

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Revisiting Mary Jane, or, Dear Cat: Being Archival in the 21st Century

Steven L. Hensen

Editor's Note: *President Steven L. Hensen presented this address at the opening plenary session of the sixty-sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Birmingham, Alabama on August 22, 2002.*

I am assuming that this last year was not a typical one for SAA presidents. Between trying to respond appropriately to the trauma of 9/11; two international meetings (Iceland and Italy); the obstinate obliviousness of various government officials with respect to public records; all sorts of interesting media attention; keynotes at two regional meetings; six columns for *Archival Outlook*; and presiding over a completely dedicated Council, it has been an interesting year. That this was all concurrent with getting my daughter out of her last year of high school and into college made it all the more so. (She moved into her dorm at Duke yesterday, without my assistance, I'm sorry to say.)

Over my entire career, stretching back to the mid 1960s and my days as a work-study student in the Wisconsin Historical Society I have never enjoyed being an archivist as much, nor have I felt prouder of being a member of SAA than I have this past year. Being president of this society has been a genuine honor and pleasure—yes, even more fun than writing descriptive standards. I'm surprised the people aren't lined up clamoring for the opportunity to be president. Maybe the Nominating Committee should set up a booth in the exhibits area where members could register in a lottery for a chance to run for the

office. I want to thank each and every one of you—and most especially the Duke University Library—for the unwavering support and encouragement I have received this past year, as SAA has marched boldly and vigorously into new and important directions.

I intend to try and keep this address short; mindful that I have had more than my share of the public spotlight over the last year and that the main event of this morning's plenary is yet to come. Furthermore, by my rough reckoning I calculate that over the course of my career (counting papers, articles, workshops, and other presentations—to say nothing of this year's columns, statements, radio interviews), I have had the opportunity to address you (or various subsets of "you") well over one hundred times—and this does not include the myriad questions and interventions that I invariably feel compelled to raise when attending other talks and presentations. In short, you have probably heard quite enough from me. Nonetheless, given my documented predilection for public utterance, you would be fools to think that I would pass up this opportunity altogether.

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Twelve years ago my good friend, fellow member of "Jerry's Kids," and former SAA president, John Fleckner, stood at this podium in Seattle and delivered one of the finest and most engaging presidential addresses ever given before this Society. His three letters to his graduate intern, Mary Jane Appel, were subtitled "Reflections on Being an Archivist." It was as close as anyone had ever come to articulating the very essence of what being an archivist then was all about. That he did so in such a straightforward and personal way had the effect of speaking to our archival souls in a way that struck chords of recognition in many of us.

Much has changed since 1990, both within our profession and within the Society of American Archivists. Therefore, with John's indulgence, I would like to borrow his effective epistolary style in an attempt to update the wisdom found in his address, though with little hope of capturing the eloquence, sentiment, or the special spirit of that occasion. I have thus titled this address "Revisiting Mary Jane, or, Dear Cat: Being Archival in the 21st Century."

Catherine Ravenal Saleeby (or "Cat," as we have always known her in the library) is a graduate intern who is working this summer for the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library in the Jay B. Hubbell Center for American Literary Historiography. Cat is a 2000 graduate of Duke from Florence, South Carolina, and has worked with us in various capacities since her sophomore year, doing such tasks as basic processing, digital scanning, database entry, and copyright clearance for our Ad-Access digital project and for the forthcoming Encyclopedia of American Advertising. She was also perhaps a hyper-typical Duke student, being an honors history major, captain of her club rugby team (at all of 5'2"), and, rather than being your average Duke "Cameron Crazy" basketball fan, was a self-confessed "Cameron Psycho." Her

senior honors thesis was entitled “Excessive Devotion: The History of Sports Spectatorship and Religion at Duke.” Cat is currently enrolled in archival studies in the public history program at North Carolina State University, and also recently admitted to me that she has wanted to be an archivist since the sixth grade. I offer up these crumbs of personal information only by way of adding some substance to what would otherwise be an abstraction. I promised that I would not use this occasion to invade her privacy. Instead I present her as emblematic and representative of the next generation of archivists. These archivists are both agent and result of forces in the profession that were all but unimaginable a dozen years ago.

