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Documenting diversity: developing special collections of underdocumented groups

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Abstract

This article explores the theoretical and practical developments in documentation planning for acquiring archival manuscript material of under-documented topics. The author examines the emergence of documentation planning theory in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to historians' and archivists' calls regarding the lack of historical records related to racial and ethnic groups, women, the working class, and the lives of ordinary people. Heeding this call, archivists initiated programs to assist repositories in identifying and selecting materials that present a more balanced historical record. The author concludes by assessing one repository's experience with collecting records on under-documented topics and suggesting a model for other special collection libraries and archival repositories. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Acquisitions; Collection development; Documentation; Special libraries; Special collections

1. Introduction

1.1. Documentation projects

The main responsibility of an archivist is to preserve historical records of enduring value that present an accurate and balanced representation of the past. These records contain evidence of the past, serve to document important events and individuals, and are a means by which we pass our culture from one generation to the next. The methods that archivists use to identify records of historical value are varied and sometimes haphazard resulting in an

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incomplete historical record. In the last two decades, efforts have been made to broaden the scope of archival collections. This article will describe the work of the New York State Archives Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) that awards grants to collect records documenting the under-documented and that of the University at Albany, SUNY which has completed a number of DHP documentation projects in the last 15 years.

1.2. Background

At the 1970 Society of American Archivists (SAA) meeting, attendees listened to historian Howard Zinn as he advocated that archivists should focus collection development work on not only the elites of society, but on documenting “the lives, desires, and needs of ordinary people.” Others at the meeting agreed that archival repositories lacked significant documentation on the working class, women, African Americans and other minority groups [1]. In the early 1970s, Gerald Ham and Gould Colman pointed to the inadequate efforts at documenting the whole of society, arguing that too many repositories collected only the records of the elite. Colman, credited with introducing the concept of documentation, noted that too many resources were devoted to collecting the records of government, at the expense of preserving records of groups outside the mainstream, documenting cultural developments, and the lives of ordinary people [2]. In Europe, archival theory was also undergoing a transformation, as Hans Booms advocated for a structured “documentation plan” leading to the selection of a systematic and balanced historical record. He argued that bringing together archivists, scholars, and record creators would improve the selection of historically valuable records from the vast amounts being created by government and society [3]. In addition to the calls by historians and archivists for a more balanced historical record, other reasons for coordinated collecting efforts include:

- New research initiated by social and cultural historians,
- Cultural revolutions of the 1960s leading to a push to document the under-documented,
- Lack of institutional records programs in many communities to deal with increasing quantities of records, and
- Concern by the archival profession over increases in the number of records created.

More and more, members of racial and ethnic communities, women, and the working class wanted to know about their past, yet archivists were ill-prepared to provide resources. The new interest in the history of groups outside the American mainstream indicated to the archival profession that collections were lacking to support this research. These issues pointed to an obvious, but un-answered question - how were archivists to decide which portions of the vast historical record should be preserved?

Building on library collection development theory, documentation strategy emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s as a new concept used to improve the techniques and efficiency of identifying and selecting records, thereby presenting a broader and more representative historical record. Emulating the work of library bibliographers, documentation strategy focuses on an analysis of the collection, setting goals and priorities for acquiring resources, planning for acquisition of new collections, and cooperating with the efforts of other institutions. To accomplish these goals, a documentation project involves a partnership

between records creators, archivists, and users of historical records to identify significant events and themes, as well as providing contacts with community leaders and holders of historical records. Andrea Hinding argued that to document a topic or community fully, an archivist must understand the key people and events, thereby selecting materials that are significant and representative [4]. In an ideal sense, a documentation plan provides a theoretical basis for the selection of archival materials that extends the concept of collection development while attempting to determine “what the ideal documentation of a particular topic or region should look like [5].” Over the past 20 years, archivists have experimented with documentation strategy hoping to improve on the selection of historical collections.

