possess a vocabulary of their own, a set of words and phrases that hold special meaning for them and that help them structure and define what they do. Most of this vocabulary is perfectly recognizable to those outside the profession, but the peculiar meaning and significance of its elements are different for those within the field. *Arrangement* and *description*, for example, are words that both archivists and nonarchivists use, perhaps every day, but when an archivist uses them, they are intended to denote very specific activities and concepts that are generally absent when a layman uses them. Professional vocabulary may degenerate into jargon, a term with a distinctly negative connotation, but regardless of that danger a particular set of terms and meanings is both inevitable and necessary for the development of any profession.[1]

Because the professional vocabulary of archivists is acquired and employed fairly readily, archivists generally do not reflect on the words they use or on how those words define and control the way they think and what they actually do. Just as no one can communicate at all by pausing to analyze every word that is uttered, so archivists cannot carry their glossaries with them at every moment and indeed have no need to. Too much reflection is paralyzing, but too little reflection risks obscuring distinctions that are rightly made, as well as blocking the consideration of new ideas and techniques that may be improvements over the accepted way of doing things. Periodically, therefore, it is useful to "pause in the day's occupations" to examine professional vocabulary, to understand how the words archivists use have changed over time and therefore how archival ideas have themselves developed. Such an exercise is more than just historical, tracing what ideas and words have meant at different times; it is also of benefit in present professional practice because it may open up new perspectives and possibilities.

One word in the archival lexicon used repeatedly without reflection is the word *permanent*. Archivists speak almost instinctively of their collections as being the permanent records of an individual or entity. The materials in archives are separated from the great mass of all the records ever created and are marked for special attention and treatment because they possess what is frequently identified as permanent value. Whether by accident or design—and the distinction is at the heart of the modern idea of appraisal—certain materials are selected by archives for preservation into the indefinite future. They are in that sense permanent. The word *permanent* does not appear in the standard glossary definition of *archives*, though the reverse is true: the entry for *permanent records* says simply, "*See* archives." The term has been employed in less formal sources and most archivists do indeed use it as a way of distinguishing archival records from those of lesser value.[2] Ironically, though archivists have not formally defined permanent records, the records managers have. The glossary of that profession specifies permanent records as

[1] On the importance of precision in professional vocabulary, see Frank B. Evans, et al., "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (1974): 415–416. On the general characteristics of professions, see Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," ibid., 49 (1986): 231–233.

[2] Evans, "Basic Glossary," *American Archivist* 37(1974): 417. No less an authority than Ernst Posner defined archives as "records considered worthy of permanent preservation" in *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., s.v. "Archives."

those that are kept "indefinitely," often for legal reasons, and provided with "continuous preservation because of reference, historical or administrative significance."[3] By judging some records to be permanent, archivists make a substantial commitment to them, a commitment of time and resources, a commitment that is intended to last well beyond the tenure or lifetime of any individual professional. From that judgment and that commitment, a whole range of specific activities seems logically to flow.

But what do archivists really mean when they talk about their holdings as permanent records? As Leonard Rapport has noted, permanent is "a convenient term for which no simple substitute comes to mind."[4] The timelessness of such a term is difficult to grasp, but the idea of permanence offers nonetheless all the comforts of any absolute. The word's meaning is so self-evident, why should it trouble us? To say that archival records are permanent seems to fix their nature beyond doubt and to establish beyond challenge the full extent of the archivist's responsibility to them. Permanence is like pregnancy: there is apparently no middle ground. In fact, however, *permanent* has always been a more complicated, even relative, term than it appears, and an examination of its shifting meaning and use over time may illuminate its current and future usefulness as a category in archival thinking.

Permanence in Oral and Written Cultures

Recording information and preserving it for long periods of time are very old problems, and human culture has found different ways of accomplishing these tasks. Before the invention of writing, a relatively late development for the species, all information had to be stored mentally and transmitted orally, and oral cultures evolved particular means of doing so efficiently and effectively.[5] By emphasizing certain characteristics that enhanced the memory—the use of formulaic language and rhythm; the embodiment in ritual of key stories, values, and pieces of information; the association of physical objects with certain events; the reliance on social and interpersonal communication of things to be remembered—all oral cultures, even those that survived into the twentieth century, achieved a degree of permanence in what they knew, preserved, and handed on to the indefinite future.[6] Some degree of timelessness was achievable in such cultures: a kind of permanence was possible.

The advent of literacy, however, changed

[3] Association of Records Managers and Administrators, *Glossary of Records Management Terms* (Prairie Village, Kansas: ARMA, 1985).

[4] Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44(1981): 148.

[5] For a general theory of the oral transmission of information, see Frederick J. Stielow, *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 11–33.

