

## Research Article

# The View From the Researcher's Desk: Historians' Perceptions of Research and Repositories

BARBARA C. ORBACH

**Abstract:** To gain a full picture of research use, it is necessary to explore not only who uses archives and what they use archives for, but also at what point researchers turn to archival materials, and where, how, and why such materials are used. To explore the potential of a broader-based analysis of information seeking and use, ten historians were interviewed about their views of research and their research practices, with special reference to their use of archival sources. Recommendations are offered concerning the training of both researchers and archivists.

*About the author:* Barbara C. Orbach is a cataloger in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division and is pursuing a Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Maryland.

It's the collecting of data, it's the collating of data, it's thinking about it, piecing it together, trying to extract meaning from it and trying to establish patterns out of thousands of little scraps of information.

THAT IS ONE HISTORIAN'S view of the research process. There have been repeated calls for systematic exploration of the research use of archival materials. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) Committee on Goals and Priorities emphasized in its final report that by learning more about users and uses of archival materials, the profession can carry out more effective appraisal, program planning, database design, and information dissemination.<sup>1</sup> Roy Turnbaugh has reminded us that repositories should be working to extend the range of uses and users,<sup>2</sup> but studies conducted so far have suggested that our present reference and access systems do not adequately support current attempts at research use.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps part of the problem is that interest in researcher behavior has mostly been confined to what researchers do from

the point at which they enter repositories until they pack up to leave.

Archivists have already begun to investigate who uses archival material, what material is used, and what use is made of it. But archives and personal papers<sup>4</sup> are not used in a vacuum; researchers arrive at the repository with fully or partially formulated queries, and they use the information they derive from archival material in conjunction with other types of sources. To gain a full picture of research use, we need to explore at what point researchers turn to archival materials, as well as where, how, and why the materials are used. Moreover, we need to concern ourselves with what researchers *seek* as well as what they *use*. We need to understand how researchers view the relation between archival materials and the other information sources they tap. These questions are important for understanding researchers' questions and behavior, so that we can offer them informed responses, if not more tailor-made systems. By gaining perspective on how archival sources fit into researchers' overall information-seeking patterns, we increase our chances of relating archival systems and services to researchers' needs, conceivably by relating archival systems and services to those found in other institutions in which researchers gather information. Furthermore, if researchers regularly use certain types of archival materials in conjunction with other kinds of information sources, documentation strategies can be adjusted to reflect this.<sup>5</sup>

To explore the potential of analyzing use of archival materials in the context of broader information seeking and use patterns, a

<sup>1</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 8, 22-29. Janice E. Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 266-77, cites and seconds the many calls for use studies. A more detailed research agenda is provided by Lawrence Dowler in "The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use Of Records," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 74-96.

<sup>2</sup>Roy C. Turnbaugh, "Archival Mission and User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 27-34.

<sup>3</sup>For discussions of user studies that included historians, see William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 15-26; Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 35-56; Mary N. Speakman, "The User Talks Back," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 164-71; Michael E. Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 64-74; Elizabeth Harper, "Manuscript Users and Their Preferences in Finding Aids" (Master of Library Science Specialization Paper, UCLA, 1980).

<sup>4</sup>For the sake of brevity, such materials will hereafter be referred to as *archival* materials.

<sup>5</sup>The necessity for understanding how archival material fits into a range of available information sources is emphasized in Richard J. Cox and Helen W. Samuels, "The Archivist's First Responsibility: A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 28-42.

preliminary study was conducted to gather academic historians' accounts of their research practices, with particular attention to their use of archival materials.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the study was not to arrive at definitive generalizations about researcher behavior, but to delve into researchers' perceptions of information and information seeking as clues to that behavior. Adding up these clues, we may discern ways to better respond to historians' felt needs; we may also identify needed alterations in historians' perceptions and practices.

Why focus on academic historians, rather than on a cross section of archives users? After all, it has been pointed out that historians are not necessarily the most regular users of archival materials;<sup>7</sup> and since many archivists were trained in university history departments, the habits and assumptions of this allied profession might seem all too familiar. Each repository must obviously address the needs of all whom it aims to serve, but special attention to academic historians is warranted because they serve as "gatekeepers" of a sort—their teaching and scholarship spread understanding (or misunderstanding) of historical methods and historical experience. Moreover, it is worth investigating whether changes in historians' interests and methods in recent decades has altered their information-seeking patterns and whether this holds any implications for the access systems we design. Archivists generally keep up with shifts in historical scholarship and stand ready to respond to changing needs. But when one is steeped in a repository's holdings and description practices, it is sometimes hard to recapture the outlook of researchers whose

mission it is to ferret out and interpret data they are not even sure exists.

