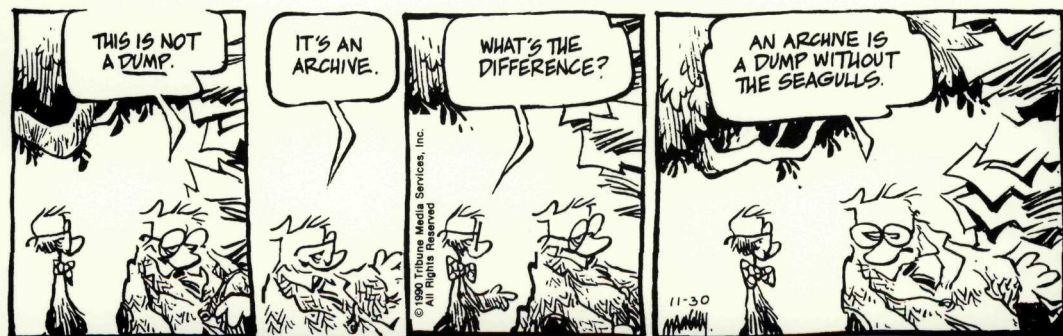


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Forum

To the editor:

In his article "On the Identity of the American Archival Profession" (*American Archivist* 54 [Summer 1991] 398–402) Dutch archivist Joan van Albada claims that the American archival profession is in danger of losing its "identity." Based upon his attendance at several SAA annual meetings and his professional reading, Mr. van Albada has come to believe that our profession is too accepting of the practices of librarians, manuscript curators, "or worse" [Mr. van Albada's words]. He says that he feels compelled to express his concerns because of the "increasing influence of United States archivists on the profession."

Since Mr. van Albada disparagingly refers to me in his article as an example of what is wrong with American archival practice, I feel compelled to offer *my* reaction to his views in general and about me in particular. Let me say at the outset that while I disagree with him, I respect his right to express his concerns. I think that all of us can greatly benefit from a free expression of ideas. Criticism has its place, but it should be expressed in a constructive and civil manner. In an international context, I believe that it is *especially* important to be tolerant of diversity. None of us, of whatever nationality, can safely assume that what we hear at several professional gatherings or read in selected professional journals can completely characterize the "identity" or the practices of the archival profession in another nation. Our profession and our world are far too complicated for that.

SAA is not an exclusive club of "pure"

archivists raised on the doctrine of Schellenberg or any other archival theorist. The individuals Mr. van Albada met at SAA meetings came from all types of institutions, from several professions, and were at various stages in their professional development. The multitude of session offerings *is intended* to meet the needs of this *diverse membership*. Recognizing that a large percentage of its members have been educated and trained in professions other than archives, SAA also offers training courses which clarify and differentiate the practices of archivists and manuscript curators. A trained, discerning archivist, therefore, should not view the plethora of SAA sessions as contributing to a loss of identity, but rather as an opportunity to enhance professional identity and growth.

The United States is a very large nation, with thousands of government jurisdictions and laws. Throughout the country, public, corporate, and other "archives" are created and staffed in diverse ways, and "archivists" must adapt to the systems and situations in which they find themselves. In the United States, archives are *not* necessarily "established implicitly in the charter of an organization." It is therefore not possible for us to adhere to a strict definition of an "archivist" or an "archives," as defined in the essential texts of the profession. Our "identity" is evolving.

In the United States, archivists do indeed adopt and modify the practices of related professions, but that does not diminish us. Rather, it enhances our ability to provide access to our holdings. We do not reject our historical roots or the professional ten-

ets that “form a picture of what can be expected from an archives service and from archivists,” but we are unwilling to be bound by practices which may be ineffective or obsolete. It is true that many SAA members are *very* interested in “collecting,” but collecting is viewed as part of a necessary process to assure the preservation of historically valuable records and other materials. We are just as interested in reference service, outreach and educational programs, and what Mr. van Albada calls the “core of the profession:” archives management, accessioning, selection and appraisal, and processing. American archivists believe, as he does, that records cannot be understood out of context, and that records should be maintained with respect des fonds and, whenever possible, in original order.

Mr. van Albada is correct that, over the years, records originated by many institutions, public and private, have found their way into manuscript and library collections. American *archivists* do realize that the transfer of records potentially impairs contextual understanding. Relocating records is often necessary, however, since most organizations and government agencies do not have the resources to operate an archives effectively. Records schedules have been established in the federal government to require the transfer of historically valuable federal records to the National Archives. Most, but not all, states require the consent of the state archives prior to the destruction or disposition of local records. Hence, an orderly transfer of records to an appropriate archives is encouraged, and in many jurisdictions mandated, but archivists have no power to compel compliance.