[6] The literature on oral cultures is fascinating and extensive. For the best guide through the issues it raises, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), esp. 31–57. On the use of formula and rhythm, see Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), esp. 226, and Ananda E. Wood, *Knowledge Before Printing and After: The Indian Tradition in a Changing Kerala* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7–9. For ritual, see Jacob Neusner, *The Oral Torah: The Sacred Books of Judaism, An Introduction* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 26–27, and Robert Goldenburg, "Talmud," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts,* ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit, 1984), 131, and Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 168–177. For the use of objects as *aides-memoires,* see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 21–24. For the social context of records, see Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel,* 23–24 and 92–93, and Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

these mnemonic necessities and offered a more objective means of recording information and of preserving it intact for the indeterminate future. Specific texts, particular ways of expressing ideas, and not just the general thrust of a story or argument, could themselves be fixed and given permanence. *Accuracy* took on a new, more precise meaning based on continuity of text.[7] Since knowledge could now be written down and stored outside the brain, it would not be lost through forgetfulness, and it could be called back to life whenever necessary or desired. It could be more securely transmitted from one place to another or from one time to another. Permanence could be more reliably achieved through the preservation of writing. The ancient adage stated this advantage succinctly: *verba volent, littera scripta manet*—words are fleeting, written letters remain. It was by remaining that writing could emerge as triumphant, even "pre-emptive," over oral means of preserving information.[8] Thus, the very act of writing something down would invest it with a permanence it would not otherwise have had. To be sure, not all writing was intended to be kept literally forever; indeed, early in literate cultures a distinction was drawn between writings created for posterity and those with only a limited effect or usefulness. St. Paul's letters to the Christian churches of the Mediterranean world, for example, were "near-oral" means of communication not necessarily intended to be enduring; in the Middle Ages, drafts of documents, meant to be transitional and impermanent, began to appear, writings produced on materials (such as wood blocks covered with wax) that were cheaper than those used for formal records.[9] Still, in comparison to purely oral systems, writing seemed a better, more reliable guarantee of permanence.

The distinction between the kind of permanence offered by oral cultures and that which was available to cultures with writing was most readily apparent at the times of transition from one system to the other. The history of writing is long and complex, but at least since the perfection of an alphabetic system by the Greeks (about 700 B.C.E.) writing has come to different cultures at different times, and the change has not always been smooth. Socrates, for example, was skeptical of writing, fearing that "it will implant forgetfulness" in the human mind, offering "no true wisdom, . . . but only its semblance." What is more, writing broke down the human links that were at the heart of the information storage and transfer process in the oral world. "Written words . . . seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent," the philosopher said, "but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing forever."[10] Writing could not be cross-examined as a speaker could, and Socrates found this a distinct disadvantage in the process of advancing understanding. Similarly, in ancient Jewish culture, both oral and written means of long-term storage of information coexisted for centuries, but social dislocation as well as religious and political turmoil led at different times to the encoding of certain basic tenets in written form. One such occasion was the emotionally powerful return to Zion (ca. 450 B.C.E.), which resulted in the codification

[7] Edward P. Dirringer, *The Book Before Printing: Ancient, Medieval, and Oriental* (New York: Dover, 1982), 15; Lord, *Singer of Tales,* 138.

[8] Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* 11–12 ("pre-emptive," p. 12); Havelock, *Literate Revolution in Greece,* 87.

[9] Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel,* 168–169; Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* 116–125; see also Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 4–5.

[10] Plato, *Phaedrus,* 274C–275D. In this connection it is worthwhile to note that Socrates himself left no written account of his thinking, this task being performed for him by his next-generation, fully literate successor, Plato.

of the Torah books known to Christians today as the Old Testament; another came after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. during the rise of Christianity, leading to the writing down of the teachings of the Talmud and the Mishnah, which had previously been available only in oral form.[11]

The key element in any such transition was not, as the historian M.T. Clanchy has pointed out with reference to Norman England, the mere fact of literacy itself (i.e., who can read and write and who cannot). Rather, the critical shift came with the reliance on written records rather than on individual recollection as the basis for society, by literates and nonliterates alike. Thus, the authors of the Christian gospels, which had been transmitted orally for a generation or two before being written down, were deliberate in choosing language that emphasized the legal validity of the writing as an acceptable replacement for the actual eyewitness testimony of the members of the apostolic generation, whose stories they told.[12] By writing the gospel narratives down, the authors hoped that they had thereby "guaranteed longevity, if not perpetuity."[13] Similarly, in medieval England transfers of land and other property, as well as other forms of agreements and contracts, came to be expressed in documents, and both the legal system and the language itself had to change as a result. Whereas in Edward I's time a nobleman could prove his title to a piece of land by displaying the rusty sword with which he had seized it years before, a generation later a charter was the only acceptable proof. At the same time, the word *deed* came to denote not only the act itself, but also the document that embodied and recorded the act and thus preserved the memory of it for future generations.[14] The results of this shift were both practical and symbolic, and it was the symbolic significance that underlined the greater degree of permanence that was available through writing. "A document could indeed make time stand still," Clanchy says of England (though the same could apply to other cultures in the process of accepting literacy); "it could pass on a record of an event to remote posterity."[15]

Permanence in American Archives

The seemingly inherent ability of written records to freeze time in this way, to make more reliably permanent what would remain fragile and evanescent if retained orally, meant that once records were preserved in archives they would attain a degree of permanence they might not otherwise have had. Because some records survived in archives while others did not, those that were preserved would naturally be valued more highly and therefore retained indefinitely. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, as elsewhere and earlier, formal archival agencies readily accepted the responsibility to do just that. The subsequent discovery that archival records could be used for broad research as well as for administrative purposes reinforced this long-term view of the archives and their functions. As writing spread to all areas of American society and written records multiplied, not everything written down could be permanent, but everything gathered into an archives would be.

Most early American archival repositories, especially those founded with a specific commitment to research, stated this desire to ensure or enhance the permanence

[11] Neusner, *Oral Torah,* 26, 222.

[12] Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel,* 92–93; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1961), 221–222.

[13] Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel,* 105.

