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Archival Priorities: Ten Critical Issues for the Profession

Randall C. Jimerson

THE ARCHIVAL PROFESSION: IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

The most striking feature of the American archival profession in recent years is its ongoing search for identity and for public acceptance as a socially significant profession. Many of the important developments in the field since the early 1980s have either derived from or eventually contributed to this quest for professional identity and recognition. At times this has stirred passionate debates over the nature of American archives, the role of archivists in society, the relationship between archives and other professions, and the education necessary for archivists, among other topics.¹

The search for professional identity has led American archivists to develop external initiatives to increase public aware-

* This article is revised from the keynote address given at the Society of Georgia Archivists annual meeting, November 4, 2004.

¹There is substantial literature on the issues discussed in this paper. For the professional debates on these issues I refer the reader to the variety of archival monographs, journals, newsletters, and listserv messages on these topics, particularly in the past four or five years.

ness of archival resources and services, partly in order to obtain increased funding and higher salaries. Within the profession there have been initiatives to improve standards of archival practice. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these efforts have often been closely related to underlying goals of increasing professionalism and gaining public recognition. This process of professionalization has had three broad manifestations: developing internal standards for professional recognition; enhancing the public image of archives and archivists; and strengthening the research and theoretical foundations of the profession.

Ever since the Society of American Archivists (SAA) emerged as a professional association in 1936, American archivists and manuscript curators have tried to define their professional mission and identity. Started by historians, the archival profession began early to forge its separate roles in two distinct but important areas: protecting the legal, administrative, and historical records of organizations, and preserving documentary evidence of cultural heritage and social memory.

In the first arena, archivists have worked diligently to protect the rights and privileges of citizens, employees, and consumers, and have held public officials, corporate executives, union leaders, and others accountable for their actions. Archivists ensure the authenticity of documentary records, provide security for vital evidence, and enable the public to enjoy access to records that affect their rights and privileges. They must negotiate the often thorny dilemmas of providing open access to information while protecting the legitimate privacy concerns of individuals, the rights of business and the private sector, and the national security interests of government.

In preserving cultural heritage, archivists share responsibility with librarians, museum curators, and other information professionals. The primary sources—manuscripts as well as archives—that archivists preserve are often unique and irreplaceable, making conservation and security high priorities. These needs must be balanced by the requirement to make such vital information freely available to the greatest possible number of people. In an age of increasing automation, archivists have to be savvy about the technology of recordkeeping and access.

TEN CRITICAL ISSUES FOR AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

In this professional environment I have identified ten critical issues facing the archival profession in the United States in the coming years. Some of these issues are direct or indirect challenges to archival identity and relevance in modern society. Others are opportunities for action, or recommendations for increased emphasis in our professional priorities. None of these are “new” issues, but they represent the concerns that should be foremost in our profession’s preparation for the future. Together, these are the “megatrends” or new directions that are transforming our archives.²

1. HOW WE DEFINE “ARCHIVES” AND “RECORDS” WILL SHAPE OUR RESPONSE TO PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

After several decades in which the purposes, perspectives, and techniques of archivists and manuscript curators have grown closer, some archivists have recently begun advocating a more rigid and narrow definition of the profession. They argue that the term archives should only apply to records created as a result of formal business transactions, not to private papers or manuscripts. This would strengthen the professionalism of archivists by emphasizing their specialized knowledge, but it would drive a wedge within an already small profession. My personal hope is that the profession will continue to embrace a broader definition of archives as all records and documents having long-term value for society and for individual citizens. Archives encompass both records of evidence and accountability and documents of historical and cultural significance. A narrower definition negates much of the importance of our professional endeavors.

2. POSTMODERNISM CHALLENGES THE NEUTRAL AND “OBJECTIVE” ROLE OF ARCHIVISTS

The recent discourse on postmodern archives challenges traditional perceptions of the role of archivists more fundamentally than any theoretical shift since the recognition, more than a generation ago, that archives are not valuable only for their historical content, but also for their legal and administrative value. Traditional archival theory defines the archivist as a neu-

² This term is taken from John Naisbitt’s *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, (New York: Warner Books, 1982).

tral party interested in preserving the authenticity, reliability, and impartiality of records. Some archivists are now contesting these assumptions, using postmodern theory to underscore the imprint of archivists in shaping the historical record and playing an active part in mediation between archives and users. As this discourse plays out, I suspect we will gain a deeper appreciation for the role of archivists and the impact of our collective and individual decisions about archival selection, appraisal, description, and reference. In doing so, my hope is that we will seek to overcome the long-standing bias in favor of documenting the powerful groups in society and attempt a broader documentation of all people. "Archives for all" should be our mantra.

