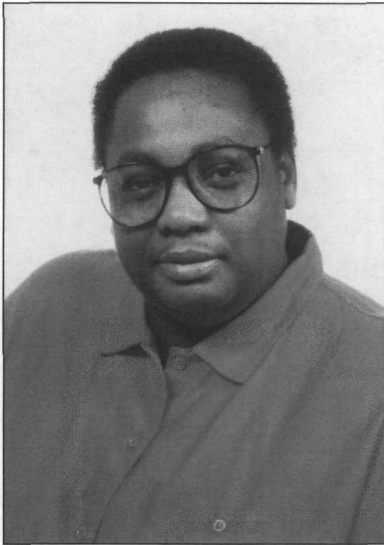


## Presidential Address

# Seeing the Past as a Guidepost to Our Future

BRENDA S. BANKS



***About the author:** Brenda Banks has held numerous positions with the Georgia Department of Archives and History since 1973, including serving as assistant director since 1989. She received her M.L.S. from Atlanta University and a B.A. in history from Spelman College. This article was delivered as her presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in San Diego, on 29 August 1996.*

**Abstract:** The author reflects on the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Society of American Archivists by looking at its evolution, noting things which have changed for the better within SAA, and some things which have not. Forging a national identity and membership was not a steady, nor always consensual, process, but as an organization, the SAA reached a degree of maturity in the 1970s, only to be challenged by new developments in the 1980s and 1990s such as electronic records, certification and graduate education guidelines, and growing membership diversity which lead to the development of new sections and roundtables to serve new and varied interests. Challenges continue to lie ahead for the Society. However, if its fundamental components are sound, SAA should have the flexibility and determination to meet these challenges.

ONE YEAR AGO, I stood before a much smaller group at the closing brunch in Washington, D.C. and talked to you about the Society of American Archivists: where we seem to be headed, what external factors have affected our direction, and what it is that we, as members and leaders, must do to ensure the continued growth and vitality of this organization. I spoke to you about how the changes in demographics and advances in technology would cast a different light on our decision making, our collections, what we collect in the future, and how we carry out the basic functions of the archival profession.

Even more important than what I said twelve months ago is what the speakers at the almost ninety sessions will say during this annual meeting. Bill Wallach and Hilary Kaplan have taken the script and crafted in into a moveable feast of informative dialogue to be carried out over the next few days.

So, what is left for me to say? Well, I considered letting my comments from last year stand and the excellent program to which you will be treated this week carry the day. But my overwhelming sense of responsibility prevailed, and I found myself grappling with what I could add to this excellent program.

Luckily, we have something very special to celebrate this year—our sixtieth anniversary. So I thought that it might be fun and interesting to look back at the road that we have travelled. For those of you who are new to SAA, I hope you will gain some insight into and appreciation of how we have evolved. To the old timers, I hope you will enjoy this quick jog down memory lane.

In preparing my remarks, I relied heavily on historical sketches, articles in the *American Archivist*, and a timeline developed by archival management students at the University of Wisconsin. It was comforting to know that attention is being given to our history, since—as we all know—it is often the cobbler's kids who go shoeless.

It is not surprising that the Society of American Archivists evolved from the American Historical Association (AHA) sixty years ago. The mid-thirties saw the establishment of the National Archives and the funding of local, state, and federal records surveys by the Works Progress Administration, both significant factors in the founding of SAA. Prior to 1936, a group of archivists had functioned as a Public Archives Commission within AHA, but with the mass of historical records being identified and the National Archives now in place to give needed attention to our national heritage, a different type of organization would be necessary to ensure the promotion, understanding, and recognition of the profession.

SAA's founders, A.R. Newsome and Solon J. Buck, had intentions of establishing a national "institute for the leading practitioners of archival administration."<sup>1</sup> This phrase, no doubt, formed the basis of how the accusations of SAA elitism, which keep communications lively on the ARCHIVES listserv, really got started. Newsome and Buck eventually came to understand how unrealistic and impractical such an organization would be, but little did they know that such a notion would continue to plague the organization for decades. A decision was finally made that membership would be limited to those engaged in the practice of archives and subject to approval of Council.

