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Peter J. Wosh  
*Seton Hall University*

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## CREATING A SEMIPROFESSIONAL PROFESSION: ARCHIVISTS VIEW THEMSELVES\*

Peter J. Wosh

Although archivists vigorously assert and defend their own professionalism,<sup>1</sup> this rhetoric often betrays self-doubts and uncertainty. In recent years, debates concerning the proper path to greater professionalism have escalated. Are archivists established professionals, emerging professionals, craftsmen, scientists, or artists? Should archivists control entry into their select group? If so, how? What role can the Society of American Archivists play in encouraging professional development? All of these questions provoke controversy and disagreement.

Wilfred I. Smith has observed that "a consistent theme in the history of this society has been the interest, perhaps even the obsession, with the idea of professionalization."<sup>2</sup> How have archivists viewed themselves and their colleagues? Have they formulated a coherent definition of professionalism? What factors do they emphasize in moving towards a greater professionalism? Are changes perceptible over time? America's founding archival fathers and mothers offer some preliminary insights into these issues.

The fledgling Society of American Archivists faced a serious question at its 1938 annual meeting. Responding in very familiar fashion, the assembly quickly established a special committee to review this particular problem and to issue recommendations. Thus, "it was unanimously voted that the president appoint a committee to recommend to the society the proper

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\*The author is indebted to Frank G. Burke for directing his research and offering suggestive comments.

pronunciation of the following words: archives, archivist, archival." The Pronunciation Committee, chaired by Edwin A. Davis, dutifully met, presumably considered all available options, and issued its final report on 13 October 1939. In a commendable, though rare, display of unanimity, the general gathering received the report, discharged the committee, and moved on to other business.<sup>3</sup>

This brief extract from the society's proceedings graphically illustrates the primitive state of the archival art in the 1930s. Before defining their activities, establishing a sound theoretical literature, developing standard and universally applicable practices, and issuing educational guidelines, archivists needed to learn to pronounce their own name. Clearly, they confronted some very basic problems.

Between 1909 and the early 1930s, the American Historical Association (AHA) defined archivists' principal concerns and nurtured their development. A generation of American historians, trained in the German seminar tradition, began developing a new scientific history based on exhaustive primary source research and characterized by narrow, meticulously researched monographs. They successfully revolutionized their craft and, incidentally, created an unprecedented demand for archival and manuscript material. Thus, the AHA stimulated the creation of new repositories, promoted the preservation of endangered source materials, and sought to develop an archival profession to service its members' research needs.<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of the national archives in 1934 satisfied these scholars' dreams and fundamentally altered archivist-historian relationships. Suddenly, American archivists faced monumental problems. Who would staff the new institution? How might archivists achieve quick control over massive federal records? Where could they turn for appropriate guidance? Did European professional literature contain relevant advice? Would limited in-service training or formal degree programs better prepare the national archives staff for their new responsibilities?

Clearly, these problems required innovative thought

and rapid solutions. Semiprofessional Archivists: View. The AHA's 1935 meeting, including Albert R. Newsome, Margaret Cross Norton, and Theodore C. Blegen, agreed that they had outgrown their rudimentary organization and lamented their lack of clearly defined methodological techniques. Their discussion resulted in the creation of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) the following year. Interpreting its constituency broadly, the SAA invited archivists, manuscript curators, historical administrators, records surveyors, historians, and librarians to join. In 1938, the *American Archivist* began appearing quarterly, and archivists started generating their own professional literature.<sup>5</sup>

Archivists had mobilized in response to an immediate crisis--the creation of the national archives--and this crucial fact defined their early professional concerns and development. Its almost immediate status as the world's largest record repository insured that federal concerns would receive primary attention.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, despite a theoretically broad-based membership policy, fully 43 percent of the SAA's members labored at the national archives, and the term *archivist* often appeared to be synonymous with *public records administrator* during the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Achieving rapid control over massive federal records and satisfying historians' appetites for quick access consumed these professional pioneers' energies.

