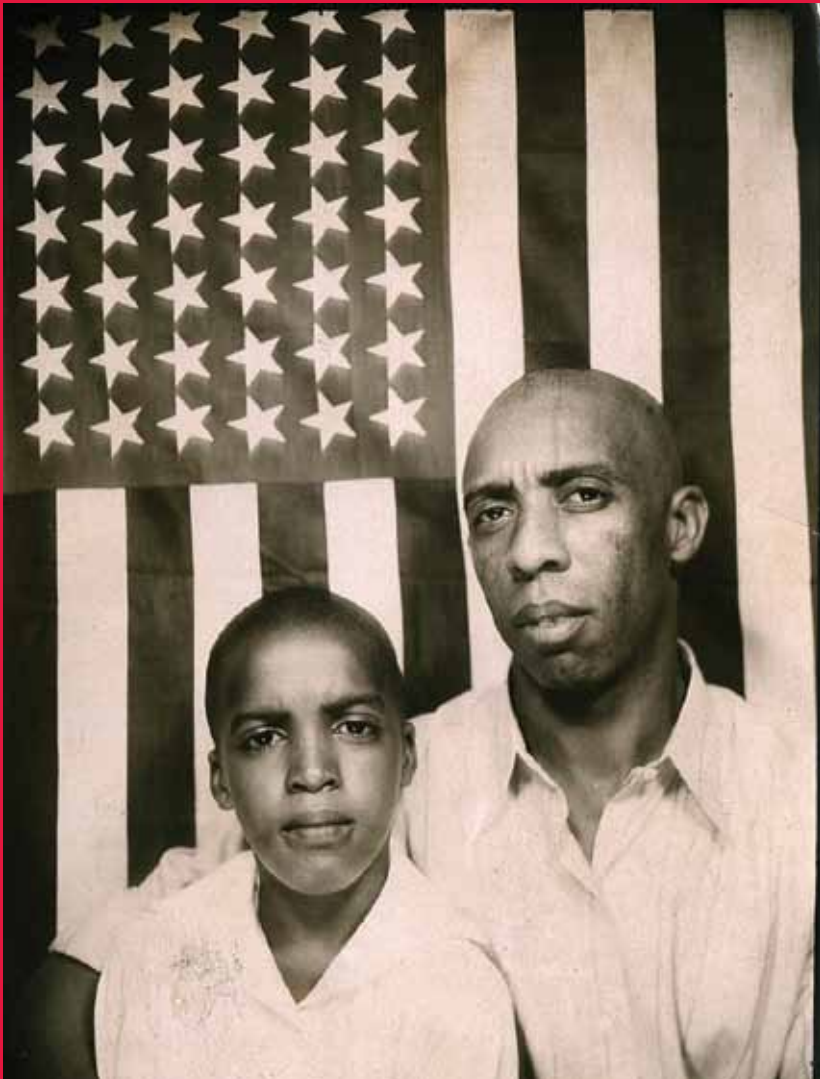


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About the Cover

This photo-booth picture of a man and boy in front of an American flag, the property of an unidentified African American soldier, was pasted in the autograph section of the 1941 yearbook *Historical and Pictorial Review of Fort Bragg, North Carolina*. The army was still segregated in 1941; black and white soldiers not only had separate living quarters, but also had separate experiences serving in the South under Jim Crow laws. In “The Heart of the Matter: The Developmental History of African American Archives,” Rabia Gibbs analyzes the history of African American self-documentation, and addresses how the separate development of black archives has resulted in collection development objectives independent of the archival profession’s traditional approaches. The article attempts to identify and address the detrimental effect internalized social hierarchies and prejudices have had on the breadth and accuracy of African American archives. *Photograph of an unidentified man and boy in front of the American Flag, African American Military Photograph Albums, MS.2881. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.*

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FORUM

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

To the Editor:

Value Doing, Not Knowing:

... Many researchers today protest cutbacks in staffing at archives because they will lose access to the specialists who “know the records.” . . . Rather, the archivists of today and tomorrow know how to find materials in their collections, and I hope that more users come to value them for those skills rather than for their supposed “omniscience” about the collections.

In Kate Theimer’s Perspectives piece, “What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?” in *The American Archivist* 74 (Spring/Summer 2011): 58–68, there is the most unfortunately titled section “Value Doing, Not Knowing” (p. 64; see excerpt above) which, aside from its implicit anti-intellectualism, at the very least appears to posit a false dichotomy between what have long been regarded as the twin pillars of the archival profession: namely that a combination of a broad liberal education (with additional subject-area expertise) and professional/technical skills, are necessary for effective appraisal and description, as well as for reference service and scholarly communication.

The issue is not the “straw-person” of individual archival omniscience, but whether or not the above-described attributes retain their relevance. The answer to this question depends upon one’s view of appraisal and description.

