The American Archivist

Volume 55
Number 2
Spring 1992

Published Quarterly by
The Society of American Archivists

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About the cover: *Clad in the conservative garb of Quakerism—cap, kerchief, and dark gown—American social reformer Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) presents a regal image in this daguerreotype portrait. This view of the daguerreotype, which was taken circa 1850-1855 (photographer unknown), shows the deterioration at the edges of the metal plate. To explore some of the reasons for daguerreotype degradation, see the book review on page 380 of* The Daguerreotype: Nineteenth-Century Technology and Modern Science. *Photograph courtesy of Chicago Historical Society, copy neg. ICHi-11897.*

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The American Archivist

Volume 55 / Number 2 / Spring 1992

Forum / 230

From the Editor

Electronic Information Technology and the Archivist: Bright Lights, Lingering Concerns / 232
Richard J. Cox

Research Articles

Scholarly Communication and Information Technology: Exploring the Impact of Changes in the Research Process on Archives / 236
Avra Michelson and Jeff Rothenberg

Enhancing Archival Description for Public Computer Conferences of Historical Value: An Exploratory Study / 316
Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland and Carol Hughes

Perspectives

Archival Theory and the Preservation of Electronic Media: Opportunities and Standards Below the Cutting Edge / 332
Frederick J. Stielow

Subject Indexing in Context / 344
Jackie M. Dooley

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International Scene

International Archival Adventures: A Reminiscence / 356
Robert M. Warner

Reviews

Boles, ***Archival Appraisal,*** reviewed by Margery N. Sly / **370**

Cook, ***The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines,*** reviewed by James D. Folts / **371**

Kitching, ***The Impact of Computerization on Archival Finding Aids: A RAMP Study,*** reviewed by Richard Saunders / **373**

Patterson and Lindberg, ***The Nature of Copyright: A Law of Users' Rights,*** reviewed by Linda M. Matthews / **374**

Reiff, ***Structuring the Past: The Use of Computers in History,*** reviewed by Mary F. Cordato / **376**

Cantwell, ***The Public Record Office, 1838–1958,*** reviewed by Donald W. Jackanicz / **377**

New York State Program for the Conservation and Preservation of Library Research Materials, ***Environmental Controls Resource Packet,*** reviewed by Sally Roggia / **378**

Barger and White, ***The Daguerreotype: Nineteenth-Century Technology and Modern Science,*** reviewed by Gary Saretzky / **380**

Frisch, ***A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History,*** reviewed by Dwayne Cox / **381**

Grele, ***Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History,*** reviewed by Dwayne Cox / **381**

CDIE Planning Committee, ***Documenting Diversity: A Report on the Conference on Documenting the Immigrant Experience in the United States of America,*** reviewed by Rosalie McQuaide, CSJP / **382**

Briefly Noted / 384

Selected Recent Publications / 387

Society of American Archivists

1991 SAA Awards / **389**

Council Meeting Minutes, January 1992 / **393**

Editorial Policy / 400

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Forum

To the editor:

The American Archivist dismissed the Illinois State Archives' publication, *Chicago City Council Proceedings Files, 1833–1871: An Inventory*, with a brief notice under the heading of "Selected Recent Titles" (Winter 1991) that also negligently omitted mention of the 91-microfiche index that accompanied that volume.

The March 1992 issue of the *Journal of American History* presented a 57-line review of the same publication (with a full and proper citation) that described it as a "very powerful research tool for a very important collection of documents," a guide to "a manuscript collection of major importance in U.S. history" that forms "a gold mine for the study of city government" which "historians will not soon exhaust."

My question is this: Are historians, a significant group of archives users, more attuned to extensive finding aids to vital resources than are archivists whose business is their production?

