

**SESSION 404**

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# Founding Brothers: Leland, Buck, and Cappon and the Formation of the Archives Profession

Richard J. Cox, Charles Dollar, Rebecca Hirsch, and Peter J. Wosh

**Abstract**

This session on archives history examines the role of three individuals—Waldo G. Leland (1879–1966), Solon J. Buck (1884–1962), and Lester J. Cappon (1900–1981)—in the formation of the archives profession in the United States in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. These “founding brothers” published extensively, but they also created and maintained personal manuscript collections that reflect how they viewed themselves and how they wanted to be remembered. Four archivists/historians track through the lenses of the papers of the “founding brothers” the emergence of professional history to the beginnings of public history with their alliance and tension with archival science as a distinct profession.

**Introduction**

*Rebecca Hirsch*

None of the men—Waldo Gifford Leland, Solon J. Buck, and Lester J. Cappon—discussed in this session fall neatly into the “archival science” box, yet they were all influential in shaping the practice, theory, and identity of the modern American archival profession. Waldo Leland was never a practicing archivist or a traditional historian, but he spent much of his life working with the sources from which history is written. Solon Buck, on the other hand, had a

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PhD in history, but he spent most of his career at the Minnesota Historical Society and the National Archives and Records Administration. Lester Cappon also had a PhD in history (from Harvard University), but he is better known outside of the archival profession as a public historian and the documentary editor of the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John and Abigail Adams. All three of these men, however, served as presidents of the Society of American Archivists.

Leland, Buck, and Cappon all worked in the nebulous area between archives and history, but by the end of their careers, those realms had largely developed into two distinct professions. Some overlap, however, does remain, as evidenced by the careers of today's speakers. The body of literature that discusses the history of the archival profession in the United States is relatively small, though it has begun to grow in the past decade or so. These three papers, and the larger works from which they are drawn, are excellent examples of what can be done. Hopefully, a better understanding of our professional past will help inform current and ongoing debates about professional identity and education.

### **Here's Waldo: Leland and the Creation of an American Archival Culture<sup>1</sup>**

*Peter J. Wosh*

North Americans who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s will probably recall the "Where's Waldo?" craze that spawned a series of activity books, video games, comic strips, and popular culture products during those decades. Waldo's illustrator challenged children to find the lovable cartoon character, invariably dressed in his signature red-and-white striped shirt, stocking cap, and glasses. Waldo blended easily into crowds, calmly wandering through chaotic and crazed situations while perpetually maintaining his polite demeanor and his ever-present grin. In a changing world, he kept his cool, relying on his young readership to locate him and sometimes help him to negotiate difficult challenges. When I began looking into the life of Waldo Gifford Leland several years ago, it struck me that he, strangely enough, shared several characteristics with this children's literary creation of the same name. In many ways, he seemed to be everywhere when one considered the founding and creation of the archival profession in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Wosh, *Waldo Gifford Leland and the Origins of the American Archival Profession* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011) contains a fuller exposition of the themes and research reflected in this paper. Primary research was conducted at the Library of Congress, which holds the Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, as well as the archives of two organizations that he remained closely connected with: the American Historical Association and the American Council of Learned Societies. The J. Franklin Jameson Papers at the Library of Congress also constitute an excellent source for studying Leland.

Born in 1879, Waldo Leland came of age just at the time that a generation of European-trained academics was inventing a new and self-consciously scientific historical “profession” in the United States based on the exploitation of previously underutilized primary sources. Leland had conducted the first comprehensive survey of federal records in garages, basements, and garrets throughout Washington, D.C., and principally authored the first *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States* in 1904. He played a key role in assembling the first Conference of Archivists in the United States, which met in conjunction with the American Historical Association in 1909. While working for the Carnegie Institution in Washington and the American Historical Association, he lobbied tirelessly for the creation of a national archives throughout the 1910s and 1920s, and his portrait hangs in its rotunda. He played an instrumental role in the creation of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, helped to establish the agency that became the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, served as president of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), and counted myriad accomplishments on his professional resume. His colleagues recognized his achievements: Ernst Posner spoke for most when he celebrated Leland as the one individual “whose name will always be linked to the beginning and progress of archival administration in the United States . . . very specially it was Waldo G. Leland who put his mark on the American conception of the function and administration of a scientific archives.”<sup>2</sup> Waldo, it seemed, was everywhere.

Yet, perhaps paradoxically, when I entered the archival profession in the 1970s (a mere decade after his death in 1966), it appeared that Waldo, like his fictional namesake, was also elusive, obscure, and nowhere to be found. He seemed peculiarly absent from the literature, having largely faded from archival consciousness. His accomplishments often appeared overshadowed by, and secondary to, those of such celebrated colleagues as J. Franklin Jameson, Margaret Cross Norton, and Theodore Schellenberg. Older colleagues recalled his presence and influence, but a younger generation seemed preoccupied primarily with placing its own stamp on professional practice. Graduate education, standardization of description, documentation strategies, machine-readable records, new user communities, and broad-based advocacy efforts dominated discourse from the 1970s through the 1990s. Baby boomer archivists rarely looked to the past for inspiration and guidance. Rather, they cultivated a new image of themselves as being on the “archival edge” and rescuing the profession from what they perceived to be its arcane and elitist traditions. Further, if Fran Blouin and Bill Rosenberg are correct in their recent book *Processing the Past*, these decades

<sup>2</sup> Ken Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 59, 117.

also witnessed the maturation of an “archival divide” that increasingly distanced archivists from historians.<sup>3</sup> Waldo G. Leland, with his proper New England and Victorian upbringing, his commitment to discredited notions of scientific and objective state-based history, his signature bowtie, and his consensual manner, appeared especially dated and out of place.

I think that this neglect is largely misplaced and unfortunate. After digging through hundreds of boxes of correspondence and institutional records—and in a bit of self-promotion I must say that for the full Leland story you should take a look at my book, *Waldo Gifford Leland and the Origins of the American Archival Profession*—I would like to highlight especially four significant legacies that Leland bequeathed to subsequent generations and that make him well worth finding.

