

Presidential Address

Searching for Common Ground

SUE E. HOLBERT



Sue E. Holbert served as president of the Society of American Archivists in 1987-88. She joined the manuscripts staff of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1972 (after having previously worked in the Society's publications division), and has served since 1979 as Minnesota State Archivist. She was a member of the SAA Council, 1981-85, and chaired the Government Records Section, 1980-81. She was elected as an SAA Fellow in 1983. She was deputy coordinator of the Minnesota State Historical Records Advisory Board from 1978 to 1988 and, at the national level, headed the State Coordinators' Steering Committee, 1985-86. She gave this presidential address to the fifty-second annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Atlanta, Georgia on 29 September 1988. At that event she chose her predecessor at the MHS, Lucile M. Kane, to introduce her. Holbert, in turn, paid tribute to her friend and mentor, calling attention to the

boundless generosity of spirit and the basic optimism that characterized her forty years of dedication to archives service and to historical research and writing.

AT THE BEGINNING OF my term as president I emphasized the importance of remembering the underlying goals and objectives that all archivists share, even in the face of what I see as the profession's increasing specialization and fragmentation. This unity is necessary if we are to prevail against social and economic forces that attach little value to knowledge about the past. If we are to overcome those forces, we will have to co-

operate, not only among ourselves but also with other institutions and organizations. We must both learn from and educate those who control the creation and use of contemporary records but who do not necessarily share our concerns about the historical record. If we do so, there is hope.

This idea of "searching for common ground" is not particularly new. In fact, it has been a recurring theme of distinguished

colleagues writing gracefully and forcefully in the *American Archivist* in years past. In 1955, Morris Radoff talked of a custom of presidents to pore over the addresses of predecessors. He told the members, "It is . . . the need for a tradition, for a solid, unifying base, which makes us pore over the words of our past presidents. . . . We are seeking there . . . the elusive something which does, or ought to, bind us together." He quoted his predecessor, Wayne C. Grover, on the folly of even thinking of parting company with records managers. Even earlier, Philip C. Brooks said, "What I would like most to do here is to get at some of the common denominators that bind us together, and beyond that some of the things we have in common with allied disciplines." In 1983, Frank G. Burke, Margaret S. Child, and J. Frank Cook addressed the subject of cooperation among archivists and with others. There are many other examples.¹

Why return to thoroughly plowed ground, to provide further exhortations to the necessity of cooperation? The reasons are fairly obvious. Archivists are few in number. We do not have a serviceable definition of the word "archivist" and until now we have had no distinguishing badge. We are marginalized in a society that most values instantaneousness and cost-effectiveness. To quote a successor president rather than a predecessor, Frank B. Evans nearly twenty-five years ago described a lack of a deep-rooted tradition of methodical recordkeeping in government or elsewhere in the United States: "Records were usually regarded as but the means to an immediate end, the

conduct of current business"² If records in the United States do not get much respect, then neither do archivists. We generally do not control our own fates and cannot command the resources we need. We are left out of decisions about the creation of data and potential future use. At the same time, modern media make it ever less likely that we will be able to review records from the archival perspective, once their creators and custodians have moved them from active use to the storeroom. Feeling isolated and helpless, we remind each other to stick together and work together, and we recognize our need for sanction and support from others.

It is cold comfort to realize that many of those "others" may be feeling lonely and helpless, too. Historians and history teachers long have decried abolition of history requirements, declines in enrollment, and cuts in their faculty ranks. Carl N. Degler, recent president of the Organization of American Historians, worried about the fragmenting of American history that has occurred in the last twenty years and he proposed a new "framing interpretation" to reintegrate the parts. Historians, then, also are specialized and fragmented.³

Speaking for the humanities disciplines, Douglas Greenberg, vice president of the American Council of Learned Societies, responded to the criticism of William J. Bennett and others by saying, "It would be naive to think that humanistic scholarship and teaching have very many willing and ready allies in either political party." Greenberg's spirits were not raised, I imagine, by Lynne V. Cheney's recent report, "to the President, the Congress, and the public," on the status of the humanities in America, as viewed from her position as

¹Radoff, "What Should Bind Us Together," *American Archivist* 19 (1956): 3; Brooks, "Archivists and Their Colleagues: Common Denominators," *American Archivist* 14 (1951): 37; Burke, Child, and Cook, *American Archivist* 46 (1983), in articles entitled respectively "Archival Cooperation," 293-305; "Reflections on Cooperation Among Professions," 286-292; and "A Time to Take Stock," especially pages 11 and 12.

