

Volume 57
Number 3
Summer 1994

The American Archivist



The Society of
American Archivists



The American Archivist

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About the cover: The illustration represents the transfer of a written document into preservation microfilm. This issue of the *American Archivist* explores a variety of aspects relating to written documents. Three research articles focus on the character and function of written documents; the history, development, and problems with major documentary publications; and a review of literature relating to the USMARC cataloging of written documents. The case study examines the challenges involved in ensuring the future accessibility of written documents using preservation microfilming.

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The following statement of ownership, management, and circulation was filed in accordance with the provisions of Section 4369, Title 39, U.S. Code, on 27 April 1995, by Teresa M. Brinati, Managing Editor.

The American Archivist is published quarterly by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal St., Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. The managing editor is Teresa M. Brinati. The owner is the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal St., Suite 504, Chicago, Illinois 60605. There are no stockholders, bondholders, mortgages, or other security holders in the organization.

The average number of copies of each issue printed during the preceding twelve months was 5,495; sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,892; total paid circulation was 4,892; free distribution was 112; total distribution was 5,004; and 491 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing. For the most recent issue (Spring 1994), total number of copies printed was 5,481; sales through dealers and carriers were 0; mail subscriptions to members and subscribers were 4,926; total paid circulation was 4,926; free distribution was 115; total distribution was 5,041 and 440 copies were for office use, leftover, or spoiled after printing.

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: \$85 a year to North American addresses, \$100 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 Reviews 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.

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Forum

McCrank Congratulated

To the editor:

Lawrence McCrank's article, "Documenting Reconquest and Reform: The Growth of Archives in the Medieval Crown of Aragon" (Spring 1993: 256-318), challenges our understanding of European archival development. Several students have questioned Ernst Posner's interpretation that modern archival practice and use stems from the French Revolution. In informal conversations, these students have noted Posner's omission of Iberian history, of its archival practices, and, indeed, of Spanish-language references. McCrank, however, is the first to document Posner's omission by analyzing the medieval legacy of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Aragon-Catalunya. Arguably, the Archives of the Crown of Aragon are the most important cache of medieval European manuscripts of the era. The author's findings are no less startling than the records at his disposal.

McCrank notes the symbiotic relationship between political expansion and bureaucratic growth. The recordkeeping generated by this development demanded regularization and professionalization of the recordkeepers. Hence, the role of scribes, notaries, lawyers, and archivists changed as they participated in evolving functional roles of an expanding state system. How this cadre of professionals was trained remains to be examined, for the author emphasizes the development of finding aids and the preservation of informa-

tion during the reconquest of northeastern Spain by Christians over Moors.

To the satisfaction of this reader, the author has debunked the supremacy of innovations in archival management and control following the French Revolution as the means that opened records to public scrutiny. At the same time, the author posits that the experience in Aragonese archives was dependent on neither Roman tradition nor Muslim practice. Rather than cultural diffusion throughout Spain (and the Western archival world), therefore, McCrank concludes that the archival developments in Aragon were indigenous and creative. They were not imitative of Roman, Visigothic, or Muslim practice. If one allows "multiple Edens" for the creation of archival Adams and Eves, then, might not the need for accessions, arrangement, description, retrieval, reference, and interpretation reflect a function of the human intellect to impose order on perceived chaos? If one accepts or demonstrates a primal need for the human mind to organize "memory" outside itself, then the progressive model for archival development is a moot point. Had there been no Rome and no Granada, but only an expanding Aragon, then its archives would have developed nonetheless. They would have differed in content but not in form.

McCrank is to be congratulated for taking on an onerous task and completing it well. Your staff is to be congratulated for publishing an article that is longer than the norm for the *American Archivist*. The historian of archives is justly rewarded for

reading a work that might be lost in some other publication.

ADAN BENAVIDES, JR.
*Graduate School of Library and
Information Science
University of Texas at Austin*

The editor responds:

The Editor appreciates the comments of Dr. Benavides. Such historical analysis is one of the most important forms of scholarship to be contributed by archivists and

is in great need. The Editor also wishes to respond to the correspondent's comment about "publishing an article that is longer than the norm" for the journal; the *American Archivist* has no prescribed length for submitted or accepted manuscripts. The Editor is concerned primarily with quality and relevance.