[14] Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* 2, 21–22, 36–37, 204.

[15] Ibid., 20.

of their holdings. Though earlier preservation efforts had had similar motivations, the historical societies founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century took as their primary goal "the responsibility to safeguard their collections," and this responsibility was echoed by their many successors and imitators.[16] The American Antiquarian Society, established in 1812, proclaimed that "its immediate and peculiar design" was "to discover the antiquities of our own continent, and, by providing a fixed and permanent place of deposit, to preserve such relicks of American antiquity as are portable." The Society optimistically observed that "all things . . . are in their nature durable, if preserved from casualty and the ravages of time." Accordingly, "a depository like this may not only retard the ravages of time, but preserve from other causes of destruction many precious relicks of antiquity, . . . which once lost could never be restored."[17] Even the location of the repository was a deliberate choice in the desire to preserve records indefinitely. Given "the destruction so often experienced in large towns and cities by fire, as well as the ravages of an enemy. . . in times of war," the Society decided that, "for a place of deposit for articles intended to be preserved for ages," an inland, out-of-the-way place (like Worcester, Massachusetts) was preferable.[18]

By offering a "fixed and permanent place of deposit" for "articles intended to last for [the] ages," other historical and archival collections likewise had permanence in mind as a rationale for their activities. One historical society in Ohio in the 1840s announced its intention "to preserve the manuscripts of the present day to the remotest ages of posterity," adding almost theologically, "or at least . . . as near forever as the power and sagacity of man will effect." To accomplish this it proposed to store its manuscript and archival holdings in "airtight metallic cases, regularly numbered and indexed, so that it may be known what is contained in each case without opening it."[19]

Preserving records in archival repositories was thus intended to ensure their permanence, but the promoters of such efforts recognized the potential dangers inherent in such an effort. Unusual circumstances could put carefully preserved records at risk. In 1814, for example, a committee of the New York Historical Society prepared to move that organization's collection out of the city in the event of a British attack; many smaller organizations, uncertain that they would be able to maintain the interest of a sufficient membership, provided for the relocation of their collections in the event of the organization's demise.[20] Fire was the most obvious hazard, and the destruction of some of the holdings of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1825 and of most of the holdings of the Vermont Historical Society in 1857 provided sobering examples of how records that had been preserved and were intended to be permanent could be lost. "By all manner of means," a colleague wrote Lyman C. Draper after one such disaster, "have a *fire-proof building*. Don't now look at size and splendor—but safety."[21]

Concern for the safety of archival materials led those responsible for them to consider other means of preserving them

[16] Leslie W. Dunlap, *American Historical Societies, 1790–1860* (Madison: Privately printed, 1944), 79.

[17] *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* (Worcester, 1820), 1:18, 29, 30–31. The repeated association of documents with "relicks" is noteworthy.

[18] Ibid., 31. This argument may simply have been an attempt to make a virtue of necessity, since the society's founders and benefactors were all located in Worcester already.

[19] Quoted in Dunlap, *American Historical Societies,* 142. The organization in question is the Logan Historical Society of Cincinnati.

[20] Ibid., 79.

[21] Quoted ibid., 79–80.

"as near forever as the power and sagacity of man will effect," and understandably they turned to whatever technology, the fruit of that sagacity, was available to them. The society that had proposed air-tight containers with detailed descriptions on the outside apparently hoped to safeguard its holdings from the possible deleterious effects of the environment and from the wear and tear of handling—both of these concerns entirely recognizable to modern conservators. Even more common among these archives was the aim of preserving their collections by publishing them. "Repositories of every kind, however desirable, are exposed to . . . accidents, from the hand of time, from the power of the elements, and from the ravages of unprincipled men, as to render them unsafe," the Massachusetts Historical Society declared in 1806. "There is no sure way of preserving historical records and materials, but by *multiplying the copies*. The art of printing affords a mode of preservation more effectual than Corinthian brass or Egyptian marble."[22]

Permanence of Information

Among the many early archives and historical organizations that sought to preserve their materials by publishing and diffusing them, there developed a surprisingly modern distinction between the permanence of the archival documents themselves and the permanence of the information they contained. Initially, historical collections were valued principally for their information, information that testified to the "pastness of the past" and thereby certified "the reality of progress." Only later did repositories come to value their collections as things worthy in their own right and, later still, as sources for specialized study by professional scholars.[23] Preserving the documents was certainly worthwhile, but it was not ultimately as important as preserving the information. By relying on printing as a preservation technology, one repository hoped to "secure our treasures by means of the press from the corrosions of time and the power of accident," while another sought to "preserve and perpetuate by publication."[24] The same principle could be applied to public records as to the holdings of private historical organizations. "Let us save what remains," Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1792, endorsing Ebenezer Hazard's first compilation of *American State Papers*, "not by vaults and locks, which fence them from the public eye and use in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of copies as shall place them beyond the reach of accident."[25] There were enough examples of the permanent preservation of the information contained in records through printing before the loss of the originals to highlight the importance and the usefulness of achieving permanence through publication. The most famous of these was the original journal of Massachusetts's Puritan governor John Winthrop, a portion of which had been destroyed by fire in 1825 after the publication of a documentary edition.[26]

As technology advanced, archivists gained access to other means by which they could hope to safeguard their collections and preserve them "as near forever" as they de-

[22] *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, 1806), 1:3.

