

# An Archival Roadmap

Danna C. Bell

Washington, D.C., August 14, 2014

We're taping tonight's address in front of my family, my coworkers, and the members of Council. I thank them all for being here and taking time away from their extraordinarily busy lives to be with me on this special occasion. We hope that recording this address will provide better access to members and nonmembers.

I asked myself, is it necessary to deliver a presidential address? I felt my columns and blog posts have given members plenty to consider. I also wanted to use the second plenary as an opportunity to highlight one of my focus areas: primary sources and how they support K-12 education. But a number of people were aghast at the idea of an SAA Annual Meeting without a presidential address. I am not quite sure why. However when one of my Council colleagues said essentially that I would make a speech come hell or high water, I said to myself . . . I guess I'd better prepare a speech.

The idea for this speech was born during a recent dinner with a dear friend. I was reflecting on my presidential year and lamenting the difficulties I was having developing this speech. As we talked, he suggested that I was creating an archival roadmap documenting the things that I thought were important for archivists to think about and some quotations that served as touchstones for me. So here is my archival roadmap. I hope you will join me on this adventure.

This summer was very busy for the Educational Outreach Team. We did five summer teacher institutes with four in a row in July. At the end of our last

institute, the team went out for margaritas. As we celebrated, my supervisor asked all of us for our favorite moments from the institute. Most of my colleagues noted times when the teachers had “aha” moments, or when they found something that was perfect for their final activity or when an activity that had not quite worked in one institute was tweaked before the next institute and worked perfectly.

When my boss asked me what my favorite moment was, I said it was when I got to see two particular letters during the open houses. Reading room staff came to talk to the teachers and often brought original documents. One letter was to Carl from Gene. The other was from Martin to Phil. Simple letters documenting specific events in time. One was a one-page letter between colleagues; the other a thank-you note. When I saw them, both made me squeal with delight. The “Carl” in the first letter was Carl Sagan, and the writer was Gene Roddenberry. The second was from Martin Luther King thanking A. Philip Randolph for the congratulatory letter when King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

I remember my colleagues also being thrilled about seeing these items up close, and I reflected on the power of those simple documents. To me, these two letters were reminders that behind the signatures were real people; that they sent letters to colleagues; and there was more to them than their accomplishments. These letters engaged me, excited me, and made me want to learn more.

Here is another stop along the way. One of my colleagues participated in a teleconference with a class of middle school students. She showed them a hand-drawn map from the Revolutionary War and asked them to tell her what this map represented. After the students had done a basic map analysis, she talked about the Battle of Princeton and how a young man just a tiny bit older than them was sent into Princeton to see how many British troops were in the town, how much armament was there, and where the troops and cannons were placed. This “brave young man”<sup>1</sup> came back and drew a map<sup>2</sup> documenting where the troops were located and where the cannons were facing. This map allowed the Revolutionary soldiers to find a different way into town and to defeat the British troops. She also read a letter from the general in charge of the battle documenting what happened.<sup>3</sup> The students were so excited and engaged that when the bell rang for lunch they would not leave. They kept asking questions and wanted to know more.

These two stories show the power of primary sources. As we work with collections and with our patrons, we must always remember that we are more than just preservers of information. We are guardians of knowledge, of inspiration, and of our connections to one another. We need to remind ourselves of the power we hold and the responsibility we accepted when we decided to become archivists.

I know it is important to think about how to acquire collections; to think about how to appraise, arrange, and describe collections. It is especially important as we work with a variety of formats and with electronic records to figure out how to preserve and provide access, especially after certain formats are no longer supported. But we must think about more than the collection, the box, the folder, and the item. We need to think about the story behind the collection or the item. We must remember the people or events behind the documents. We need to think about how to use them to our advantage.

The primary sources in our collections can engage and inspire. They can also serve as tools to advocate for the importance of archives and archivists. Sharing the story behind a document, a specific collection, or your repository can help you gain support from donors or key supporters. But to do so, they need to be discussed in their full context; as part of a story. Dave Leiber of the *Dallas Morning News* made the same point when he said, “We connect with people through their stories, not their business cards.”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that story matters. Kate DiCamillo, the current National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, puts it front and center. She chose “Stories Connect Us” as the theme for her term. Something she said at the start of her term stuck with me. Though it relates to reading books together, I think it also relates to our work as archivists. She said, “We sit together and look at a world hidden inside this world. Sitting together and listening together helps us to connect. We are able to see each other and we open up. We change.”<sup>5</sup>

Think for a second. Do you know the stories behind your collections? Do you know the story of a unique item that might excite a student? Engage a family? Inspire your director?

