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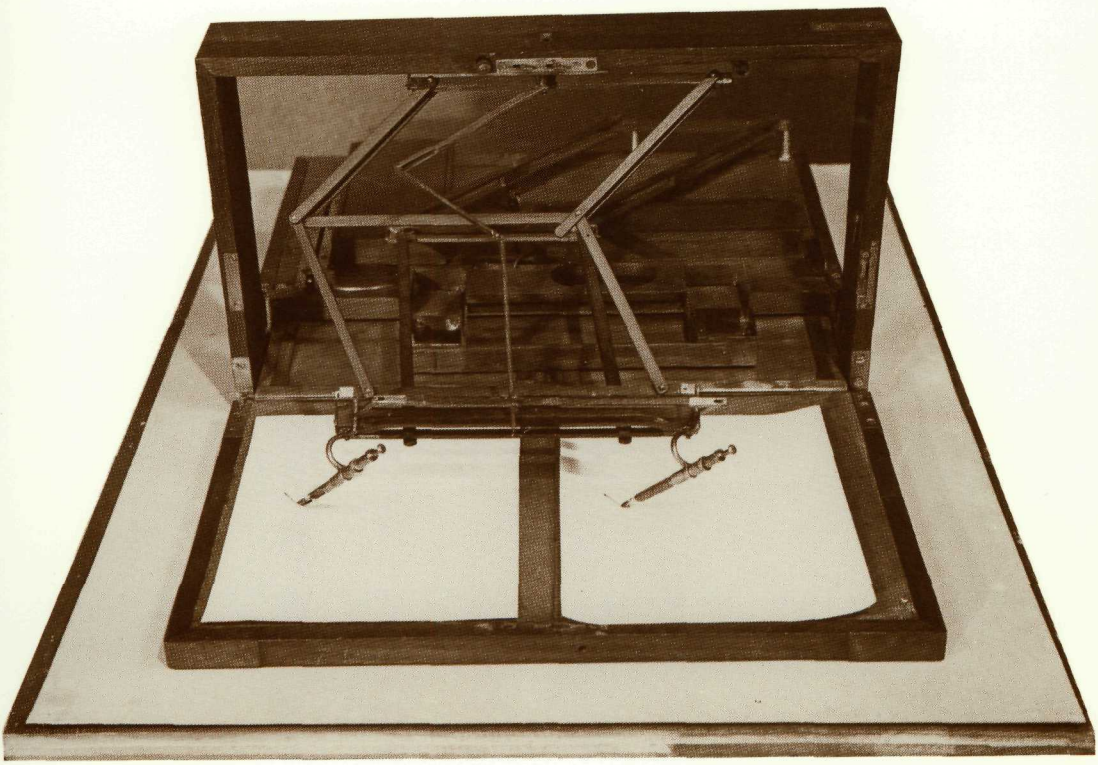

multiple writing machine
multiple writing machine

The Society of
American Archivists

About the cover: *The "multiple writing" machine was constructed so that, as the writer moved one pen along a sheet of paper, another pen attached to it by wooden arms wrote the identical words on a second sheet. Essentially, the machine made two originals—not one original and one copy—at the same time. Strictly speaking, both could not be "unique," as yet they were. See James O'Toole's article, "On the Idea of Uniqueness," on page 632 for a further exploration of the concept of uniqueness in archives. Photograph courtesy of Manuscripts Print Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.*

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International Scene

Reviews

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Forum

Electronic Records Education

To the editor:

The excellent articles on education concerning electronic records and techniques may give readers the impression that SAA members had no experience with such education before 1978. Two American archivists, members of the U.S. and Canadian national archives, had prominent roles in the 1974 electronics seminar conducted in England. Archivists from twenty-five nations attended.

The U.S. archivist chaired all sessions and assisted the Public Record Office (PRO) in planning the 1974 seminar. The content appears in the PRO publication, *Proceedings of an International Seminar on Automatic Data Processing in Archives* (London, 1975). The topics included the use of computers for archival management; name and subject retrieval; file processing; indexing; current records management; and records disposition. Attendees also presented several case histories.