[23] Henry D. Shapiro, "Putting the Past Under Glass: Preservation and the Idea of History in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 10(1985): 243–278, describes the evolving viewpoint of collecting organizations; the quotations are at 258.

[24] Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1962), 40; Dunlap, *American Historical Societies,* 177.

[25] Quoted in Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies,* 4.

[26] *Winthrop's Journal: "History of New England," 1630–1649,* ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1908), 1:17–18.

sired. The development of practical microfilm technology, for example, seemed to offer a better means of reproducing documents than letterpress publication—better because it preserved actual images of the items themselves, not just the information they contained, thereby in some sense preserving both. This use of microfilm for storing records of permanent value had been suggested as early as 1853, and by the early 1870s it was actually being employed. In 1871 a French insurance company was regularly producing a microfilm copy of all its policies; three years later an enterprising Irishman received a patent to record property deeds in this way, using what seems to have been a lineal ancestor of the modern-day rotary camera.[27]

Permanence of Original Documents

In the twentieth century still newer technological developments focused on archival records and eventually worked a near-revolution in the way archivists looked at and cared for the permanent records they held. Concern for the information in records was still strong, but concern for better treatment of the originals themselves increased, in part because it now seemed possible to do something about them. At least since the mid-nineteenth century, archivists had worried about the physical deterioration of their collections, even those that were already published or microfilmed, and about how to preserve them permanently; now the advance of preservation theory and practice offered the possibility that the long-desired goal could in fact be achieved. Preservation technicians learned more about the physical properties of documentary materials and the forces that caused them to deteriorate, and they began experimenting with methods for retarding, stopping, and reversing that deterioration.[28] In the process, the technical distinction between extending the so-called usable lifetime of documents (a more modest and realistic goal) and preserving them literally forever was often blurred. The "ravages of time" that had for so long troubled those in charge of archives could at last be controlled: real, physical permanence seemed within reach.

There may well have been a significant psychological predisposition in favor of preserving and repairing the original documents, of not being satisfied with printed or micrographic substitutes that preserved the original information, but in a different form. "Copies are never totally satisfactory," said the pioneer preservation researcher William J. Barrow in explaining the motivation for his work at the Virginia State Library, "for the originals possess unique and desirable characteristics lost in copying."[29] Though he did not specify what those "unique and desirable characteristics" were, he probably did not have to. The desire to preserve unusual original papers was often what had attracted many archivists to their profession in the first place. In its earliest manifestations, the collection of manuscripts was closely associated with the collection of other interesting curiosities, including museum objects and specimens in the physical and natural sciences.[30] These efforts were reinforced by a broader cultural disposition that preferred to see even historic items in their pristine condition. Deterioration "symbolizes failure," the philosopher of history David Lowenthal has observed, serving perhaps as a reminder of our own transcience and mortality. Ac-

[27] Frederic Luther, *Microfilm: A History, 1839–1900* (Annapolis: National Microfilm Association, 1959), 24–25, 84, 94–95.

[28] For some of the early history of preservation work and research, see James L. Gear, "The Repair of Documents—American Beginnings," *American Archivist* 26(1963): 469–475.

[29] William J. Barrow, "Deacidification and Lamination of Deteriorated Documents, 1938–1963," *American Archivist* 28(1965): 285.

[30] Shapiro, "Putting the Past Under Glass," 244–245.

cordingly, "however venerated a relic, its decay is seldom admired"; indeed, "decay is more dreadful when it seems our fault."[31] With the advent and apparent perfection of preservation technology, archivists seemed capable of mastering decay; not to do so would only increase the "fault" of those whose responsibility it was to keep the permanent records of society.

As a result of the work of Barrow and others throughout the middle of the twentieth century, an active concern for the details and techniques of conservation developed and flourished among archivists. They learned more about the physical characteristics of their holdings, and they were increasingly disposed to act on the basis of that knowledge. Advancing far beyond early methods of "silking" or backing documents with synthetic crepeline, Barrow had perfected a method for deacidifying archival materials by about 1940, later maintaining that such a procedure extended their life expectancy "by a factor of from 8 to 10."[32] Archivists reported happily that they were using these procedures to good effect, along with the eventually controversial process of lamination (also developed by Barrow): Leon deVallinger, state archivist of Delaware, endorsed Barrow's method, reporting that his state archives had treated 5,000 documents in its conservation laboratory's first year of operation.[33] A kind of technological imperative took hold in archival thinking. Archivists could actively preserve their holdings; they could approach more nearly the long-desired goal of physical permanence. In the process, they did not doubt either the wisdom or the efficacy of doing so. They could do it, and they naturally assumed that they should.

Concern for conservation was suddenly everywhere in the archival profession. The very first article published in the new journal, the *American Archivist*, in 1938, dealt with the subject of "manuscript repair," and it was followed in subsequent issues by a string of related papers, many of them describing preservation and restoration laboratory techniques in great detail.[34] The Historical Records Survey of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration was actively concerned with preservation problems as it went about its business of surveying the documentary holdings of the various states.[35] Barrow appeared regularly on the programs of archival meetings, describing his own research and not unnaturally promoting his own methods and procedures. He and other preservation specialists found interested audiences among their archival colleagues. A session at the Society of American Archivists' second annual meeting in Springfield, Illinois, in 1938 dealt with "Fumigating, Cleaning, and Repairing Archival Material," and the large audience greeted the formal presentations with "an animated discussion."[36]

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the number of program sessions and journal articles on preservation activities, most focusing on specific techniques and positive

[31] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 147, 175, 143.

