

January 1975

## Career Expectations and Opportunities in Archives

Robert D. Cook

*South Carolina Department of Archives and History*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia\\_archive](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive)



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cook, Robert D., "Career Expectations and Opportunities in Archives," *Georgia Archive* 3 no. 1 (1975) .

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia\\_archive/vol3/iss1/9](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol3/iss1/9)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

Cook: Career Expectations and Opportunities in Archives  
CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES  
IN ARCHIVES

Robert D. Cook

When asked to address this body concerning career opportunities in archives, I immediately reacted fearfully. I have been an archivist for less than three years and do not consider myself qualified to incisively examine the issue of career opportunities in this young, but rapidly growing, profession. I imagined an appearance before an auspicious group of wily professionals, eager to attack every word uttered with "can you substantiate that?"

The body here gathered certainly is an auspicious one. Nevertheless, the longer I pondered what to say, the more I realized perhaps there was something constructive I could say. As one who is not a career archivist, I can perhaps be somewhat more objective in examining several of the problems which the archivist must face in order to expand career opportunities.

When I began thinking about the topic, the first word that came to mind was "job." The second word was "money." What jobs were available in the profession? How might more be created? Why are salaries in some areas so low? How can they be raised to competitive levels?

We all realize the importance of such questions, especially in a society where the costs of living are enormous. Thus, my first reaction was that these questions would be the obvious ones among which to dwell. I could assemble a mass of statistics, conduct surveys among other archivists, tell everyone how job opportunities were improving, new areas of scholarship emerging, new opportunities for women and the minorities, new status for archivists.

---

Mr. Cook is on the staff of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. He read this paper at the South Atlantic Archives and Records Conference in Atlanta, May 3, 1974.

Yes, things are improving. The archivist is finally getting his foot in the door of professional status. Yet, when speaking of career opportunities in archives, is professional status most basic? Should not the advances I have mentioned occur as the result of something far more fundamental?

What is a career? The opportunity for what? Is the traditional concept of career, complete with the trappings of financial gain, power, prestige and status a correct one? Or does "career" contain broader implications than personal or professional gain; is it not an idea--that of lifelong service to the community and its inhabitants?

Archives is a young profession. Only now is it beginning to achieve the recognition that it should. It possesses a strong and ever growing professional organization, the Society of American Archivists; regional organizations, such as this one, attribute to the move toward professionalization. Today the idea of professional training of archivists is not disputed. On the other hand, does this profession want to follow the beaten path of professionalization which other emerging professions have chosen? Associations, academic status, prestige, a language not discernible to the laymen--these are all worthwhile for what they are; they are to a degree essential for the profession to retain credibility. However, does the archivist choose to become so involved in the fact that he is a professional and that his profession is unique that he fails to recognize his principal responsibility and discern the obvious opportunities which lie before him?

What are archives, but the recorded embodiment of societies and communities of the past? Through archives, if we possess a perceptive eye, we can view a complete cross section of any society or community--its laws, its politics, military actions, civil strife, scientific and technological retreats as well as advances, its intellectual maturation, its art, music and literature--in essence its people.

As archivists, we are charged with the care, arrangement and service of this powerful research and resource tool. That fact places us in a unique position of opportunity, which few other emerging professions can claim. For the development of all of a society's profes-

sions, as well as the development of a society itself, are documented in the records for which we care. The way we interpret, at the local level, how this resource tool is to be utilized, either for the benefit or ill of the community which we serve, is critical. Therefore, if we are to meet our basic responsibility, so that this powerful resource can be used for the benefit of the entire community, clearly the concept of "career" must transcend traditional interpretation. If we are to seize the initiative and capitalize on the opportunity presented to us, traditional career expectations must remain only a consequence of community service, and not an end in themselves.

As archivists, we must recognize and exploit the fact that we are a functional segment of the community, whatever the physical or political boundaries. We must assist the community in whatever way possible and, in turn, the community must assist the archivist in order to benefit itself. There must be continual mutual exchange between the archivists and all segments of the community in order for the "total community" concept to be effective.