2. New York State Archives Documentary Heritage Program (DHP)

In a recent issue of the *American Archivist*, H. Thomas Hickerson outlined the ten most pressing challenges facing the archival profession. Hickerson’s sixth challenge to the profession was to “expand the scope of our collection development priorities [6].” He singled out the cooperative work of the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board and the New York State Archives in “broadening the documentation of overlooked aspects of the state’s programs, organizations, and people [7].” Hickerson lauded the past work of the New York State Archives to strengthen the state’s historical records programs, particularly its role in collecting records on under-documented topics.

In 1984, the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board issued a report of its findings from a statewide assessment of records repositories. Based on discussions with over five hundred non-government records repositories in New York State, one of the report’s major conclusions was that historical records programs were unsystematic, haphazard, and lacked coordination in their collecting activities. New York State, it concluded, has “no regular forum for developing methodical documentation of key topical areas or geographic regions.” Furthermore, the report stated that repositories holding records relating to “women, Blacks, and other minorities” as well as “environmental and ecological concerns” received relatively little attention [8]. The assessment recommended, “coordinated documentation strategies be developed to ensure that adequate records are preserved to document all important subjects and geographical regions.” In addition, the State Historical Records Advisory Board recommended that regional documentation strategies be developed and supported by state grant programs [9].

Following the issuance of the statewide assessment, the New York State Archives decided to experiment with a regional documentation project of six counties in Western New York. The coordinators of that project concluded that a documentation project should identify priority areas for collecting and that future projects need to involve records creators. Further, the project revealed that resources and guidelines for documentation analysis are needed to support future projects [10]. Heeding the call, the New York State Archives launched two grant programs in 1988 aimed at supporting the development of historical records programs in the state - the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF) for grants to local governments and the DHP for grants to community organizations and historical records repositories. While LGRMIF focused on strengthening records programs in

city and county government agencies, the DHP provided grants to not-for-profit archives, libraries, historical societies, museums, and other programs that collect, hold, and make available non-government historical records. DHP was established to ensure the identification, sound administration, and accessibility of New York's historical records, focusing on topics deemed under-documented in the 1984 report. The DHP has funded many types of documentation and processing projects, but priority is given to those projects focusing on the following under-documented areas:

- New population groups in the twentieth century, such as African American and Latino/a communities in New York State,
- De-industrialization and economic revitalization in the twentieth century,
- History of mental health and public health, and
- Environmental affairs and natural resources [11].

The University at Albany and other repositories have used this model for under-documented topics developed by the New York State Archives. For example, in 1998, Northeastern University Libraries began a two-year NHPRC grant project to identify, locate, secure, and make accessible the most important and at-risk historical records of Boston's African American, Chinese, gay and lesbian, and Latino communities, borrowing much of their documentation planning framework and strategy from the New York State Archive's experience [12].

3. University at Albany, Archives of Public Affairs and Policy (APAP)

On the heels of the newly created DHP, the University at Albany Special Collections & Archives began conducting documentation projects focusing on developing historical record collections of under-documented topics, with much of the funding for these projects obtained from the NYS DHP. In 1983, the Department of Special Collections and Archives of the University at Albany, created the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy (APAP) to collect, preserve, and make available the papers and records of individuals and organizations concerned with New York State public policy in the twentieth century. As the capital, Albany is home to many statewide political interest groups. The purpose of APAP was not only to collect the records to support research of these groups, but also to document a significant aspect of the region's history. Initial efforts to develop APAP focused on creating a collection development policy, enlisting support from the campus community, and acquiring several appropriate collections including the papers of Eliot Lumbard, Special Assistant Counsel for Law Enforcement under Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, and the records of the National Organization of Women, New York State Chapter [13]. APAP's collecting efforts were particularly vigorous in the areas of criminal justice and New York State politics, with emphasis placed on collecting the papers of members of Governor Rockefeller's Administration. The initial efforts to build this collection focused on three broad areas:

1. Personal papers of individuals and organizations that have had a significant impact on 20th Century New York State politics and government,

