

## Case Studies

# A Documentation Strategy Case Study: Western New York

RICHARD J. COX

**Abstract:** Documentation strategy has emerged as one of the major new archival concepts of the 1980s. The emergence of interest in it is a healthy sign for the archival profession's quest to identify, select, and preserve records of enduring value. Yet, the documentation strategy is still a largely untested concept. This essay describes the strategy's application in documenting geographical localities, in this case western New York, and, as a result, poses a number of additional questions about the documentation strategy that still need answering.

*About the author:* Richard J. Cox is Lecturer at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Pittsburgh. He is a member of the SAA Council and has written extensively on archival topics. As staff for the New York Historical Records Program Development Project until fall 1988, he assisted the western New York test. He has co-taught SAA's documentation strategy seminar since 1987. He acknowledges the assistance of the following persons in the preparation of the essay: Larry Hackman and Bruce Dearstyne, directors of the statewide project; Joyce Everingham, Western New York Library Resources Council; Shonnie Finnegan, State University of New York at Buffalo; and Helen Samuels and Tim Ericson, who made numerous useful comments on the essay.

LIKE ALL PROFESSIONALS, ARCHIVISTS sometimes fall captive to trendy buzz words, terms, and phrases, and suffer the usual mixed results from their use. In the 1980s one of those terms has been *documentation strategy*. In the case of documentation strategy, however, the reasons for its sudden emergence are good, and the results from such a strategy's use and discussion about its applications are promising.

Interest in documentation strategy has evolved from the archival profession's general uneasiness with its effectiveness in identifying and selecting records having continuing or enduring value. Although archivists are rightly confident that they have saved many important manuscripts and records, they also know they have preserved information of marginal and redundant value or have failed to fill significant gaps in their documentation. The increasing quantities of records, a growing complexity in the nature and sources of creation of these records, expanding uses of technology to create, manipulate, and store information, and the extremely slow growth in resources to deal with these concerns have all made archivists more nervous about how well they can be expected to identify, select, and preserve valuable historical materials.

These concerns, and the efforts to resolve them, are signs of a healthy profession. For too long archivists have been prone to view their world and their responsibilities within narrow institutional parameters. Although records are created by individuals and individual institutions, the formation of these records is shaped by many external influences, such as government and legal regulations and cultural trends. Archivists are now asking more and better questions about such influences. Instead of just looking at what a repository should collect, archivists are also asking questions about how they can document society. Do the records held in our archival repositories add up to a thorough documentation of society's past? Are our repository acquisition policies even

roughly approximate to the issues and concerns that need addressing in documenting society? These, and many other concerns, are leading to cooperative efforts in analysis, planning, and action such as those suggested by the documentation strategy.

Although the documentation strategy has been more than adequately defined,<sup>1</sup> two points should be kept in mind when reading the following description of its test in documenting localities. First, although it was developed to deal with some of the serious concerns already mentioned, the documentation strategy is intended to supplement rather than replace traditional methods of archival appraisal. Documentation strategy is not a synonym for all archival appraisal, although unfortunately it has fallen prey to just such use. Second, the documentation strategy is largely hypothetical at this point and its supposed benefits are largely untested.

The western New York documentation strategy case study described here was part of the New York Historical Records Program Development Project, funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and administered by the New York State Archives and Records Administration in 1986-88. The project grew out of a major statewide assessment of historical records and historical records programs in New York done in 1982-83. One major conclusion of this assessment was that historical records programs lacked coordination in collecting records, resulting in uncertainty about how well the Empire State, even with more than two thousand repositories holding millions of documents,

<sup>1</sup>Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109-24; Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and A Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 12-47; and Philip N. Alexander and Helen W. Samuels, "The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987): 518-31.

was being documented.<sup>2</sup> It was acknowledged that some kind of coordinated and cooperative analysis, planning, and action was necessary to rectify these problems, and the Western New York Project was an effort to experiment with their solutions.

Because documenting New York was considered too large and complex an undertaking to tackle all at once, the New York State Archives and Records Administration decided that a regional test, of between one and two years and involving many institutions and individuals, could serve to evaluate potential mechanisms for accomplishing this task. It was assumed that documentation approaches used successfully on the regional level could be reapplied throughout the state. The state's six western counties were selected because within that region there existed all the ingredients necessary to conduct a viable test of the documentation strategy concept: a variety of historical records programs, a number of archivists and other historical records custodians, records users, a rich and diverse history, and, most important, a regional institution—the Western New York Library Resources Council—that could support such documentation analysis, planning, and implementation.<sup>3</sup>

The Western New York Project intended to explore a number of questions about documentation. How well were regions of the state being documented through exist-

ing archival practices? Could the documentation strategy be used, or adapted, to help historical records programs and others evaluate and strengthen a geographical area's documentation? Could repositories be persuaded to revise their acquisition policies and could records creators be persuaded to create archival programs to ensure that the adequate documentation is created and retained? What kind of documentation procedures needed to be developed for documenting all of New York? What would the project teach the archival profession about the documentation strategy's effectiveness in documenting society? The project provided partial answers to these questions.

