

## Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Johna Picco, Assistant Editor, The Filson Historical Society

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### A Year in the Archives: Unsolicited Advice from a Fellow Up-and-Comer

By Johna L. Picco, *The Filson Historical Society*

Happy New Year MAC-ers! Johna here. As your “Up-and-Comers” assistant editor, I thought the New Year an apt time to introduce myself and reflect on my first year (and a half) in the archival profession. As an up-and-comer—just like you—I’m learning as I go. The following paragraphs are glimpses into what I’ve learned, some advice, and what I’m looking forward to in 2016—and beyond.

#### Background

**Education.** As a graduate of Illinois’s Library and Information Science program (GO ILLINI!), I began my graduate degree online while living in Chicago. Not long into the program, I knew I wanted to be a residential student, so I packed my bags and moved to Champaign to complete my final year of study on campus. While at Champaign, I was able to secure work as a graduate assistant with GSLIS’s Advancement and Alumni Affairs. I also worked within Illinois’s Graduate College in the Career Services office. For me, working two jobs was ideal because it kept me financially afloat, but, more important, it helped me to use my time wisely. This isn’t to say this tactic is for everyone.

I didn’t begin graduate school knowing I wanted to be an archivist; I learned of my interest in archives somewhere around the middle of my studies and with the assistance of both course work and practicum participation. I found myself gravitating toward courses less about library science and more about history (history of the book, history of library buildings), as well as archival theory and practice and library architecture. I liked the hands-on aspect of the archives courses and the sense of accomplishment that I felt when finalizing an arrangement and description of a collection. Equipped with this knowledge as well as the understanding of where I wanted to live postdegree (my fiancé was living in Louisville while I studied at Illinois), I began searching for practicum and internship opportunities in Louisville.

**Internships and Volunteer Opportunities.** I was brought on at University of Louisville for a 100-hour practicum at the Ekstrom Library’s Archives and Special Collections. While working with the Ekstrom’s archives staff, I met the archivist of UL’s Kornhauser Health Science Library



*Johna gets dirty during her intern days at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, Kentucky.*

where, later that year, I was warmly taken on as a semester-long volunteer. Kathie Johnson, the archivist at the Kornhauser, also connected me with a local swim club that needed help processing its small archives as it prepared events commemorating its 90th anniversary. Next up was the H.F. Boehl Internship at the Filson Historical Society.

The Filson internship was extended several times and then transformed into a full-time position. As I write this (November) it is exactly one year since I transitioned from the Boehl intern to an assistant curator. What is my point in sharing all of this? Well, a few things.

#### Foot in the Door

First, it’s the idea of using intern and volunteer experiences as a way to get your foot in the door. Now, I know there are a lot of different opinions on working for free and/or low wages, and some might argue with me on this topic, but let me emphasize that these experiences are intended to be temporary. As an intern and/or volunteer, you’ve got to know when enough is enough and when the time has come to move on. Not all internships will turn into a job. In fact, most won’t. Yet, it’s the connections you make that will help you get a job elsewhere. So, for me, while I didn’t land a gig at the University of Louisville, the folks who generously lent their time working with and teaching me were able to vouch for my work and my attitude.

#### Getting the Job

**Cover Letters.** Everyone knows the importance of a

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well-written, tailored-to-the-position cover letter, yet, somewhere along the way, many have forgotten that the very same cover letter that highlights one's talent and personality also needs to convey what the applicant can do for the employer. Your cover letter cannot be all about what you want out of a job. Rather, it needs to inform the employer how your presence will add value to the company and how your particular skill set can help the institution accomplish specific goals and metrics.

**Negotiate, Negotiate, Negotiate.** If you take one thing away from this essay, let it be this: don't walk away from a job offer without having negotiated your salary. For many of us, this is the absolute last thing we want to add to our list of things to do, say, and remember during the interview process, but it is a must. This part of the process will take extra effort and a little bit of research, but, it will, literally, pay dividends. Utilize resources to find out commensurate salaries for the position for which you are applying, and prepare yourself to ask for a comparable salary. Of course, I am making this sound a lot simpler than it actually is and that is why I recommend everyone pick up a copy of *Ask for It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want*. Ignore the subtitle because Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever's book has advice that is applicable for both women and men.

### **On the Job**

**Suck It Up.** I imagine that my experiences at the Filson are similar in many ways to those of other archivists, that is, I have a lot of "nonarchival" tasks. In fact, I quickly came to understand this during my book publishing days, years before I became an archivist. That is, no matter where you go, tasks will be assigned to you that will have you biting your tongue hard in order to not blurt out "Wait, what? That isn't my job. Ha! I didn't go to college and graduate school to do that." Because guess what? As it turns out we did. Yep. We did, in fact, pay a lot of money to schlep boxes and clean out super-dirty, abandoned museum spaces. Think of it as calorie burn and move on. You will get dirty. You will get annoyed. But for all of the *ehhh* tasks, there will be all of the *oooo!* projects that make the schlepping worthwhile. Trust me on this one.