JOHN DALY
Illinois State Archives

"Reviews" editor's response:

John Daly's letter provides an excellent opportunity for articulating some basic assumptions governing the *American Archivist's* "Reviews" section. During my own brief tenure as "Reviews" editor, I have attempted to select books, studies, guides, and compilations which appear most likely to interest the broadest spectrum of readers. Our readership consists of a diverse mix of archivists, manuscript curators, records managers, genealogists, historians, conservators, and librarians, among others. Works contributing to archival theory, practice, and technique receive the fullest treatment. Significant publications relating to broader issues in information science, oral history, information management, public history, and historical method also receive full reviews. Repository-level and subject guides that break new methodological ground or that highlight especially significant research resources either receive full reviews or are featured in "Brief Notes." Collection-level descriptions and inventories tend to appear under "Selected Recent Titles." This should not be viewed as either a slight or a dismissal of finding aids. Rather, this general policy serves as a concession to space limitations and an effort to provide the general readership with more detailed treatments of theoretical and methodological works that increase our ability to, for example, produce better finding aids. Hopefully, this clarifies our "Reviews" policy. Comments and suggestions are always welcome.

PETER J. WOSH
American Bible Society

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

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From the Editor

Electronic Information Technology and the Archivist: Bright Lights, Lingering Concerns

When I arrive at my office at the University of Pittsburgh, I go through a set of ritual-like activities, partly as a means of getting my day started. (The ritual is probably my substitute for coffee consumption.) At one time, the lead activity was checking my morning mail and telephone messages. Now my first action is checking and responding to my electronic mail, which brings messages from faculty-colleagues down the hall and from other colleagues from around the world. Other, now normal, activities find me scanning university library catalogs from throughout the country for my own research or for development of course syllabi, or using the commercial databases increasingly available to me through the personal computer in my university office. Not too long in the future, I anticipate making a few adjustments and some minor investments that will allow me to conduct the same kind of work in my home office. Research and writing accompanied by the churning sound of the washing machine or the voice of my seven-year-old Emma playing in the front yard just seem too tempting to resist much longer. Is this great, or have I become blinded by the bright lights of the big city?

It is obvious that the world the archivist seeks to document and to serve is changing rapidly. Although I am not a technological determinist,[1] I am convinced that the increasing sophistication of electronic information technology is bringing profound changes and challenges to us, as well as suggesting new solutions and approaches for archivists.

The work on this journal issue and other personal professional activities certainly illuminated for me the new world in which we reside. The essays by Michelson/Roth-

[1] I am fundamentally convinced by Arnold Pacey's argument that technology's impact is influenced by the technology itself and by its possibilities, political and social restraints, and culture. See his *The Culture of Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

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enberg, Gilliland-Swetland/Hughes, Stielow, and Dooley are all, in one way or another, concerned with the impact of electronic information technology on archival administration and science. The publication of these essays with such a thematic unity was not the result of a planned process, but instead was the natural outcome of archivists' increasing concern with the technological implications of our work.

While I edited and managed the production of this journal, I also found myself completing a dissertation on electronic records and the American archival profession, drafting a grant proposal for research on the archival implications of electronic information systems, and preparing to host the last phase of an advanced institute for state government records administrators on the topic of modern information technology. And I thought I had made a conscious decision twenty-plus years ago to be a humanist! Given my interests and background, my own involvement with information technology is additional evidence to me of the pervasiveness of the technology's influence and reach.

The richness, along with the challenges and invitations, of the main essays in this *American Archivist* issue make it difficult to summarize their contents easily. However, they do reflect what should be major concerns for the American archival profession and, I am sure Bob Warner would remind us, for the international archival community as well. The first two articles reveal a new world of electronic telecommunication; both essays chart how archivists must strive to cope with the implications of our increasingly wired universe. Although there are numerous consequences, implicit and explicit, of information technology, the authors of these essays also reveal that archivists really have only begun to deal with these concerns. Fred Stielow's efforts to demonstrate how the technology has raced ahead of our basic archival precepts are disconcerting, especially because such concerns have been voiced at other times over the past three decades. Stielow is more direct than most in his discussion of the impact of information technology on archival theory, but his essay demonstrates the need for more sustained research on the topic.[2] Anne Gilliland-Swetland and Carol Hughes reveal the value of such research, but it is also clear that the kind of inquiry they have made is a rarity on the archival scene. The tools of information technology are changing faster than we can blink or turn our pages in Schellenberg, yet as a profession we have only begun to imagine what the technology means to our mission and influence. Would we be asking the kinds of questions posed by Jackie Dooley if the electronic highways had not been built, linking our repositories and connecting us to our users? Will international archival relations conducted over formal dinners and through carefully prepared speeches, as sketched by Bob Warner in a very personal manner, survive in the age of modern information conduits?