²"Modern Methods of Arrangement of Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 241.

³"In Pursuit of an American History," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 1-12.

chairman [sic] of the National Endowment for the Humanities. She recognized and deplored declining interest and disappearing requirements for humanities coursework; but she added salt to the wound by attributing much of the blame to the academy itself, citing over-specialization, lack of reward for teaching as opposed to research and publishing, and politicization of the curriculum. The *Washington Post* subsequently published an opinion piece which argued that the result of those trends is a decline in interest in the humanities among students. Being isolated and threatened, humanities departments "circle the wagons. . . and leave the rest of the world outside." The editorial writer concluded that, "By any reasonable standard, the humanities in America are, individually and collectively, endangered species."⁴

Greenberg called upon his colleagues to learn to play the political game as well as they do in the sciences and the arts. But we know that scientists are split over the increased emphasis on applied research, to the detriment of basic research, and are facing loud and troubling debate about the ethics of science. Scientists also have concerns about how new methods of information storage may change the "time-honored" practice of peer review of research results prior to dissemination.⁵ The chairman of the Information Resources Administrative Councils, a group of federal information managers, has announced his intention to work to improve the skills and the status of records managers, whose role, he says, has diminished as automation has in-

creased. Attorneys, judges, and vendors have questions about the acceptability of evidence in machine-readable form. Even John Sununu, the governor of New Hampshire [before becoming White House Chief of Staff to President Bush], raised some alarms about automated recordkeeping:

I'm not sure all the details are preserved properly with the process of dumping from one computer to another. A lot of historical steps are lost if you preserve the final result electronically but lose the individual steps.

He challenged the idea of an electronic signature because "the public is entitled to the permanence of a personal signature on a policy document" and he worried about privacy of information in electronic databases, noting that special interest groups—not the general public—are the ones pressing for computer access to state records. He questioned whether the state should spend "millions and millions of dollars" to provide access for these groups, perhaps to exploit the information more quickly than government can.⁶

It may seem to us that librarians are in many ways better off than we, but they do not believe they have the world by the tail. The current policy to "privatize" dissemination (and perhaps creation or compilation) of federal information radically affects the premise on which librarians have operated—that such data is owned by the public and should be equally available to all. If costs rise or a machine is needed to gain access, are we not prohibiting access to the many in favor of elites? Nor are librarians satisfied with their public image. Americans value libraries but not necessarily librarians.

My recitation of concerns about modern-

⁴Greenberg, editorial in *ACLS Newsletter* 1:3, second series (Summer 1988): 3; Cheney, "Humanities in America," published in full in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 September 1988: A17-A23; Jonathan Yardley, "Oh, the Humanities!," *Washington Post*, 19 September 1988.

⁵As evidence of the last point, the program of the 1988 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science features a session on technology and scientific peer review.

⁶John Babcock, chairman of IRAC, quoted in *Government Computer News*, 1 August 1988; Rod Paul quoted Sununu in "New Hampshire's Governor Preaches High-Tech Solutions to Age-Old Problems," *Governing*, August 1988: 54.

day information could continue at length. Many who probably do not see themselves as having problems in common with ours in fact do. For example, the 1988 conference of the American Society for Information Science includes a session entitled "Information Malpractice: Spectre or Reality?" featuring a representative of a major legal publisher, an attorney, and a professor. New questions surround copyright because of new technologies. The "end-users" of data in business and government as well as in libraries and archives are frustrated at unfriendly systems; common sense doesn't get you far when you face a terminal.⁷

I have been impressed with how rapidly the issue of the "brittle book" has become widely known and how resources for microfilming have increased because of it. (There is a lesson for us. Big causes require popular phrases, which we seem unable to coin.) Despite bigger filming efforts, the crisis of the brittle book is not solved. Ellen R. McCrady, editor of *Abbey Publications*, targeted to book and paper conservators, is valiantly trying to gather a group of interested parties at the meeting of the Technical Association of the Pulp and Paper Industry in Washington in October 1988 to generate a national strategy to tackle the problem from the other end. She points out that use of alkaline paper "for anything that might become part of a library or archive collection" will do far more, at less cost, than microfilming, restoration, or deacidification ever can. She lists a number of constituency groups, admitting freely that many individuals and organizations already are doing research, producing reports, endorsing resolutions on this subject, educating, and lobbying.⁸