Not surprisingly, archival writings addressed basic nuts and bolts issues during the 1930s. The national archives' staffing needs and the absence of formal training programs created a demand for technical knowledge. Instant archivists, trained as historians and needing guidance in basic archival functions, appeared. These developments required a rapid exposition of existing techniques and archivists quickly constructed a useful bibliographic base.<sup>8</sup> Early issues of *American Archivist* focused on "the concrete and practical rather than the general." Practicing archival administrators generated how-to case studies to assist their novice brethren and surveyed contemporary public record practices in Europe for further guidance. Future generations bore the burden of analyzing, synthesizing, and building upon their efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Public record policymakers developed appraisal principles and arrangement techniques for their bulky institutional holdings and codified their practices as professional standards. *Record group, inventory, and provenance* entered the archival vocabulary. Yet, a significant constituency remained outside this archival mainstream; historical societies and manuscript repositories received little guidance or attention from the burgeoning profession. Cataloguing, calendaring, and cross-indexing continued at the local level, and manuscript curators working with small, diverse collections of personal papers fashioned their own utilitarian practices. Archival leaders generally dismissed their operations as antiquarian or of minor significance and concentrated on refining techniques for controlling the bureaucratic records they considered most useful for historians.

Attempts to establish standard educational and training guidelines during the late 1930s further reflected these biases. The SAA's Committee on Training, chaired by Samuel Flagg Bemis, emphasized the necessity of attracting "erudite and critical historical scholars" into archival work. Basing its recommendations largely on European precedents, the committee urged strong preparation in history and political science, suggested an American history Ph.D. as an essential qualification for major national positions, and rejected the applicability of library science.<sup>10</sup>

Other historically trained archivists, including Albert Newsome and Solon J. Buck, applauded Bemis's guidelines and underscored the importance of formal training.<sup>11</sup> America's first professionally conscious archivists thus sought to prepare their successors primarily for processing massive governmental records and produce colleagues conversant with historiographical trends and scholarship.

In fact, however, few formal archives courses developed during the 1930s. Columbia University offered a two-semester course in 1938-39 and a 1940 summer course, but discontinued the experiment thereafter. Buck began a series of courses at American University in 1940-41, with Ernst Posner eventually assuming the

teaching duties. These latter courses, aimed at funneling students into the national archives, proved a lasting educational achievement.<sup>12</sup>

Archival leaders had established a broad professional consensus on most major issues by the early 1940s. Trained as historians and generally concerned with modern public records, their interests and backgrounds were relatively homogeneous. They had developed basic processing and preservation techniques for coping with massive bureaucratic records. They agreed on the importance of university-based graduate history training for future archivists. While mindful of the need for more abstract, conceptual thought, they began developing a basic American archival bibliography upon which others might build.<sup>13</sup>

By 1970, the broad consensus of a generation earlier had evaporated. Archivists failed to resolve their professional problems during the intervening years. In fact, virtually every move toward greater professionalism generated disagreement and dissent. Archivists no longer shared common perceptions and well-defined goals.

The SAA's broad membership policies contributed to this development. Frank Evans's and Robert Warner's 1970 member survey revealed the profession's immaturity. Reciting archivists' wide ranging educational and occupational backgrounds, these surveyors concluded "the bounds of the profession still remained undefined, and the professional identity of the members is uncertain."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Gerald Ham characterized his colleagues as "a broad-based society of individuals who deal primarily with nonbook, documentary material regardless of format."<sup>15</sup> One fundamental conclusion of the SAA's Committee for the 1970s involved making "the Council more representative of and responsive to the diverse interests" of society members.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, National Archives and Records Service employees no longer dominated SAA membership, though they retained significant power within the organization. A colorful mosaic of archivists, record managers, manuscript curators, librarians, historians, and information

specialists now composed the organization. Public records, once considered virtually synonymous with archives, were of only peripheral interest to many members of SAA.

