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Up from the Basement: Archives, History and Public Administration

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In 1929 Margaret Cross Norton, Archivist of the state of Illinois, addressed the Conference of Archivists being held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) on the subject of archives as an administrative function of government. The essential nature of public archives was legal, she said, and the archivist’s primary responsibilities were the promotion of administrative efficiency and the protection of individual rights, rather than the facilitating of historical scholarship. Although these remarks were greeted by the assembled historians with “stony silence,” they correctly foreshadowed the emerging differences between archivists and historians.¹

These comments on the nature and functions of government archives were made by way of explaining the slow pace with which public records programs had developed in most states. Although twenty-two states² had developed nominal programs by that time, Miss Norton expressed the belief that only about a dozen states were giving systematic and sustained care to their records. The principal reason for this, she alleged, was the popular misconception that archives existed primarily to serve scholarly researchers. This opinion, she argued, made legislators reluctant to appropriate funds for programs which seemed to duplicate functions already being performed by state libraries and historical societies, and which seemed to them to be of only marginal importance in any case.

In retrospect, there are many reasons to explain the underdevelopment of the archival profession in the United States in the year 1929. The National Archives Act would not be passed by Congress until 1934, although $6.9 million had been authorized for a building in 1926. The Public Archives
Commission of the AHA, the only real forum for the discussion of archival problems, had lost its financial support and momentum after World War I. No major book or manual on the theory and practice of archives had yet appeared in America.³

Today, in 1978 — nearly half a century since Miss Norton’s speech — the archival profession remains underdeveloped and its identity still in doubt. To be sure, much has happened in those fifty years: the National Archives has been established, along with twenty-three new archival programs at the state level.⁴ Archival theory has benefited from publication of T. R. Schellenberg’s Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques (1956), Thornton Mitchell’s edition of Norton on Archives (1975), and a number of manuals prepared by the National Archives and Records Service, the Library of Congress, and the Society of American Archivists. Despite these achievements, the archival profession remains misunderstood by users of archives, by government officials, by the public at large, and by archivists themselves. Its growth during the mid-twentieth century notwithstanding, “the archival profession is still in the formative stage,” concludes a report based on a survey of the membership of the SAA in 1970. “The bounds of the profession still remain undefined,” say the authors of this report, “and the professional identity of the members is uncertain.”⁵

Other recent examples of the lack of support for archival programs abound. In 1973 a management study team recommended the abolition of the Maine State Archives and the institution of a “crash program” by an outside contractor to “process and dispose” of the records generated by the state.⁶ The New York State Archives was forced to rely on an emergency grant from the federally-funded National Historical Publications and Records Commission to continue its basic inventory of government records after all state funds were cut off in early 1976, reducing the size of the archives staff to two. In Massachusetts, plans for a new state archives building, announced with great fanfare in April 1976, have met with open opposition from the governor, protracted inaction by the legislature, and a negative editorial response from the press.

Nor is this phenomenon confined to the Northeast. The State and Local Records Committee of the SAA reports that programs for the preservation, arrangement, and description of county and municipal records are hampered by a severe shortage of physical, financial, and staff resources.

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in nearly every state. A former President of the United States has recently argued that the Archivist of the United States is not the appropriate custodian for the public records of his administration. A justice of the Supreme Court has expressed his belief in the inability of archivists to "remain completely silent with respect to those portions of the [Nixon] presidential papers which are extremely newsworthy." Why, in spite of the growth and progress of the archival profession, have such misunderstandings persisted? Why, in spite of the coming of a new generation of professional archivists, are archival programs still among the first to be marched to the fiscal chopping block? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the close association of archives with the study of history and the continuing influence exerted by academic historians on the archival profession. It is ironic that the historical profession, which has done so much to initiate and advance the cause of archives in America, may at the same time have unwittingly contributed to a misunderstanding of the primary function of archives. Archivists themselves have not succeeded in clarifying this misunderstanding. The historical and archival professions have become confused in spite of the developments that have separated them.

The archival profession in the United States grew directly out of the historical profession. Beginning with the establishment of the Public Archives Commission by the AHA in 1899, academic historians were in the forefront of efforts to survey, describe, and preserve state and local records. A Conference of Archivists was held annually in conjunction with the meeting of the AHA, beginning in 1909. Although some doubts would be expressed as to the need for a distinct professional group, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) was founded at the AHA meeting in Providence in 1936, followed by the first publication of its journal, The American Archivist, two years later. Thereafter archival interests found their organizational expression increasingly through the National Archives, the SAA, and for a brief period in the later 1930s and early 1940s, the Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration.

