Perspectives

Keepers, Users, and Funders: Building an Awareness of Archival Value

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Abstract: Archivists need to build an awareness of "archival value" among the general public if they are to command the support the profession deserves, and they need to work together with the community of public and academic historians in creating this awareness. The recent emphasis on outreach indicates that archivists are becoming aware of this need. But is outreach moving in the right direction? Merely educating the public about what archivists do is not enough. Archivists must create a larger body of users. By doing so, the profession will not only build a larger advocacy base for its fiscal support but will also help create a citizenry more aware of the sources and value of history and heritage.

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DURING THE PAST DECADE, the archival profession has, for good reason, become obsessed with the issue of outreach. By *outreach* we mean the matter of educating the public, and those whom we choose to call "resource allocators," about the purpose and importance of what we, the custodians of Clio, do for a living. Paradoxically, we have at the same time become engaged in a process of professional definition that seems to be moving us away from a link with history, a link that may be far more critical for the well-being of the profession than are arguments about theory or vocational purity. It would seem that fragmenting the historical profession into obscure fields of specialization and creating a guild of archivists can serve only to counteract the benefits of outreach, for it divides us from our allies and, more critically, may tend to isolate us intellectually from the public, who, in the United States, are the ultimate source of all that we might consider support.

The professional fragmentation of those involved in the field of history is a matter that Theodore Karamanski of Loyola University and the Council of Public History addressed most adroitly in a 1989 Midwest Archives Conference meeting. At that meeting, Karamanski called into question the barriers that people who "do" history for a living have created between their respective spheres of endeavor. He argued that the numbers of history practitioners are so small that any particular subdivision within the field can ill afford to set itself apart from its peers, whether that separation takes the form of certificates of specialization or an attitude of professional superiority. According to his argument, there are far too few "history" people in any of these professional disciplines to make any impact in advocating their work before legislative bodies and other resource allocators—entities that seemingly take little notice of heritage but that do seem to notice large numbers and noisy demands. By recognizing our common mission, working together, and marshalling our numbers in a single voice we might, Karamanski reasoned, have a better chance at advocating our individual and common causes.[1]

Such unity is a correct and necessary beginning if those who would preserve this nation's heritage are to have any impact on public and political attitudes that not only determine the resources allocated to Clio, but more important, set a societal standard for historical self-understanding. Yet, one wonders what the effect would be even if all of those professionals who "do" history for a living were to march in unison on the national capitol or prepare a direct-mail lobbying campaign. Would such numbers be sufficient to impress public representatives accustomed to receiving millions of postcards and telephone calls from an organized citizenry upset about more popular issues ranging from abortion to zoological catastrophe? That seems doubtful. What the history profession needs, in addition to unified action, is the development of a large clientele that understands, respects, and, therefore, will advocate our cause. We, the keepers, need more users.

Archivists have tried to create a broader understanding of our mission. The number of outreach programs that have been discussed at so many of our professional archival gatherings during the past ten years are evidence of that effort. Archivists, blessed or damned, if you will, with a professional moniker of great popular obscurity, have had a greater problem in creating an awareness of their importance among the public than have our colleagues in allied historical fields. We have tried

[1]Theodore J. Karamanski, "Resolved: Graduate Study in Public History Shall Be Required for Archivists," unpublished paper delivered at the Midwest Archives Conference meeting in Chicago, May 1989. Karamanski's thoughts on this matter are further explicated in "Making History Whole: Public Service, Public History, and the Profession," in *Public Historian* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 91–101.

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mightily to remove the shroud (or is it a cloud of dust?) that surrounds us. Not that our efforts have been minor. Witness the activities of the Archival Roundtable of Metropolitan New York as it annually sponsors an "Archives Week" designed to inform the public about archival activities. This activity now will become national, and archivists in a number of cities and states are deciding what they will do for an archives week each year.[2] Yet such activities seem not to have moved the public to a general awareness of what archivists do. (For most people, for instance, presidential libraries are not repositories but museums crammed with wax dummies, football helmets, and the gifts of foreign heads of state.) Despite the archivists' efforts at outreach, nationally syndicated cartoonist Jeff MacNelly can still equate archives with the messy desk of an idiosyncratic "Perfesser" and describe them as differing from a garbage dump only by lacking a flock of scavenging seagulls.[3] It might be appropriate to have the Society of American Archivists (SAA) fund a national survey to see how many Americans know what the term *archivist* means and, more important, to delve more deeply and learn how many have any inkling of where history comes from.

