Perspective

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Plowing the Sea: Appraising Public Records in an Ahistorical Culture

ROY TURNBAUGH

Abstract: Appraisal of public records is a common-sense process that should reflect the value records hold for a government and its citizens rather than any group of users. Appraisal decisions are naturally based on the specific conditions that surround government archives.

About the author: *Roy C. Turnbaugh is the state archivist of Oregon. He gave an earlier version of this article at the 1989 annual meeting of the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators in Seattle, Washington.*

PUBLIC RECORDS ARCHIVISTS WORK in a culture without a sense of history. Government cares little about yesterday. It functions in a kind of existential present. In order to assess the implications of this culture for government archives, several aspects of archival appraisal should be considered: *how* public records are appraised, how they *should* be appraised, *why* we appraise public records, and what the consequences of our practices are for those of us charged with the responsibility for appraisal.

An institution's concept of its mission is directly reflected in the appraisal decisions it makes. This suggests a role for government records archivists that provides us with an identity and frees us from depending on our users to define us.

Appraisal is one area of our work that has eluded the application of technique, defined here as the organization of effort into procedures that are governed by rules. Description has had technique superimposed on it successfully, as in the case of the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format. Arrangement, preservation, description, and even budget and management activities can also be made subject to technique, but appraisal is seemingly immune. Why is this so?

My perception of appraisal as practiced in state archives and records management programs was informed by a study that I conducted in 1984 under the auspices of the Bentley Historical Library's research fellowship program, funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Each state program received a questionnaire from me, which most were good enough to complete and return.

The responses were interesting but confusing. Asked to assess the importance of appraisal as a function of a public records program, the respondents ranked it highest in importance, above reference, description, preservation, or outreach. But, judging from the responses, few state archives dedicate any significant part of their limited resources to appraisal. This latter perception was reinforced by the NHPRC-sponsored state assessment reports that appeared at the same time as my survey; they virtually ignored appraisal.[1]

I used T. R. Schellenberg's categories of value to organize the questions related to how appraisal is practiced. (In retrospect, it may have been a mistake to provide respondents with ready-made rationales for their decisions.) The results showed that some programs appraised records primarily for their informational value, i.e., what they contain about persons, places, and subjects with which public agencies deal. Others appraised records primarily for their evidential value or what they reveal about the agency or program's structure and functions. All programs considered informational value to be at least as important as evidential value. Most programs believed that legal, fiscal, and administrative values needed to be factored into an appraisal decision.

A similar confusion existed on why, or for whom, we appraise public records. Many respondents placed more weight on research or historical values than they did on protecting the rights of the state and its citizens, this despite the rather slender use scholars make of public records. Those of us who work with government records must compete with all other archivists, manuscript curators, and special collections librarians for the attention of historians. The low level of use suggests that perhaps we need to keep the historian's market share in perspective when appraising records.

In practice, many of us appraise public records on two tracks. We routinely acquire many of the records that have been earmarked as permanent by law, rule, or retention schedule. We do this with little

[1]See Lisa B. Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States* (Albany, NY: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1983).

enthusiasm and little effort. We are far more involved in appraising records for hypothetical or potential users. We ask ourselves, and sometimes each other: "Would so-and-so use these?" If we think so, or if we think so-and-so's colleagues or students would, we decide to accession the records—and wait. We make ourselves schizophrenic. On the one hand, we are government agencies, created to serve government, and ultimately the public. On the other hand, we are looking out for the interests of the scholarly research community, which is at best a marginal constituency.

Some of the lack of consensus about appraisal of public records derives from the strong influence that institutional context has on holdings. A few years ago I moved from a large state archives in the Midwest to a smaller one on the West Coast. Superficially, the programs resembled each other: both included records management, and both were part of the secretary of state's office.

The use patterns of the two state archives are, however, quite different. In Illinois, by far the largest single group of users is genealogists; in Oregon, it is lawyers. In Illinois, an enormous name index is the most heavily used resource; in Oregon, the records of the legislature, especially the committee hearings, are the most heavily used.