The concept of an institute for leading practitioners soon gave way to the founding of an organization devoted to the promotion of the ideals of the archival profession—an

---

<sup>1</sup>J. Frank Cook, "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 375.

organization which, in years to come, was open to almost anyone who shared our lofty ideals and concerns and, most importantly, anyone who could pay dues.

Theodore C. Blegen, Vice President of SAA in 1939, described the establishment of the then-named Institute of American Archivists as “a clearinghouse and center for discussion of problems and experiences of archivists at the federal, state, and local levels.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Blegen called for this institute to prepare scholarly and bibliographic publications; conduct experiments and investigations; provide education and training; develop the theory and practice of archival administration; and foster cooperation among archivists and repositories. And I am sure that Mr. Blegen also advocated the requisite amount of receptions, dinner cruises, tours, reunions, and parties, of which we have all grown so fond.

Blegen’s remarks laid the foundation for the SAA charter, adopted in 1936, which stated that “the objects of the Society of American Archivists shall be to promote sound principles of archival economy and to facilitate cooperation among archivists.” As we enter our sixtieth year, we are examining many aspects of our organization, but it is doubtful that we will find the need to change the basis upon which the organization was founded.

In a recent column in *Archival Outlook*, I spoke of the need to begin examining the organization’s structure. I am pleased to report that the foundation, indeed, appears sound. However, as with any renovation project, the plumbing and wiring may have to be ripped out and replaced. While the ideals upon which SAA was founded remain valid, the way we carry out its functions, the changing expectations, and the number of individuals and subgroups within SAA, have forced us to reconsider our methods. This means we must not be afraid to question tradition and consider new ways of accomplishing our goals. We must be willing to shed our traditional conservatism and embrace change.

As is the case with many other organizations, SAA is ever evolving. Much has changed since 1936. As I look out at the audience tonight, I see more than the ninety-six men and twenty-nine women who passed a unanimous vote at the organizing meeting in Providence, Rhode Island to form this society that now has a membership approaching four thousand. The very emphasis and I dare not say *theme* of this meeting, “Highlighting Diversity,” suggests the vast difference that sixty years has brought about in this organization.

Some things, however, have not changed. The *American Archivist*, which began in 1938, continued uninterrupted throughout the war years. However, by 1946, when Margaret Cross Norton took over as its second editor, she noted that the journal was “perennially” short of copy. Even then, SAA Council and the *American Archivist* editor were grappling with ways to get members to contribute more articles. In 1996, we are still considering options for this esteemed journal, due to the same difficulties.

The first ten years of SAA brought such challenging issues as the proper pronunciation of the words *archives*, *archivist*, and *archival*. And, yes, a committee was formed to study the issue and draft recommendations for Council. The threat of war, however, forced SAA to take on more serious issues, those of preserving records for both historians and the war effort. To that end, SAA established the Committee on the Protection of Archives Against the Hazards of War and the Committee on the Emergency Transfer and Storage of Archives. Now, we must remember that this predates our fondness for acro-

---

<sup>2</sup>Cook, “The Blessings of Providence,” 375.

nyms, but just for kicks, these committees might have been called CPAAHW and CETSA. (And we thought CGAP, TFOE and TFIP were awful.)

The members of SAA were not only concerned with U.S. repositories, but also provided assistance and support for our European neighbors. It was also during this period that SAA gained favor in the White House. President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a bold public step in admitting that he liked archivists. Remember, this was at a time when most folks were asking that all-important question, "What the heck is an archivist?" Unfortunately, we still hear that question being asked all too often.

The next ten years, the mid-forties through the mid-fifties, found SAA embroiled in its own civil war with the first major clash of interests, viewpoints, and power. In the words of then-SAA Secretary Lester J. Cappon, "State archivists have crossed swords with national; the internationalists have been criticized by some of our more domestic-minded members. . . pure archivists have looked askance at curators of historical manuscripts. . . [and] the practical archivist has vied with the theoretical and the historical for space in our magazine."<sup>3</sup> Each of the conflicts and tensions listed by Cappon shaped the society during its second decade.

