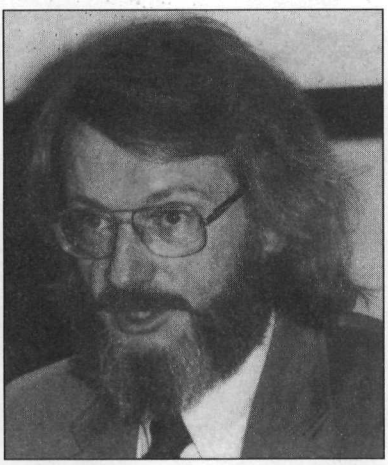
Presidential Address

"Dear Mary Jane": Some Reflections on Being an Archivist

JOHN A. FLECKNER



John A. Fleckner gave this presidential address at the fifty-fourth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Seattle on 30 August 1990. F. Gerald Ham, retired state archivist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, introduced him on that occasion with these words:

In early 1971 a gangly graduate student—wearing a locomotive engineer's cap—came into my office. He inquired if there was a future in archives for a budding historian with a growing family to feed. He soon took over directing the thirteen-member archival network affiliated with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and, with the help of others, made the Area Research Center system a national model. After twelve years at Wisconsin, in 1983 John became the first director of the newly formed archival program at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. He has held that position to the present.

Among John's most significant contributions to our profession are his role in fostering cooperation, in helping other archives help themselves, and in promoting the notion that wider use of archives by a broader clientele is good for the health of a democratic society. His 1976 article on "Cooperation as an Archival Strategy" helped define and broaden the concept of interinstitutional collaboration. A few years later he organized a conference on archival networks and edited the resulting 1982 special "archival networks" issue of the Midwestern Archivist, *which has become a standard reference.*

While in Wisconsin, John had worked with several groups of Native Americans to develop their own archives. This work was the seedbed for the SAA manual, Tribal Archives: An Introduction, *for which he received the Waldo G. Leland Prize in 1985. Earlier he had published another manual,* Archives and Manuscripts: Surveys.

His role in promoting wider use is best evidenced by his work as one of the original members of the Task Force on Goals and Priorities. In the report, Planning for the Profession, *his guiding hand is seen throughout the chapter on promoting wider use. John went on to chair the Committee on Goals and Priorities.*

The real roots to John's contributions to our profession lie in his deep and abiding interest and concern for others—extending to his colleagues in the workplace, to the broader profession, and to all others because of their human dignity and equality.

THIS ADDRESS IS WRITTEN in the form of three letters to a recent college graduate who spent nearly a year as a volunteer and intern in the Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. For Mary Jane Appel the year was an opportunity to experience archival work firsthand and to consider her future before entering graduate school. For me, our conversations were an occasion to recollect and reflect on my own career choices and on the archival mission.

Dear Mary Jane:

You asked me how I became an archivist. Really, it was elegantly uncomplicated. After too many years in graduate school, pursuing a vague notion of teaching college-level history, I recognized that university jobs weren't to be found, even if I somehow managed to complete a dissertation. I recognized too that moving office furniture—my latest in a string of minimum-wage jobs—helped to feed my small family and to nurture my identification with the proletariat, but starved my mind and spirit.

Still, I was so naive that it took a University career counselor to recognize that my history background might be anything other than an economic liability. Leaning back in her chair, she pointed out her office window to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin just across the street, and she directed me to a recently established graduate program in archives administration. The instructor—yes, it was Gerry Ham—would make no promises about the prospects for a job, but with a sly smile he offered that all his previous students were working. I didn't need a weatherman—as they said in those days, the early 1970s—to tell me which way the wind was blowing.

So, it was an accident in good guidance that got me in the door. But it was the experience of doing archival work—beginning with simplest class exercises and then a formal internship—that sealed it for me. I loved the combination of handicraft and analytical work and I loved the intense, intimate contact with the "stuff" of history. Before I completed my internship, I knew I wanted to be an archivist. I never considered the long-term prospects, the career ladders, or the alternatives. No, I didn't visualize my future at all.

