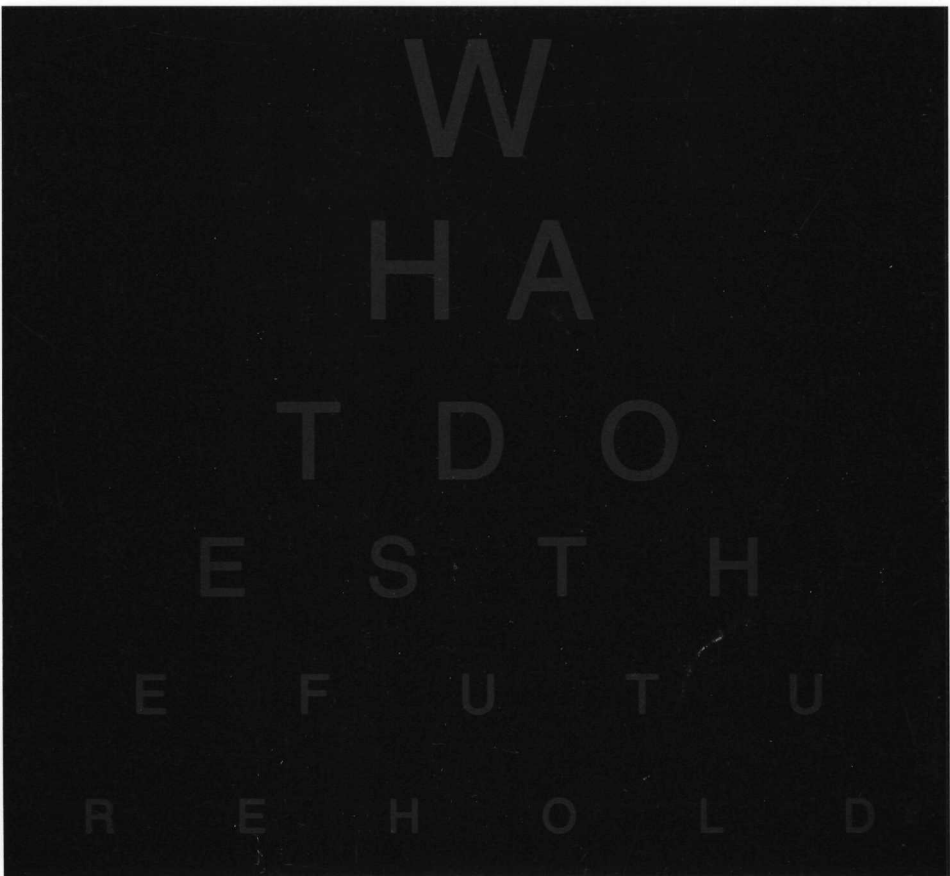


The American Archivist

Volume 57
Number 1
Winter 1994

Special Issue 2020 Vision



The Society of
American Archivists



The American Archivist

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About the cover: What does the future hold? This special issue, 2020 Vision, explores the perspectives of experts from outside the archival profession on the long-range vision for the profession and the Society of American Archivists. These articles present an opportunity to learn about significant trends in society and culture, organizational structure, technology, and research. (Cover design by Charles Stohrer of Imperial Printing Company, St. Joseph, Michigan.)

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Subscription Information

The *American Archivist* (ISSN 0360-9081) is published quarterly by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. Second class postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and additional mailing office. Postmaster: send address changes to the *American Archivist*, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. Subscriptions: \$75 a year to North American addresses, \$90 a year to other addresses. Single copies are \$25 for magazine copies and \$30 for photocopies.

Articles and related communications should be sent to Teresa M. Brinati, Managing Editor, Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. Telephone: (312) 922-0140. Advertising correspondence, membership and subscription correspondence, and orders for back issues should be sent to SAA at the address above. Requests for permission to reprint an article should be sent in writing to SAA at the above address. Claims for issues not received must be received by SAA headquarters within four months of issue publication date for domestic subscribers and within six months for international subscribers.