First, his career reflected the profoundly international roots of North American archival theory and practice. In 1907, the Carnegie Institution of Washington (which was Leland’s principal employer until he became director of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1926) sent him on a mission to Paris to discover and duplicate American history research materials that were held in European repositories. He spent most of his time from 1907 through 1914 in Europe until World War I interrupted his project. He returned to Paris in 1922 and lived there again for the following five years, authoring one guide to research materials in Paris, contributing to a second volume, and drafting manuscripts for several additional books in a proposed series. Leland’s global connections and personal networks proved more enduring than his publication projects, however, and they exerted a profound influence on American archival history. His meetings with leading archivists throughout the European continent convinced him that Americans needed to move away from dominant library and historical society practices to develop a functional public archives tradition, and to place their procedures in conformity with international standards and techniques. He read the foundational Dutch manual shortly after its 1905 translation into German and almost singlehandedly moved the concepts promulgated by Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin to the forefront of professional discussion in the United States. Leland led the American delegation at the First International Congress of Archivists and Librarians in Brussels in 1910, reveling in the global environment and expressing a snobbish condescension at the parochialism of some American colleagues: He disdainfully described Dunbar Rowland, director of the Department of Archives and History for the State of Mississippi, for example, as someone who “fitted into a European

<sup>3</sup> Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

background about as well as a pair of roller skates on a whale.”<sup>4</sup> Leland attended classes in Archive Economy at the *École des Chartres* in Paris from 1913 to 1914, causing his superiors at the Carnegie to worry that he was devoting too much time to archives at the expense of his “real” job gathering research materials. Throughout the teens, he relentlessly promoted an interchange of international ideas through the annual meetings of the American Historical Association by assembling a distinguished list of guest speakers. Leland introduced the principles of provenance and original order to American audiences, advocated formal training in history and law for archivists, encouraged like-minded colleagues to produce an English-language manual that would rival the Dutch manual for practitioners in the United States, and took advantage of opportunities to promote international collaboration. Not surprisingly, in 1913, when the chair of a Delaware committee charged with investigating a new state archives building sought his advice about an appropriate candidate for state archivist, Leland responded that “he should be familiar with the fundamental principles of archive economy as practiced on the European Continent (notably in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany).”<sup>5</sup> Leland helped to move archivists away from the narrow manuscript traditions and historical society practices that dominated acquisition, arrangement, and description over the course of the nineteenth century. He embraced the global community of archivists, exhibiting little patience for the more parochial voices that advocated American exceptionalism and defended uniquely conceived local approaches to dealing with documents. Though he understood the peculiarities of working in an American context, Leland never doubted that international exchanges and broader perspectives would enhance and enrich the field. He possessed a fluid, fertile, and flexible mind that remained open to foreign concepts and European precedents.

Second, Leland embodied the values and virtues that historians associate with middle-class Progressivism in the early twentieth-century United States. His commitment to professional expertise, bureaucratic efficiency, administrative acumen, and public service resonated with many contemporaries. Scientific managers, statisticians, records analysts, and corporate managers assumed a new prominence in the institutionally complex capitalist culture that had emerged in Gilded Age America. Leland operated comfortably in these managerial circles. He viewed such work as a noble calling and firmly believed that well-managed collections and reliable recordkeeping practices promoted the greater social good. Indeed, Leland found a purpose and a calling in archival

<sup>4</sup> Waldo G. Leland to J. Franklin Jameson, 1 September 1910, J. Franklin Jameson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>5</sup> Waldo G. Leland to Josiah Marvel, 20 June 1913, Box 23, Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, Library of Congress.

work that might at first seem jarring and surprising to subsequent generations. When he arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1903 to begin surveying federal records, Leland still entertained hopes of earning a PhD in history at Harvard and entering academia. Immersion in the politics and bureaucratic culture of the nation's capital, however, soon altered those plans. He quickly became enamored with the proponents of Progressivism who populated Theodore Roosevelt's Washington, as well as with the romance of archival work. His daily discoveries in federal offices included long-forgotten and neglected letters from Alexander Hamilton, James Monroe, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, as well as the Papers of the Continental Congress, territorial governance material, and individual documents ranging from the Declaration of Independence to the surveys of Mason and Dixon. Leland gloried in the primitive working conditions and viewed archival work as romantic. In a remarkable series of letters to his mother, he describes his efforts to survey federal records: at the State Department, "I have rummaged around in documents till I feel like one of them. . . . All around the rooms are closets and in those closets are documents, bound for the most part but many tied in bundles, or put in boxes, or in some cans, lying around loose and crumpled. . . . These volumes are indescribably dirty and my hands perfectly filthy." At the Navy Department, "we have been turned loose in a lot of lockers (of which we were given the key) in a cold hall in the upper part of the department. We have had to move lively to keep warm." At the Treasury Department, "part of the records are in a hole in the ground called the sub-basement of the Treasury, part in an old building on New York Avenue and part in a building elsewhere. The books are about as dirty as anything I ever hope to handle. I have mostly been living in dirt today."<sup>6</sup>

The survey provided Leland with the opportunity to interact with an interesting array of extraordinary and eccentric individuals. They ranged from Washington power brokers such as Secretary of State John Hay, to officious and obstructive bureaucrats such as Adjutant General Frederick C. Ainsworth, to the bevy of clerks and file keepers who maintained their own secret catalogs and prowled the mysterious basements and garrets of the District. His self-importance and self-confidence grew daily. By February 1903, Leland informed his mother, "I am getting more and more interested in the work and rapidly losing my awe of men in high places." In early March, he proudly proclaimed, "I feel differently than I ever did before. I feel more self-reliant—more confident and far more energetic. . . . This work of meeting all sorts of men in high places . . . gives me a feeling of confidence such as I never had before. I feel more like a man among men. And I feel perfectly . . . able to carve a comfortable income from this time

<sup>6</sup> Waldo G. Leland to his mother [name her?], 25 January and 1, 5, and 21 February 1903, Box 6, Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, Library of Congress.

on.”<sup>7</sup> Archives provided Leland with a sense of purpose, a link to the scientific rational world of research that seemed to hold such promise for public culture, and an affirmation of his own masculinity. Subsequent generations of archivists have unconsciously inherited and imbibed the Progressive legacy and organizational orientation that Leland exhibited. Until very recently, remarkably few archivists have questioned its central ideological assumptions.

Third, Leland carved out a fundamentally new type of career that possessed transformative social implications. Leland’s own upbringing and education (staunch Baptist roots, immersion in the middle-class culture of Newton, Massachusetts, reared by a family of educators, matriculation at Brown University) emphasized a series of personal virtues that characterized his career. Character, duty, obedience, service, and usefulness remained important core concepts that informed his life choices. He sought to maintain high personal standards and also to enshrine these ethical principles at the institutions that employed him, as well as in his professional practices. A talented researcher, he wrote sparingly and never produced a major monograph. Though often identified as a historian, he failed to earn a terminal degree and appeared completely disinterested in academic appointments. Colleagues considered him an archivist, but he exhibited no affinity for building collections or managing research libraries. Rather, he spent his life in the service of bureaus, institutions, and organizations that supported the work of others: the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the American Historical Association, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Society of American Archivists. Leland excelled at building consensus, mediating conflict, bringing people together, and creating organizations. Often described by colleagues as “a good meeting man,” he exhibited tremendous talent for formulating agendas, keeping his colleagues focused on the task at hand, and solving complex administrative problems with a winning smile. His congenial personality, courteous style, and kindly manner earned the praise of contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> He made few enemies, eschewed controversy, and rarely clashed with anyone. His public presentations often appeared bland and inoffensive, though he might exhibit a caustic wit and sharp opinions in private. In short, Leland succeeded by cultivating a self-effacing humility, anticipating the needs of others, making people feel important and appreciated, and repressing his own beliefs in the interest of achieving a broader consensus.