The community concept has rapidly disappeared in America. Enormous advances have made us no longer dependent upon one another, and thus less motivated to communicate. With technology has come the need to professionalize in order to obtain status for one's particular occupation. Ironically, however, this organization into many professional groups has resulted in little communication among them. Each occupation clamors to be a profession, and once it is, usually becomes an elitist group which is overly sensitive to criticism and resistant to internal change. The standard retort is "we are in the best position to judge ourselves." A poor analogy of the situation might be that of a neighborhood consisting of twenty or thirty households within two blocks. Each household advertises its occupants and painstakingly organizes internally. Once this has been completed, however, all doors to each house are locked and the occupants never venture outside again.

There is an urgent need to revitalize the community concept, to renew the idea that everyone is part of a community and that the community, like humans, must give as well as receive in order to mature. In that regard, all professionals, while recognizing the goals and ambitions of their own professions, as well as of themselves, must still seek a higher goal, that of service to the community and to

each other.

The youthful archival profession can seize the initiative. Despite its growth and strides toward the achievement of status in the professional world, it remains capable of self-renewal, and the possessor of the opportunity to lead the way in the revitalization of a dormant community spirit. The local archival agency can and should supply the vital link among all professions within the community, as well as other segments of that community.

How? The local archives can be a major tool in the solution of community problems. It can be a principal contributor in the establishment of a sense of community pride, tradition and realism about its past. It can substantially augment the development of the community's desire to learn, to question, to pursue knowledge about itself--its geography, politics, technology, its people.

These should be the basic goals of the archivist in the service to his community. He should do his part to instill community awareness. He is custodian of a major community resource, and it is his responsibility not only to be proficient in that custodianship, but to do all possible to insure that the resource is fully utilized by all segments of the community. This establishes the archivist's role as an active and not passive one.

What specifically can the archivist do to revive the idea of community awareness and vitality? How can the archival profession implement the basic principles I have mentioned? Fundamental change must occur primarily at the local level, and it is the responsibility of the community archivist and local archival agency to effect it. Reform within the professional hierarchy is indeed worthwhile; however, for the community concept to experience rebirth, the local community must play the major role. The archivist must be a key figure in the process of change. Secondly, the program for change at the local level must be twofold. We must reach out, while reforming from within; there must be convergence, not diversity.

Externally, the archival role is a weak one indeed. What part of the local community utilizes archival resources? What part are even aware of the existence of archives and their services? How fully do the professions use this

resource in their work? How far do we go in meeting their needs or even knowing of them?

We are all aware that every community is part of a larger community that is made up of a great number of smaller communities within it. These subcommunities have no formal boundaries, continuously overlap, and retain their own uniquenesses. Yet, they are all a vital part of the well-being of the larger community and, if properly motivated, can meaningfully contribute to its ability to mature.

An integral part of the academic community, it is there that the archivist must initiate action. This group, composed generally of universities, professional schools, technical training centers, libraries and archives, has one common purpose, the dissemination of knowledge to the community. Its role, to function as the primary source of expertise regarding the character of the community, demands the pursuit of every avenue to make that expertise available to all. Yet, often we encounter the incredible situation where the community's academic elite, who take pride in the pursuit of knowledge, fail to even informally communicate with their professional colleagues, perhaps only a block away. Petty jealousies, conceit and unawareness of the benefits of productive exchange often completely stifle growth of the community concept within the intellectual subcommunity. Having no example to emulate, how then can that concept be expected to thrive in the community at large?

Why cannot all segments of the academic community work together as one in the common purpose of community service? Each possesses vast resources and offers a multitude of services which could be extended more effectively through joint program planning and cooperation. The local archival agency should supply the initiative for the formation of formal multi-agency associations and informal academic groups within the community. The Governor of South Carolina recently issued an executive order deeming it "in the best interests of the State to encourage joint ventures among and between State and other agencies in the pursuit of comprehensive development programs." With that theme in mind, the archivist should press for the establishment of a formal association comprised of representatives of all segments of the local academic community. Such an association would be dedicated to the principles of joint planning and development to meet common objectives. A few possibilities which

might result from the application of this principle include:

- (1) joint goals,
- (2) the mobilization of technical services offered,
- (3) joint public exhibits,
- (4) joint seminars and workshops for the exchange of information and techniques and for the training of personnel of all members,
- (5) utilization of technical expertise of each member by all,
- (6) use as a means for exchanging information with the various professions,
- (7) use as a combined research network for government,
- (8) use of combined resources as a teaching device in colleges, universities and professional schools.

