

## Project Report

# Smaller Archives and Professional Development: Some New York Stories

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**Abstract:** In 1987, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission funded a two-year project designed to improve religious archives in the New York metropolitan area. The Archivists of Religious Institutions, a regional group responsible for administering the grant, developed a coordinated program of workshops, consultation reports, and cooperative endeavors in order to address the peculiar problems of smaller repositories. The results illustrate the difficulties of interinstitutional cooperation, weaknesses in traditional archival training methods, and the profession's failure to address realistically the nature, role, importance, and uniqueness of smaller archives.

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ARCHIVISTS SOMETIMES APPEAR to be better at initiating projects and conducting workshops than at assessing their long-term effectiveness and impact. Remarkably little follow-up is conducted by workshop organizers after the immediate educational experience ends, and granting agencies rarely require extensive longitudinal analysis. Formal conservation consultant services also conduct few surveys designed to gauge their success in effecting programmatic change. Notable exceptions do exist. Paul Conway has conducted an interesting survey of former Society of American Archivists (SAA) preservation workshop attendees; the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference's (MARAC) New Jersey caucus continues to analyze the success of its Caucus Archival Project Evaluation Service (CAPES) program; and New York State has attempted sporadically to survey its Documentary Heritage Program's regional archival workshop participants. Nevertheless, many of these surveys seek to measure the participants' responses to the actual workshop or consultation. They rarely seek to identify the specific institutional applications and programmatic improvements that all of this archival education has produced.

As a result, archivists appear confused about the effectiveness of the plethora of educational and consultative opportunities available. Further, the profession has no clear idea of the impact of these programs on actually increasing accessibility to historical records and preserving them. Perhaps most critically, archivists seem unable to develop practical criteria for measuring success. Over the past decade, regranteeing programs and regional projects have funneled considerable state and federal money into smaller and more local archival programs. What has been achieved? Are programs successful because they have incorporated standard administrative policies and components into their operations? Do budget figures, the amount of linear feet processed, and user statistics provide better

measures? How has preservation planning been incorporated into local programs? This report seeks to consider some of these issues by analyzing a specific program developed to assist small to mid-size religious repositories in the New York City area.

### Historical Background

Archives documenting American religion underwent dramatic changes during the 1970s and 1980s. Many denomination-based repositories trace their origins to the mid-nineteenth century, and these primarily mainline-Protestant historical societies largely dominated the religious recordkeeping community until very recently. By 1970, well-established and professionally administered programs existed for the Lutheran, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Latter-Day Saints churches, among others. Several factors coalesced during the last two decades to change this pattern, however, and many of these influences reflected both new historiographical emphases on the importance of social history and broader developments within the archival world.<sup>1</sup>

First, within the Roman Catholic communion, both the episcopal hierarchy and individual religious congregations exhibited a new enthusiasm for collecting and making available archival material. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a landmark "Document on Ecclesiastical Archives" in 1974, lamenting "that our Church's singular role in the development of our country has not been presented

<sup>1</sup>August R. Suelflow, *Religious Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 6; and see especially the October 1966 issue of the *American Archivist*, which contains numerous articles documenting the state of religious archival activity at that time. A good summary of the Religious Archives Section within SAA can be found in an unpublished paper by August R. Suelflow, "Where Have We Been? A Survey of Work in Religious Archives," delivered at the Society of American Archivists meeting, St. Louis, Mo., October 1989.

as fully as it deserves to be," and urging "each bishop who does not already have a diocesan archivist to appoint one." The renewed interest of these ecclesiastical decision makers stimulated a remarkable growth in diocesan archives, causing one archival practitioner to label the movement "a renaissance in progress" in 1980. Whereas a national survey of archival resources discovered only four American Catholic diocesan archives in the early 1960s, more than 120 diocesan programs functioned on some level by 1991.<sup>2</sup>