It has been my experience that American archivists are opposed to the rearrangement of records by subject because we believe it destroys the integrity and context of records. Through organizations like SAA we have made our beliefs known to our colleagues in the related professions. Subject access, however (in

contrast to subject arrangement), is basic to research. Therefore, we have modified certain automated descriptive formats originated by the library profession to suit our needs, and we have created formats and systems of our own which will provide the research community with subject access. Obviously, the use of USMARC-type formats is not mandated worldwide. *Some* standardization in the type and amount of input *is necessary* in systems intended for worldwide integration, however. The use of such systems should not prevent an archivist from creating additional detailed descriptions and box lists for internal use.

It seems as though Mr. van Albada is accusing the American archival profession of a lack of character because of perceived deviations from accepted archival standards and practices. As an example of this deficiency, he cites an advertisement that appeared in the *SAA Newsletter* in 1986. The advertisement, *which I wrote*, states that the City of Los Angeles is seeking a repository for its police department files relating to the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Any repositories interested in acquiring the collection were urged to contact me at the National Archives in Laguna Niguel, California. Mr. van Albada states that “no sound Dutch archivist would be capable of even drafting such an advertisement, unless in a state of extreme mental perversity.” He goes on to say that the advertisement is a “total denial of the profession, and of the ethics of the professional archivist.” I believe that such an unwarranted use of pejorative language is far from appropriate in professional circles and quite counterproductive to constructive dialogue.

The *SAA Newsletter* advertisement cannot be understood in a vacuum; it was part of a larger process. I prepared the advertisement as a necessary act in a process that was as much political as archival. If Mr. van Albada had read my article in the Sum-

mer 1989 issue of the *Public Historian* he would know that in 1986 I was appointed as the chair of Mayor Tom Bradley's Advisory Committee Regarding the Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Investigation Materials. For years, researchers had demanded the release of the Kennedy files, and the mayor of Los Angeles saw the appointment of this committee as a way to deal with the issue. The committee was selected by the mayor, upon the advice of his staff and several interested researchers. I accepted the appointment as chair as a community service. I was one of only two archivists appointed to the committee; the other ten members were chosen from the ranks of university professors and administrators, law professors and judges, public and university librarians, and researchers.

As I stated in my article, "From the outset of the committee's deliberations, it was my position that government records originating within a particular jurisdiction should be housed by a government repository within that jurisdiction, regardless of the magnitude of the case involved. I believed, therefore, that the Los Angeles City Archives should have been the repository of first choice . . . [and that] if the Mayor, for whatever reason, felt the city archives did not have the staff resources to process and provide reference service on the records, then . . . the materials should be sent to the California State Archives." My view was not in the majority, however, and the mayor, in fact, informed the committee that *we must make a nationwide search for a repository*. In instructing us to make such a search, the mayor was not encumbered by California law. Hence, I reluctantly placed an advertisement in both the *SAA Newsletter* and *Library Journal*. As it transpired, the committee received only one response to the advertisement and that institution later withdrew from consideration.

In preparing the advertisement, I was both practical and ethical—certainly not in a state

of "extreme mental perversity" as Mr. van Albada believes. I could have refused to comply with the mayor's instruction and immediately resigned from the committee, but that would have left the committee with only one archivist to influence the course of events. Instead, I decided to remain on the committee and work toward an optimal solution. In the final analysis, I believe that I was quite influential in persuading the committee to select the California State Archives as the repository for the Kennedy assassination materials. The materials have since been released, and the research community has been well served.

I don't believe that archivists can afford to have an elitist attitude. We live in an imperfect world and we cannot divorce ourselves from political and practical realities. A knowledge of "context" is just as important in understanding the practices of a profession in another nation, and the individual actions of other archivists, as it is in interpreting the records in a repository. Through his attendance at SAA meetings and his professional reading, Mr. van Albada has obviously made considerable efforts to understand American archival practice. But the *complexity* of our circumstances can make true understanding of our actions elusive. Deriding those whom we may never fully understand is not a useful exercise. Instead, I believe that we should *strive* to respect and to learn from one another. Rather than negatively focusing on our perceived differences, we should work together as amicably as possible to further the accessibility of all types of research materials and the expansion of knowledge throughout the world.

DIANE S. NIXON
Regional Director
National Archives
Pacific Southwest Region

Author's response

I have read with interest Diane S. Nixon's rebuttal of my recent article. As a result I

am now aware of the wider picture surrounding the advertisement about the police department files relating to the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Had I been aware of the circumstances I would not have chosen it as an example to illustrate my point and I am happy to withdraw my criticism of Ms. Nixon's course of action.

However, my article was primarily concerned with what constitutes an "archives" as opposed to an artificial collection, and what implications this has for the archivist in terms of custody, acquisition, selection, appraisal, and cataloging/listing of archives.