MEYER H. FISHBEIN
Consultant,
Bethesda, Maryland

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

The SAA Business Archives Section and " 'Wonderful Things' "

To the editor:

I was delighted to see that the Spring 1993 issue of the *American Archivist* included an article by Duncan McDowall titled " 'Wonderful Things': History, Business and Archives Look to the Future." However, I was disappointed that the article abstract contained no reference to the origin of his essay, which was first presented at the International Business Archives Forum, held in conjunction with the 1992 annual meeting in Montreal. More than 90 archivists from 13 different countries attended the forum, which was sponsored by the Business Archives Section. Professor McDowall's paper was the keynote presentation.

The Business Archives Section worked very hard to pull the International Business Archives Forum together, so I would appreciate it if you could correct this oversight. I must say, however, that my primary reaction to seeing the article in print was one of gratitude that Professor McDowall's thoughts are being conveyed to a wider audience than the original.

ELIZABETH W. ADKINS, C.A.
Archives Manager
Kraft General Foods
Morton Grove, Illinois

The editor responds:

I apologize for the oversight. While I knew the origins of the essay, I neglected to make sure that its origins were noted. I apologize to the Business Archives Section and the others who worked on this forum.

RICHARD J. COX

Historians, Archivists, and the Use of Archives

To the editor:

In their recent article, "Is the Past Still Prologue?: History and Archival Education" (Vol. 56 (Fall 1993): 718–29), F. Gerald Ham, Frank Boles, Gregory S. Hunter, and James O'Toole argue for the continuing relevance of historical training and the historical perspective to archival education and practice. In several instances, their demonstration of the necessary and beneficial points of intersection between the distinct disciplines of history and archivy are cogent and well taken. In making their central argument, however, their analysis of this relationship is ambiguous and problematic, and sometimes alarming in its implications.

The authors' conceptualization of the use and users of archival holdings is particularly troubling. They state that:

> Understanding the nature of the questions historians ask enables the archivist to evaluate the significance of particular groups of records. . . . It helps identify the points of intersection between the archival holdings and the kinds of research they will support (p. 723).

Such statements immediately beg the question: Why privilege the historian's perspective? Is not an understanding of the nature of the questions asked by administrators, lawyers, and genealogists, or any other user group for that matter, equally important in evaluating the significance of particular records or in identifying what kinds of questions particular materials will answer? I would answer my own question with a yes and would argue that our appraisal decisions and our reference activities should serve our institutional mission and those user groups understood to be the targeted beneficiaries of that mission. To categorically assert that historians, or any group, possess some prior importance in driving these practices is misguided. The authors, on the other hand, have clearly answered my question with a no and they do it with a polemical sleight-of-hand. They state:

> Other user groups (administrators, lawyers, genealogists, etc.) may frame questions different from those of historians, but the reasons for asking questions of archival collections will be essentially the same . . . they are all "historical" in that they deal with information from the past . . . for that reason, the archivist should understand how historical questions are framed (p. 723).

The somewhat circular logic that drives this series of statements conflates at least two different, and distinct, issues. Specifically, these statements attempt to establish an equivalency between a characteristic of the materials—their historicity—with the nature of the queries directed towards those materials—framing "historical" questions. These are not equivalent concepts. It is indeed true, it is in fact a truism, that most, if not all, of our holdings are "historical" by definition—they document events that happened in the past, be it in the last hour or in the last century. But the fact that patrons are using historical records does not mean that they are framing historical questions or bringing a historical perspective

with them. For example, when the physical plant staff needs to determine the location of wiring and pipes in a wall before beginning a renovation in our building, they will probably visit the reading room to examine engineering drawings housed in the institutional archives. While these patrons are indeed using historical materials, I as a reference archivist would not consider their question to be "historical" in nature.