Many Catholic religious congregations also became aware of the need to formalize their archival programs through the appointment of trained archivists and greater participation in professional organizations. One key development in this process involved the compilation of *Women Religious History Sources: A Guide to Repositories in the United States* (1983), edited by Evangeline Thomas, CSJ, and sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.<sup>3</sup> Sister Evangeline coordinated several archival workshops during 1977 and 1978 as part of her preparatory work toward publishing this guide. These training sessions and other similar conferences proved instrumental in introducing new archivists and officers of religious congregations to the basics of archival work. By 1979, women religious constituted a significant and growing presence within the Religious Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists.<sup>4</sup>

New archival programs also proliferated within Protestant denominations, fellowships, and faith groups. Evangelical, pentecostal, and fundamentalist movements experienced a new vigor during the 1970s and 1980s, and archival developments reflected a growing scholarly and popular interest in these traditions. The establishment of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in 1974, dedicated to the study of missions and evangelism, provided a new leadership and central focus for archival efforts within these movements. Programs at such institutions as Fuller Theological Seminary, the Assemblies of God, the Salvation Army, and Asbury Theological Seminary dramatically expanded the available source material and the professional network of archivists devoted to "documenting the spirit" of this renewed evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup>

As new religious archives appeared and new religious archivists began attending SAA meetings, two trends became clear. First, relatively few religious archivists received their professional training in formal academic programs or through apprenticeships at established repositories. Rather, they typically assumed their archival responsibilities after working in other, usually unrelated, capacities within their institutions or denominations. Many possessed graduate degrees, but few had taken course work specifically applicable to archives. Workshop or seminar training proved especially important for these beginners. They often worked alone or in very small shops, serv-

<sup>2</sup>James M. O'Toole, "Catholic Diocesan Archives: A Renaissance in Progress," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 284-93; James M. O'Toole, *Basic Standards for Diocesan Archives: A Guide for Bishops, Chancellors, and Archivists* (Chicago: Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists, 1991), 1. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops' statement is reproduced in O'Toole, *Basic Standards*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>3</sup>The term *Women Religious* here refers to any congregation or community of vowed women.

<sup>4</sup>Evangeline Thomas, CSJ, ed., *Women Religious History Sources: A Guide to Repositories in the United*

*States* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1983). See also the review of this work by Mary Ellen Gleason, S.C., in *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 182-83.

<sup>5</sup>Robert D. Shuster, James Stambaugh, and Ferne Weimer, *Researching Modern Evangelicalism: A Guide to the Holdings of the Billy Graham Center, with Information on Other Collections* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); *A Heritage at Risk: The Proceedings of the Evangelical Archives Conference, July 13-15, 1988* (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 1988); and Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 135-41.

ing as the prototypical "lone arrangers" and enjoying limited contact with the larger archival world and its literature.

Second, these new archival practitioners developed their programs within a larger archival environment that celebrated diversity and, in many ways, encouraged professional fragmentation. Regional associations like MARAC and the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC), professional "affinity" and interest groups such as SAA's sections and roundtables, and organizations based on institutional affiliation like NAGARA proliferated during the 1970s and early 1980s. The Society of American Archivists, by issuing basic manuals on religious, business, and museum archives, unwittingly reinforced a tendency to view one's archival environment as unique, special, and unrelated to a broader professional community, despite the best intentions of the authors of those manuals.

An unfortunate by-product of this trend has been a decrease in the tendency of subgroups within the profession to speak with each other and to recognize their common problems. This undoubtedly has contributed to religious archivists' isolation from their colleagues, and SAA annual meeting programs throughout the 1980s illustrate the results. Sessions such as "Religious Archives: An Examination of Distinctiveness" (Washington, D. C., 1984), "The Theory and Practice of Religious Archives" (Chicago, 1986), and "In the Beginning: The Religious Archives Section Then and Now" (St. Louis, 1989) implicitly suggested a distinctive role for religious repositories. A separate American Catholic Diocesan Archivists organization was founded in 1982, and a roundtable for women religious archivists has been established recently within SAA's structure.