We should embrace the power of archives. Archivists are *not* handmaidens of history, passive guardians of cultural treasures, or gatekeepers limiting access to endangered documents. As recent writers discussing the implications for archivists of postmodern thinking have declared, archivists play an active and essential role in shaping the contents of our repositories, in interpreting them (through finding aids, for example), and in either encouraging or limiting various types of access to "our" records.

This power carries a solemn obligation to use it wisely, to acknowledge that neutrality and objectivity are desirable but unattainable in a pure form, and to ensure that archives protect the public interest rather than the privileges of the political, economic, social, or intellectual elite.³

3. DIVERSITY IS CRITICAL IN ORDER FOR THE PROFESSION AND OUR RESEARCH HOLDINGS TO DOCUMENT ALL FACETS OF SOCIETY

Archivists and museum curators comprise a largely white, middle class profession, with relatively small numbers of people from underrepresented social groups. SAA has undertaken an important diversity initiative, in response to a recent task force on diversity. These concerns need to receive prominent attention, not only to ensure that a broad array of demographic perspectives will be represented in the profession, but also to ensure that archives and manuscript collections do not neglect

³ This was the theme of my August 2005 presidential address, "Embracing the Power of Archives," presented at the SAA annual meeting, New Orleans, LA, 18 August 2005. This was presented nine months after my SGA keynote address.

minority groups in favor of the easier process of documenting the wealthy and powerful segments of society.

Our archives—either at the level of individual repositories, or at least collectively on a national level—should represent all people in our democratic society. The interests, perspectives, and stories of the common man and woman deserve to be protected and preserved, along with the records of government, business, organized labor, religious institutions, and cultural organizations. Archives can speak truth to power, but only if we ensure their voices are heard. Archives can ensure not a more diverse or more just society, but at least one in which the rights and interests of all social groups—even the most marginalized and neglected—are protected and documented. We need to heed the call made a generation ago by Jerry Ham, Howard Zinn, and others to be activists in ensuring the preservation of these unheard voices.

As a profession we have made important progress in documenting previously marginalized groups. But just as in our broader society's quest for civil rights, there remains much to be done. In August 2002 civil rights leader Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth spoke at the SAA plenary session. A slip of the tongue led him to address us not as archivists but as "activists." But he then stated that *as archivists* we should also *be activists*. We can start by reaffirming our profession's commitment to diversity. The SAA Committee on Diversity has begun an active agenda to meet its charge, derived from Council's June 1999 position statement:

The Society of American Archivists is committed to integrating diversity concerns and perspectives into all aspects of its activities and into the fabric of the profession as a whole. SAA is also committed to the goal of a Society membership that reflects the broad diversity of American society. SAA believes that these commitments are essential to the effective pursuit of the archival mission 'to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of the nation's historical record.'⁴

⁴ SAA Council, "Position Statement on Diversity," 13 June 1999: <<http://www.archivists.org/statements/diversitystatement.asp>> (accessed February 3, 2006).

My hope is that SAA and all archivists will celebrate the diversity within our profession, and commit ourselves to building an archival profession that truly and accurately reflects the diversity within our society: in our membership, in our archival programs, and in the activities of both SAA and regional archival associations.

4. ARCHIVAL HISTORY CAN PROVIDE A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN PROFESSION

One sure sign of a maturing and self-conscious profession is an enhanced awareness and concern about its own history. As archivists we need to understand our own historical development as a profession. As Bob Marley stated: "If you know your history, then you would know where you're coming from."⁵ After many years of neglect, the study of archival history, both in the United States and internationally, has made significant recent strides. The SAA Archival History Roundtable meetings have become more active and vibrant in recent years, with several formal papers presented, and lively discussion of themes in archival history. In October 2003 the First International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA) brought more than a hundred people to the University of Toronto for three days of stimulating papers and discussions. The conference featured twenty-six papers by researchers from Australia, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The second I-CHORA conference assembled in August-September 2005 in Amsterdam, with an even more extensive program of speakers from around the world.⁶ Future conferences will be held in Boston in September 2007, and in Australia in 2008. Selected papers from the first two I-CHORA conferences will be published, respectively, in *Archivaria* and *Archival Science*. This increasing focus on the history of archives and records will help archivists in understanding the roots and growth of their profession.