2. Personal papers and organizational records documenting public policy reform and civic issues related to gender and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, and
3. Records of local and statewide public policy advocacy groups related to education, criminal justice, unions, working families, and civic issues in the Capital District. [14]

In 1988, DHP awarded the University at Albany a grant to document non-profit and private groups that study, monitor, and influence the making of public policy in New York State. In an effort to expand APAP, the grant project aimed to document an endangered and under-documented aspect of policy formation by focusing on statewide groups advocating for good government, women's issues, educational policy, criminal justice issues, and public employee unions. The grant funded two nationally recognized consultants, an archivist and a historian, as well as a graduate student to identify and survey organizations about their records. The consultants identified the directions and tendencies in the study of public policy, concluding that collecting records of special interest groups is warranted to support research on campus. In addition, they reported that no other repository in New York State was actively collecting on this topic bringing greater value to the project [15]. A graduate student hired for the project sent two hundred and thirty-one questionnaires by mail to organizations in Albany and New York City. Twenty-nine responded by mail and an additional one hundred and thirty were contacted by phone. Overall the grant project, although only funded for one year, led to close to twenty acquisitions of historically significant research collections including the records of the Family Planning Advocates of New York State, Civil Service Employee Association (CSEA), Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Correctional Association of New York State [16].

Also in 1988, in an effort to expand collecting the records of under-documented topics, the University at Albany launched the Capital District Labor History Project, a continuation of the New York Labor Documentation Project begun three years earlier at the Robert Wagner Archives at New York University (NYU). Funded by the New York State Legislature, the Wagner Archives surveyed over four hundred organizations in NYC between 1985 and 1988, resulting in a substantial collection of union and labor records. In 1988, the University at Albany, along with Cornell University and the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, began surveying the rest of New York State. The Capital District Labor History Project provided funds for a full-time Project Archivist to survey the three hundred private sector and five hundred and fifty public sector unions that existed in the "Albany District," the NY Department of Labor's geographic definition of the area from the mid-Hudson Valley to the Canadian border, and as far west as Utica, NY [17].

Initially, the Capital District Labor History Project created an Advisory Board of archivists, labor historians, and regional labor union officials to establish collecting priorities, provide contacts with labor organizations, and generate publicity about the project. A Project Archivist was hired to identify labor unions in the region and mail descriptions of the project and records surveys to 850 unions. As with other documentation projects, few responded to the survey, but it did allow the project team to introduce the project to record holders. For many reasons, people are reluctant to respond to record surveys either because they do not have the time or, more often, because of their unfamiliarity with the nature of archival work. Significant time is spent with potential donors of records to educate them about why and how

historical records are deposited in an archive. Consequently, follow-up phone calls and site visits are necessary to provide the most useful data about the existence of historical records and how an archive maintains their security and accessibility. The two-year project led to the acquisition or microfilming of over forty collections. Acquisitions included the records of the Albany Typographical Union, No. 4, the first trade union in the Capital District of New York, as well as unions representing the printing trades, building and construction industry, manufacturing, and public employee unions. Records documenting the textile and glove industry and the records of IUE Local 301, the union representing the original General Electric (GE) plant in Schenectady, New York was also acquired during the project [18]. The Capital District Labor History Project resulted in the development of a valuable and growing archive of the Capital District's labor history, provided a core list of organizations for future contacts, and increased community awareness of the role of an archive in preserving historical records.

In 1990, the DHP awarded the University at Albany funding to initiate the Capital District Black History Project to document the African American community in the Capital District. Using a strategy similar to those of earlier documentation projects, the Capital District Black History Project formed an Advisory Board and hired a Project Archivist. The Project Archivist mailed records surveys, conducted follow-up with phone calls, and, in many cases, conducted in-person records assessments. The project, spread over two years, identified close to sixty African American organizations and churches in the five counties in and around the Capital District. The project experienced difficulties with staff turnover, resulting in a failure to actively follow-up on possible accessions. However, the project reinforced the idea that maintaining close contact between archivists and record holders leads to successful documentation projects as eight collections were acquired, including the records of the NAACP chapters in Albany and Schenectady, and of African American women's groups including the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs founded in 1908 [19]. The Project staff learned some useful lessons about documentation projects, not the least of which is that networking with prominent members of the community is vital in building historical record collections of a region. A good start is to create an Advisory Board that represents a wide variety of viewpoints and perspectives for the project [20]. Another effective technique is to work with a timetable that meets the needs of the community. At the very least, the University at Albany's documentation projects have shown that educating and advising records creators about what and how to preserve their historical records leads to the development of a stronger and more balanced documentary record of the past.