If the slide shows, archives-week document examination opportunities, brochures, and preconvention publicity for professional meetings have done little to educate the public, what can we and our colleagues in allied fields do to educate the public and thus affect what we now call resource allocators? It is, one suspects, time for the keepers to strive not only to educate the public but also to create more users, on the assumption that someone who uses the product is more likely to value the industry that produces it. If we are to get a reasonable proportion of the gross national product in the era of the new free enterprise, we are going to have to get more customers.

The issue of bringing more users into the archives and manuscripts repositories of the land is not new or single-sided. Many of our colleagues in the field of business and institutional archives know how important broad service is to their survival in a larger corporate or bureaucratic environment: Only useful parts of the corporate entity deserve to survive. It is those of us who preserve largely for research purposes—whether in governmental archives or manuscript repositories—who need to address the user issue in a broader sense. But we know the problems of increased usership. If we increase usership, we also endanger collections from overuse and overtax staff who must serve larger numbers of patrons. Is the price too high to pay for this gamble? Perhaps not. Creating a larger usership does not necessarily involve overstuffing our research rooms. All such methods, however, depend on people deriving "something" from archives other than awestruck reverence for famous signatures and fragile old documents. Several programs undertaken at the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in Cleveland and other repositories in the state of Ohio have served to bring new faces into the research room and have provided funds and advocates in the state house in Columbus. Although much that follows relates to keepers and users, it should be clear that that relationship can and does have great impact on funders.

Primary among these user groups, and recently represented in a focused exchange

[2]Larry J. Hackman, "Archives Week in the United States?" *SAA Newsletter* (March 1991): 14, 20. In this article Hackman proposes that a national Archives Week be declared during the first week of October 1992, and he cites the successful programs undertaken as part of archives weeks throughout New York State.

[3]In several of his *Shoe* comic strips, syndicated cartoonist Jeff MacNelly has made the connection between the unkempt desk of the "Perfesser" character and archives. The characterization of archives as "a dump without seagulls" occurred in the 30 November 1990 strip.

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in the *SAA Newsletter*, are genealogists.[4] There is no need to rehash the sometimes stormy relationship between archivists and genealogists or to debate the issue of good research versus bad research. Good research and bad research can characterize the work of any patron in our facilities, be that person a published scholar or a neophyte family historian. In many cases, archivists and genealogists need and can come to some accommodation, whether over the care that must be accorded to collections or the understanding of what constitutes legitimate research.

The bottom line here is that genealogists are the fastest growing group of researchers in many repositories. At the Western Reserve Historical Society, usage of the library has grown by more than 151 percent in the last ten years, and most of this growth is genealogical in nature. The Ohio Genealogical Society claims over twenty-thousand members. At the Ohio Historical Society and at the member centers of the Ohio Network of American History Research centers, government records and other files draw considerable genealogical research.[5] Within the past two decades, genealogical societies have been started for people of African-American, Polish, Czech, and other "nontraditional," non-Anglo ancestries. Whether as a post-retirement activity in a national population with more golden agers than ever before, or as a class assignment in high schools or colleges running programs in family history or cultural awareness, the tracing of one's roots is a rapidly expanding activity, and it promises to produce more users of primary sources than we have ever seen before.

There can be many benefits of close work with family researchers. At WRHS, for example, the library has long had a genealogical advisory committee. Meeting monthly, this group has raised money to purchase books, microfilm, and microfilm storage cabinets. Good relationships last; the estate of one genealogist, left in total to WRHS in 1980, allowed the library to purchase the entire federal census for the United States on microfilm. This served only to spur genealogical use and support of the library (patrons of the library are now helping WRHS underwrite the cost of purchasing the entire newly available 1920 U.S. Census).[6] This relationship has also proved a boon to the cliometricians in our general research population. The genealogical committee also provides a cadre of competent volunteers who work with the professional reference staff to keep the research room fully staffed. With an attendance that can exceed one hundred people per day, WRHS greatly needs this help.[7]

[4]Peter W. Bunce, "Towards a More Harmonious Relationship: A Challenge to Archivists and Genealogists" and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Genealogists and Archivists: Communicating, Cooperating, and Coping!" *SAA Newsletter* (May 1990): 18–21, 24.

[5]Approximately 75 percent of the people using the WRHS library on any given day are pursuing family history research. Conversations with representatives of the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers indicate that the bulk of research use with local governmental records held by those centers is done by genealogists. The size of the Ohio Genealogical Society (OGS) membership is based on 1992 figures. In 1992, OGS had over one hundred chapters throughout the state. For chapter listings, see the *OGS Newsletter* for recent years.