Leland’s rhetoric of selfless service and dutiful labor became core components of archivists’ own self-perceptions. Listen to Albert Ray Newsome

<sup>7</sup> Waldo G. Leland to his mother, 21 February and 4 March 1903, Box 6, Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup> See especially the profile of “Waldo G. Leland” in *Studies in the History of Culture: The Disciplines of the Humanities* (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing Company, 1942), viii.

describe “the archivist” in his first presidential address to the SAA: “The archivist professes that he has the requisite special knowledge, mastery, and inclination for devoting his time and energy to the service of others by practicing his chosen art for considerations not wholly or primarily commercial.” Many of the same personal values and managerial techniques that Leland espoused reflected and became enshrined in the success literature and popular advice manuals that permeated American corporate culture during the Great Depression. They appeared most famously in Dale Carnegie’s classic and controversial bestseller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*,<sup>9</sup> published in the year SAA was founded.

Leland bequeathed a fourth and final problematic legacy to twenty-first-century archivists. His professionalization project, which began to bear fruit nearly a century ago, served both to inspire and to exclude. On one hand, Leland promoted common principles, consensual practices, objective standards, superior training, and rigorous methodology. Such values have become so enshrined in our professional culture that they appear unexceptional. But they came with a cost. Quirky amateurs, idiosyncratic eccentrics, obsessive collectors, unreliable antiquarians, and strange file clerks populated the archives, historical society, and manuscript world of the late nineteenth century. Women operated many local historical societies, storytellers often functioned as community past keepers, ethnic groups established their own organizations and information-sharing networks, ex-Confederates created their own sacred shrines to lost causes, and cabinets of curiosities dotted the landscape. Leland valued an orderly, reliable, rational, consensual, and scientific universe.

Professionalization meant marginalizing the periphery, minimizing dissenting voices, and establishing a new orthodoxy. Leland’s diaries of a trip throughout the South in 1905 to visit local historical societies and locate papers relating to the Continental Congress, for example, are replete with disparaging comments concerning people that he perceived to be inferior and not worthy of attention—idle women, lazy African Americans, slothful backwoods denizens, card players, drinkers, and shabby city-dwellers. Genealogists bored him, antiquarians raised his hackles, and he considered administrators and academic historians to be the primary clients and only legitimate users of archival records. By the mid-1930s, as the archival profession coalesced around the SAA, the implications of Leland’s revolution had become clear. Conference attendees who gathered for the annual banquets of the Society of American Archivists found their colleagues to be a congenial and friendly group. They overwhelmingly shared common class backgrounds, racial characteristics, gender profiles,

<sup>9</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).



and educational attainments. They supported each other professionally, rarely criticized each other in print, and banished strange ideas to the margins. Community boundaries had been established. Diversity largely disappeared.

These four characteristics—globalism, political Progressivism and the accompanying enshrinement of bureaucratic forms, institutionalization, and a narrow professionalization—loom large in early twentieth-century American archival developments. But I want to close with one other thought concerning archival history. James O’Toole, at a recent Archival Education Research Institute conference, called on archivists to construct a new intellectual history of the profession. I heartily endorse that and think it is a worthy endeavor, but I would like to make a comment on that research agenda. Too often, archivists present their own past as pure intellectual history—essentially a story of disembodied concepts like provenance, original order, and evidential value—that takes on a peculiarly ahistorical cast. A generally accepted canon of important published works exists, beginning with the Dutch manual and ranging through Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Theodore Schellenberg, and now on up to and including Verne Harris and a variety of postmodernists and poststructuralists. Graduate students absorb and dissect the words of these theorists, but I find that our intellectual history sometimes lacks a social component. Archival history remains as much about interesting, time-bound, and very flawed flesh-and-blood people like Waldo Gifford Leland as about words and concepts. Understanding their dreams, actions, social networks, and institutional lives reveals much about the strange way in which our profession developed. Leland himself bequeathed 183 containers of his papers comprising more than fifty-five thousand items to the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, an institution, interestingly enough, that he often pilloried and criticized. He also organized the papers of the American Historical Association and the American Council of Learned Societies, depositing them at that same Library of Congress. These rarely consulted collections contain extraordinary documentation concerning the debates, relationships, and social influences that shaped the modern world of archives and undergirded its theoretical precepts. My colleagues on this panel have mined similar collections at other institutions. The same impulses that prompted Leland and his cohort to create an archival profession apparently stimulated them to meticulously document and shape their own personal papers. In this sense, Waldo Leland, like his colleagues and like the beloved cartoon character whose exploits influenced a generation of children, has provided us with the tools to make himself visible. He has just been difficult to find, and it seems to me that making Waldo and his colleagues visible is our job.

## **Solon J. Buck: Historian, Archivist, and Administrator**<sup>10</sup>

*Charles J. Dollar*

Almost six decades ago in a letter to Solon Justus Buck upon his retirement as assistant director from the Library of Congress, Herman Kahn wrote:

There is not in this country today a single institution or idea of any stature in the archival profession of which it cannot be said that Solon J. Buck did not play an important part in its creation and development. And this is equally true of the men and women in our field. Seldom has a profession owed so much to one man.<sup>11</sup>

I prepared a detailed paper for this session that reviews Buck's long career and attempts to identify and articulate these contributions. Time constraints preclude such a detailed discussion. Consequently, I have chosen to present a brief biographical sketch of Buck with a commentary that establishes the context within which he worked as a scholar-historian, archivist, and administrator for more than four decades. This commentary is organized along two broad themes: "The Road to Archives, 1905–1934," and "The National Archives, 1935–1948." The second theme, which excludes discussion of topics that do not bear directly on the archival profession in the United States, is organized into four topics: (1) creation of the Society of American Archivists, (2) archival education

<sup>10</sup> This paper draws upon the following source material: the Berlin Public Library, Berlin, Wisconsin; Theodore Blegen Papers, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Solon J. Buck Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Solon J. Buck Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Solon J. Buck Papers, Micro 156, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Oral History Transcripts, Records Group 64, Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland; "The Reminiscences of Solon Buck" (21 June 1955), Oral History Research Office, Columbia University; Dorsey Hyde Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Dan Lacy Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; B. B. Meyers Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Margaret Chase Norton Papers, 1924–1958 (Microfilm Edition), Illinois State Archives; Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania; Carnegie Institute of Washington Administrative Records, 1890–2001, Administration, Carnegie Institute of Washington, Washington, D.C.; Illinois History and Lincoln Collections, University of Illinois Library, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois; Society of American Archivists Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and the University of Wisconsin Archives, Madison, Wisconsin. I am grateful for the assistance of Tracy Baker, Minnesota Historical Society; Jeffrey Flannery, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; John Friend, Wisconsin Historical Society; Edie Hedlin, Arlington, Virginia (retired); David Grinnell, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Erik Holmes, University of Minnesota Archives; John Hoffman, Illinois History and Lincoln Collections, University of Illinois Library, Urbana-Champaign; David Null, University of Wisconsin Archives; and John Strom, Carnegie Institute of Washington Archives, Washington, D.C.. I am especially indebted to Judy Koucky whose knowledge of the complexities of Record Group 64, Records of the National Archives, was invaluable.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Kahn to Solon J. Buck, 26 July 1954. Solon J. Buck Papers, Box 51, Library of Congress. At the time, Kahn was director of the Franklin Delano Presidential Library at Hyde Park, New York, and had known Buck since 1928 when Kahn was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota and Buck was professor of history and superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. In 1936, Kahn joined the staff of the National Archives.

