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Let's Give Them Something to Talk About: Advocating for Archives*

Kathleen D. Roe

Every morning I drive to work past Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a highly regarded college in the northeast for engineers, architects, mathematicians, and a predictable array of geeks and techno-nerds as well as a couple of what my daughter would term “hot college kids.” What fascinates me during my drive, beyond the people-watching opportunities, is a banner displayed on the overpass linking the two sides of campus that poses one simple question to the students: “Why not change the world?”

I love the spirit that reflects, the encouragement it provides for these fertile minds to have big ideas, big dreams, and big goals. Am I envious of them? Not a bit—because as archivists, we are already there. And I don’t mean because we have our own contingent of geeks, nerds, and “hotties” but because what we do, what results from the use of archival records already DOES change the world. It’s just that we almost never TALK about it.

Think about your last conversation about archives. My bet is that it was either about an archival process or

technique (perhaps EAD-speak or MPLP patter) or about the interesting historical content of some record or about the vaunted researchers who came to use your collections. When was the last time you told someone a compelling story about how the resources in your archives made it possible for someone to obtain rights or benefits? How those resources influenced a major policy decision? How archives helped someone connect with their family or community? Or how archival resources literally saved a life? Too often archives and archivists operate in the background, doing essential but unheralded service. The time has come for this profession to step forward and share the stories of how archives change lives and make important contributions to our society.

Let's step back a moment, though, and talk about what people think about archives. When you tell someone you are an archivist or that you work with archival records, what do they say? "Oh, that must be sooooo interesting." We do not elicit fear as dentists do, the jokes made about lawyers, or the glazed look that bankers engender. When people look at an historical record, as evidenced by the crowds at the National Archives, the two most common words are "oooooh" and "ahhhhhh" followed closely by "look at that handwriting." People love our "stuff" and in an inchoate way understand that there must be some larger purpose or value to all this. In truth they generally haven't a clue what to make of archival records beyond the age or treasure status. So it follows that it does not come immediately to mind for them what difference archival records make.

Knowing that we have so many well-meaning constituents, potential supporters and users, what do we as professionals tell them about archives? We go straight for the jugular and tell them such things as:

- "Did you know George Washington's teeth were actually made out of wood?"

- “We have records that prove Uncle Sam was a real person.”
- “We have reports from a woman who infiltrated Emma Goldman’s organization and sent information to an investigative committee on her activities.”
- And one that will go over especially badly here in Georgia and South Carolina, “We have a diary that shows there were people in Atlanta who aided Sherman’s Union soldiers.”

Somewhere in the far recesses of your mind, does anyone hear a voice screaming “so what?” We often tell people about some amazing historical fact or information in our holdings, or the “treasures” we have--and there are some truly astonishing, fascinating ones. However that does not get us past the “ooooh aaaaah” effect. What we rarely, if ever, talk about is the value of archives and research therein, the outcomes that have been realized because of the use of archival records. We are too often silent about how archives change lives, how they influence decision-making, how they literally can change the fabric and nature of a life, a community, and the landscape of our nation.

So what does it look like when we provide information on the value resulting from the use of archival records? To begin with, here are several examples that demonstrate the specific outcomes of using archives:

Biologists in Georgia are trying to reintroduce the American chestnut, which was almost entirely wiped out by an Asian fungus in the 1930s. But identifying where to plant them so their survival is most likely had been a challenge until one staff member of the Department of Natural Resources went to the state archives and found maps created as the state surveyed land ceded to Georgia by the Creek and Muscogee Indians. The surveyors marked the lots by recording the tree species growing at the corners

there and painted lot numbers on those trees. The resulting maps provide biologists an excellent picture of locations where the American chestnut had grown well in the past, and have served as a guide for the replanting efforts.¹

In the Town of Amherst (NY) the archives has served the town during a controversy that developed between a shopping mall owner and a senior center in the town over an existing right-of-way between a senior center and a local shopping mall. The shopping mall developer had threatened to close the access route fearing litigation, but a letter of agreement located by the archivist in the local planning department's files was used to validate that it was the original intent of the developer, as well as the town, to allow the seniors to use the path. The pathway was kept open.²