There has been no lack of attention to historians' information needs and practices. They have been studied indirectly by analyzing the sources drawn upon in historical research. Citation studies such as those conducted by Frederic Miller and Jacqueline Goggin help to establish general patterns of information use, demonstrating the degree to which historians are using—or overlooking—archival materials, as well as how the scholars' research orientations and period and subject concentrations relate to the types of repositories and sources that are tapped.<sup>8</sup> Because citation studies rely on the *results* of the research process, however, they cannot offer insights on how researchers go about locating and obtaining materials, how important various sources are to the researcher, or how sources' importance may vary depending upon how far the research has progressed.<sup>9</sup> Studies

<sup>8</sup>Fredric Miller, "Use, Appraisal, and Research: A Case Study of Social History," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 371-92 and Jacqueline Goggin, "The Indirect Approach: A Study of Scholarly Users of Black and Women's Organizational Records in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 57-67. Examples of earlier citation studies include Arthur Monroe McAnally, "Characteristics of Materials Used in Research in United States History" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1951), cited in Rolland Stevens, "The Study of the Research Use of Libraries," *Library Quarterly* 26 (January 1956): 41-51; Clyve Jones, Michael Chapman, and Pamela Carr Woods, "The Characteristics of the Literature Used by Historians," *Journal of Librarianship* 4 (July 1972): 137-56; Clark A. Elliott, "Citation Patterns and Documentation for the History of Science: Some Methodological Considerations," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 131-42.

<sup>9</sup>A method for systematically studying users that addresses some of these aspects of research has been proposed by Paul Conway in "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393-407. It is unclear, however, whether repositories have begun to employ Conway's framework for analyzing use. Marilyn Domas White has addressed the matter of how research stages influence approaches to information seeking in the work of academic economists in "The Communications Behavior of Academic Economists

<sup>6</sup>This paper draws on findings reported more fully in Barbara C. Orbach, "Historians: Information Needs, Information Seeking and the Research Process" (Master of Library Science Specialization Paper, UCLA, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Elsie Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111-23.

conducted in the United States and Britain that have queried historians and archives users directly have shed light on some of these issues.<sup>10</sup> But these explorations are of limited use in helping us to understand research dynamics and the parameters that influence how—and how intensively—archival material is sought.<sup>11</sup> To explore some of this less charted terrain, this study sought to pursue the following questions:

- What are historians' conceptions of the research process? Where does research begin, where does it end, and does it progress by a series of stages?
- What factors influence the nature and intensity of information seeking in conducting research?

in Research Phases," *Library Quarterly* 45 (October 1975): 337-54.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries"; Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids"; Margaret F. Stieg, "The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981): 549-60; Sue Stone, "CRUS Humanities Research Programme," in *Humanities Information Research: Proceedings of a Seminar, Sheffield*, 1980, CRUS Occasional Paper no. 4, BLR&DD Report no. 5588 (Sheffield, England: Centre for Research on User Studies, 1980), 15-26. A broad spectrum of research practices and attitudes of art historians is presented in Elizabeth Bakewell, William O. Beeman, and Carol McMichael Reese, *Object, Image, Inquiry: The Art Historian at Work, Report on a Collaborative Study by the Getty Art History Information Program and the Institute for Research in Information and Scholarship, Brown University*, ed. by Marilyn Schmitt (Santa Monica: Getty Art History Information Program, 1988).

<sup>11</sup>Oblique references to the dynamic nature of historical research appear in Lester D. Stephens, *Probing the Past: A Guide to The Study and Teaching of History* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1974), 22-23 and Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). A survey of historical literature for the past five years, however, suggests that historians' discussions of the nature of their work are confined primarily to epistemological matters. One exception is Joan N. Burstyn's reflective examination of factors that influence historians' choice of topic and research procedures in "History as Image: Changing the Lens," *History of Education Quarterly* 27 (Summer 1987): 167-80.

- What are historians' patterns of use of primary, secondary, and tertiary<sup>12</sup> sources and how do these interplay with the formulation of ideas, hypotheses, and arguments?
- When historians undertake a search for primary materials, what is their conception of what they need and what factors shape that conception as research progresses?
- How does the training in methods of historical research that historians receive influence their attitude and approach?

Responses to these questions were gathered during the winter and spring of 1984 through personal interviews with ten academic historians, eight of whom were professors then employed at a state university and two graduate students in the final stages of their dissertations at the same university. All were working in the general field of American history and had in the previous six months been conducting research involving materials found in American archives or manuscript repositories. No rigorous attempt was made to obtain a representative sample of scholars working in the field of U.S. history. Nevertheless, the distribution with regard to factors such as professional level, gender, historical approach, and historical period is fairly even. The study included, in addition to the graduate students, one visiting lecturer, one assistant professor, and six professors. Four of the historians were female, six were male. When asked to label their areas of specialization, two historians identified their field as "political" or "political/diplomatic history," two described their work as "intellectual" or "ideological" history, one used the label "cultural history," and the label "social history" was unenthusiastically claimed by four schol-

<sup>12</sup>"Tertiary" sources is used here to mean information sources that are designed solely to lead to other information—periodical indexes, catalogs of holdings, and collection guides, for instance.



ars. One historian described his area of specialization simply as "general U.S. history." Two of the research topics focused on the eighteenth century, two on the nineteenth century, four on the twentieth century, and two were conducting broad surveys that spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The interview combined structured and unstructured questioning. The unstructured portion took place early in the interview, when historians were asked to describe their research processes on the project in question. The subsequent structured portion of the interview was designed to elicit responses from all historians on the same set of issues. As one might expect, the interviewees did not find it easy to articulate a process that is neither entirely conscious nor entirely linear. Nevertheless, the historians' responses offer glimpses of the view from their side of the desk and invite speculation on what we might do to bring their use of archival materials, at least, into better focus.