Ellen McCrady and I are on the same

track. We believe we have to take what we have and join together to use it effectively. To give credit where credit is due, Nancy A. Sahli made this point to the 1987 annual meeting of the State Historical Records Coordinators. We had just heard a very fine paper by Larry J. Hackman, who proposed a national historical records policy and described an organizational structure and a procedure to achieve it. Nancy did not disagree with Larry's premise that it would be useful to agree upon such a policy, which would emphasize the value of records and define the issues to be addressed if American society is to adequately preserve and use these records. Noting that Hackman introduced new elements and ideas in an already crowded field, she pointed out that the ad hoc group which had met in Annapolis in September 1986 had drawn up a statement incorporating a dozen requisites for a national records program. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) has endorsed a shorter and different list of elements. Other statements of archival goals and objectives, agendas, and action plans are abroad in the land. These many voices produce a cacophony, not a symphony. If the genesis and seriousness of these various documents is confusing within the records community, how can we expect to convince others that we know what is needed and that we have the constituents to back us?⁹

⁷All these questions are raised in the ASIS program cited above.

⁸McCrady letter to "Dear Friend, Subscriber, or Associate," 18 June 1988.

⁹Hackman, "A National Historical Records Policy for the United States," and Sahli, "National Records Program: Where Is It Now, Where Is It Going?," papers presented at the Annual Meeting of the State Historical Records Coordinators, Boston, 6 November 1987. The evolution and publication history of various lists of "elements of a national historical records program" are complex and obscure. An initial list of nine elements was drafted by the State Historical Records Coordinators Steering Committee in July 1985, discussed at the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators meeting in August 1985, and published in *NAGARA Clearinghouse*, September 1985. The NHPRC endorsed the idea of outlining a "national historical rec-

I said earlier that I find some room for hope. Then I used some illustrations to show that archivists are not the only people who feel troubled by some issues having to do with records and history—some issues old and persistent, some arising new from the unstoppable growth and diffusion of computer use. If we can agree on a brief statement, employing ordinary English of some power, I believe there are many, many groups which can be enlisted in our cause.

Nearly fifty organizations, plus coordinating committees in more than half of the states, support the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCC). Some of these groups are small and have little in the way of financial resources, but all have members and all have wider publics to whom they speak. It is quite remarkable what NCC, primarily in the person of Page Putnam Miller, has been able to do; we and the American public owe her a large debt of gratitude. There is a myriad of other organized groups and agencies which at least in part have explicit aims and interests that coincide or intersect with ours.

Among the important groups on such a

list, several federal agencies and institutions spring to mind—the National Endowments for the Humanities and for the Arts, the Department of Education (because of its role in education, of course, but also and especially because of its role in library funding), the National Archives and Records Administration and the NHPRC which it harbors, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution. As federal entities, of course, they cannot subscribe to a lobbying service such as NCC. There are other organizations such as the Council on Library Resources, the Research Libraries Group, the Association of Records Managers and Administrators, the American Society for Information Science, and ACLS. Most of these organizations have state or regional associations. NHPRC, for instance, works through a board in each state or territory. There are dozens of library groups and local associations of records managers. There are foundations and trusts which already have expressed an interest in issues that concern us; among them are the Mellon Foundation and the Getty Trust. There are genealogy groups of all descriptions. There are a number of organizations concerned with conservation and preservation of paper, books, art works, and other materials. Thinking globally, there are the International Council of Archives, sister archives and library groups abroad, and the United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization.