Metropolitan New York's religious archival community mirrored these national developments. By the spring of 1979, religious archivists in the New York City area began meeting on a regular basis to ex-

change information and provide mutual support. Organized at first on an informal basis by Brother Denis Sennett, S.A., of the Friars of the Atonement, this group soon evolved into a more structured, dues-paying organization with by-laws, elected officers, and regular meetings. A 1985 membership survey of this Archivists of Religious Institutions (ARI) group confirmed many of the trends discussed above. More than half of the archives had been established since 1970 and fully 83 percent of the archivists had received their appointments subsequent to that date. Only 26 percent of the ARI members belonged to MARAC, and only 33 percent to SAA. Further, few members actually attended the professional meetings of either the regional or national organization, usually citing limited budgets and the inability to afford travel costs as the principal reasons. Not surprisingly, religious archives in the New York area typically appeared to have small staffs (one or two archivists), small budgets (\$2,500 per year, excluding salaries), and moderate-sized collections (700 cubic feet per institution).<sup>6</sup>

### The Project

The Religious Archives Technical Assistance Project (RATAP) evolved from these findings and constituted a response to these trends. Several assumptions informed ARI's decision to design the program and seek National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) funding for the project.

First and foremost, RATAP sought to break down the professional isolation often

<sup>6</sup>For a brief history of the Archivists of Religious Institutions, consult Sister Margaret Quinn, "Archivists of Religious Institutions: A Summary," (August 1986), unpublished paper available at ARI Archives, in Archives of the Sisters of Charity, Mount Saint Vincent, Bronx, N.Y. The raw data results of the 1985 survey by Claire McCurdy (on which most of this data is based) are also available in the ARI Archives.

characterizing small archival programs. Throughout the 1980s, archivists rapidly moved toward a greater standardization of practice, the development of more rigid guidelines for individual certification, and a clearer articulation of the "common body" of archival knowledge. Automation and description largely drove these developments. Nationally organized task forces and working groups appeared to be redefining the nature of archival practice. Smaller, more localized archives and manuscript repositories seemingly functioned outside this "information loop," retaining their own idiosyncratic, traditional styles. The need to narrow the gap between grandiose archival theoreticians and working archivists responsible for processing documents and finding information appeared more challenging and critical than ever.

Second, RATAP evolved as a response to the traditional workshop method of training religious archivists. It attempted to provide an integrated program, linking basic workshops with concentrated planning efforts, on-site consultation visits and reports by a trained archivist, cooperative inter-institutional programs, and various forms of technical assistance. The project directors hoped to build on the enthusiasm typically generated at workshops by connecting this technical training with ongoing program practices.

Finally, RATAP hoped to address some difficulties inherent in small archival programs: the rapid personnel turnover, minimal commitment by parent organizations, limited funding, and lack of internal visibility that hinder many small religious, corporate, and community archives. The project directors hoped to combat some of these problems by encouraging stable programs through active planning, more intensive postappointment training, contact between professional archivists and institutional administrators, and cooperative programs. Ultimately, they hoped to reach a signifi-

cant group of practicing archivists who operate largely outside the commonly accepted archival information networks and to bring these individuals into the professional mainstream.