The Western New York Project followed the documentation strategy process as it has been described. The initial step in this project was to assemble an advisory group to analyze the quality of documentation in western New York. The group consisted of archivists, historians and other researchers, librarians, officially appointed local historians,<sup>4</sup> and the director of a regional service agency charged with assisting local historical societies and other organizations. All of these individuals were selected because of their knowledge of and interest in the history of western New York. They also represented a fairly even geographical distribution throughout the six counties.

While this group was being assembled, a tentative framework for regional documentation analysis and planning was developed. This framework included several major parts. Fifteen topics, encompassing the breadth of human activity, were identified, based on an anthropological conceptualization that had been used fairly successfully by several state archival institutions for evaluation of their acquisition

<sup>2</sup>*Toward A Usable Past: Historical Records in the Empire State* (Albany: New York Historical Records Advisory Board, 1984). This report focused on private papers, public records, and institutional and organizational records. The Western New York Project had a similar wide focus.

<sup>3</sup>The actual configuration of counties was determined by the system of nine regional library research and resource councils. These councils, with two decades of service to libraries, were likely choices for sponsoring such documentation work because of their experience with regions, existing mechanisms to coordinate cooperative efforts, and, in the case of a number of regions, their interest in archives and historical records.

<sup>4</sup>New York State has an elaborate system of town, village, municipal, and county historians appointed by the local governments.

programs.<sup>5</sup> The framework also included a simple time delineation of past, present, and future created to allow the working group to differentiate between the region's historical documentation, the needs of documenting the more recent past, and anticipated future documentation needs. Finally, definitions of topical significance and documentation quality were developed to assist the working group to evaluate the significance of individual topics to the western New York region and the quality of documentation currently held by western New York repositories, institutional archives, and major records creators<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 1 for a sample worksheet that was produced and reflects the definition for agriculture).

After assembling the working group and developing the analytical framework, the western New Yorkers met six times from spring 1987 to spring 1988. This group discussed the nature and quality of documentation in western New York (only beginning to analyze what repositories actually held and to compare these holdings to documentation needs), the process of evaluating it, and the tools and products needed for

guiding such geographically based documentation analysis and planning. Although the project began with the goal of producing and implementing a written plan for the improved documentation of New York's western counties, the group fell short of this objective. In hindsight, it is fair to state that the goal was unrealistic for a process that was entirely new and untested, and that perhaps stretched the limits of the documentation strategy concept. Notwithstanding the initial assumption that six counties would constitute a manageable context for the analysis, the group discovered that a region equalled the world in the complexity of documentation and mechanisms needed to evaluate and strengthen it. Still, it was valuable for the region, the state, and the archival profession to test these ideas; some lessons were learned and major benefits gained from the work that was done.

Participants in the working group concluded that the process of examining documentation helped to evaluate the acquisitions of historical records repositories, open channels of communication, and build bridges of cooperation between historical records repositories and users. Several members of the working group referred to the process as an excellent consciousness-raising exercise, even if it seemed overly subjective at times. The process drew needed attention to the overall documentation of western New York, a matter not being considered carefully enough by the region's repositories and individuals. Underlying the participants' thoughts seemed to be the notion that although this process is worth doing, it requires significant effort and discussion to accomplish. The failure to develop a full documentation plan was partially counter-balanced by the recognition, then, that a good start had been made to prepare and implement such a plan.

The working group also recognized that in order to be successful they needed more detailed procedures or guidelines for conducting a geographically focused documen-

<sup>5</sup>For a description of such efforts, refer to Judith E. Endelman, "Looking Backward to Plan for the Future: Collection Analysis for Manuscript Repositories," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 340-55. The topics included agriculture; arts and architecture; business, industry, and manufacturing; education; environmental affairs and natural resources; labor; medicine and health care; military; politics, government, and law; populations; recreation and leisure; religion; science and technology; social organization and activity; and transportation and communication. These topics are defined in the draft local documentation guide available from the New York State Archives and Records Administration or viewed in the collection of readings assembled for use in the documentation strategy seminars sponsored by the Society of American Archivists in 1987 to 1989.

<sup>6</sup>These scales were modelled after those developed in the RLG Conspectus project. Copies of the scales can be acquired from the New York State Archives and Records Administration or viewed in the collection of readings assembled for use in the documentation strategy seminars sponsored by the Society of American Archivists in 1987 to 1989.

