

## Presidential Address

# On Being an Archivist

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**Abstract:** Without a doubt, promises of high pay and generous fringe benefits do not lure most archivists to the profession. Why then do we become archivists? In view of the great diversity within the profession, evidently it is not because of any particular external characteristics or interests that we share. Instead, three core attitudes shape the professional life of archivists and draw us to this profession. These are a commitment to service, an ability to search for evidence and meaning in the documentary record, and a rich appreciation of the passing human scene.

Editor's Note: Before delivering her presidential address, Maygene Daniels presented Meyer Fishbein and Leonard Rapport with the **SAA Citation for Lifelong Service to the Archival Profession** and made the following comments:

*At this point in the program, a distinguished colleague traditionally introduces and honors the SAA president. This year I would like to do something a little different by instead recognizing two archivists whose teaching and guidance have meant a great deal to me. Let me tell you a little about them.*

**Meyer Fishbein** made major contributions to appraisal theory and practice as Director of the Records Appraisal staff of the National Archives. In the early 1970s, he developed the concept of what he called "retention plans," reports that analyze the functions of an agency and recommend which functions should be documented in the archives. This was a prototype for the concepts of "functional analysis" and "documentation strategies" that have been much discussed in recent years.

At the National Archives, Meyer was a leader who insisted on maintaining the intellectual content of appraisal decisions. In an era when the National Archives was part of the General Services Administration and economy and efficiency were the governing principles of management, he emphasized the importance of careful research and study to arrive at wise decisions. He encouraged his staff to be active scholars and to write intellectually compelling appraisals in the face of pressure to produce statistics or empty the records centers.

Meyer was also a pioneer in recognizing the importance of electronic records. He served on the International Council on Archives ADP committee well before others recognized the significance of electronic records, and actively promoted the importance of planning for this new medium.

And, he was a great boss. He created in his office a sense of teamwork and professional commitment that I have rarely seen equaled. In every sense, Meyer belongs to the greatest traditions of civil service and archival accomplishment.

**Leonard Rapport**, too, has had a long career marked by important contributions to our profession. His writings are clear and cogent models of prose style. "No Grandfather Clause" brought a common sense point-of-view to the concept of reappraisal, affecting the attitudes of a whole generation of archivists. His work on the WPA Historical Records Survey was path-breaking and led to another of his fine articles in the *American Archivist*, "Dumped from a Wharf into Casco Bay."

But it is as a connoisseur of human beings that Leonard has made incomparable contributions to our profession. Several years ago at one of these meetings, noting that all of the elected brass had name badges with enough ribbons to win the war in the Pacific, Leonard added one simple addition to his collection which many of you remember: "Best of Breed." After that, this organization eliminated all but a few ribbons on meeting name badges. As Leonard often observes, a bit of comedy may have more impact than a learned paper.

I remember many happy hours, typically on Friday afternoons, in the old records appraisal offices, when Leonard would instruct us all on the fine points of the use of "that" and "which" in the English language. He would also read aloud portions of certain selected addresses of past SAA presidents from "the early days" (let me quickly

*add that none of the authors are with us now) to illustrate various human foibles and foolishness.*

*Even in retirement, Leonard continues to make contributions to the profession and its future through the archives cradle, which has traveled virtually coast-to-coast as the first resting place for a generation of archival babies.*

*Leonard embodies the intelligence and humanity that distinguish the best of our profession.*



MEYER FISHBEIN and LEONARD RAPPORT are, to me, archival heroes. Between them, they have something approaching eighty years of archival experience. They have survived at least their share of management changes, reorganizations, staffing cuts, a steady diet of coffee from the National Archives snack bar, and young archivists such as me asking impertinent questions. Yet, as nearly as I can see, throughout their careers they continued their work with zest and enthusiasm.

In fact, it seems to me that archivists as a group share a passion and enthusiasm for their work. Although I often hear colleagues say that they wouldn't mind a new job or a new boss or a new challenge, I rarely hear an archivist say he or she made a terrible mistake in life and chose the wrong profession.