and training, (3) arrangement and description of records, and (4) records administration. Also excluded are his subsequent tenure as chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress (1948–1951), assistant librarian of Congress (1951–1954), and his retirement years until his death in 1962 at the age of seventy-eight.

#### ***The Road to Archives, 1905–1934***

Solon Justus Buck was born on 16 August 1884, in Berlin, Wisconsin, the son of Charles A. and Clara Luther Buck. After graduating from Berlin High School at the age of sixteen, Buck enrolled at the University of Wisconsin where he majored in history and political science. He graduated in 1904 with honors, having been selected for membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and decided to work on a master's degree in American history at the University of Wisconsin under Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1906, Turner accepted a position in the History Department at Harvard University, and Buck followed him to work on a PhD in history. Buck completed his dissertation on *The Granger Movement* in 1911, and it was published in 1913. From 1908 to 1910, he was an instructor in American history at Indiana University. In 1910, he accepted a position in the University of Illinois History Department as a research assistant where he worked largely on a centennial history of Illinois project.

In 1914, Buck accepted a joint appointment at the University of Minnesota as assistant professor of history and superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. During his seventeen years as superintendent, Buck reorganized the society; ensured that the design of a new archives building met best practices and standards; modernized the museum; launched *Minnesota History, A Quarterly Magazine*; organized local historical societies; and developed a system for integrating state records (1919) into the holdings of the Minnesota Historical Society. He also continued his scholarly work, publishing *The Agrarian Crusade*,<sup>12</sup> editing William W. Bolwell's four-volume history of Minnesota, and writing several articles. He took on a variety of assignments with the American Historical Association and the Mississippi Valley Historical Association.

By 1930, Buck's success as superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society was nationally recognized. In 1931, he accepted a joint appointment as director of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh. As director, he would manage a Historical Records Survey of western Pennsylvania funded by the Buhl Foundation.

As Buck settled into his new position, he learned that the operating budget did not support the number of staff he planned to recruit for the survey and it

<sup>12</sup> Solon J. Buck, *The Agrarian Crusade: A Chronicle of the Farmer in Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920).

did not include the expense of opening and operating a new addition to the society's building. Budget issues were only the beginning of Buck's problems. He believed in conducting full research before writing, so the projected completion date of 1935 for *Planting the Seeds of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania* put him on a collision course with the director of the Buhl Foundation, who believed that Buck should produce a popular history within two years. Buck also unwittingly antagonized local historians with his insistence on accuracy and precision in researching and writing history.

By the end of 1933, Buck realized that he could not replicate his success in Minnesota. A few months later, he advised a few friends that he was interested in an academic appointment at another university. After passage of the National Archives Act in 1934, several of his friends began a campaign for his appointment as Archivist of the United States. However, before this campaign could get underway, President Roosevelt appointed R. W. D. Connor of North Carolina to the position. His friends now shifted their attention to persuading Connor to bring Buck in at a high level. Consequently, in the spring of 1935, Connor nominated Buck for the position of director of publications at the National Archives subject to Senate confirmation. His nomination was confirmed on 25 July 1935, and he reported for work at the National Archives on 1 September that year.

#### ***The National Archives, 1935–1948***

Connor's appointment of Buck was a wise decision. Buck's involvement in the professional activities of the American Historical Association and the Mississippi Valley Historical Association gave him connections and credibility that Connor's other three senior appointments—Dorsey Hyde, Collas G. Harris, and Thad Page—lacked, especially with regard to the establishment of a professional organization for archivists.

#### *Creation of the Society of American Archivists*

Connor and Buck believed it was important for archivists to establish a professional organization, so Connor asked Buck to organize a meeting of the Conference of Archivists at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in late December 1935. Both were sensitive about perceptions that the new professional organization was simply an extension of the National Archives, so Buck arranged for A. R. Newsome, who had recently joined the history department at the University of North Carolina, to preside at the luncheon and for Ted Blegen of the Minnesota Historical Society to read a paper on "Problems of American Archivists" that

would lay the foundation for a discussion of the need for a professional organization for archivists.

The fifty-one attendees at the luncheon conference endorsed the creation of a professional organization for American archivists and authorized Newsome to make plans for an organizational meeting. Buck took on the task of drafting a constitution for the society. One area of concern was what to call the organization. Initially, he supported Institute of American Archivists but later accepted Waldo Leland's proposed Society of American Archivists because *institute* "implied a select group of top-notchers." Another area of concern was eligibility for membership. A number of people, including J. Franklin Jameson, wanted to limit membership in the organization to individuals who worked exclusively in public archives. Buck and Leland wanted a broader definition of *archivist* to include those who worked with historical manuscripts. The draft constitution stated that membership was open to "those who are or have been engaged in the custody or administration of archives or of historical manuscripts or who, because of special expertise or other qualifications . . ." <sup>13</sup>

More than a hundred historians, archivists, and those affiliated with historical societies attended the organizational meeting of the Society of American Archivists at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Providence, Rhode Island, in late December 1936. After approving the draft constitution, they organized themselves as the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and elected officers. The new society elected A. R. Newsome of North Carolina as president; Luther Evans, director of the WPA Historical Records Survey, as vice president; and Phil Brooks of the National Archives as secretary.

#### *Archival Education and Training*

At the 1936 organizational meeting of the Society of American Archivists, a Committee on Training was established with historian Samuel Flagg Bemis as chairman. Two years later at the second annual meeting of the SAA, Bemis presented the committee's preliminary report. Its underlying premise was that

It is the historical scholar, equipped now with technical archival training who dominates the staffs of the best European archives. We think it should be so here, with the emphasis on American history and political science. <sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Society of American Archivists Draft for a Constitution," 29 December 1936, 2nd Conference of Archivists, Providence, Rhode Island, 1936, Archives of Society of American Archivists, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 2 (July 1939): 157, available at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014985058>, accessed 12 November 2011.

