

January 1977

The Archivist as Activist

Patrick M. Quinn
Northwestern University

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



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quinn, Patrick M., "The Archivist as Activist," *Georgia Archive* 5 no. 1 (1977) .
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol5/iss1/4

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.

THE ARCHIVIST AS ACTIVIST

Patrick M. Quinn

Almost six years ago on September 30, 1970, I had the privilege of presenting a paper at an SAA Annual Meeting session entitled "The Archivist and the New Left."

The session, chaired by Frank Evans, featured a remarkable presentation by Professor Howard Zinn of the Boston University History Department, which he called "The American Archivist and Radical Reform." This paper was followed by a vigorous critique of Zinn's remarks by Philip Mason of Wayne State University and a perhaps equally vigorous defense and expansion of Zinn's views by myself. All in all, the observations and admonitions made that date attracted the largest audience of any SAA session held prior to 1970.

As I reread Professor Zinn's paper in the course of preparing my presentation, I was struck, in the first instance, by the inordinate modesty of his concluding entreaty to archivists and, secondly, by the enormity and magnitude of the unfolding events of the past six years that have clearly, in my opinion, proven Zinn's remarks to have been prophetic.

Zinn left his audience with but two requests: "One, that they engage in a campaign to open all government documents to the public. If there are rare

Patrick M. Quinn is the Archivist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

exceptions, let the burden of proof be on those who claim them, not as now on the citizen who wants information. And, two, that they take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs of ordinary people." "Both of these proposals," Zinn contended, "are in keeping with the spirit of democracy which demands that the population know what the government is doing, and that the condition, the grievances, the will of the underclasses become a force in the nation."

I can vividly recall the reaction of many of our colleagues following the session. While there was a certain general agreement that archivists had indeed been remiss in not devoting sufficient attention to the task of collecting documentation pertaining to women, Blacks, and other minorities and the working class, the reaction to Zinn's call for the opening of governmental records was decidedly adverse. Adjectives ranging from ill-advised to ludicrous peppered much of the post-session commentary.

In part as a result of the controversy surrounding the subject of activism, a number of archivists gathered together during the SAA convention in San Francisco the following year, largely at the initiative of Lynn Donovan, of the California Historical Society. With the intention of initiating an informal caucus within the Society, this group adopted purposes, loosely defined objectives, and, most importantly, commitments to 1) initiate actions designed to democratize the SAA; 2) increase rank-and-file participation in the affairs and policy-making decisions of the SAA; 3) encourage the recruitment and advancement of minorities within the profession; and 4) improve the status of women within the profession. Now known as ACT, which is variously acronymic for Activist Archivist or Archivists for Change, the caucus continues to play a prominent and vocal role in SAA affairs.

It seems to me altogether appropriate at this juncture of the 40th Annual Meeting of the SAA and the VIII International Congress on Archives, with its thematic emphasis on "The Archival Revolution of Our Time," to draw a balance sheet on the progress made by both the SAA and the profession during the six years that have elapsed since our colleague from the historical profession, Howard Zinn, confronted us at once

with a scathing critique of our practices, and, most importantly, presented us with a forthright challenge to come to grips with some of the larger issues that place archivists as important components of a broader social fabric.

During the intervening six years we have witnessed a series of most extraordinary revelations of the contents of governmental records--we have seen a beginning, if you please, of the implementation of the spirit, if not the letter, of Zinn's proposal to make all public records open to citizen inspection. We have become acutely aware of the signal importance of a momentous series of events commencing with the release of the "Pentagon Papers." The public airing of the Nixon tapes and other Watergate related disclosures, the release of public records documenting the massive number of illegal activities undertaken by FBI, CIA, and other police and intelligence agencies, and, most recently, the disclosure of the existence of literally millions of pages of documents pertaining to the private lives and activities of thousands of American citizens, the overwhelming majority of whom have never been involved in any illegal activity whatsoever, all bear witness to our need for vital concern. For example, Attorney General Edward Levy, under pressure generated by the multi-million-dollar court suit initiated by the Political Rights Defense Fund and the Socialist Workers Party, disclosed that the FBI had accumulated over eight million documents alone on members of the Socialist Workers Party, an organization which has never numbered more than 1,500 members and, as Mr. Levy admitted, had never engaged in any illegal activities during the period when the documents and dossiers were compiled.