⁵ Bob Marley and N. G. Williams, "Buffalo Soldier," on the album *Confrontation*. (Island Records, Inc., 1983).

⁶ For details, see "I-CHORA 2: The Second International Conference on the History of Records and Archives" (online resource) <<http://i-chora2.archiefschool.nl/>> (accessed February 3, 2006).

5. NEW TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES TOOLS FOR ARCHIVAL ACCESS AND CONTROL

In addition to protecting electronic records, archivists have developed automated techniques for managing the records and providing access. The adaptation of the MARC cataloging format as one means of archival description, and subsequent development of Encoded Archival Description for online access, have substantially enhanced the means for researchers of all kinds to access archives and manuscripts. One promising development which did not meet its visionary goal was the joint U.S.-Canadian descriptive standard project called CUSTARD (Canadian-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description).⁷ The effort to develop a common North American standard of description led instead to separate revisions of United States and Canadian standards. Another recent initiative may be more successful: American archivists are now developing Encoded Archival Context as a means of providing information about the creators of records and the circumstances under which such records came into existence. In these new initiatives, archivists need to pay careful attention to the needs of users and to ensure that technology enhances rather than obscures accessibility.

6. ELECTRONIC RECORDS CHALLENGE OUR ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS FOR CONTROLLING MODERN DOCUMENTATION

The increasing reliance on electronic records in commerce, government, and even personal communications requires archivists to develop new strategies for ensuring adequate documentation of society and for ensuring the preservation and continued accessibility of those "born digital" records that have enduring value. Cooperation and communication with information technology professionals is increasingly essential. This of course is a research area of necessarily international dimensions. The InterPARES Project is an excellent model of such international and multidisciplinary cooperation. The challenge that archivists still face, it seems to me, is to translate academic models of perfection into workable standards that meet the daily operational needs of organizations.

⁷ Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), v-vi.

7. ARCHIVISTS MUST ENHANCE THEIR PUBLIC IMAGE IN ORDER TO SECURE ADEQUATE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

An SAA initiative in the 1980s focused on “Archives and Society,” and concluded that although archivists enjoyed respect and admiration for their work, their resource allocators (those who controlled funding for archival programs) perceived them as “mousy” and ineffective in commanding resources and power within their own institutions. The report prepared by Sidney Levy and Albert Robles, entitled *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators’ Perceptions* concluded:

The general public does not seem well informed about archives, their locations and their contents. The typical view among resource allocators is that the average person has only vague notions about archives. ...Traditional stereotypes that linger on even among more knowledgeable resource allocators need to be counteracted.⁸ ...In sum, archivists have an identity that is a compound of specific abilities and attractions, somewhat vaguely conceptualized in the minds of others and burdened by unexciting stereotypical elements. To improve their situation, archivists need to define more coherent identity objectives, and communicate greater freshness and distinctiveness in imagery by their training, programs, self-assertion, publicity, advertising, and relevance to modern life.⁹

It is time for a renewed focus on these concerns, in order to educate the public about the importance and power embedded in archival records. We need to renew our efforts at public outreach and increasing public understanding of archives and what we do. I am currently developing a proposal for SAA to create a new task force to examine these concerns and recommend actions that SAA can take to build on the ideas generated in the 1980s. This will employ data gathered by the A*CENSUS project, which in 2003 surveyed over eleven thousand archivists

⁸ Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators’ Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984), 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, v.

in the United States, developing valuable data that we can use in future planning and programs.

8. PUBLIC ADVOCACY IS ESSENTIAL TO ENSURE OUR RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

In order to protect citizens' rights and the integrity of archives, we must forge a stronger alliance and partnership for public advocacy. With that goal in mind, I chaired a session at the American Historical Association annual meeting in Seattle in January 2005 on the topic of "Public Advocacy for Archives, Museums, and Documentary Editing." As the proposal for this session stated:

Historians rely on archives and artifacts for much of their research and evidence. So do all citizens. As a recent proposal for increased federal support for state and local history organizations points out: "Our democratic form of government relies on a public grounded in knowledge of our nation's past and skilled at using that knowledge to make reasoned decisions about our nation's future direction. It is our commitment to keeping honest records—archives—that preserves the rights of individuals and assures that governments and other institutions perform in the public interest."