The report presumed that a historical scholar would be an individual recruited from a PhD program in American history or political science. Training for these historical scholar-archivists (also described as “first class”) could “be grafted on to graduate instruction in any first class American university” and supplemented with a thesis that required handling “manuscript material of some considerable range and out of official archives.”<sup>15</sup> The report also described another category of archivists—second-class archivists—who would be recruited from master of arts degree program in the social sciences.

During this same period, Buck was exploring opportunities to teach a course on archives. The first opportunity came in January 1937 when Ernest S. Griffith, dean of the graduate school of American University, invited him to teach a course in the history department on historiography—Methods and Materials for Research in American History. Buck agreed to offer a two-semester course that would familiarize students, primarily in American History, with the work of more important historians and historical agencies; functional tools, such as guides and inventories to facilitate research; sources for historical research including archives, historical manuscripts, newspapers, and published documents; and methods for collecting these sources.

This class provided Buck the opportunity to experiment with ways of introducing archival themes into a graduate history course that would be invaluable in his second teaching opportunity at Columbia University, where he taught a two-semester course in 1938–1939 on Archives and Historical Manuscripts and Archival Internships at the National Archives. Although fourteen students enrolled in the first semester course, no student enrolled in the National Archives internship program, largely because of the cost of traveling to Washington, D.C. Subsequently, the course was cancelled.

Undeterred, in a 1939 collaboration with American University, Buck organized an in-service training course at the National Archives for academic credit that he would teach. About the time this class was to get underway, Ernst Posner, a Prussian-trained archivist who had fled Nazi Germany, arrived in the Washington area. Buck had met Posner the year before, so recognized that his knowledge and experience in European archives would be a valuable resource in the training of U.S. archivists. With the assistance of Buck and others, Posner was given a one-year appointment as a lecturer on the history of archives and archives administration in the graduate school of American University, where, in the fall of 1939, he and Buck taught a course on History and Administration of Archives. Subsequently, the Carnegie Institute of Washington funded a three-year program at American University for training in the history of archives and administration of archives taught by Posner.

<sup>15</sup> Bemis, “The Training of Archivists,” 159.

Buck's engagement in the development of education and training for archivists in America was exceptional. Karl Trever, editor of the *American Archivist* and a staff member of the National Archives for many years, had it right when he said in a 1974 oral history interview, "I think probably one of Dr. Buck's greatest contributions, not only to the National Archives but to the profession as a whole, was in the field of training."<sup>16</sup>

#### *Arrangement and Description of Records*

In 1939 and 1940, as Buck prepared the revised *Guide to Material in the National Archives*, he recognized that accession numbers, which were assigned to records as they were transferred to the National Archives, "are not logical units," and should be abandoned as the primary means for arranging and describing material in the National Archives. He began to devise a new description procedure based on what he called "archival groups."

In March 1940, the Archivist of the United States appointed a committee to make a study of finding media and other instruments for facilitating the use of records in the custody of the National Archives. One of the first items the committee had to address was what to call a body of records created by an agency. Buck rejected the use of "fonds" because continental archivists, he said, tended to use it for records filed and preserved by a particular registry or filing unit, which could result in multiple fonds in a given agency, thereby introducing confusion. Nor did he like Sir Hilary Jenkinson's definition of "fonds"<sup>17</sup> because it was too abstract and theoretically could incorporate all of the records of a government. Instead, he proposed the term "record group." In late January 1941, the Finding Mediums Committee presented its report to the Archivist. A month later, he issued Memorandum No. A-142, Directions for the Preparation of Finding Aids, which was based on the concept of record groups.<sup>18</sup>

The National Archives' development of the concept of a record group in the arrangement and description of records has had a strong influence on the archival profession in the United States. Numerous state archives and institutions with large volumes of records implemented the record group concept.

<sup>16</sup> Transcript, oral history interview with Karl Trever, 20 February and 29 March 1973, Record Group 64, Records of the National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>17</sup> See citation 149 in the definition of "fonds" in Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), available at Society of American Archivists, [http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term\\_details.asp?DefinitionKey=756](http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=756), accessed 2 October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See Mario D. Fenyo, "The Record Group Concept: A Critique," *American Archivist* 29 (April 1966): 229-39, available at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015072452785>, accessed 12 November 2011.

*Records Administration*

Enactment of the Federal Record Act of 1950 was a historic watershed for records management in the federal government. It required each agency to make and preserve records that accurately and completely document its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and transactions, and to manage the quality, quantity, preservation, and disposal of these records. Although recommendations of the Hoover Commission on Reorganization of the Executive Branch of Government's Task Force on the Reduction of Records partly precipitated passage of the Federal Records Act, it was the culmination of activities that began in 1935 and 1936 through the work of deputy examiners and special examiners whose task was to identify agency records that should be transferred to the National Archives. Early on, these examiners realized that the absence of systematic management of records by federal agencies made identification of permanent or useless records very difficult and time consuming.

Although as director of publications Buck had no line responsibility for the work of these examiners, he was keenly aware of the problems they faced. He supported the work of Phil Brooks and Emmett Leahy, which eventually became the foundation of modern records management, although at the time it was called "records administration." After he became Archivist of the United States in September 1941, Buck made records administration a top priority.

Leahy was especially interested in eliminating the huge accumulations of duplicated or useless records that many federal agencies held. In addition, he was an evangelist for the use of microfilm to reduce the volume of records that federal agencies and the National Archives retained. Brooks believed that the huge volume of unscheduled federal government records required involvement of archivists with agency recordkeeping long before records came to the custody of archives. He presented a paper in 1943 on "The Selection of Records for Preservation" that incorporated a dynamic life history of the records model that he conceived. He recommended that the selection of records, which implies both preservation and disposal, occur as early in the life history of records as is practical.

It is surprising that, with all of the discussion about records and the creation of the National Archives, there was no statutory definition of "federal record." The National Archives Act did not define "records," and the definition of a record in the 1939 Act Concerning the Disposal of Records "as an original or copy" of a variety of physical formats (e.g., motion pictures, papers, maps) and other kinds of records belonging to the government" did not help.

Enactment of the 1943 Records Disposal Act<sup>19</sup> provided a comprehensive and robust definition of "federal records" for the first time. It substantially

<sup>19</sup> See Pearce-Moses, *Glossary*, s.v. "Records Disposal Act of 1943," available at Society of American Archivists, [http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term\\_details.asp?DefinitionKey=2905](http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=2905), accessed 2 October 2011.



expanded a definition of “public records” previously published in a 1939 report on a Proposed Uniform State Public Records Act<sup>20</sup> led by A. R. Newsome of North Carolina. Buck led this expansion. Phil Brooks and other retired employees of the National Archives credit him with being the driving force behind the classic definition of a record in the Records Disposal Act of 1943.

