

January 1976

Just Think ... Access to Archives

David E. Horn
DePauw University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Horn, David E., "Just Think ... Access to Archives," *Georgia Archive* 4 no. 1 (1976).
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol4/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

ACCESS TO ARCHIVES

Do we hold the principle: "Archives are for use"? We develop expertise in locating, identifying, acquiring, transferring, processing, and describing historical materials. And then we lock them up! We restrict access; we limit use; we put them in closed files; we wrap them in red tape, tied with Gordian knots woven from donor restrictions, claims of literary property rights, government regulations, and personal preferences.

Changing these ways must become a primary concern. We can begin with collecting. There is no patented solution for the dilemma of accepting materials with unreasonable restrictions or, by a refusal to agree to the conditions, of acquiescing in their destruction. We might be able to avoid this problem, however, by discussing the usefulness of materials in our first contacts with potential donors. We can explain that other collections, with similar information, are available to researchers, and that those researchers mention the collections by name in their citations. Thus we can create a climate in which donors expect their materials to be available for use in the archives. We archivists can help donors (and others) to regard our institutions as centers of research, rather than as places for storage.

It sometimes happens that records are restricted in one place but available elsewhere. A local businessman might want to restrict access to the records of his firm when he gives them to an historical society, but if he is advised that the reports he has made to various government offices

Mr. Horn is the Archivist at DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. "JUST THINK . . ." is a regular feature of comment in *GEORGIA ARCHIVE*.

are available as public records, he should see the advantage of easy access to the one location where all the records are available. The same situation could occur with personal papers. A university professor might want her papers locked in a vault for a long time, even though her publications, her reports, and her letters to other professionals are available elsewhere. Her own papers, the best source for complete information about her work, should be available to researchers.

What can be done about restricted material already in our collections? We should review the documents in our vaults and back rooms and should ask who has placed limitations on access to each of the restricted collections. If the present archivist or curator has done it, the policy can be reconsidered easily. If a predecessor restricted the materials, can that person be consulted? If a donor has requested secrecy, perhaps it is time for a new contact to discuss accessibility. Circumstances that made the restriction desirable may have changed.

I am advocating an active reconsideration of all restrictions on our collections, both the limitations on particular items and such general laws as withholding papers from researchers for fifty years, or some other length of time. It is easy, temptingly easy to a busy archivist, to reply, in person or by mail, to an inquiry: "That material is not available," or "Those tapes are reserved by executive privilege," or "The diaries will be opened at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, July 2, in the year 2108. I shall have retired by then, but I shall leave a note for my successor to contact your successor." Instead of turning such requests aside, curators can use inquiries as opportunities for re-thinking policies on access.

Would this be too much work? Is reconsideration too much fuss and bother? No indeed! It is a necessary part of our work if we accept the principle that archives exist for the use of researchers. I am not advocating the opening of all records to all inquirers at all times. I am not thinking of records involving national security or of records containing personal information, for example. I am thinking of the records of local and state governments, businesses, churches, colleges and universities, and various organizations. Some of these records are open when they are made and should be kept open after transfer to archives or other repositories.

Archivists have a dual responsibility--to protect the privacy of individuals and to make historically valuable records available for researchers. This duality will continue, and will continue to present us with difficult problems. In some instances, however, we have restricted access to records for the wrong reasons. A careful reconsideration of the reasons and the restrictions will help us meet our responsibility to researchers. Archives *are* for use.