When funding and support for archives, museums, and documentary editions proves inadequate to meet the needs of both academic and non-academic researchers, public advocacy becomes an essential tool for educating political leaders, institutional administrators, and the public about the importance of documents and artifacts for all members of society. Although the priorities of archivists, museum curators, and documentary editors sometimes differ, experience demonstrates the importance of collaboration and mutual support in achieving our common goals. . . .

Neglect and poor funding still threaten the loss of documents and artifacts in many states and cities. Another area of challenge and concern is with misuse and inadequate access to those records and artifacts that do exist. Recent advocacy concerns have included excessive se-

crecy regarding access to public documents, excessive classification restrictions for many government records, access limits to papers of former presidents and other elected officials, and concerns about intellectual property rights.

In almost every successful advocacy initiative the combined forces of many groups concerned about the nation's historical documents and artifacts have worked toward a common objective.¹⁰

There are three agenda issues regarding advocacy efforts by historians and archivists in this statement:

1. Funding concerns for archives, including the National Archives and Records Administration and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.
2. Opposition to secrecy in respect to public records.
3. Concerns about open access to records, particularly government records subject to security classification, privacy legislation, and freedom of information.

In addition to these issues, another significant concern emerged in 2004: the attempt by the Bush Administration to nominate a new Archivist of the United States without public hearings or professional review of his qualifications. On April 8, 2004 the White House announced that Archivist of the United States John Carlin would step down and that President Bush would nominate historian Allen Weinstein as the new Archivist. This action appeared to violate the independent and non-partisan nature of the position of Archivist of the United States. Twenty-five professional organizations, including AHA, OAH, ALA, and other national and regional groups, joined with SAA in issuing a public statement:

When former President Ronald Reagan signed the *National Archives and Records Administration Act of 1984*, he said that, "the materials that the Archives safeguards are precious and irreplaceable national treasures and the agency that looks after the historical records of the Fed-

¹⁰ AHA session proposal, in author's possession.

eral Government should be accorded a status that is commensurate with its important responsibilities.”

[The law] clearly states that, “The Archivist shall be appointed without regard to political affiliations and solely on the basis of the professional qualifications required to perform the duties and responsibilities of the office of Archivist.”¹¹

In an April 15 editorial entitled “The Haunted Archives,” *The Nation* stated:

The national archivist is crucial in a democratic society: He preserves our history and makes government records available to the public. He should also serve as an advocate for greater openness. ... Bush’s move is part of a larger pattern of expanded White House secrecy... It’s true that all Presidents want to control access to their papers, but it’s the responsibility of the archivist to see that access is “free, open, equal, and nondiscriminatory...”¹²

Weinstein gained confirmation as Archivist of the United States in February 2005. He has since worked closely with leaders of SAA, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, and the Council of State Archivists to seek collaboration among archival organizations.

Why should we care about who serves as Archivist of the United States? How does it affect us? Control of the documentary record, with the power to alter or suppress the truth about governmental actions, threatens the very basis of democratic society. As George Orwell warned in *1984*, “Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.”¹³ As public citizens we must demand that the National

¹¹ SAA, “Statement on the Nomination of Allen Weinstein to Become Archivist of the United States,” 14 April 2004 (online resource) <<http://www.archivists.org/statements/weinstein.asp>> (accessed February 3, 2006).

¹² “The Haunted Archives.” Editorial. *The Nation* (15 April 2004) v. 278, no. 17: 3 and 4; (online resource) <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040503/editors>> (accessed February 24, 2006).

¹³ Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109. Quoting George Orwell, *1984*.

Archives and Records Administration remain a non-partisan body, led by people dedicated to the public's democratic rights.