Within a few weeks of finalizing the draft Records Disposal Act, Buck took up consideration of a Public Records Act, motivated in part by a proposal that Emmett Leahy, by then director of Records Administration at the Navy Department, had submitted to the Budget Bureau in 1942 on behalf of the Society of American Archivists Committee on Records Administration. It called for the appointment of a records officer in every major federal agency and for the creation of a Council on Records Administration in the Budget Bureau. Disagreements within the Budget Bureau had sidetracked this proposal, so Buck attempted to revive it by initiating action to draft a Public Records Act that would establish a records administration policy for the federal government. The draft act incorporated the 1943 Records Disposal Act definition of a record and key components from Leahy’s 1942 proposal to the Budget Bureau, which required the head of each agency to maintain and preserve all records made and received in connection with the transaction of public business, thereby ensuring adequate documentation of the agency’s program. The draft Public Records Act also required each agency head to appoint a records officer whose duties included generally supervising a comprehensive program for current records management, developing a schedule for the retention and disposal of records, and cooperating in all matters respecting records administration activities. The most important point about the draft Public Records Act of 1944 is that its key elements were incorporated in the Federal Records Act of 1950.<sup>21</sup>

The Budget Bureau opposed the draft Public Records Act but did agree to support an executive order (1946) that required heads of agencies to support records administration. Executive Order 9784 and the draft Public Records Act of 1944 laid the foundation for the Federal Records Act of 1950, which is another of the notable contributions that Solon J. Buck made to the archival profession.

### **Conclusion**

This presentation has reviewed Solon J. Buck’s contributions to the archival profession. Whether they rise to the level of Kahn’s claim that “seldom has a

<sup>20</sup> See “The Proposed Uniform State Public Records Act,” *American Archivist* 3 (April 1940): 107–118, available at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015071453461>, accessed 12 November 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See Pearce-Moses, *Glossary*, s.v. “Federal Records Act,” available at Society of American Archivists, [http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term\\_details.asp?DefinitionKey=2899](http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=2899), accessed 2 October 2011.

profession owed so much to one man” remains an open question. Nonetheless, it is incontrovertible, I think, that Buck played a major role in the creation of the Society of American Archivists. R. D. W. Connor’s strategy as Archivist of the United States was to distance himself from the actual organization’s activities, and Buck was the only National Archives staff member who had the necessary visibility, credibility, and connections with the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and the Minnesota Historical Society to handle this assignment. It is equally incontrovertible that Buck’s approach to the arrangement and description of records—specifically the records group concept, the education and training of archivists, and records administration have had a major impact on the formation and development of the archives profession. The records group concept is still alive after seventy years, at least in some quarters. As far as the education and training of archivists are concerned, the profession has moved from requiring a PhD in history to its being “nice to have but not essential.” Buck’s most persistent contribution is his vision of records administration that aligned record making with recordkeeping within the life history of records.

I have one final observation about Solon J. Buck. Buck was a scholar in the sense that he was erudite and learned about history and archives. However, he was not a publishing scholar. Buck authored several books early in his career, but *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*, was the last one of any substance, published in 1939 and co-authored with his wife, Elizabeth.<sup>22</sup> Even his celebrated presidential address, “The Archivist’s One World,” was drafted by Oliver Wendell Holmes who did most of the “heavy lifting” in promoting the United Nations Archives and creating the International Council of Archives.<sup>23</sup>

So what is a “scholar-archivist”? Connor was “scholarly” and adept at dealing with Congress and President Roosevelt, but he never really was a hands-on administrator of the National Archives. Buck was a scholarly “hands-on administrator,” but not particularly skillful in the politicals of the National Archives. In a 1973 oral history interview, Oliver W. Holmes said that Buck “wanted to be a scholar and I think he realized increasingly that the Archivist of the United States was going to be mainly an administrator and a politician.” He speculated that “there’ll never be a scholar Archivist in the same way that that the first two Archivists were.”<sup>24</sup> Holmes was right. No Archivist since Buck has had the same scholarly status. This raises the broader question of whether it is essential or

<sup>22</sup> Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939).

<sup>23</sup> Solon J. Buck, “The Archivist’s ‘One World,’” *American Archivist* 10 (January 1947): 9–24, available at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014985538>, accessed 12 November 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Transcript, oral history interview with Oliver W. Holmes, 10 July 1973, Record Group 64, Records of the National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.

even possible for the Archivist of the United States to be a productive, publishing scholar. But this is a question for another time and place.

## **Lester J. Cappon and the Historian as Pioneer Archivist and Documentary Editor**

*Richard J. Cox*

### *Introduction*

I am presenting today a very brief description of a book-length study of Lester J. Cappon, based on his twenty-eight-volume diary and other personal papers and organizational records. A better name for my paper would be “peeking under the hood,” as I am going deeper into Cappon’s life and career to learn more than can be gleaned by looking at his publications. And, surprisingly, given that we are archivists writing about our own past, most of what has been written has drawn on the published literature rather than archival sources.<sup>25</sup>

My current project draws from an earlier work, produced by SAA, that published a dozen of Cappon’s seminal essays on archives and documentary editing.<sup>26</sup> When using Cappon’s personal papers located at the College of William and Mary, I discovered that he had maintained a diary, closed until 2006. When it opened, I returned with the idea of investigating Cappon as a diarist, considering whether his knowledge of documentary sources produced any differences or enabled any insights in the diary form. I discovered a detailed diary covering the years between 1954 and his death in 1981 and containing interesting, sometimes remarkable, insights into a number of historical endeavors in the third quarter of the twentieth century. It required multiple research visits over two-and-half years. That such wonderful archival sources exist relative to our own profession is good news; that you have the sense, when working through these papers, that no one else has examined them is not such good news.

### **Who Was Cappon?**

Wisconsin-born Lester J. Cappon (1900–1981) was a doctoral student of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. He spent most of his career in the South, first at the

<sup>25</sup> I have examined the following archival materials for my work on Cappon: Lester J. Cappon Papers, 90 C17, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia; Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Williamsburg, Virginia; Records of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, RG-2/5/1.871, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; University Librarian Office Administrative Files RG 12/1/1.681, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Lawrence W. Towner Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago; and Atlas of Early American History Files, Newberry Library, Chicago.

<sup>26</sup> Richard J. Cox, *Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship in the Golden Age of Archival Theory* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

University of Virginia and then at the College of William and Mary, Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. He was involved in the founding of both the Society of American Archivists and, forty years later, the Association of Documentary Editors; serving as president of both of these associations and of the Southern Historical Association—one of a small group of individuals who held multiple presidencies of such scholarly and professional associations. Today, he is best remembered for his edition of the correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, originally published in 1959 and still in print,<sup>27</sup> and his *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era 1760–1790*,<sup>28</sup> a groundbreaking reference work in historical geography published in 1976. He ended his career as a research associate at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Cappon is important for his contributions to the scholarly and professional standards of and educational foundations in documentary editing, archival work, and scholarly publishing. He was a vigorous proponent of the centrality of history in the work and education of archivists and documentary editors, and he represents an important position in the formation of these disciplines, especially as the schisms between historians and archivists, and archivists and documentary editors, has weakened the preservation of our documentary heritage. My current work on Cappon examines how we study the American past and the importance of archives for this, a topic gaining renewed attention in the recent book by Francis X. Blouin, Jr., and William G. Rosenberg.<sup>29</sup> As Blouin and Rosenberg seek to identify the tensions between historians and archivists over the past century, I focus on one individual, demonstrating that leaders in these debates harbored many doubts about their professional and scholarly identities.