You will see sprinkled throughout these essays suggestions for new strategies or calls for new thinking where the strategies have not been identified. This is very important, it seems to me, because we have so much work to be done. Most recently, in writing my doctoral dissertation, I had occasion to reread archivists' writings on electronic records. Two things struck me as I did this. First, there really was little professional consensus about what archivists should be doing with the modern information systems. In other words, this was one area in which my reliance on the *American Archivist* as a practicing archivist had done little for me.[3] Some said archival principles held

[2]In case anyone might wonder, I have not made up my mind regarding the impact of the computer on archival principles. During my dissertation defense, one tenacious committee member tried in every way he could to get me to answer this question, but I honestly don't know what to think at this time.

[3]See my first "From the Editor" column, "The

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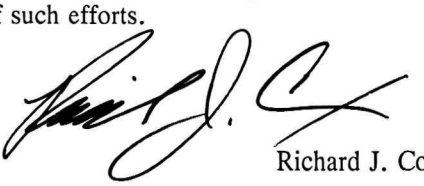
up or could be applied in the organization's use of computers and networks. Others said the entire game had changed, and new principles or guidelines needed to be developed. Still others were convinced that archival theory was irrelevant or nonexistent and that such concerns about it should not burden us. The second thing that struck me (and I think a major reason for the lack of consensus), was that the quite considerable amount of writing was not based on research and, in fact, much of the literature was not built on first-hand experience with electronic information systems.[4]

In the half-century since the first clunky and enormous computers were installed and in the past decade and a half since the advent of the personal computer, these electronic marvels have dramatically influenced the way individuals and organizations operate. Even humanities scholars have had their relatively quiet lives interrupted by the possibilities of the computer and electronic networks, as Avra Michelson and Jeff Rothenberg chronicle in elaborate and intriguing detail. Yet we in the American archival community see few systematic programs for dealing with this reality and the electronic records (can we still call their products "records"?), few educational offerings to train and equip us to work with the modern information systems, and little basic and applied research to answer our questions about how to manage the archival information created by and captured in computers. Two decades ago one archivist predicted, for example, that every major archival repository would support an electronic records program,[5] but, of course, this has not even come close to occurring. We might have gotten away with this until now, but can we afford not to shift, in dramatic and bold ways, our resources and energies to working with information systems designers, implementors, and users?

Yet our world is being subtly changed because of information technology, or at the least accelerated by it, whether archivists believe themselves to be prepared for these changes or not. Over four hundred archivists from North America and around the world are connected in an electronic listserver, corresponding with one another and debating issues of interest to their profession and practice. The USMARC Archives and Manuscripts Control format and developing descriptive standards have allowed the electronic linkage of many archival institutions formerly isolated from one another. Neither the act of signing on and off the electronic bulletin board nor the plugging in of a computer for creating a finding aid has been analyzed for its impact on us and our work, but it is hard to imagine that some change will not occur as a result. These essays are about such concerns and about the need for more work in basic research and speculation. This editor hopes to see future pages of the *American Archivist* filled with the productive results of such efforts.



Richard J. Cox

American Archivist: Voice of the Profession or Another Role? Some Thoughts at the Beginning of an Editorship," *American Archivist* 54 (Fall 1991): 462–64.

[4]Read *Research Issues in Electronic Records* (St. Paul: Published for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission by the Minnesota Historical Society, 1991).

[5]See the introduction to Meyer Fishbein, "ADP and Archives: Selected Publications on Automatic Data Processing," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 31–42.

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