As a graduate student, of course I had done some research in archives—at the Library of Congress, the College of William and Mary, and especially the State Historical Society. But the archivists had taken all the fun out of it—the materials were antiseptically foldered, boxed, and listed. Wheeled out on carts, they were like cadavers to be dissected by first-year medical students. On occasion, perhaps, I even donned white gloves. The documents always seemed lifeless.

Now, as a would-be archivist, they thrilled me. Of course, now I was in charge of these would-be archives. I would evaluate their significance, determine their order, describe their contents, and physically prepare them for their permanent resting places. Still, it was not so much this heady feeling of control that awed me but more the mystery, the possibilities of the records themselves. Unlike the research forays of my graduate student days, I now came to the records without preconceived questions and I didn't judge them solely by their contributions to my puny research interests. Now I didn't have to ignore those portions that fell outside my research design. No, the records could speak to me in whatever voices my curious ears could hear, with whatever messages I could understand.

I recall my first collection as an intern, the first I would take charge of from beginning to end—is it possible I still remember this more than twenty years later, like a first date? It was the records of a local settlement house. The building itself had been razed, a casualty of 1960s urban renewal. I knew nothing of the settlement

house, although I lived nearby and could still see remnants of the Italian-American neighborhood it once served. Of the collection I especially remember the photographs, some of them taken for a neighborhood garden contest. Old men in undershirts and women in house dresses, amidst great clusters of tomato vines, stared out at me from four decades before. And the minutes and reports, dutifully prepared by the students and imitators of Jane Addams, with their predictable WASP views, recorded a world they had come to make over and which now, only a few decades later, had vanished.

It was my job, I knew, to be imaginative in listening to these records. My judgments would be critical to building paths to them for generations of researchers, across the entire spectrum of topics, and into unknown future time. Pretty heady stuff for someone who had devoted much of his—admittedly quite brief—adult life to writing term papers for required courses. (Years later I still was crushed to learn that despite my best efforts and great enthusiasm the collection had to be entirely reprocessed—a learning experience for both intern and supervisor.)

The archival enterprise held another attractive feature for me. For all the opportunity to reconstruct the past captured in these documents and to imagine the future research they might support, I had a well-defined task to accomplish, a product to produce, techniques and methods for proceeding, and standards against which my work would be judged. There was rigor and disicipline; this was real work. And, as good fortune would have it, I soon was getting paid to do it.

Well, Mary Jane, this has gone on perhaps too long but your questions brought back a rush of recollections.

Sincerely,
John

Dear Mary Jane:

Your question about the satisfactions of being an archivist gives me some pause. Like most folks, I suppose, I go off to my job each morning with little thought to what it is that sustains my enthusiasm, in this case for some twenty years. Perhaps these reflections will convey to you, and even reveal to me, something of what being an archivist means.

Some background. My father and my grandfather were, among other things, craftsmen, skilled machinists. Whether for lack of aptitude or—I suspect—in quiet rebellion, I turned away from industry to more academic interests. But who knows better than archivists that our pasts—personal and communal—are never left entirely behind. And how fitting, then, that today my mastery of the craft of "doing archives" should be so important to my sense of personal and professional identity.

I didn't become a skilled archivist overnight, of course. After an introductory class and an internship, I served, in effect, an extended apprenticeship (although we never called it that and only now do I recognize what it really was). Senior colleagues, whose critical attention to my work was never clouded by our warm personal relationships, honed my skills. In those ancient days, before word processing, I rewrote and retyped finding aids, memoranda, and reports until I met their high standards. I accompanied my colleagues to courthouses, university campuses, attics, and basements. And they stood over my shoulder as I analyzed records, proposed processing plans, and replied to reference inquiries. In a spirit of personal generosity and professional pride, they passed on to me their craft and their wisdom. I wish I had been as grateful then as I am now.

I began to understand the payoff for all this attention when I ventured out on my own. The Crawford County courthouse in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, stands out in memory. My task was to survey a great jumble of nineteenth-century court records—some of them among the oldest in the state. Stored in a damp basement, the

records were adjacent to the prison cell in which the Winnebago Indian leader Red Bird had died in 1828. A single naked light bulb revealed the iron manacles still hanging from the walls of the tiny rooms. It was an eerie place and a true archival challenge. But I mustered my archival knowledge and trusted my budding archival instincts, and I succeeded in making sense of the records, producing an intelligible survey report, and thereby initiating a long process that eventually saved some of these treasures.