Cappon struggled with whether he was a historian, archivist, or a documentary editor, observing the changes in historical research brought on by the New Social History and cliometrics (changes that left him disengaged and dissatisfied). Examining Cappon's struggles reminds archivists of the difficulties of locating themselves in a still-shifting landscape of studying and preserving the past that is, to borrow from David Lowenthal, as much a foreign country as ever.<sup>30</sup> My own career has engaged me in similar soul-searching, and examining Cappon's career has been illuminating for me. I have a doctorate in library and information science, but none in history (only a master's). I am not a member of that club. I am unemployable in a history department (although I am not

<sup>27</sup> Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

<sup>28</sup> Lester J. Cappon, Barbara Bartz Petchenik, and John Hamilton Long, eds., *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760–1790* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> Blouin and Rosenberg, *Processing the Past*.

<sup>30</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

sure just how employable I would be even with such a degree), *and* I am uneasily situated in an information school surrounded by information, computer, and cognitive scientists who wonder what I do.

Cappon—along with Jenkinson, Leland, Norton, and Schellenberg (among others)—was part of a small group of individuals with backgrounds in other disciplines who were involved in the formation of the modern archival profession and its archival knowledge, theory, and practice. Cappon was the quintessential proponent of archival knowledge based on historical scholarship, and his writings are relevant more than three decades after his death. While the historical perspective Cappon brings may seem old-fashioned today, others (Brien Brothman, Terry Cook, Rand Jimerson, Tom Nesmith, and James O’Toole) argue for history as part of the conceptual and working knowledge of the archivist. Individuals coming into the archival field today bring an interest in, but not necessarily a stronger knowledge of, history, historiography, and historical method. I believe Cappon would be critical of recent developments in the educational preparation of archivists, especially centering so much of it in library and information science, or information, schools.

### ***Positioning Cappon in the Memory and Public History Spectrum***

The archival profession lacks a working memory of its own graduate education and other important matters. When I proposed editing a book of Cappon’s seminal writings on archival topics, few people recognized Cappon was despite his having been SAA president in 1957. Attending the Archival Education Research Institute (AERI),<sup>31</sup> a conference that brings together doctoral students and archives faculty each summer, I discovered that few current archives doctoral students understanding or are interested in the history of the archival profession. Every archival topic or function must be understood historically, and Cappon’s own historical orientation reminds us why this is necessary.

For Cappon, history and historical scholarship were the glue, the “common denominators,” for all historical fields, including archives and historical manuscripts work.<sup>32</sup> He believed that the connection between historical methods, historical sources, and archival work was obvious. What does such a sentiment tell us about how Cappon fits into what became “public history” (my conceptual framework for understanding Cappon)? In the 1970s, toward the end of Cappon’s life, the academic subdiscipline of public history emerged. What

<sup>31</sup> See Building the Future of Archival Education and Research, <http://aeri.gseis.ucla.edu/>, accessed 2 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Cappon used this phrase in his summary talk at the Institute on Archival and Historical Administration he ran at Radcliffe College. Cappon diaries, 2 August 1956, College of William and Mary.

attracted attention, at least from the archival community, was this movement's effort to deal with the declining employment opportunities for history graduates. It also represented an effort to apply practically the historical perspective to social, political, economic, and cultural issues. Cappon had worked as an archivist, as a scholarly editor, and in historical and cultural agencies. While he maintained connections to universities, and from time to time was interested in academic posts, his career fits within the parameters of today's public history. Although many commentators on public history look to its early antecedents, I have found no references to Lester Cappon. He seems to be forgotten.

Given this foggy past, it is essential that we revisit the archives (indeed, we need to ensure that we are preserving such archives to begin with). Archivists may be making the mistake we observe in others—to become briefly interested in our own past at anniversaries and other celebratory moments. Examining the archives of an individual like Cappon has illuminated more brightly for me the limitations of public sources in revealing our past. It worries me, first, that I am well grounded in understanding archival history and many coming into the field are not, and second, that others outside of the field are examining us while ignoring archival materials, including our literature. The recent book by Blouin and Rosenberg is an exception. Reading Cappon's diary (and other papers) provides us reasons to pay attention to both the published literature and private and public archives. I gained the following insights doing just that.

### *Glimpses into Motives and Ambitions*

In reading through Cappon's papers, we learn why he authored what he did. In early 1956, after having sent his essay on historical manuscripts as archives to the *American Archivist*,<sup>33</sup> Cappon also sent a copy of the essay to his good friend Phillip Brooks for comment. He indicated that it was a draft of "a chapter for a book on collecting and arranging historical manuscripts"<sup>34</sup> inspired by his lectures in Ernst Posner's summer archives courses at American University between 1949 and 1953. He never finished the book, but now we understand why the journal published this particular essay, which was out of step with its usual content during those years—mostly practical or personal reflections.

Cappon clarified why he did what he did in nearly every area of his life, professional and private. Examining his unpublished letters, notes, and diary entries often leads me back to a rereading of his published reviews and essays,

<sup>33</sup> Lester J. Cappon, "Historical Manuscripts as Archives: Some Definitions and Their Application," *American Archivist* 19 (April 1956): 101–10, available at Hathi Trust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015072453056>, accessed 12 November 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Cappon diaries, 18 January 1956, College of William and Mary.

allowing me to see more clearly his attitudes and perceptions. It is a reminder of why archives are important in understanding our past.

### ***Personal Archives***

Archivists have become more interested in our digital age in personal archives. Cappon's archives reminds us of what we could acquire from a previous generation, and it reveals the sensitivity of this historian toward his own records. The diary was the centerpiece of his system of personal recordkeeping. He used diary entries to help him label photographs taken on various trips, plan new trips, and identify hotels to stay in and sites to revisit. How Cappon utilized his diary for personal purposes offers many insights into his life and career, attitudes about the archival and historical communities, and his perspectives on archiving his own papers. In early 1963, Cappon writes about cleaning out personal files at the institute office, noting that he was "inclined to keep everything in true pack-rat spirit. When in doubt, I *don't* throw papers away."<sup>35</sup> In the personal reflections of this man who made interesting speculations about archival appraisal, we find a description that anyone, anywhere, could have written. Perhaps it affirms our notion that much of what makes up archival knowledge is good old-fashioned common sense.

