

Georgia Archive

Volume 2 | Number 1

Article 4

January 1974

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Recommended Citation

Rhoads, James B., "Central or Local Control: The Case for an Archival Partnership," *Georgia Archive* 2 no. 1 (1974).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol2/iss1/4

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CENTRAL OR LOCAL CONTROL

THE CASE FOR AN ARCHIVAL PARTNERSHIP

James B. Rhoads*

A few years ago, one of my colleagues, Oliver Holmes, published an article in the American Archivist with the somewhat ungainly title: "Archival Arrangement-Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels." The thrust of the article is that the archivist does not function at one level alone when dealing with records, but has a variety of ways of approaching the arrangement of his materials. That title occurred to me when I thought of talking to you tonight about archival organizations, because I have long been aware that in the profession we all operate at different levels at different times. Some of the staff at the National Archives is active in the committees and offices of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, and also maintains an active participation in the Society of American Archivists. I am fortunate enough to have recently been elected Vice President of the SAA while at the same time holding the position of Vice President for the Western Hemisphere in the International Council on Archives. At least one person whom I know, Frank Evans of the National Archives and Records Service in Washington, is active at all three levels: regional, national, and international.

One would presume that there is a certain degree of conflict between these three levels of archival professionalism. There have been a number of discussions, both verbal and in print, about the competition between local and national archival professional activity. I do not believe that this is the case, and would like to state why.

The formation of regional organizations of archivists is a recent development. The amount of research in original source material is growing. More archives

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are being established, and the number of archivists is increasing. At the same time, and due to the same reasons, the Society of American Archivists is growing. It is no longer exclusively the small, sociable, informal group that it was a number of years ago when its membership was 200 or 300. In those days the same people met year after year, served on the same committees, and recognized each other by first name. In contrast, membership has now increased to a point where larger facilities are required to accommodate the annual meeting. Modern convention centers are located in expensive metropolitan areas, and the cost of attending the annual meeting has risen accordingly, thus becoming prohibitive for many not subsidized to attend by their institutions. Such subsidy often accompanies the kind of position that one attains with seniority, although ironically it is quite often only the senior people who can afford to attend a meeting even if not subsidized.

It is not surprising, therefore, that younger archivists often do not get to the annual meeting unless it is held in their community and they can sneak in under the tent. Because they do not attend the society meetings, they cannot serve on committees effectively, their names and faces do not become familiar to their professional counterparts, and when it is time to nominate and elect officers their names do not appear on the ballot. It is not long before they feel alienated, left out, non-participants in their own profession. It is also not long before they feel that the society is run by a self-perpetuating oligarchy that is out of touch with the real problems of archivists. Discussion at the annual meetings becomes more esoteric and political, less practical and helpful in solving everyday problems or transmitting basic archival fundamentals. The younger archivist feels frustrated and ignored to the point where he might decide to become a librarian or museum curator, or open a pornographic book store. At that point we, as archivists, lose him.

But now it is not necessary for all of that to happen. Regional archival associations have been established, not as competitors to the national organization, but as necessary adjuncts to it. The necessity for them has risen from the unwieldy size of the national organization, which renders it sometimes irrelevant to the practical needs of the practicing archivist. The large num-

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ber of people involved in the national society suggests a diversity of interests. Diversity suggests compromise on issues so that all views might be entertained. And compromise suggests a trend towards irrelevancy. Meeting for only three days, just once a year, the national society cannot serve all its members if it concentrates on only one or two questions. And the committees, which are supposed to be the bodies that meet that attack and solve specific problems, find it difficult to meet and effectively propose, study, and implement programs. Committee members may be scattered from Boston to Austin, and if communication is difficult, consensus can be impossible.

But put the regional association of archivists in the picture and see what happens. Familiarity, proximity, and size are three important advantages. Communication between members is improved. A one-day meeting at a central location in the region can be attended by most members without the expense of an overnight stay. The regional group is small enough to permit lengthy, informed, and concentrated discussion on particular problems. In several important ways, therefore, the regional archival groups are today what the national group was thirty years ago.