[6]John Hyde Gehrung, a member of the WRHS Genealogical Advisory Committee, left his entire estate to the society's library upon his death in 1980. The bulk of the proceeds were used to purchase the entire available U. S. census microfilm, a move that vastly increased use of the library. Given this precedent, the library has proceeded to purchase additional census microfilm as it has become available, including the 1920 census, which will cost over $114,000. This cost is being underwritten, in large part, by patrons and friends of the library.

[7]Over eighty people volunteer to assist the WRHS reference staff. Two to six volunteers assist the two full-time staff members in the reference area on any given day. Their duties usually center around assisting genealogical researchers, making electrostatic copies, and handling written research requests on a fee basis (with the fee going to WRHS).

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The committee, working with the library and manuscripts curator, is also a de facto field staff. In one instance, the committee will assist in a survey of local funeral home records that may result in a large-scale microfilming program directed toward such sources. Critics who see little use for these materials beyond the needs of family researchers should be aware that in Cleveland, Ohio, as in other cities, funeral record books often provide valuable historical detail on the customs and mortality statistics of ethnic and minority groups in the community.

There is, therefore, a relationship that can be of immediate fiscal benefit to a repository. Of greater import, however, is the potential of genealogists as lobbying agents. In a recent case that would have resulted in the partial sequestering of vital records, the Ohio Genealogical Society and its members pressured state officials by letter and telephone until the bill in question was rewritten so that certain vital information remained easily obtainable.[8] There is great potential here for the historical community, provided it builds bridges with the family researchers and makes its needs known. One has to be optimistic in believing that those who derive so much from the primary source can not only be educated about the precautions necessary for its use but also about the societal resources necessary for the continued preservation of such valuable materials.

Using archival material, and becoming aware of its vast potential, are the key elements in what has made genealogists advocates for archives. Fostering the use of archival material among other segments of the population is a wise program for the keepers of the past. Exhibits of our treasures, at archives week events or other occasions, are fine, but people must understand the personal utility of those treasures before they will ever become our advocates. In particular, we should build a new generation of heritage advocates by attempting to introduce students, from the elementary to the undergraduate level, to the sources of history. In several cases, the production of teaching packets of archival facsimiles, such as that produced by the New York State Archives, has served to move the collections to the classroom. It is equally possible to bring the classroom to the archives by making careful, prior arrangements with instructors and setting assignments that match neophyte researchers with carefully controlled collections.

Experience at WRHS has shown that collections can be successfully and safely presented to students from grade levels six and up. One particularly notable program in the library involves an annual visit of middle-level Montessori students for primary source research in local ethnic history. Library staff also work carefully with local university history departments in an effort to have professors interest their students in undertaking primary research for papers in a variety of courses. Outside of creating a new clientele, the library staff has always found it fulfilling to observe students as they find a sense of excitement and discovery in reading a Civil War letter or reviewing the correspondence of a locally notable figure. Given the manipulation that history has undergone in some television mini-series and in the tabloid press, it seems imperative that methods courses not be limited to graduate-level history students, but instead be made a requirement of all liberal arts undergraduate students. An educated citizenry must know

[8]In 1987–88, the Health Department of Ohio introduced legislation (House Bill 790) relating to the maintenance and preservation of health records. A portion of the bill would have made it much more difficult for researchers to gain access to vital statistics. Lobbying by the state genealogical community was intense, and the "offending" portions of the bill were changed. Building coalitions with groups such as genealogists can provide archivists with the same clout when issues critical to the profession are being considered in the halls of government.

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whence their past derives and be aware of the unscrupulous manipulation it might undergo.

One national program, National History Day, has tremendous potential for creating a new clientele and friends for a wide variety of repositories. Begun in Cleveland and now operating in almost every state of the union, this program's intent is to introduce students to the "stuff" of history and, like local science fairs, to present awards for the best historical papers, projects, and presentations. This move to make history more popular is a program initiated by our colleagues in academe. Archivists and curators would be wise to participate as fully as possible in it, for History Day is too good an opportunity to miss. It offers the chance not only to build links with academic historians and secondary school teachers but also to bring young, new users to our collections. It has other satisfactions as well. One of the proudest moments for the staff of the WRHS library was when a project based on one of our collections received a national first-place award. The student who produced that project certainly knows what the keepers are about. It is not, perhaps, too much to suggest that SAA should establish a formal liaison with the governing board of History Day, in much the same manner that it keeps in contact with other professional organizations.[9]

User-keeper bridges can also be built with portions of the American population who may have felt left out of the historical mainstream; indeed, the young student who won the History Day prize based his project on the papers of a local African-American inventor. Once created, such relationships will have long-term benefits for the repository, the archival profession, and society. It is worth citing two particular WRHS programs, the Black History (now African-American) Archives and the Cleveland Jewish Archives.[10] The former program, begun as a collecting arm of the society's library in 1970, has greatly enriched the library's holdings relating to local African-American history. It has also created an increased awareness of the importance of history and of WRHS's commitment to history within the local African-American community. Located in a city with a population that is nearly 50 percent African American, the society makes a concerted effort in this area as part of its general commitment to preserve all aspects of community history. Such interest and commitment do not go unnoticed by the local political establishment or funding agencies.