RATAP began in 1987, as the result of a two-year grant from the NHPRC. The American Bible Society headquartered the program. Peter Wosh and Thomas Wilsted served as project directors, and Elizabeth Yakel worked as the project archivist. Thirty-nine metropolitan-area archives participated in the program, with three basic criteria determining eligibility. First, each organization was required to have a formally appointed archivist, working on at least a part-time basis. Second, institutions needed an access policy consistent with the statement "Access to Original Research Materials in Libraries, Archives, and Manuscript Repositories," endorsed by the American Library Association (ALA) and SAA. Finally, participants were required to attend one planning workshop, held at the beginning of each year. Costs to participating institutions remained minimal. Participants paid a modest registration fee for the workshop, contributed one-half of the expenses for consultant visits, and provided housing for the project archivist as necessary.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The following institutions participated in the grant program: Sisters of Mercy—New York Province, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.; Franciscan Sisters of Peace, Yonkers, N.Y.; Mission of the Immaculate Virgin/Mount Loretto, Staten Island, N.Y.; Unification Seminary, Barrytown, N.Y.; Deaconess Community of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Gladwyne, Pa.; New York Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, New York, N.Y.; Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, Hartford, Conn.; Daughters of Charity, Albany, N.Y. and St. Mary's Hospital, Troy, N.Y.; Sisters of the Good Shepherd—New York Province, Jamaica, N.Y.; Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford, Hartford, Conn.; Augustinian Fathers Archives, Villanova, Pa.; Church Women United, New York, N.Y.; Ethical Culture Society, New York, N.Y.; Benedictine Fathers, Newark, N.J.; Fourth Universalist Society of the City of New York, New York, N.Y.;

It should be noted that the largest group of participants had been influenced greatly by the Leadership Conference on Women Religious archival workshops held in the late 1970s and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. More than a decade later, these influential training sessions formed the primary archival educational base for many of the women's religious archival repositories in this project. Archival principles and practices, however, had not evolved to remain current with the new trends reshaping the profession throughout the 1980s. Policies and procedures often seemed fixed in time and rarely incorporated professional advances in standardized descriptive practices, new conservation research, and appraisal techniques.

As part of the RATAP program, each year's participants initially attended a two-day planning workshop designed to help clarify the project's goals, prioritize archival activities, and decrease the archivists' feelings of isolation. James O'Toole and Randall Jimerson, the workshop leaders, challenged participants to create mission

statements for their archives. They also urged them to plan and prioritize activities in the areas of accessioning and appraisal, arrangement and description, and reference and access. Individuals broke into small discussion groups, in which they developed and discussed actual plans for their repositories and attempted to weave these plans into an overall program.

Following the conclusion of the workshops, participants were encouraged to carry the plans back to their repositories, develop time lines, and begin implementing some of these objectives. As Yakel began her on-site consultations, she frequently referred to the plans developed at these workshops and sought to help the archivists analyze, revise, and implement their ideas. At the end of the second year, all participants were invited to an advanced planning workshop that was intended to strengthen their administrative and planning skills.

On-site consultations constituted the heart of the program. One- or two-day visits resulted in fifteen- to twenty-page consultation reports that were tailored to the individual needs of each participant. Yakel developed a fairly standard set of inquiries, based largely on the SAA's *Self-Evaluation Manual* and on materials developed by the New York State Archives and Records Administration. Frank discussions with the archivist's supervisor proved a key factor in ensuring the success of the visits. Yakel served as an archival advocate at most institutions, and increased supervisory input invariably resulted in more useful and comprehensive reports. In many cases, an administrative dialogue opened between the archivist and resource allocator for the first time. Yakel's reports frequently stimulated future meetings between archivists and supervisors and, in some cases, helped formalize and structure loose reporting relationships. The consultant report also constituted a permanently useful blueprint for action, providing some continuity for

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Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, N.Y.; Lutheran Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pa.; Dutch Reformed Church, Rhinebeck, N.Y.; Episcopal Diocese of New York, New York, N.Y.; Sisters of Mercy of New Jersey, Watchung, N.J.; Dominican Sisters of the Sick Poor, Ossining, N.Y.; Benedictine Sisters of Elizabeth, Elizabeth, N.J.; Sisters of the Divine Compassion, White Plains, N.Y.; Sisters of Charity, Bronx, N.Y.; Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine, Suffern, N.Y.; YWCA of the City of New York, New York, N.Y.; Fordham University, Bronx, N.Y.; Consumers Union Magazine, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Maryknoll Sisters, Maryknoll, N.Y.; Catholic Relief Services, New York, N.Y.; Newburgh Dominican Archives, Newburgh, N.Y.; Grace Church, New York, N.Y.; Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, N.J.; Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, West Paterson, N.J.; Sisters of the Presentation, Staten Island, N.Y.; Sisters of St. Dominic, Caldwell, N.J.; Franciscan Sisters of Penance, Stella Niagara, N.Y.; Dominican Sisters of Blauvelt, Blauvelt, N.Y.; Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary, Sparkill, N.Y.

operations suffering from personnel turn-overs.