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

From the Editor

Playing with Archival Assumptions: Reading Our Professional Literature

ONE PURPOSE (THERE ARE MANY, of course) of a mature professional literature should be the testing of assumptions that individuals hold about their disciplinary practice. These assumptions influence us, guide us, and sometimes dictate our acting in certain ways. Assumptions exist both because of preoccupation with and reliance on experiential-based knowledge and because of a lack of literature with specific data on practice.¹ As is true of any applied professional, the archivist should labor to make the best decisions, whether they are based on assumptions or on more reliable

information. At the same time, however, the archivist should also be questioning and testing the validity of such assumptions. With scarce resources and large responsibilities, the archivist must continually strive to replace assumptions with reliable approaches; can we only justify our existence by appealing to only subjective knowledge. The articles in this *American Archivist* issue, like those in nearly every issue, provide insights into the challenges raised by archivists possessing too many assumptions. Such articles might themselves also be based on some assumptions, but these can be used to formulate additional topics for study, reflection, and research.

In introducing this particular issue, I have endeavored to identify some assumptions that are challenged by this group of professional writings. Assumptions other than the ones I have identified and commented on also exist, but those listed here should serve to make one simple point that any editor of this journal would probably endorse: there is a continual need for careful research and writing that moves the

¹In other words, examining these two explanations, there are *good* and *bad* reasons for this characteristic of the archival profession. In this applied field, theory and methodology are relevant only as they relate to, inform, or improve archival practice. Yet, too often, archival practitioners resort *only* to assumptions generated or supported by practice or common sense, partly because this is easier. Hence, the often negative reception of any challenge to traditional practice posed because of a lack of substantial—or in many cases, *any*—supportive evidence. Obviously, the professional literature too often reflects such attitudes in a lack of orientation to careful research design and in an easy acceptance of standard explanations.

archival profession from best guesses to best practices.

Has it ever struck you that archivists seem to spend a great deal of effort *describing* records for their potential users but relatively little time *analyzing* these records? Rather than relate what I mean by such analysis, I direct your attention to Clark Elliott's essay in this issue as an example of the value of such work for both archivists and the users of archival records.²

Elliott's study provides insight into the origin of records, how records are viewed by their creators, and the manner in which records should be maintained. He is able to determine, for example, that the nineteenth-century university devoted as much as 5 percent of its operating budget to recordkeeping. It would be interesting to study how this has or has not changed in the subsequent century and a half in the administration of higher education. Elliott contends that "recordkeeping was an integral part of university life, and that it was given a status of some importance." More recent studies on records management in higher education challenge the idea that this perspective has remained.³

Elliott also demonstrates the importance of conventional notions of functions and records to recordmaking, a topic archivists have become increasingly concerned about—especially in facing the challenge of

electronic records. In this instance, the author considers letter-writing manuals and their potential influence as well as the "communicational and authority structure" supporting the creation of records. These are important (if not new or novel) matters for the archivist, suggesting the need to gather considerably more documentation about the nature of the record creators rather than expending elaborate quantities of time on describing the records themselves for potential users.⁴ Finally, Elliott raises some important issues relating to the functional description of records. He reveals the importance of seeing a specific document not as a single informational item but as part of a group of records related to broader institutional functions, while noting that any individual record can be related to many different functions.

Is documentary editing an *archival* function or the responsibility of historians and other scholars? Does the editorial preparation of archival records for publication have anything in *common* with the typical work of the archivist? What can each—the documentary editor and the archivist—contribute to the other's work?

Although the *American Archivist* has not published extensively on the topic of documentary editing,⁵ the George Kent essay demonstrates why archivists need to be concerned with the issues raised by documentary editing projects. Professor Kent shows how documentary editing is tied up with access, declassification, and, in the fo-

²In other words, I do not mean that such analysis is the sole responsibility of the archivist. However, it does seem that such analytical investigations are more often conducted by other professionals studying the nature of recordkeeping and information technology, the history of literacy, the history and theory of communications, and the nature and development of organizations and their culture. The archivist, as Elliott's essay suggests, possesses the knowledge and inclination for such research.

³Consider, for example, Don C. Skemer and Geoffrey P. Williams, "Managing the Records of Higher Education: The State of Records Management in American Colleges and Universities," *American Archivist* 53 (Fall 1990): 532–47.

⁴Concerns about such matters have been a focus of archival theorists for a long time. The idea that archivists need to understand the nature of an organization's recordmaking milieu is a *central* concern of the Dutch archival manual published in the later nineteenth century, and it is easy to find expressions of similar interests in the past century of our archival literature.

⁵It has been almost a decade, in fact, since the last such essay was published. See Mary A. Giunta, "The NHPRC: Its Influence on Documentary Editing, 1964–1984," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 134–41.

cus of his essay, federal information and records policy—all issues that archivists need to be involved with in the formulation of archival approaches and policies. His essay also demonstrates the inherent power of certain documents for public and scholarly debate on contemporary questions, and the public perception of the documentary heritage is a matter that every archivist must be concerned about in this age of shrinking federal support in nearly every sector.