Despite this growth of an independent archival profession, however, the ties between archivists and historians have naturally remained close. Although the two groups now see themselves as distinct professions, the distinction is not one that is readily perceived by the non-archival, non-historical community. Because the two remain related, the distinction seems a subtle one, considered by many to be a kind of "distinction without a difference."
There are some grounds for such a belief. Archivists themselves still come to their profession predominantly from history. A recent survey of the directors of state and provincial archival programs revealed that, of the forty-one with master’s degrees, thirty-three obtained their degrees in history (the other eight were in library science). Of the eight archivists with doctoral degrees, six were doctorates in history. Only four of all the archivists surveyed held law degrees.\textsuperscript{12} Nearly 64% of all SAA members responding to Frank Evans and Robert Warner’s 1970 survey reported holding graduate degrees in history.\textsuperscript{13} Such a close relationship between archives and history has led to a consistent blurring of the boundary between the two, a blurring that can be seen in subtle ways. The Library of Congress classification scheme for printed books, for example, lists archives as one of the “auxiliary sciences of history.”\textsuperscript{14} Archives are still viewed as a branch of traditional, academic history. The view of the importance of archives, therefore, largely depends on the view of the importance of history, which by all accounts is not at the moment very great.

The archivist is therefore consigned to life in the basement. He is forced into a stereotype that is dark, dusty, unpleasant, and most of all irrelevant. In this image the archivist is seen as providing his services only for the scholarly historian and the genealogist. Such services may be desirable in themselves, but they are relatively esoteric and considered not important in the face of pressing political, economic, and social problems. Some lip-service may be paid to the vague notion that somehow the present grows out of the past, but that is too complex a process to be explored when immediate action is called for by governments. Faced with such a view of the nature and value of archives it is hardly surprising that increased financial support is withheld and reductions made at every opportunity.

None of this is to suggest that the association between archives and history is an improper one. Rather, it demonstrates the importance of considering the true nature of the relationship between the two disciplines. The leading theorists of archival science are not agreed on the ways in which archives and history should be related. Sir Hilary Jenkinson and T. R. Schellenberg start from a common point: archival records of public agencies are materials that have been created in the course of conducting the public business. Beyond that, however, the reason for preserving those records as archives is more controversial.

The disagreement between Jenkinson and Schellenberg on this latter
point arises from their differing notions of how archival records ought to relate to history. For Jenkinson, archival records are "preserved in their custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors." Archives exist solely for their reference value to the individual or institution that produced them. Jenkinson considered such value to be of an essentially legal nature which, in turn, required that the integrity of the records be carefully preserved through an "unbroken chain of custody" for possible use in a court of law. The interests of any outside researchers such as historians were simply irrelevant in the preservation of archives.
A far different concept of archives was set forth by Schellenberg. For records to be archives, he maintained, they must not only be created in the transaction of public business by an agency or government; they must also be "preserved for reasons other than those for which they were created or accumulated." Records became archives when they were preserved for a reason other than administrative reference, "and this reason is a cultural one." Broadly defined, the interests of historical researchers were extremely relevant. At the same time, the archivist had to assist researchers by assuming responsibility for establishing the long-term "archival value" of records.

To determine archival quality, Schellenberg argued for appraisal of public records in terms of what he called both the "evidential" and "informational" value of their contents. By evidential value he meant the value of records as evidence of the organization and functioning of the agency or institution that created them. Such records would contain information of prospective value both to future administrators and outside researchers of varying interests, and would emphasize especially those documenting policies and the decision-making process itself. It is, of course, the evidential value of archival records which inheres in the theory of provenance: only in the context of the organization and activity of which they are the product can the value of such records be fully understood.

Schellenberg would also retain for their archival value records containing information of interest to a variety of outside researchers apart from their organic relationship to a specific agency or institution. In contrast to archival records containing evidence of governmental organization and function, those of informational value alone would be of interest mainly to outside researchers. The information contained in these records, gathered during the course of performing an official function, would relate to a variety of people, conditions, and situations. In other words, such information on a number of subjects would exist only incidentally to the performance of an activity to which the records as a whole related. Yet the very presence of such information would increase their value as archives.