Being able to tell the story behind a document or the story of the person behind the collection can help us establish connections. The stories can remind us of our connections to our past, and to events in our community, in our nation, and in our world. It is also a hook allowing us to share the importance of archives and professional archivists.

A second touchstone for me is how we tell the story. We are a smart community. Archivists know our stuff. However, we could be better presenters. We need to remember our audience.

Odd as this may sound, sometimes it is not important to be smart. Sometimes it is more important to be an effective communicator. Avoid the big terms and technical jargon. Have interesting items to show. Allow time for silences and be prepared to answer questions. Being good storytellers can help us become effective advocates for our repositories, for our colleagues, and for the preservation of the materials that document our heritage.

A third touchstone: We also need to know who can join us in telling our story. Who are our champions? We must encourage them to share our story

and let people know the power of archives and the archivists who protect them. Equally important, we need to learn to listen to *their* stories.

There are others who can help support archives. Others we may encounter along the way can provide opportunities for connection or collaboration. We need to build bridges within the cultural heritage community by listening to their stories. Not only can these groups work with us to show the importance of archives and archivists, they can help in the communities we want and need to work with. They can help us understand the concerns of community members regarding donating collections. They can help us avoid or correct mistakes and provide information we need to help us to connect and collaborate successfully.

Here is one personal example of the power of listening to stories. During the discussion of the Native American protocols, I was talking to a colleague about what was going on. One of the discussions was about images of the Ghost Dance. According to the protocols, those images should most likely be destroyed.

My focus was on the preservation of these images. I thought it didn't seem right to destroy them. What if those who have the memory of this dance die and there is no way to remember it? What if someone wants to do research on this topic? Is it fair to deny them access to these primary source documents? At that time I did not quite understand the history of the Ghost Dance, its attachment to the Battle of Wounded Knee, and its links to the deaths of hundreds of Native Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Now I have a better understanding of the importance of the Ghost Dance and other rituals that Native Americans want to keep within their communities. But I still have big questions. What if someone wants to learn about this history and heritage? Is it right to deny access to these materials, which tell a tragic but important story? To find answers to these questions, archivists and those from various ethnic communities must come together and discuss these tough issues. Archivists need to understand why many believe that some materials should not be available to researchers. We cannot just argue. We need to listen and discuss so we can reach a mutual understanding and find solutions to difficult issues.

The Ghost Dance, however, is just one example of the need to listen to other stories and find ways to collaborate. Council has been discussing ideas on collaborating with other organizations and perhaps hosting joint conferences. Here are some of my suggestions:

- I think it would be wonderful to find a way to connect with the libraries and archives section of the American Folklore Society. They have similar issues and interests. Is there a way to collaborate? What about learning more about the National Folklore Archives Initiative and its activities to determine who has collections relating to folklore and cultural heritage.

- Another thought would be to bring together archivists working with cultural heritage collections to work on issues of importance. Brian Cumer said in a blog post that “Archivists have an incredible opportunity to help shape cultural heritage in the way we organize records, provide access to them, and perform our role in helping to preserve the memory of events, groups, places, and attitudes, as well as other aspects that make up culture. This will require archivists to learn to think a bit like a historian, relate to other cultures like an anthropologist, understand emerging technological trends like an IT specialist, and mediate between interest groups like a politician (a good one)!”<sup>7</sup> And we need to make sure the training is available so that we can ensure we can deal with all of these issues. The model that was used for the National Forum for Archival Continuing Education might work to move these ideas forward.
- To my knowledge, we have never had a joint meeting with AHA, OHA, or AASLH. Perhaps it is time to meet with those who make use of our collections and explore ways to work effectively on issues of interest.
- Should we consider collaborating with the National Council on the Social Studies and working directly with social studies teachers in the K–12 community?
- What about the digital humanities community? Are we missing an opportunity to work with this growing community?