Compare that to the lawyers you know.

We like being archivists. But why? I'd like to spend the next few minutes exploring this question.

Let me start with the most obvious possibilities.

Could it be that, as archivists, we love our profession due to the power and prestige of our work? I doubt it. Although we know that there is power in controlling access to information and holding proof of great acts, few other people seem to be aware of this or even know what archivists do. Even my mother continues to have a slightly uncertain tone in her voice when she explains that her daughter, is, well, an...archivist.

Could it be the pay or perks of the job that lure us into this field? I think probably not. Although by-and-large we are paid a living wage, I like to believe that most of us could earn more in some other field — selling stocks for example. Our offices generally aren't particularly impressive — one archivist described our desk drawers that stick and our envelopes that don't. Our perks are usually limited to cafeteria discounts.

What about the chance archival work gives us to pursue our own interests in research and scholarship? Undoubtedly, archivists are fascinated by history and many are talented and productive researchers. But most archivists are working so hard serving others that they rarely have time for their own study and writing.

If we are not drawn to our profession by power, wealth, or fame, is there something about us as a group that explains our peculiar passion for archives?

Unfortunately, apart from our common humanity, it's difficult to find many ways in which archivists are alike. I can't help noticing, in fact, that we're a rather disparate lot. We are short and tall, athletic and clumsy. A few of us set off in life with the ambition of becoming an archivist. Others — in fact most of us, I suspect — came to this profession more or less by accident.

Our interests and life-styles are equally diverse. Some archivists are fascinated by labor history, others by corporate development. Some wear suits and ties, others blue jeans. Some love jazz, others classical music.

Since we seem very different from one another, could there be some singular aspect of archival work that excites us all and unites us as archivists?

This is 1995, well into the information revolution of the late twentieth century. Are we, as archivists, drawn to our work by the appeal of serving as care-givers of information, the most valuable commodity of our age?

Certainly all archivists are committed to managing information as part of their work. We find much common ground with other "information professionals." But as a group, archivists are not interested in simply managing information. Archivists are also deeply committed to preservation of the tangible, physical documents in which the information is stored. Although archivists manage information, all information managers are not archivists.

Could it be then that the common interest that unites archivists is not management of information but, instead, management of documents, the tangible objects that hold so much valuable information?

Again, the answer is yes, but only in part. Archivists are inevitably managers of shelves, boxes, files, magnetic media, and machines which protect and reveal documents. Clearly, we must also manage everything from scarce personnel and procurement dollars to conservation surveys, Xerox machines, and databases. But does this mean that archivists understand their work in terms of management, and that they become archivists to direct, control, and execute? I think probably not. Although archivists must manage, most would prefer not to manage anything but archives. There must be something else that draws us to this work.

Archivists use technologies to reproduce and conserve documents and information. Are we united then by our delight and openness to new technologies and our ability to use them?

Unquestionably, many archivists are on the leading edge of the electronic age, adept at operating complex computers, imaging systems, and internet connections. Yet there are also archivists who can barely manage to change the ribbon on a manual typewriter.

In fact, the more I think of the many facets and possibilities of our work, the more I am convinced that there is no single aspect of our professional life that draws us all to this profession. Our unity seems to be as much in our diversity and the breadth of our interests as in any common professional core.

I must wonder again whether there is anything about us that might help explain our common, peculiar professional passion. What would explain why we are not only willing to be archivists but love our professional work?

To me, the answer to this question is not evident in any description of our appearance or interests. Instead, it lies in shared attitudes and beliefs that define our professional life. This common professional core includes three key elements that open us to the gifts of our particular professional world. None of these is exclusive to the profession, but all are found in every true archivist. The three together are a rare combination and make archivists, indeed, very special people.