These differing conceptions of the archival function as defined by Jenkinson and Schellenberg contain important implications for the role of the archivist. Jenkinson's archivist is relegated to an essentially passive role in which preserving the physical and moral integrity of the records in his custody is uppermost. He does not take part in the management of current
records; he leaves the problem of appraisal to the administrators, for whose benefit alone the archives exist; and he remains free of any outside research interest lest they compromise the impartiality and authenticity of the materials in his custody. On the last point Jenkinson was particularly blunt: "the Archivist is not and ought not to be an Historian." 18

The role assigned to the archivist by Schellenberg, on the other hand, is a broader and more dynamic one. For him, there exists an integral relationship between the administration of current and archival records; one naturally evolves into the other. For this reason the archivist cannot avoid involvement in decisions affecting the disposition of records. In fact, he brings much-needed perspective and knowledge, which the administrator lacks, to bear on that process. The importance of protecting records as legal evidence through a long and elaborate chain of responsibility must be deemphasized, given the conditions under which modern records are created and utilized. Only a "reasonable assumption" of their authenticity can be established by strict adherence to the theory of provenance and protecting them against all agents of physical destruction. 19 Above all, it is Schellenberg's insistence that archival quality is a function of value for purposes other than those for which the records were created or accumulated that separates him from Jenkinson.

Elements of both these definitions can be found in the writings of Margaret Norton, an anthology of whose essays was recently edited and published by Thornton W. Mitchell. 20 Miss Norton, who was trained as both a librarian and a historian, served as the State Archivist of Illinois from 1922 until 1957. Coming from such a broad background, it is small wonder that her writings on the subject of archives provide a useful synthesis of the divergent views of Jenkinson and Schellenberg and help illuminate the proper relationship between archives and history.

Norton's conception of archives as a basic function of public administration was first expounded in 1929 before the Public Archives Commission, a body which had for thirty years been trying to justify archives on scholarly grounds alone. Archival records acquire their primary value in relation to the administrative activity of which they are the product, said Norton. Any subject value they might have is entirely incidental to that purpose. The main task of the archivist, therefore, is to serve as "custodian of legal records of the state, the destruction of which might seriously inconvenience the administration of state business." 21 In other words, records are both created and preserved for use as archives in order to facilitate the conduct of the
public business. Jenkinson would wholeheartedly agree.

Given this starting point, it is not difficult to understand Norton’s emphasis on the primary use of archival materials in defining and protecting the rights of the people and the government in relationship to each other. For this purpose, she identified two broad categories of public records to be retained permanently. The first included those records that document the rights of individuals and property, such as records of vital statistics, census records, naturalization records, records of court actions, wills, and deeds. The second and much broader category included records that document the actual functioning of a given agency or institution, a definition which, on one level or another, could include virtually any public record. Meeting records, office manuals, rules and regulations, attorney general’s opinions, and correspondence or other documents relating to office policy exemplify this type of archival record. These are records that contain what Schellenberg would call “evidential value,” and they are perfectly appropriate for inclusion in Norton’s archives.

To preserve the authenticity required by the legal nature and function of archives, Norton believed with Jenkinson that it was necessary to demonstrate “an unblemished line of responsible custodians.” More specifically, she said, the archivist must be able to certify the authenticity of records in his custody for possible use as legal evidence. Precise rules for the processing, handling, and servicing of archival records were designed with that purpose in mind. In fact, Norton asserted, “the necessity for acceptable certification is the basis for the adoption of provenance as the basis for the classification of archives.”

Although Norton argued repeatedly against the unfortunate consequences of the traditional association of archives with history, she was still, with Schellenberg, keenly aware of the historical and informational value of archival materials. Taking care of records because of their historical value was “an important service no one can deny, since government records form the only source materials for early American history.” The inverse relationship between the age of records and the frequency of legal and administrative reference to them only served to reemphasize the connection between archives and history. The archivist could not be indifferent to the historical value of the records under his care, as Jenkinson would prefer. At the same time, however, the archivist could not succumb to the historian’s temptation to rearrange archival collections so that all materials related to a certain
subject could be placed together. The archivist cannot be separated from the historical process and the work of the historian, said Norton, but he must recognize that the way in which archivists and historians viewed the same records was different. While historians were "interested in archives primarily from the subject side," the archivist never forgot the importance of maintaining his collections in the order and condition in which they were created by the government. 24

This middle ground established by Norton is the only position from which the archivist can deal with the problems of modern public records management. The leading role played by historians in organizing the archival profession and the regular use made of archival collections by historical researchers suggest the inevitable role of the archivist in the historical process. More specifically, the appraisal function requires the archivist to make decisions that will largely determine the materials from which future history can be written. The preparation of finding aids is designed to facilitate access by researchers who are more interested in the meaning than in the organizational sources of the records. To this extent, the connection between archives and history is unavoidable.