I’m sure there are many, many other groups we should be considering. If you have suggestions, share them with Council. We need to move beyond the bounds of SAA and show how we are necessary, be it by providing support or showing how collections and materials are better preserved by having archivists involved. We must work with groups and organizations that will help us to show the importance of our collections, build or improve current collaborations, and provide a basis for support now and in the future.

My final series of touchstones on my archival roadmap is dedicated to people who have served as models for me and provided words I live by.

The first is my mom. She essentially raised me as a single mother while also working multiple jobs and studying to obtain her master’s in social work and complete nearly all of the work for her doctorate in social work. She has been a model for me on what to do and, on occasion, what not to do to be a success. She has provided a lot of advice that at first made no sense but after a bit has made tremendous sense. She has also always reminded me that I was brilliant, beautiful, and strong even at times when I felt the exact opposite. I am grateful for her love and support now and always.

The second person I see as a model and touchstone is Maya Angelou. Her words touch me and remind me to be centered and to always be ready to learn.

I have one quote at my desk, "Preparation is rarely easy and never beautiful."<sup>8</sup> I have seen that over and over again in my life and in the lives of others. That quote has reminded me to continue to work even when it seems like nothing will ever be right. Eventually it will be.

The third person I want to mention is Leanita McClain. She was an editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. She also wrote a number of columns for other publications including one for *Newsweek* called, "The Middle Class Black's Burden."<sup>9</sup> In it she used a phrase that I find fits me. She described the difficulty of having a foot in each world. I feel that intensely, especially in my roles as the African American president of a primarily white organization and as the sole archivist in a team of educators. It is hard to balance when you're not sure where to step. I am not quite sure I will ever feel comfortable with this juggling act, but I am learning to be at peace with my discomfort.

The last person is Mary McLeod Bethune. She has always been a lodestar for me. She did so much in her life from starting a school that eventually became Bethune-Cookman University to serving as an advisor to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to being a founder of the National Council of Negro Woman.

As I was thinking about how I wanted to conclude this speech I came across her last will and testament. A portion of it reads:

I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you a respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men. I leave you a responsibility to our young people.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of a last will and testament, I decided that I wanted to leave a set of wishes for the Society as I finish my term.

- I wish the profession and its practitioners would be continually reminded that at its core whether you are working with paper, bits and bytes, photographs, or sound recordings, being an archivist requires basic skills in appraisal, arrangement, description, and reference as well as an understanding of what an archivist is and does. Yes, it is vital to understand issues involved in working with electronic records as more and more collections come to us in digital media. Yes, we must understand issues of preservation and management and must effectively advocate for our records. But without the basic fundamentals, we are essentially information clerks filing information, not professionals who appraise, edit, and maintain permanent records and historically valuable documents.
- I wish that the Society could find a way to balance the needs of students and new professionals with the needs of those who are further along in our careers. It is vitally important to support our new professionals,

but we also need to support those who may need additional training to meet the changing world of archives or may need other kinds of support to move forward.

- I wish that the Society could work with archival educators to encourage them to review their programs and determine if they are meeting the needs of their students and preparing them to be successful professionals.
- I wish the Society could create a document that could be shared with those who are creating archival positions or hiring archivists to help them understand the work and worth of archivists.
- I wish that the members of our profession would see the importance of working with the K–12 community and work with teachers, providing access to collections and volunteering to judge at History Day activities.
- I wish that the members of the Society of American Archivists would understand that membership in a professional association with professional staff has substantial costs. To have an organization with a strong publishing program, a vibrant education program, a strong and intense support system for its members, and a spectacular conference requires a full-time staff, offices, and technology. And that full-time staff, just like archivists, deserves jobs with living wages, benefits, and support. We must accept that these things cost, and when the discussion turns to dues, be willing to pay for what we so often demand of SAA.
- I wish that the membership would stop the vitriol. We need to support one another. We cannot be effective advocates for our historical heritage if we are complaining about one another and are so set in our ways that there is no opportunity for change. We cannot move forward if we do not listen to each other. The membership has called upon SAA to be a flexible and nimble organization. Fair enough. However, SAA can only be as nimble and flexible as our members. And if the membership is not willing to listen to each other, to be patient and supply support, then we will not move forward. We will be seen as a group of people who cannot stand together, a group of people who cannot solve problems and who are willing to bash one another instead of listening and discussing issues with open hearts and minds. In my speech last year I said that we should turn a complaint into a call for action and suggest potential solutions. This evening I ask that again. We are a strong, vital, powerful group with great minds and passionate hearts. We can be effective advocates for our repositories, for our profession, and for ourselves if we begin to listen to each other.