The University at Albany slowed down its collecting efforts in the mid-1990s due to lack of storage space and the need for an additional faculty member who could focus on documentation initiatives. In 1999, the University Libraries created a new curator position and the Special Collections and Archives moved into a new library building. With the increased space and additional staff, great strides have been made in acquiring new collections by following up on leads identified in earlier DHP grant surveys for public policy groups, African American organizations, and labor groups mentioned above. A long-term goal of a documentation project is to maintain contacts with important members of the community. Many holders of historical records cannot work within the timetable of a grant, so it is important to maintain contacts, since it might be many years after an initial contact

is made before a collection is acquired. The University at Albany efforts to document New York State public policy reform aimed at gender issues, ethnic groups, and criminal justice issues has been expanded to include records of gay and lesbian activists, environmental advocates, and mental health groups. In 2000, the Capital District Labor History Project received additional funding to contact unions identified earlier and conducted a survey project to collect records beyond those unions, including records that document the struggles of retired workers and senior citizens, the work of social welfare and housing advocates, cultural aspects of the labor movement, and policy reform organizations that advocate for working class families.

In keeping with the New York State Archive's priorities for under-documented topics, the University at Albany was awarded a documentation grant in 2001 to identify record holders relating to the environmental and conservation movement in the Capital District. Recently, we have acquired the records of the Environmental Advocates (EA), an environmental lobbyist group that dates from the late 1960s. Our experience with past documentation projects has produced some useful conclusions about strategies and approaches to strengthening New York State's historical documentation.

4. Recommendations based on the Albany experience

The following outline contains basic guidelines in developing a documentation plan. The guidelines are based on five documentation projects conducted during the last fifteen years by the University.

4.1. Define a topic and determine existing documentation

The first step in a documentation plan is to define a topic and establish a regional focus. Staff should complete background research on the topic by asking the following questions:

- What is the state of available documentation in the region?
- What are the recent research trends?
- Are there any institutions currently collecting materials in this topic? If so, is collaboration possible?
- Who are the significant groups, organizations, and individuals for the topic or region?
- What are the key issues, events, and developments in the community?
- Can the institution handle the storage and processing of records so they are accessible in a timely fashion?

When choosing a topic, one must think of anthropological categories of human endeavor. One of the results of the Western New York documentation project described earlier was the utilization of anthropological categories of human activity including: Agriculture, Arts and Architecture; Business, Industry, and Manufacturing; Education; Environmental Affairs and Natural Resources; Labor; Medicine and Health Care; Military, Politics, Government and Law; Populations; Recreation and Leisure; Religion; Science and Technology; Social Organization and Activity; and Transportation and Communications [21]. More precise local

and regional definitions will fall under these categories once consultation with local subject experts and records creators is completed. However, these broad categories serve as a starting point for repositories in assessing the current state of documentation in a particular region, as archivists and curators identify and assess the importance of particular collections, and decide where to look for documentation of important topics that are not well represented in the current historical record. In New York's case, DHP has commissioned historical surveys and documentation plans for under-documented topics, assisting repositories in documentation efforts. Once important regional events and issues are defined within these categories, the work of identifying potential record holders can begin

