

ARCHIVES: THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

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Like myself, many people during the 1970s found themselves with a Doctor of Philosophy degree in history, but no teaching job prospects. College teaching had been the traditional career of history Ph.D.s, but in the 1970s many turned to other uses of their education. Those young historians became museum curators, historical preservation specialists, and archivists, among other things. After a short, but heated debate within professional historical organizations, those non-academic careers have been satisfactorily titled "public history."

My own small part in this movement out of the academy occurred in 1973 when I was hired as an archivist. Now half way to retirement eligibility, I would like to report to you on the state of archives in this country as it appears to me and, more importantly, as it affects you. I would also like to describe career opportunities in archives for your students.

What is the current state of affairs in American archives and how does that relate to your research interests? To simplify matters considerably, it is perhaps best to say that archivists do five things: they acquire, preserve, arrange, describe, and provide reference services.

In the area of acquisition, archivists are becoming more aggressive and comprehensive in acquiring records covering all aspects of life in the United States. Previously, the manuscript tradition of collecting relied on individual archivists at universities or historical societies going to private individuals to purchase or have donated what were usually small collections of letters, diaries, or business records. Today the archival tradition seeks to funnel almost every piece of paper used in this country into some established archival institution.

States began establishing archives to house the permanently valuable records of the state governments in the early 1900s. The United States finally created a National Archives to capture and maintain the records of the federal government during the 1930s. In the 1940s, Presidential Libraries began to appear. Since World War II, more municipal, university, and corporate archives have been established. Still, not all of society was covered, so archives devoted to specific topics have emerged. The growth in this one area was dramatized at a recent meeting of the Society of American Archivists where one of the members honored as a Fellow is currently Director of the National Museum of Roller Skating in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The modern archive is not content to sit back and passively accept what flows in. The most common method of guiding the creation of material for archives is records management. Ideally an archives would seek to have some control over an organization's documents "from cradle to grave." Records managers suggest, and require if they have the authority, what paperwork is to

be retained and how it is to be filed before it leaves the office of origin.

Another aggressive archival practice which has recently been blessed with a name is documentation strategy. This concept suggests that archivists should go one step further and actually create history for history's sake. Oral history is a common method used in this area as is photographic or videotape coverage of events. Here the archives is performing tasks not directly related to the ongoing business of the organization involved.

As you might suspect, with all those aggressive archivists out there some competition has developed in the acquisition of material not bound for and delivered to an organizational archives. A state archives and a state university may go to court over a governor's records, as recently happened in California. A widow representing a subject-oriented research institution may battle with a university over the literary remains of a martyred civil rights leader, as is happening now. Archivists do try to ameliorate such competition by cooperating in developing institutional collection policies that are widely publicized and are modified only after considerable thought and publicity. They also form committees to foster cooperation, such as the recent Society of Georgia Archivists Cooperative Collecting Strategies Committee.

What does all this vigorous acquisition effort mean to historians? Simply this. Whatever your topic, there is probably an institution in this country collecting material that would be of interest to you. You may have a problem finding that institution, but it probably exists.

The second archival function is preservation. What effect does that have on your research? Contradictory as it may seem, the first step in a preservation program for any archives is frequently destruction. And this is probably the point at which historians start shaking their heads and wondering just whose side the archivists support. There are two reasons to destroy. One is clearly economic. It is simply not financially possible to preserve every piece of paper created in America today. Archives would be inundated by it. For example, today fewer than two percent of the federal government's records will be preserved. And that is a good thing, because the second reason to destroy is that the human mind is not capable of reading, comprehending, and synthesizing any more information today than it was several hundred years ago. Historians are served by archivists who decide that certain records simply are not worth keeping. Archivists can and do make mistakes in this function. However, someone has to do it, the individual historian cannot, and wise archivists do call on historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, and other specialists to give them advice on appropriate disposition policy and practice.

The method of preserving the material to be permanently retained is also important to the historian. Some material may be available only on

microfilm because the paper copy is so fragile. some material may have to be temporarily withheld from research use while preservation steps are taken.

Most important, the terms of researcher's access to material must be guided by security considerations. You all have heard of the Charles Merrill Mount case, in which a specially trusted researcher stole material from at least the Library of Congress and the National Archives. You have probably not heard of other similar but less-publicized cases around the country. Security has tightened at most institutions. You may find this inconvenient for your research, but it is the only way to protect materials effectively.

The third archival function is arrangement. Archivists who are accustomed to receiving large collections of material normally try to keep such information in the same order in which it was originally used. Our theory is that if this was the most useful arrangement for whoever produced the materials, then it is the arrangement which will be most effective for the majority of researchers. It is impossible to rearrange material for each scholar. It is also unrealistic for the historian to expect the originator of documents to arrange their files to please the historian's needs twenty years later.