But is the confusion between the two, and the attendant lack of support, also unavoidable? If archives are defined solely in terms of their relationship to history, the answer must unfortunately be yes. If involvement in the process of historical research is the only justification for the existence of archival programs, there can be little hope for their expansion or even continuation. The surge of enthusiasm brought on by the Bicentennial notwithstanding, interest in history is simply not as great as it once was; increased attention is now focusing on other social sciences, especially psychology, sociology, and economics. As any unemployed Ph.D. can readily attest, history is having a difficult enough time trying to support itself. For archivists to expect the historical profession to support and justify them as well is utter folly.

The confusion between archives and history, and the problems of misunderstanding and underdevelopment that have resulted, can be avoided only if archivists begin to emphasize that there is more to their profession than involvement in historical research. Archivists must place comparable emphasis on their involvement in the process of public administration itself. At least a partial redefinition of the nature and importance of archives, in which their use as a practical aid to efficient government
management is stressed, will be required. Norton’s declaration of 1929 that archives have an important role to play in the conduct of public business must not meet with the same “stony silence” today if archivists are to change the patterns of underdevelopment and lack of support.

It is not enough, of course, simply to assert that archives can provide a real service to the public administrator. An exclusive association of archives with history gives that assertion a hollow ring. Can archivists honestly expect that assertion to be taken seriously if they confine their training and experience to the historical profession? Can government managers be expected to believe that some relevant service, one that reduces costs and increases efficiency, can be provided by an agency that calls itself a department of “Archives and History,” the parent agency for the state archives in fourteen states?25 The relationship between archives and public administration must be described and emphasized — just as the relationship between archives and history has been heretofore — if the archivist’s claim to relevance is to carry any weight.

This shift in emphasis from history to administration is best accomplished by stressing the concept of the “life cycle” of a record. The life cycle is a way of describing the four stages of creation, use, storage, and disposition through which all records pass. Administrators responsible for the management of records seldom possess such a coherent perspective on them. Records are generated in order to accomplish a specific administrative or legal task, and are generally forgotten once that purpose has been achieved. The responsibility for a record throughout the various stages of its life cycle is frequently fragmented among a number of agencies and individuals, among whom there is little or no communication on the subject of record-keeping itself. The obvious result is a failure on the part of most administrators to recognize the many ways in which records can better complement, rather than compromise, their conduct of the public business.

In order to understand fully the concept of the life cycle, it is necessary to realize the extent of the interaction among the various stages. Any action, or inaction, with respect to one stage cannot but affect one or more of the others. The archivist, who is by definition interested in retaining records of permanent value, for example, cannot properly identify such records without becoming actively involved in determining the disposition of all records, most of which will not be archival in nature. The archivist who has taken an active hand in the management of current records will
also find it much easier to prepare finding aids for the records which eventually will be accessioned into the archives. Although widely acknowledged in archival literature to be desirable, these expanded functions are often ignored in actual practice. With a proper understanding of the life cycle and its implications, however, the archivist will be able to develop the unified perspective the administrator lacks.

As the archivist becomes more involved in every phase of record-keeping, it will become increasingly possible to bring the resulting information to bear upon both the records themselves and the larger administrative activities to which they relate. By thinking through the expected life span of a given record before it is created, many problems of the future can be avoided. Records of archival value, for instance, can be created on permanent and durable paper or other appropriate medium, thereby helping to save the cost of expensive restoration at a later date. Regular implementation of disposition schedules is essential to making optimum use of available storage space and equipment. Decisions made in designing a new form of a record will, of course, also determine the physical requirements for storage. The increased efficiency to which these factors all contribute can be obtained only by a thorough knowledge of these interrelationships between the stages of the life cycle.

The benefits of increased record-keeping efficiency are, of course, not limited to the records themselves, but extend to the very heart of the administrative process. First and most obvious is the elimination of unnecessary costs in labor and equipment devoted to the storage and maintenance of records. Just as records seldom command the attention they require, so too the related costs go uncontrolled. The piecemeal way in which these expenses are incurred further obscures the administrator's grasp of the problem, and thus compounds it.