In July 2002 a serious disaster occurred at the Quecreek Mine in Somerset County, Pennsylvania with 9 miners being trapped alive underground. No accurate maps showing all the current and closed tunnels existed for the mine, posing serious problems for rescue plans. But the family of a former Department of Environmental Protection mine inspector, who worked from his home, had donated his maps, including ones for Quecreek, to the Windber Museum. Those maps were made available and played an essential role in the location and planning for the rescue of the miners. So literally, archives can save lives.³

¹ S. Heather Duncan, "Old maps give clues where fabled chestnut trees might grow," *The Macon Telegraph*, April 18, 2009, accessed October 21, 2010, <http://www.macon.com/2009/04/18/686786/old-maps-give-clues-where-fabled.html>

² "Archives and You: The Benefits of Historical Records" NY State Archives, State Education Department, Albany, NY, 1990

³ Testimony of Barbara Franco, Director of the Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Information Policy, the Census and the National Archives, June 9, 2010.

These are very different stories, but note how each demonstrates very clearly a specific benefit, gain, or value resulting from the use of archives, something that literally either changes the landscape, the rights of individuals, or the quality of a life. Not bad, is it? There are stories like this being played out every day in archives across the country. All too often, we don't know about them. We need to find them—by communicating with our researchers and our staff or colleagues so they do a little “talking” and bring out this essential information. Our good colleagues at the Georgia Archives literally track this type of information in a file on their reference/research website. The Society of American Archivists has just launched an Archives Month campaign called “I found it in the Archives” urging archival institutions to hold contests and undertake initiatives to reveal what users are doing with and finding in historical records.

Turning to another value of archives, as a democracy, we also sometimes forget the essential role that records play in holding governments and individuals accountable. In 2003, the International Conference of the Roundtable on Archives (CITRA) met in Capetown, South Africa, to discuss “Archives and Human Rights,” where Bishop Desmond Tutu observed that “...records are crucial to hold us accountable... They are a potent bulwark against human rights violations.”⁴ Truth and reconciliation commissions, court trials, and many legal proceedings rely on the evidence in archives. Accountability, the demonstration of what really happened, can be enormously important. Let me give you two examples from the United States, lest we

⁴ “Transcription of Speech by Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the 37th Annual Citra Conference: 21 October 2003” <http://new.ica.org/3715/reference-documents/archbishop-desmond-tutu-keynote-capetown-south-africa-21-october-2003.html>, accessed October 21, 2010.

forget that “truth” or “what really happened” is not always immediately available or revealed in our own society:

In 1950, Mary Jean Price, salutatorian of her high school, tried to enroll at her hometown college to become a teacher. She was denied access because she was an African-American and never went to college to fulfill her dream. Instead she stayed at home, helped her aging parents, got married, worked as a janitor, and buried the story. Many years later, she finally told her son and he pursued the facts in the university’s archives. There he unearthed the evidence that she was denied entrance specifically because she was an African-American. He shared that information, and as a result, 60 years later his mother was awarded an honorary degree from Missouri State University. The stories found in archives may not always be “happy,” but confirmation of the accuracy and truth of a situation was extremely important in this case.⁵

Another piece of information that many who lived through the Sixties and Seventies have long wondered about relates to the deaths of four students at Kent State University. Some of us recall endless and divisive debates about whether the Ohio National Guard was ordered to fire on the student demonstration. A KSU communications student had a reel-to-reel tape machine running in his dorm room on May 4, 1970, capturing 30 minutes of audio of the protest, including 13 seconds of the shooting and the aftermath. After preserving the recording for 40 years, the former student learned that the technology now perhaps existed to reduce background noise so that it might be possible to hear if an order to fire was given. The tape was analyzed, and results were found that indicated a handgun appears to have been shot off before the Guard began to fire, leading to further investigation of reports that an FBI

⁵ “Sixty years after rejection, college grants degree” by Ryan McCartney, msnbc.com, July 30, 2010, accessed on October 21, 2010, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38472533/ns/us_news-life/.

agent was seen firing his revolver. That generates more questions, but the archival survival of this tape gives a bit more evidence that may help lead to the “truth” of this experience.⁶