Diversity fostered problems. Ham voiced concern over members' emphasis on their own uniqueness and failure to perceive common concerns and problems. James Rhoads termed SAA members "professionally schizophrenic" in 1976, lamenting their loyalty to several other professions and organizations. Within the SAA, members formed smaller regional organizations and professional affinity groups.<sup>17</sup> Was the SAA really a coherent professional body? What basic principles and elements bound archivists together? Could they develop meaningful professional standards at the very moment when the society boasted its most diverse membership? These provocative questions defined the major archival challenges of the 1970s. Three related themes now dominated archival discussion: professional literature, standardization, and training.

Leading archivists expressed continual frustration over the scarcity and quality of theoretical writings. Ham observed in 1971 that the previous generation failed to develop any "discernable...archival theory and the concomitant refinement of practice." By 1974, he criticized archivists' obsession "with the 'nuts and bolts' or craft aspects of our work" and the persistence of the "custodial image."<sup>18</sup> Case studies and technical advice still dominated archival articles.

While the SAA hierarchy echoed Ham's judgments and regularly lamented "the scarcity of our professional literature," the 1970s produced little substantive improvement. Though Elizabeth Hamer Kegan called for more professional publications in her 1975 presidential address, she also revealed that "some how-to-do-it pamphlets are my priority items." The Basic Manual Series did constitute a notable SAA achievement in the late 1970s, but these publications again illustrate archivists' very elementary concerns and the embryonic state of the literature.<sup>19</sup>

The *American Archivist* has consciously broadened its criteria for full-length articles,<sup>20</sup> but its regular

contributors possess more interest in presenting their own institutions and techniques as models than in conducting critical analysis and offering original, provocative thought. Frank Burke concluded persuasively in 1981 that "to date, there has been no elucidation of archival theory in the United States and little, if any, in the rest of the world."<sup>21</sup>

Archivists' attempts to standardize practices achieved some results during the 1970s. Thus, a Committee on Terminology published "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers" in 1974. A Committee on Finding Aids prepared *Inventories and Registers: A Handbook of Techniques and Examples* in 1976. Other committees have developed a code of ethics and established standards for college and university repositories.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of their utility, these efforts reveal a greater professional problem than the ones they resolve. The fundamental flaw is the SAA's inability to enforce its own standards. Voluntary compliance has not produced acceptable results. While a faithful few seriously consider and implement society standards, the curatorial masses politely ignore SAA pronouncements.<sup>23</sup> Individual archivists vary descriptive techniques according to local needs. Even seemingly concrete, straightforward information, such as size of collection produces extraordinary institutional variation. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, which offers free publicity to all participating institutions, has elicited responses from a relative handful of repositories. Clearly, the SAA message has not penetrated the hinterlands.

Ultimately, archivists' inability to create a more stimulating theoretical literature and achieve greater methodological standardization manifests a graver professional failing. After nearly a half century, debate concerning archival education rages. In many ways, this issue underlies all others. The failure to institutionalize training in an academic setting has retarded archival theory. A lack of standardized training also contributes to anarchic procedures and a reluctance to embrace externally imposed professional practices.

Unfortunately, the Bemis committee's 1939 statement

largely defined the boundaries of subsequent discussion. Archivists agonized over whether library schools or graduate history departments offered the better educational environment. While this generally unproductive debate monopolized attention, archival training drifted in several directions. Individuals and institutions initiated diverse programs throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The SAA exercised neither an aggressive nor a regulatory role, but remained passive and officially silent.<sup>24</sup>

Its Committee for the 1970s, appointed in 1970 to analyze future professional needs, recognized the inadequacy of this situation and urged the parent body to exert more forceful leadership in this area.<sup>25</sup> Accreditation and official sponsorship appeared impractical, since the SAA lacked the financial resources and accepted standards to effect such reform. Members endorsed the concept of sequential, multicourse archival offerings attached to M.A. and Ph.D. programs in other disciplines. Before the SAA could monitor programs, however, it needed to "define minimum standards" and apply them to existing offerings.<sup>26</sup>

While the committee accurately summarized professional options and shifted discussions away from the traditional history department versus library school debate, substantive accomplishments appeared negligible. Archival training courses multiplied during the 1970s, while SAA leaders bemoaned their own minimal impact. Their failure to initiate programs left them with only a regulatory role and continuous disagreements hindered their effectiveness.