The *American Archivist* is available on 16 mm microfilm, 35 mm microfilm, and 105 mm microfiche from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. When an issue is out of stock, article and issue photocopies may also be obtained from UMI. The *American Archivist* is indexed in *Library Literature* and is abstracted in *Historical Abstracts*; book reviews are indexed in *Book Review Index*.

©The *American Archivist* is printed on an alkaline, acid-free printing paper manufactured with no groundwood pulp that meets the requirements of the American National Standards Institute—Permanence of Paper, ANSI Z39.48-1992. Typesetting and printing of the *American Archivist* is done by Imperial Printing Company of St. Joseph, Michigan.

The *American Archivist* and the Society of American Archivists assume no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

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Forum

Frank G. Burke on the Archives Listserv: A Response

To the editor:

The Archives listserv is an open electronic forum for discussion of issues affecting the profession. With over seven hundred current subscribers, it provides a unique opportunity for archivists to meet and develop relationships with colleagues, to pose questions, to share knowledge, and to debate topics of mutual concern. The listserv is a kind of electronic town meeting in which all are welcome and encouraged to express their views. It is limited, unfortunately, to the extent that not everyone now has a means of access to the network. If hurdles to access can be overcome, the listserv has the potential to generate wide interest in archival issues and to rival (if not replace) more traditional forums.

Not everyone shares this sense of the listserv—a novel forum in cyberspace—as an opportunity to broaden and deepen participation in the profession. Some, like Frank G. Burke, seem to think of it mostly as a place for erstwhile populists to trade in banalities or to vent their spleens. In last year's SAA presidential address (reprinted as "Letting Sleeping Dogmas Lie," *American Archivist* 55 [Fall 1992]: 530–37), Dr. Burke makes several caustic, condescending observations about participants on the listserv. He characterizes debate on certain topics as

1. "not necessarily intellectually super-

lative . . . not all intellectually inspiring." On the contrary, much of it has inspired this participant to think about issues I hadn't thought about before. Whether the discussion has been superlative or not, I'm in no position to judge . . . but must discussions be superlative to be worth something? If so, we'd better write off not only the listserv but much of what goes on elsewhere as well. How much superlative thinking is on display at SAA meetings or in the pages of the *American Archivist*?

2. "not all pertinent to the discussion at hand." The dynamics of debate often lead off on tangents—some interesting, some less so. Attempts to moderate or keep a debate pertinent can hamper the free, sometimes creative, flow of ideas. The listserv isn't a formal classroom; it's a place to generate, express, and respond to ideas on a broad spectrum of concerns. Furthermore, decisions about "pertinence" are too often determined by editors, editorial boards, a narrow circle of professional leaders—and by the inherent constraints of the print vehicle itself. The listserv refreshingly transfers choice to the individual subscriber; allows the subscriber to assess relevance or pertinence based on his or her own unique perspective and experience; and encourages a level of forthright, creative, and independent thinking not always observable in more traditional forums—a journal

or a convention—whose agendas are controlled for the most part by an entrenched professional elite.

3. “by no means unbiased and objective.” Is this to suggest that there *is* such a thing as unbiased or objective discussion, debate, or scholarship? One person’s bias is another person’s perspective, and vice versa. When someone lays claim to a higher plane of objectivity than someone else, it’s usually a sign of desperation, sophistry, or arrogance.
4. “dogmatic.” This term is often used to denigrate views with which one disagrees. The proposition that “archives are unique,” for example, strikes Dr. Burke as dogma. A platitude definitely, a dogma perhaps . . . but any different in these respects, I wonder, from Dr. Burke’s own opinion that “[archives] are parts of their own *genre* . . . and, as such, can be treated as classes or types of material”? There are plenty of dogmas flying around the archival circuit nowadays, including some emanating from our foremost archival educators and theoreticians. One important function of the listserv is to challenge dogmas in whatever guise they appear.
5. “occasionally . . . personalized and vituperative. When the social mores of professional communication were breached, however, hitherto unheard-from voices rose to call for order and discretion.” Listserv debate can as yet hardly match either the acrimony or lack of politeness of many academic forums, past and present. One trend in academic debate is away from fussiness about interactive rules (where ideas often get muddled by obfuscation or euphemism) toward a mode where participants converse candidly and plainly, without tiptoeing around the edges of issues or fear of treading