One should not imply, however, that the two are, ipso facto, incompatible. Certainly there are things attainable by the national group that the regional associations cannot accomplish. It can set professional standards; it can raise money for profession-wide programs, as in the areas of paper preservation or data archives techniques. The national society can bring together archivists who are geographically diverse, but who represent similar special areas, such as cartographic archives, audiovisual archives, data archives, and others, each of which may have only two or three representatives in any given region.

The regional associations, on the other hand, can make major contributions to the entire profession, and indeed, they can contribute to the growth and health of the national society. Those of us who are regularly trying to fill key archival positions throughout the country with people of appropriate talent recognize the value of grass roots organizations. If we limit our talent search to the attendees at the annual meeting of the SAA, or to those with whom we have become acquainted through participation in the activities of the national society, we are undoubtedly overlooking a vast reservoir of skills and

capabilities--some of which are still latent--that reside in the individuals who are not yet in a position to make themselves known on the national scene. It is very difficult to recognize such individuals when archivists are spread so thinly over the country.

The regional archival association, however, provides a mechanism for such talent to surface. Without big institutional support or personal expenditures, an archivist can participate in regional activities with all that entails--delivering professional papers, serving on committees, contributing to publications, assuming roles of coordination and leadership, and expressing views that may be innovative or just substantially professional. Through such activities it is not difficult for a talented person to become a rather large frog in a small to medium-sized pond, and if the archivist cum frog follows natural instincts, he will soon be looking for a larger pond. A good reputation in the Southeast, the West or the Middle-Atlantic Region is easily communicated and transferred to the national scene, and the archivist comes to the national society with organizational experience and the ease that comes with proper training. The archivist also comes to the national scene with a fine recognition of regional problems and a desire to use the national mechanism to help solve them.

It should be clear by now how I feel about the rise of regional archival groups, and that I feel that the groups have developed at the time in history when they were needed, and that their natural development serves the purposes of the archival profession.

There is not such a neat distinction between national and international associations as there is between regional and national. The one international organization of archivists is the International Council on Archives, the ICA. For many of the same reasons as cited earlier, the ICA is out of reach of most working archivists. The cost of travel to meetings, the high level of its deliberations, the limited number of open meetings--one every four years under normal circumstances--and the language problem, all work to limit the membership and active archival participation in the ICA. Three years from now, however, there will be an opportunity for many of you, and others around the country, to experience an ICA meeting, because the quadrennial convention scheduled

for 1976 will be held in Washington. As an added incentive to U.S. and Canadian archivists, the ICA meeting will be held concurrently with the 1976 convention of the Society of American Archivists, and we hope the economy of such an arrangement, as well as an existing program, will lead to a record turnout.

There are relationships between membership in the SAA and the ICA that affect archival activity the world over. Problems of microfilm, automation, access, and other archival questions that are settled at the national level can quite often be carried up to the international level if the solutions are professional and have universal applicability. I know, for example, that through our activities in the ICA, American archivists have been able to influence the liberalization of some archival policies in other parts of the world, all for the benefit of researchers both here and abroad. I am enthusiastic about the future of our international archival relations, and I see a family of professionals developing who, while not always of one mind on controversial issues, at least has the ability to communicate differences and respect opposing opinions.

It is my belief, therefore, that each of the levels of archival association is necessary--both to the benefit of researchers and scholars, and for the full realization of improved archival practices. Each level--regional, national, and international--has its contribution to make to the improvement of archival science, and none of the three holds total suzerainty over the others. The goal of each of us as professionals should be to participate at which ever level we can contribute most and gain the greatest amount of benefit for ourselves and our constituents. I urge you all to take the professional route by joining with your peers in improving our services to scholarship through your work in your professional organizations.

Thank you.