Are they to be simplistically viewed as a set of mainly low-level meaning or independent technical operations performed on a finite set of atomistic data elements (creator, forms and genres, date-spans, and, for well-organized collections, obviously apparent series)? Can such an approach adequately capture the totality of information potentially relevant to researchers?

Or, are appraisal and knowledge representation semantically rich operations concerned with the historical context, multiple meanings, and use values of collections? I would argue that archival materials exist in a nonfinite, multi-causal web of relationships, and that there is a vast array of tacit information, meanings, and research values that are, in principle, incapable of being fully captured in any formal system. So judgment must come into play, and informed choices must be made.

If the latter is the case, then understanding, in the broadest and deepest sense, what one is describing is fundamental. (It is not for nothing that one of

the most enduring acronyms of the computer age is GIGO: garbage in, garbage out.) It is also clear that, for the foreseeable future, it will be the case that archivists' minds will contain knowledge not captured by knowledge representation systems. Thus, reference service should never become completely self-service, and communication (be it via email, chat, or other methods) between researchers and archivists, not only about which materials are present, but also about relationships between them, about gaps, about interpretation and current scholarship, will retain its relevance.

Nevertheless, we must certainly ask what are the implications for the value of the traditional notion of the scholar-archivist of the transformative developments of the last half-century: a) the explosion of the volume and variety of information; b) the technological revolution: the Internet, the semantic Web, online catalogs, structures of description (*DACS*), and systems of archival management, e.g. the Archivist's Toolkit; and c) intellectual developments, not only in information science, but those in the social sciences and humanities that have affected research and descriptive practices, e.g., social history, cultural studies, critical theory and postmodernism, etc.

I would argue that each of these developments qualitatively increases, and, not to slight metrics, also increases by an order of magnitude the importance of traditional archival values.

The explosion of the volume of recorded information, and the related Greene-Meissner trend toward less granular description, magnify the costs of inadequate appraisal and description, and highlight the importance of a broad liberal education to be able to identify those materials worthy of retention, and those requiring explicit description, e.g., identifying those especially valuable materials that a) comprise a small portion of most collections, and that b) are typically unevenly distributed within collections and often unlabeled as well.

At the same time, *DACS* and the Archivists Toolkit provide the flexibility to provide more granular description at any given level, where appropriate, instead of privileging collection-level description, thus allowing archivists to take advantage of the power of full-text searching of finding aids, inventories, and brief descriptions. Subject expertise is the tool for making full use of these capabilities. (It should also be noted that the ability to include links to related external archival resources places a premium on subject expertise, as there is as yet no equivalent of Worldcat for archival collections.)

Technological change has not been the only force driving change in archival theory and practice. The past half-century or more has been witness to remarkable social changes and intellectual developments that have been reflected in scholarly research, with movement away from a narrow focus on institutions and elites to broader social and cultural investigations, and archival descriptive practices have been correspondingly "democratized." Of course,

older finding aids (whether online or not) will have to be revisited in view of these changes.

Intellectual developments such as critical theory and postmodernism have also impacted the archival profession, in somewhat the same direction, with their critiques of certain notions of objectivity and authority, and their insistence on the importance of the seemingly marginal. Despite often abstruse prose, their “de-centering” analytic approach finds striking resonances and even parallels with developments in information science (from the architecture of the Internet and the semantic Web, to the flow and organization of knowledge), and in the study of cognition.

Viewing the semantic Web as representing the occasion for an upbeat, “we can do more with less” attitude should not be taken to mean that resource constraints are irrelevant. And it must not obviate the need for advocacy for increased archival resources. The evolving semantic Web, still relatively in its infancy, is about embedding and extracting higher-order information (remember that semantic = meaning), the type of information that a scholar-archivist is best equipped to provide in the description of archival resources, *and* in the design of information systems. (The construction of ontologies is an excellent example of the interplay of information science and subject expertise.)

Finally, it is important to insist on the value of scholar-archivists because of the ambivalence with which they are often viewed by repositories and their administrators. While their knowledge may be valued as a scarce commodity embedded in unique individuals, such individuals may be viewed with suspicion as possessing a degree of independence. Administrators may prefer the simplicity of having a staff consisting of less skilled (and perhaps low paid?), interchangeable individuals essentially defined by their technical skills. This dystopian vision of the archival profession is not compatible with adequate recognition of, and compensation for, archivists, and it is one that neither archivists nor their professional organizations should endorse.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Gregory S. Hunter

It is an honor to begin my term as editor of the *The American Archivist*. This is the “transition volume,” where I complete the production process on the journal content assembled by the previous editor, Mary Jo Pugh. I will provide an overview of the content below, but at the start I wish to thank Mary Jo for her six years of service to the profession. As her successor, I also wish to thank her for leaving me with a very strong, well-respected journal. It is a great way to begin.