It was during this period that the International Council on Archives was formed, with SAA listed among its philosophical and financial supporters. It was also during this period that SAA began to gain prominence among other long-established organizations like the American Library Association. By this time, SAA had perfected the committee system, having established committees on state and local records, archives buildings and equipment, church records, and what has now evolved into one of the largest groups, college and university archives. These committees worked diligently to contribute to the goals of the society, greatly aiding in this young organization's acceptance by older and larger institutions.

SAA flexed its new national prominence by passing a resolution urging Dwight D. Eisenhower to maintain the nonpolitical nature of the position of the Archivist of the United States, a scrimmage that SAA would re-enter regularly in years to come. SAA also exerted its new national voice when the issue of independence for the National Archives first surfaced in the fifties.

Having leaped some major hurdles, SAA turned to the issue of continued growth and membership development. Following six years of debate, it was announced at the 1955 business meeting that Council had approved an amendment to accept members based on interest, not vocation, and to discontinue requiring a Council vote to approve each application.

Now, I don't know if you remember where you were when this momentous announcement was made, but I was in the back of Ms. Denson's first grade class, busily counting up my Blue Horse coupons for a new transistor radio. I stopped immediately and made a beeline to the post office to send in my membership form to this sterling organization of national repute that now accepted commoners like myself.

Today, even with competent paid staff, SAA remains an organization very much dependent on volunteerism. An organization where, for the price of modest dues, one can receive an excellent journal and an informative newsletter, take advantage of discounts on training and a wide offering of professional publications, rub shoulders with the best and the brightest, and, most of all, participate fully at any level.

---

<sup>3</sup>Cook, "The Blessings of Providence," 381.

The late fifties saw solid growth, with membership and subscribers topping one thousand for the first time in SAA's history. Although there was much discussion of hiring a paid secretariat, it would be 1974 before the first paid executive director was hired. Meanwhile, members recognized the value of training and education to equip them for the jobs that they sought. SAA members began to expect a different level of service from the organization, and SAA leadership responded in kind.

At the 1957 annual meeting, Secretary Delores Renze stated “ ‘This 21st annual meeting in many ways reflects the coming of age of the Society—the membership, the approach to problems encountered, and the examination of trends for the future.’ ”<sup>4</sup> Somehow, that statement still rings true today. We, too, are facing those same challenges as we enter the new millennium.

As in any large organization, the threat of splintering and mutiny was constant. SAA leadership became increasingly concerned about the many factions developing around areas of specialization and geography. By the late sixties, there was a proliferation of regional and state organizations that were seen by many as a curse and by others as a blessing. The next thirty years led to an uncomfortable but prosperous coexistence of SAA and the regional and state organizations. With fears allayed, SAA and the state and regional organizations have learned to “play well with others” and enjoy the success of collaboration to meet the ever-demanding needs of the nation's archives professionals.

The sixties also brought about the introduction of official contested elections, rather than the dogfights that often resulted from floor nominations which challenged and sometimes defeated the nominating committee's slate. While contested elections are often still criticized, they continue to be the ultimate pinnacle of democracy in any civilized organization.

Toward the end of the sixties, SAA woke up to find a social and political revolution in full swing throughout the nation. Drowning out the sounds of political infighting at the Council table were singing, marching, and demands of social and political equality. SAA members were not to be outdone and soon began making demands of their own.

At the 1971 annual meeting, a group of socially concerned archivists formed ACT to serve as a catalyst for change within the Society and to encourage the organization to take a position on social and political issues. Soon after, SAA would emerge as an organization with a social conscience.

The appointment of the Committee for the 1970's by President Phil Mason began a new era for SAA. The members were surveyed and queried on every aspect of membership expectation. The Committee's charge was to study the organizational and program needs of the Society for the coming decade. More specifically, the Committee for the 1970's was charged with reviewing and forming recommendations for eight areas:

- organizational structure and operations;
- relations with other groups;
- the committee system;
- research and publication;
- membership relations and development;
- education and training;
- annual meetings, conferences, and symposia; and
- finances.