**Take a Backseat.** Another thing I've learned both in the archival world and in my pre-archival book publishing days is this: no one likes a know-it-all. In fact, people really cannot stand them. Even more disliked than a run-of-the-mill know-it-all is a super-green-just-graduated-

from-school-and-the-book-tells-us-to-do-it-this-way type of know-it-all. Word to the wise: best practices are just that. In reality, real-life roadblocks like miniscule budgets and lack of staff make those best practices difficult. I encourage you not to show up to your new job and begin telling your coworkers and superiors how to do things. Rather, take a backseat for a bit. Ask questions. Find out how things are done before deciding that things should all be done the way you learned them in school.

**Ask Questions.** Not only are we new to the job—we're new to the field. That said, no one is expecting their new hires to be experts. Asking intelligent questions doesn't reveal weakness, it reveals a willingness to learn and get the job done properly. Don't ever feel bad for what you don't know. Just ask.

**Make Decisions.** As important as it is to seek counsel when needed, it is equally as important to stand on your own two feet and make decisions independent of supervision. Learning to know when it is necessary to ask for permission and when it is permissible to act on your own takes time and emotional intelligence, but it's a learned skill and it's a necessary skill. There will be days when you doubt yourself, your skill set, and your preparedness for the job, but as they say: fake it 'til you make it.

**Create.** One of the best parts of my job as an assistant curator at the Filson is proposing and executing projects. Only after I followed my own advice of taking a backseat and getting the lay of the land did I propose projects to my boss. One of those projects has been a monthly blog post<sup>1</sup> featuring a recipe from our archives. Not only does this keep me writing, it allows me to better understand our collections. Another example, this one a little less ordinary, was getting the Filson to participate in an architectural and building materials trade fair. I set up a small booth at the yearly meeting of Central Kentucky Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (CKC-AIA)<sup>2</sup> and Construction Specifications Institute (CSI). There I promoted our architectural collections and informed architects about our interest in collecting their work—I even sold a few books! Both of these examples included a great deal of collaboration with outside parties like Broken Sidewalk,<sup>3</sup> local and regional AIA chapters, as well as architects.

**Have a Plan.** Know where you want to go with your career, make a plan, set goals, and, along the way, recruit help as necessary. Don't assume your employer will provide a framework for growth. It's 100 percent possible that



*The #MintJulepMonth recipe was among Johna’s most popular blog posts.*

unless you carve out your own path, you may end up stagnant and dead-ended. Take control of your career and don’t apologize for doing so. Own your successes (and your failures).

## Outside the Job

**Get Involved.** Join local, regional, and national archival organizations. But don’t just join—participate! A membership with the Society of American Archivists is more than just a good thing to have on your resume, it helps keep you informed and active in the community. Local and regional organizations are especially great because they are a smaller scale and make getting involved that much easier—for me, it’s MAC (of course), but also the Kentucky Council on Archives (KCA). These outlets have helped me meet other archivists on whom I can call with questions and who help me feel like I am a part of a community.



*Johna [wo]mans the Filson’s booth at the 2015 AIA-CKC trade fair.*

## Into the Future

The year ahead promises exciting happenings at the Filson, including the completion of our campus expansion project.<sup>4</sup> Between the opening of the Owsley Brown II History Center and the re-energized direction and leadership provided by our new president and CEO, Craig Buthod, it’s a good time to be an archivist at the Filson. I look forward to increased—and encouraged—collaboration between departments, particularly programming and special collections. With our expanded facilities, I hope to finally process some of the larger architectural collections I’ve been forced to set aside, including Anne Bruce Haldeman and Jasper Ward’s records and drawings. Outside of work, I am exploring various leadership and community opportunities, like applying to participate in the Archives Leadership Institute (ALI) and serving on Louisville’s Historic Landmarks and Preservation Districts Commission. All in all, I’m grateful for the opportunities I’ve been afforded and all the help I’ve had along the way, and I hope what I’ve experienced is of use to others. And, as always, I’d love to hear from you—contact me with questions, comments, article ideas, and/or anything else.’Til then, readers!

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## Notes

1. The Filson Historical Society, *Recipes from the Archives*, accessed November 20, 2015, [filsonhistorical.org/category/recipes-from-the-archives](http://filsonhistorical.org/category/recipes-from-the-archives).
2. AIA Central Kentucky, accessed November 20, 2015, [www.aia-ckc.org](http://www.aia-ckc.org).
3. Broken Sidewalk, “Johna Picco,” accessed November 20, 2015, [brokensidewalk.com/author/jpicco](http://brokensidewalk.com/author/jpicco).
4. The Filson Historical Society, “Campus Expansion and Cornerstone Campaign,” accessed November 20, 2015, [filsonhistorical.org/give-join/campus-expansion-2](http://filsonhistorical.org/give-join/campus-expansion-2).