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Dear Cat:

Thanks for having lunch last week with Elizabeth and me; not only did you give her many useful hints for what life at Duke will be like, but your enthusiasm for archival work may have helped offset some of the “dorkiness” of the profession that has gathered in her mind over the years with me as its only exemplar. I was especially pleased and surprised to hear that you had essentially grown up wanting to be an archivist. This got me thinking about my own career, which yawns behind me, and your own, which stretches before you.

Many of the archivists of my generation—as well as some of the several generations between you and me—while proud to be archivists and generally happy in their chosen profession, rarely started out in that direction. When you *were* in sixth grade another archivist of my generation wrote a similar set of letters to a graduate intern with whom he was working. His frame of reference then was that of an erstwhile historian finding true meaning and satisfaction in both the significant and quotidian aspects of the archival enterprise. He spoke knowingly of the almost visceral thrill of working with original documents and of learning to “listen” to them. He also spoke of his education as an archivist consisting of an introductory class, an internship, and “an extended apprenticeship,”¹ under the watchful and friendly eyes of experienced archivists, who had presumably gained their skills in the same manner. Clearly, this worked. John Fleckner went on to become one of the finest archivists of his generation, president of the SAA, and is still widely regarded with the respect and admiration that his accomplishments merit.

Though I am not at all tempted to go back to school and start over, I can’t help but being a little envious of the education and training that is available to you and your classmates. There are a growing number of fine graduate programs for archivists that are aligned either with schools of library and informa-

¹ John Fleckner, “‘Dear Mary Jane’: Some Reflections on Being an Archivist,” *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 10.

tion science, or, as in your case, with history programs. In addition, with the recent release of SAA's "Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies," these programs will only improve and, I believe, proliferate.

And in this proliferation lies the most excitement for you as a new archivist. I never thought I would live to utter these words, but all of a sudden, archives seem to be "in;" and being an archivist is actually "cool." Now this probably doesn't apply to me—if only on general principles—or to many archivists of my generation, but as the archival profession has moved slowly but inexorably over the past twenty years towards assuming its rightful role as part of the emerging "information universe," the words "archive" or "archives" seems to be on everyone's lips. A simple Internet Google search on "archive" yields over 50 million hits. Although many of those hits do not refer to archives in the traditional sense, they are a reflection of the more expansive concept of an accumulation of information. While we archivists rightly regard most of our holdings, the organic, evidential—even sacred—record of our collective memory, as something existing on a higher plane than say, the *World Almanac* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the end, all is, in fact, *information*. And as we work towards making that information more accessible to our potential users via the Internet along with all the other kinds of information, the cultural and documentary heritage over which we preside is simply being stirred into that great cosmic stew.

Moreover, the pervasiveness and ubiquity of this information has raised the consciousness of the country with regards to the larger questions of access, preservation, and authenticity. Somehow, this all sounds familiar. But that's enough for now. I'll write you again after we get a chance to chat further.

Sincerely,
Steve

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Dear Cat:

It was great to meet with you yesterday. There is something about your youth, energy, and enthusiasm that helps me remember what has sustained me in this profession for so many years. You see, like any child of the 1960s—a generation often labeled as "never growing up"—my youth is the most accessible part of my memory. Don't ask me what I did last week, but I still have distinct and palpable memories of my student assistant days at the Historical Society.

I was especially interested in the story of your passion for archives being ignited when you visited the South Carolina Historical Society in sixth grade to examine some of your ancestor's family papers. Although I am now a Carolinian of some sixteen years' standing, I know that the general historical sensibilities of the "Old North State" don't even come close to those of the

citizens and great families of Charleston. That your own sensibilities led you into the archival fold are perhaps less surprising in this context. It is then also not unexpected that you have consciously taken a more “historical” instead of “information science” route to your profession.

