

Research Article

To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture

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Abstract: The idea of archives as collective memory is sometimes employed as a metaphor for discussing the social and cultural role of archives. It is argued here that the idea is more than a metaphor and is supported by theories that would view collections of documents and material artifacts as means of extending the temporal and spatial range of communication. Archives, along with other communicational resources such as oral and ritual tradition, help to transfer information—and thereby sustain memory—from generation to generation. Two examples illustrate the interrelationship of archives and memory within this broadened view of communication and culture. The first arises from attempts to find ways to warn future generations of the location of radioactive waste repositories. The second revolves around pressure to efface from cultural landscapes evidence of tragic events that people wish to forget.

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The Memory Metaphor

ARCHIVISTS HAVE LONG been interested in the theoretical dimensions of their work as well as its institutional and social goals. With a view toward improving archival documentation strategies, some writers have drawn attention to the question of why societies maintain archives.¹ In addressing this broader question, archives are sometimes said to be society's collective memory. From this perspective, archives transcend the immediate tasks of documentation, education, enrichment, and research to help sustain cultural traditions and values. Although the view of archives as collective memory is sometimes employed metaphorically, it is a claim that can be placed on firmer theoretical foundations. Previous writings in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and semiotics argue that material objects, artifacts, and documents—including those contained in archival collections—play a special role in human communication.²

¹Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 40-46; Lester Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?" *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 19-25; F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (1975): 5-13; Andrea Hinding, "Toward Documentation: New Collecting Strategies in the 1980s," in *Options for the Eighties: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference on American College and Research Libraries*, eds. V. Massman and M. Kathman (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1982); Michael Lutzker, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 119-30; Society of American Archivists, Task Force on Goals and Priorities, *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).

²Kenneth E. Foote, "Object as Memory: The Material Foundations of Human Semiosis," *Semiotica* 69 (1988): 243-68, and "Space, Territory, and Landscape: The Borderlands of Geography and Semiotics," *Recherche Semiotique/Semiotic Inquiry* 5 (1985): 158-75. The case made in those two articles is based on a number of sources: Victor Yngve, *Linguistics as a Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Linguistics and Economics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977) and *Language as Work and Trade: A Semiotic Homology for Linguistics*

Unlike verbal and nonverbal action, which is ephemeral and disappears as it occurs, the physical durability of objects, artifacts, and documents allows them to be passed from person to person and from place to place over long periods of time. Their durability defines them as communicational resources that can be used to transmit information beyond the bounds of interpersonal contact. The first of the two key points of this article is, then, that archives can be seen as a valuable means of extending the temporal and spatial range of human communication.

The coevolution of writing systems and early civilizations provides an example of the relationship between the use of documents and communicational range. Although many factors were involved in the rise of early civilizations, the beginning of complex social organization seemed to require a means of notating the spoken word.³ Writing allowed information to be transferred from place to place and from year to year, even if the information pertained at first only to commonplace business transactions and government decrees. In this way, documents and archives facilitated transfers of information that were difficult to accomplish through means such as oral and ritual tradition.

Yet, the fact that documents and artifacts can extend the temporal and spatial range of human communication does not mean

and Economics (S. Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1983); Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Norton, 1979); Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); and Pierre Bourdieu, "Le marche des biens symboliques," *L'Année sociologique* 22 (1973): 49-126.

³Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-56, and *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (London: Duckworth, 1986), 76-157; Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 46-61.

they are the only resource available for meeting this need. Oral and ritual tradition can serve a similar function and, indeed, *memory* may even be said to reside in the institutional mission of organizations such as archives, museums, universities, some government agencies, and the like. In this light, the idea of *collective memory* assumes a double meaning. First, as discussed in sociology and psychology, collective memory refers to beliefs and ideas held in common by many individuals that together produce a sense of social solidarity and community.⁴ In the second sense—of interest here—the term implies that many individuals and organizations act *collectively* to maintain records of the past, even if these records are shaped by the demands of contemporary life. From this perspective, the activities of, say, archives and museums are interwoven. Each particular institution may sustain a *representation* of the past quite specific to its institutional mandate, but these representations can be interrelated.⁵

