

# The American Archivist

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## The American Archivist

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*About the cover: Elders of the Omaha tribe, among them Good-Old-Man pictured here, performed traditional songs and chants for ethnologist Melvin Gilmore, who recorded them in August 1905 on the Omaha Reservation in northeastern Nebraska. The wax cylinder recordings are now in the collections of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, which has preserved them on other media. Photograph courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln, Nebraska.*

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**Postal Notice**

The following statement of ownership, management, and circulation was filed in accordance with the provisions of Section 4369, Title 39, U.S. Code, on 11 October 1991, by Teresa M. Brinati, Managing Editor.

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

The average number of copies of each issue printed during the preceding twelve months was 5,914; sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,580; total paid circulation was 4,580; free distribution was 25; total distribution was 4,605; and 1,091 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing. For the most recent issue (Summer 1991), total number of copies printed was 5,845; sales through dealers and carriers were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,514; total paid circulation was 4,514; free distribution was 25; total distribution was 4,539 and 1,306 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing.



## Forum

### Roberts and Archival Theory

John Roberts has stimulated renewed discussion and controversy by his ridicule of contemporary archival theory (Winter 1990) and has, in effect, stated that the emperor hasn't any clothes. Naturally, the emperor's adherents are closing ranks to defend the sacred cause (Winter 1991, and elsewhere). Roberts's criticisms are whimsical but have enough validity to rock, though not upset, the proverbial apple cart.

At first glance, the debate is one-sided at best. The archival profession is inundated with theoretical expositions through the scholarly journals, training institutes, and graduate education. Archivists traverse through a sea of theory hoping to glean something with practical application and fearful that they will overlook something for which they will be held responsible later. Theory and reality seldom meet face to face. A working archivist must readily adapt to the conditions of his or her place of employment. Budgetary weakness, administrative isolation, understaffing, insufficient time, and processing backlog are endemic to most archival repositories. Archival theories provide basic professional principles and guidelines but are not cure-alls for chronic archival maladies. Most archivists function and survive through contingency planning, flexibility, and prioritization. Organization, common sense, and contextual knowledge of record groups are primary tools, although automation technology is

certainly revolutionizing the field. Roberts's essential point is one of pragmatism and is difficult to refute.

The continuing evolution of the age of information has forced the archival profession into close cooperation with librarians. This enables similar access to the developing computer data networks. This union has been a shotgun wedding, to say the least, but perhaps resentment and misunderstanding are fading as mutual awareness and interaction grow. Archivists of the twenty-first century must continue to be flexible and adaptable as the technical capabilities and requirements of automation and data networking will continue to expand. For better or for worse, archival theories will reflect these developments and suggest modifications. Archivists will have to combine the roles of information manager, historian, and library scientist in a manner in which the sum total is greater than the parts. The greatest challenge is that the archivist's traditional role of caretaker not be subsumed within a morass of information and technology.

WILLIAM JOHN SHEPHERD  
*Catholic University of America*

**Editor's note:** John Roberts declined to comment.

*With the exception of editing for conformity of punctuation and capitalization, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.*

## From the Editor

# The *American Archivist*: Voice of the Profession or Another Role? Some Thoughts at the Beginning of an Editorship

LET ME START MY TENURE AS EDITOR of the *American Archivist* with some personal thoughts. When I started my career as an archivist on 27 December 1972, I was, like many of my colleagues of this era, relatively poorly trained and unprepared for the tasks at hand. The most memorable aspect of my first few days was working for two days and then having a long weekend for the New Year's festivities, during which I could reflect on the predicament in which I had placed myself and my employer. But I also used that weekend (well, at least part of it) to begin a systematic reading of the *American Archivist*. Not knowing where to begin, I started with the first volume and eventually read, with different levels of interest and concentration, all of the existing issues. It was my introduction to the value of this journal, a publication that I have continued to use throughout my career as manuscript curator, municipal archivist and records manager, state government archivist, and, most recently, graduate archival educator.

Over these past few months, as I have

functioned in my new role as its editor, I have often thought about my early experiences with the *American Archivist*. I first read its pages in a search for practical assistance, then (and gradually) more critically, and most recently in hopes of finding sources for teaching aspiring archivists. Now, I have come even further from my early use of the journal, contemplating what its purpose should be and what legacy I, as its editor, might leave behind.

