

Editor's Special Forum on Needs in Archival Research and Publication

Provenance: Regional Journal as Training Ground

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FOUNDED BY THE SOCIETY OF GEORGIA ARCHIVISTS (SGA) in 1972 as *Georgia Archive*, *Provenance* was the first journal published by a state or regional archival group. Originally conceived as a small publication serving archivists, curators, librarians, and researchers in Georgia, the journal quickly drew a much wider audience, and the editors and SGA board fostered its continued expansion in both content and format. The editors have consistently striven for a regional and national, rather than strictly Georgia, focus by appointing editorial board members from outside the state and region, by maintaining the juried status of the review process, and by soliciting and publishing submissions from all over the country on equally wide-ranging topics.

In 1983, the society changed its journal's name to *Provenance* to reflect the broader focus it had assumed and its continued desire to appeal to archivists all over the South and the nation. Today, the majority of the contributors and at least half the subscribers are from out of state.

Articles and shorter case studies on archival theory and practice form the basis of *Provenance*. In addition to book re-

views, the staff solicits and accepts review essays and annotated bibliographies. The editorial board is particularly interested in articles that further the discussion of archival theory or introduce new ideas to the profession. The journal also features case studies, called Short Subjects, which draw from a single case broad conclusions that may be applied by readers in their own work. Occasional Short Subjects address archival arcana that might interest or amuse the journal's readers.

In soliciting and accepting articles, *Provenance* attempts to give first-time authors an opportunity to experience the editorial process on a smaller, less threatening scale. In practice, this policy results in submissions that require considerable work to bring them up to publishable standard. Of course, submissions from long-time practitioners are welcome as well.

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Provenance receives very few articles addressing the broad issues of theory and practice faced by the profession today. The majority are more appropriately described as case studies—a situation that has caused a not yet totally serious consideration of converting to a total case study format. Many of the studies unfortunately come from the “how we done it good” school. In particular, graduate students and archivists new to the profession seem to have difficulty taking that one additional step to place their situation or project in context and apply their theoretical training or analytical skills to the questions and issues they address.

This weakness is also reflected at archival professional meetings where editorial board members and staff go to scout and solicit articles. In listening to papers, staff members hope to hear well-written, thoughtful pieces that add to the body of professional knowledge. Even after filtering out the overenthusiastic use of first person, staff members find that quality presentations are few and far between—and often are not written down or, if written, are not adequately documented. Adequate research into a topic and documentation of that research seldom occur.

In general, the submissions from all levels of authors suffer from deficiencies in both content and style. It is a depressing fact that few articles can be published with only a minimum of copyediting. Editors, once dismayed that authors could not manage to submit their manuscripts in the format described in the journal's manual of style, are now grateful and amazed when that is all a manuscript requires. Fuzzy outlines and lack of thesis statements and conclusions require considerable editing and rewriting on the part of both the editors and the authors. And even basic problems with inaccurate spelling and incorrect content add to their work.

The paucity of submissions creates an additional problem. To have articles to

publish, the journal frequently accepts pieces that have potential but require considerable work. In such cases, the editorial staff completely rewrites large portions of articles after the authors have made factual additions. Some authors are unwilling to devote the time and effort to bring their submissions up to the quality needed for publication; as a result, the journal has lost potentially worthwhile articles.

However, many authors are willing to work with the editorial staff to improve and correct their work. These authors view the process as they should—one in which author and editor work in concert to produce the best possible article.

It has been said that the individuals who are doing the interesting work and testing theory with practice are the same people who have no time to write. Often it seems to jaundiced editors that only the individuals who cannot write and have nothing to say submit articles for review.

Editorial staff know what they would like to read: articles that address old issues in new or thought-provoking ways, that raise new issues for consideration by the profession, that are well written and display competent research, that excite and inspire. It is not that ideas and projects are difficult to identify but rather that no one is writing about them. Practicing archivists have even less time now than they did five years ago when they were saying they had no time to write.

Archival graduate programs bear a large responsibility for giving their students the theoretical background and analytical skills to enable them to write about archival issues—and then to require and encourage their students to submit their course papers to journals. Other archivists who manifest their feelings of obligation to their profession by being professionally active should take that obligation a step further and write something publishable that will be more permanent than much of their committee work.

Practically speaking, however, these improvements may not be enough to enable some archival journals to continue in quite the same way that they have in the past. Periodically, the Society of Georgia Archivists has explored the possibility of copublication with nearby regional archival organizations, although nothing has resulted. The paucity of publishable articles, combined with the smaller amount of time and resources members and the society have to devote to publications, requires both a philosophical and practical reconsideration of publication programs. One practical step—work toward making more of the papers given at the society's meetings publishable—is under way. And the society voted in 1993 to publish *at least* one issue of the journal per year, reserving the

option to produce the usual two issues or special publications when enough material is available.

It also seems logical for American archival journals to work more in concert and cooperation with one another. Surely the *American Archivist* receives articles it cannot publish, some of which might meet the editorial requirements of *Archival Issues* or *Provenance*. For all their national subject focus, regional journals can serve as a training ground for fledgling authors, bringing up these authors in the way journals such as the *American Archivist* or *Rare Books and Manuscript Librarianship* want them to incline. Improved quality and content of submissions to those journals could result from the regional journals' earlier work with beginning authors.