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The American Archivist

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About the cover: Frontispiece of the *Liber Feudorum Maior*, or the grand secular cartulary of the count-kings of Arago-Catalunya, ca. 1192–6 when the project was begun under Alfons I by the deacon archivist Ramon de Caldes in Barcelona. This is one of the earliest depictions of an archivist at work. Lawrence J. McCrank's article explores the growth of archives in the Medieval Crown of Aragon in northeastern Spain during the twelfth century. (Cover illustration courtesy of the author)

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Forum

To the editor:

Herwart Vogt's review (Summer 1992) of Jessie Clark's *The Encyclopedia of Records Retention* omits one very significant caveat to the purchaser of the encyclopedia. While *The Encyclopedia of Records Retention* is a useful tool for the information and records manager's library, it should not be used as the final authority for establishing a records retention schedule. While Mr. Clark's work is certainly not to be slighted, he does not cite the specific laws and regulations upon which he bases his recommendations. The retention periods for specific record series can vary considerably from state to state and, most definitely, from country to country. This is a critical factor. The information and records manager who bases his or her entire retention program upon Mr. Clark's work runs considerable risk of finding him- or herself in the position of explaining to a court of law that it was not necessary for him or her to do any formal legal research in the process of determining the company's (institution's, organization's) records retention schedule. The courts usually do not find this position defensible. Mr. Clark also states in the encyclopedia that,

"the author [is] not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional advice. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought."

I would suspect that Mr. Clark would not want to become a codefendant in a trial involving the use of the encyclopedia as the

primary source for a records retention schedule.

The encyclopedia is a reference tool that will find its way to many information and records manager's desks (as it has mine). The retention periods suggested are good *guidelines* that can be used to assist the records manager in determining the retention periods actually approved for his or her company (institution, organization). The records manager, however, *must* supplement the encyclopedia with thorough research in primary legal sources, other records retention resources, and industry practice. To do otherwise puts the records manager and his or her company (institution, organization) at risk.

PATRICK CUNNINGHAM, CRM
Senior Business Systems Analyst

To the editor:

In the Spring 1992 issue of the *American Archivist*, Jackie Dooley claims that my article "Authority Control Issues and Prospects" (*American Archivist* 52 [Summer 1989]), argued that "subject content analysis of archival materials is impossible" and that I had concluded from Michelson's work that "consistent subject indexing of archival material is unattainable." What I said, after reviewing substantial literature in information retrieval and indexing applied *explicitly, and only*, to topical subject terminology. I was rigorously careful to state that "taken alone, these conclusions [from the literature I had reviewed] should discourage archivists from further efforts to

employ authority control for topical subject access points” and, of Michelson, to state that “this hypothesized failure of topical subject-based authority control has been empirically demonstrated by Avra Michelson.” Since my article is available, people can read it, but allow me a modest plea. I ask my colleagues to stop pretending the world is black and white, wishing that authority control would do more than it does, and asserting without reason that differences about subject indexing distinguish the content-indexing approach to access from the approach to access by provenance. This last position is advanced again in the recent Canadian manual on subject indexing for archivists, where it continues to obfuscate the issue. The issue is not whether to index subjects but rather, as I have explained in “Documenting Documentation” (*Archivaria* 34 [1992]), what the object of subject indexing is to be and which categories of

subjects will most benefit archival retrieval. I consider Jackie Dooley’s otherwise excellent article to be a step in the same direction I have been urging for many years. Let us index subjects, but let us be strategic about (1) the categories of subjects we index (functions and forms of material), (2) the source of the information from which we subject index (information about context not content), and (3) the structures in which we record that data (provenancial reference databases).

DAVID BEARMAN

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

From the Editor

The Context of Archives and Archivists

MY PREVIOUS EDITORIALS have focused on the need for additional research about archives and archival institutions, the impact of electronic information technology on the archival mission, and the challenge of educating archivists in the late twentieth century. My aim in these brief compositions is to identify specific themes in the essays in a particular issue as a way of introducing the issue. My purpose for this editorial is the same, and its focus is also a prominent topic of concern for the archival profession.

Every archives and historical manuscripts repository operates in a multidimensional environment. While archivists operate with a sense of the importance of context as a fundamental principle (that of provenance, as Michel Duchein has described it) in order "to appreciate a document, it is essential to know exactly where it was created, in the framework of what process, to what end, for whom, when and how it was received by the addressees, and how it came into our hands."¹ It is not difficult to argue that in order to appreciate archives and the work of archivists, it is necessary to understand their various contexts. But burdened by the daily pressures in administering their programs, with organizational sur-

vival at stake in more than a few cases, many archivists can see only partial aspects of their environment. One archivist may become so involved in professional activities that he or she neglects organizational responsibilities, while another may fail to see the importance of professional issues, ultimately reducing his or her effectiveness as a working archivist. The essays in this issue of the *American Archivist* all, to one degree or another, touch on the importance of understanding the archivist's institutional and societal environment.

The address of then-incoming Society of American Archivists President Anne Kenney is an important statement of the reasons why *professional* archivists need to belong to and be active in *professional* associations. As she nicely states, "the coming together with kindred spirits once or twice a year has been critical to our sense of legitimacy as a distinct profession." As she continues to suggest, participating in professional associations is also crucial to the quality of work archivists perform in their particular organizations. Being cut off from such a context will diminish what archivists do. Most archivists will admit that many of their own professional and institutional victories have stemmed from ideas and approaches hatched in private discussions and public sessions at SAA and other professional meetings. As President Kenney again stated so well, the message is

¹Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Problems and Practical Problems of 'Respect des Fonds' in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 67.

that "in order to have a stake in the archival future, [archivists] can't afford *not* to belong to SAA."