Figure 1

Documentation Worksheet				
GEOGRAPHICAL AREA:				
Topic	Documentation Quality			Comments
	Pre-1900	20th Century	Present	
Agriculture				
A. Agricultural Sciences				
B. Family Farming				
C. Corporate & Commercial Farming				
D. Transportation & Marketing Corporations				
E. Agricultural Economics				
F. Lobby, Professional, & Educational Groups				
G. Individuals				
H. Underdocumented Areas				
I. Aspects Essential for Documenting the Geographical Area				
CROSS REFERENCES TO OTHER TOPICS:				

tation analysis. As this became clear, the group’s attention shifted to discussing what these procedures or guidelines needed to be. In cooperation with this group, the New York State Archives developed a guide that describes the goals, benefits, and procedures of local documentation analysis and planning (see Figure 2). This guide is now available as a “working draft” and is an official product of the NHPRC-funded project. The state archives intends to test the guide, encourage others to use it and

comment about its use, and eventually issue it in a final format or abandon it in favor of some other approach.<sup>7</sup>

The working group was also very helpful in suggesting ways of refining some of the tools prepared by the New York State Archives and Records Administration for re-

<sup>7</sup>Copies of the guide can be obtained from the New York State Archives and Records Administration, 10A75, Cultural Education Center, Albany, New York 12230.

**Figure 2****TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR NEW YORK LOCAL DOCUMENTATION GUIDE****Section One: Introduction**

Working Together to Document New York's Localities  
 Who Can Use This Guide  
 Using This Guide  
 Here's What Following the Steps in this Guide Will Do for Documenting  
 New York's Localities

**Section Two: The Essential Products of Documentation Analysis**

Plan for Documenting the Locality  
 An Ongoing Documentation Advisory Group

**Section Three: Suggested Basic Steps for Documentation Analysis and Planning**

Step One: Assemble Advisory Group and Conduct Preliminary Review of  
 the Locality's Development and Documentation

Step Two: Evaluate the Documentation Quality of the Major Aspects of  
 the Locality's Historical Development and Present Nature

Step Three: Prepare Report on Priority Actions for Documenting the Locality

Step Four: Establish Working Groups to Analyze and Plan for  
 Documenting Priority Topical Areas

Step Five: Continue Improving Locality's Documentation

**Section Four: A Framework for Documentation Analysis****Section Five: Definitions of Topics of Human Activity for Documentation****Section Six: Additional Tools for Local Documentation Analysis and Planning**

Archival Documentation Analysis Readings  
 Additional Documentation Studies  
 Guides for Locating New York's Historical Records

**Appendix: Documentation Worksheets**

gional documentation analysis and planning. The group's members argued, for example, that a focus on the distant past was less helpful than one on more recent time periods. It had been assumed that individuals and institutional representatives involved in such a process would be uncomfortable conceptualizing documentation unless they started with older time periods and records,

because this seems to be the orientation of most historical records repositories and the majority of researchers. The consensus of the western New York working group was that little can be done now to improve society's documentation prior to the twentieth century; attention and energy are better devoted to documenting the twentieth century, especially the post-World War II

Figure 3

CRITERIA FOR TOPICAL DOCUMENTATION QUALITY	
0. <u>Insignificant Level</u>	No or few historical records repositories with existing collections or with policies that promote collection in this topic; no organizational, institutional, or corporate archives related to this topic.
1. <u>Minimal Level</u>	Repositories have some collections related to the topic, but with major gaps in the topic's documentation; repository acquisition policies do not emphasize the collection of records related to the topic; few organizational, institutional, or corporate archives pertaining to the topic.
2. <u>Moderate Level</u>	Significant repository holdings (in quantity and quality), but still uneven in topic's coverage; repository acquisition policies cover the collection of records related to major, but not all, aspects of the topics; some organizational institutional, and corporate archive complement other collecting repositories, such as historical societies and libraries.
3. <u>Significant Level</u>	Important repository collections (in quantity and quality) covering all elements of the topic; repository acquisitions emphasize all crucial aspects of the topic; adequate organizational, institutional, and corporate archives that complement other collecting repositories.

period. This attitude partly results from trepidation about the massive quantities of records being produced in the late twentieth century, and how these records can be properly evaluated and managed. One of the historians in the working group even expressed concern about the twentieth century becoming another “dark ages,” with a paucity of surviving or understandable documentation and, therefore, a lack of understanding of our time by future generations.