### What is "Research"?

To understand historians' self-described research processes, we need to know what they mean by "research." While in its broadest sense research might be construed as activity undertaken to fill a gap in knowledge, most of the historians viewed it more narrowly. Only two historians made any explicit reference to looking at secondary materials in describing their research process. When pointedly asked if their conception of research included using secondary materials, most agreed that it did, elaborating on the importance of being familiar with what has been done in the field. One historian hedged by saying it was important, but not a part of research. Another replied: "Research to me is something original."

Perhaps partly because research was being thought of in this narrower sense, it was

not universally perceived as consisting of a well-ordered series of stages; while five of seven historians who answered this question felt that their research did proceed in stages, one expressed the view that "all stages are potentially present all the time to some degree." One professor who specialized in intellectual history emphatically rejected the notion that research takes place in a series of steps:

It's a question of asking questions and working away at knots that you have to untie. It's being engaged with questions and having your mind turn to them. . . . As you read and think and look around, you'll figure out other ways to find the information. . . . I think that the idea of making this thing mechanical is simply to impose a form on content.

Her comments underscore the degree to which historians are wrapped up in content, in the materials themselves and what they offer to the researcher's argument, sometimes to the exclusion of conscious consideration of strategies for finding and assimilating materials. This, as well as factors such as the vagaries of obtaining different sources, may explain why searching behavior may seem to the outsider—and even, sometimes, to the researcher—haphazard, not flowing logically from one source or type of source to another. The four historians who tended to be the most articulate about their process and to phrase it in terms of steps or stages were also those with the least experience in the field. While the small size of the sample makes it risky to attempt to discern patterns, it seems logical that the more experienced the historian, the less she or he views the research process as a multi-stage one; no doubt the process eventually becomes "second nature" and consciousness of the decisions one is making wanes. Those who are still learning the process may be more inclined to mentally group research activities into stages.

## What to Study and Why?

Inspiration for topics may derive from a variety of sources. Occasionally, topics develop out of others' suggestions. One of the graduate students noted that his adviser had proposed his dissertation topic; another historian was commissioned to write a paper for a conference, although his review of the secondary literature prompted him to alter the topic and, eventually, the end product. Topics also grow from earlier work. Both students at the dissertation stage were extending topics treated in seminar papers. More experienced historians similarly reported that they tended to draw upon knowledge and interests acquired in the course of previous research projects to branch out to new fields of inquiry.

Researchers' motivation for pursuing a topic may often be fueled by their involvement in contemporary issues. Such concerns prompted historians to pose questions, for instance, about municipal finance, big government, racism and ethnicity, and social movements of the 1960s. Historians also sometimes have their eyes on the future. Anniversaries of an event can stimulate research activity. This was the case with one researcher, who was also swayed by the fact that most of the files and documents on his subject would soon be opening for examination by researchers.

The historians stressed, however, the importance of secondary literature in framing their research topics; treatments present in—or absent from—the literature stimulate ideas. Apparently, awareness of the availability of primary material is generally *not* what awakens the Muse. The comments of several historians suggest that it is not unusual for the assessment of primary sources to occur *after* the selection of the topic has been made. Finding such material clinches the commitment to the topic, however. For instance, one researcher noted:

The main historian who should have known told me that there weren't pa-

pers, that there wouldn't be any personal papers. So I, in some way, went ahead thinking that, "Well, there's enough professional papers." And then, partly to my horror because it cost me so much in xeroxing, I discovered there [were] *piles* of papers. . . . At that point, I said, "Okay, that's it. Am I committed to this project. This is absolute dynamite." So certainly I would say that one's assessment of the depth and richness of the manuscript sources is a critical part of the process and should be at an early stage.

Do historians regularly follow scientific method, framing a hypothesis or tentative explanation at the outset of a project, which would presumably lead them to pursue or perceive certain types of evidence and to ignore others? In seven of the ten projects discussed, the historians claimed that they had a thesis or hypothesis in mind when they began the research; in the other three cases, the historians had developed or were developing hypotheses in the course of the research. It is certainly possible that the latter researchers simply did not consciously articulate tentative explanations they were entertaining from the start, but, again, their comments hint at the intuitive approach to research. The scholar who struck it rich with personal papers noted, for instance, "It certainly is true that I trusted more the gap I saw in historiography than I trusted some hypothesis that I developed—that if I studied this gap, I was going to make some kind of contribution."

## When and How is Research Undertaken and How Much is Enough?

Few scholars would argue with the ideal of thorough and painstaking research; fewer still care to or can afford to engage full-time in this single pursuit until its completion. At least three of the historians preferred to juggle several research projects at once. For instance, an urban historian was

not only researching municipal finance, but was also involved in two other books and another article while planning for a third book. This may, in part, have been self-defense against the problems of obtaining materials at the library; he commented, "When I go, I typically look for two or three items relating to two or three projects, so I'm not disappointed." Personal satisfaction and professional pressures can also come into play. A researcher of nineteenth-century religious life concurrently pursued two related projects as well as an unrelated project on social movements of the 1960s. She stated her preference for working on one project at a time, but hers was "the kind of project that takes a long time, and if one works only on that then you will find that you're not getting as much done as you like . . . first of all, for your own sense of completion and then also for tenure."