These developments have shocked archivists and perhaps caused them just a bit of shame and reflection. Need it have taken one from outside our ranks to bring to our attention the obvious, necessary and urgent task of pressing the opening of our nation's public records to public scrutiny? Ought not we, as archivists, to have played a central and prominent role in the campaign that Howard Zinn urged upon us since the "Archivists' Code" tells us that "the archivist should endeavor to promote access to records to the fullest extent consistent with the public interest . . .?"

It is hoped that Watergate has provided a watershed for us as archivists to begin, individually and collectively, to play a much more active and important role in opening more and more of our public records to the sunshine of public access. I recognize full well that there are myriad exceptions, nuances, and technical and logistical problems inherent in any undertaking of this magnitude. These, of course, should be taken into consideration and, if possible, be reasonably resolved. But let us not slow or lose the momentum that has been generated. Let us not obscure the spirit of our endeavor in the murk of procedural obfuscation.

What, then, of progress made involving some of the other salient issues that confronted us in 1970? Here, perhaps, both the SAA and the profession have performed much more commendably. It appears that we have made some important progress in two important areas: democratizing the SAA and improving the status of women in both the Society and the profession. In each of these areas, supporters of ACT played important roles, yet much of the credit for improvements that have occurred extends far beyond ACT. In the area of reducing discrimination within the profession, the record is less even. The exemplary work of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women in the Archival Profession, chaired by Mabel Deutrich, should be noted here, as should the passage of the SAA Anti-discrimination Resolution at the 1973 convention in St. Louis, which codified for the first time the clear and unequivocal opposition of the SAA to the existence of discrimination in any form within the profession. While we have indeed come a long way in a few short years in eliminating some of the most overt and objectionable impediments to the professional advancements of women in the archival profession, it must be recognized that much more needs to be done before the de jure status of equality enjoyed by women archivists coincides with de facto reality.

While supporters of ACT may well have initially stimulated action designed to implement more democratic forms and procedures of self-government, the credit for realizing these goals must belong to the SAA Committee on the 70s, of which the chairperson, Charles Lee, was a most active and contributive member. The Committee on the 70s played an especially

important role in crystallizing and giving coherent form to a plethora of inchoate complaints, suggestions, and proposals involving constitutional and procedural changes designed to open the SAA's policy-making bodies and procedures to greater membership participation.

There is, however, one area in which scant, indeed almost imperceptible, progress has been made since we last gathered in Washington. It is especially embarrassing, as we concurrently convene with our archival colleagues from throughout the world, to note that very little progress has been made in recruiting Blacks and members of other minorities to the ranks of the archival profession. One need only glance about the sessions of the Annual Meeting to discern that the SAA continues to be one of the whitest professional organizations in the United States. For the few black colleagues we number among ourselves there may well have been substantial improvements in various individuals' personal circumstances, yet any such positive developments reveal only minimal progress. I am not at all suggesting that racism is rampant among the SAA. It is clearly not. Nor is the SAA comprised of men and women of callous or insensitive dispositions. Archivists must, however, begin to take some very real and concrete steps to address minority participation, and we must initiate specific action proposals in this area with the same spirit of resolve and determination that characterized the campaign to improve the status of women in the profession.

Several other achievements of the profession warrant our attention. Archivists, I would suggest, in concert with historians, librarians, and other allied professionals, have become much more responsive to the need for altering collecting and publications policies in order to rectify the inherent biases that Howard Zinn described in connection with documenting the role of working people in American history. Two important projects currently under way serve to underscore and accent this point: the W. E. B. DuBois Papers Project and the Women's History Sources Survey. Both projects serve as prototypes for similar, long-overdue, and much needed projects. In addition, collecting areas have broadened. Accessions reports in the American Archivist and other journals seem to

indicate that many archival institutions are beginning to abandon elitist orientations in their quest for new collections.