The value of this point is that it guards against assuming that collective memory is invested in any single type of human institution, such as the archives. Any view of the past conserved by the archival record can be placed, profitably, in the context of the representations maintained by other institutions. The task of assessing this archival contribution is made no easier by the variability in the way different societies come to sustain important information. In one society, oral and ritual traditions may predominate, while in another society they may be allied with archival records, written documentation, and even elements of ma-

terial culture such as monuments and memorials.⁶

This second key point—about the collective, interdependent nature of institutional memory—implies that the cultural role of the archives is hard to isolate from the contributions of other institutions and traditions. Setting archives in such a broad context, however, gives us a better understanding of how social pressures influence and shape the archival record. No matter how tempting it is to discount these forces, understanding the force of their influence is a natural outgrowth of viewing archives in relation to, rather than as set apart from, the goals of other cultural institutions.

The two key points of this discussion can be set in bolder relief with examples, the first of which arises from recent attempts to isolate high-level radioactive wastes from living ecosystems. Warning future generations about the location of waste sites is a serious public policy issue and raises the possibility of archives being used to help communicate across spans of time greater than any single civilization has ever endured. The second example emphasizes some of the forces that shape a society's view of its past. It derives from study of landscape history and the selective way in which tragedies and acts of violence have been marked with monuments and memorials in order to outline an almost mythological representation of the national past.

Sustaining Warnings for Ten Millennia

Since the dawn of the Atomic Age during World War II, the United States has produced large quantities of high-level nu-

⁴Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. F. J. and V. Y. Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) and Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁵Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 69-90.

⁶Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). The literature of oral history is of interest also in this regard, including David Stricklin and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *The Past Meets the Present: Essays on Oral History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988) and William W. Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation," *American Archivist* 40 (1970): 429-39.

clear waste. These radioactive byproducts of weapons production and commercial power generation require up to ten thousand years to decay into less dangerous isotopes. No solution has yet been found to the problem of this material's safe disposal. Current plans call for its solidification and burial deep in stable geologic formations. However, quite apart from uncertainty about natural processes that might breach the storage chambers, human violation of the waste dumps is an important concern. No matter how securely the waste is stored, it is virtually impossible to prevent people from disturbing the waste—intentionally or unintentionally—during the next ten millennia. If some of the buried waste becomes of value to future generations, it may even be “mined.”

Recognition of the dangers of possible human penetration of waste deposits led to the formation of a Human Interference Task Force by the U.S. Department of Energy in 1980.⁷ The task force included specialists in semiotics and communication and was charged with proposing long-term warning systems for disposal sites.⁸ It recognized from the start that disturbance of the sites by future generations could never be completely prevented. Indeed, the task force was unwilling to assume responsibility for safeguarding the waste from deliberate violation. However, it did accept the obligation to reduce the likelihood of inadvertent, ill-informed penetration of the storage areas.⁹ Long-term communication

regarding the location of waste deposits was seen as crucial to this goal.

The key to understanding the interplay of archives and communication in this instance lies in the task force's pursuit of long-lasting means of communication employing a variety of transmission techniques. Durable physical markers at the storage sites were seen as a long-lasting, but insufficient, technique (figure 1). It would be impossible to hope that such markers could retain their meaning for three hundred generations, or that they would even remain physically intact. After all, some of the most durable building materials known are, by virtue of their durability, prime quarry for scavengers. The task force therefore proposed that other techniques be employed to supplement the warning conveyed by physical markers.

Written documents maintained in on-site vaults and off-site document collections would be the most important of these supplements. At the site of the waste deposit, written warnings could be placed in an above-ground document vault to explain the nature and danger of the radioactive materials. In this way, detailed information about the design and layout of the storage area would be available for careful study. Future generations would be encouraged to periodically translate the documents from their original languages into languages that

⁷The following discussion summarizes an argument found in Kenneth E. Foote, “Object as Memory: The Material Foundations of Human Semiosis,” *Semiotica* 69 (1988): 253-59.

⁸Thomas A. Sebeok, *Communication Measures to Bridge Ten Millennia* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, 1984) and Percy H. Tannenbaum, *Communication Across 300 Generations: Detering Human Interference with Waste Deposit Sites* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, 1984).

