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The Archivist as Scholar: A Case for Research by Archivists

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Has the time arrived for archivists to reevaluate their disengagement from the historical profession over forty years ago? It was then their desire to draw together those whose prime concern centered on the creation of "scientific" methods for administering archives from those whose chief occupation was to teach, since the latter had seldom taken an interest in the technical side of arranging and describing records. The establishment of an archival profession has, consequently, resulted in the development of sophisticated archival tools at the expense of unity between the archival and historical professions. For both archivists and historians a point of diminishing returns in the continued separation may have been reached, yet a renewal of the partnership could prove as difficult as the break. One step archivists might take to renew relations is to direct their attention toward the use of documents in their charge by engaging in scholarly research.

Archivists' scholarly work based on primary source material housed in the institutions that employ them may never emerge as a major job responsibility; indeed, some might flinch at the suggestion, worrying that regular archival chores would be hampered if co-workers kept themselves busy researching. Even leaders of the archival profession, while advocating scholarly research, sometimes downplay its pursuit by archivists. Nevertheless, few in our profession would deny that a qualified archivist ought to have the education and experience that equip him to engage in scholarly research. Historical research expertise, nearly all archivists agree, is necessary for effective archival work, whether administration, reference, appraisal, or processing. Every archivist should be able to unravel the origins of records and to trace the background of the persons or organizations that produced the records.

Once on the job, archivists are confronted with disturbing restrictions on the use of the very research skills that were conditions of employment. New staff are invariably warned against too serious an involvement in their research for their archival projects lest they neglect their clerical tasks. Do not persevere in research beyond the requirements of archival necessity, concludes a common admonition to beginning archivists who, often having spent years in graduate school training in the search for elusive truth, receive such advice with a heavy heart.

Once employed as archivists, are these historians never again to look upon themselves as scholars? Are they now essentially clerks, or, even worse, "dead file clerks," according to a humorous definition for archivists that once upset Solon Buck, the second Archivist of the United States?

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Must archivists, upon entering the profession, forsake scholarly research or relegate it to a hobby? Such questions are the focus of this article and the answers to them occasionally appear severe.

In one school are those who view the matter strictly from an administrator's perspective. Christopher Crittenden, for instance, taught that the archivist's prime duty is to be a "public servant" because employees of archives have to perform too many archival chores to allow time to engage in scholarly endeavors. In line with that advice, others have urged archivists to restrict their archival research to studies of the structure of the organizations that created the records preserved in their repositories and to analyses of the developmental growth of those records. Writers of this school urge archivists to avoid turning their research into a scholarly enterprise, but to concern themselves with the functions of the records creator. While on the job, similar instructions urge, historical interests should be limited to information that may cast light upon the records that are serviced.

Those remonstrances, however, have not yet congealed into a consensus within the archival profession. During its early years, a generation ago, experts had hoped that archivists would remain scholars; that dream persists in the thinking of some, perhaps a dwindling number, of archivists. To them, the rationale for the scholar-archivist still appears cogent. Waldo Leland said, "The archivist must, it is true, deal with a vast number of technical problems, but he must not, because of that necessity, become a mere technician." Philip Brooks added that scholarly accomplishments, because they lead to improved archival reference and description work, "could be an important element in distinguishing between the various degrees of archival competence." And Lester Cappon urged archivists not to act as mere caretakers of records. Archivists, Cappon explained, have a "scholarly obligation to publish, for an archivist is a scholar ... because of the function he performs and the process he supervises."

Even so, archivists noted for their own publications might not represent most professional opinions on the subject of archival research. Those who have made a name in the profession, and who find it easy to publish what they write, could hold a bias on the question. Archivists who exhibit slight desire to see their names in print may form the majority and may have no aversion to being typed as clerks or technicians. It is not unusual to hear archivists argue that scholarly research benefits archival operations in the long-run, yet in the short-run technical abilities determine the efficiency of an archivist. In the long-run, as John Maynard Keynes quipped, we are all dead.

Those views may have helped to produce the current situation in the archival profession. By scanning archival, library, or historical journals over the past decade or so, one's impression deepens that the technician side of the archival profession has been gaining acceptance at a cost to the scholarly research side. That trend has been growing so strong that today college professors might find it incongruous to envision an archivist, or many of them, researching in and writing about records that he handles in a housekeeping fashion. In some circles, archivists—and others with scholarly training, but working outside academia—are considered as having rather haphazardly fallen into their jobs because they could not synthesize, analyze, write, or teach well enough to become full-fledged scholars. An archivist
is a scholar manqué. It is curious that American academics have adopted such an image of archivists. After all, it was through the efforts of the American Historical Association that the archival profession emerged in the United States. Certainly the study of history is well-established as, if not essential to, training for archivists. In fact European scholars have long considered archives a branch of historical pursuit, so much so that it is not uncommon for European historians to switch from teaching to working in archives and then back to teaching, not only without any loss in prestige but with a clear acknowledgement that the experience has enriched their professional skills.

Despite the prevalence of the archivist-as-technician attitude in the United States, recent events may augur a change. As the employment crisis for historians has worsened, European thinking about the symbiotic relationship of archivists and historians has begun to receive favor. But the breach between American scholarship and archival work may be difficult to bridge. Archivists' habitual focus on the routine could prove just as great a hindrance to an alliance of history and archives as the well-known indifference of those historians who still maintain that history is essentially a teaching profession. Archivists, however, might initiate the alliance by advocating in their own institutions the adoption of an institutional policy that encourages staff to research, write, and publish monographs based on the exploitation of collections in their own repositories.

Archival scholarship, as administrative policy, is neither a new nor a radical proposal. It exists in some institutions on a voluntary basis. But it is a policy that should be promoted if scholars, especially academics, want to cultivate financial resources for the sustenance of their apprenticed recruits and if the archival profession is not to be classed as a clerical skill, a fate that today's archival leaders should view with dismay. Walter Rundell, Jr., has ranked archival scholarship as the fifth, and last, priority for a soundly based historical records program. Although records disposition, inventorying, indexing, and local document preservation receive higher priorities, Rundell encourages scholarly investigations by archivists into the records that they maintain. "The scholarly curator," he explains, "is a better curator because of the deepened understanding that research and publication bring to his task. Thus, he is better able to serve the needs of history as well as his own institution."

What should constitute the elements of such a policy, and how might it be implemented both to the satisfaction of efficiency-minded administrators and intellectually-oriented academics? As a beginning, an archives might announce that its staff will be permitted to engage in personal research one day a month, or a half-day every two weeks, on subjects for which the archives collection is a major source. Only archivists who wish to participate in the program would be given the time, but the opportunity would be open for all. Research topics might be approved by the archives director, as would the completed monographs before submission for publication. Outlines, or progress summaries, could be required periodically, say at three- or six-month intervals. Subjects selected need not be oriented only toward history, but also toward the interests of scholarly journals in public administration, law, government, genealogy, librarianship, or archives. Typical research topics offered by an archives collection might include: 1) interaction between governmental entities; 2) their origins and growth; 3) their activities that led to significant change or

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public attention; 4) their reaction to new laws, directives, or social events, such as those arising from racial unrest; 5) diminution of agency responsibilities or power; 6) prosopographical studies when records reveal biographical data of many individuals over long periods; and 7) quantitative analyses of documents that offer consistent statistics.

Collections in manuscript repositories would, of course, lend themselves to more traditional avenues of research; and there the danger arises of a conflict with patrons who are researching the same topic as the archivist, if his personal ethics do not impel him to treat the patrons' requests with a higher priority than his own project. Worries, however, about such conflicts need not develop if archivists reflect upon how unlikely it is that similar hypotheses would be pursued and how many rooms the mansion of historical interpretation contains. An analogous situation exists in a university archives when professors insist that they be given first rights to research a collection and then proceed to tie it up for long periods of time. Librarians and archivists have long considered such tactics as "fraud."15

A research program in institutional history would provide training for archivists, generate favorable publicity for their institutions, and demonstrate that their collection offered varied services for government officials, academics, or other citizens. Interpretations in the resulting monographs ought to be guarded (since the archivist will inevitably represent his institution in such a work) but, at the same time, clear. Otherwise, archivists may find themselves compiling chronicles in the tradition of medieval monks. If, however, archivists choose their themes with the goal of developing hypotheses that may fill vacuums in the realm of human knowledge, or correct erroneous accounts of the past, or solve historical problems—as Carl Becker advised—no one can effectually charge that antiquarianism, or nineteenth-century historical "scientism," has once again bloomed under official sponsorship.16

To avoid such a criticism, archive directors might take care that these research projects do not result in the mere abstracting and stringing together of documents or the trivializing of historical data by limiting the research to a particular pile of documents, rather than investigating all relevant sociocultural ramifications wherever questions lead during the course of research. Maynard Brickford noted the value of this approach:

Administrative history is an important research use often confused with administrative uses of historical records by the office of origin and the archivist's own special concern with administrative history in the identification, arrangement, and description of his holdings. . . . Institutional studies are not favorite topics of scholars, and the archivist's professional bias has produced misunderstandings among researchers more interested in economic development, social change, and the dynamics of inter-institutional relationships than organization, functions, procedure, and authority. The special obligation to promote the serious study of institutions and records makes the archivist an advocate of institutional history.17
At the monthly rate of one day for work on these projects, an archivist ought to complete a monograph within two years (24 days of research). The writing itself might be accomplished during the archivist’s free time after work or on weekends. Such a program should result in the production of a scholarly article researched in depth. Not all research should be performed in the archives, since a thorough job necessitates synthesis of unpublished documents with publications—both primary sources and insights from secondary works—available from libraries or other document repositories. Besides acting as an incentive for archivists to stay abreast of historical research, public administration problems, and legal interests, such a policy would enhance the reputation of an archives by publicizing its potential.

The former Archivist of the United States, James Rhoads, explained why his institution adopted the policy: "We believe that in order to be responsive to the needs of scholarship, archivists should themselves be practicing scholars... All our professional staff are being encouraged to spend ten percent of their time in independent research and writing activities." Ten percent is two days a month; some university libraries permit their staffs the same amount of time for similar activities. The "surest proof," according to Brichford, that a solid archival program exists is "the frequency and variety of use" by administrators and scholars. And, he added, to keep up with the profession, to grow as an archivist, even to possess the ability to appraise records and carry on discussions with researchers, the archivist "must read history extensively to understand research uses and write history to gain an appreciation of historical methodology."

Furthermore, in another work, Brichford deemed continual personal research mandatory for all archivists to perform satisfactorily. Only archivists who keep up with contemporary research can judge whether documents available to archives are worth preserving. In Brichford’s words: "The most difficult task in archival evaluation is deciding that a record is not likely to be needed for scholarly research. Here the archivist must look at current scholarship, research trends, and his own experience in research work. ... Without a sound personal research background and a wide knowledge of research in other fields, the archivist cannot anticipate the research needs of others."

Federal and university archivists, who have written most about the problem of archival scholarship, ought to be joined in their concern by all archivists, be they local, state, private, religious, or corporate. All archivists should endeavor to start institutional programs that not only allow, but promote personal research on the part of the staff. Not until such a policy is generally recognized as necessary for personnel development will the archival profession emerge from its status as a skill to a professional standing on par with other scholarly disciplines. When the care of archives is perceived as belonging to the intellectual pursuits, then the world of scholarship may accept the archival vocation as a full partner in the search for truth.
NOTES


12Instances of Ernst Posner's and T. R. Schellenberg's backgrounds quickly come to mind, but their historical-archival interests stem from a European tradition. For example, Friedrich Meinecke, after receiving his doctorate from the University of Berlin, spent the next fourteen years working in the Prussian Archives. During that time, he came across the papers of Prussian Field Marshall von Boyen, who had reorganized the German army following Napoleonic era. The resulting von Boyen study boosted Meinecke into the ranks of outstanding European historians. Even in the early 1930s, Meinecke was acting as a consultant for Prussian archives. Albert Brackmann, "The National Archives Staff Information Circulars: Archival Training in Prussia," 1 (December 1938): 2, 7, 9.

13DeLloyd J. Guth, "History as Epistemology" (Presentation delivered at the Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Neb., March 10, 1978).


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