on delicate sensibilities. It’s a healthy trend, in my view—not always comfortable, perhaps, but ultimately conducive to getting at the heart of things. If “social mores” hadn’t compelled Dr. Burke to refer so gingerly to listserv discussions as “not necessarily intellectually superlative,” he’d probably have found a spicier, more direct epithet to apply.

Dr. Burke’s negative portrayal of the listserv raises at least two questions in my mind. What is it about the medium that gets some people’s hackles up, to the point where they either stamp their figurative feet and storm away from the discussion in a huff (at least two memorable instances of this last spring) or—like Dr. Burke—make studious efforts to rise above the fray and to deprecate the listserv’s potential as an innovative forum for the exchange of ideas and information? Why are those most critical of—and apparently frustrated by—the dialogue on the listserv (i.e., that portion that doesn’t deal with relatively benign, noncontroversial topics such as folder labeling) also readily identifiable as part of the revolving circle of individuals who tend to dominate the agenda and leadership of our professional societies, print media, and educational programs?

A simple answer to the first question is that people aren’t quite comfortable yet with the medium. Answering the second is a more complicated matter, but I believe it has to do, at least in part, with the listserv as a threat to business as usual. Unlike a regular conference or print vehicle (ordinarily structured to reflect mainstream thinking and favored agendas of the professional leadership), the listserv is broadly inclusive and fosters the expression of a rich diversity of views. Topics for discussion arise not by fiat or decree (what the leadership thinks *ought* to be discussed) but directly—and, in a sense, organically—out of the concerns and experiences of individual participants (what rank-and-file archivists *want*

to discuss). As each of us lines up from time to time with our virtual documents, all listserv members have pretty much equal access—something quite rare in professional discourse.

Is this what prevents Dr. Burke from enthusiastically endorsing what transpires on the listserv? I have no way of knowing for sure, but there may be a hint in his concluding admission that the forum could be here to stay: "If we must debate on the archival listserv, at least let us stop being sophomoric and instead recognize the family to which we all belong." *If* we must? Why this tone of grudging concession? Dr. Burke and other archival leaders ought to *encourage* such debate. Rather than berating others for alleged bias, rudeness, and lack of intellectual rigor, they ought to join the fray and contribute to the ongoing dialogue. As for the profession being one big happy family (shades of the Huxtable clan?), that may be a comforting analogy, but it's also spurious, maudlin, and—to use Dr. Burke's own term—sophomoric.

PHILIP N. ALEXANDER
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

To the editor:

Hallelujah! Someone has actually read and even commented on an SAA presidential address! I was under the impression they were published annually to guarantee the editor at least one article for that space in the Fall issue! Unfortunately, the critic appears to have stopped reading after the first page or two, and condemns me for my comments on the Archives listserv. I plead guilty on all counts but offer an adverbial defense. I see nothing wrong with saying the Archives listserv is not necessarily intellectually superlative or is occasionally personalized and vituperative, or by no means unbiased and objective. I would

say the same about the *New York Times*, "All Things Considered," the "Macneil-Lehrer Newshour," and the *American Archivist*.

Can one not hint that imperfection exists without being accused of condemning the imperfect medium? And how does the critic come to assume that I think the listserv is "mostly a place for erstwhile populists to trade in banalities or to vent their spleens"? Or that "the medium gets some people's [implying my] hackles up"? Or that "people [implying me again] aren't quite comfortable yet with the medium"? Or that I am part of a "narrow circle of professional leaders" and part of an "entrenched professional elite"? Well, maybe those last two are close, but it took me twenty-five years in the SAA to become president, and most of my entrenched circle have retired or passed on to their reward!