⁹Battelle Memorial Institute, Office of Nuclear

Waste Isolation, Human Interference Task Force, *Reducing the Likelihood of Future Human Activities That Could Affect Geologic High-Level Waste Repositories* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, 1984); U.S. Department of Energy, *Statement of Position of the U.S. Department of Energy in the Matter of Proposed U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Rulemaking on the Storage and Disposal of Nuclear Waste (Waste Confidence Rulemaking)* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Energy, 1980); U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Environmental Standards for the Management and Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel, High-Level and Transuranic Waste,” *Federal Register* 47, 29 December 1982, 53196. U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, “Disposal of High-Level Radioactive Wastes in Geologic Repositories, Technical Criteria,” *Federal Register* 48, 21 June 1983, 28194.

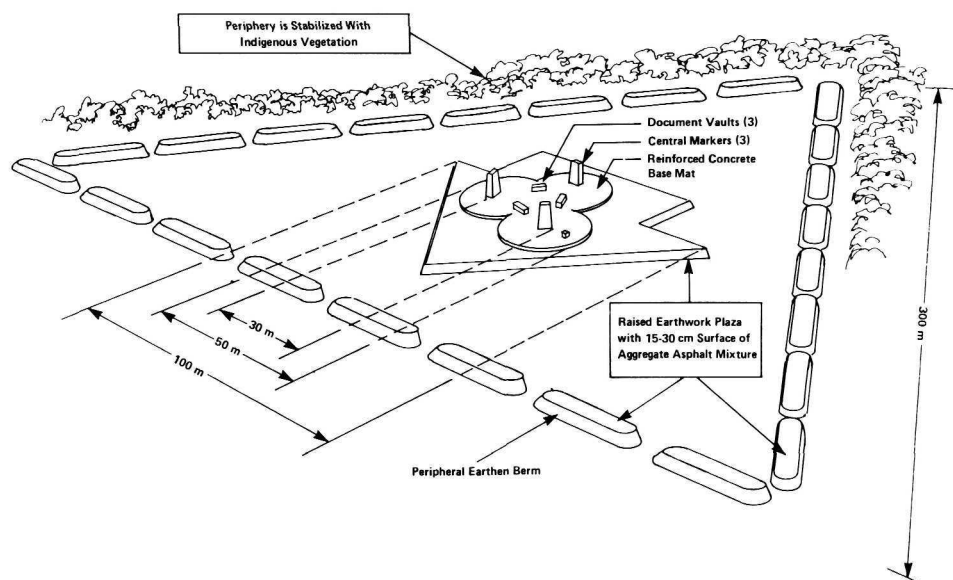


Figure 1. A schematic plan of the surface marker for a nuclear waste repository. The plan mirrors the shape of the proposed nuclear waste warning symbol. Monoliths are combined with document vaults in the plan, which includes a geodetic survey coordinate marker. Source: Battelle Memorial Institute, Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, Human Interference Task Force, *Reducing the Likelihood of Future Human Activities that Could Affect Geologic High-Level Waste Repositories* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, 1984), 87, with permission.

may emerge over the next ten thousand years, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the on-site written documents. The task force saw periodic translation of the materials as a means of creating a sort of temporal "relay system" of information transmission.

In addition to this relay system of translation, the task force proposed distributing information about the disposal sites and their location to off-site library and archival collections. Printed records produced on acid-free paper were judged the most durable for distribution, but microfilm, magnetic tape, and electronic storage media were viewed as possible alternatives if periodically copied and replaced.¹⁰ Entrusting the care and updating of these new records to

established libraries and archives would serve to extend their longevity. History has shown that collections gathered by libraries and archives have been maintained with care for long periods—in some cases for many centuries—without serious disruption.¹¹ Worldwide distribution of warning messages in this manner would mean that the potential loss of a record from any one place would be offset by the conservation of copies in other collections.

