from Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp, eds., Public History: An Introduction (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1986)

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ARCHIVES AND HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS

Fredric Miller

Then Darius the king issued an official document and they conducted an investigation into the archives of the treasuries deposited there at Babylon, and a roll was found in the fortress of Ecbatana in the province of Media with the following written on it—Memorandum: In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued an official document. About the house of God at Jerusalem: Let the house where sacrifices are offered be reconstructed and its foundations retained. . . .

Ezra 6: 1–3

But fortunate too the man who is friends with the country gods. . . . He spares not a glance for the iron rigour of law, the municipal racket, the public records.

Virgil, Geogrics, ii (493, 500–02)

Both the importance of historical records and their unhappy public image clearly date back thousands of years. Civilization often is identified with writing, and the earliest writing was in fact record keeping. As Virgil noted in his hymn of praise to the rural life, the Tabularia—the archives—were connected intimately to the ordered life of cities and public administration. For him—as for others who have followed—they symbolized some of the routine and regimented aspects of urban society. Yet many of his fellow Romans used archives readily in the writing of history and the administration of government, much as Darius had used his archives to retrieve that memorandum for the grateful Hebrews four centuries before.[1]

Such ambivalent attitudes toward archives and archivists have dominated the relationship between the historical and archival professions. Since the late nineteenth century, the reliance of historical research on primary sources, the increasing identification of "professional historian" with "history professor," and the fluctuating job market for historians have combined to produce a variety of patterns in the United States. Archivists are regarded by academic historians sometimes as colleagues, sometimes as assistants, and sometimes as unrelated professionals. Much of the uncertainty is based on incomprehension. To understand the archival profession as part of the larger world of historical work, it is necessary to understand what archives are and what archivists do—subjects which have recently not been part of the training of most historians.

ARCHIVES AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Unfortunately, the use of the word *archives* in the English language adds to the confusion. To begin with, it can mean an actual building, an agency, or a collection of historical documents. Strictly speaking, archives as historical documents are "the noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their continuing value" by that organization or institution.[2] They are in effect those of its files which are of historic interest. In direct contrast to deliberate intellectual creations like books, "archives were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of Posterity."[3] They derive instead from some kind of ongoing activity.

Archivists are responsible for determining which records deserve to be retained permanently, and for ensuring that they are then preserved and made available for use. But of course there are many records—ranging from the old files of a YMCA to the personal papers of a long dead Congressman—which are not maintained by their creators but are instead held by such institutions as university libraries, historical societies, and private research centers, which may each have the papers and records of hundreds of individuals and organizations. Technically such materials held outside of their original custody are called manuscript collections. The professionals who work with them are often called manuscript curators, though to add to the confusion the generic term *archivist* can also include them, and hundreds of manuscript curators are members of the Society of American Archivists. Some people are both archivist and curator, being responsible for the archives of their own institution while also collecting related records and personal papers.

In terms of modern historical materials, archives and manuscript collections have many similarities. "Most recent private records have the organizational quality of public records and are therefore archival in character."[4] Archivists and manuscript curators have the same kinds of duties, and both tend to become experts in the subjects documented by their collections. Since manuscript curators are responsible for records coming from different sources, they are in one sense "a kind of multiple

WEEK 8

archivist."[5] Adding to the complexity of the field is the development of new types or formats of historical materials. Thus, some archivists specialize in a kind of record, such as photographs, maps, or machine-readable records, just as many others specialize in more traditional historical themes.

The relationship of archives and manuscripts to the writing of history lends itself to a multitude of images, some flattering, others less so. Archives have customarily been described as the primary resources of history. Historians "mine" archives and manuscript collections, which are often stored in conditions which justify the metaphor. For those of a more scientific bent, collections of primary materials are the laboratories of the historical profession, the places where the raw data is kept and the experiments performed. Even those historians who rarely venture outside the secondary literature usually think of archives as in some way the foundation of historical research. As Philip Brooks pointed out, "the scholar is wholly dependent upon the archivist not only for the preservation, the condition and the order of the documents, but also for their identification."[6]