I reserve the right to choose the medium through which I will get the information I need, and not just the information others are dispensing. I do not feel socially or professionally obligated to stare at a video screen while someone propounds the racist/sexist observation that the next archivist of the United States should certainly not be a white male, or advances that anti-intellectual proposition that archival educators should not be involved in designing the graduate archival curriculum, any more than I feel obligated to read the *National Enquirer* or listen to all-night call-in talk shows rambling on hour after hour in the "cyberspace" of the A.M. band.

That, of course, does not condemn the medium, but as one who spent fourteen years as a commercial radio/teletype operator I am reminded of the first rule of the communicator's code: "Think before you transmit!" I have professionally embraced the electronic communications medium for the past forty-five years. From the same listserv that I am accused of "storming away from the discussion in a huff" (my doctor ordered me to quit storming and do only

controlled huffing), I have downloaded hundreds of pages of valuable information about gophers, waives, the 245 tag, AACR2, and other professional concerns (I ignore things about labels, usually), and they have been dutifully filed in the folders covering such topics in my classroom lectures. But to get at the wheat there is an awful (in more ways than one) lot of chaff to wade through, so when I come back from a short trip and find four hundred messages in my mailbox I disconnect for a few weeks until I can catch up and evaluate.

I am not opposed to listservs, and, indeed, I subscribe to a number of them and actually administer one, and I deal with so much traffic that I use two different e-mail addresses—one just for the listservs, and the other for personal mail. I am opposed, however, to mixing gossip, social theory, and, yes, even vituperation with professional discussion. When such objections are occasionally raised on line, they are often shot down by the ranting of those who appear to have no other mechanism for communicating with the professional world, and so the voices of reason (not to be confused with tradition) often fall silent and turn to other media, thus lessening the value of the listserv by their absence. I continue to reserve the right to pick the newspaper I read, the programs I watch, the movies I attend, and the listserv that I monitor, unfazed by those who try to entice me to read, watch, attend, or monitor more of whatever they are pushing. I mean, is this America or what?

Now, if someone would like to discuss the central theme of my presidential address, instead of just the opening paragraph, I would be pleased to do so, even on the listserv, as soon as I sign on again, when I have fully perused the backlog—try me in three or four months.

FRANK G. BURKE
University of Maryland

To the editor:

Memories! Dennis East's article (*American Archivist* 55 [Fall 1992]: 562–77) on the Ohio Historical Society and its efforts to create and maintain a state archives caused me to recall many satisfying, wistful, and angry thoughts.

His presentation relates most of the events, but I do have a couple of quibbles and clarifications for Dennis and my colleagues to consider:

1. On page 576, Dennis states that the 1959 Archival Act “was not the major achievement of the Ohio Historical Society had sought for most of the twentieth century.” I disagree! The legislation, while not perfect, did provide authorization for every need of a state archives. The failure was due to the lack of money and support from the Society and the State Legislature with which to carry out the provisions of the act.

2. Dennis seems to agree when he writes later, “Clearly, the archives was a lower priority than other society endeavors.” One of my major reasons for leaving the Society was the constant reminder by the head of the Ohio historical properties work, saying “I spend more money mowing the grass than you have to operate the state archives!” Sad, but true.

3. In my opinion, Dennis could have “spiced up” the story by relating a few human interest events. For example, the time I got a call from the Governor's office that he wanted to see me *now*. I was sorting volumes with “red rot” and was *very* filthy but jumped into my car and went to his office. His staff was shocked when I walked in and expressed their displeasure over my appearance. My response was that until funds were made available for hiring someone else to do the job, I did it! Despite such events, the funds never came. Have they yet?

Also, we lived in the old Governor's mansion for several days while waiting for our moving van to arrive from St. Paul.

During that time, our four-year-old daughter had a ball exploring the place. Her favorite part was taking a shower in the master bath. It had *three* shower heads—head tummy and feet! I enjoyed it too.