The task force also recommended that information about nuclear waste sites be added to maps and included in the national land survey system. Maps were seen as an effective means of communicating with future generations because they are used extensively, are produced in great number, and are constantly revised under the super-

¹⁰Battelle Memorial Institute, "Reducing the Likelihood," 67.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 72.

vision of established national, state, and local government agencies. To encourage mapping of the waste sites long into the future, each site would have established vertical and horizontal reference points within the national geodetic survey system. These reference points would provide surveyors and cartographers with the incentive to retain information about the location of the storage areas. Furthermore, it was recommended that the locations of waste storage sites be included in recently created *geographical information systems*. These are large computer databases developed by government agencies and private corporations to store plat and tax maps and plans of public utility systems. Geographical information systems are among the largest databases ever created in the world of computer technology. The high cost of their creation provides some assurance that investment in their maintenance will continue long into the future. The task force concluded that this plan of distribution would extend the longevity of warnings by again entrusting their care to a variety of established and long-lived organizations.¹²

Beyond the use of records stored in on-site vaults and off-site document collections, the task force considered the possibility of employing oral tradition to communicate with future generations.¹³ Disagreement exists among historians, anthropologists, and folklorists about the effectiveness of oral traditions in accurately transmitting information over long periods of time.¹⁴ Instances can be found in which factual information has accurately been maintained orally for hundreds of years, but

in many other cases oral tradition has fallen far short of sustaining factual accuracy. Of all the means of conveying information, oral tradition was judged the most difficult to assess in terms of potential long-term effectiveness. Legend-like tales and stories might well arise, or be created, to convey the dangers of the waste deposits. But the task force held little confidence that such stories would transfer enough information to guarantee safety, unless one or more of the other long-term communicational techniques succeeded, too.

Finally, as part of its recommendations, the task force suggested creation of a universal biohazard symbol as a two-fold aid to communicational durability. First, the symbol would depict the deadliness of the waste in a form that could be marked on a wide variety of monuments and written documents. Second, use of a single legible symbol would permit its meaning to be assimilated more readily and accurately into oral and social traditions.

Taken together, these efforts reflect the varied resources societies have at their disposal for extending the temporal range of communication. Given the need to communicate through ten millennia, the Human Interference Task Force recommended that both durable markers and documentary records be employed as the cornerstones of long-term warning systems. The task force did, however, find value in other communicational resources, such as legend-like stories. The task force also argued that synergistic relationships can be expected to emerge from the interplay of communicational resources. For example, the longevity of markers and written records could be improved significantly if their safekeeping could be made an ongoing concern of existing human institutions, such as libraries, archives, and government mapping agencies. The conclusions imply that even though documents and markers may be the preeminent means of sustaining memory in human communication, they are not the only

¹²Abraham Weitzberg, *Building on Existing Institutions to Perpetuate Knowledge of Waste Repositories* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, 1982).

¹³Sebeok, *Communication Measures*.

¹⁴Battelle Memorial Institute, "Reducing the Likelihood," 74, and W. L. Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970).

way, and they benefit from interaction with other communicational resources.

The Effacement of Memory

If archives can play a part in extending the range of communication, they can just as readily be implicated in any attempt to thwart communication by diminishing its temporal and spatial range.¹⁵ In George Orwell's novel *1984*, the Ministry of Truth ("Minitrue" in the language of Newspeak) revised records to reflect current dogma. By translating documents from Oldspeak into Newspeak, Minitrue workers could manipulate the past to support "good-think." In real life, people do sometimes choose to keep secrets, to lie, and to distort information to control others. Bureaucracies and corporations may seek to control the flow of damaging information by destroying incriminating records and employing oaths of secrecy.¹⁶

Despite the prevalence these days of paper shredders in high government offices, professional archivists would not condone effacement of records in their care. Nonetheless, as was earlier made clear, archives are subject to the same social pressures that shape the collective memory of other institutions. Perhaps archivists are more successful in resisting these pressures, but effacement does sometimes occur with respect to representations of the past maintained by other institutions and by society at large. Insight into how such forces aid

forgetting can be gained by turning to the history of places that have been stigmatized by violence and tragedy.