The theory and practice of arrangement has not changed much in recent years. However, improvements in the fourth function of the archivist, description, make any arrangement shortcomings more tolerable. Archivists do not index material; we describe it. Indexing suggests itemized control. Archivists deal in groups when they describe, and modern description seldom extends below the folder title level and often stops at the series level in large institutions.

But a modern technological development, the computer, can revolutionize description. The difference between a library's indexing and archival description has just been mentioned. Indexing is itemized and nationally standardized. To further define this situation, the analogy of a family containing both Baptists and Catholics will prove useful.

Library indexing is like the Catholic Church in that rules are made at the top of the hierarchy and passed down. The advantage of this situation is that you can go into any Catholic Church in the country and know what the people profess to believe and what to expect during the service. Libraries are the same in that you can go into almost any library in the country and find *Keeping Faith* by Jimmy Carter under the same Library of Congress assigned number.

Archives have been more like the Baptist Church, making description decisions locally. The advantage is that description may be tailored to fit the needs of the material and users just as Baptist beliefs and order of service can be tailored to fit the preferences and needs of each congregation. The disadvantage is that just as visiting Baptist churches around the country can yield real surprises, researchers using divergent archives encounter differing levels and

methods of description.

Archival description is changing now and this alteration is being driven by the computer. Archivists all around the country are now talking about standardized description. Nationally, this could ultimately result in a computerized data base that would allow a researcher at Valdosta State College to determine the availability and extent of material on their topic in archival institutions around the country. Furthermore, a more extensive indexing of this data base would result in the discovery of much more tangentially related materials. For example, hypothesize that a researcher wanted to do a study of day care in America since World War II. Theoretically, the data base would refer them to records in state and municipal archives, the National Archives, Presidential Libraries, and university archives holding the personal papers of a professor who did research earlier on the topic, in addition to the corporate archives of a national day care company. The problem for the researcher now shifts from "Where do I find any information?" to "How do I selectively research, analyze, and synthesize this information to provide my audience with an accurate and interesting account of American day care since World War II?" In the past, it seems that frequently the admired historians were the first to locate or use some body of records. In the future, the admired historian may well be the one who can take great amounts of material available to everyone, condense it, find patterns, and through writing skills focus readers' interest on the subject.

This same data base pattern would be available at every archive and library. For example, if a researcher came to the Jimmy Carter Library and said they were interested in material on Alaska, a member of the staff could immediately refer them to the White House Central File category States-Territories, which is subdivided by state. However, in order to find everything on the topic, the researcher would have to read through thousands of pages of folder title lists dealing with open material on Alaska to find everything. There might be, for instance, material in Hamilton Jordan's files on Democratic politics in Alaska, the Counsel's Office files on legislation concerning Alaska land, the Domestic Policy Staff files on the Alaska pipeline, or in the Press Office files concerning all issues relating to Alaska on which the White House made a public statement.

In the wonderful world of the computer, the hope is that as the finding aid is entered, folder titles will also be coded so that the computer can simply be asked to print out an up-to-date list of all folders which contain material dealing with Alaska. It seems that each archival institution in the United States is dreaming of, if not planning, such a capability.

At this juncture, the focus of this presentation has clearly and naturally shifted from description to providing reference service, the fifth archival

function. From an archival management standpoint, improvements in description as a result of computerization should result in fewer staff hours being devoted to reference. Thus more time can be devoted to acquisition, preservation, arrangement, and description. The result will be more material, which is better preserved and available sooner in addition to being more helpfully described. This is not to suggest that the archivist-historian relationship will disappear or even diminish noticeably. Rather, the computer as a tool of reference service will hopefully do what computers and television are supposed to do in the classroom. They will allow the teacher more "creative" and "quality" contact time with students while routine, repetitive burdens are taken over by machines.

So far this presentation primarily has dealt with the internal characteristics and operations of archival institutions. What about external activities? In this area, three topics deserve brief consideration: 1) international activities, 2) outreach, 3) organizations.

International bridges increasingly are being built in the archival community. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century archival activity has been a worldwide profession. A few examples of the current situation will suffice. Frank Evans, current president of the Society of American Archivists and a long-time employee of the National Archives, spent several years in Paris, France, in the midst of his career to serve as UNESCO archivist. A few years ago Ann Pederson left the Georgia Department of Archives and History to teach archives at the University of New South Wales in Australia. Although she continues to teach there, Ann has shared what she has learned in Australia by serving as an instructor in various institutes held for American archives. Ann is also the editor of *Keeping Archives*, a volume written by archivists in Australia but used widely in the United States. Similarly, each issue of the *American Archivist*, published quarterly by the Society of American Archivists, includes a section entitled, "The International Scene." As a last example, though many more are available, the International Council on Archives, including representatives from scores of nations, meets every four years in a different part of the globe while its executive committee meets annually. The sum of all this, one hopes, is transfer of archival knowledge and innovation across national boundaries for the ultimate benefit of all historians.