My example suggests a more fundamental and disconcerting problem with the authors' statements. By viewing all uses of archives as "historical uses," the authors render the phrase meaningless in much the same way as librarians render the phrase "information seeking" useless by applying it to all uses of their resources. In both cases, descriptive terms that reflect and attempt to further professional biases and agendas are being used that do little to help us analyze the nature of the diversity of requests with which we as archivists contend on a daily basis.

The authors reflect at length on the growth and diversification of historical inquiry and subject matter, and they encourage archivists to stay abreast of the changing schools of historical thought. They also challenge us to appreciate the importance of other historical content which has an effect upon our daily activities but which is not gained through traditional history classes or even through the "discipline" of history. Their advice is sound and welcome. Unfortunately, in their attention to the subject content of historical inquiry, the authors make scant reference to the more pressing need for archivists to understand the development of diverse and often complex historical methodologies employed by academic historians. Much of the growth in the subject matter of historical inquiry in the last decade—class, race, and gender studies, which challenged the focus on great white men, for example—was accompanied, and in large part made possible, by the development of new research methodologies—quantitative analysis, textual analysis, for example—which challenged the traditional narrative form of history.

Because different methodologies require that research data must be in a specific format to be usefully manipulated, that specific format should be of primary importance to archivists; what conclusions will be drawn from the data once they are processed are secondary in importance to the archivist. To my mind, the authors have put the cart before the horse and are asking us to keep our eyes forward. I would argue that in order to provide effective services to academic historians, let alone to our many other patrons, we need to pay more attention to how our patrons wish to use—at the methodological level—our holdings, than to what use—at the interpretive level—our patrons make of our holdings.

As the article develops, the authors' attempt to demonstrate the relevance of historical training to the ill-defined archival perspective becomes increasingly strained. In their explication of the value of "historical method" to archivists, for example, the authors enumerate a number of skills which archivists gain from that method:

> How to frame research questions; how to identify sources that contain information relevant to answering those questions; how to verify and evaluate the sources thus identified; and how to fit those records into a historiographical context (p. 723).

The authors are, without actually stating it, leaving the reader with the sense that "only" historical method can teach archivists these skills. In reality, any discipline that has any rigor whatsoever advances itself by utilizing these epistemological processes; replace the word *sources* with *artifacts* or *data* and retool the last clause to read "fit those materials into a sociological or anthropological context" and we

are, for example, just as easily and accurately describing the disciplines of sociology or anthropology.

Finally, the authors ponder on the importance of the historical perspective for the appraisal process. In their discussion of this topic my concern, again, is with the forward-looking emphasis they give to this, the basic archival function. I would agree with the authors that appraisal is the act of "assessing the records created by specific people, in specific places and times," that it "cannot proceed without understanding what was going on around those records creators," and is therefore, in the main, a backward-looking activity (p. 726).

When the authors suggest, however, that because appraisal "seeks to judge current and potential value in archival records . . . the archivist should be looking for records that answer the widest range of potential questions" (p. 724), appraisal becomes not as much about documenting activities and functions of the records creator as about anticipating possible future research uses by individuals other than the records creators. This definition of appraisal may be appropriate in a manuscripts repository, but it is not appropriate in an archival environment. Based on my experiences in the processing room of various manuscript repositories, moreover, I have found that letting a strong consideration of the potential future uses of the materials guide my appraisal decisions immediately puts me on the slippery slope to where I can discard nothing because I can always devise a potential research question that could be answered from the document in hand. Once I take off the historian's hat, however, and don the archivist's, I feel once again comfortably responsible to the past rather than uncomfortably responsible to the future. Put differently, this reminds me of one of the stock jokes in the archival profession: never ask historians what to keep in a collection because they will always say "keep everything."