These are cases stemming from landscape history, an active area of research in contemporary geography. To draw a parallel with archival theory, this research has stressed, among other themes, the interrelationship between cultural landscape and collective memory. Such studies are based on observations of the close connection between the places a society values and that society's view—or "myths"—of its past.¹⁷ Like archives, cultural landscapes can be said to maintain a representation of the past. In some early civilizations and primitive societies, this representation was legible in the layout of cities and villages that were designed according to sacred cosmological principles.¹⁸ In modern secular societies, the organizational principles that guide the shaping of cities and landscapes are considerably more complex and elusive. Yet, as the historian Catherine Albanese has noted, Americans are not without a sort of "civil religion," despite claims to the contrary.¹⁹ This civil religion has attained a sort of cosmographical representation in the American landscape, in the national parks, battlefields, museums, monuments, and

¹⁵Further discussion of the following issues can be found in Kenneth E. Foote, "Object as Memory: The Material Foundations of Human Semiosis," *Semiotica* 69 (1988): 259-63 and in "Stigmata of National Identity: Exploring the Cosmography of America's Civil Religion" in *Person, Place, Thing: Essays in Honor of Philip Wagner*, ed. S. T. Wong and M. E. E. Hurst, (in press).

¹⁶Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage, 1984) and *Lying: Moral Choice in Public Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁷Foremost among these works are those of David Lowenthal, including "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *The Geographical Review* 65 (1975):1-36, and *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 185-259. Other related works are: John B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); John Gold and Jacquelin Burgess, eds., *Valued Environments* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

¹⁸Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1971), 225-476.

¹⁹Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976).

memorials that are maintained at public expense and are the object of pilgrimage by tourists.²⁰

One of the most interesting aspects of this landscape cosmography is the selectivity with which sites are commemorated to recall great victories, watershed events, historical turning points, and the women and men who made sacrifices for the cause of nationhood. Not infrequently, however, darker events—tragedies and massacres—are marked as well. The value of turning to episodes of violence and tragedy lies in the fact that the memory of such events is so prone to be held in tension. A society's need to remember is balanced against its desire to forget, to leave the memory behind and put the event out of mind. Few events produce such strong ambivalent feelings as acts of violence, and as societies grapple with these feelings in public debate, the struggle comes to imprint itself on landscape. If a tragedy seems to illustrate a lesson of human ethics or social conduct worth remembering, or if it demands that warnings be forwarded to future generations, tension may resolve in favor of a permanent monument or memorial.²¹ If the violence fails to exemplify an enduring value, there is greater likelihood of the site, artifacts, and documentary record being ef-

faced, either actively or passively. As the geographer David Lowenthal has written, "Features recalled with pride are apt to be safeguarded against erosion and vandalism; those that reflect shame may be ignored or expunged from the landscape."²²

This point about effacement can be illustrated with striking, but contrasting, examples from Salem, Massachusetts, and Berlin, Germany. Today in Salem, no one knows exactly where the town's "witches" were executed.²³ Soon after the witchcraft episode of 1692, witnesses retracted their testimony and the trials were discredited. Through the years, the exact location of the site of the executions was forgotten (figure 2). Tourists visiting Salem today can stop at the Witch Museum (the building and site are unrelated to the events of the seventeenth century), and visit a house where it is believed accusations were leveled against some of the victims. The sense of shame engendered by the trials, combined with Salem's subsequent growth as a prosperous seaport, led to the passive effacement of the execution site. All records of the site, both oral and written, were lost. Still, with the tercentenary of the trials approaching in 1992, the executions remain part of Salem's public life. Proposals to raise a memorial, and thereby publicly accept the event as a valid part of Salem's past, are countered by the desire of many to leave the episode unmarked and unremarked.

In Berlin, buildings closely associated with Nazi power have been destroyed. The Berlin Wall was originally begun close to the heart of the former Nazi government

²⁰An informal but provocative account of cosmographical representations and "pilgrimage" routes to be found in the capital cities of Europe is provided by Donald Horne, *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

²¹In this context it is useful to recall that the etymological root of the word *monument* is the Latin verb *monere*—"to remind, to warn." Monuments may arise from other impulses, but their power to remind and to warn often overshadows secondary considerations. Further insight into this issue is offered by Kurt Foster, "Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture," *Oppositions* 25 (1982):1-19; Alois Riegl, "Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen und seine Entstehung," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Augsburg: Dr. Benno Filser, 1929); and John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: J. M. Dent, 1907), 182.

²²David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *The Geographical Review* 65 (1975): 31.

²³Sidney Perley, *Where the Salem "Witches" Were Hanged* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1921). For an account of the witchcraft episode, see Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).