4.2. Select advisory board and establish project goals

A significant component of any documentation project is locating records of enduring value. This is facilitated through the formation of an advisory board that includes archivists, record creators, and subject specialists. The role of an advisory board is to bring together people with historical knowledge of a region, provide contacts to record holders, discuss the parameters and gaps in the documentary record, identify important events or issues, and to cement the trust between the donor and the repository. Vital to a successful documentation project is the willingness of the project staff to network with community leaders. This is done through the advisory board. An advisory board will be especially useful for those engaged in collecting papers of politicians, public servants, and political parties, and also in developing a trust with labor unions, African American organizations, and other political action groups. The goal is to build a relationship with donors through the board, thereby gaining their trust so they are assured that their papers will be preserved. In addition to the subject specialists on an Advisory Board, it is useful to maintain contacts with graduate students doing historical research on regional topics. This holds true especially for oral historians who may come into contact with a person who has knowledge of an event, but may also have kept documentation. In addition to enlisting the support of relevant community members, the project team should generate publicity about the project in local newspapers.

4.3. Contact potential record holders about available documentation

Based on work of the Advisory Board, the project team, usually consisting of a project director and project archivist, can compile a directory of contacts or individuals who might possess archival documentation. One effective strategy would be for the project archivist to send a cover letter and records survey form to potential record holders. The cover letter introduces the project to potential donors and the survey lists the types of records considered archival. Many people are reluctant to return the records survey because they either do not have the time or because they do not understand or are unfamiliar with the nature of archival work. Therefore, the project staff may need to conduct follow-up phone calls or enlist the help of advisory board members. In many cases, an average of ten to twelve phone calls will be made to eventually set up an appointment for a site visit [22]. The project archivist needs to develop networking techniques to meet and gain the trust of significant community

members. These include phone calls, site visits, and attending board or membership meetings, anniversary celebrations, or other special events.

4.4. Schedule site assessments to examine potential acquisitions and educate

Considerable time will be spent educating potential donors about the importance of their records, how and why a researcher might use their records, and how access is provided. Many organizations have records containing personal or private information, so it is important to gain their trust that the records will be used in a scholarly manner. Although groups may have significant unused records that are endangered by being stored in a basement or attic, their members may still be wary about giving them away.

For many reasons, some organizations are not ready to commit to a documentation project, so the project team must be persistent but patient. Many organizations that were contacted more than ten years ago are only now able, for various reasons, to schedule a visit from an archivist to examine potential acquisitions. Since the University at Albany has spent considerable time on documentation projects, it is interesting to note responses to appeals to preserve their records. Some of the issues raised by record holders include:

1. No time or staff to allocate to records management, especially true for non-profit groups
2. Organizations and individuals are concerned about gaining access to their own materials, believing that an archive is closed to all but a select few
3. Donors are unsure about how records are used by researchers
4. Concerns that a competitor may gain access to their records
5. Believing that their records have no long-term value, many records are destroyed or lost
6. In some cases, former organization leaders have documentation stored in their home and contacting them is difficult
7. In general most people are unfamiliar with the archival profession, indicating a need to educate the public about the role of an archive in documenting a community's history

On the other hand, many organizations are glad that we are able to assist in documenting their history. The University at Albany has acquired over one hundred and twenty-five collections of historical significance in the last fifteen years.

5. Conclusion

Based on the past fifteen years of work collecting records on under-documented topics, the University at Albany Libraries has learned valuable lessons in documentation planning. The past work has led to the acquisition of several important collections and the development of potential contacts for the future. The University at Albany's experience can help guide other libraries and archives as they develop similar programs.

It is clear that the historical narrative will continue to include new voices. In 1998, the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board issued a follow-up to its 1984 report

outlining its future priority and goals. The 1998 report stated that there “remains significant gaps in the documentation of New York State” and that the New York State Archives will continue to identify under-documented businesses, communities, and groups” [23]. What about the records of the disability rights movement, senior citizen issues, non-union labor force, poor people’s movements, new regional ethnic groups, or the growing computer and electronic culture? Historians and archivists have a common goal - to preserve and make accessible the records documenting a community’s history - and need to work together to ensure that a balanced and well-represented narrative is written and that the story of a rich and diverse society is told.

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