At the same time, it’s clear from talking with you that, even with your more historical perspective, you understand the profession you are joining is every bit as firmly committed to, and a part of, the information revolution that has overtaken society at large—you have, in fact, been a party to this process as you assisted us with some of our early digital projects. Your commitment to putting “the cool stuff,” as you put it, before the masses may, in your case, be focused more on the “what” than the “how,” but they are both essential parts of what we have always done and can now do in greatly enhanced and more interesting and dynamic ways.

Referring back to the Google search I mentioned at the end of my last note, and the proliferation and expansion of the notion of archives, I would argue that these new approaches, instead of being at odds with more traditional notions of archives, are at the very heart of it. Thus, a substantial part of “Being Digital,” as Nicholas Negroponte coined the phrase in his book of the same name, is also about “being archival.”

I have heard you muttering about having to learn MARC and study “Hensen” in your archival program or cringing over EAD. Okay, maybe some of this stuff is not for everyone, but surely you realize that it is these standards and tools that have put us squarely in the midst (and even, in some cases, on the cutting edge) of the information revolution. More important is that the archival principles that underpin these standards are gradually being absorbed by non-archivists. So, in the broader world, now “being archival” means taking a methodical and conscientious approach to the stewardship of the information; it means maintaining its context and authenticity; it means using international standards for encoding and metadata creation; and it means (or *should* mean) providing open and democratic access to that information. Archives, more generally, are coming to be understood as carefully managed information repositories. In modern libraries, this archive often consists of the entirety of the digital assets of that library, which are sequestered in some way to ensure not only fuller integration but also their special handling and care. In more ambitious endeavors such as the “Internet Archive,” Brewster Kahle is attempting to save nearly the entirety of the Internet as it has existed over the past few years, and his stated purpose and methodology in doing this could be extrapolated directly from the pages of Schellenberg.

Cat, this is certainly one of the biggest areas of change in the profession over the past twelve years. In 1990 we were just coming out of a long period of idiosyncratic isolation. Today most repositories understand almost intuitively that they are all interconnected as essential pieces of the universe of the earth’s cultural heritage and collective memory.

This has gone on long enough. I got talking about descriptive standards and you know what happens then. I have some broader issues relating to the archival profession rattling around in the back of my head and I will see if I can put together some thoughts in that direction in my next message.

Best wishes,
Steve

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Dear Cat:

I will be leaving in a few weeks for the sixty-sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Birmingham, Alabama. It is sobering to think that I have been a member of SAA for nearly half as long as it has existed as an organization. I remember my early meetings as being great fun—interesting sessions to be sure, but perhaps more for the keen and rowdy companionship of my fellow archivists and my greater capacity for late nights and strong drink. Of course, I could be wrong: Nearly everything I did thirty years ago seems like more fun in retrospect than I’m sure it really was. Since then, the meetings have become progressively more involved and serious, as the society has taken on greater responsibilities and the whole level of professional discussion—on topics from education to standards to the complexities of electronic records—has taken on increasing national and international importance.

This is not to say the fun has disappeared; on the contrary, it’s evolved and “matured.” If Elizabeth could hear this, my dorkiness quotient would rise again, but I have found that there is nothing quite so enjoyable as getting rowdy at the same time you’re having serious discussions of archival theory and practice or developing new descriptive standards. Maybe this is altogether too self-revealing, but my best friends in the world are among the ranks of SAA members. In fact, I suspect an unconscious sub-motive in my writing many grants for SAA may have been to afford me a good excuse to get together with those friends more often than annual meetings would otherwise permit.

I’ve always thought that one of the main advantages of SAA was that it was small enough to meet in cities like Birmingham, and if you’ve ever attended an ALA meeting in Chicago, San Francisco, or New York, you know what I’m talking about—battalions of people in sensible shoes marching ten wide down the sidewalk, toting Baker & Taylor bags full of vendor souvenirs. It is also small enough so that it’s pretty easy to get to know almost everyone, either directly or indirectly. Plus, as you already know, archivists are the salt of the earth—friendly, intelligent, direct, hardworking, highly sociable (no doubt due, in part, to the relative isolation required by much of their work), and dedicated to some pretty important universal principles.