Figure 2. View from Gallow's Hill toward Salem, Massachusetts. No record was kept of the site of the executions of 1692; only the general location can be surmised. The witchcraft trials and the reputation they lent the town remain a divisive issue in Salem. This is particularly true now, in light of the suggestion by some citizens to raise a memorial in 1992 during the tricentennial year of the witchcraft episode. This and all following photographs by author.

district as an intentional means of breaking apart this stigmatized area. The site of the Gestapo headquarters remains vacant more than forty years after the building's destruction. In Berlin, this conscious effacement of buildings was based on renouncement of this vicious genocidal episode, as well as on the belief that effacement would waylay attempts to create pro-Nazi monuments. The destruction of Spandau Prison, following the death of Rudolph Hess, was predicated on the latter motive. Some Germans go so far as to call for the razing of all remaining Nazi buildings, such as the libraries and galleries that still stand in Berlin and elsewhere.²⁴

In Germany, of course, this active effacement of buildings has been matched by

topic of debate in Germany and is discussed in Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Topographie des Terrors: Gestapo, SS und Reichssicherheitshauptamt auf dem "Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände"* (Berlin: Verlag Willmuth Arenhövel, 1987); Gottfried Korff and Reinhard Rürup, eds., *Berlin, Berlin: Die Ausstellung zur Geschichte der Stadt* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1987), 543-60; and Benedikt Erenz, "Der Ort, der Stört," *Die Zeit*, 9 September 1988. Debate about the disposition of this "landscape of terror" is closely related to attempts by Germans to come to terms with the Nazi legacy, a topic discussed by Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981) and Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 1989). This debate is likely to increase in intensity in the wake of East and West German unification; many sites are likely to be reappraised in light of this development.

²⁴The fate of these sites of Nazi terror is an active

the demand that sites of Nazi atrocities be memorialized for eternity. Without question, the Holocaust has inspired some of the most forceful memorials of modern times (figure 3). The pressure to sustain these sacred places is growing ever stronger as members of the last generation of Holocaust survivors seek, in their remaining years, to leave enduring testimony to the evil of the Holocaust.

These cases bring to mind other events of violence and tragedy where calls for monuments divide opinion and provoke heated public debate. Generally, this debate is resolved in favor of one of four outcomes for landscape: sanctification, designation, rectification, or effacement. As was the case above with respect to concentration camps, sanctification entails construction of a memorial—perhaps a building, monument, or park—and ritual dedication

of a site to the memory of an event, martyr, great individual, or group of victims. Designation revolves around the marking of an exceptional event without the religious overtones borne of sanctification. Rectification occurs, generally, after accidental tragedy, when a place or building is “put right” and reused. As was noted above for Salem and Berlin, effacement occurs both actively and passively after particularly shameful events and involves obliteration of the evidence of violence.

The most striking aspect of all four outcomes is the length of time required for transformation to occur. Even in cases where tragedy sites become transfigured into shrines of national, state, or civic identity, their sanctification frequently involves a lengthy struggle. In the first place, as many historians have noted, historical conceptions of a national past are almost entirely



Figure 3. The rail siding leading to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. Memorials to the victims of the Holocaust are among the most compelling reminders of twentieth-century genocide. In Berlin and elsewhere, symbols of Nazi power were effaced.



Figure 4. The Boston Massacre marker in Boston's State Street. The hub of the memorial is believed to lie where the first blood of the Revolutionary War was shed by Crispus Attucks on 5 March 1770. This memorial was laid in 1886. A monument commemorating the massacre was built several blocks away on the Boston Common in 1888.

retrospective and take time to evolve.²⁵ The American Revolutionary and Civil Wars had to be won, for instance, before people be-

came interested in identifying key events of the struggle. Second, as has been noted above, tragedies carry intense equivocal meaning and people may hesitate to sanctify sites of tragedy without first reinterpreting their meaning. The initial horror of a tragedy usually must pass before its significance can be assessed and its site sanctified. As a consequence, years or decades may pass before sites achieve the status of national shrines. Until then, the sites may lie abandoned and virtually ignored.