[32] William J. Barrow, *The Barrow Method of Restoring Deteriorated Documents* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1965), 7. On silking and other methods of document repair and reinforcement, see Gear, "Repair of Documents," 470–475.

[33] Leon deVallinger, "Lamination of Manuscripts at the Delaware State Archives, 1938–64," *American Archivist* 28(1965): 290–293.

[34] L. H. Smith, "Manuscript Repair in European Archives: I. Great Britain," *American Archivist* 1(1938): 1–22. See also Smith's "Manuscript Repair in European Archives: II. The Continent (France, Belgium, the Netherlands)," ibid., 51–77.

[35] William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus, 1969), 751–828.

[36] *American Archivist* 1(1938): 233; ibid., 2(1939): 23.

steps that archivists could take, continued to grow.[37] At the same time, though the concern for microfilm techniques and applications remained strong, consideration of preserving archival records through publication virtually disappeared from professional discussion.[38] With so much attention focused on the care and treatment of documents in their original form, archivists were—perhaps unconsciously, perhaps deliberately—restricting their notion of permanence. Increasingly, *permanence* became a technical term, a term that was defined by conservators and accepted by archivists in a limited, specific sense. More and more, *permanence* meant the physical permanence of archival collections, a goal which, thanks to the forward march of archival science, seemed attainable. "Today, for the first time," one technical report said expansively in 1964, "the possibility of preserving mankind's most significant records—in their original form and almost indefinitely—is at hand."[39]

Conservation Consciousness

Other aspects of professional culture reinforced this growing conservation consciousness. In April 1950, Arthur Kimberly of the National Archives announced the results of a study on archival record containers, approving the use of pressboard boxes (not specifically identified as being acid-neutral) covered with foil to retard fire damage. Two years later, the Hollinger Corporation advertised such a box for sale, again without any reference to its acid content, but highlighting the box's "unique metal edge construction, . . . no paste or glue to attract vermin."[40] Hollinger introduced in 1961 an archival file folder, "tested and approved by leading authorities," that was "100% Rope Manila Paper; PH Neutral Guaranteed," and in 1963 the Milltex Paper Company produced archival quality paper "for document, map and picture folders and for other uses where permanence is essential."[41] The Council on Library Resources funded a project to develop a "safer" archival box at about this same time. The result was the birth of what quickly became an archival staple and cynosure: the acid-free box, first advertised in the *American Archivist* in July 1966.[42] That journal had added a regular section of "Technical Notes" in April 1963, the first of which centered on some newly available microfilm equipment and, more significantly, on a test of various ballpoint pens to determine their suitability for use in making "permanent" records. In the following year, the journal took the next logical step. Deciding to practice what it preached with regard to physical permanence, the principal periodical for the archival profession in the United States

[37] See, for example, Adelaide E. Minogue, "Some Observations on the Flattening of Folded Records," *American Archivist* 8(1945): 115–121, and Minogue, "Treatment of Fire and Water Damaged Records," ibid., 9(1946): 17–25; James D. Breckenridge, "Have you Looked at Your Pictures Lately?" ibid., 17(1954): 25–36; Harry F. Lewis, "The Deterioration of Book Paper in Library Use," ibid., 22(1959): 309–322.

[38] The National Historical Publications Commission, revitalized in the early 1950s, did begin to promote documentary publishing during this period, but its main goals were scholarly use and wider dissemination of materials rather than preservation. See Mary A. Giunta, "The NHPRC: Its Influence on Documentary Editing," *American Archivist* 49(1986): 134–141, and Lester J. Cappon, "A Rationale for Historical Editing Past and Present," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., 23(1966): 56–75.

[39] "'P' Stands for Permanent," *The Laboratory: Current Developments in Instrumentation and Technique* (1964): 101.

[40] Arthur Kimberly, "New Developments in Record Containers," *American Archivist* 13(1950): 233–236; Hollinger advertisement, ibid., 15(1952): 46.

[41] Hollinger advertisement, *American Archivist* 24(1961): 131; Milltex advertisement, ibid., 26(1963): 468.

[42] Gladys T. Piez, "Archival Containers—A Search for Safer Materials," *American Archivist* 27(1964): 433–438; Pohlig Brothers advertisement, ibid., 29(1966): 393.

changed the paper on which it was printed to one defined as durable (i.e., able to withstand wear and tear) and permanent (i.e., sufficiently stable chemically to withstand internal deterioration).[43]

As concern for the physical permanence of their collections grew, archivists and conservators naturally began to study the deterioration and preservation of records more intensively. The results were both a greater understanding of the nature of the problem and a greater realization that active, ongoing programs were needed to address it. A number of national studies were commissioned, and the dimensions of the preservation challenge began to emerge. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) surveyed the condition of deteriorating library and archival materials and, with an activism that was typical of the Great Society era in which it appeared (1964), proposed a central national agency to address the problem. Ten years later ARL was working on "detailed specifications for a national system for preservation of library materials," which resulted in the formation of a National Conservation Advisory Board. On the regional level, too, archivists and librarians were banding together to advance the preservation cause in the interests of ensuring the permanence of their holdings. The New England (later Northeast) Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) was organized in 1973 to provide preservation and restoration services for that part of the country; several studies later explored the idea of setting up similar organizations elsewhere, especially in the West. The founding director of the NEDCC, George M. Cunha, became a sort of traveling missionary for the conservation gospel, and his works quickly became standard reading and reference points for archivists concerned about preserving their collections. In 1976 the Library of Congress sponsored a conference to outline the scope of a "national preservation program"; by the early 1980s the Society of American Archivists (SAA) had embarked, with money from the National Endowment for the Humanities, on a basic conservation program that sought, through workshops and publications, to spread awareness of physical conservation issues even more widely through the archival profession.[44]