The western New York working group also struggled with the subject-significance criteria originally proposed to assist its work (see Figure 3; originally there were subject-

significance “levels” matching those for topical documentation quality). The original purpose of the criteria was to identify areas of activity that were particularly important to the region’s development and nature, not to suggest any general importance of one aspect of human endeavor over another. The participants, however, thought the criteria were too imprecise to be useful, and, more important, some felt that the criteria suggested a faulty hierarchy of historical causation. To them, the criteria suggested that one area of human activity might be more important than another, e.g., that the arts were of greater value than industry or science. This area needs more



thought and experimentation.<sup>8</sup> Archivists somehow need to be able to identify priority activities. The benefit of the criticism of the working group here, however, was to reinforce the importance of broadly documenting any geographical region, i.e., ensuring that all major facets of human activity are sufficiently represented by the records preserved in historical records repositories and institutional archives.

Although it was not difficult to accept the definition of the geographical region (any definition can be accepted as long as the definition's limitations are taken into account in documentation analysis and planning),<sup>9</sup> using a geographical region as the basis for documentation work caused some additional problems. Assembling a working group to examine all human activity in a given region eliminated the participation of records creators, at least in western New York. The involvement of records creators is assumed to be one of the major benefits of the documentation strategy approach as proposed. Applied to the geographical region, however, the approach does not really accommodate the involvement of records creators until attention is focused on specific topics identified as priorities for the adequate documentation of the region. Any one region will have countless institutions creating records covering the spectrum of human activity, and all cannot be gathered around a table to plan for the suitable documentation of the region. The dimensions of this problem are unclear, but certainly it requires further thought and reflection.

---

<sup>8</sup>Additional work is going on, in fact, in the areas of evangelical religion, medicine, disease, and business. We especially require more work in the matter of documenting localities. Successful geographically based documentation analysis and planning require a satisfactory group of topics and knowledge about how to break archivists away from thinking only along their institutional parameters.

<sup>9</sup>For example, if a group accepts political boundaries as defining the geographical region, it must be aware of socio-economic, cultural, topographical, and other characteristics that suggest different boundaries.

The broad geographically based documentation analysis also tested the knowledge of the working group members. Although other experts could be consulted, or added to the group as necessary, seeking to document a region was akin to trying to document the world. Wrestling with such problems caused several members of the working group to conclude that the process provided little more than informed intuition in making decisions about what to document and what records were needed for such documentation.

The project participants also learned in western New York that resources to support broad regional documentation analysis are difficult to obtain. One hopes that geographical documentation work can be done satisfactorily with existing funds; in fact, the success of such work depends on the support of existing historical records programs and other institutions as a normal part of their responsibilities. However, the issue remains that some repository or individual must assume responsibility for coordinating such documentation analysis and planning—calling meetings, developing agendas, preparing reports, contacting needed experts. The full range of resources necessary to support such activity is uncertain because the complete process has not yet been carried through. It is still to be determined whether, in the long run, the process is cost-efficient and results in better-informed selection and acquisition decisions.

All of these problems and concerns affirm that the documentation strategy approach is a very new way for archivists and others to consider the selection of historical records. The project's initial questions (mentioned earlier) were only partially dealt with because of the limited time and resources available. Documentation analysis and planning requires significant discussion, and it will take a long time for individuals and institutions to become accustomed to using this methodology. A



number of important additional questions remain about this approach to documenting our society:

- Is the local geographical area the best way to analyze our current state of affairs and to plan for the better documentation of society? Can we document society through a variety of methods, such as national groups focusing on specific topics, state and local groups looking at the documentation of their geographical areas, and repositories taking leadership to develop cooperative acquisition approaches with other repositories?
- What is the best way to educate historical records repositories and records creators about the need for such broad-based cooperative documentation analysis and planning?
- Are there other approaches that might be better than the documentation strategy for documenting society?
- What kinds of incentives are required for getting records creators, records users, and records custodians to cooperate in broad-based documentation analysis, planning, and implementation?
- Can such documentation analysis and planning only be undertaken if there are sources of external funds, or can such efforts be supported through the existing resources of the participants of such efforts?

- In any geographical area, is there the need to include all repositories in documentation analysis and planning? Or, should it only be the major repositories involved in such efforts?
- How do you reconcile the need to save historical records in immediate danger with the need to plan carefully for the adequate documentation of any given topical or geographical area?
- Even if the documentation strategy model as now proposed is flawed, don't we need some kind of method that enables us to look at the broader issues of identification and selection of historical records?

These and other questions will only be answered as archivists use the documentation strategy. For it to move from a trendy phrase in the 1980s to an important process in the 1990s, the documentation strategy requires further testing, evaluation, and discussion. Even if the documentation strategy is abandoned, some other process is likely to replace it because the strategy addresses fundamental questions and problems that face the archival profession. The Western New York Project was only a preliminary effort at the kind of evaluation that is needed. Subsequent efforts will likely demonstrate that the documentation strategy approach, and its spin-offs, will be one of the most significant legacies that the archival community of the 1980s passes along to future archival administrators.