Nowadays, the Boston Massacre of 1770 is viewed as the first act of violence of the Revolutionary War era, but more than one hundred years passed before it was permanently marked (figure 4). Even after this was accomplished, people argued against the marker on the grounds that the massacre was little more than a street fight, an undignified provocation of British troops

²⁵Some of the most useful sources in this large literature are Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); George Allan, *The Importances of the Past: A Meditation on the Authority of Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, and David Sutton, eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Michael Kammen, *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness, or, The Remembered Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Patricia N. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).



Figure 5. A memorial raised outside Goliad, Texas, in 1936 at the gravesite of those men massacred by Mexican troops after surrendering during the Texas Revolution. The battle sites of the Texas Revolution, like those of the American Revolution, went unmarked for many years before being sanctified. It took Texans a century to mark the sites associated with origins of the republic and state. The Goliad site is perhaps less celebrated than the Alamo massacre site in San Antonio, possibly because the Alamo's defenders died fighting whereas the soldiers of Goliad surrendered before being executed.

unfit for commemoration as part of America's "glorious" struggle for independence.²⁶ Similarly, many years passed before Texans sanctified the Goliad and Alamo battlefields, both sites of needless massacres (figure 5). In fact, the Alamo was almost lost to urban development before it was rehabilitated and enshrined to mark an almost mythical view of Texas's origin as a republic and state. The same delay occurred in the cases of Chicago's civic tragedies: the Fort Dearborn Massacre of 1812, and the Chicago Fire of 1871. Initially these were viewed as at least inauspicious, and

perhaps even shameful, events. Only later did they become reinterpreted—and marked—as episodes demonstrating Chicago's civic spirit as a hardworking, enduring, and enterprising city.

In contrast to these landscape "stigmata" of national, regional, and local identity, places go unmarked and even unnoticed when defaced by other types of violence. Accidents, for example, seem to have little effect on landscape, unless they claim many victims of a single group and induce a feeling of community loss. Society seems to find little redeeming value in accidental tragedy. Once the immediate causes have been deduced and rectified, the site of an accident is usually forgotten. As a result, the sites of many accidental tragedies have remained unmarked or have been reused.

²⁶Franklin J. Moses, "Mob or Martyrs? Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre," *The Bostonian* 1 (1895): 640-50.



Figure 6. Site of the former home of serial murderer John Gacy in Des Plaines, a suburb of Chicago. The house was disassembled during the police search for victims in 1978-79. The remains of the structure were bulldozed shortly after completion of the investigation. Effacement is one common response to particularly shameful acts of violence, although a sense of stigma may still remain attached to the site itself.

Among these are the sites of many of the worst accidental tragedies in American history, such as the Iroquois Theater fire (1903) and the Our Lady of Angels School fire (1958), both in Chicago, and the Cocoanut Grove fire (1942) in Boston. By isolating, cleansing, and returning such sites to everyday use, people absolve them of guilt in a manner common to other ritual processes.²⁷

In the case of accidental tragedy, the passage of time is a useful means of absolution. But when a tragedy is not acci-

dental, rectification resulting from the healing action of time is not always acceptable, and this is where social pressure is most outwardly evident. People may be so outraged and shamed by the appearance of violence in their community, perhaps caused by someone they knew and trusted as a neighbor, that they demand active, not passive, effacement. In the case of many mass murders, for instance, people have not hesitated to destroy the site of the massacre—or even the murderer's home—as soon as possible after the violence (figure 6).²⁸ Apart from assassinations of promi-

²⁷Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969) and Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

²⁸Perhaps the best known of these demolitions followed the 1984 mass murder in a fast-food restaurant

nent individuals, which tend to inspire memorials, the general trend is for murder sites to be rectified gradually, as are places of accidental tragedy.²⁹ But slow decay is unacceptable in instances of particularly heinous crimes. In some cases, the sense of shame and stigma is so great that a place, once effaced, will remain isolated and unused indefinitely, never to be reincorporated into the activities of daily life.³⁰ Perhaps the "silence" of these sites actually does "speak" to the senselessness of the violence as eloquently as any monument would.³¹ In the end, all these cases show how social pressures shape landscape into

an acceptable representation of the past. The disposition of the tragedy sites comes to mirror society's view of its own motives and aspirations.