So much thinking and worrying about the physical permanence of records resulted in archivists' and conservators' beginning to appreciate just how massive the problem was. This recognition was only aggravated as the number of archives holding valuable records grew throughout the 1970s, with more and more bulky collections expanding at an alarming rate. The spread of new technologies, especially those that were computer-based (tapes and disks, for example), further complicated the problem by adding new media for storing information, media that had their own particular problems and required their own special treatments. The 5,000 manuscript documents treated by the Delaware State Archives in the late 1930s, impressive in its own day, were now seen as only the very small tip of a very large iceberg.

[43] "Technical Notes," *American Archivist* 26(1963):263–266; announcement, ibid., 27(1964): 562.

[44] Many of these developments are described in Carolyn Clark Morrow, "National Preservation Planning and Regional Conservation Efforts," *Conserving and Preserving Library Materials,* ed. Kathryn Luther Henderson and William T. Henderson (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1983), 37–53. See also Ann Russell, "The Northeast Document Conservation Center: A Case Study of Cooperative Conservation," *American Archivist* 45(1982): 45–52; ARL, *The Preservation of Deteriorating Books: An Examination of the Problem with Recommendations for a Solution* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980). Cunha's work is summarized in his *Conservation of Library Materials: A Manual and Bibliography on the Care, Repair and Restoration of Library Materials,* 2 vol. (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1971), and its updated version, *Library and Archives Conservation: 1980s and Beyond,* 2 vol. (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

A kind of preservation apocalypticism set in, as archivists came to understand graphically not only what was needed to make their collections truly permanent, but also just how impossible it would be to do so with the time and resources that would ever conceivably be available. "The magnitude of the deterioration problem in American manuscript and printed records appears to be far greater than realized," William Barrow had said calmly enough in the 1960s, but in the following decades a steadily gloomier tone became the standard in any consideration of preservation and permanence. Cunha spoke of the "dire straits" the archival profession was in and estimated that as much as 80 percent of all materials in archives and library special collections was in need of some kind of treatment. Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, described the problem, which was of "cataclysmic proportions," as being "all the more serious because it [i.e., the slow deterioration of materials] is so undramatic."[45] Drama was not lacking from other quarters, however, as one report showed a conservator blowing on a handful of paper that scattered through the air like so much confetti. A film produced in 1987 and broadcast widely on public television showed a deputy librarian of Congress performing the same trick and, while a funeral bell tolled a steady peal of doom on the soundtrack, the narrator spoke sonorously of "these precious volumes [that] are burning away with insidious slow fires, . . . falling apart within their covers and within the very fortress meant to preserve them."[46] A study prepared for the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) concluded that no state even approached "the goal of providing adequate preservation" and estimated that a colossal $500 million would be needed to remedy the situation and to provide satisfactorily for the "permanently valuable government records [the state archives] need to preserve and make accessible."[47] Having become convinced of how important it was to preserve their physical holdings permanently, archivists began to realize how impossible it would be to do precisely that.

Retreat From the Absolute

Virtually everywhere in the profession there was a subtle but steady retreat from the idea of physical permanence as archivists had come to understand it. The National Archives had recognized as early as 1950 that "a selective, rather than a comprehensive, rehabilitation of records" was the only realistic choice, especially in large collections, though this distinction was often lost in the conservation euphoria of the following decades.[48] More to the point, archivists began to grow uncomfortable with the apparently limitless commitment that adherence to a notion of absolute permanence implied, and they began to view questions of appraisal and preservation in much more relative terms. Maynard Brichford, author of what became a standard manual on appraisal, felt constrained in 1977 to put the word *permanent* in quotation marks while describing how the value and

[45] Barrow, *Barrow Method for Restoring Deteriorated Documents,* 3; Cunha, *Conservation of Library Materials,* 1: 233, 140; *A National Preservation Program* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1980), 11–12, 13. Boorstin painted a picture of documentary deterioration as a kind of "silent killer" of civilization which had to be checked.

[46] *Slow Fires: On the Preservation of the Human Record* (Council on Library Resources, 1987). When the author showed this film to an introductory archives class recently, the students giggled through this melodramatic introduction to the problem.

[47] National Materials Advisory Board, *Preservation of Historical Records* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1986), 40; NAGARA, *Preservation Needs in State Archives* (Albany: NAGARA, 1986), 13, 2–3, 5.