The other development which merits mention is the forthright collective action taken by American archivists on behalf of their beleaguered colleagues in Maine when that state's archival operation was threatened with elimination. Actions of this sort clearly illustrate the effectiveness and strength of a collective response. The leaders of the I.W.W.--the Wobblies--summed it up well with their slogan: "An injury to one is an injury to all," as did Ben Franklin with his metaphoric admonition regarding the choice of hanging together or separately.

The foregoing remarks have necessarily but scratched the surface and, as such, can scarcely comprise a definitive balance sheet of the past six years. I have omitted mention of the public ownership of the papers of public officials issue, for example, because my position is very well represented by J. Frank Cook's articulate and comprehensive essay on the subject in the July 1975 issue of the American Archivist. Nonetheless, it seems to me that I have at least noted in passing some of the most important issues that have faced us, as archivists.

Finally, there is the larger philosophical question of whether archivists ought to be activists as well.

Let me make it clear that I am cognizant of the fact that there are many extenuating and inhibiting factors which mitigate against archivists playing active roles as archivists in often controversial situations involving issues of social, political, and economic concern to all of us as private citizens.

I am also aware that precisely because of our disparate backgrounds, employment situations, and positions, it has been and will continue to be difficult for us to act collectively and in concert on any particular issue unless we enjoy the broadest consensus--which in many instances suggests that the particular issue we can all agree on may well be banal in its import and innocuous in its resolution.

We are, in the main, a professional society whose basis for existing involves a common interest in archival theory and practice. Beyond that, we may be corporate or trade-union archivists; or employees of states, counties, municipalities, or the federal government; some of us are employed by public colleges, universities, libraries, or manuscripts repositories; others of us work in the private sector, some are members of religious orders. More importantly, some among us are administrators and supervisors; others are administered and supervised. This latter differentiation which distinguishes us from many other professional organizations often makes it especially difficult for us to act in concert and at times tends to diminish our appreciation of each other as peers.

Nonetheless, as archivists we are constantly faced with choices and decisions involving a broad range of issues of concern to all of us. A number of these are relatively trivial and mundane; others are paramount in their importance and urgency. While some fall clearly within the archival domain, many tend to reside in the gray area that spans our dual roles as archivists and private citizens.

Let us reconsider just one of those issues, a most controversial one, which I raised earlier. I am speaking here of a matter often and wrongly, in my opinion, counterposed as the "Right to Know" versus the "Right to Privacy." We have, in fact, two issues here, neither of which is exclusive of the other.

As archivists, as the keepers of the records of our nation, should we not have a say about what kinds of records are being kept on private citizens and a say about who has access to them? I think so.

Two specific examples drawn from my own experience as an archivist for the past decade graphically illustrate the point I am attempting to make. About seven years ago, as an archivist on the staff of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, I was assigned the task of processing the papers of Alexander Wiley, a once-prominent member of the U.S. Senate from Wisconsin, who at times chaired both the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee. In the course of processing the totally unrestricted Wiley Papers, I came across what

we today describe as "sensitive material." The item in question, a communication from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to Senator Wiley, dated in the 1950s, questions the "loyalty" of Senator J. William Fulbright. Hoover asks Wiley if he knows of any information which might be of value to Hoover in substantiating Fulbright's alleged disloyalty, and concludes with a request that Wiley keep his eyes and ears open regarding Senator Fulbright's activities, views, and utterances for this purpose.

In the late 1960s when this document was uncovered, most Americans would not have believed that such a communication existed, let alone have accepted the word of a known political activist such as myself that it existed. Since that time, however, the American people have learned that such communications were commonplace, and were, perhaps, the rule rather than the exception. Given the values of that time, however, what were the moral, ethical, and political responsibilities of an archivist faced with the discovery of a communication of this nature and, more importantly, have those responsibilities changed perceptibly in the interim?