The creative mind undoubtedly would find many more. The formal and informal organization of the local academic community would result in a medium for exchange between that community and the professional world. The lawyer could exchange ideas with members of the academic community through the law professorship, as could the physician through a representative of the medical school. The archivist would obviously benefit in his own work from such mutual exchange, and in turn, would be better prepared to meet the research needs of the professional world.

What about the non-professional and culturally deprived? How does the archivist reach that segment of the community who did not attend college or is functionally illiterate? These groups have little awareness that the archives even exists or that it or other segments of the academic community are anything more than taxpayer burdens. Such ideas must not perpetuate if the community concept is to be revitalized. The entire academic community must jointly find methods to sensitize the non-college

and functionally illiterate segment of the populace to the needs for community awareness and the benefits of the community concept.

Little action has yet been taken in this direction. This is where mutual exchange between the academic and professional worlds would be extremely useful. Archivists, as well as other members of the academic community, need to reach out to the worlds of sociology, education, and psychology, among others, in attempting to grapple with this difficult problem. It will require a great deal of innovation and creativity to solve it.

A valuable concept in achieving the goal of community awareness among the non-college and functionally illiterate populace is a meaningful paraprofessional program. While the archivist has made strides in the development of effective public relations programs, the idea of "selling" the archives as an institution is not enough. The pursuit of knowledge is not a gimmick game. Instead, we must make the entire community sensitive to the benefits of an awareness of itself.

The paraprofessional program could greatly aid this effort. The archivist, as well as other members of the academic community, should actively recruit non-college-educated personnel for service as paraprofessionals. Not only would this make the academic community aware of the needs of this group and the best methods for meeting those needs, it would, more importantly, allow wider community participation in program planning.

The establishment of a working relationship between the academic world and agencies which aid in the educational and vocational motivation of the culturally deprived is the initial step. In the development of a paraprofessional program, designed to stimulate community awareness among the culturally deprived, it is vital that the academic community be made aware of the problems and needs of this subcommunity, in order to prevent intellectual condescension. Only too often academics have failed miserably in relating to those of less education. On the other hand, the problem of overcoming inferior feelings toward job superiors, which the culturally deprived may possess, must also be dealt with.

If those planning the paraprofessional program consider and can overcome the human relationship problems



inherent in the employment of the culturally deprived, such a program could augment the development of community consciousness within this group. The paraprofessional, who receives sufficient on the job training, and is not viewed as a lower echelon clerk by job superiors, can serve his community as well as a person possessing a college degree. Furthermore, a primary source of exchange between the academic community and the culturally deprived would be created.

One step further would be the contribution of the archivist to adult basic education programs, as well as other programs that attempt to aid the undereducated adult to achieve functional literacy and high school equivalency. The archivist could work closely with these programs to assist in providing job opportunities through the paraprofessional programs as well as utilizing the paraprofessional in the recruiting efforts of all agencies involved. The true role of the archivist in the community could best be conveyed to the undereducated adult through his peers. One's peers can do more to nurture awareness of the community consciousness concept and its relationship to the archival role than any posters or brochures ever could. Furthermore, use of the archives and its resources could be encouraged in the development of adult education curricula. The development of a sense of community awareness and sensitivity, certainly already emphasized in adult education programs, would be enhanced if only more exchange between the archivist and the adult educator were to occur.

What of the high school and elementary student in our public school system? Here, obviously, is the greatest opportunity for community consciousness and the total community concept to be instilled during the development years of youth and adolescence. Yet, the archivist has failed to recognize this opportunity or at least to do much about it. While it is true that most of our archival institutions conduct tours of their facilities for elementary and high school students, is this enough? Whirlwind tours, especially if school children must come from afar to the state capitol and be forced to see several facilities in one day, may even produce a negative reaction later. Today, ask people who went on archival tours years ago what the archives is, and they will probably answer that it is "something sort of like a museum."

No, simple exposure to our school children is not the answer. We must relate that it is beneficial to them to be conscious of their community and that the archivist can contribute much to the development of that consciousness.

Naturally, reform in the educational structure must shoulder much of the burden. However, the archivist, himself an educator, as well as other members of the academic community, must do his part in effecting such reform. We can begin by establishing close relations with the department of education and local school boards. The use of educational television can be expanded.