[48] "The Rehabilitation of Paper Records," *National Archives Staff Information Paper No. 16* (December 1950), 5.

usefulness of records changed over time, thereby intimating that what was permanent about archives might not in fact endure. "The documented past is represented by a static body of surviving records," he wrote, "but the human perception of the past is dynamic." Archivists erred, therefore, if they imputed too great a degree of immutability to their collections.[49] Shortly thereafter, Brichford applied this belief specifically to the subject of preservation in archives, proposing a blunt "let it rot" philosophy. "Documents that need the conservator's attention, if they are to be preserved for posterity, may not be worth the cost of conservation," he argued before an SAA annual meeting. While acknowledging such an attitude as potentially "sinful," he added pointedly: "We have wasted a lot of money placing acid-laden documents in acid-neutral folders and boxes."[50]

A significant aspect of the retreat from the absolute of permanence was a renewed emphasis on the idea of the intrinsic value of records. T. R. Schellenberg had hinted at this idea in his discussion of the form and uniqueness of certain records, and the notion had been current in archival and preservation circles for some time. The archival glossary of 1974 included *intrinsic value,* prescribing its use to designate the worth of documents "dependent upon some unique factor," a not particularly helpful designation in singling out materials in collections the entirety of which claimed to be unique.[51] Concern over the possibility of throwing money into a bottomless conservation pit in the hope of achieving permanence led to a renewed consideration of intrinsic value. The National Archives formed a committee on the subject in 1979, which sought to outline the criteria for assessing the "qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical format the only archivally acceptable form for preservation." All records had such characteristics, of course, but some had them "to such a significant degree" that the originals had to be maintained and, if necessary, restored.[52] The report itemized nine standards by which to judge intrinsic value, including aesthetic value, exhibit potential, and cases where the physical form of the record might itself be a legitimate object of study. Far more tricky was the issue of "general and substantial public interest because of direct association with famous or historically significant" persons or events, a category that presumably covered items like the Declaration of Independence.[53] As with Justice Potter Stewart's supposed remark about pornography—"I can't define it, but I know it when I see it"—archivists were left with some guidelines for judging intrinsic value but with something less than a precise formula for evaluating it.

The decision to subject any particular records to preservation treatment remained an involved process, one in which priorities and desires had to be balanced against available resources and potential benefits. For the first time, archivists began to examine and rethink the technological imperative that had previously governed much of

[49] Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: SAA, 1977), 5.

[50] Maynard J. Brichford, "Seven Sinful Thoughts," *American Archivist* 43(1980): 14. That Brichford felt compelled to label this notion "sinful" is an indication of how much archivists had come to accept the responsibility of at least attempting to ensure the physical permanence of their collections.

[51] Evans, "Basic Glossary," *American Archivist* 37(1974): 424. See also T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 150–151, and Schellenberg's chapter on "Record Attributes" in *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 119–143.

[52] The committee's report, originally contained in *NARS Staff Information Paper No. 21* (September 1980), is reproduced in its entirety in the *Report of the Committee on the Records of Government* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 117–125; the quotations are at 118.

[53] Ibid., 120–121.

their approach to preservation work. The National Archives, for example, determined that only 0.5 percent of its holdings—a far cry from Cunha's 80 percent—should ever receive preservation laboratory treatment, with the remainder receiving no treatment, "maintenance" through proper housing in a good environment, or copying.[54]

At the same time, the focusing of renewed attention on the subject of appraisal led archivists to rethink the triple meaning of the idea of "preserving" records: collecting and acquiring the original documents; intervening to conserve or restore their physical condition; and preserving the information in an alternative format. The implications for the idea of permanence were to reemphasize the relative at the expense of the absolute. Leonard Rapport presented the case for reappraising and destroying records that already were in archives, in what was a serious blow to the notion of archives as truly permanent records. Arguing that there should be "no grandfather clause" for records, Rapport raised the possibility that permanence was a quality that was subject to change or even outright revocation: records that were permanent today might not be so permanent tomorrow.[55] Though his argument was controversial and, in fact, few archives have as yet followed his advice on a large scale, Rapport's point of view helped underline a growing archival attitude in which permanence seemed an unrealistic and unattainable ideal.

Other examples of this reconsideration of the idea of permanence emerged in professional discussion. In the middle 1980s, the SAA task force on goals and priorities (GAP) in its monumental and comprehensive report, *Planning for the Archival Profession*, nowhere referred to archives as permanent records, preferring instead to speak of "records of enduring value."[56] This distinction, relying on the participial form, was more than semantic or purely stylistic: the implication was that once the enduring value stopped enduring, the permanence of the records was at an end. At about the same time, even a preservation group recognized the problem and spoke of the idea of "acceptable permanence," treating information in its original form or copying it into some other form so that it could survive and be useful to a certain degree.[57] If the GAP report implied that permanence could exist for a time and then come to an end, this group seemed to argue that a limited amount of permanence might be enough. In either case, the absolute had been dethroned, and archivists were left with the vague sense that permanence simply meant nothing any more. Whether consciously or not, the word permanent seemed to be disappearing from the archival lexicon, even as it was lingering in the archival mind.

Archives Without Permanence

Thus, the idea of permanence as it is understood by archivists has changed considerably over time, passing from an unattainable desire to an absolute value within the realm of achievement to an extremely relative notion of little clarity. Today, the idea may be in the process of evolving out of usage altogether. This should not come as a surprise; the twentieth century is not a congenial climate for absolutes of any kind. At the same time, an information-rich society such as the modern one is inclined to accord any particular datum or document a lesser value than would an information-

[54] National Archives and Records Service, *Twenty Year Records Preservation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: NARS, 1984), no pagination.

[55] Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause," 143–150.

[56] *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago: SAA, 1986), 8 and elsewhere.

[57] Materials Advisory Board, *Preservation of Historical Records,* 6.

poor society. If this is the case, however, what are the implications for archival theory and practice? How should archivists think and what should they do in a professional world without the security of the traditional idea of permanence? As might be expected, there are more questions than answers.