In looking back on my archival career, 1956–1993, it has been, to me, a successful one. Much satisfaction, some accomplishments, plus a few frustrations and disappointments. Even though retired since 1986, my archival interests are still strong. As evidence of this, I am currently the volunteer archivist/oral historian of the Hemlock Society–USA, the PNW District of the Unitarian-Universalist Church and I am negotiating for the same position with the Washington League of Women Voters and the Washington State Grange. It keeps me busy!

BRUCE HARDING
Retired

To the editor:

Bruce Harding's letter was a most welcome addition to my correspondence file. It was certainly good to hear from him and learn of his activities since his retirement.

By my statement on page 576 that the 1959 Archival Act was not "the major achievement the Ohio Historical Society had sought for most of the twentieth century," I did not intend either to belittle or diminish either Bruce's or the Society officials' hard work to obtain this legislation. All of the wailing about space limitations and lack of state support for the archives, the recognition that the state's archival activities did not contain major elements of a sound archival program, and the earlier effort to obtain a new, separate building for the archives, convinces me that archival legislation of 1959 fell short of expectations.

In a state where a tradition of neglect of the state archives and local records programs was longstanding, the 1959 legislation is certainly a major achievement. I just believe it fell short of the expectations of those people at the Society who thought more would be forthcoming in 1959.

Like Bruce, I, too, could relate many anecdotes about the attitudes and opinions of the Ohio Historical Society and state officials toward the state's archival and records management programs. I did not solicit such anecdotes from Bruce and others associated with the Society and the state archives because I did not believe them appropriate to the type of article I was trying to write.

Perhaps Bruce would like to take on part two of the Ohio Historical Society–state archives story. The post-1959 story is also one of angst and apathy with a lot more personal and political chicanery. Unfortunately, the basic pattern of apathy and neglect of the state's archival (and records management) program that characterized the pre-1959 period exists today. I have this personal theory that no one cares about public records until they come up missing (like Governor Rhodes's papers) or until their very existence creates a crisis that cannot be ignored. It's too bad there is not forward-looking leadership promoting and planning to care for one of the state's great resources.

DENNIS EAST
Bowling Green State University

To the editor:

I have just finished scanning the Winter 1993 issue of the *American Archivist* and am somewhat distressed by the style of a bibliography entry, number 811, on page

120. This entry is truly inadequate and may indicate wider problems of identifying published series. The Nicosia volume is a facsimile edition, volume 4 of the 26-volume series "Archives of the Holocaust," series co-editors: Sybil Milton and Henry Friedlander. There is a second volume by Nicosia on the Central Zionist Archives 1933–39 (volume 3 in the series), but no one would ever guess this from entry 811. The loss of the series identity in your journal's current format poses serious problems for researchers, since most American libraries catalog series as a unit and not by individual volume titles. I would appreciate it if you could modify future entries and possibly list (or review?) the twenty-three volumes of this archival series that have already been published. Thank you for your consideration.

SYBIL MILTON
*United States Holocaust Memorial
Museum*

From the editor:

I hope this letter informs readers of the journal about the existence of the other volumes in this series.

To the editor:

Thank you very much for David M. Weinberg's informative and flattering review of the *Guide to the American Medical Association Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection* (Fall 1992). I couldn't help being a bit taken aback by the crediting of Arthur W. Hafner as sole editor in the headnote of the review, and by the references in its text to the guide as "Hafner's work" and to myself as "a project consultant." I'm sure Mr. Weinberg

writes with no conscious intent to mislead; indeed, he is probably following standard reviewing conventions. But these details do create a somewhat inaccurate impression of the origins of the intellectual work which went into the guide.

For the record, the title page of the guide lists Dr. Hafner as executive editor, myself as senior editor, and John F. Zwicky, Ph.D., as contributing editor. Both Dr. Zwicky and I were employed full-time on the Health Fraud Collection Project for its two-and-a-half-year duration, and our respective contributions to the guide were at least as extensive and substantive as those of Dr. Hafner.