---

<sup>4</sup>Cook, “The Blessings of Providence,” 389.

If this sounds familiar, it is because even today, more than twenty-five years later, we find ourselves contemplating many of the very same issues. The establishment of this Committee and the resulting recommendations signaled major changes and new directions for SAA. The Committee's recommendations touched every aspect of the organization, involving programs, organizational structure, finances, hiring of an executive director, and attention to social issues. Following the Committee's recommendations, President Wilfred Smith established the Committee on the Status of Women to encourage recruitment of women and minorities into the profession and into the Society.

Many members may recall the 1972 annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio as being a watershed meeting for SAA. In their welcome to attendees, Program Chairs Herman Viola and David Larson wrote, "Since the initial plans for the 1972 annual meeting began last fall, we have both felt that the Columbus Convention would be one of the most significant meetings in SAA history. . . We have worked hard to provide an environment in Columbus that will encourage positive and immediate SAA reform for a more democratic structure and a more effective professional organization capable of providing dynamic national leadership."<sup>5</sup>

For the first time, SAA provided extensive publicity about the meeting, experimented with a combination of traditional seminar sessions and workshops, held open Council meetings, and gave committee meetings scheduled slots. Special efforts were made to include women, minorities, and junior staff as speakers; child care was offered for the first time; and time was set aside to allow adequate discussions of the report of the Committee for the 1970's.

This trend continued and, in 1973, SAA adopted a resolution eliminating discrimination within the Society on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, lifestyle, or political affiliation. Later in the seventies, another resolution was passed in which SAA voted to hold meetings only in states which had ratified the Equal Rights Amendment.

In the report from the Committee for the 1970's, members had indicated that they wanted better "communications with Council, that they wanted a newsletter, and that they wanted the *American Archivist* to be more timely and more useful to archivists and historians." And in this age of SAA enlightenment, what the members wanted, the members got. Well, at least some of it. In March 1973, the first issue of the *SAA Newsletter* was published. The seventies also brought about the publication of the first five *Basic Manuals* in response to members' need for more education and training. Professional Affinity Groups, the forerunner of sections and roundtables, first appeared in the late seventies.

In 1974, with just over thirteen hundred individual members and a total membership of twenty-seven hundred, SAA hired Ann Morgan Campbell, its first paid Executive Director. Indeed, SAA had come of age. The seventies clearly marked the age of maturity for SAA. However, by the 1980 meeting, reorganization plans were again under way and efforts were made to reduce the number of committees.

The eighties pushed archivists, kicking and screaming, into a new electronic environment in which, for the first time, we realized that all of the basic functions of our work would soon be revolutionized. However, the technological revolution did not catch us sleeping. After all, it was Mary Givens Bryan, in her presidential address of 1960, who

---

<sup>5</sup>Herman Viola and David Larson, "Why Columbus Should Be Different," *36th Annual Meeting Program for the Columbus, Ohio Meeting of the Society of American Archivists* (1972): 2.



hinted at changes to come that would have a significant impact on archival work, when she stated, "A new technology, in the mechanized systems for searching, correlating, and synthesizing recorded knowledge, will doubtless be in general use in the not too distant future."<sup>6</sup>

Echoing similar concerns, J. J. Hammitt, in a 1965 *American Archivist* article, characterized the computer revolution in the following description. "They belch forth records at the rate of more than 800 lines a minute, adding to our accumulation. They bring about a need for a complete reevaluation of retention periods for computer-evolved records. In many cases, our source documents cannot be read without machines—and who knows now whether the same machines will be available 50 years hence?"<sup>7</sup>

Well, Mr. Hammitt, we could not have stated that more aptly today. (Although I don't think that I would have used the word "belch.")

The eighties and nineties gave rise to new issues and challenges. The annual meetings saw record attendance, with sessions on automation topping the charts for attendance. Certification became a reality and gave some members the credentials needed to achieve status within their institutions. Guidelines for graduate education were developed, reviewed, and distributed. Employers had a wider choice of applicants, many with graduate concentrations in archival management.