First, do conservation decisions become simpler or more complex? The restriction of the idea of permanence to mean primarily physical permanence instilled in archivists a set of instinctive habits, the value of which seemed impossible to doubt. Would any archivist, given the choice, actually prefer to store records in acidic folders rather than acid-free ones? Is not Brichford's sinful thought precisely that, and even foolhardy as well? From one perspective the benefits of acid-free storage appear so self-evident as to defy challenge. From another, such an activity is at best an exercise in fighting a rear-guard battle that will only delay the inevitable for a brief time. Not even the most enthusiastic conservator can say with any certainty what the measurable benefits of acid-free storage are. At worst, therefore, archivists may indeed have simply wasted their money. At the same time, preservation activities become a slippery slope, leading inexorably to ever more elaborate and expensive procedures. In the way conservators have "sold" conservation consciousness and in the way archivists have been disposed to "buy" it, archivists have been lulled into a false sense of security about the permanence of their collections. As a result, they have lost sight of the larger purposes of their work—preserving over time information that is of benefit and use to society—and have restricted the available options for approaching that goal.

Refocusing their attention on the permanence of the information in records rather than on the documents themselves will restore a broader view and will reemphasize the possibilities and the usefulness of preserving information in formats other than the original. For larger archives, this will inevitably mean a better use of scanty resources: the National Archives found, for example, that physical conservation of one large group of heavily-used records was more expensive by factors of two or three to one than transferring the information they contained to other media.[58] For smaller repositories, unable to provide or acquire sophisticated alternative technologies, the implications will be less dramatic but no less real: acid-free folders (which actually touch the documents) might still be a necessity, for example, but the money spent on acid-free boxes (which touch only the folders) might well be applied to other purposes. In repositories of whatever size, the intrinsic value of records might be assessed more rigorously, perhaps with the assistance of subject specialists, before materials are submitted to the conservation laboratory. A harsher, more demanding standard of what archivists wish to preserve—and why—might restrict even further the amount and nature of material that is submitted for conservation treatment.

Second, do appraisal and accessioning decisions become simpler or more complex in a world without physical permanence? Abandoning the implicit guarantee of permanence that archival preservation has come to entail, will certain repositories not have freer reign to define and redefine the scope and purpose of their collections, as well as greater flexibility in managing them? Will an active documentation strategy approach to assembling archival materials make constant redefinition of what is permanent and what is not more likely? Despite their reluctance to do so heretofore, will repositories not be in a better position to follow Rapport's advice and to

[58] NARS, *A Study of the Alternatives for the Preservation and Reference Handling of the Pension, Bounty-Land, and Compiled Military Service Records in the National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: NARS, 1984), esp. Table 6.2.

cross the line between permanent and valuable on the one hand and impermanent and valueless on the other? Though no one would argue for archival collections that respond only to research fads (real or perceived), the result may be archives that are more regularly forced to reexamine their basic purposes and to respond more directly to the needs of their users and of society at large. At the same time, however, the ongoing reappraisal of collections will surely complicate the acquisition of material. Will records creators—whether private individuals seeking repositories for their papers (as traditionally defined) or officers of the parent organizations that archives serve—be reluctant to entrust their recorded memory to archivists without the assurance that it will be safeguarded as long as possible? The abandonment of permanence as an archival ideal may open new options in the management of historical records, but it may also lead the creators of those records to look elsewhere for assistance in preserving them.

Third, what impact will new technologies have on the notion of permanence? By almost any standard, virtually all of the newer means of recording information, though more flexible, are less permanent than older ones. The contrast is most visible at the extremes: magnetic impulses on computer disks are certainly more unstable than baked clay tablets. The continued development of the technological means for recording information will therefore increase the options available to archivists for preserving information and for transferring it from one medium to another. Like physical conservation, however, such transfers are not without cost, and archivists will be forced to evaluate their options repeatedly, resisting the natural human temptation to rely on similar solutions to different problems. Choice is a fine thing and seems to possess inherent value. The availability of choice, however, does not make the choosing any easier.

Finally, does the decline of archival permanence shed any light on the fundamental motivations that cause creators to create records and archivists to keep them? Why do individuals or administrators not simply throw their records away once their immediate usefulness is passed? Why do they give them to archivists, and why do archivists lavish such attention on them? What are the intrinsic values of certain records, whether for individuals—diaries, love letters, records of significant life-events; for corporate bodies—the company's charter, the denomination's organizational minutes, the school's first enrollment register; or for whole societies—the Declaration of Independence? What is the basis for the human disposition to keep these records, to keep them in as near pristine condition as possible for as long as possible? Is it merely revulsion at even the smallest reminders of our own mortality, as Lowenthal maintains, or is there a larger, even quasi-religious meaning? What are the connections between records and relics? How do both attempt to ensure the continued presence of past events, persons, and things, and what ongoing meaning do they therefore have? To argue that permanence is devoid of meaning may be possible, but do certain basic human impulses thereby go unfulfilled?

Such larger questions are surely beyond the scope of the archivist's daily professional practice. They do, however, constitute appropriate subjects for future research and reflection. Questions about the meaning of archival vocabulary are always relevant because they lead to greater clarity in thinking about what archivists do and why they do it. In maintaining a healthy balance between theory and practice, the tension is helpful for any living and growing profession.