JAMES G. CARSON

To the editor:

In his letter to the editor which appeared in the Fall 1992 issue of the *American Archivist*, Frederick Stielow calls MARC a technological dinosaur and demonstrates his lack of knowledge of rather basic cataloging terminology. MARC is a format for the exchange of descriptive information about an item or collection of items. These items can be bibliographic, archival, three-dimensional objects, individuals, or organizations. MARC is a standard for computer-to-computer data exchange, designed so that the information moved back and forth will be recognizable when it is received. It's akin to the conventions of written language—spaces, punctuation, division into sentences and paragraphs, etc. Without such conventions the reader receives a jumble that would require far more time to organize than the information contained therein would normally warrant.

Perhaps, rather than the popular and pejorative use of the word *dinosaur* as an evolutionary failure, Stielow is using *dinosaur* in the way paleontologists and evolutionary

biologists would. After all, a taxonomic group which dominated their environment for 60 million years, both adapting to and altering their habitat, is quite a model for emulation. May the MARC format and all its evolutionary descendants be with us for so long.

Rather than killing the messenger (the MARC format) or even the rather long-winded and discursive oratory the messenger employs (APPM, AACR2, local cataloging practice) what Stielow should be addressing is the basic processes of appraisal and arrangement, the assumptions which underlie these processes and the decisions which are being made by archivists, long before they attempt to create a cataloging record in the MARC format.

MARC does not regulate what a collection is or at what level of specificity it should be cataloged. APPM does not do so either. Neither do microcomputers or AMC protocols. Cataloging an item does not accord it an equal value with another item, even in the most "simplistic library approaches." Cataloging records ownership and location and provides users with access points—it's up to the users of the material to assess its value to their work. Acquiring an item and making a decision about keeping it do imply the material possesses value; cataloging simply follows.

Before one can create "more modern data constructs" for archival access, a great deal of work needs to be accomplished in the areas of appraisal and arrangement. As the computer folk like to remind us, "Garbage in, garbage out." Before burying the MARC format and catalog, let's do more work on the crucial archival processes that logically precede the cataloging phase. MARC and APPM are tools, and tools usually get improved but only if the raw materials they are being applied to warrant improvements.

JUDITH CAMPBELL TURNER
Milwaukee Public Museum

To the editor:

I would like to draw your attention to a piece of incorrect information published in the *American Archivist*, (55 [Winter 1992]). Both M. Duchein and P. René Bazin claim that in Belgium there is "no specialised archival training at all" (p. 23) and "no separate archival training" (p. 60). Yet they refer to the symposium Archives and Europe Without Boundaries (Maastricht, 3–5 October 1991), where my colleague Prof. Dr. J. Verhelst delivered a report on his findings as a lecturer at the course for archivists at the Free University of Brussels (V.U. Brussels)—see "What Training and Qualities Does the General Archivist Need?" *Janus* 2 (1992): 188–90. May I kindly request you to rectify this when you next go to press? Moreover, let me seize the opportunity to inform you of the latest developments in archival education in Belgium.

V.U. Brussels started a postgraduate (Master's) course in archives and records management in October 1988. The Catholic University of Leuven (K. U. Leuven) organized a similar course the year after. The two universities together have granted about thirty Master's degrees. As from October 1993 they will join forces with the University of Ghent, which will result in a specialized training in archives and records management with the head office in Brussels. This postgraduate course is the only one for the whole Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders).

In *Archiefinitiatief* (2 [1993] 9–28), Dr. F. Scheelings outlines the objectives of the new syllabus. The subject matter covers the following archival domains: Principles and Terminology, Old-Regime Archives and Arrangement Systems, Records Management, Practical Exercises, Archival Legislation and Archival Organization for both inland and abroad, as well as Conservation and Restoration. An Introduction to Informatics and Management of Nonprofit Or-

ganizations are obligatory subjects. In addition, students can choose between several auxiliary sciences. They also have a traineeship of three hundred hours in either a public institute, a company, or an archives service. The presentation of a final thesis completes graduation.

An archival education for the French-speaking part of Belgium was recently started by the University of Liège.

J. BAERTEN

*Chairman of the Specialised Training in
Archives and Records Management
Brussels*

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