James M. O'Toole's essay on the "Symbolic Significance of Archives" is a trenchant contribution to our archival literature, reminding us that we need to see beyond the utilitarian value and use of archives, the perspective that many of the leading archival theorists have displayed in their writings. O'Toole provides a significant revisionist interpretation of this prevailing view, largely by drawing on historians and other scholars outside of the archival community. He has shown not only that archives have a broader symbolism for society (and archivists) but that archivists need to keep abreast of work in many disciplines that can provide new insights into the meaning and purpose of society's documentary remains. One recent study on orality and literacy in the ancient world, for example, has shown how Ernst Posner's interpretation of modern archives may have caused him to misinterpret the nature and importance of ancient archives.² O'Toole's essay argues, quite effectively, that understanding this symbolic importance of archives is essential for the archivist's work in such areas as appraisal and description. The walls of our archival domain must be broken down to enable us to do this. As O'Toole states, we must think about "not the practical, but the *impractical* reasons for the creation of records."

Lawrence McCrank's essay provides yet another illustration on the importance of context for archives and archivists, in this case the relevance of their historical milieu. He shows, initially, how our sense of an information age is not all that different from what other archivists and information specialists perceived in considerably earlier

ages. McCrank's revision of our perception of medieval archives demonstrates that closer looks at the milieu of recordkeeping may bring some surprises, if we can reject our modern viewpoints to see the "greater interplay between daily life and recordkeeping than a simple linear development of records accumulating in grand archives." His description of the depiction of a medieval archivist, one of the earliest representations of a European archivist, shows the growing importance of records to government and society. And this growing significance of records led to the development and use of basic archival functions before the mid-thirteenth century. As McCrank notes in his conclusion, "archives then, as now, very much reflected the culture in which they existed and exhibit idiosyncracies from the circumstances of their creation."

The essay by Robert Spindler and Richard Pearce-Moses brings to the fore other questions and issues about the broader context in which archivists ply their trade. Their analysis of patron use of the online catalog at Arizona State University clearly demonstrates the many variables that a diverse user clientele brings to such institutions. It is not just a matter of archivists' learning about how to manage automation, but it is also the issue of what our patrons know about the use of such electronic information systems.

Ron Becker's case study of an interesting, and troubling, lawsuit demonstrates that the archivist operates in a sometimes complicated and litigious environment. It also has something to say about the symbolic importance of archives to individuals and institutions. While we possess a variety of useful practical procedures and forms, the archival community unfortunately lacks specific case studies such as Becker's. His article shows that even the most well-meaning and candid arrangements can turn to complicated and critical legal disputes. The archivist's environment presents some

²Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

extremely complicated challenges, and more such case studies may help us to understand and cope in this environment. Meanwhile our world becomes more complicated, as electronic information technology transforms the institutional and home office and poses new and intriguing legal questions.³

Duncan McDowall's essay on business archives is another view of the archivist's context. Historian McDowall has aptly captured the continued challenge for the archivist to contend with and adapt to the corporate culture of business. While his stress on the need for archivists to cast aside their professional jargon and other attributes may be troubling to some (it is to me), McDowall's main thesis of the need for archivists to demonstrate their relevance to businesses is certainly a worthwhile reminder about our broader societal mission. More case studies in the development (successful or unsuccessful) of North American corporate archives would be valuable to assist our understanding about such activities and the utility of archivists operating within their work place.

The essay on the East African School of Librarianship and the education of archivists in that part of the world is an additional reminder that, despite cultural and other differences, there are some consistent themes and concerns in the education of archivists. Isaac Kigongo-Bukenya's references to the debates about the place and content of such education should be extremely familiar to North American archivists. For some, his contention that archival science is linked to library science will be controversial, but it is obvious that this remains an important relationship to the education of archivists across the world. Some of his comments are, of course, more directly connected to the European and

UNESCO efforts in international archival education. Kigongo-Bukenya's comments, for example, on the requirement for education and training at paraprofessional, professional, and postprofessional levels has been a consistent theme in these other communities but has rarely been commented on in North America archival circles. To some extent, this reflects the different cultural, economic, political, and other contexts. Librarians in African nations, for example, initially prepare for their careers via undergraduate library science programs, and the stress on different professional levels for archivists may reflect this as much as anything.

While all these essays comment on the context of archives and archivists, it is clear that much more research and writing remain to be done. Why do some archival programs succeed and others fail? Why are some archival programs well supported and others barely exist on thread-bare budgets? How will the changes in the use of information technology transform (or not transform) the nature and roles of archival programs? And, yes, there are hundreds of other questions remaining to be answered. Most of these have had some *opinions* expressed about them, but few have been the subject of any substantive data gathering or analysis. The *American Archivist* is certainly one vehicle for conveying some of the results of such research, and it is a vehicle ready and willing to provide such service to the archival community. We need to know more about the environments in which we operate and which create the documents we preserve.



RICHARD J. COX

³For a recent assessment of the new electronic institution, see Angelika Menne-Haritz, ed., *Information Handling in Offices and Archives* (New York: K.G. Saur, 1993).