In 1991, the Cleveland Foundation, the city's pioneering community trust, awarded the society a three-year, $150,000 grant to revitalize its African-American collecting program. During this grant period the society's African-American Archives Auxiliary has been working to create an endowment fund that will permanently underwrite the position of associate curator for African-American history.[11] In embark-

[9]Information about History Day can be obtained by writing to the History Day Office, Department of History, Mather House, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio 44106. The national headquarters of History Day is in the process of moving to Washington, D.C., but the Cleveland connection will remain viable.

[10]For information about the specialized collecting programs at the WRHS library, see John J. Grabowski, "Fragments or Components: Theme Collections in a Local Setting," *American Archivist* 48 (Summer 1985): 304–14, and Kermit J. Pike, "Western Reserve Historical Society," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 33 (1982), 131–36.

[11]It will take an estimated $400,000 to endow the African-American Archives. Members of the auxiliary, working with WRHS library and development staff, have prepared a program that will solicit support from various components of the African-American community—churches, business, the legal profession—and will inform them of the need to preserve their records in the archives. In this manner the archives becomes more than an abstract funding goal; it becomes a program that has specific benefit for a donor group.

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ing on the endowment drive, the auxiliary (composed largely of citizens interested in African-American history) is following the lead of the city's Jewish community, which has supported a Jewish history archives at the society for more than a decade.

When the society began extensive collecting in the city's ethnic communities in the early 1970s, the Jewish community was automatically targeted within this program. This move on the part of the society was well received by the organized Jewish community, as represented by the local Jewish Community Federation. This interest eventually led two prominent local Jewish families to fund a separate Jewish archives program in 1976 and then, with the assistance of other families and the federation, permanently to endow that program in 1981. Although focusing on the records of a specific segment of the community, this program nevertheless allows the society to work toward its goal of total community documentation.

The immediate benefits of working with groups outside of the historical mainstream can be seen elsewhere in the archival/historical community. Most notable here are the efforts of Rudolph Vecoli at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, and those of Mark Stolarek, former director of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia. In both instances, Vecoli and Stolarek worked closely with ethnic groups not only to accumulate records but also to fund surveys, microfilming, and preservation projects.[12] What seems to be operative in all of these dealings with groups outside of the historical mainstream is a hunger for historical recognition, a realization on the part of those who have been on the outside of how important history is as a means of self-identification and cultural continuity, as well as a symbol of acceptance. It is a lesson all Americans should heed, and it is certainly one any practitioner of history should understand. To begin programs directed at nonmainstream history is not to suggest that those who practice history should "use" these groups. Rather, it is simply a statement that the legitimate recognition of the history of so-called minorities may carry benefits in addition to those that come with creating a more complete record of the past.

Although collecting and preserving the records of various constituencies in the American body politic does help build a larger awareness of the importance of archives and history, it is imperative that these and other records be brought out of their boxes if they are to have the maximum impressive effect. The work at WRHS with the African-American and Jewish communities and the work of Balch with various ethnic communities has been assisted by exhibitions that use archival materials and create a broader awareness of their importance to the study of history.[13] One particular example at WRHS deserves attention. The accessioning of the more than forty-thousand negatives of Cleveland African-American photographer Allen E. Cole was a major event in the history of the then Black History Archives project. At the time it occurred, it garnered little press coverage. However, only when a portion of the

[12]For an overview of the program at the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), see Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Diamonds in Your Own Backyard: Developing Documentation on European Immigrants to North America," *Ethnic Forum* 1 (September 1981): 2–16. The *IHRC News* published by the center also contains detailed information on IHRC programs that are supported by grants from various ethnic organizations. For the Balch Institute, see R. Joseph Anderson, "Building a Multi-Ethnic Collection: The Research Library of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies," *Ethnic Forum* 5 (Fall 1985): 7–19.

[13]The Balch Institute has been particularly innovative in creating exhibits that focus on specific ethnic groups and that involve those groups in both the creation of the exhibit and the associated programming. The Balch newsletter, *New Dimensions*, details the exhibits mounted by the institute during the past several years.