Yet archives and manuscript repositories are far more than the preserve of the lonely scholar. They might instead be thought of as the original public history programs, established to serve the direct needs of institutions, in the case of archives, or citizens interested in the past, in the case of manuscript collections and historical societies. It is crucial to recognize that the vast majority of the users of these materials are not professional historians, just as the people who create original records and personal papers are not historians. But it is equally true that in the end archives and historical manuscripts are about history. Individuals come to them to find out about something in the past, whether as part of their work or for purely personal reasons. In a fundamental sense, "the primary purpose of archives is cultural, and it is the research value of documentation that invests this essentially cultural purpose with substance and significance."[7] The archivist is thus the quintessential public historian, interacting first with a variety of people to identify historical materials, and then making it possible for others to put those materials to different uses.

Such a field is naturally diffuse.[8] And the nature of American social and political institutions reinforces that tendency, for it is institutional settings that define the work of archivists and manuscript curators. Most archivists in the strict definition of the word work in the comparatively straightforward area of public records. Here there is a clear geographic structure of repositories from the National Archives, through the fifty state archives, to those relatively scarce cities and counties fortunate enough to have professional archivists on their staffs. With some variations and exceptions, these archivists work primarily on the records generated by the government which employs them.

The National Archives and Records Administration, established in 1934, dwarfs all other archival repositories in size and importance. Now an independent agency of the government, like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, it employs hundreds of professional archivists and has custody over about 1.4 million cubic feet of records. The staff of the National Archives is responsible for determining which files produced by each agency of the federal government are worthy of permanent retention. In addition, the archives runs the nine presidential libraries which contain the papers of the presidents since Herbert Hoover, as well as many of their associates. While the National Archives has pioneered in some aspects of archival administration, its complex bureaucracy and the sheer mountain of paper with which it deals make it very atypical.[9]

In contrast, the state archives range from long-established, highly active institutions to small operations in obscure agencies. Despite the fact that the first state archives was established as early as 1901 in Alabama, a national overview reveals a very uneven pattern of support.[10] Nevertheless, the diversity of state archives and their large but manageable size has ensured that some have always been in the forefront of archival experimentation. Current activities in such states as New York, Illinois, Texas, Kentucky, Alabama, and Wisconsin continue that tradition.

Not all archivists work for governments. Private institutional archives form the other major type of archival repository. All kinds of agencies, societies, and organizations maintain their own archives. Among the most common in the United States are those of colleges and universities, churches and other religious organizations, and corporations. Archives are also maintained by some labor unions, hospitals, social service organizations, and scientific groups. In sharp contrast to the government repositories, private institutional archives are often very small operations, with only one or two full-time professional archivists.

The world of manuscript repositories in many ways parallels this archival system, though there are significant differences. Because they go out into society to acquire from many different sources both personal papers and organizational records—"fugitive archives" in a sense—the lines of division between manuscript repositories are not as neat as they are for archives. Collecting policies overlap considerably. So there is no one institution like the National Archives, though the Library of Congress comes closest. The library's Manuscript Division, which was created in 1897, contains the papers of twenty-three presidents and the records of such national organizations as the NAACP. Of course other institutions have collected on a national scale, such as major universities like Harvard, Texas, and Indiana; libraries like the New York Public and the Newberry in Chicago; and research establishments like the Hoover Institution.

Most manuscript repositories are far more focused than these by geographic area or subject concentration, though in either case they can and do acquire collections of national importance. Manuscript collections with a geographic orientation are commonly found in public libraries, and many have recently been established at universities. But the most prominent are in the state and local historical societies, which

already numbered over 200 in the United States by 1900, and nearly 1,500 in 1944.[11] They range from such large and professionally run institutions as the Massachusetts Historical Society (founded in 1791), to county repositories and even town or neighborhood societies, which are often open only a few hours a week and staffed by volunteers. Historical societies tend to include libraries, museums, and educational programs, as well as manuscript collections.[12] Some double as genealogical societies, while others serve as the official public archives, as in Wisconsin.