### Previous Views About the Journal

Others have had similar musings. Almost exactly forty years ago, Karl Trevor, a previous editor, characterized the *American Archivist* as the "voice of the profession."<sup>1</sup> His familiar address, which was then published as an essay, was a unique document of his professional times. In an era when records managers were separating

<sup>1</sup>"The American Archivist: The Voice of a Profession," *American Archivist* 15 (April 1952): 147-55.

from archivists and the archival profession was going through another of its periodic identity crises, Trevor clearly identified the journal's role as that of a "vehicle for harmonizing and unifying the various elements of specialization within its confines."<sup>2</sup> The *American Archivist's* primary function was, in his words, "to provide this essential bond of union."<sup>3</sup> Trevor thought the journal should be balanced in content, serve as a tool for promoting the profession, provide a mechanism for communicating with other professions, and, finally, function as a source for professional knowledge, practical advice, and teaching. "The voice of the profession" was, above all, to be a conciliatory one.

Almost twenty years later, the Society of American Archivists' Committee for the 1970s presented a somewhat different notion of the *American Archivist*. Diversity and change now seemed to be the order of the day:

The quarterly journal of the Society should be further expanded in scope and content to reflect more fully the professional interests of all the Society membership, both in America and overseas; the style and emphasis of the journal should continually change as the archivist's professional interests and involvements extend into other fields; and the journal should encourage contributions from other disciplines that have an interest in the archival profession.<sup>4</sup>

This, again, is a statement from a document capturing its particular era. In the early 1970s, the archival profession was in a pe-

riod of immense growth and substantial change, ranging from the founding of new archives and new regional professional archival associations to the emergence of more purposeful educational offerings. The soon-to-be-established professional staffing of the society's executive office was yet another indication that the profession was taking itself more seriously. The voice of the seventies differed from that of the fifties.

### The Journal's Present Role

Some day, an observer may look at these words and identify them as part of yet another document of the 1990s. But it would be foolish to speculate about which characteristics of our time will be identified as its most significant markers. Rather, let me simply state what I, as the journal's new editor, see as the role the *American Archivist* must play in the nineties. This role must serve at least four purposes. First, the journal should be the publisher of systematic research about archival functions, repositories, activities, practices, and principles. Second, and closely related to the first, the *American Archivist* should be the vehicle for publication about both the archival profession's knowledge base (theory, if you prefer) and its practice. Third, the journal should be a mechanism for serving the profession and stimulating discussion and new venues; its voice may be many voices at times. Fourth, and finally, the *American Archivist* should chronicle the profession's development, sometimes in a very introspective manner in explicit historical essays but more often in publishing essays that may become documents of their own era.

I have deliberately avoided elaborating on any of these purposes. Rather, I believe the best way to show my ideas is in the pages of the journal itself. I also intend to return to some of these points in future contributions to "The Editor's Perspective." Let me begin here by commenting briefly

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 147-48.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>4</sup>Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970's," *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 203.



on what my concepts of the journal's purposes may mean to what you will see between its covers.

Will the *American Archivist* look different? Perhaps, but this will be determined in part by what I receive as submissions. The "Research," "Perspectives," "Case Studies," "International Scene," and "Reviews" sections will remain the same, because these sections have proved their value. They clearly provide an excellent opportunity for the archival profession to grapple with its concerns and issues. Two new sections are being added. The first, "Professional Resources," makes its first appearance in this issue, and it will provide a forum for practical aids for the working archivist. The second, "Project Reports," which is in the planning stages, will become the forum for brief descriptions of completed grant-funded projects, information that has so far been elusive.

Another, more subtle, change may be in the journal's interpretation of archival work and practice. I operate from a conviction that the archivist must keep one foot firmly planted in the historical disciplines and the other in the information disciplines—the trick always being to maintain one's balance. I hope to reflect this balance in essays and research articles that will be a mix of highly technical writing and more practical application. This mix is not intended to keep everybody happy. Rather, it is the result of

the breadth of the archivist's—every archivist's—required knowledge base and the increasing specialization (which I consider inevitable and good) that characterizes our field.

Finally, what do I see as the *American Archivist's* voice? In a study of university publishing, the authors started with the statement that "publishers stand at the crossroads of intellectual discovery and public consumption of that discovery," drawing on a sociologist's notion that publishers are "gatekeepers of ideas."<sup>5</sup> I like the sound of this. I hope the *American Archivist* will speak of ideas for the profession's guidance. As I think back on the hundreds of thousands of words residing in the more than half century of this journal, I have found many ideas—some old, some outmoded, some being revised, and, yes, some waiting to be rediscovered. And, of course, each of you has the opportunity to contribute to this community of ideas. I hope to hear from you.



RICHARD J. COX

<sup>5</sup>Paul Parsons, *Getting Published: The Acquisition Process at University Presses* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 7.