And it is these principles that I'd like to address as I wind up this correspondence. At about the same time that John Fleckner wrote his "Mary Jane" letters, there was still a debate raging among many archivists about the nature—or even the existence—of archival theory. At one end of the spectrum was the perspective that archives work was simply digging in, getting your hands dirty, and the job done. This was perhaps most provocatively articulated in John Roberts' 1987 *American Archivist* article entitled "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving."² At the other end, an example (of many I might choose) would be Luciana Duranti's fascinating and elaborately articulated meditations on the application of medieval diplomatics to electronic records.

With the advent of descriptive standards (which were really just starting to gain a foothold about the time that John wrote his letters), it was beginning to dawn on most archivists that reinventing the wheel every other week was not really that much fun and that through the application of standards they could make their materials more accessible more efficiently.

More recently, as these standards have evolved it has become obvious that the historical archival principles are now more relevant than ever. That, as archivists, our concerns with authenticity (from which the dual doctrines of *provenance* and *respect des fonds* derive), access, and preservation are the very foundations of all modern information management. The effectiveness of our approach has put us in the unfamiliar, though certainly welcome, position of being a role model and leader for the rest of the information community. We now understand that the same principles of information management and access apply whether you're working with family or personal papers, corporate records, digital library asset archives, vast statistical datasets, the Internet Archives . . . or the records of the office of the President of the United States.

And it is these standards, underpinning our historical and democratic traditions of open access to information, which have given the Society of American Archivists the confidence to move assertively into public policy arenas where we rarely ventured before; areas where we have a professional stake and where our opinions are respected and valued. Concretely, this means that we are now a party to a lawsuit before the Supreme Court that seeks to overthrow legislation which has made a mockery of the intent of the Founders and the concomitant rights of the people in the area of copyright; it means that we are ready to jump into the fray when commercial interests would weaken federal standards for records storage facilities; it means that we are standing on the steps of City Hall making statements and taking questions from the press, when the former mayor of New York City removed the official records of his office from public custody and scrutiny; it means that our opinions are sought by the press and others in broader issues of information policy; and it means that we can sit right

² John Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter, 1987): 66–74.

across a table in the West Wing, look the White House Counsel in the eye and tell him that, however expeditiously his staff may be releasing papers of former presidents, the procedures of the executive order under which they are operating are contrary to law and fundamentally wrong.

More than our new willingness to engage in principled advocacy and action, the society you will be joining is one of friends and colleagues helping and supporting each other; of enormously enriching professional and personal diversity; of untiring dedication to the many small and large responsibilities upon which volunteer organizations such as our own depend for their very existence. It is, in short, a true society and community in all senses of those words, and I challenge you to find another group from which you will gain so much or for which your efforts will be so richly rewarded. Trust me, it will be even better than being a “Cameron Crazy.”

What a time to be an archivist! I envy you, Cat, as you stand at the brink of what I expect will be an even more fulfilling and exciting career than I have had. Given the revolutionary changes that have transpired over the past thirty-one years—but most especially the last ten—I’m sure that the next couple of decades will hold challenges and excitement beyond my capacity to even imagine them. But as I look at the new archivists that are coming into the profession, such as yourself, I am struck by two thoughts: (1) you are by far the best-trained, most diverse, most technology adept, and committed group of archivists that I have ever seen; and (2) I’m certainly glad that, with my antiquated degrees and credentials, I’m not applying for a job today.

John Fleckner ended his letters to Mary Jane with an invitation to join him in his profession; he expected to follow the path a good while longer (which he has), and wanted her to “come and walk with us.” While I also expect to be at this a bit longer, you will probably be in your prime just about the time I retire. But be sure to keep me posted; challenge and engage me, let me know what’s happening from your perspective. Above all, get involved in SAA. There is no better professional association anywhere. Through the unflagging efforts of its many members and its dedicated staff, the profession has achieved the prominence, credibility, and respectability that it now enjoys. Who knows? Someday you, too, could be president of SAA and get the opportunity to tell the other President just how wrong she is.

Sincerely,
Steve