Membership in SAA has continued to grow and has become increasingly more diversified, reflecting society. The African American and Third World Archivists Roundtable, which evolved from the minority caucus of the seventies and eighties, changed its name to Archivists and Archives of Color to reflect its own diversity, openness, and inclusiveness. A group which had met informally for a number of years came out of the closet and became the official Lesbian and Gay Archives Roundtable. It is important to note that this open environment did not happen overnight, but was the result of many years of a young, ambitious organization struggling with its identity and coping with and adapting to changes occurring within the larger society.

SAA subgroups proliferated, and with their growth came higher levels of activity and greater demands for services that stressed the structure, finances, and member benefits of the organization. In an effort to address the mounting demands and diminishing resources, a Task Force on Sections and Roundtables was appointed to evaluate the current structure.

The recommendations of this task force coincided with SAA's recognition of the need to plan more strategically and take a closer look at the organization as a whole. This led to the establishment of the Task Force on Organizational Effectiveness (TFOE), which is currently examining SAA's readiness for the future.

The Committee on Goals and Priorities (CGAP), charged with developing a strategic plan, recognized the importance of member input as a major factor and began to hold open forums. Equally important during this period was the recognition that Council plays an essential role in the planning process. As a result, an annual Planning Day was instituted for Council to review and evaluate the strategic plan and to approve implementation of action items.

---

<sup>6</sup>Mary Givens Bryan, "Changing Times," *American Archivist* 24 (January 1961): 6.

<sup>7</sup>J.J. Hammitt, "Government Archives and Records Management," *American Archivist* 28 (April 1965): 221.

So, how have we evolved? SAA is now a thriving organization boasting nearly four thousand members. Although we have solved many of our past problems, many continue to be a reminder that only time passes, challenges remain constant. We now face many new challenges that may be easily solved by reviewing past lessons learned. For, as I have learned and have shared with you, organizations are ever evolving and often face the same or similar challenges from decade to decade, with only the intensity and the magnitude as variables.

Nick Burckel said it best in his Presidential candidate's statement: "Annual turnover of presidents makes it very difficult to maintain programmatic continuity from one year to the next. Therefore, it is essential for each president's term to be devoted to working toward one of the main four goals already identified in the Society's planning effort."<sup>8</sup>

In the past two years, I have concentrated on putting into motion activities that will help us evaluate the most fundamental components of this organization. Such navel-gazing is not always pleasant, but it is necessary to make the major adjustments needed to ensure that SAA remains an agile and dynamic organization, one with a structure that allows the level of responsiveness that is essential in our fast-paced society. It is my hope that the efforts that we have put in motion during the past eighteen months to assess the needs of SAA will bring forth solutions that reflect the road that we have travelled, the lessons that we have learned, and the challenges that accompany the new millennium.

Finally, as I think of the status of the profession and the Society, I am reminded of the words of past president John Fleckner in his presidential address, which was creatively and eloquently delivered as a series of letters to an intern named Mary Jane. In one letter he said:

I would like to tell you much more about my profession: about the sense of shared commitment to the archival mission; about the spirit of generosity and collegiality; about the lifelong friendships. I would tell you, too, about the Society of American Archivists which embodies so much of the profession and through which we have accomplished so much on its behalf. And, lastly, I would tell you of my hopes for the profession: that we will overcome centrifugal forces and embrace all who care for the historical record in all its forms; that we will articulate the public interest in preservation of the record; and that we will increase public understanding and support for our essential mission.<sup>9</sup>

I cannot think of more appropriate words to convey the message that we should all carry as we continue to serve in this profession. Armed with the lessons of the past, the willingness to accept and adapt to an ever-changing society, and the commitment and conviction described in John's letter to Mary Jane, we will move confidently ahead to meet the challenges of the future with knowledge, courage, and determination.

Thank you again for trusting me with this organization for the past year. Thank you for listening, helping, and caring about the future of this organization.

---

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas C. Burckel, "Candidate's Statement," *1995 SAA Ballot*.

<sup>9</sup>John A. Fleckner, "Dear Mary Jane: Some Reflections on Being an Archivist," *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 13.