In addition to these organizations, there are others that *ought* to share our agenda if they do not now. They just have not been educated or convinced of it. I think of the Department of the Interior, with its responsibilities for historic properties; the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the organization of state historic preservation officers, and the state offices that rely upon and create valuable records; booksellers, book buyers and readers; trade and manufacturers' groups, especially those that aim

ords program” and authorized a group of selected coordinators and commission staff and members to discuss the proposal further, which resulted in the addition of a tenth program element. These elements, plus eight specific action steps recommended by the Steering Committee for NHPRC implementation, were described in a 12 February 1986 discussion paper prepared by George L. Vogt, then director of NHPRC's Records Program. The ten elements were published in NHPRC's publication, *Annotation*, April 1986, which reported that the commission had adopted some of the recommended actions and added others. An ad hoc group of coordinators, documentary editors, and commission members and staff meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, in September 1986, added two elements, making a list of a dozen. The group passed other resolutions endorsing the idea of a national heritage documentary trust and endorsing an SAA effort to mount a “national congress on historical records” to capitalize on the bicentennial of the Constitution. This meeting was described in *Annotation*, December 1986, which lists the additional elements and notes NHPRC action on the Annapolis group's resolutions.

at the government market; and standards-setting organizations. Stretching further, cannot we think of museum managers and museum goers, who have an affinity with us if not a direct tie; attorneys and judges, who rely heavily on the records of past decisions; environmentalists and scientists who must trace causes and effects over time; documentary film makers (and the film industry as a whole); magazine editors and other publishers who rely on us to provide the historical photos they use in abundance? There also are vendors who cater to the library, business, and government markets. We appreciate the Spacesaver Corporation's contribution for our annual meeting reception; have we ever asked such vendors for program funds to preserve records or process or catalog them? Would conservation materials suppliers contribute to research or help argue for adoption of alkaline paper as the standard? Might not the manufacturers of catalog cards (if cards are not obsolete yet) or archives boxes contribute?

To be sure, there are overlaps and possibly conflicts in these lists. Some groups should be among the convinced but at present would be on a list of those to be convinced instead. Not all of the organizations I have named always see things as we do, and we know there has been friction if not downright competition or hostility at times. The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) took the local government records bull by the horns, and what did it get but grief! At the same time, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators has its own five-year plan for the improvement of local records programs, and SAA pretty much sits on the sidelines and worries about government records in the abstract. The most significant and valid criticism of the AASLH effort to date probably is the lack of intense and widespread prior consultation. If first there had been general agreement about how

best to assist local governments, perhaps there could have been a truly joint committee guiding the program and the matter of who received the funds and which organization sponsored it would not have mattered so much. The point in bringing up a rather sore subject is that consultation and cooperation are nicer than fights over scarce resources. We need to make all our money and all our human effort count for as much as possible.

If we could coalesce even some of the many players I have envisioned, a clear, strong message might get to Congress, our state legislatures, funding agencies and foundations, business and government leaders, and all the others who must understand the nation's records problems and help to solve them. Where in the world could we begin?

Probably every president of SAA has believed her or his years in the archives business have been extraordinarily exciting and fruitful. I am no exception. In the last few years SAA, other organizations, and individual archivists have conducted a number of major studies and have produced excellent reports and recommendations. They address many critical issues, among them:

- overall planning and setting of archival priorities;¹⁰
- the current condition of historical records, in the various states¹¹ and in the federal government;¹²

¹⁰Society of American Archivists, Task Force on Goals and Priorities, *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago: SAA, 1986); and SAA Committee on Goals and Priorities, *An Action Agenda for the Archival Profession: Institutionalizing the Planning Process* (Chicago: SAA, 1988). Also relevant here is the continuing effort to define elements of a national historical records program (see note 9).

¹¹Lisa B. Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States* (Albany, NY: National Association of State [now Government] Archives and Records Administrators, 1983). See also the state publications reporting on

- preservation of historical records generally,¹³ and in state archives;¹⁴
- improving the public's awareness of the importance of archives and archivists.¹⁵

In addition to the substance of these reports, there have been some effective outreach tools—the film *Slow Fires*, and brochures such as the SAA's "Who is the 'I' in Archives?" and NAGARA's "State Government and the Public Interest" and "Warning: We are Losing our Past"—that might be more fully exploited. Collectively the reports provide us with some sound data and some useful ideas from people who know whereof they speak—people with credibility, both inside and outside our ranks. We cannot always defer until another study is done or another idea surfaces. I believe it is time to gather the reports, find their common threads, select a few of those that would be of interest to the widest possible public if explained succinctly, issue a clarification call, and get some action.

By calling for a synthesis of the key points of these documents and a concerted, shameless effort to package a sales kit, I do not mean to downplay what we have accomplished. There are any number of excellent goals, objectives, activities, and achievements that are not mentioned here.

