

1-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Bastian, Jeannette, "Only Connect: Communities, Archives, and the Making and Keeping of Memory," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 33 no. 2 (2016) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol33/iss2/3>

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Only Connect: Communities, Archives and the Making and Keeping of Memory

Jeannette A. Bastian

"Only connect," counseled author E. M. Forster in his classic novel *Howards End*. And three years ago in the Fall of 2012, connecting is exactly what the students in my seminar class on community archives wanted very much to do. The class was small. The students were a combination of doctoral and masters. All were near the end of their program and so were well advanced in their archives course. All had experience working in archives.

Each student was asked to select a community archive in New England, using it as an ethnographic case study to determine its relationship and relevance to the community it represented. Students could interact with the archive in ways they felt most appropriate – as volunteers, outside observers, researchers – or a combination of strategies. The students selected a wide variety of sites – historical societies, independent volunteer-run archives, an Armenian photo archives, a zine library – and tried to engage them in various ways.

And this is where the surprises and difficulties began. The students – and their instructor – assumed that these small primarily volunteer sites would be happy to invite them in, talk to them, utilize them as volunteers, perhaps even tap their expertise, but this was not necessarily the case. One Boston-based site, a youth-centered activist theater and arts group flatly refused any involvement with our project at all, others were simply suspicious. For all the students, it took several weeks of class strategizing, site visits and work on their part before their chosen sites accepted them. And even when the sites were welcoming, there were other unforeseen issues. Several students who elected to volunteer at their site discovered that the site wanted them to work as docents, or greeters, not in areas that were about archives – in fact, in several sites, archives took second and third place to fund-raising and public events, interviews were difficult to get, sites themselves were often so hard-pressed to survive and so engrossed in staying alive that dialoging with students trying to study them was low on their priority list.

Connecting may not have been easy, but why was the path to connecting so fraught with rocks and boulders? Why was this so

difficult? Was it the students' inexperience? The instructor's naiveté? The difference between the academic ivory tower and harsh reality? Or was there really no problem? Rather, was it more about the recognition that both communities and their records are varied and complex, defying simple definitions and easy categories and demanding substantial thought, analysis and understanding from those outside the community before attempting to engage them.

The students' experiences offer an opportunity to reflect not only on the nature of communities and community archives, but also on the potential alliances between archivists and the many diverse groups that make up the society in which archivists function – be it locally, statewide or national. How can and how should archivists connect with communities, and how might communities relate to archives? How and why do communities create their own archives and how does a traditional archives engage with those relationships? The students' experiences also point to the need to recognize how communities themselves understand their own identities and position themselves within their wider society. Archivists spend considerable time thinking about bringing communities into the archives, but what about bringing archivists into communities? What would archivists need to know in order for that to happen? And this perhaps is the basic question that my students tried to resolve.

In the spirit of their inquiries, I'd like to address the conference theme, "Archives as Community: Building Bridges and Sustaining Relationships" by posing several questions: What is a community? Why should we as archivists care? And if we care, what do we do about it? To address these questions I will consider the following:

- Some definitions of communities and community archives
- Why we care – the place of community records and memories
- Thinking about the "How" – some examples of crafting relationships with communities

Defining Community

Interacting with a community requires understanding its major characteristics, its reason for being, its identity and its place within the larger society and these all may be many and diverse. We generally think of communities as groups of individuals united

around commonalities. These commonalities could be:

- A Common Place or Locality – shared geography
- A Common Interest, Belief, or Lifestyle – shared characteristics other than place that could fit into a variety of categories such as religious beliefs, sexual orientation, occupation, ethnicity, origins, activities such as sports, civic organizations
- A Common Purpose – shared events or missions – attachment to a common idea or calling

Of course, these commonalities may overlap. Each of us, I am sure, belong to many different communities that fit into one or all of the categories above.

In addition, communities may be seen as:

- Relational and Longitudinal: A group of individuals who form relationships over time by interacting regularly around shared experiences, which are of interest to all of them for varying individual reasons
- Sites of Communion: Shared sense of attachment to a place, a group or an idea. In its strongest form "communion" entails a profound meeting or encounter (i.e. a hurricane, a tragedy)
- Often Virtual: "Imagined" and online but similarly of place, interest, communion, relationships

Community is often thought of as a network or local social system. But just because people live in the same location does not necessarily mean that they interact with one another. It is the relationships between people and their social networks that are often seen as one of the more significant aspects of "community." And we see the concept of "community" play out every day through social media networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter, networks designed specifically (and very successfully) to create community.

We also associate communities with particular types of values and actions:

- They may create identity and a sense of self for the members of the group

- They may foster and promote a sense of collective memory and heritage
- They may act as vehicles of communication and advocacy for the group
- They may offer social structures for the group
- They often imply deeply-held values such as "fellowship," "trust," and commitment
- They will also define their boundaries: Shared commonality distinguishes members of a group in a significant way from the members of other possible groups. Community implies both similarities and differences. If some people are inside, then others are outside and so to some extent community also involves exclusion

These many facets and possibilities of communities are important to keep in mind when thinking about relationships between communities and archives, whether we are trying to create a community ourselves, foster a relationship with a community, or bring a community into our archives. If archivists are to fulfill their fundamental mandate of documenting their society, then acknowledging, exploring and building relationships with the many diverse communities in their midst should be essential archival activities. Building inclusive relationships with the many communities that together form a particular society, be it a university, a town, a county, a state or a country, is an essential part of the archival mission.

Community Archives

The values that communities place on their own memories, their own identities, and on the collective activities of their group are often embodied through various kinds of records and some communities express their need to establish identity and preserve their memories by creating community archives. While community archives are not the primary focus of my discussion here today, a brief word about Community Archives seems appropriate.

Although the term "community archives" entered the archival vocabulary several decades ago, its definition remains vague and ambiguous. A "community archives" usually refers to materials generated by not-for-profit and non-governmental entities, often a

particular group or community sharing common interests, whether origins, geography, ethnicities, lifestyles or other factors. