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The Activist Archivist: A Conservative View

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My initial reaction when I was asked to participate in this session on the archivist as activist was one of incredulousness. To allot one of three theme sessions at this particularly important convention of the Society of American Archivists, where we are meeting jointly with the International Council on Archives, implies that we do believe we possess, either actually or potentially, the means of becoming true activists, that is, the kind of people, and the type of profession, that can have a major influence in determining not only our own future, but the future of others, even of our entire culture. I find this a staggering claim from a profession that has done nothing that can be termed momentous.

I am convinced that no self-proclaimed activist archivist will ever attract much notice except from members of our own profession, and further, that even if we banded together as a profession and issued an activist manifesto, it would not alter the course of American history in the slightest. But the activists still pose some questions and proposals that warrant our attention, perhaps even our censure. We are, relatively speaking, a young profession. We constantly benefit from criticism, and we must incessantly strive for improvement. But this is not being activist, it is simply a prudent and logical way for any profession to evolve and develop as it increases in sophistication. Thus, the conservative archivist

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is committed to change, but change within limits de-
finite by a cautious and reasoned analysis of needs
and opportunities, not upon whimsy, fad, or seren-
dipity.

The conservative archivist believes our pro-
fessional mission in life is too important to permit
hasty changes in existing procedures and methodolo-
gies. The archivist stands alone as the guardian of
those current and past records that document our cul-
ture for present and future generations, and his in-
tegrity and impartiality must not be compromised.
The conservative archivist recognizes that many areas
of our profession require further definition and im-
provement, but he insists that the basic principles
developed by our predecessors were sound. Above all
else, the conservative archivist is a realist. He
knows that we do not live in an ideal world; he knows
that his judgment in the capacity of the "honest
broker" is fallible; and he knows, given the resources
allocated to him in terms of staff, space, and funds,
that his functions as guardian of our culture can be
performed but imperfectly. But the conservative
archivist does not despair. He is committed to doing
the best job possible with the resources he has; he
is committed to the basics of our profession—the ap-
praisal and transfer of permanently valuable records,
the accessioning and processing of those records, and
the creation of guides and finding aids to make them
accessible to all interested persons. He is even
committed to change, as long as he can be convinced
that in reallocating his available resources to ac-
 complish such changes that he has neither jeopardized
his impartiality nor neglected his fundamental re-
sponsibilities as an archivist.

I perceive two major problems with those
archivists who style themselves activists. First,
the activist archivist is too often tempted to real-
locate his available resources in an effort to redress
what he perceives as inequities in the policies that
directed his predecessors. In so doing, he often ig-
nores the basics, and projects of lasting utility are
deferred or terminated. The current craze in our
profession for documenting women, blacks, and other
special interest groups has caused countless man-
hours and archives dollars to be diverted into a fran-
tic reanalysis of our holdings for pertinent records
to list in specialized finding aids. Activists
applaud our sensitivity and our timeliness in creating these guides, but the handful of women and blacks who clamor for and benefit from our labors is robbing the general public who need those comprehensive guides whose preparation we set aside in favor of our quest for relevancy.

The second major threat posed by the activists is that their actions may sully the traditional "honest broker" stance of our profession. Once we permit ourselves to be politicized, once we assume the mantle of creator of records rather than the curator of records, we as a profession will have lost most, if not all, of those attributes of impartiality that were in large part our reason for existence. The archivist must maintain his integrity, and he cannot do so if he actively seeks to generate records to fill what he perceives are gaps in the existing record documenting our culture. No individual has the capacity to view the present world and the countless millions of records it generates to determine what aspects of our culture are inadequately documented, and by presuming that he can, the activist in fact will distort the picture of our culture that is consulted by succeeding generations.

The major affliction of the activist archivist, I suspect, is his inability to cope with the identity crisis that has long plagued our profession. The traditional archivist believes that he must keep a low profile. He cannot afford to alienate or antagonize any special interest group or governmental agency, and he must be accessible and helpful to all. Experience has shown that our work can best be done from the stance of the "honest broker." We have found that results are best obtained by working assiduously to develop an understanding and trust with those agencies and institutions which generate the records we believe are permanently valuable, and by providing the best service possible to those who desire to use the records in our custody. But as a result of the traditional archivist maintaining a low profile, most people do not know what an archives or an archivist is. The traditional archives, by its very nature, is liable to be overlooked, and when funding is cut or not forthcoming, or when other agencies are consulted because of ignorance of what we can provide, archivists find it does little good to become partisan or vocal. Our best recourse is to
establish our worth through implementing the best possible archival procedures, thereby making our pro-
grams, if not indispensable, at least recognizable as worthy of continued support.

Some people become very unhappy when others do not recognize them as professionals, and they tend to blame the establishment for their crisis of identity. The activist may strike back by asserting that the traditional archivist has ignored virtually everything important in today's culture simply because it is easier for him to continue accessioning the same kind of records as in the past. In some cases the activist may be correct—there are archival administrators who follow faulty selection criteria—but the conservative archivist does not believe that the answer to legitimate problems with our profession can be solved by dramatically altering existing principles and procedures.

Granting that there is room for improvement in the archival profession, let us examine some of the suggestions that have been made by activists to determine whether or not such changes would indeed be beneficial. A major complaint of the activist is that traditional archival procedures inadequately document our culture, thus we are leaving an imperfect record for future generations. They insist that we must actively seek out series of records not now accessioned into our archives that document those aspects of our culture that have been ignored in the past, and when relevant records are not available, they suggest we fill the void by creating records of our own.

Two favorite program elements advocated by activist archivists are oral history and photography. They argue that our archives are filled with records documenting the rich and powerful, and that the oppressed classes, even the "average American," are underrepresented or totally ignored. But do we archivists have the expertise to define what the "average American" is, and even if we ethically should, could we formulate questionnaires free of bias that would help define for posterity what the "average American" in 1976 was like? Could we, as archivists, approach a member of the lower class, especially someone from a different racial or ethnic background, and be certain that our own preconceptions

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would not intrude upon our interview? Could we prop-
erly assess the effect our mode of dress and pattern
of speech, our education and relative affluence,
might have on the respondent?

I would argue that few, if any archivists,
could conduct a program of oral interviews that would
result in a corpus of useful records, and further,
that it would be wrong for us even to try. Conserva-
tive archivists believe that oral history should be
conducted outside the archival environment. Oral
history should be generated, if at all, by trained
interviewers, who may call themselves historians if
they like.

If our archives are dominated by the records
of the rich and powerful, with only fleeting glimpses
of the less fortunate, it simply means that the soci-
ety from which we draw our records is dominated by
the rich and powerful. In our role as the "honest
broker," we select records we deem worthy of preser-
vation, and the generations of historians to come
will correctly conclude that the mass of humanity in
our day had little influence or power in our society.
If we archivists politicize our role by diverting re-
sources from assessing, transferring, and processing
a judicious selection of existing records into con-
ducting oral interviews with those persons who appear
infrequently in our records, we will pervert, not im-
prove upon, the record of our culture we leave for
posterity. Transcripts or tapes of oral interviews,
when they are done well by trained interviewers, can
have a place in an archives, but they are not a pana-
cea and they should not be generated at the expense
of, or be accepted into the archives in lieu of, rec-
ords of greater value for illuminating our entire
culture.

Activist archivists also frequently advocate
creating a photographic record of our culture, argu-
ing that this medium best captures, for example, life
in the big city ghetto. Photographs can be an impor-
tant addition to an archives, especially when they
are generated as an integral part of the records of a
particular agency or institution, and we must be sen-
sitive to the care and preservation of such collec-
tions that we accession into our archives. But as
with oral history, the conservative archivist objects
to diverting archives dollars and staff resources
into the creation of photographs to fill alleged gaps in existing record series, because they must ultimately reflect the preconceptions and prejudices of the archivist who undertakes the project. Certainly, with sufficient funding, we could document in detail the plight of our inner cities, with photographs of ill-clad children forced to play in the streets, with derelicts lying in alleys, with tenements, garbage and rats. But when future generations review our record of what repelled us most about our inner cities, would they conclude that the residents never experienced happiness, never enjoyed family or friends, never learned to cope with their environment?

Photographs, in fact, are not very useful for documenting many aspects of our culture, because they capture only an instant in a continuum and because they record that instant too precisely. What we archivists seek to do is to preserve for posterity an image of our total culture, not just one instant in front of one tenement in one large city. We must spend our time and resources locating and transferring assessment lists, unemployment and welfare rolls, and court records to indicate to future generations what life was like in the ghetto. Once we are certain we have identified and transferred these record series, then we can accept photographs to complement the record. But photographs are often nothing more than illustrative, and other types of records must be brought into our archives if we hope to provide posterity with a comprehensive view of our culture.

Another favorite theme of activist archivists is that we must do more to secure records relating to special interest groups, by generating new records, assiduously seeking out records relating to these groups that heretofore were not brought into the archives, and by creating special finding aids to records already in our custody that relate to them. Conservatives believe that highlighting any particular group is wrong, because it distorts reality. We prefer selection procedures that will bring into our archives records that document all facets of our culture and the creation of comprehensive, rather than specialized, guides to those records. No amount of vocalizing by women, blacks, or other allegedly oppressed, ignored, or misunderstood segments of
American society will change the fact that until the last few years our culture was indisputably dominated by white Protestant males, and in most respects it still is. More important, we archivists must not permit ourselves to compromise our principles by being forced to judge that particular groups have been wrongfully ignored in the past. We must eschew all attempts to force us to divert our scarce resources into enterprises designed to enhance the status of recently activated groups who demand that we archivists provide them with historical legitimacy.

A guide to nearly 33,000 loose papers dating from the Revolutionary War era that we at the Hall of Records will publish this winter exemplifies my point. While we might have gained more applause for preparing specialized guides to specific papers relating to women and blacks during the period, we chose to do a general guide. As much as some people would like to believe that women, blacks, and other non-white-male groups played a crucial role in our struggle for independence, this series of records, which includes virtually all invoices, chits, vouchers, and communications issued by the State of Maryland between 1775 and 1789, establishes conclusively that they did not. White men, the products of modest or oppressed backgrounds, were the backbone of Maryland's war effort, and these men were inspired by the hope of material self-improvement, not rhetoric. What the collection of State Papers does indicate is that the men who bore the burden of the war were a special class of whites. They were not the wealthy merchants, lawyers, and planters whose rhetoric had reluctantly convinced Marylanders to join with the other colonies in declaring independence, rather they were the sons of tenant farmers, newly freed indentured and convict servants, and men who owned neither land nor slaves in a society where economic and social mobility were dependent upon both. Furthermore, the records show that money, not patriotism, inspired this class of white men to enlist. The bounty on the barrel head at the recruiting station was what counted for people at the bottom of the economic spectrum, and with the promise of land at the expiration of service, enlistment seemed like an unprecedented opportunity for them. Ultimately, speculators got most of the soldiers' pay and benefits, but the ranks of privates were nonetheless filled by the dispossessed, who hoped that by marching off to war they might finally
achieve something better for themselves and their families.

Conservatives believe that comprehensive inventories of collections such as the Maryland State Papers are infinitely more useful to the public, and thus are the only defensible course for an archivist to take. This does not mean that comprehensive inventories have to be done in the traditional way. Our work on the Maryland State Papers illustrates that even we conservatives are willing to benefit from progress if it will permit us to utilize our limited resources more advantageously. The guide we have done was inventoried by humans—very inexpensively because we utilized summer interns—but then the items were typed on an in-house text editing system that created machine-readable tapes. The actual sorting, composition, and even the author-recipient index to the collection was done by computer. As a result, we were able to produce a massive finding aid within our budget limitations, and more important, we will be able to offer the public a thousand page book—case bound—for just $16.00.

The fundamental concern conservative archivists have with much of what the activists advocate is that they are calling for us once again to become historians. We were historians once, or at least a part of their professional organization, and many of us have suffered from a sense of inferiority ever since we broke away from them. Still, our relationship with the historical profession has remained close, and many of the reforms advocated by the activists are put forward in the name of assisting future generations of historians. Activists claim that unless we alter our criteria for accessioning records, or unless we actually create records ourselves through programs like oral history and photography, that future historians will be unaware of important facets of our culture.

But when we adopt this type of reasoning, we are actually becoming historians ourselves. We are placing ourselves in the position of the historian of the future, looking at our culture and the records it generates, and saying that the records in our archives do not give sufficient weight to those aspects of our culture that we judge are too important to be overlooked. When tempted to engage in this kind of
History making, we archivists should be sobered by looking at historians themselves. They are much better equipped than we to determine the salient facts of past cultures, and yet each generation of historians changes its collective mind about what the past was like. Historians alter their interpretation of the past not necessarily because they are more closely approaching the truth, but rather because the preconceptions, environment, and educational imperatives of each generation of historians changes. The conclusions of historians are based as much on the personal biases and prejudices of the individual practitioner as they are on the realities of the past.

When an archivist understands that the historian's vaunted quest for the truth is largely a sham, he should then examine his own motives when he advocates generating new records—literally stacking the deck—for future generations of historians. What may seem terribly important to us personally may in the end prove to be unimportant. Those activist archivists who advocated seeking out the records of radical groups in the 1960s, and who promoted their successes as examples of the kinds of social activity that should be documented in an archives, in all probability performed a disservice to future historians, because it turns out the radicalism of the 1960s was but a temporary, and largely inconsequential, phenomenon. The time and resources these activists expended securing the records of radical groups would have been much better spent documenting aspects of our culture in that decade that were more lasting and meaningful.

While archivists should not attempt to emulate historians, our profession could learn one important lesson from them. Historians are members of a respected and well-known profession, and yet, ironically, they do little that is socially redeeming, and they have had a minimal impact on our culture. Most of what historians do interests only a few members of their own profession, while we archivists touch nearly everyone's life, if not for genealogical research, title searching, or solutions to particular problems, at least for a birth, marriage, or death certificate. The irony is compounded by the historian's dependence upon archives for survival, for
without us the historian either would not exist, or he would be reduced to playing the role of a court jester recounting the oral legacy of times past.

But what has given professional respectability to historians, and what is missing from our own profession, is their ability and willingness to write. Most of what historians write is not very good, but still the reputation of individual members and of the profession as a whole is enhanced through publication. We archivists should follow the example of the historians by writing more, and by learning to write better. We need informed, articulate statements from archivists who have long been in the profession concerning exactly what our purpose is and what we hope to attain. We need less rhetoric and simpleminded "how I did it" expositions, and more statements of fundamental theory and policy. I believe most of the misunderstandings between activist and traditionalist archivists could have been avoided had we conservatives taken the time, and had the ability, to express what our policy was to others in the profession.

Unfortunately, as any issue of the American Archivist will attest, most members of our profession are unable to identify interesting and challenging topics for discussion, and even worse, most of us are functional illiterates. I suppose the explanation is that many of us were originally trained as historians, and we abandoned that profession for the archives because we failed, or feared we would fail, to meet the test of writing and publishing demanded by that profession. Still, writing is a skill that can be learned, and I believe we archivists would be well advised to teach ourselves how to do it. If the quality of our profession is to improve, we must explain our position fully to others in the profession, we must exploit those record series that can never be suitably interpreted by anyone other than an archivist, and we must lead the effort to educate the public concerning the role of archivists and archives. If we had done this before in well-written articles and monographs, I seriously doubt we would be meeting here today discussing activism. The good archivist has always been an activist, in the best sense of the word. That the established profession must defend itself against those who advocate programs so foreign to what an archivist in this country has always meant

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is, I believe, solely a product of our unwillingness, or inability to articulate the principles that direct us.

In short, the archival profession is an imperfect reflection of the imperfect individuals who make up its ranks. Our goal is to preserve for posterity those records of the present that will convey an accurate picture of our culture and to make accessible to our contemporaries the records in our custody. We never succeed in achieving all our goals, but we do our best, given the resources allocated to us, to come close to the mark. We strive to achieve the status of the "honest broker," seeking to bring new information into our archives as assiduously as we work to disperse information to whomever requests it. We refuse to become record creators, preferring instead to allocate our resources to accessioning new records and creating finding aids to facilitate access to them. Above all else, we who call ourselves conservative, or traditionalist, archivists are realists. We admit there are problems with our profession, but we believe solutions can be found without abandoning the principles our profession has developed through trial and error. We acknowledge that some aspects of our culture could be more fully documented, but we adhere to our determination to remain cultural conservators, not cultural arbiters. We applaud the interest of women, ethnic, and racial minorities in their history, but we refuse to dissipate our archives dollars in combing through records that legitimately document a white, male dominated society to bolster their egos. As realists we know that our resources are limited, that regardless of how pleasant it might be to initiate new experimental programs or to undertake for our own amusement some of the record-generating projects advocated by the activists, it would mean that we would have to cut back elsewhere. Finally, we conservatives are not loath to initiate change, but we insist that the feasibility and productivity of a reallocation of existing resources be made abundantly clear. Our hesitancy to accept change, we believe, is well-founded; from experience we know that our existing programs, policies, and procedures are good ones—they have stood the test of time.