NHPRC-funded records needs and assessment studies undertaken from 1982 to the present.

¹²Committee on the Records of Government, *Report* (Washington: The Committee, 1985).

¹³National Research Council, *Preservation of Historical Records* (Washington: NRC, 1986).

¹⁴National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, *Preservation Needs in State Archives* (Albany: NAGARA, 1986). Also relevant here is Linda James and Sue Holbert, *Standing the Test of Time: Quality Assurance for State and Local Government Records Microfilming* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986).

¹⁵The SAA Task Force on Archives and Society, now the Committee on Public Information, has produced or sponsored a series of reports since 1983, the most well-known being Sidney Levy and Albert Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: SAA, 1985).

Efforts to understand recordkeeping in scientific endeavors, new ways of looking not at documents but at what needs to be documented, certification, work on thesauri, and a plethora of other items deserve our continued attention. The new Committee on Goals and Priorities action agenda concentrates on some areas I have not addressed at all.¹⁶

I have come to the conclusion, however, that the extreme ends of the records cycle are or can be of the greatest interest to the widest public. This suggests the need to focus public attention on the physical media on which information is captured, and on the public uses of historical data.

Building upon the publicity surrounding "brittle books," the archives, library, historical, and other communities could encourage the development and use of improved information media. The problems inherent in unstable media and the long-term costs of preserving or reformatting information recorded on such media are not too difficult to explain to the layperson. If office supplies purchasers, book buyers, and others demanded archival media, such media would be developed and or marketed at more affordable prices. This is an area in which the individual citizen could play a direct and important part.

On the other end of the spectrum, we must collect and use the best examples we can find of how information is used to the public's benefit—particularly information preserved in archives. Historical records enabled the government to compensate Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. They have provided an opportunity for a skeptical public to test and retest findings pertaining to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. They hold the key to determining what is happening to our air, water, and soil. They allow veterans to receive their benefits. They show that you are a citizen

¹⁶CGAP, *An Action Agenda*.

or legal resident and that someday you are to receive Social Security payments. A strong case can and must be made that everyone loses when important information is lost. This emphasis on use harks back to the issue of the media but has other aspects to be exploited: accessibility, equality, integrity, and democracy.

Most of SAA's committees, task forces, and roundtables are focused on matters that are of little obvious interest or concern to the uninitiated. We must do good work and manage well and serve our institutions and our particular publics effectively. We do not deserve broader support if we do not continue to strive to improve archival practice. Automated techniques in archives or the education of archival managers may be crucially important to us, but these workplace issues are not going to captivate a general audience or even the power-brokers. We talk to ourselves too much.

One of the disappointments of the last few years has been the inability of the archival and documentary editing community so far to capitalize on the bicentennial of the Constitution. Given the general fizzle of the celebration of this document, perhaps we would not have had the public platform we hoped. Some of our attempts were rebuffed, such as the proposal to hold a records congress in Philadelphia. The idea of using the bicentennial as the occasion to establish a Documentary Heritage Trust, somewhat analogous to the independent National Trust for Historic Preservation, seemed to have promise. However, that effort appears to be at a standstill, after run-

ning afoul of a familiar problem: the lack of sufficient communication and consultation to develop a broadly based constituency. The State Historical Records Coordinators assembled in Boston nearly a year ago and adopted a resolution instructing their leadership to consult with appropriate parties about calling a cultural congress to bring about a "Cultural Heritage Bill of Rights of the American People" in conjunction with the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights. We have until December 15, 1991; could a coalition be formed around this idea?

Money is always the question, and I suppose we would need an angel. If funds could be found, I suggest that SAA develop a short and snappy records agenda with popular appeal by bringing together the major strategist or author behind each of the major documents referred to earlier (and others I may have overlooked). The resulting statement could be sent to an extensive list of cultural and professional organizations, with a deadline for comment. The drafters would consider those comments and present a final version for endorsement by as many organizations, institutions, and agencies as possible. This could include individual archives, museums, and libraries. In the meantime, of course, strategies for using and disseminating the statement must be devised. The major characteristic of the document I have in mind (in addition to brevity and lucidity) is that it would not be SAA's or ALA's or AASLH's, but it would belong to all of us.