Very different are subject-oriented manuscript collections, generally found in either academic settings or independent research institutions. Paralleling private institutional archives, in virtually every area of American life, they have collected personal papers and the records of defunct organizations or organizations unable to support their own archivist.[13] For example, labor records are collected by Cornell, Wayne State, Georgia State, and Pennsylvania State universities and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, among others, while the Baker Library at Harvard and the Hagley Museum in Delaware are prominent collectors of business records.[14] Many religious denominations and ethnic groups have historical societies or university collections devoted to their development. Larger repositories often specialize in a number of subjects. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for example, has important groups of collections on contemporary social action and mass communications, as well as on labor. With private libraries like the Morgan in New York, the Clements in Michigan, and the Huntington in California, which specialize in rare and valuable items, added to the mixture, the rich complexity of the manuscripts world is evident.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ARCHIVISTS AND CURATORS

Archivists and manuscripts curators clearly work on a wide variety of subjects, with various types of records and in many different settings, all depending on the specific mission of the repository. Yet whatever that mission, archivists and curators share a broad range of professional responsibilities. The degree to which any individual is involved with one or all of them varies according to the size and organization of different repositories. But there is an essential core common to the work of all those responsible for historical records.

To put it succinctly, that core is the charge to preserve historically valuable materials and make them available for use. Everything else is an expansion of that deceptively simple assignment. It is important to remember this essential goal, because its implementation involves a great deal of detailed and often technical work, whose basic justification must always be kept in mind. Similarly, archivists and curators learn to adapt policies and procedures to both the nature and the content of their holdings. Archival work holds its interest only by avoiding a divorce between content and technique. Thus, the daily work of most professionals usually has a direct relationship to what their collections document.

The most fundamental set of tasks involves acquiring materials for the repository. "Adapting the aphorism that 'each generation rewrites history', it may be said that each generation collects records anew, not replacing what is already in hand, but enriching the accretion."[15] To that end, archivists have to ensure that the "life cycle of records" in their organization culminates in the retention of historically important materials in the archives. Manuscript curators have to decide what areas and/or subjects they are willing and able to document. Archival decisions are often related to records management programs, which regulate the creation and destruction of internal paperwork, usually with a view toward efficiency rather than history.[16] Manuscript repositories in contrast have to establish collecting policies, not unlike libraries. They look at their institutional mission and decide which of the thousands of potential collections of papers and records in the outside world they should even attempt to acquire. The transfer of organizational records can sometimes involve manuscript repositories in records management, but the operations of most repositories remain comparatively isolated from the creation of materials they hold.

Deciding what should be kept is still a long way from putting record cartons on the shelves. Both archives and manuscript repositories often conduct surveys to locate and identify potential acquisitions. An in-house survey is an obvious prelude to a sensible records management and archives program. For manuscript curators, general surveys of the potential donors in a field may help define a collecting policy. A more detailed survey of a possible acquisition can precede one of their most challenging tasks—obtaining an agreement for the transfer of records or personal papers.[17] Unlike archivists, manuscript curators must persuade organizations and individuals to physically part with their property—whether by deed, will, deposit, gift, or some other agreement. An elaborate negotiation is often involved, and diplomatic skills are not the least of the requirements for many manuscript positions. A whole range of donor relationships and conditions of access can be discussed, and the discussions can go on for years before the material appears in the repository. While an archivist confronting a bureaucrat reluctant to part with "his" files might disagree, the process of establishing and implementing a collecting policy clearly distinguishes the world of manuscripts from that of archives.

Having been offered a set of records or successfully concluded a negotiation, one crucial task still lies ahead in the area of acquisitions—that of determining precisely which materials should be accepted into the respository. This process is called appraisal. Here the archivists' task is probably the more challenging. They may face tens of thousands of cubic feet of files, while manuscript collections rarely exceed a few hundred feet. As early as 1904, the first guide to federal archives noted that "the mere mass of these records of the government is well-nigh appalling," and the problem has gotten far worse in the ensuing decades.[18] The National Archives saves less than 5 percent of the paper

produced by the federal government, and a similar standard applies to many other public and corporate archives.