Second, the archivist will inevitably acquire through his involvement in the life cycle of records an invaluable knowledge of the administrative activities of which those records are the product. Perhaps because of the way in which archivists are perceived by administrators, this knowledge remains unexploited by them, relegated to the basement along with the archivist himself. Instead, it should be used by administrators to facilitate access to information needed to solve problems of current management, not just those of academic or antiquarian interest. The use of archival records for purposes other than those for which they were created or maintained
need not be confined to outside researchers only. If the administrators could better control and use the information already at their disposal, they would reduce their need to gather more.

Finally, good record-keeping bears directly on the accountability of public officials to the people, a subject of increased popular interest in recent years. This accountability of elected and appointed officials requires the preservation and accessibility of the records containing information on their conduct in office. Increased demands to use records for this purpose have led to the passage of freedom of information and privacy laws at the federal and state levels. The archivist's understanding of the frequently contradictory provisions of these laws enables him to make a unique contribution to their successful implementation.

In order to achieve this greater impact on public administration, the archivist will first have to change his own perception of his professional responsibilities and relationships. Archivists have moved away from their formal organizational ties with historians and have established their own society and journal, but they have not made corresponding efforts to move closer to administrators. Only an insignificant number of SAA members are also members of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA). Joint committees and meetings of the SAA with associations of professional public administrators and organizations such as the American Management Association are virtually nonexistent. Archivists must begin, through the SAA and individually, to establish such formal contacts as a way of demonstrating to administrators the seriousness of their intent to exert an influence on the operation of modern government. The exploration of topics of mutual interest with professional managers can help archivists overcome their stereotypical association with academic historians and can begin to convince unbelieving public officials that good archival management does indeed have some relevance.

The archivist will also have to reconsider what constitutes an appropriate education for his work. The debate over whether archivists should be trained in graduate history departments or in schools of library science needs to be deemphasized. Concentration must be placed instead on the potential for professional training of archivists in public administration. Highly specialized training in history, particularly at the doctoral level, has of itself little to do with the ability to care for public records. Formal training in public administration will in many cases prove to be more helpful. Considering
government management problems as records management problems can bring a new perspective and new insights for the public administrator. We know that one of the fundamental things that government now does is create records; uncontrolled "paperwork" has become a central feature of modern bureaucracy. The peculiar talents of the archivist address themselves to precisely that condition and, if properly applied by archivists with formal training in public administration, they can be made to yield significant results.

The result of such a shift in emphasis toward public administration will be to bring the archivist up from the basement. The belief that archives are a mere luxury, provided for the benefit of scholarly researchers, divorced from the central concerns of the government and the public, will no longer be supportable. The value of archives beyond the interests of the academic world will be demonstrated. The importance of archives in the management of the public business will be made clear.

Only after such a new conception of archives has taken shape and been reinforced by the activities of archivists will the decline of support for archival programs be checked. The correction of misunderstandings concerning the nature and function of archives will provide the basis for their continued and expanded support. Public officials who hold the purse strings will not begin to provide archives with the financial and staff resources that are required until they are convinced that archives have some relevance to the management of government. A new emphasis on the relationship between archives and public administration can do much to establish a balance with history, and can help break the pattern of misunderstanding, underdevelopment, and lack of identity that has plagued the archival profession in the past.


3 Birdsall, "Two Sides of the Desk," *AA*, 38 (1975), 164, 167. The Public Archives Commission published *The Preservation of Archives* in 1930, but this volume dealt only with the historian's concern for preserving materials of research value and not with the administration of records programs.
4 Kinney, *Directory of State and Provincial Archives*, Table 8.


9 This was not the case in Europe, where archives were created and preserved solely for the use of administrators. It was not until the French Revolution that archival collections were found to be of use to historians as well, and therefore opened for private scholarly research. For a discussion of these developments and of European archivists’ involvement in government administration, see *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Ken Munden (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), especially Part I, Chapter 1 (“Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution”) and the four essays of Part III (“The European Example”).

10 The first report of the Commission, published as the second volume of the AHA *Annual Report* for 1900, is a good example of this kind of inventory.


12 Kinney, *Directory of State and Provincial Archives*, Table 10.


14 Books on archives are classified under “CD.” Still, the Library of Congress scheme is kinder to archives than the Dewey system. The latter makes no provision at all for archives, and classifies manuscripts in the 090s as one of a number of “Generalities.”


17 Schellenberg's discussion of archival appraisal is found *ibid.*, 139-160.


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