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Letters to the Editor

Johanna S.R. Mendelson

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LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Response to Gregory A. Stiverson's Article:
"The Archivist as Activist: A Conservative View"

Although I am a newcomer to the field of archives, I am not unfamiliar with the historian's craft. Thus, my comments about Mr. Stiverson's article are written with Clio's bias. Let me begin by saying that the issue of the archivist as arbiter of culture, past and present, is not a simple one, as he so well explains. No one person can embrace the breadth of knowledge or resources to make a total value judgment on the future use of documents or artifacts available for accessioning. However, I do feel that the issue is not one of being conservative or activist so much as it is a matter of good judgment derived from one's training--be it in history, art, or science. Likewise, the ability to know one's limitations in a given area of specialization appears to be a crucial factor in the decision-making process.

Mr. Stiverson's attack on historians does not rest well with one who has viewed archives from both sides of the search room. His conjecture that archivists are usually those historians who do not care to publish is a blind disavowal of the current job market. If anything has emerged from the job crisis imposed on humanists, and especially historians, it is the fact that in seeking alternatives to academe, historians have come to archives as a natural extension of their intellectual curiosity and training. That so many historians are working as professional archivists is testimony to the concern the historical profession demonstrates for the preservation of past records. Likewise, the input of trained scholars to the archives provides another dimension to the goals of an institution and to the potential uses for materials processed and stored.

Finally, the historian, rather than being the archivist's nemesis, can serve as a liaison with both the academic community and the public, as well as with such other professional institutions concerned with history as museums, historical societies, and educational enrichment programs. The historian-archivist can be viewed as the best public relations officer an archive can have.

If archivists are to define their profession, must they do so in terms of the patrons who use the archives most? Berating the narrow perspective of historical research, degrading the small professional community the historian serves is to undermine the purpose of many archival collections which have become famous through their connection with ongoing historical research. After all, genealogists do not an archive make.

Sincerely,

Johanna S. R. Mendelson