Since then I have exercised, and expanded, my archival skills in many locations—although very few have been as exotic and unpleasant as the Crawford County courthouse basement. And, on many of these occasions, I have been taken aback by the awe that the ordinary practice of archival techniques can inspire in nonarchivists. Part science, part art, and—when done properly—part showmanship, our ability to quickly understand and evaluate the record—especially when it is old, large, or complex—is a unique facet of our craft. So too is our ability to satisfy research inquiries by applying our complex understandings of how and why the historical record is created. Perhaps in modesty, or perhaps because we devalue the everyday and familiar, we fail too often to appreciate our unique archival skills and capabilities.

Most often, of course, my exercise of archival mastery has no audience. I smile only to myself at how quickly I recognize a pattern of arrangement in a complex body of papers and how I determine the correct provenance of a misplaced file. No one else will fully appreciate the concise accuracy of my well-constructed scope note. And, like a surgeon, I do bury my mistakes: the unidentified negatives, left behind for disposal and only later fully appreciated; the series misinterpreted and scheduled for destruction. Successful archivists relish their unseen accomplishments and learn from them; they don't brood over their mistakes, seen or unseen.

Mary Jane, you've noticed that these days precious little of my time is spent appraising, arranging, or describing archives. Is it nostalgia for "real" archival work that sustains me now, you might ask (if you were less discreet)? Well, as manager and administrator, much of the satisfaction is secondhand. The funding proposal I help to write and to massage through the bureaucracy enables David—with temporary staff—to turn an embarrassing backlog problem into an important research resource. With my advice and assistance Barbara scrounges time from our in-house editor and designer, coordinates staff review of her narrative text, selects illustrations, and the Archives Center finally has a brochure announcing its program and services. Fath and I pore over a potential donation, as she reflects on its appropriateness to our collection. A consensus emerges and she carries through with the acquisition.

Often, my role in all this is only to facilitate the work of others: clearing roadblocks in "the system," recognizing and encouraging good work, coordinating efforts. At other times I represent the Archives Center and its fifteen staff members in the complex and unending rituals of budget and policy planning that are the soul of the modern bureaucracy. And, at appropriate moments, I lead—most often, I hope, by example; least often by direct command. My leadership—once again, I hope—sets larger goals and standards and motivates and facilitates my colleagues' efforts.

Some days it doesn't work so well. We have our crises of confidence and our fallings out. Yet, in the long run I know it does work. We have created a viable archival program. Historical records are preserved and used. We have the support of our colleagues (and the respect of our competitors). The individual efforts of dozens of people combine to achieve our goals. It is a different satisfaction from the exercise

of my individual professional skills to achieve mastery. I like them both.

Sincerely,
John

Dear Mary Jane,

As I reread my letter to you about the pleasures of mastering archival practice, I realize it neglects a critical source of the satisfactions I find in my archival career. As a professional archivist, I have joined a community of colleagues who share not just a common occupation but a common set of values and commitments. We join in this profession in mutual self-interest and in the pursuit of the larger public interests that we espouse.

This notion of "profession" is much debated these days and much abused in the public parlance. After all, what do we make of "professional" wrestling except that it is done in public for large amounts of money? Well, we archivists rarely qualify on either score, but we do have many of the other manifestations: a journal long on footnotes and short on photographs; annual conventions where we stay up too late (or at least we did when we were younger), and an esoteric jargon requiring a regularly revised glossary. More seriously, we do share a body of common knowledge, practices, and standards for our work. Indeed, much of our expanding professional literature, our educational endeavor, our certification program, and our committee work is devoted to these matters.

But the notion of a "profession" also harkens back to a more old-fashioned idea: the idea that as "professionals" we have something to "profess," something more than devotion to the latest techniques. And further, that in this act of "professing" we tie our own self-interest to the well-being of the larger society so that our "profession" is not merely that of a self-interested clique, but, instead, a legitimate claim on behalf of the greater public interest.