It’s traditional for a new editor to communicate his or her vision for the journal. I do have some ideas about where I would like to take the journal over the next three years, ideas that I already have begun discussing with the Editorial Board. Vision may be a bit strong a word, but my hope is that the entire archival profession will view the *The American Archivist* as essential to their daily activities. I would like everyone, from first-year students to most senior practitioners, to look forward to receiving each issue of the journal. I hope to bring in diverse voices, including those from outside the archives profession. I would like to include translations of key articles from other nations. But most of all, I would like to work with people who have an idea for an article but are nervous about taking the first step. As editor, I would like to help them develop ideas into publishable articles.

As I thought about first-year archival students, I decided to look at the first issue of the *The American Archivist* I received as a graduate student. Thirty-five years ago, in January 1977, I excitedly opened up volume 40, number 1. Revisiting it today, I note that some things certainly have changed! The issue contains an advertisement for the *Basic Manual Series*, which was to be available in the spring. Since then, SAA has issued two series of *Archival Fundamentals* and will soon offer update modules through Web delivery. The “Technical Notes” section of the journal proudly reports “Video Disc at Last. It appears that 1977 will finally be the year for the introduction in the U.S. of the much discussed video disc.” Since then, archivists have encountered wave after wave of new technology and tried to preserve the records left as each wave recedes. Finally, almost 40 percent of the issue is devoted to content that SAA now delivers through its website and other media: news and announcements from repositories and professional organizations, and minutes and reports from SAA Council

and committees. Today, the *The American Archivist* is able to devote all of its pages to scholarly discourse.

Some things, however, remain the same. The 1977 journal contains six articles that reflect the most current concerns of the profession. One deals with archival education, which at the time was dominated by the “three course sequence” of introduction, advanced seminar, and internship. A second article discusses the standardization of descriptive information through the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Other articles address college archives as windows on American society, the provenance of the Jefferson Papers, and secrecy in American government.

Volume 40, number 1 also contains the presidential address Elizabeth Hamer Kegan delivered during the bicentennial year of 1976. She discusses the importance of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and its expansion beyond documentary editing. She also comments on the public policy implications of the post-Watergate Presidential Records Act. I am struck by her call for archival involvement, especially on the latter issue: “As the keepers of the nation’s records, and sometimes its conscience, we archivists have a serious responsibility to contribute to this debate, as we have at this conference. Far more than the federal government will be affected, of course, tomorrow if not today. We must act with ‘a becoming regard to posterity.’”¹ This call remains relevant for the archival profession thirty-five years later.

And what concerns face the archival profession in 2012? The ten articles in this issue provide an excellent overview:

1. Helen Tibbo’s presidential address celebrates SAA’s Diamond Jubilee while recognizing the difficult economic climate for the archival enterprise. Her main focus, however, is on the archival profession’s “coming of age” in dealing with digital records. The profession has grown and matured; it is ready to face one of the major challenges of the coming decades.
2. Laura J. Davis represents beginning professionals. Her essay investigating how well Web-based archival products meet the needs of patrons with disabilities won SAA’s Theodore Calvin Pease Award.
3. Jessie Sherwood steps back in time to discuss records and oppressive regimes. She explores how medieval inquisitors used archives and indexes, new technological tools, to uncover heresies, lies, and evasions.
4. Karsten Jedlitschka explores some of the same themes from modern times, reviewing the archival legacy of the East German State Security

¹ Elizabeth Hamer Kegan, “A Becoming Regard to Posterity,” *The American Archivist* 40, no. 1 (January 1977): 14.

Service and demonstrating the importance and power of archives in serving the public good.

5. Sara White asks whether archivists adequately document people with disabilities. Her essay examines how disability studies provide archivists with a framework for understanding and documenting disability.
6. Cristine Paschild looks at notions of identity and their effect upon community archives. She uses the Japanese American National Museum as a case study for her discussion.
7. Jody L. DeRidder, Amanda Axley Presnell, and Kevin W. Walker discuss Encoded Archival Description. They perform a cost and usability analysis of leveraging EAD for access to digital content.
8. Rebecca Altermatt and Adrien Hilton look at collections of printed ephemera, often hidden within archival repositories. They report on a project conducted by the Tamiment Library at New York University.
9. In a “Perspectives” article, Rabia Gibbs reflects on the development of African American archives, including segregated collection objectives and internalized social hierarchies. She considers the impact of these variables on broader diversity initiatives of the archival profession.
10. Finally, Sarah Buchanan and Katie Richardson provide a case study of acquiring student life records at UCLA. They present methods for supporting acquisition and use of such materials, offering a model for emulation at other campuses.

The issue concludes with a review essay on historical photograph albums by Jeffrey Mifflin and reviews of six recent books of professional interest.

So, whether you are a first-semester archives student or an archivist enjoying retirement after a long career—or anywhere in between—I hope you will find the contents of this issue engaging and enriching. I will try my best to do the same with future issues.

Gregory S. Hunter
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