Faced with that decision, I concluded that the best course of action would be to bring it to the attention of Senator Fulbright. Accordingly, I made a xerox copy and delivered it directly to the Senator's Washington office. I have no idea what impact it may have had, and, in fact, my action was never acknowledged by the Senator. Nonetheless, I was convinced that I had acted properly as an archivist and a citizen. Since then I have often wondered how many similar communications have been uncovered over the years by archivists and what, if any, action was taken. Were such communications quickly slipped back into folders--out of sight, out of mind? Were they noted on descriptive inventories? Were copies sent to appropriate authorities?

The second example which I wish to relate pertains to the position of the archivist vis-a-vis the larger questions of freedom of information and the right of privacy.

During the zenith of the anti-war movement and other movements for social change in the late

1960s, the University of Wisconsin at Madison was a major center of dissent. Here, the local police department organized a special tactical unit officially known as the "Affinity Squad."

This body was charged with the mandate of infiltrating and spying on a wide variety of groups alleged by local officials to be "subversive." In the course of carrying out its duties, the Affinity Squad compiled files and dossiers on thousands of Madisonians who may have marched in an anti-war demonstration, written protest letters to local newspapers, or participated in other dissent-related activities. Recently under pressure to disclose the extent of the squad's undercover work, the police department released the expurgated contents of some eight thousand pages of Affinity Squad files to the public. Individuals whose names appeared in the files, among them myself, were allowed to obtain copies of material which pertained specifically to them. From these reports I learned that my activist activities had been monitored for at least three years and that I possessed a "suspicious vehicle," although the records clearly state that I had no record with any police or intelligence agency.

I have introduced these two anecdotes to illustrate the general point that archivists as archivists are faced with various choices which we must act upon even though some decisions may entail "bucking the system." I further suggest that we, as archivists, should collectively be concerned about and unalterably opposed to the compilation and maintenance by security agencies of dossiers and files on private citizens who have done no wrong. While I may well be one of the few members of the SAA with such a "documentary record," I am, however, from all published accounts, but one of a million or so other Americans who have had their constitutional rights violated through such abuse of records creating, maintenance, and disposition procedures.

While I am strongly in favor of the SAA going on record in opposition to governmental record-keeping of this nature, I am not counseling individual archivists to violate or disregard any legal restrictions that have been imposed upon collections in their custody. I do, however, urge administrators and donors to minimize access restrictions on records that

are transferred to archives. Most importantly, I would like to encourage archivists in all institutions, particularly those of the National Archives and Records Service to work through appropriate channels for the removal of all unreasonable access limitations to records in their custody. Furthermore, I urge all archivists as private individuals to speak out against the maintenance of secret files on their fellow citizens.

What else does activism mean? It means that we should not tolerate another "Ohio Massacre" among our ranks. No matter how we might agree or disagree on the particular merits of the positions taken by the two sides on the recent Ohio Historical Society situation, I would hope that we can all agree that the methods and procedures utilized by the administration of that institution have nothing in common with fair play and due process and, as such, should be forthrightly condemned.

At the least, the Ohio experience should spark some meaningful exploration of working conditions for archivists. I would hope that the SAA Council will take up the questions of what constitutes fair employment practices in our profession and whether sanctions could ever be a feasible means of redressing grievances should a similar situation occur. In addition, I would encourage those of my colleagues who are not administrators or supervisors to investigate the possibility of organizing unions at their work places. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) have all at times expressed interest in organizing archivists. In Wisconsin, for example, archivists are organized in the AFT, and the arrangement, I understand, has worked out rather well.

What then is activism? Is it not the process by which each individual archivist acts upon his or her convictions, rather than passively acquiescing to whatever real or imagined conditions or set of circumstances conspire to circumscribe our views, our visions, our goals, our aspirations.

If that is what activism is all about, then let us have more of it. Let us incorporate it as an integral component of the archival revolution of our time.