If we step back to examine the settings in which these two archives operate, some obvious differences are apparent. Illinois is an older state, to which many people came and through which many people passed on their way west. In area, Illinois is the second largest state east of the Mississippi; in population, it has one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country. It is a major agricultural and industrial state. Culturally and politically, it has traditionally had a north-south division, although this has increasingly become one between Chicago and the rest of the state.

Oregon did not become a state until 1859, forty years later than Illinois. As a West Coast destination, it did not play the gateway role that Illinois did. Until World War II Oregon was agricultural. Right up to the present, Oregon's wealth has been based on natural resources, on timber, farming, and ranching. It is far less culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse than Illinois. Portland is Oregon's only metropolitan area of real size. Geographic divisions are primarily east-west, between the coast, the valley, and the high desert.

Genealogy plays a less important role in Oregon than in Illinois because there is less genealogy to do in Oregon. Legislative records are critically important in Oregon because legislative intent is very powerful in the state's courts and because the legislative branch is powerful in relation to the executive branch.

My point is simple: appraisal decisions—when they occur—necessarily reflect the setting in which a program operates, and each program functions in a unique setting. Much of what we do is to document the obvious. We keep those records the law requires, our users demand, and common sense dictates. Beyond this, some of us may go off into areas of interest or concern to us as individuals and professionals, although these areas are again probably more obvious and less risky than we think. This is all right; in fact, it is our job to document the obvious, to respond to our users, and to listen to the still, small voice of common sense.

There is appraisal going on, but I am not sure that it is any great intellectual task, or even that it should be. Those of us who try to elevate appraisal to the status of one of the mysteries are doing so in an attempt to elevate our own status correspondingly. We need to remember that government archivists are part of our governments. This means a great deal. Governments are not attractive creatures to observe at close hand. A government does a lot of things, sometimes well, sometimes not. In many ways,

government can be rather unpleasant. It is operated by government employees, civil servants, bureaucrats, people who are universally held in low esteem by their fellow citizens. It is led by elected officials, politicians who respond to an entirely different set of imperatives than those felt by civil servants. Government can be unresponsive; its leaders can be irresponsible.

Government archives are part of this whole ungainly apparatus, which shambles along, performing the most pedestrian and necessary tasks—operating prisons, maintaining roads, dispensing public assistance, inspecting, licensing, regulating, taxing; we trudge along in government's wake, picking up the records that document these activities. We are a part of government and yet somehow apart, little understood, often poorly funded, seeking recognition and appreciation.

There is another role that we must play. One striking feature of government is that its field of view is almost always confined to the present, or, when stretched, to the present and the immediate future. As archivists, our vision is much broader, necessarily encompassing past, present, and future. We rely on this expanded sense of time when we appraise records, splitting our focus between our governments and our often hypothetical users. Implicit in this is a sense that we are acted on, rather than being actors. For our own survival, we need to heal this division. We need to see ourselves in a special relationship with our governments and our users. We can begin this healing by understanding and accepting the idea that we exist to make sure that the records of the significant actions of government are preserved.

Paradoxically, if we do our jobs well, the results of our labors can be used to hold government accountable when it has done badly. We should acquire the records of well-run agencies and offices and of mismanaged ones. The resulting holdings comprise a sort of giant ledger, in which the accounts of the public trust are entered so that eventually they may be balanced, debit and credit alike.

Appraisal is important. The how of appraisal is a reasonably straightforward process, driven by the configuration and direction, past and present, of our governments, by the needs of our users, and by our own common sense as archivists. The why of appraisal, our purpose in appraising, is not to serve any one group of users, but rather to select the records that may serve our citizens as a necessary counterpoise to government itself. We do this by ensuring that we acquire and keep those records which document government's deeds.

We have lived through quite enough as Americans to know that government has a frightening side. We have witnessed government lie to us more times than one can count. As Americans, heirs to the tradition of self-government, we have a debt to pay. As public records archivists, we are in a privileged position to make payments on this debt. We do so by appraising records honestly and realistically for our real constituents, our fellow citizens.