### Results/Problems

RATAP sought to encourage cooperative undertakings, such as the joint purchase of conservation materials and supplies, archival internships at established institutions, and the sharing of such available resources as micrographics facilities. This proved the least successful aspect of the program. Little interest or enthusiasm existed for cooperative purchasing, either from vendors or project participants. Many archivists expressed loyalty to particular vendors, whereas others indicated difficulty in projecting costs and budgets. Most participants purchased few supplies and did so at highly irregular intervals. Some degree of sharing already existed between institutions, and most archivists agreed they might take advantage of a cooperative buying program that already existed. Few wished to play any role in creating and developing such an endeavor.

Internships also generated little enthusiasm. Most archivists felt overworked within their own repositories and thought they had too much to accomplish within their own facilities to begin working elsewhere. For many, archival work functioned as one aspect of a life-long ministry within a particular religious community, denomination, or agency. The archival career constituted an interlude in a broader life of service and commitment. Accordingly, archivists exhibited great interest in personally "organizing" their particular archives as quickly as possible but felt less compulsion to participate in a professional archival culture.

Finally, sharing archival resources, such as micrographics facilities, also proved unworkable. Larger, better-funded operations proved so busy with internal projects that they could not offer services to other repositories. Smaller operations often had problems defining their own needs and

planning their programs at a basic level. Even low-cost cooperative endeavors proved beyond the scope of their budgets and resources.

Efforts at stimulating interinstitutional cooperation clearly failed. Did the workshops and consultations produce long-term programmatic improvement? A 1992 questionnaire, mailed to all project participants, attempted to answer the question. Twenty-one RATAP institutions responded, a return rate exceeding 50 percent. Twelve respondents represented Roman Catholic women's religious orders, whereas nine provided data from other nonprofit or denominational organizations. Based on this sampling, five trends appear obvious.

- RATAP appeared most successful in encouraging institutions to articulate and define basic administrative elements. Mission statements, collection development policies, formal position descriptions, and similar documents permeate most of these institutional archives. They have adapted standard professional terminology and appear structured in familiar ways. Considerable effort has been made to develop and articulate policies and procedures, which have received appropriate bureaucratic imprimaturs from institutional governing boards. Administrative structure is important, but it does not necessarily translate into an archival program. Policies and procedures can, in fact, provide the shell of a program where none really exists. For real advances, one must look elsewhere.
- Reasonable advances occurred in arranging and describing material. The percentage of documentation under some descriptive control grew for virtually every institution. Increased control could be measured at the series, box, file folder, and item levels. A few caveats appear necessary. Quantitative achievement does not always translate into greater descriptive

standardization. Few have training in, or use, the USMARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format, and virtually none contributes information concerning holdings to standard databases. Notable exceptions also exist, as many RATAP participants still hold unique and historically significant resources that will not be available to researchers in the foreseeable future. In such cases, consultants need to raise more seriously the possibility of donations and deposits at larger and better-staffed institutions.