The society's council finally endorsed specific educational guidelines in 1977, recommending a graduate concentration or minor in archives and outlining a basic curriculum which included theoretical, practical, and experiential components. Still, the recommendations appeared vague, and the SAA provided no real enforcement mechanism. Institutional evaluation, educational program approval, and individual certification proposals have not won wide acceptance. Though the forum and many of the issues have changed, disagreement and diversity still characterize the discussion of archival

education.<sup>27</sup>

In the title of his state-of-the-art article in the *American Archivist* in 1957, Ernst Posner asked, "What Then Is The American Archivist, This New Man?" His inquiry remains relevant in 1981. Archivists have not resolved their identity crisis. The first generation constructed a limited definition of archival work. They addressed the immediate, urgent issues which emerged during the 1930s. Their common training and shared concerns enabled them to form a broad professional consensus concerning technique and training.

As the profession diversified, archivists broadened their definitions and outlook. Manuscript curators and records managers inserted their ideas and experiences into the literature. Paradoxically, professional expansion often encouraged individual myopia. Archivists emphasized their differences and divided into smaller, narrowly conceived groupings. Their literature betrayed an unwillingness to address broad issues and examine universal similarities. Their world fragmented and their illusory consensus vanished.

Archivists in 1982 exhibit many characteristics of emerging or marginal professions.<sup>28</sup> Whether they emerge or remain marginal depends on the maturing generation. They can take comfort from the fact that other emerging professions have encountered similar problems. They can take less comfort from the fact that many have never solved them.

Archivists cannot apply cosmetic cures to serious illnesses. Codes of ethics and booster rhetoric do not nurture professional consciousness. All archivists share a responsibility to think critically and constructively about their craft and colleagues. They cannot approach the 1980s with the same confidence their predecessors brought to the 1940s. Yet, if prospects are uncertain, the potential is exciting. If archivists can harness their diversity, and reach beyond Washington and Wisconsin for their ideas and principles, they may define and create a brand new organism--a meaningful archival profession.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Waldo G. Leland, "American Archival Problems," in *Proceedings of the First Annual Conference of Archivists, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1909*, (Washington, D.C., 1911). James B. Rhoads, "The President's Page," *American Archivist* (hereafter cited as *AA*), April 1975, pp. 275-76.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred I. Smith, "Broad Horizons: Opportunities for Archivists," *AA*, January 1974, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>"The Second Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists," *AA*, April 1939, p. 125; "Report of the Secretary," *AA*, January 1940, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>See Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), esp. pp. 92-105; William F. Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935," *AA*, April 1975, pp. 159-173; and, for a broad historiographic essay, John Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), esp. pp. 112-117.

<sup>5</sup>Birdsall, "Two Sides of the Desk," pp. 169-172.

<sup>6</sup>McCoy, *The National Archives*, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 93; Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *AA*, July 1939, pp. 158-9.

<sup>8</sup>Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *AA*, Winter 1981, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup>*AA*, January 1938, p. vi. Samples of early articles illustrating this tendency include: L. Herman Smith, "Manuscript Repair in European Archives," *AA*, January and April 1938; Margaret Cross Norton, "The Illinois State Archives Building," *AA*, April 1938, pp. 78-90; Arthur E. Kimberly, "Repair and Preservation in the National Archives," *AA*, July 1938, pp. 111-117; and Christopher B. Coleman, "Some Problems of State

Archival Administration," *AA*, July 1941, pp. 149-58.