It was also concerned with the role of the archivist, as distinct from that of the librarian or documentalist. I remain firm in the principles outlined in the article, which was written in a constructive attempt to stimulate a debate of the issues involved. I look forward to that debate continuing.

JOAN VAN ALBADA
Municipal Archivist
Dordrecht, The Netherlands

To the editor:

Joan van Albada's article, "On the Identity of the American Archival Profession: A European Perspective," presents a stunning commentary on the identity crisis, if not schizophrenia, which afflicts the Amer-

ican archival profession. Perhaps it takes an outsider to infer that we cannot see the forest because of the trees. It is readily apparent that as librarians and computer scientists take over the archival field, collection mania, abstract theories, informational overload, and technological pedantry increasingly overwhelm the core archival principles of management: appraisal, accessioning, and processing. All too often these outside influences combine to burden an archives with inane projects and superfluous collections and attempt to set agendas that make little allowance for sound archival management. If we are not careful, historical contextual knowledge and artifactual value of archives will be lost in the frenzy to provide pervasive computer accessibility. A primary example of this dubious evolutionary process is the rapidity in which the concepts and terminology of the information center are subsuming archives and libraries within its tentacles.

WILLIAM JOHN SHEPHERD
Catholic University of America

Editor's note: Mr. van Albada declined to comment on Mr. Shepherd's letter.

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

From the Editor

Charting the Unknown: The Continuing Need for Research About Archival Work, Institutions, and the Profession

I AM ALWAYS AMAZED BY HOW much we don't know about our own profession. When we ask very basic questions—How many archivists are there in the United States? What are the educational and experiential backgrounds of these individuals? or What are their primary responsibilities?—we often are able to answer only in approximations. Even in more selective aspects of the profession, such as our education and training, we tend to find mostly unanswered questions: How many graduate students are there? Where do these students find employment? Does the practicum really work as a part of graduate education? What are the practical programmatic results of our workshops and institutes?¹

Why do we lack so much information about our work? Why is it that the archival profession has tended not to study itself, even if only to provide some general in-

formation about archival work that can be used in advocacy, attracting recruits, and developing institutional procedures and processes? Although we have been asking such questions at least since the 1956 presidential address of Ernst Posner and re-asking them every decade or so since then,² as in the 1986 published report of the Society's Goals and Priorities Task Force,³ it is still a relative rarity for essays (and even more so for monographs) to address such primary concerns. In fact, efforts to set forth research agendas have generally been ignored by the archival community.

The essays in this issue of the *American Archivist* begin to provide some very basic answers to primary questions about the

¹I conducted such an exercise myself, enumerating a list of areas in archival education requiring more research in my *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990), chapter six.

²Ernst Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" *American Archivist* 20 (January 1957): 3–11. In this address, Posner commenced the series of attempts to profile the membership of the Society of American Archivists.

³*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the Society of American Archivists Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986). This report was used for the preparation of three research agendas, published in the Winter/Spring 1988 issue of the *American Archivist*.

profession in the United States. This is, of course, one of the main purposes of this journal—to serve as a forum for the publication of research, and it is hoped that the issues raised by these essays will stimulate more thinking, research, and writing about the archival profession. The American archival profession does *not* lack a journal outlet for publication of research, commentary on completed research, or new and creative calls for additional research, but it sometimes seems to lack a corps of individuals and institutions supporting such work. As the published essays in this issue suggest, the *American Archivist* can provide this function in a credible fashion.

The initial essay (after the Presidential Address) is an excellent lead for this issue, trying to determine more precisely what archival employers want in entry-level positions. Alan Gabehart considers the employer qualifications for entry-level archivists, providing a rare view into this aspect of our work. Gabehart's study, although simple in design, draws on his more detailed dissertation and provides an interesting glimpse into the staffing of our institutions, educational requirements, new positions being created, and other qualifications for entry-level archivists. Perhaps his most interesting findings are the potential need for a certification program (there is no strong preference for one) and the prospects for more rigorous graduate archival education programs (there is a predilection for this by employers). Although there have been some related studies on the backgrounds of archivists, they have either been more interested in sketching out profiles of Society of American Archivists members or in considering employee characteristics in certain kinds of institutions. Gabehart's study is the first to examine entry-level qualifications across a broad spectrum of archival repositories, providing the profession a benchmark for additional research.