9. ACCESS TO RECORDS IS ESSENTIAL, BUT RECENT POLITICAL ACTIONS THREATEN THIS RIGHT OF ALL CITIZENS

In the heightened anxiety about homeland security and terrorist threats, the White House has launched an extensive and broad assault on First Amendment freedoms and the public's right to know what government agencies are doing. Archivists and librarians must continue to speak out against such unwarranted invasions of public interests, and to educate the public about the importance of access to public records. This problem has deepened in the past decade, particularly under the current administration. As I wrote in a letter published in *US News and World Report* on January 26, 2004:

On behalf of the Society of American Archivists, I congratulate you on publishing "Keeping Secrets," which reveals the Bush administration's ongoing efforts to hide records from the public. Open access to government records is the hallmark of democratic government. It is vital to protect the rights and privileges of each citizen. As professionals charged with ensuring adequate documentation of actions by government and other organizations, archivists recognize the necessity of holding our leaders accountable. Our democratic institutions depend on accurate records and public access to such information. The rationales presented by Bush administration officials to withhold records from public scrutiny eerily echo the Nixon administration's arguments during the Watergate scandals. Such policies threaten the public interest. The freedom which we claim to represent depends on an informed citizenry. As such we must demand the overturn of recent administration policies which cloak our public servants' actions in secrecy.¹⁴

These are ongoing concerns of the highest priority for all citizens of democratic societies. As archivists, part of our profes-

¹⁴ Randall C. Jimerson, letter to editor, *US News & World Report* (26 January 2004): 10; (online resource) <<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/040126/26lett.htm>> (accessed February 24, 2006).

sional responsibility is to ensure accountability of public figures, corporate executives, and university presidents.

10. COOPERATION WITH RELATED PROFESSIONS PROVIDES STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

None of these public advocacy initiatives or concerns can be fully addressed without renewed and active cooperation among the various information professionals. Archivists need to strengthen their ties with librarians, historians, records managers, museum professionals, government records keepers, information technology experts, and many other allied professionals. This was one reason for the interdisciplinary panel of archivists, historians, editors, and museum curators at the AHA meeting in January 2005. It is also why SAA has begun holding joint Council meetings with the leaders of the National Association of Government Archivists and Records Administrators and the Council of State Archivists. Rather than competing for slices of a small pie, we must cooperate in the effort to provide a more bountiful repast for all who labor to ensure the documentary heritage of society. We must work together, for we shall all struggle to survive if we continue to work independently of each other.

ISSUES CONFRONTING MEMBERS OF THE PROFESSION

This is a long list and an ambitious agenda. These ten critical issues relate, in one way or another, to the SAA strategic priorities that are currently being developed and revised as the basis for the archival profession's action agenda. The three broad strategic issues identified by SAA focus on the challenges posed by changing technology, the need for diversity in American archives, and the limited public awareness of archival issues.¹⁵

These broad issues affecting the profession also suggest important implications for individual archivists and manuscript curators. Some of the concerns addressed above will have immediate impact on many, perhaps most, archivists and manuscript curators in the United States. Using technological tools such as MARC and EAD, or negotiating the sometimes-treacherous shoals of providing equitable access to manuscripts and archives, loom on the near horizon if they have not already reached our personal workplaces. Other issues will affect only a

¹⁵ Randall C. Jimerson, "The Archival 'Radar Screen': Strategic Issues Identified by SAA Council," *Archival Outlook* (July/August 2005): 5.

small number now, but more people a decade hence. Preserving electronic records or considering the issues of professional identity and definition, diversity, and public image may fall in this category. As individuals, as well as collectively, however, we ignore these concerns at our peril. Successfully fulfilling our professional responsibilities requires attention to these matters. We cannot survive without such awareness.

However, there are some concerns that we face on the job that differ from the broad perspective of the profession. In our daily work we must find adequate money, time, and resources to keep the door open and the lights on. We have to schedule reference desk time, processing and description, acquisition, preservation, and planning. Our backlogs always threaten to grow out of control, and researchers of all types require assistance. There never seems to be enough time to get through the piles of papers or the daily requirements of our work.

Despite these daily struggles, it is essential for all of us whose work involves caring for archives and manuscripts to keep an eye on the horizon. We need the broad view to see what direction we are heading and to ensure that we reach our destinations safely. We need to know not only where we are coming from, as Bob Marley stated, but also where we are going. As individual archivists, this will require learning new techniques, new professional concepts, and new strategies for success. It is part of our lifelong learning. As a profession, it is essential for our success and indeed for our very survival.

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