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Cole negatives were selected, printed, framed, and exhibited did the Cole collection receive the recognition it deserved. That exhibit, which is now available for loan, receives frequent use throughout the year, and it brings to the library dozens of researchers who have now realized that it contains material relevant to their lives, families, and communities. The travels of such an exhibit are critical—it goes out to the community and enjoys an audience that might not think of stopping in an archives or a museum. Its travels also represent a means of creating users, those who read and view the exhibit but who do not necessarily come to the research room.

A recent exhibit created by the Jewish Archives, which celebrates the founding of the Cleveland Jewish community 150 years ago, has also been quite popular, both in and outside of the society's museum. Composed entirely of copies of documents and photographs, the "Founders" exhibit was designed for two purposes: to stand as a major museum display augmented by original materials and to travel on its own. In the museum, at a local mall, at a community theater, and at one of the city's major reform temples, it has attracted considerable attention and has served to lure both patrons and new collections to the Jewish archives. Its travels are important, for in a mall setting it will attract over 10,000 viewers a week, far more than the 1,300 who visit the society's museum gallery each week. 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.

Creating this awareness of the holdings of archives and the richness of history is an important step in garnering more users and potential advocates. Traditional exhibits go a long way in stimulating awareness, but many archivists lack the facilities or the resources to mount an exhibit. However, most can still make their materials more visible and at the same time be at the popular edge of community interaction by using the broadcast media. The electronic media can be a tremendous resource for creating awareness and advocacy. Although the reference staff at WRHS often shudder at the prospect of dealing with another television film crew (who have a propensity to come in five minutes before their deadline), they know the relationship with television is essential if archivists are to create advocates among the public. The issue is how to control the media instead of letting it control you.

A few examples can suffice here. Major events and anniversaries usually receive television coverage. Archives holding material relating to these events should bring relevant collections to the attention of the media. That means inviting them in before they descend on you. Two minutes of evening news coverage relating to holdings on a Korean War anniversary, the inauguration of a mayor, or the granting of women's suffrage can let thousands of people into the mysteries of the document. Certainly, working with the local media can be troubling in terms of short deadlines and arguments for proper credit. However, a good relationship with a local television station may come in handy when a funding cut looms or some other threat confronts one's institution; producers who know the value of a potential source may well be interested in devoting air time that might protect that source.

In a broader sense, those allied with heritage preservation must learn to work well with those in the media who are creating the new "consumer history," because the television documentary, the PBS special, and their resulting videos for sale are the chief access routes to history for many Americans. Making contact with documentary producers, being aware of their needs, and giving them careful direction in the use of one's collections can all pay off in new friends for history as people view such ex-

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cellent productions as the Ken Burns television history of the American Civil War. This extraordinary program, which brings the history of the war into a popular, yet historically accurate perspective through the use of still period photographs and quotations from a variety of manuscript and published sources, is a model of what good, popular history is destined to be. More than any other recent production, the Burns history epitomizes the rich potential of traditional historical source material and provides testament to the importance of archival work in preserving and presenting that material. One can only hope that those who have viewed the series are fully aware of its origins and of the role of archivists in making it possible. It might well be worth SAA's consideration to fund a short documentary about the role archivists and historians play in producing such works. This would be outreach at its most effective.[14]

Building an awareness of archival value, to the extent that substantial portions of the population understand and appreciate what we as archivists do, is no easy task. It is advocacy that goes beyond the production of brochures and slide shows, though these may be necessary first steps in attracting people to our repositories. For some of us, it will involve a long step down from the ivory tower—the disavowal, if you will, of a priesthood of history. For others, it will involve coming home to the "why" of our profession from a sometimes obsessive sojourn with the "how." For almost all of us, it will involve extra work as we go out to talk with potential user groups and then carefully shepherd them through the intricacies of collection use. But such effort is necessary. If we say that we are preserving the *nation's* heritage, we and our colleagues throughout the history profession cannot narrowly define the owners of that heritage. We can only strive to make it broadly available in a manner commensurate with our duty to preserve and protect it. Only when a large number of users join the small number of keepers and their historical allies in saying that archives, history, and heritage are important, will the funders respond in a manner that befits the work we do.

[14]When the Burns series was shown on the local PBS affiliate (WVIZ) in Cleveland, interviews, in which Burns discussed his work on the project, were used as fillers after some of the series segments. Unfortunately, the importance of archives and manuscripts repositories in Burns's work was not clearly articulated during these interviews, although his dependence on archives has been clearly noted in some of the subsequent appearances he has made before groups of archivists and historians. Given Burns's high public visibility and forthcoming projects (including a documentary on baseball), the profession should seriously consider using Burns in an archives-oriented documentary.

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