I am not suggesting, in voicing my reactions to this article, that the authors are engaged in some kind of mission to convert archivists to the will of historians. I agree with the authors that history is the most obvious, though not the only, profession that informs archival theory and practice. I am suggesting, however, that the formulation of many of the arguments in this article are not clearly enough articulated to move us dramatically closer to understanding the important points of cross-fertilization between the historical and archival perspectives. Potentially, this article perpetuates the perception that archives are at best merely an extension of history. Finally, I am concerned that this article enables those of us who were trained as historians, as was I, to continue blissfully along in that sometimes eerie no-man's land between the professions rather than helping archivists to understand more clearly the lay of the land as a first step to taking what is most pertinent from the history profession.

LUKE GILLILAND-SWETLAND
Henry Ford Museum
& Greenfield Village Research Center

From the Editor

What Is an Archival Record, and Why Should We Care?

A CAREFUL EXAMINATION of the archival literature on the concept of a record can leave one scratching his or her head, as it has caused me to do on at least one occasion.[1] Until very recently we have lacked, in North American archival practice, a precise definition of a record and, even more specifically, of an "archival" record.

Do not mistake what I am saying; we *have* definitions and descriptions. The recent version of the Society of American Archivists glossary states that a *record* is a "document created or received and maintained by an agency, organization, or individual in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business," and that *archives* are the "documents created or received and accumulated by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs, and preserved because of their continuing value."[2] The issue is what we can do with such definitions in the late twentieth century. Not only do they send us scurrying back and forth through the glossary in an effort to arrive at a better understanding of a record (and we never arrive at one), such definitions also handicap our abilities to function in organizations where systems designers, information resource managers, and chief information officers require precision.[3] Are such definitions precise enough to be used in designing recordkeeping systems or even in distinguishing between a recordkeeping and information system?

There is no question that the concept of an archival record in this most recent version of an information age is important. Benjamin Barber, a political scientist recently

[1] Early in the National Historical Publications and Records Commission-sponsored research project at the University of Pittsburgh on recordkeeping functional requirements and electronic records management, I did a survey of the standard archival literature for precise definitions of a record and its attributes. I was amazed at how few efforts had been made to compose such a definition. For background information on this project and my own efforts to contend with the definition of a record, see my "Re-Discovering the Archival Mission: The Recordkeeping Functional Requirements Project at the University of Pittsburgh; A Progress Report," *Archives and Museum Informatics,* forthcoming, and "The Record: Is It Evolving? A Study in the Importance of the Long View for Records Managers and Archivists," *Records & Retrieval Report* 10 (March 1994): 1–16.

[2] Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo, comps., *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), pp. 3, 28.

[3] Terry Eastwood's review of the SAA glossary focused on the confusing suite of definitions on records and archives; see the *American Archivist* 55 (Summer 1992): 493–96.

writing about the higher education wars, commented on the fact that teaching and learning requires teaching and learning about the past. In the midst of his explanation about this, Barber made the following statement:

> computer-generated information banks give us the same instant accessibility to data usually associated with a discrete time frame and accessible only by dint of extended research, again creating the illusion of a ubiquitous here and now reaching out to swallow up all the theres and thens that define past and future.[4]

Archival records are the "theres and thens" in organizations and society and, unless we are precise enough to ensure that these can be identified and maintained, they will be lost. For too long, we have tended to behave as if we can determine when a record has archival value only when we see or touch it, rather than because this record possesses certain standard characteristics. In the emerging electronic and networked organization, we must have formal production rules and functional expressions to support metadata for records. This requires that we understand what a record is and when it is archival.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the basic definition of an archival record, a matter about which I am currently engaged in research and a topic which has been treated elsewhere.[5] But the reason for my focus on this theme in my editorial is that all of the essays in this issue concern, in one fashion or another, the nature of an archival record. They represent the profession's efforts to develop more precision for the archival record.