Well, Mary Jane, you might ask what, then, do I profess as an archivist? Most simply put: that what we archivists do is essential to the well-being of an enlightened and democratic society. No, not every step or each day is so vital, but the sum of all our efforts makes a critical difference. Of course, like all grand and abstract claims, this one is at once self-evident and layered with complex meanings. In my two decades in the profession, I have begun to discover something of its essential truth for me.

The archival record—and here I mean the total of what we look after as well as the underlying principles of records keeping—is a bastion of a just society. In a just society, individual rights are not time-bound and past injustices are reversible. Thus the archival record has sustained the claims of Native American peoples to lands and liberties once unjustly denied them. And the archival record will help to secure justice for the victims of government actions forty years ago downwind from the Hanford, Washington, nuclear installation.

On a larger scale—beyond the rights of individuals—the archival record serves all citizens as a check against a tyrannical government. We need look no further than the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals to see that without the documentary record there could have been no calling to account, no investigation, no prosecution. And that record—the tapes, the documents, and all the rest—stands as witness in the future to those who would forget or rewrite that past.

The absence of outright scandal and of irreversible injustice is no guarantee of an enlightened and democratic society. The archival record assures our rights—as individuals and collectively—to our ownership of our history. As archivists who maintain the integrity of the historical record, we guard our collective past from becoming the mere creation of "official" history. Fortunately, today there is little threat to us from a centralized Orwellian

tyranny. Yet the continuing struggles of individuals and groups neglected or maligned by the dominant culture remind us that central governments are not the only oppressors. African Americans, Native Americans, and others are now recreating from the surviving historical record a sense of their historical peoplehood too frequently denied to them in the past. And they are struggling also to assure that the historical record in the future does greater justice to the richness and truths of their pasts.

The history of the United States is uniquely one in which we—as individuals, as ethnic groups, as localities, as generations—continually reinvent ourselves and then, like Huck Finn, light out for new territory. All this places a special burden on the American archivist. Our society values the present and the future above all. And yet, from time to time, we turn back, almost in panic or desperation, to rediscover and rethink where we have come from. Today, for example, we ask how the nation fared in a previous era of massive immigration and how we brought the natural environment to its current precarious state. If we are successful as archivists, the historical record will speak for this past in a full and truthful voice. And, as a society, we will be wiser for understanding who and where we have been.

As I write these words, I am struck—as always—by the magnitude of our profession's ambitions and responsibilities in contrast to our miniscule numbers. And then I recall—as I usually do—that it is precisely the breadth of our professional values that ties us to a wider community of professions, institutions, and individuals. Our allies are all those who struggle to understand and protect the past for the benefit of the future. We are, from this enlarged perspective, truly the partners of librarians, museum professionals, folklorists, archaeologists, and all the others who preserve the cultural record in its material form. We are the colleagues of political leaders and scholars, of jurists and journalists, of architects and artists who would be faithful to the integrity of the past in their interpretation of it.

Well then, this is my joy in doing archives. To be, at once, a master practitioner—with esoteric knowledge and uncommon skills—and a participant in the most profoundly and universally human of all undertakings: to understand and preserve the past on behalf of the future.

Mary Jane, I would like to tell you much more about my profession: about the sense of shared commitment to the archival mission; about the spirit of generosity and collegiality; about the lifelong friendships. I would tell you, too, about the Society of American Archivists which embodies so much of the profession and through which we have accomplished so much on its behalf. And, lastly, I would tell you of my hopes for the profession: that we will overcome centrifugal forces and embrace all who care for the historical record in all its forms; that we will articulate the public interest in preservation of the record; and that we will increase public understanding and support for our essential mission.

I would like to tell you all this, but perhaps better, I invite you to join me in this profession, to share in our commitments, and to discover for yourself the larger (and smaller) meanings in what we do. If this is your calling, I assure you lifelong challenges, a sense of community through participation, good friends, and more than a few good times. Let me know; I expect to follow this path for a good while longer. I hope you will come and walk with us.

Sincerely,
John