The first of these qualities is a question of character. I would define it as honest and selfless commitment to a larger good. This characteristic can take many forms. For the appraisal archivist, it is the unquestioned responsibility to identify and evaluate a group of records honestly and unflinchingly, asking the key question, "What information or evidence is in these records?" Notice that the question is not, "Would these records be valuable to me?" or "Do they demonstrate what my employer wants to see?" Instead, archivists serve some higher, broader public good.

Our very principles are directed toward ensuring universal goals. An arrangement scheme that favors any one form of inquiry over others is considered inappropriate. And our sense of service and responsibility is so strong that we seek to serve not only those researchers who are at our study tables today, but also those who are somewhere in the future, whose interests and intellectual outlook will never be known to us.

This honest and selfless commitment to a higher good takes on another form as well—that of dedicated and generous service. Archivists gain as much pleasure from seeing their archives used as they do from using them themselves. They work generously and without stinting.

This is not to say that archivists are not ambitious or do not appreciate credit for their work. Yet we often work with very little recognition, and carry on without complaint. Anyone who is not eager to be of service in the greatest sense, to all people in the present and in the future, would not be happy as an archivist.

Beyond this core of honesty and commitment, archivists also share an intellectual approach that defines our world view.

Archivists ask questions about evidence, proof, context. They approach the tangible without preconceptions. Archivists are detectives, starting with the evidence in documents and moving backward to understand the who, what, where, and why behind the reality of the records for which we are responsible. Archivists know we must classify, catalog, and describe historical materials in a way that is true to the documents in our hands, not to an abstract intellectual structure. This brings to mind Sherlock Holmes's explanation of his own approach to solving crime from *A Study in Scarlet*. Let me quote Holmes in Dr. Watson's words:

Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backwards, or analytically.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that archivists, whether responsible for manuscripts or electronic media, share with Sherlock Holmes that rare ability to reason backwards — to start with the evidence and work to the underlying events, the reality, the meaning of the documents. That is what we are trained to do. It is what a great archivist does naturally.

Archivists are not alone among professionals who are concerned with sorting through physical evidence and seeking an underlying pattern, order, and explanation. Entomologists, for example, do this as they study large numbers of individual insects and classify them into orders, families, species, and sub-species. It all makes me think of Oliver Wendell Holmes's classic five levels of arrangement of archival materials.

Of course there are major differences between the work of archivists and entomologists, and this brings me to my third defining characteristic of the archival spirit. Humans are not insects and, I'm pleased to say, archivists know this. Archivists work with the legacy of human activity. And archivists, to their core, appreciate the varied, erratic, irrational complexity of human life and its changes over time.

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 122–123.

Remembering this quality, it should not be a surprise that archivists can become deeply involved in the lives of individuals whose existence is reflected in the records. Many of us are on a first-name basis with people long-deceased whose papers we are organizing, and we have been known to refer to dates decades in the past as if they were in the present.

The pleasure in exploring the past and in our contact with it may not be necessary for our work, but it brings joy that helps compensate for many of the challenges archivists face. In its essence, our work is a reaffirmation of the value of human life and a celebration of the human spirit, and archivists recognize and treasure this fact.

If these are the essential characteristics of archivists, and if it is our fate to have them, then we probably are destined for this profession. Given this and the fact that we are likely to continue to be archivists for many years, perhaps we should ask what the future will hold for our profession. Evidently, records are being created in a rapidly evolving technological world. If, as I maintain, delight in direct contact with people and events of the past is a defining characteristic of the archival spirit, will archivists soon be obsolete in this new technological age? Are we doomed as hopeless romantics to a limited past?

I think that it is safe to say that the answer to this questions is "No!" All record-keeping systems are and will continue to be designed by human beings. Documents will always be created, considered, and used by persons living and acting in a temporal world. They will be meaningless out of the context of human life. And we should note that, to the present, every technological revolution has led to multiplication, not elimination, of documents, whatever their physical form. Until human nature changes, I believe that that will continue to be the case.