At times the diary is a not just a record of memory but also a source of entertainment. While in Williamsburg attending a dinner party in 1979 with old friends, Cappon recounts that "after the dessert I read some passages from my diary of 1961—local events and incidents that sparked a succession of reminiscences by my guests and much laughter. Now the past of 18 years ago was partially relived. Thus the party turned out to be quite a merry occasion."<sup>36</sup> I am sure that he would be pleased that today we are reading from his diary to make this session a merry occasion as well.

### ***Telling It Like It Is: Candid Assessments***

People close their personal papers sometimes because they contain private assessments that they would not make in public. While Cappon always intended for his diary to be read, he didn't want this to be done while those named were still alive. For example, Cappon records interrupting a research project to write a letter of appreciation for Solon J. Buck when he was retiring and then confides to his diary that he was a "difficult" and "irritating" man to work with.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Cappon diaries, 23 February 1963, College of William and Mary.

<sup>36</sup> Cappon diaries, 4 November 1979, College of William and Mary.

<sup>37</sup> Cappon Diaries, 29 July 1954, College of William and Mary.

Cappon did not just make candid assessments about others, he also made them about himself. The main reason for his diary was to push himself as hard as he could. At age seventy-seven, Cappon was still working, albeit at a more deliberate pace, chiding himself to get various projects completed. He left incomplete more projects than he finished, but then again this is the norm for many scholars and professionals. In the midst of the daunting technical, legal, fiscal, and cultural challenges archivists face, why else would I spend so much time researching and reflecting about someone who has been dead for thirty years?

### ***Professional Identity***

Many archivists have entered the field as much by accident or necessity as for some visionary purpose. This has changed somewhat with the explosion of graduate archival education programs, but not as much as some would like. Cappon's entire career was marked by such soul-searching, with the only consistent feature being his love for history and his belief in its importance. Today, as history fades from centrality in archival work, has anything replaced it?

While he practiced sound records management, for example, Cappon basically hated it because of its focus on techniques. Cappon also wrote ample diary passages criticizing historians who were disinclined to understand or support archives, documentary editors who were sloppy in their work, and scholarly publishers who offered poor design and production. Cappon viewed himself as a reformer, but taking this position made him uncertain about his own professional orientation. And, in this uncertainty, we detect much of what has befallen archivists and public historians.

### ***Human Touches and Memory***

Cappon's diary writing shifts decidedly over the quarter of a century that he maintained it. At first it is easy to see him using the diary to goad himself to greater productivity. As he aged, however, the diary seems to have become primarily a device for remembering. Sometimes, for example, minor events triggered poignant memories for Cappon, and he used his diary to reflect on their significance to him. In late 1970, he remembered his long-dead dog, churning up other memories of his lost family (his wife and daughter). These kinds of entries abound in his diaries, providing a human portrait of Cappon that is less visible in his other personal papers and underscoring the importance of the diary for him. They also help me understand the peaks and valleys of his own productivity; in one brief span of time his daughter committed suicide, his wife died of a brain tumor, and his beloved dog died.



### **Other Characteristics**

If I had more time, I could emphasize other features of Cappon's archives. For example, he was a mimic, modeling his journals "journals (with small volumes tipped into them), which he reproduced and sent to friends and others who accompanied him on trips, after those of Western explorers, naturalists, and scientists. One of Cappon's own personal research and collecting interests concerned the Lewis and Clark expedition, and he used his diary as a record of his own journeys and collecting adventures. Some of his acquisitions formed the basis of published essays and lectures.

Cappon was quite committed to ensuring that archivists understood their own past, something in which we see increasing interest today, especially buoyed by memory studies and other analyses of documentary forms. But Cappon was also interested in his own memory. In 1979, Cappon jotted this comment about the SAA annual meeting:

The final sessions of the SAA were held this morning, but two days of it were sufficient for me. The membership now totals about 4,000 and attendance at the convention this year, about 1,000, set a new high record. The programs have become so elaborate that there is something for everyone and perhaps more than enough. I looked for the surviving old-timers of 40 years ago and found only Oliver W. Holmes. He doesn't seem to be very alert and responsive. I asked him about Ernst Posner, now living in Germany, with whom Oliver corresponds but his reply was not informative. Most of the historical editors, whose projects are supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, are historians rather than archivists, or seldom both, and do not attend meetings of archivists.<sup>38</sup>

When I look around, I certainly see fewer old friends here than I did in 1978, my first meeting.

While Cappon's diary, and the existence of other personal papers, is a testament to his steadfastness in leaving behind a record of his career and the early profession, his archives are also a record of multiple failures. A careful reading of Cappon's papers provides a litany of projects he never finished, including a history of documentary editing, an edition of the Jared Sparks journals, a manual on archives and manuscripts collecting, and a collection of essays on the making of the early American atlas. Cappon left far more unfinished than he completed, and perhaps that is the legacy of being a pioneer. When there is a blank slate, no matter what is accomplished still much remains to do.

<sup>38</sup> Cappon diaries, 28 September 1979, College of William and Mary. This was the only occasion when I met Cappon (it was my second SAA meeting).

### Conclusion

What do I principally walk away with as a result of my research into Cappon? In representing the generation of founders of the archival profession, he was not necessarily confident about the professional identity of either archivists or documentary editors. But he was confident about the value, the centrality, of history for archival work. What are archivists now confident about?

One area of common ground between today's public historians and Cappon is a concern about the separation between historians and archivists. Cappon matured in this context, and he spent sixty years trying to change it. Even at the end of his life, Cappon could not come to grips with the emphasis on the technical rather than the humanistic aspects of archival work, but reversing the lack of understanding of archives by historians and other scholars was a lifelong crusade and a feature of his own scholarly and professional work. That he carried out much of his work and pursued his own agenda targeted at a larger audience outside of academe made him a pioneer in what became public history. Today he would be appalled, I think, to see the many specialized archival associations, focused on institutional type or documentary form, splintering archivists not just from historians, but from other archivists.

Finally, there is another reason why we need to do studies like this. In the Blouin-Rosenberg study about the position of history in the archival field and the archival turn, Cappon is seen as a historian who had some influence within the archival community. But Blouin and Rosenberg paint their portrait in very broad strokes, losing much that helps us to understand someone like Cappon. But theirs is an important book that every doctoral student in archives *must* read and every master's student preparing to practice archivy *ought* to read (but probably won't). It portrays archivists moving farther and farther away from their historian colleagues as they grapple with the new demands of cyberspace. Cappon would have lamented this shift.

While Blouin and Rosenberg imply that it is archivists who have drifted away from history, they do not consider why historians do not embrace stronger graduate archival education. Examining Cappon in a microscopic fashion suggests that the relationship between historians and archivists is more complex. Cappon died in 1981, at the very moment of the birth and adoption of the personal computer, suggesting a more complicated story. Examining the archives of our pioneers, especially those like Cappon who straddled archives and history, gives us the essential look under the hood that more sweeping studies such as produced by Blouin and Rosenberg cannot. Their book ought to inspire new monographic studies. Hopefully it will.