This same historian adopted a strategy of making her teaching and her research coincide, working, for instance, on her 1960s research while teaching a class on that subject. "The reason I do that is because the students give you a tremendous amount of ideas and even come up with sources that you don't know about. And so, it's a way of complementing the teaching, and you don't feel that the teaching is taking you away from your research."

What causes historians to call a halt to further information seeking? All but two of the scholars knew their intended end products (e.g., book, article, lecture) at the start of their projects. All agreed that this knowledge played a role in determining how much information they collected, although one historian qualified this view. He started on what was intended to be a short article and ended up with something more appropriate as a book: "It was something I was going to follow through to the limits of my patience." Logically, the intended outcome of research plays a role in the amount of effort expended, but *time* appears to be a crucial factor. These historians spoke of

their projects in terms of how long they calculated (or miscalculated) it would take.

The nature of the intended product and the allotted time frame form fairly solid parameters; nevertheless, the general consensus was that determining the endpoint of the research is one of the most difficult tasks in the entire process. One scholar who faced mountains of material on his twentieth-century topic expressed some of the dilemmas:

When you're doing this kind of research, there's never enough information or there's always too much information. Therefore, what happens is you research vigorously and energetically, as extensively as you can, but when . . . your ideas gel, when you think you are onto what you feel are active assumptions—maybe your initial assumptions will be confirmed and you'll be able to go with that. . . . Some things you never feel you'll be able to get enough on, and it's just hopeless to do more than say in a book, "I *think* this is true."

Two historians who were dealing extensively with quantitative data were able to identify the termination point in more pragmatic, almost economic terms. According to one, "At a certain point you realize that for every hour of research you're getting very little return. And you know that you've more or less exhausted the sources and it's time to start writing." A researcher who was not using quantitative methods gave a somewhat more mystical account:

A friend of mine told me someone had written a book about John Brown. And they asked him at a historical conference, "What makes you think the things you said about John Brown are true?" And he told them, maybe in all seriousness, that he'd worried about that and then one night while he was doing his work, a vision of John Brown came to him and told him that he was telling it right—the way it was. In a

less ghostly way, I suppose you get sort of a sense of power . . . when you know more than the books that are published, then you feel it's publishable and an advance in knowledge.

Other factors determining when information seeking stops included the intended audience, deadlines, the discovery of contrary evidence, and exhaustion—whether of resources or of the researcher. One historian remarked: “I do think the constraints of time and money are greater on scholarship than anyone imagines and [than] anybody is going to face up to or tell.” The decision she usually faced in doing research away from home was not determining when she had gathered enough information, but when she could leave if she had to.

Comments have been appearing in the archival literature since the 1940s to the effect that historians are no longer willing to sift through archives with the thoroughness necessary to obtain all materials related to their topics; rather they demand more immediate access to directly relevant materials.<sup>13</sup> Changes in research questions and methods may partially account for this phenomenon. But the historians' comments reinforce the common sense explanation that lack of sufficient time and funding for lengthy searches and, in some cases, the sheer volume of available source material may be equally responsible for such shifts in research behavior.

Whatever the concrete economic and temporal constraints, there is also a subtle cognitive shift alluded to by several historians that occurs as information accumulates. Noted one:

At some point you lay off the primary stuff. . . . You just stop digging because you've got enough. Because I'm almost afraid to find something brilliantly new on the primary sources because I just won't care . . . as you have formulated a narrative, at some point you don't want more input on that. What you want is input on the secondary stuff.

These comments also hint at the interplay between the use of primary and secondary sources as a researcher's thinking proceeds. Seven of the historians explicitly said they used secondary sources during the initial part of their projects, then turned to primary sources, where their attention remained until writing up the research, when secondary sources were again consulted. As one might expect, the historians drew clear distinctions between the functions of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were central, the most important body of materials they drew upon in generating and presenting their arguments; secondary materials played supporting roles such as exposing untrod intellectual territory, providing background, supplying leads to pertinent sources, and filling in facts. Curiously, the historians did not appear to perceive a correspondingly sharp distinction between how primary and secondary materials are organized and accessed. Although the search for primary and secondary materials were addressed in separate questions in the interview, the researchers tended to blend the two types of sources in discussing their search for materials.

Eight of the historians named citations in footnotes and bibliographies as a method they used to locate primary materials, making it the most frequently mentioned mode of access to such materials. While one of them expressed the opinion that this is how one locates the “better stuff,” another pointed out one of the weaknesses of relying on others' citations: “A newspaper story from 1891, March 3rd, in the *Chi-*

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Roy F. Nichols, “Alice in Wonderland,” *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 149-58; Howard H. Peckham, “Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections,” *American Archivist* 19 (July 1956): 221-28; Fredric M. Miller, “Social History and Archival Practice,” *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 113-24.

cago Tribune is like in the annals . . . all the historians have been using it over the years, but there might be a story right next to it that is more valuable." Recommendations of colleagues were relied on in at least four instances, and researchers seemed to place considerable weight on this avenue for finding information, although it seemed less marked among those who had gained experience—and a stake—in their field. In some cases, historians find themselves at the wrong end of the avenue. Such was the case with the knowledgeable scholar who reported spending about one hour every day in one repository speaking to other researchers referred to her by the librarian.