Another very persuasive route to gaining support and attention is to demonstrate that archivists have some substantial competencies and capacities to offer to stakeholders and constituents. In a recent Congressional hearing on the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, Karen Jefferson of the Atlanta University Center and Kaye Lanning Minchew of the Troup County (GA) Archives spoke very persuasively about the skills archivists have that will help in dealing with the issues of managing electronic information.⁷ It bears noting that many, many managers and resource allocators “get” that email, blackberries, Facebook, Twitter, as well as databases and other electronic information sources, pose an almost incomprehensible array of problems. The importance and value of our knowledge and capacities with electronic records became particularly clear when David Carmichael, Director of the Georgia Archives, and I met with Senator Carl Levin’s staff to request that the Senator become a co-sponsor of the PAHR (Preserving the American Historical Record) bill. It led to a serious 30 minute discussion about the challenges of electronic information and what archivists have to offer on this. Normally one can expect 5 to 10 minutes of even a staffer’s time; so, clearly this was a topic that really captured

⁶ “Audiotape of Kent State Shooting to Get New Analysis” AOL News, April 29, 2010, accessed on October 21, 2010, <http://www.aolnews.com/nation/article/audiotape-of-kent-state-shooting-to-get-new-analysis/19458944>.

⁷ Testimonies of Karen Jefferson, Atlanta Clark University and Kaye Lanning Minchew, Troup County (GA) Archives before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Information Policy, the Census and the National Archives, June 9, 2010.

attention and support, as Senator Levin indeed became our Democratic co-sponsor along with Republican Orrin Hatch.

If the human stories or technology anxiety don't win over supporters to archives, the sheer economics can also be underscored. Professor Elizabeth Yakel and students from the University of Michigan did a survey to measure the economic impact of government archives on their local community. Some of you may have participated in this study, as we did at my employing institution, the New York State Archives. The study provides useful statistics such as the fact that archives were the primary destination of 69% of the people surveyed, and provides information on the amount of money they spent on average for food, lodging, and other expenses related to their visit.⁸ So for the hardcore realist among our managers, stakeholders, or government officials, archives can demonstrably stimulate the economy.

It takes a bit to develop the mindset for capturing the information that demonstrates the outcomes and impact of archives, but some practice will have astonishing results. And that little troublemaker in the back of your mind is probably saying to you "I can't take the time to do this. I can't collect this kind of information." Wrong, wrong, wrong. You may be a bit shy or reluctant to ask, you may have to do the dreaded statistics or collect data, but you need to do it, and you will learn amazing things—it will literally give you "something to talk about" that people important to your program will want to hear. We can also share the information we collect across our regions, among similar types of repositories, or within your two regional organizations. Everyone isn't alone on this – and we can tell each others' stories or find similar ones in our own repositories.

⁸ "Measuring the Economic Impact of Government Archives: A Nationwide Study," Archival Metrics, accessed on October 21, 2010, <http://archivalmetrics.org/node/22>.

That leads to the second major point I want to make. Consider which of the following apply to you and your archival repository:

- We are ridiculously well-endowed financially and can hire all the staff we want or need, all the equipment we want or need, and do all the programs and activities we want or need – and we always will have this level of financial support.
- We are a vital part of the (university/government/community); everyone loves what we do, understands what we do, values what we do and supports our organization.
- Our collections are being used by the optimum number of people for every possible use one could think of – and more.

If these apply to your repository, then I have nothing to offer you. However, for those who do not have these conditions, then the time is here to talk about the value of archives. Whether you work on the reference desk, process or preserve records, do archival web crawls, or are an archival manager, advocacy should be a part of your job – all the time, every week, every month, and every year. You need to do it consciously, and conscientiously. You need to do it. It is that simple.

Doubtless one of the following is likely to go through the mind of many archivists:

- It's not my job – I'm just the archivist, not a manager/politician etc.
- I hate having to suck up to [choose the one that relates to you] politicians, managers, university presidents, board members.
- I don't like to have to beg for things.
- I have no training for this.
- It's not a good time to be asking for money, equipment, staff.

- But I have so much work I need to do ... I don't have time for that.

If you're not saying it now, you will use those excuses later – especially the last one.



Kathleen Roe encourages archivists at the 2010 Society of Georgia Archives annual meeting to advocate for their archives.

As many of you know, I've been working for over 3 years with colleagues in the Council of State Archivists, the Society of American Archivists, and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators on an effort to obtain federal legislation, the PAHR Act, to bring \$50 million in formula-based funding to the states and territories.⁹ One of the most compelling things I was told by Anne Georges, a very savvy and experienced member of the staff of our lead House sponsor, Congressman Maurice Hinchey, gets to the heart of the problem. She told me that there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that we could get this legislation passed. "The only thing that will stop you," she told me, "is if your community does not do the work to make this happen."