- A decidedly less encouraging trend involves use. If, as the 1986 report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities report underscored, the ultimate purpose of archives is use, these small repositories face discouraging prospects. Fifteen of the twenty-one respondents (71 percent) reported either no use or fewer than fifty requests per year. Only one RATAP participant indicated more than 250 informational queries. Clearly, the strong administrative base that these archivists have constructed is not translating into increased internal or external use. Similarly, better physical and intellectual control over records did not correlate at all with use. Most institutions with over 100 requests indicated more control at the series and box level than at the file folder or item level. A large percentage of the institutions with fewer than 50 requests annually revealed a higher percentage of collections processed at the file folder or item level. Many view arrangement and organization as the key archival elements, a vision that must change if small archives are to be integrated into the larger professional mainstream.
- Preservation initiatives appear rare and, again, appear correlated with use. Five of the six archives boasting more than 100 annual requests achieved some

environmental control, but only five of the remaining fifteen stabilized temperature and humidity. Most repositories achieved “environmental control” with an air-conditioner, occasionally supplemented by a humidifier. Acid-free boxes and folders appeared integrated into virtually every program, but few institutions moved beyond this. Even relatively inexpensive improvements, such as the use of ultraviolet shields over fluorescent tubes, proved sporadic. Creating a suitable conservation environment and developing an overall preservation plan remained distant goals.

- These archivists generally belonged to professional organizations, but they did not often participate in conferences or contribute to professional discourse. Again, membership correlated most with use. All six archivists claiming over 100 requests per year belonged to both SAA and at least one regional archival organization. Only 40 percent of the remainder did likewise. Convincing archivists from smaller institutions that national and regional organizations speak to their concerns remains an issue. Providing relevant and affordable opportunities for these individuals to participate in the larger archival world continues to present a challenge.

## Conclusion

These five trends contain four important implications for the archival profession as it wrestles with the relationship between national standardization and local archival autonomy. First, the profession needs to examine its expectations for small archives and consider realistically the possibilities for achievement and improvement. Use and preservation of records remains the ultimate professional goal. Archivists have spent considerable time, money, and effort train-

ing and certifying individuals over the past several years. Programs have received less attention. Many smaller repositories still suffer from high personnel turnover, minimal commitment from the parent organization, and a failure to integrate archival programs into the administrative mainstream of the larger organization. Where archivists successfully stimulate use and place their programs within the institutional mainstream, more professional archival environments grow.

A second conclusion naturally follows. Archivists must examine their criteria for "successful" programs. What programmatic elements do we really value? How does the profession balance quantitative and qualitative achievement? Policy statements and procedure manuals can be developed and neatly filed, but do they constitute the core of an archival program or merely an empty shell? Lone arrangers often argue that they cannot promote use until arrangement and description is "complete." RATAP evidence argues the opposite. Parent organizations will not fund arrangement and description activities until they perceive use. Generate institutional excitement by demonstrating practical value, and funding may follow.

A third series of questions involves the role of workshops in archival training. Simply put, has the profession developed an unstructured and unregulated series of personal enrichment courses for archival transients, or do workshops help produce stronger programs? Archivists in smaller institutions simply will not enter formal, long-term graduate programs in large numbers. The financial rewards are meager and, in many cases, their own sense of long-

term professional commitment has not fully developed. Yet these archivists remain responsible for important records and care for an extremely significant share of the nation's historical heritage. Workshops remain their principal link with the larger archival world. Opportunities for workshop training abound. As with archival consultants, the marketplace rules. University-based archival education programs, which ultimately reach a much smaller clientele than workshops, receive extraordinarily disproportionate attention in the literature and at SAA meetings. It is time to redress this imbalance. A concerted professional effort to study workshop training, assess its longitudinal programmatic impact, and develop a coherent national strategy for educating archivists in nontraditional settings seems overdue.

Finally, RATAP contains a lesson for funding agencies. Mandate long-term evaluation. Build in follow-up activities. Do not end interest in a particular project with the end of a funding cycle. Require grantees to define *success* and *failure* and realistically assess changes in programs. Partial successes and failures can be more instructive than glowing tales of magical transformations. Grant recipients need encouragement to provide that honest assessment. They need to return to projects sufficiently far in the future to measure real institutional change. They should neither prematurely label their efforts as failures nor feel pressured to define all projects as successful. Like all archivists, they should take a pragmatic approach to the real world of institutional recordkeeping and build programs and projects based on that reality.