And I believe that our great archivists of the future will have the same sense of honorable service to a higher good; will ask the same questions about evidence, context, and meaning; and will have the same appreciation of the human drama as archivists concerned with files, photographs, maps, motion picture film, or computer records do today. Undoubtedly, the basic human compulsion to recognize the value of the passing human scene will remain as long as mankind exists.

To close, I would like to tell you about a piece of archival literature of which most of you are probably unaware. In 1956, amidst announcements of staff vacations and the end of the tennis season, the National Archives newsletter, *Archiviews*, carried an article called "The Last Archivist," [reprinted at the end of this article—Ed.] which described the development, beginning in 1970, of the sentient machine *Archivac M1* which absorbed the contents of the National Archives in electronic form in a machine smaller than an upright piano. *Archivac M1* was quickly succeeded by model *M2*, and then by *Historiac*, which performed many of the analytical functions of archivists. *Clichiac*, originally developed for the writers of fiction, quickly took over reference, appraisal, and disposition functions. Evidently, with archival functions performed by these machines, the need for archivists diminished and, as the 1970s and 1980s wore on, archivists became increasingly irrelevant, and most retired from the National Archives. Finally, by 1992, only a single individual, the Archivist of the United States, remained on the National Archives staff. Then, a new machine was invented, *NArchinac*, that made it possible, on December 31, 1993, for the last of the human archivists to leave the National Archives. It is noted that *NArchinac* did not attend the going-away party.

I am pleased to report that December 31, 1993, has come and gone and that archivists are in no way obsolete. Our numbers are growing and our excitement in our work remains intact. I feel confident that our honest and selfless commitment to the common good; our



concern for evidence, proof, and meaning; and our joy in the passing human scene cannot easily be replaced.

Archivists are a rare and special breed. I have every reason to believe that we will endure for many further generations, *NArchinac* notwithstanding.

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## The Last Archivist

[Leonard Rapport]

(reprinted from *Archiviews*, October 1956)

The problem of what to do with the remaining Obsolete Archivists and, to a lesser extent, the Fallible Archivists, was a recurrent one during the final decades of the twentieth century. Perfection of Archivac and the development of NArchinac and of individual archinacs made these human archivists as out of date and as impractical as the hydrogen bomb. By the time of Archivac M4, most of the remaining archivists were, of course, electronic engineers and therefore Fallible, but there was one relic of the middle twentieth century, old Dr. J. Merton Tolliver, who was a historian and therefore obsolete.

Dr. Tolliver had entered the National Archives several years after 16 and 35 mm. microfilm had permitted the reduction of the building's content of paper records to a single stack area of film and a decade before micro-microfilming permitted a further reduction of this microfilm to a single roomful of the newer hair's-breadth film. The development in 1970 of the Archivac M1 enabled the data contained in the micro-microfilm to be absorbed into an electronics machine the size of an antique piano; and with the consequent revision of the required qualifications for an archivist to include a Ph.D. in electronics there arose the question as to what practical use the Obsolete Archivists with their historical training could be put. An unexpected temporary solution appeared when bugs in the design of the M1 caused occasional and unfortunate telescoping of time sequences (particularly between dates of marriages and births of first children), and when such information was furnished in response to requests (as in the famous Senator Elijah Mulberry incident) it was written into the Records Act that all such data by Archivac should be subject to review by Obsolete Archivists.