⁹ Preserving the American Historical Record website, accessed on October 21, 2010, www.archivists.org/pahr.

Doing “the work” is the essence of advocacy. For PAHR, it has meant that we have had to prod, push, and plead with our professional colleagues to write letters, make calls, or apparently most scary of all, make visits to their federal legislators. It is essential to bring in the numbers from the “grass-roots” and we are making progress. But it would be disingenuous to say that the archival community has been highly responsive to our requests for support. Along with my dear colleague David Carmichael and the other members of the PAHR Task Force, we have wheedled, cajoled, and worked with many, many people to get letters and visits to take place. It takes time, patience, and support, but we are developing some really good advocates throughout our community, and there are people who’ve just given it a try despite their lack of previous experience.

It has meant pitching PAHR and getting support from organizations whose members will benefit: the National Association of Secretaries of State, the International Institute of Municipal Clerks, the American Library Association, various national genealogical organizations, as well as businesses like Ancestry.com and Hollinger Corporation. It’s work – but somebody, in fact everybody, has to do their share of it.

Advocacy is not just for national legislation, however. Think about what you do that you cannot do as well as you’d like, if at all, because someone else holds the purse-strings, can make decisions about your work, or is essential to opening the doors you need to do your work. You may need to advocate with your immediate supervisor to be able to work on a project you believe is critical, try a new approach, or move an idea forward. You may need to convince a donor to place an important collection in your care. You may need to convince administrators that your program is not the first to go on the budget-cut chopping block. The possibilities are endless. The solution is simple.

Start talking about what you do and why your archives is of value, inestimable value, for your constituents and for the person who makes the decisions.

Don't wait for a crisis before you start talking. Have you ever had a friend, a family member, or a colleague who only seeks you out when they need something from you? That happens to administrators, government officials, and resource allocators all the time. It makes them feel as good and as well-respected as it makes you feel when that happens. And let's face it, archives are not the easiest thing to explain – so you have to spend half of your time just getting them clear on what you do and what you have before you can ask for what you need, whether it is money, permission, or support.

So start “talking” to the people you need to influence now. They need to be familiar with you and your organization. Introduce your organization to those key people, invite them to events, give them a tour, show them documents that will touch their particular interests and their hearts. Offer to advise them on managing their own records – this is particularly helpful since there are a lot of records slob out there, and you have something of value to offer them.

If you can't do it, either because you are “not allowed,” you are too incredibly shy to speak to another person, or your natural voice sounds like the lead singer in a “screamo” band, you can be the background person who feeds the information to the person who can do the talking. Many times, in truth, it is much more effective to have someone who uses your service doing the talking to a resource allocator about why your organization is so essential to their work.

Advocacy takes real planning – from the identification of the audience to whom you need to advocate, to honing the message, to getting supporters to help you, to learning the ropes to successfully carry out your effort. I can't give

you all that in this brief time, but you can learn to do it. I can tell you honestly that it takes time to do it, but it is imperative that you take the time. Most importantly, I can tell you with absolute assurance that if you don't do advocacy, no one will come looking for you to be your patron, to give you money, or to change the conditions in which you work. You will not be able to change anything significant if you don't do advocacy, if you don't start "talking" about the value of archives.

We're not clerks stocking shelves at Wal-Mart, auditors scrambling to evaluate numbers, or personnel administrators managing paperwork and processes for hires and terminations – all those jobs need doing, but they do not have a very direct and immediate connection to the value of the function they support. As archivists, we have a unique and exhilarating opportunity to see very directly how what we do literally "changes the world" – and that is a great gift we should not neglect or squander. If you value what we do, if you value the outcomes historical records enable, then it is time for you to become an archival advocate. So I leave you with this final suggestion and request: Let's talk.

Kathleen D. Roe is Director of Archives and Records Management Operations at the New York State Archives where she oversees records management services to state and local governments, and the management of the State Archives facility, holding over 200 million items. She is past president of the Council of State Archivists and currently serves as chair of the CoSA Government Relations Committee. She has chaired or served on numerous SAA committees, is a member of the Government Affairs Working Group, and is a Fellow of SAA. Her current professional activities focus around serving as the chair of the CoSA/SAA/NAGARA Preserving the American Historical Record (PAHR) Task Force and advocating, nagging, and generally

talking endlessly about the need to enact the PAHR
legislation presently before Congress.