Since some have questioned the strength of historians' informal networks,<sup>14</sup> and these historians' techniques for surveying the secondary literature would not necessarily take them down new paths, it is interesting to speculate about how valuable citation indexing such as that found in *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* might be for expanding historians' sources. Provided that historians' citations were consistent and accurate, that monographs were more regularly used as sources of citations in the indexes, and that citations to unpublished sources were included more consistently, researchers could look up who had written on a topic, see what primary sources they had cited, then cycle back and see who else had used those sources, and what other archival materials they had used, and so on. This technique might alert historians to research and sources not identified in their routine scanning of journals and catalogs; on the other hand, it might simply demonstrate the wide range of research topics

a single set of archival materials can support.

Perhaps for lack of adequate reference tools, researchers reported relying on more intuitive methods of identifying sources; several mentioned the technique of reasoning out where materials "should be" and then corresponding with the appropriate repositories. Researchers' comments tended to confirm earlier findings that the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) volumes are not heavily used as a means for locating materials.<sup>15</sup> The urban historian expressed the need for a comprehensive guide to archival and manuscript collections, but he noted that NUCMC did not fulfill this role, because it is "hopelessly out of date," not comprehensive in listing individual repositories' holdings, and concentrates on listing the papers of "Great White Men," whereas he was looking for diaries of ordinary policemen in his project. Guides *are* used, however; six out of the ten historians reported using a guide of some sort to locate primary materials: two had used NUCMC, one had used Andrea Hinding's *Women's History Sources*, another had used a guide to manuscript materials relating to blacks, and two had used guides to government information.

Upon identifying repositories believed to hold material appropriate to their investigations, the historians seemed to rely principally on dialogue with repository staff to hone in on specific collections or portions of collections. Seven of the historians corresponded with repositories in advance. The historians tended to accord repository staff due credit—and considerable power—in facilitating access to primary material. One of the graduate students commented:

<sup>14</sup>Stieg, "The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians," 556; R. C. Snelling, "R & D Work in Retrospect and Prospect," in *Humanities Information Research: Proceedings of a Seminar, Sheffield*, 1980, CRUS Occasional Paper no. 4, BLR&DD Report no. 5588 (Sheffield, England: Centre for Research on User Studies, 1980), 10.

<sup>15</sup>Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids"; Maher, "The Use of User Studies"; Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries"; Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 64-75.



Assume and remember you kow-tow to the librarians. You be very nice to them because they can make your stay much more pleasant. They know what they're doing—and zero in on the people who know what they're doing and ask them. Yeah, make clear the fact that you are a researcher and they'll do things for you. And they will let you know what's going on. . . . They're always very helpful. I've been very, very much aided by them.

Another, more seasoned historian remarked, similarly, "The luck depends on the archivist and how you manage to get along with the archivist and whether the archivist has the time to help you. . . . For me, the main key to successful research is getting an archivist to help you." These views were seconded by five other historians.

Archivists are taught that the ideal access system consists of a hierarchically related series of tools. Although six historians recalled using a card index or catalog and four remembered using finding aids to a single collections, only one of the nine reported using both, despite the intended linkage between the tools. There are several possible explanations: perhaps the repositories in question simply didn't feature the full array of related tools; or if they were available, maybe the researcher's discussions with the staff enabled him or her to bypass one or all of them; or quite possibly researchers *did* use more than one of these types of tools, but did not recall using them. The difficulty of even eliciting this information from the historians strongly suggests that they are not familiar with the names archivists use for these tools and may not be aware of their functions or relationships. While the researchers seemed to feel that they comprehended the access mechanisms in libraries, they seemed to assume that they would not be able to operate equally independently in ferreting out archival materials. If there is any consistent structure

underlying different repositories' access systems, it was not apparent to these researchers.

The historians were queried about their relative preferences for subject or name access, both in identifying repositories holding appropriate material and in working with a repository's access tools. Since social historians often seek to illuminate the lives of "ordinary" people whose names are unknown at the outset of the research, it seemed probable that social historians would more often desire a subject approach than political or intellectual historians who frequently deal with the thought or actions of known individuals. It rapidly became apparent in the interviews that, as Michael Stevens discovered, the distinction between name and subject breaks down,<sup>16</sup> and so do labels like "social" and "political" history. One historian investigating political organizations in the post-Civil War South was quite receptive to subject indexing. Quite possibly the names of those involved in organizations he focused on were not well known or, given the nature of the organizations, were even deliberately concealed. Another historian, although he was focusing on the life of a famous political figure, also expressed interest in subject access; faced with the vast quantity of material he uncovered, he probably sought any indexing that would refine his search. Those who accepted the label "social historian" indicated that they searched by subject, but one researcher in Afro-American history declared that he would have preferred a name approach, had it been available. Another scholar in Afro-American history noted that subject indexing in *NUCMC* was sometimes so broad as to be useless; she usually looked under names: "After you've gone through the period, you know who the planters are. . . . If I find a planter, then

<sup>16</sup>Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids."

more than likely there will be something that I want. But the subject . . . would take too much time.”