Although many historians use archives, it should be made clear at this juncture that many non-historians also utilize archives. As least archivists think this is the case. As a result, archivists in the past decade have not restricted their outreach efforts to only historians. Originally outreach suggested getting genealogists, school children, playwrights, and other groups in addition to historians excited about using archives. More recently, it has been used to also include better archival relations with those who support archives, whether the

assistance comes from Congress, state legislatures, university presidents, or corporate chief executive officers. You may even hear the term "archives and society," which brings all outreach activities together in an effort to increase appreciation concerning the value to our civilization of the preservation and use of historical records.

Much international and outreach activity has been greatly increased because archivists have organized. The Society of American Archivists was founded in 1936 and in 1974 hired a full-time executive director. It now has a staff of 10, a membership of 4,500, and a budget of \$800,000. The organization publishes a bimonthly newsletter, a quarterly journal, and numerous other educational publications. It also administers a number of grants each year. More than one thousand archivists attended the annual meeting in Atlanta last fall.

Perhaps because of SAA's size and success, the last couple of decades have witnessed the emergence of city, state, and regional archival organizations. For example, The Society of Georgia Archivists was founded in 1969, has 400 members, an annual budget of about ten thousand dollars, meets twice annually, and publishes a quarterly newsletter and a journal which appears twice a year.

One matter to which archival organizations devote much time is training and job placement. College history majors may well be interested in the brief description of training opportunities and job prospects which follows. Perhaps the best way to begin is to state that there are a number of ways to become an archivist. For example, the National Archives typically hires people with graduate degrees in history. On the other hand, it seems that most university libraries require a Masters in Library Science of archival candidates. Specially designed degree granting programs are also available. Georgia State University offers a Masters Degree in History with a specialization in archival work. Eastern Illinois University grants a Masters in public history with a course or two in archives, and Clark Atlanta University has a Masters Degree in Library Science which contains a course or two in archival work. Additionally, many archivists have received their only formal training in two week institutes, such as the Modern Archives Institute sponsored by the National Archives or the Georgia Archives Institute sponsored by a variety of Atlanta organizations. The Georgia Archives Institute is preparing for its twenty-third annual session this coming summer. Although there are a number of seminars offered on a variety of archival topics around the country each year which vary in length for from one to three days, I am not aware of any Masters or Doctoral programs in archival work in the United States.

Because of the varied quality of the educational offerings in the archives area, the Society of American Archivists has prepared guidelines for a curriculum in archival work and has discussed, but never implemented,

accrediting archival educational programs of study. However, the SAA has just launched a controversial program for certification of individual archivists. The goal is to provide those who hire archivists with some basic standard by which to judge job candidates. At this time, it is unclear whether enough archivists will seek certification in their college and university programs of study to financially justify the procedure. It is also uncertain as to whether enough large employers of archivists, such as the National Archives and state archives, will require certification so that archivists will be encouraged or forced to go through the expensive and time consuming certification process.

Considering the above described situation with regard to certification, what should you advise your students? A college student interested in archives should realize that they will not be able to successfully get a job which particularly attracts them. Rather, careers in the field seem to be propelled by diligence and chance more than intent, design, or preference. It is also wise to realize that most archival jobs are with various levels of government, and that very few exist with large corporations.

Archives can be viewed as a problematic career choice for someone trained in library science. Such people appear to have more opportunities as a generalist librarian. On the other hand, the history major who does not wish to teach may find archival pursuits an income-sustaining method of staying close to their discipline. Such a choice means being prepared to serve other researchers, becoming more of a specialist on a particular topic or time-period, working standard forty hour weeks, and stifling one's own instincts to write history if that is the policy of the employing institution. On the other hand, archivists do not find themselves in a publish or perish situation, have to repeat the same lectures scores of times during their careers, create and proctor make-up exams, and grade thousands of tests.

Archivists hope to assist historians in their personal research endeavors. Additionally, they try to assist people with their teaching responsibilities. And archivists will hire some of your better students. In return, archivists ask historians to help in the process of finding materials in danger of destruction. They also need for historians to be patient and understand that materials must be processed properly before they can be opened to researchers. Furthermore, archivists solicit historians' opinions concerning developing more illuminating descriptive formats. And finally, archivists ask for historians' endorsements as they seek financial support for archival institutions since these repositories constitute our civilization's record of its past.

* The views expressed are those of the author and not those of the Jimmy Carter Library or the National Archives and Records Administration.