- I wish that all of those who have supported me know how deeply I care about them. I have learned a great deal and grown as a professional and as a person. I had the honor to work with an amazing Council, spectacular volunteers, and a staff that is the best in association management. I have been blessed with a wonderful family, heavenly coworkers, and terrific friends who have helped me navigate some stormy waters. I thank all of you for your love and support.
- Finally, I wish that we remember something that Verne Harris said: “Archives are not the quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftspersons. They are a crucible of human experience; a battleground for meaning and significance. A Babel of stories. A place and a space of complex and ever shifting power plays.”<sup>11</sup> And to these places and spaces we are working to bring the culture and heritage of our communities. We are building places that ensure that culture can continue to provide our strength and an opportunity to continue to grow. Let’s find ways to do it together.

I am honored you saw me through to the end of this journey. Thank you for listening and for giving me the great honor of serving as your president.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Cadwalader, letter to George Washington, December 31, 1776, Library of Congress, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741–1799, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw4&fileName=gwpage039.db&recNum=463>.

<sup>2</sup> [Cadwalader, John] Plan of Princeton, December 31, 1776, Library of Congress, American Revolution and Its Era: Maps and Charts of North America and the West Indies, 1750–1789, <http://www.loc.gov/item/gm71000925/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cadwalader to Washington.

<sup>4</sup> Lara Zuehlke, “How to Connect through Story,” *Pierpont Blog*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.piercom.com/knowledge-center/blog/posts/2013/june/how-to-connect-through-story/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kate DiCamillo, *National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature 2014–2015*, Library of Congress, Center for the Book, <http://www.read.gov/cfb/ambassador/ambassador.html>.

<sup>6</sup> There are many sources for additional information about the Ghost Dance. For example, see <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=GH001>; [http://www.ndstudies.org/resources/IndianStudies/standingrock/historical\\_ghostdance.html](http://www.ndstudies.org/resources/IndianStudies/standingrock/historical_ghostdance.html); and <http://www.smokymountainnews.com/news/item/3168-ghost-dance-has-a-long-history-in-cherokee>.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Cumer, “What Is Information Archaeology?,” *Information Archaeology: Archives and Cultural Heritage*, <http://bcumer.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Maya Angelou, *Singing and Swinging and Making Merry Like Christmas* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 133.

<sup>9</sup> Leanita McClain, “The Middle Class Black’s Burden,” *Newsweek*, October 13, 1980, reprinted in *A Foot in Each World*, ed. Clarence Page (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, “Dr. Bethune’s Last Will and Testament,” August 1955, Bethune-Cookman College, [http://www.cookman.edu/about\\_BCU/history/lastwill\\_testament.html](http://www.cookman.edu/about_BCU/history/lastwill_testament.html).

<sup>11</sup> Verne Harris, “A Plea for Ethics in Archival Practice—Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives and Passion for Justice” (paper, Silver Jubilee annual conference of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand [ARANZ]), August 2001, <http://www.caldeson.com/RIMOS/harris01.html>.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

---



**Danna C. Bell** served as president of the Society of American Archivists from 2013 to 2014. She was able to combine two of her passions, reference and access for patrons and professional development for archivists, when she, along with Mary Wolfskill, created and taught the Real World Reference Workshop. Bell also has served on SAA Council, the Nominations and Elections Committees, several program committees and on what was then the Committee on Education and Professional Development. She has also served on the steering committees of the Manuscripts and Reference, Access, and Outreach sections of the Society. Bell was named as a Fellow of the Society in 2008. She is also a past chair of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference, in which she remains active.

Bell is an educational resources specialist at the Library of Congress. Previously she served as a member of the Digital Reference Team at the library, the first reference division created to specifically deal with the online resources found on the library's website. Prior to joining the library's staff, she worked as the curator of the National Equal Justice Library, as an archivist within the Washingtoniana Division of the District of Columbia Public Library, and at the Henry Lee Moon Library at the NAACP. She also worked as a reference librarian and coordinator of bibliographic instruction at Marymount University. Bell obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees at Miami University. She received her MLS from Long Island University.