Archivac M2 was so great an improvement over M1 that review of its findings was no longer necessary; and the Records Act, as amended in 1975, by no longer requiring such review, recognized the fact. Thus another crisis threatened the dwindling band of Obsolete Archivists. The development of Historiac closed a related area of work to which, a few years earlier, their training might have enabled them to switch. (This article, produced by Historiac in 1½ seconds, would have taken a historian several hours to research and write.) Again they were reprieved, this time by Fallible Archivist Dr. Lucius F. MacMillan's research which allowed the recapture of speech waves of the past. The first great speech-wave collecting project, which was set up to recapture and record all utterances within the continental United States between 1775 and 1860, was halted after the release of "Public and Private Utterances of the Revolutionary and Early Federal Period, 1775-1800." Following the issuing and subsequent withdrawal of "Public and Private Utterances....1775-1800" the task of selecting those utterances which would be recorded and those which would be allowed to remain in time-space was assigned to the Obsolete Archivists. Several of the Obsolete Archivists retired during this period, including an outstanding lady Obsolete Archivist who, while working on "Speeches and Utterances of U.S. Military Leaders, 1775-

1860,” drew both General Washington’s remarks to his retreating troops at the Battle of Long Island and General Andrew Jackson’s remarks on an occasion unspecified.

The breakthrough in 1979 by Dr. MacMillan and his colleague, Dr. Waldo Ausgabe, whereby they were able to recapture thought waves gave to the Obsolete Archivists a lease of several more years of useful life. The thought-wave recapturing project seems to have hastened the retirement of the remaining lady Obsolete Archivists and to have had a disquieting effect on the remaining male Obsolete Archivists. (The speech-wave and thought-wave recapturing projects, incidentally, are believed to have had some connection with the almost complete collapse of genealogical research.) Dr. Tolliver, whose career had included a hitch in the Marines before Harvard and a romantic attachment to a well-known actress thereafter, was the only Obsolete Archivist to last much beyond the 1970’s.

By 1982 Archivac M3 was operational. The feat of Dr. Maria-Jean Boiseau in adapting and incorporating into the M3 and Clichiac, hitherto used mostly by writers of fiction, permitted the M3 to perform not only the reference function but also to produce almost instantaneous disposal and accession appraisals. The Aphorisiac, a separate unit during the period of the M3 (it was later incorporated into the M4), permitted the rapid production of inventories and other finding aids. This was the only archival machine Dr. Tolliver was ever checked out on, and he mastered it sufficiently to produce several creditable items.

When Archivac M4 was placed in service in 1989, it was a graphic example of what progress a relatively few years had seen. A generation before the permanently valuable records of the Government had occupied the entire Old Archives Building. Then these records had been reduced to a single stack area of microfilm, then to a single room of micro-microfilm, then to the piano-size Archivac M1, then to the file cabinet-size M2, to the file drawer-size M3, and, finally, to the book-size M4.

Archivac M4 was situated very comfortably in what in the old days had been the parking moat. The M3 had remained in one of the stack areas for several years after the well-remembered 1983 Christmas holidays during which the starlings had found their way through a broken window into the building; but after no acceptable method of evicting them was ever able to obtain the approval of the various ornithological and humane society lobbies in Congress, and as the starlings moved, over a period of years, through carelessly opened doors into more and more stack areas, no real objection was raised when the decision was reached to clean off Archivac and move it into the moat.

Dr. Tolliver, last of the Obsolete Archivists, retired in 1990. By 1992 all of the Fallible Archivists had retired except the Archivist of the United States himself. The Archivist had several years to go before reaching retirement age; but there was a growing demand that he step out and allow the installation of NArchinac, an infallible machine which would render infallible decisions. Archivac M4 was, of course, self-contained and required no maintenance or attention. The Archivist resisted the pressure for a time, but when the Society of Electronic Engineers, of which he was a long-time member and which had nominated him to his post, announced that it was replacing its own president with an infallible machine, the grounds of resistance were cut out from under him. Thus it was that on December 31, 1993, the last of the human archivists retired. (It is interesting to note that the individual archinacs, which were designed to replace the lower-grade Fallible Archivists, were never required. The perfection of Archivac M4 and the success of NArchinac made the lesser machines unnecessary even before they went into mass production.) Dr. Tolliver and several of the Fallible Archivists returned to the moat and took the Archivist to a farewell luncheon. NArchinac, it may be said, did not attend.