Assessing these comments is complicated by our awareness that, as Avra Michelson has demonstrated, subject access to archival materials is hit or miss—an awareness the historians shared.<sup>17</sup> They commented on the inconsistency in headings used in card catalogs and the dearth of cross references; this fed the impression that searching had to be “creative.” While they could see how names could be fairly reliably extracted from records as pointers, they recognized that assignment of subjects is necessarily subjective. The historians anticipated that their needs and outlooks would differ from the next user and from the next generation of users, making it difficult to index to everyone’s satisfaction. The types of subject terms the researchers did suggest were so broad, given the contexts of their projects, that it is unlikely that the terms would have served as any but the most general of pointers.

Names and subjects weren’t the only “handles” used by the historians. Several indicated the usefulness of chronological access for reducing the amount of material to be examined. While only one historian mentioned a form of material as a way she searched for archival material, all but one indicated that they had consciously considered types of material they would like to find. Correspondence was the most frequently mentioned form; six researchers had sought this type of material, at least one noting its value for revealing the non-public side of historical experience. Oral histories and transcripts of telephone calls were also mentioned, as were pamphlets, clippings, newspapers, petitions, broadsides, and census records.

The historians also underlined the importance of the kinds of contextual information offered by collection registers and some catalog records—information that places certain segments of a body of records in the context of the collection as a whole, and that conveys biographical information about the principals. It is not clear why the two historians who expressed their need for the latter information would have needed it more than the others, although the fact that both were relatively new to their areas of research and, therefore, may have been less familiar with the key figures may have had something to do with it.

In an effort to test assertions in archival literature that retrieval precision has become of greater concern to historians, the researchers were asked if they preferred to look at a lot of things and cull what was useful, or to retrieve specific items. All except two stated that they preferred to see a lot of material. Comments by several of the researchers suggest that the tendency to browse may be tied to perceptions of the adequacy of cataloging or indexing in the repository. It may also be that the interpretive frame the researcher is using makes it difficult to articulate—or even envision clearly—what is needed. This may lie behind the comment of the scholar who was driven to browse because “I know what I’m looking for, but I don’t know what’s there.” As Adele Newburger and Paul Rosenberg have suggested, browsing may be less characteristic of quantitative research;<sup>18</sup> when researchers employed quantitative methods they reported going in search of specific data, although one historian remarked, “I’ll take any quantitative data I can get.” Supportive of Richard Lytle’s hypothesis that browsing behavior may be characteristic of the initial stages of re-

<sup>17</sup>Avra Michelson, “Description and Reference in the Age of Automation,” *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 192-208.

<sup>18</sup>Adele M. Newburger and Paul M. Rosenberg, “Automation and Access: Finding Aids for Urban Archives,” *Drexel Library Quarterly* 13 (October 1977): 45-59.

search,<sup>19</sup> one of the more potent factors influencing the researcher's retrieval requirements seemed to be experience with the topic: researchers wanted to get more directly to specific materials as their research progressed and their knowledge of the sources accumulated. This may also explain why one historian expressed more desire for subject access in the early part of research.

The broad subject approaches the historians proposed generally guaranteed that a large number of materials would be retrieved, at which point the researcher would scan in order to discover leads into relevant materials and to stimulate ideas for new angles from which to tackle the topic. By casting a wide net, the researchers also increased the potential for discovery and surprise—for uncovering buried treasure. In fact, the historians repeatedly used phrases and metaphors that evoked treasure seeking, and this is clearly one of pleasures of the endeavor.

This poses a seeming paradox. Although historians desire better access mechanisms, if description and indexing were to be detailed, comprehensive, and widely available, it might cut into the pleasures of research. "The basic strategy of a historian is to get his or her hands on some manuscript material that other people haven't explored," explained one individual. One historian described with frustration one such "gold mine" to which another researcher had been given exclusive access in exchange for organizing the papers. Researchers seem to recognize, however, that the size of many collections and the necessarily general nature of most collection descriptions leave plenty of virgin territory. One of the graduate students remarked:

If you were going to find something out of the blue that other people hadn't seen, you probably wouldn't pick it up

in *NUCMC* but you pick it up as you thumb through the stuff.

Moreover, what makes some material a "gold mine" for one researcher may be an indescribable quality that adds richness to that person's argument, while the same material may look like a black hole to anyone else.