Also, research projects, for the high school students, jointly sponsored by the local academic community and offering college scholarships as incentives, might be another possibility. Research in the central archival institution might be a logistical problem for many students. However, the archivist, working through the county records program, and with local school officials, could provide for research projects for the high school student, using local archives or the county courthouse as a practical alternative to the central archives. To reemphasize the point, we must do more than expose our institutions to our school children if the seed of community awareness is to be planted. We must allow them to see for themselves how archival resources can be used for their benefit as well as for the benefit of the community as a whole.

So much for the external community. What of ourselves and our own community? Before successfully reaching outward, we must be assured that we are healthy internally. I do not speak of our professional organization. Others, far more able than I, can and will do that. I choose instead to talk of the need for reform at the local level.

The same basic principles which I have applied to the community at large are equally apropos of the archival community. For "career" to have the true meaning that it should, local archives personnel should feel happy, productive and responsible in what they are doing. Any effort to cultivate community consciousness among the community at large is ultimately doomed to failure, if those who are to exercise leadership in this effort, the archival community, are racked by dissension from within.

Just as the community at large, the local archival community must possess an awareness of itself. There must be a consciousness among all its members of fundamental goals in relation to the community at large; there must be productive internal exchange; there should develop a feeling among all members of the local archival community that they are part of a joint effort and that "career" implies meaningful contribution to that effort.

Obviously, we do not have time here to deal with the issue of internal reform in great detail. Yet, there are several basic questions which I should pose, and ask that you who are career archivists, and those who are not, consider them in the context of "career" as I have defined it. I will simply raise the questions, offering no pat answers to them.

(1) Are local archives becoming massive bureaucracies, which thrive on petty "problems" instead of dispensing of them with the attention they deserve?

(2) Is the true concept of career, professionalism and the "community concept" stressed within the local archival institution? Are all staff members made aware of their role in service to the community?

(3) With this in mind, has the local archival agency established fundamental objectives aimed toward determining community needs, meeting them and cultivating community consciousness? Who determines these goals and are there adequate means of evaluation so that the staff member is aware of his or her contributions?

(4) What is the relationship between the agency administrator and staff members?

a. Are all staff members able to contribute ideas and suggestions and are there effective means for incorporation of these into policy planning? Or are all decisions made "behind closed doors" and by a few?

b. Do staff members have academic freedom? Are their professional decisions supported? Are staff members encouraged to pursue personal research and is scholarship and furtherance of education encouraged?

c. Are staff members encouraged to make contacts with other members of the academic community and across agency lines?

d. Are all members treated fairly and indiscriminately in hiring and promotion? Is promotion based upon merit, political expediency or favoritism?

e. Are there means for fairly adjudicating employee grievances?

f. Does the agency administrator have formal training in effectively relating to employees?

g. Does he seek employee respect? Does he get it?

h. Are there standards of professional competency? Are these standards maintained? Is there an adequate mechanism for the agency administrator to remove incompetents or are they simply tolerated?

(5) Basically, is the local archival agency a community in the true sense of the word--where all segments of the archival community feel a close part of it, where each is aware of contributions to its strength, where its strength is recognized as a source of strength of the larger community of which it is an integral part?

In conclusion, I have stated my concept of career opportunities in archives. There are unlimited opportunities if "career" is applied in its true sense of service to one's fellow human beings. The archivist at the local level must reach out to his academic colleagues in the community. Together, they must seek to show every man, woman, and child in the community, that it is to their advantage, that it is to the community's advantage, to be aware of itself in all stages of its development.

The archivist can lead the renewal of effort to make the idea work in the local community. He has two advantages. First, his profession is a young one. Thus, the archivist can still function effectively in the move for change. Second, many of today's young people, emerging from high schools, technical schools, colleges and universities, are increasingly aware that there is more, much more, to life and career than salaries, professional recognition, and accolades. While true that many possess

the desire to serve only self, others are coming forth completely willing to give of themselves. We must seek them out, convince them that the archivist truly believes, just as they, in the strength of a self-renewing community; at the same time, we must thoroughly examine ourselves and find ways to strengthen those beliefs.

This is the question that the potential career archivist must ask himself, "Am I willing to give my all to the entire community so that the community might be more aware of where it has been and where it is going?" Likewise those already in the profession must ask: "Has service to the community been the most basic aim in my concept of career?"

The question, then, should not be what career opportunities in archives today are; the answer to that is obvious. The real question should be, are we as archivists willing to capitalize upon the multitude of opportunities which lie before us?