The decision-making process involves many complex considerations, of which value to historical scholarship is only one. To a large extent, appraisal is informed guesswork. "Recognizing that associating records with future use was a prophetic act, Philip Bauer concluded that 'prophecy is the essence of archival evaluation'."[19] Inactive records may have permanent value for the continued operation for the organization which created them—as a reference to past policies and procedures; for financial accounting; for legal requirements; for public relations programs; or for some other administrative purpose. Key files, such as minutes, are often saved as the basis of the corporate memory, without any thought of outside users. In the rather unique phraseology of the eminent British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the "Golden Rule of Archive-Making" is to ensure that records are in "such a state of completeness and order that, supposing (an administrator) and his staff to be by some accident totally obliterated, a successor totally ignorant of the work of the office would be able to take it up and carry it on with the least possible inconvenience and delay simply on the strength of a study of the Office files."[20] In contrast to such considerations of "evidential value," saving records for their research potential involves an informed evaluation of the kind of information they contain, the nature of the activity they document, and how they might be useful to the research community. The archivist or curator must also assess how information is contained in the records—to what extent the collection can be made usable for research.

Whatever the arguments for saving records, whether for internal or external use or both, their value has to then be weighed against the mission and the resources of the respository. All records have some potential use to someone, which is often made clear to the archivist shortly after they are destroyed. But appraisal is the very difficult task of balancing that value against other factors, and often making the irreversible decision not to retain original records. One of the most important principles of appraisal is that not all old records are by definition archival; not all original documents deserve to be saved. As Leonard Rapport noted after many years in this field, "Appraisal is at best an inexact science, perhaps more an art; and a conscientious appraiser, particularly an imaginative one with an awareness of research trends and interests, is apt to know nights of troubled soul searching."[21]

Most archival and manuscript work begins when appraisal ends. Records have to be arranged, described, stored, and occasionally restored, before they can be used. These are detailed, labor intensive internal operations, a good deal of which can be done by nonprofessional staff under the general supervision of the archivist or curator. The first manual on such archival operations, published by three Dutch archivists in 1898, opens with the forthright declaration that "This is a tedious and meticulous book. The reader is warned."[22] The admonition applies most directly to the arranging and describing of materials,

known as "processing." This is somewhat analagous to physical classification and book cataloging as done in a library.

There are, however, major differences. Both archivists and manuscript curators keep their holdings together by creator rather than by subject—the principle of "provenance." They arrange the materials by organizational structure or personal activity, and within that structure by type of filing group, such as memoranda, correspondence, diaries, ledgers, and so forth. The filing groups themselves—known to archivists as "series"—are kept in the same order as they were during their active life, where this was not purely idiosyncratic. This is known as the principle of "original order." Both provenance and original order are based upon the concept that, in Theodore Schellenberg's words, "records have a collective rather than a unitary significance. All records arising from a particular activity have a cohesive character and are part of one another. . . . Their subject content is only incidental to accomplishing an action."[23] Finally, the main method of describing collections to others is not the catalog card but the inventory. Inventories can be many pages in length and customarily include an organizational history or personal biography, an essay on the major components of the collection, and a list of the different file units, sometimes down to the folder level. Archivists and curators thus think in terms of a folder containing a year of correspondence within the "outgoing correspondence" series of someone's papers or office files. They think in terms of a document's place within an organically unified whole, rather than in terms of an individual book or article, as is the case with most library work.[24]

The arrangement of records and the preparation of inventories are the bases for other internal operations. As records are arranged, those in need of repair, restoration, or special storage (such as photographs) can be separated. Preservation is a vital operation in all repositories, whether or not they can afford specialized staff, space, and equipment.[25] Basic descriptive work also generates further activity. Many respositories produce published guides based on their inventories and report their holdings as described in the inventories to national data bases. These external "finding aids" are complemented by internal aids which supplement the inventories, such as special lists, card catalogs, and computerized indexes. Because manuscript repositories have many different collections with no organizational relationship to each other, it is especially important that they have some overall system to help provide users with access to information spread throughout their holdings.

COLLECTION USERS

Use is the ultimate justification for all the work outlined above. Archivists and curators have to be service-oriented rather than research-oriented. For those with traditional historical training, this can be a difficult assignment. The very knowledge and training which enables them to assist researchers can also tempt them to view the collections as