Barbara Floyd and Richard W. Oram's work on the employment of undergraduates

in university archives is another groundbreaking study in its own right. As their citations reveal, little has been written on any aspect of this topic. Their creation of an analytical framework based on personnel literature and the collection of some actual data about how undergraduates are used should be very useful to others in the archival profession engaged in such work. Although their orientation is more on the practical than the research side, Floyd and Oram have given us some worthwhile things to reflect upon. For one, we need some similar studies on other aspects of how archival employees are used. The profession could benefit from some additional research on the roles and usefulness of the archival practicum/internship, both as a form of education and as archival employment. What may be most intriguing about the study are some teasers for additional research. Floyd and Oram note that it is satisfying to see some undergraduate employees go off into archival careers, suggesting that as a profession we still lack much knowledge (other than hearsay) of how people make archives their life work. And, finally, because this may be a way in which some excellent individuals can be attracted to our profession, the authors note it is important to ensure that the students' experiences are positive ones. This suggests that we know little about whether we tend to be satisfied with our own work and careers.

The remainder of essays in this issue examine the archival profession from very different angles. Richard Carter Davis, in his case study on the appraisal of mining records, reconsiders the traditional values enunciated by Schellenberg as a guide for appraisal decisions. His essay forthrightly reveals the sometimes elaborate process archivists must go through in order to make practical appraisal decisions while reconsidering the theoretical and methodological bases for their decisions. Davis argues for the organic relationship of both evidential and informational values, linked by the ar-

chival notion of provenance. He criticizes some recent writings on archival appraisal and shows how the values have practicality for the typical appraisal decisions made by archivists. His case study should remind us that, as archivists, we have considerably more work to do in developing our own operating principles and methodologies and that, furthermore, our institutions can be effective laboratories for such research.

The "Perspectives" contribution by John Grabowski on public awareness likewise raises a number of questions about the nature of our basic archival work, questions that deserve more attention and research. Grabowski worries that the fragmentation of the history-based or history-oriented disciplines has undermined our ability to advocate effectively on behalf of the documentary heritage. Grabowski believes that some analysis of what Americans really think about archives and archivists would also assist us in our efforts to capture public attention about the importance of archives. And, most important, the author of this essay argues that archivists must simply reach out and attract more users in order to support their programs properly. To demonstrate his points, Grabowski turns to his own nearby laboratory, his home institution—the Western Reserve Historical Society. More such descriptions will aid the archival community as it grapples with its own identity and mission. Based on his experiences as archivist, Grabowski argues that "heritage becomes tangible only when seen. Hidden in a box, it becomes only another mystery to be associated with the arcane profession of archivist and the dull pursuit of history." Looked at in another fashion, we could say that careful analysis of our public programs will help us to understand what works and what doesn't, as well as understanding what motivates greater public interest in archival records.

The essay by Peter J. Wosh and Elizabeth Yakel initiates a new section, entitled "Project Reports," in the *American Ar-*

chivist. This section was started because so many excellent specially-funded grant projects are carried out but never very effectively reported in the archival literature. Many of these projects provide important data about who we are and what we do, as the Wosh and Yakel article demonstrates. These authors report on the Religious Archives Technical Assistance Project, funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and designed to provide assistance to small religious archives programs. Not only do the results of the project provide interesting details about the nature of small archival operations, but the article tries to demonstrate the value and need for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of short-term workshops and institutes. Wosh and Yakel have provided an excellent venue for identifying additional research that should be undertaken on such repositories and on the network of continuing education that seems to provide a lifeline for their ongoing operation.

Joan Warnow-Blewett's brief contribution reminds us again of the international dimensions of our profession. Her examination of the efforts of the American Institute of Physics' (AIP) Center for History of Physics to gain international bibliographic control of the archival sources for documenting this discipline provides some valuable lessons. AIP's "International Catalog of Sources for History of Physics and Allied Sciences" has, she implies, been about as international as U.S. baseball's World Series has been representative of the world. Drawing on other similar institutions and the availability of descriptive standards and international bibliographic utilities, the center has expanded its scope to document physics worldwide.

We can even see some of the problems of our lack of self-analysis in the lead reviews in this issue. Nicholas Burckel's review of the NHPRC-sponsored report on the use of historical documents reveals how ill-conceived our approaches can be to even

so basic a matter as how our archival records are used. Terry Eastwood's stirring critique of the new SAA glossary reminds us that we must be more careful in our use of the archival terminology. I began this editorial preface by lamenting the lack of research we do on our own work and methods, and Eastwood shows, in a pretty convincing fashion, that only through more careful self-scrutiny can we develop the precise terminology we require to teach about archival administration, do archival work, and conduct research about archives.

This journal will make every effort to feature interesting and stimulating research and opinion about the archival profession and its work. Accomplishing this should assist every archivist to be more effective in his or her work.

The American Archivist is here as a forum to support, of course, and to comment on the result of such research and other research that is needed. It can serve that function only if (1) such basic and applied research is done, and (2) it is written up to be disseminated to the profession. We stand waiting to publish the results.



Richard J. Cox

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