Long-standing archival arrangement and description practices in some instances necessitate, but in any case support, historians' browsing. For browsing to be effective, there has to be some sort of arrangement: materials sharing common features are placed in physical relation to one another, or are brought together intellectually through indexing or listing, thus laying the way for "serendipitous" encounters. The current focus on cataloging standards—on improving methods of subject analysis of collections, on applying standardized vocabulary, and on doing the authority work necessary to provide needed cross references—will, however, provide vital support by enabling researchers to locate unexpectedly relevant collections and to become less dependent on staff for this aspect of their research. Steady application of standards may enable researchers to perceive consistency and underlying structure in access systems within and among repositories. The number of catalog records accumulating in union databases such as RLIN and OCLC, as well as the recent availability of *NUCMC* records in RLIN increases this potential in a manner that was only dreamt of when the historians were interviewed in 1984.

### What Is Research Like?

Research is an intellectual enterprise, but it is experienced physically and emotionally as well. One well-traveled scholar alluded to the "struggle" research represented—apparently more than compensated by the "vicarious living" and view of the "secret sides of people's lives" it affords. Another depicted the mixture of pain and pleasure as:

<sup>19</sup>Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," 68.

Sitting long hours in the library and spending some lonely weeks by oneself in hotels and motels. Working from nine to five. It's a lot of very hard work. Sometimes it's very tedious, but it's also exhilarating when you come up with the nuggets that make it worthwhile and it grows into a book, and it's well received.

The arduous and solitary nature of the work seemed to come as a particular surprise to the graduate students, one of whom complained of the long hours and lack of "social support." The other described how her vision was shattered:

I've always had this idea that you sit at an oak desk and people bring you things and you look at them. I'd spent the whole day reading this yellowed novel to find one crummy note. It wasn't what I imagined at all.

The gap between researchers' notions of primary research and its realities was starkly depicted by one of the more seasoned researchers: "You'd have to go to the basement of the City Hall Annex in Philadelphia, where all the numbers runners are going through and steam pipes are clattering, to understand, but there are some places you do research that don't seem very much like archives at all."

### **Historians' Assessments of Archival Research**

The vividness of some of these depictions of research, in contrast to responses to questions about thinking processes and searching techniques, suggest that historians carry away—or are able to express—the physical and emotional aspects of their experiences in archives more than its intellectual elements. When asked what, if anything, they found to be bothersome about finding or obtaining materials or using archives, the historians replied along three general lines: eight made reference to issues of physical comfort and access, seven

expressed concerns about the social aspects of research, and only four offered negative comments or suggestions about intellectual access, while a good deal of satisfaction with archival access systems was expressed. As noted above, two historians desired more biographical data with collection descriptions to help set the context; one of these historians also noted how helpful he found transcripts of papers to be, since deciphering illegible documents had slowed his research.

Inevitably, when materials cannot be obtained locally, researchers face the expense and loneliness of travel. This is, perhaps, why the historians' most intensely expressed requests had to do with easing these burdens. Most of the historians expressed a need to study and synthesize their data at their home base after all of it had been gathered; this, along with ever-present time pressures, probably explains the emphasis they laid on being able to reproduce research materials efficiently. Two historians noted their appreciation of the opportunity to obtain research materials on microfilm. Another historian proposed simply that the reproduction of materials should be "easy and cheap." Two historians made a point of recounting experiences illustrating that not all repositories meet this need.

The researchers identified other ways repositories can help them cut research expenses and make maximum use of travel time; several historians pleaded for longer repository hours as well as clearly posted and advertised ones. One researcher proposed that repository staff be prepared to suggest inexpensive places to stay.

Reliance on repository staff was a continuing theme; several of the researchers emphasized that the intellectual connections repository staff could supply were critical to their work. One researcher made special mention of a service he enjoyed at the National Archives, where staff alerted him to other scholars working with the same materials or on similar topics. Perhaps the

greatest testimony to researchers' reliance on staff help was that when repositories were criticized, it was never for having inadequate cataloging or indexing, but for having no staff on hand who were knowledgeable about the materials—an experience recounted by two historians.

Strangely, despite repeated references to the physical discomforts of research in repositories, the only concrete suggestion was for greater proximity of coffee machines. Perhaps researchers suspect that repositories have little control over such conditions, or maybe those discomforts get folded into researchers' images of the arduous—and virtuous—nature of the enterprise.

## Conclusions

The historians suggested a few concrete actions repositories can take to assist research work, at the same time revealing some lack of acknowledgement of the constraints—budgetary or otherwise—under which repositories operate. The small, unscientific nature of the sample and the limitations of the interview method make it impossible to draw conclusions about specific changes needed to access systems or documentation strategies. But if the comments of these historians are in any way representative, they confirm observations offered by archivists over the years and suggest that archivists have a significant contribution to make to historical scholarship by ensuring that archival materials are exploited fully and effectively.

First, however, those who staff the repository must assess the degree to which they share historians' assumptions that a researcher cannot (or should not) operate independently in archival repositories and must rely on staff knowledge. Because archival description is necessarily general, the reference interview may well be more effective than any catalog or finding aid in getting researchers directly to pertinent material. On the other hand, time pressures

seldom allow as much consultation as either the researcher or the archivist would like, and archivists' "omniscience" is challenged by the growing number and volume of collections.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as researchers often need to see material to recognize its relevance and to stimulate new ideas, they need a level of self-sufficiency. Once a repository establishes a viable level, it should carry through with techniques that encourage independence such as clear signs, handouts that explain available tools and their relationships, and regularly scheduled or videotaped introductions to the facility.