Has it ever seemed to you that archivists can become obsessed with *practical solutions* without considering the *implications* of these seemingly *down-to-earth* solutions? Does it seem that the archivist, for whatever reason, can be transfixed by the trees without understanding that they are part of the forest?

Lyn Martin's research on the use of the US MARC AMC (United States *M*Achine-Readable Cataloging for Archives and Manuscripts Control) provides additional evidence that archivists often become absorbed with tools without fully considering the implications of tool choice or tool purpose. The diversity of approaches to using MARC AMC in academic archives suggests a racing ahead to adopt a means without full consideration of the *ends*. The diversity would probably appear even greater if the study covered MARC AMC use or lack of use across the full spectrum of archival and historic manuscript repositories. As Martin suggests, archivists (in academic archives at least) have moved from considering the potential of the descriptive standard to the responsibility of making the standard meaningful. But there may be another way of looking at this. Did archivists move too quickly to adopt the MARC record as the basis for description before considering either the kinds of analysis of records (the stuff that archivists are, after all, describing in the AMC format) suggested by Elliott's study or the kind of knowledge of archival users (the ones who will ultimately scroll through the records

descriptions on the computer screen) that we seem to lack? While it is just as probable that the archival profession needed to adopt this method of bibliographic description *in order* to mobilize its resources to work on the array of standards needed, we still can wonder how we can develop mechanisms to evaluate our needs more carefully before committing scarce resources to major professional standards.

Have you ever reflected on the fact that even the most standard archival activities are extremely *costly* in time and other resources? Have you sometimes wondered about the argument that, because of scant staff and financial resources, archivists don't have time to devote to *studying* their functions and activities? Yet, might this not lead to decisions using these resources in unwise or wasteful fashions?

The case study of the Amherst micro-filming project provides an excellent glimpse into the time, effort, complexities, and finances required to carry out a reformatting effort. Although there is little question that the Dwight Morrow papers deserved the efforts expended, the nature of the project details described should cause any archival program to pause before launching into such an endeavor. If the archival profession possessed more such studies, archival programs could make better decisions about choosing fonds to be microfilmed. If there were studies on other preservation and reformatting efforts, archivists would be in a better situation to decide when microfilm or some other preservation option should be considered. In this instance, the amount of time added to the project to analyze the project was well worth the effort.

All three Perspective pieces also are concerned, to some extent, with various assumptions formed by and relied on by archivists. Historian Timothy J. Gilfoyle has raised some interesting issues about the preservation of records that can be used for the study of human sexuality.

Some archivists might be prone to discount this essay, assuming it is another example of a historian arguing that everything must be saved. Gilfoyle does not make this argument, and his contribution does provide one more reason why archivists need to develop careful and more precise appraisal criteria that are sensitive to potential use and certain elements of society. Gilfoyle's essay goes far beyond an expression of the needs of some small group of specialized scholars and raises issues of broader import to our contemporary society wrestling with sexual identity and sexually transmitted diseases.

Appraisal is, indeed, an archival function that some archivists would contend is based completely on assumptions, if the subjective expertise acquired by practice—which some suggest is all there is to appraisal—can be characterized by our sense of assumptions. German archival educator Angelika Menne-Haritz's contribution on archival appraisal theory is a serious reevaluation of such attitudes. Professor Menne-Haritz reevaluates Schellenberg's notion of informational and evidential values in the light of recent archival theorizing on macro-appraisal approaches, and she contends that some substantive issues relating to the precision and motives of our appraisal work must be reconsidered in practice. She sees the notion of "evidence" as a much more substantive basis for archival appraisal.

Finally, Robert Martin's comparison of library and archives education places the discussion about archival education in a somewhat new context, but it, too, perhaps challenges an interesting assumption. Many archivists continue to complain about the poverty of archival education *within* the library science framework because—"Well, you know, it is after all *library* education." Personally, I have heard all sorts of complaints, ranging from such evidence as the knowledge of one poor librarian, the sad state of one poorly constructed library course, or the reading of one particularly poorly presented essay in a library journal. These statements ignore at least a couple of obvious points: first, library science education, warts and all, has moved far beyond anything archivists have been able to develop, offer, and take in their educational venues. Second, why don't we hear about the counterpart poor individual, course, or article in the field of history? The answer is that the criticism of library science education is little more than an excuse, rather than a carefully honed reason. Martin's essay prods us to reexamine our fundamental assumptions about education and training.

It is possible that you may be questioning my assumptions about archival assumptions. I hope so. I remain convinced that the archival literature should be a form of continuing dialogue about archival knowledge and practice. This is a fundamental purpose of the *American Archivist*.