Elizabeth Yakel and Laura Bost concern themselves with a surprisingly neglected aspect of the archival record—its administrative use. By examining such use in college and university archives, the authors reveal that it challenges some of our approaches and assumptions and endorses others. Clearly, Yakel and Bost did not set out to write a new definition of an archival record, but the fact that there have been so few studies of administrative use suggests that archivists have tended to stress the wrong aspects of the values of such records. There are other interesting issues brought to mind by this essay. While their study demonstrates a high reliance by administrative users on the archivists, one wonders if the increasing development of electronic recordkeeping will not cause a situation where the role of the archivist will be transformed from retrieving archival records to ensuring that archival records are retrievable by the administrative user. This will require that the archivist work with the systems designers and others to enable them to understand precisely the archival record. We can also speculate whether the best definition of an archival record is for administrative, rather than often ill-defined historical and other research purposes.[6]

Phyllis Ngin offers the archivist a behind-the-scenes look at how the patient record is created. While she suggests that archivists have not closely examined such records, she offers a very archival perspec-

[4] *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 32.

[5] Early results of this research are reported in "University of Pittsburgh Recordkeeping Functional Requirements Project: Reports and Working Papers," *University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science Research Reports*, LIS055/LS94001 (Pittsburgh, September 1994). The conceptual work about a record is seen in David Bearman, *Electronic Evidence: Strategies for Managing Records in Contemporary Organizations* (Pittsburgh: Archives and Museum Informatics, 1994).

[6] My own perspective is that archivists will increasingly emphasize administration through a focus on accountability, evidence, and corporate memory. We will rely on records preserved for these reasons (and there will be sufficient records) to serve other researchers such as historians.

tive: "Documents are artifacts created within specific contexts." In her view, however, these contexts extend beyond the institutional and regulatory backgrounds of the record to the individuals who create the records. As the author suggests, "although archivists would most likely choose to preserve the official records of patients . . . , it is also important that they understand the processes by which the medical record is compiled by nurses." It is this topic Ngin focuses on in her essay. The archival record is a document created not just by regulations and processes but by people. Archivists must ensure that a complete record reflects this as well.

O'Toole asks us to reconsider our fundamental assumptions about the archival record, these assumptions ranging from the notion of permanence to their form and function to whether the record is necessarily unique. While this author reexamines the theoretical foundations of the idea of uniqueness, his ideas must make us question whether we really have the time *not* to consider such characteristics as we labor. He gets to the heart of the issue, as well: "When the world of documents is populated only by handmade originals that require so much effort to create, the uniqueness of each one remains largely undiminished." Since we obviously do not live in such a world, just what is it that we are examining when we appraise modern records? We need to consider what purpose the record serves, how it was made, who or what made it, and its relationship to other records—all, in my opinion, far more important and appropriate roles for the archivist than worrying about who will use the record or when or if it might be used. (For, if we do our jobs, these latter worries are not issues at all.)

John Whaley's article takes us one step further by asking us what is missing from the records held by our repositories. While this is not a new question, it is one that is certainly gaining more relevance as our society becomes more multicultural and faces an unparalleled transformation. Again, what does the archival record represent? What does it reflect? And, how do we react to the vision of archives with only copies (Professor O'Toole, are these merely copies, too?) of records? Whaley provides a much different sense of public outreach, by making public outreach the essence of the definition of the archives, and I find this an intriguing idea.

Grimard's description of mass deacidification also prompts us to ask some serious questions about what makes a record an "archival" record. His experience suggests that mass deacidification is not a viable solution for archival records, and he returns us to the fundamental issue of needing to select from the vast universe of documentation and the matter of migration to other storage media. In his comments, there is one that particularly caught my attention. Grimard notes that such basic issues were not adequately dealt with because "everybody has been too preoccupied with concerns about the effectiveness and viability of the processes being examined." In other words, we just loss sight of the archival responsibility and the view of the archival record.

Finally, we have the contribution from two South African colleagues, Verne Harris and Christopher Merrett, that makes us question whether what makes a record truly archival is its accessibility and potential for use. Archivists must provide, they argue, "optimum access" to their holdings; does this mean that those many records held by archives and shackled by restrictions are really archival at all? While they are writing about conditions in South Africa, which have been far more difficult to deal with than those in North America, readers will also recognize similarities between their examples and cases we have had even in the generally open United States.