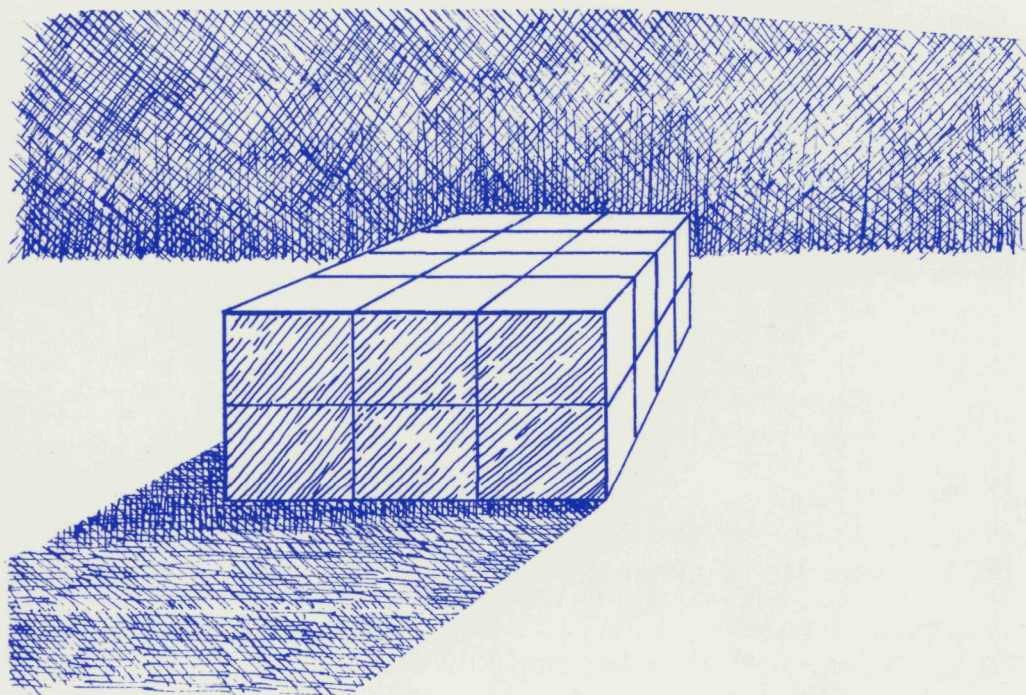


# The American Archivist

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## The American Archivist

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**Cover note:** The graphic on the cover is a representation of the matrix developed by the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, whose work is presented in this issue. The three dimensions of the matrix depict three salient characteristics of standards that might apply to archival description: who developed them, their strength, and the aspect of description to which they apply. For more discussion of the matrix, see pp. 452–54.

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**Postal Notice**

The following statement of ownership, management, and circulation was filed in accordance with the provisions of Section 4369, Title 39, U.S. Code, on 28 September 1989, by Teresa M. Brinati, Managing Editor:

The *American Archivist* is published quarterly by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal St., Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. The managing editor is Teresa M. Brinati. The owner is the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal St., Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. There are no stockholders, bondholders, mortgages, or other security holders in the organization.

The average number of copies of each issue printed during the preceding twelve months was 5,502; sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,296; total paid circulation was 4,296; free distribution was 116; total distribution was 4,412; and 1,090 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing. For the most recent issue (Summer 1989), total number of copies printed was 5,323; sales through dealers and carriers were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,190; total paid circulation was 4,190; free distribution was 116; total distribution was 4,306; and 1,017 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing.

## Forum

# From the Editor:

DAVID KLAASSEN

Even a passing glance at the cover and table of contents will indicate that this is not a "typical" issue of the *American Archivist*. To be sure, there have been occasional theme issues in the past, and there will soon be another—devoted to preservation—three issues down the line. But the Society of American Archivists has seldom, if ever, seen an issue of its journal used as a vehicle to present the work of a committee or task force, particularly one set up independent of the society's own governing structure.

When Larry Dowler called last summer to inquire about making available the final report and recommendations of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description as a special issue of the *American Archivist*, my initial reaction was guarded at best. Instinct told me that a journal's purpose is to promote and present dialogue through diverse reports of research, reflection, and description, and not to serve as the mouthpiece for a particular group's agenda.

Sometimes it pays to think twice. As I talked with persons familiar with the group's efforts and read the early draft of its report, it became clear that such a publication would fall squarely within the journal's stated mission: "to reflect thinking about theoretical and practical developments in the archival profession, particularly in North America; about the relationships between archivists and the creators and users of archives; and about cultural, social, legal, and

technical developments that affect the nature of recorded information and the need to create and maintain it."

The working group was formed out of the conviction that something needed to be *done* to foster the development of standards for archival description. It quickly came to realize, however, that it must educate as well as act, advocate, or delegate. In his background paper prepared for the group's first meeting, David Bearman argued for the need to "present a coherent case to the profession, explaining what standards can be, what role they could play, what potentials we see, and what realities we recognize."

As an archivist I may agree or disagree with elements of the working group's recommendations or with the assumptions that underlie them—that is part of the dialogue we encourage. But as an editor I can only applaud the explanatory and educational aspects of what the group has done. That is why, as a nonparticipant with no pride of authorship, I feel particularly free to commend the significance and clarity of the working group's presentation to the *AA*'s readership. All archivists can expect to profit from the discussion of the nature of archival description in an era when repositories and their holdings must be viewed as part of an increasingly interrelated web.

The original plan was to present the entire Standards for Archival Description package in this issue. But a funny thing happened on the way to the printer: too

much of a good thing. In order to keep this issue within manageable proportions (particularly given the inclusion of the annual index), it was necessary to shift some of the background papers to the subsequent issue. Included in this issue are the working group's report, recommendations, checklists, and three background papers that gave the project its overall shape. Ten additional background papers, prepared for the group's

second meeting, will appear in the Winter 1990 issue, but abstracts of their contents are included here.

My involvement in moving this body of materials forward to publication, interacting primarily with Vicki Walch, made it clear to me that the working group functioned extraordinarily well as a unit. It is a pleasure to make their work available to the profession.