Does this verge on training? Without question. Walter Rundell's landmark survey, conducted in the late 1960s, queried American history students and professors, as well as repository staff, about training in historical research methods and uncovered a general lack of adequate preparation in searching for and using primary materials.<sup>21</sup> Judging from the comments of the ten historians interviewed here, the situation hasn't changed much. All had received some kind of formal or informal instruction in historical research methods; only one believed that it had been adequate. One felt that he had not been "pushed enough," particularly in using archival sources. Another scholar stated simply that she thought it is "probably somewhat scandalous" how poorly informed historians are about research sources and tools.

The last decade's worth of writing on historical methodology and pedagogy predicts the advent of new types of evidence and places heavy concentration on techniques of evaluating and weighing evi-

<sup>20</sup>Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33-44, suggests that there is too much reliance on reference archivists' subject knowledge rather than on comprehensive and consistent access tools.

<sup>21</sup>Walter Rundell, *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970).



dence, with far less attention to how evidence is obtained in the first place. Historians generally teach what methodology courses are offered, yet their comments here suggest that, once they have developed their own research styles, they find it difficult to break research down into the kind of discrete steps that are necessary to teach systematic information gathering, if not to conduct it. Of even greater concern, historians may not fully comprehend the range of access tools available to them. Wouldn't more effective guidance in information-gathering procedures be delivered by professionals who are prepared to articulate how the access tools and systems function and how they relate to one another? Undergraduate and graduate classes conventionally make at least one trip to the library for bibliographic instruction. Sometimes they are also addressed by an archivist or special collections librarian. But students who will be moving between primary and secondary sources need to be familiar with the organization and access tools of both; this will become ever more necessary as institutions' online catalogs and union databases such as RLIN and OCLC increasingly offer access to both types of sources. If there were a full partnership between history instructor, librarian, and archivist in providing coordinated instruction in the tools and methods of research, students might be better equipped to tap the full range of information available to them as they formulate questions, seek and evaluate evidence, and develop arguments.

Archivists usually stay current with the research completed or in progress in subject areas related to their collections; they can no doubt also identify collections or portions of collections that have not been tapped and cry out for attention. This puts archivists in a prime position to propose fruitful lines of inquiry—a service that might be of particular value to novice scholars. Several repositories offer fellowships to encourage use of their holdings but, if the

archival and historical periodical literature of the past five years is any indication, few take the additional step of suggesting topics.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this is taking place in unpublished form on university campuses.

University archives and special collections departments have an additional role to play in giving students "hands on" experience, not only so that they can better understand how to use the appropriate research tools, but to provide students with some "reality testing." Would-be researchers can gain an introduction to pleasures and corresponding rigors of the endeavor on their home campuses before undertaking costly research trips.

Would-be historians are not the only ones who need hands-on training, however. Many archivists are also practicing historians, well acquainted with the ins and outs, ups and downs of research. But those who are not so experienced often gain only a partial picture of the research process in the course of their training; because it is presented in an ideal, linear fashion, research seems more systematic than it really is, and little acknowledgement is given to the constraints that operate in any research project. Training for archival work should include research that requires students to use the resources of at least one unfamiliar repository.<sup>23</sup>

"Continuing education" for those already in the historical field is a greater challenge. Historians don't commonly delve into archival publications, but the historians interviewed here indicated that they do

<sup>22</sup>A survey of the past five years of *America: History and Life*, which comprehensively indexes publications on American history, turned up only one such reference: Bill Sumners, "Research Opportunities in the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives," *Baptist History and Heritage* 21:2 (1986): 23-25.

<sup>23</sup>Janice E. Ruth makes a good case for the role reference archivists might play in educating researchers, as well as the need for archivists to experience research as part of their training, in "Educating the Reference Archivist."

routinely scan journals in their field. Perhaps these scholars would sit up and take notice if, alongside those announcements of newly opened collections, there appeared information about the access system that leads to the collections, beyond the stock phrase "finding aid available." If the American Historical Association's newsletter *Perspectives* is any indication, editors may not resist such incursions, perhaps acknowledging that in the present historical era—the "Information Age"—knowing how to find information is as important as being able to interpret it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>The AHA has published at least one article describing information access tools at length: Joyce Duncan Falk, "OCLC and RLIN: Research Libraries at the Scholar's Fingertips," *Perspectives* 27 (May/June 1989): 1, 11-13, 17. An encouraging move in the direction of supplying more extensive information about both collections and access methods appears in

In the last analysis, communication between archivists and historians may be at its most effective when it takes place in front of the coffee machine. Some scholars are not willing to discuss their research in any setting. But for those who are willing, paving the way for informal contact with archivists may ease researcher isolation, and the back-and-forth of an informal conversation can often produce a fuller picture of a researcher's needs than can be elicited in a formal reference interview. More importantly, both parties stand to gain a better picture of each others' knowledge, work, and the constraints under which each operates. Taking the view from the other side of the desk may well promote better functioning on both sides.

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a special issue of *Labor History* devoted to labor archives and collections in the United States: *Labor History* 31 (Winter-Spring 1990): 7-226.