<sup>10</sup> Bemis, "Training of Archivists," pp. 157-160.

<sup>11</sup> Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," *AA*, April 1941, pp. 85-89; Albert Ray Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," *AA*, October 1939, p. 220.

<sup>12</sup> See McCoy, *The National Archives*, pp. 97-102; Robert M. Warner, "Archival Training in the United States and Canada," *AA*, July/October 1972, esp. pp. 348-9; Frank B. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," *AA*, January 1977, pp. 57-59.

<sup>13</sup> Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," p. 217.

<sup>14</sup> Frank B. Evans and Robert M. Warner, "American Archivists and Their Society: A Composite View," *AA*, April 1971, p. 172.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Ham, "Secretary's Report," *AA*, January 1972, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies Report of the Committee for the 1970s," *AA*, April 1972, p. 197.

<sup>17</sup> Ham, "Secretary's Report," p. 111; Rhoads, "The President's Page," p. 276. Regional groups include: Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Southwest Archives Conference, New England Archivists. Professional affinity groups classified archivists by functional (appraisal, processing, etc.) and institutional (college and university, religious, etc.) interest. Further fragmentation within these subgroups has already begun as Catholic Diocesan Archivists, for example, have formed their own body.

<sup>18</sup> Ham, "Secretary's Report," p. 111, and "The Archival Edge," *AA*, January 1975, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Robert M. Warner, "Secretary's Report," *AA*, April 1973, p. 322; Elizabeth Hamer Kegan, "The Society of American Archivists," *AA*, January 1976, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> "The American Archivist: Editorial Policy," *AA*, Winter 1981, p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, "Future Archival Theory," p. 42. A recent bibliography of such articles should include: Alan Calmes, "Practical Realities of Computer-based Finding Aids: The NARS A-1 Experience," *AA*, April 1979, pp. 167-78; Dan H. Fenn, "Launching the John F. Kennedy Library," *AA*, October 1979, pp. 429-42; Richard J. Cox, "The Plight of American Municipal Archives: Baltimore, 1729-1979," *AA*, July 1979, pp. 281-92; Michael Stephen Hindus, "Designing Projects for Maximum Impact: Saving the Early Court Records in Massachusetts," *AA*, July 1979, pp. 307-11.

<sup>22</sup> Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, and Edwin A. Thompson, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators and Records Managers," *AA*, July 1974, pp. 415-34; Society of American Archivists, Committee on Finding Aids, *Inventories and Registers: A Handbook of Techniques and Examples*, (Chicago, 1976). Many SAA Committees set out to develop such standards. One interesting case involves the College and University archives' guidelines, which were somewhat mechanically compiled from the "Core Mission and Minimum Standards for University Archives in the University of Wisconsin System," 1977. Again, a specific institutional experience became a professional standard.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Sahli, "Finding Aids: A Multi-Media, Systems Perspective," *AA*, Winter 1981, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> For classic articles advocating historical vs. library training, see H.G. Jones, "Archival Training in American Universities, 1938-1968," *AA*, April 1968, pp. 135-54; and Theodore R. Schellenberg, "Archival Training in Library Schools," *AA*, April 1968, pp. 155-65.

<sup>25</sup> "Report of the Committee for the 1970s," p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207-209.

<sup>27</sup> Hugh A. Taylor, "The President's Page," *AA*, April 1979, pp. 259-60.

**Bernard Barber, "Some Problems in the Sociology of the Professions,"** *Daedalus*, Fall 1963, pp. 669-688, discusses emerging and marginal professions. Applying his model, archivists appear to constitute a marginal or emerging profession. As he indicates, professionalism is a matter of degree. For an interesting comparison with librarians, see *The Library Quarterly*, XXXI, 4 (October 1961). Archivists may be roaming where librarians trod twenty years ago. Yet, some might seriously question whether librarians have solved their professional dilemma in 1982.