Implications for Archival Appraisal and Retention

The issue of sustaining or effacing memories of tragedy has a direct bearing on debate concerning the collection and appraisal of archival materials. In 1970, historian Howard Zinn faulted archivists for neglecting to collect records documenting significant social minorities outside the mainstream of American life.³² In a sense, Zinn was maintaining that archives err in favor of preserving records of dominant social groups at the expense of the less powerful. As the discussion of tragedy shows, the issue of selectivity is even more involved. The American landscape, too, is notably silent in regard to these less powerful groups. Few monuments mark the course of American racial and ethnic intolerance. But even with respect to the activities of dominant groups, powerful forces may intervene to influence the record of the past, regardless of whether it is represented in the landscape or in an archival collection.

The Dallas County Historical Foundation had difficulty raising funds to open an exhibit entitled "The Sixth Floor" in the former Texas School Book Depository from where Lee Harvey Oswald shot President John Kennedy. The foundation's fund-raising efforts were hampered by a division of public opinion concerning the exhibit. Some people felt that an exhibit was needed, whereas others believed it would only serve to glorify the assassin, since Dallas had already built a cenotaph honoring President Kennedy.³³ The Historical Museum of South

in San Ysidro, California. The restaurant was razed and the land donated to the City of San Diego. There are, however, many less well-known cases. During the course of the investigation of a serial murder in a suburb of Chicago in 1978-79, the killer's house and garage were leveled by public officials (figure 6). In the case of a series of murders discovered in 1957 in Plainfield, Wisconsin, the killer's house was destroyed by arson. Many sites of mass murder are rectified, but about half are effaced.

²⁹For example, see the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial shown in the cover illustration for this issue. The memorial is on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where King was assassinated; it was created by the motel's owner, Walter Bailey. It took nearly twenty years for supporters of a memorial to gain public funding that would convert the motel into a civil rights educational center. Similar tensions have been aroused by attempts to memorialize victims of American violence of the 1960s at Kent State University, Jackson State University, and the John F. Kennedy assassination site in Dallas, and with respect to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

³⁰Shame and stigma may have a powerful effect on the shaping of landscape and the archival record. Future research in this area is supported by a suggestive literature on shame and stigma and their bearing on interpersonal relationships, including Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Agnes Heller, *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); and Edward Jones et al., *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1984).

³¹Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) and Peter Ehrenhaus, "Silence and Symbolic Expression," *Communications Monographs* 55 (1988): 41-57.

³²Hinding, "Toward Documentation."

³³Candace Floyd, "Too Close for Comfort," *History News*, September 1985, 9-14.

Florida was severely criticized for collecting the motorcycle of a black man whose alleged murder by Miami police in 1980 sparked a major riot. Some museum sponsors withdrew their support in the wake of rumors that the motorcycle was to be put on display.

Archivists have never come to terms with the concept of the cultural effacement of memory. They have long recognized the necessity of selective retention, but have done so to avoid squandering limited archival resources on redundant or relatively unimportant records. Similarly, they have accepted the necessity of restricting access to certain records, at least temporarily, in order to balance national security, personal privacy, or competitive business considerations against the value of public availability. But the possibility that a positive purpose might be served by conspiring to efface the collective memory of a particular event is alien to prevailing archival values, at least in contemporary Western civilization. The point here is not to realign those values, but to help understand the conflicts inherent in any society's attempts to remember and deal with its past. A critical role for archives may well be to serve as a countervailing force to effacement as a "source of last resort."

For archivists, the idea of archives as

memory is more than a metaphor. The documents and artifacts they collect are important resources for extending the spatial and temporal range of human communication. This view implies that attitudes toward the past, as well as visions of the future, can sometimes condition collecting policies. In regard to the long-term storage of nuclear waste, it may be imperative that archives be employed to protect future generations from danger. Conversely, the history of tragedies exposes the power of social pressure to shape society's view of the past as represented in cultural landscapes and, by extension, archival collections. At the same time, the examples discussed in this article suggest how much remains to be learned about the dynamics of collective memory. Theorists must eventually come to terms with how archives, as communicational resources, are to be related to other means of memory conservation, and why some events are so well documented and stir so much interest while others leave such a small mark on the historical record, to the point where archives become a memory of last resort. Pursued in these directions, research can yield insight into the relationship of societies to their archives so that the concept of memory is not overlooked—or forgotten—in archival theory.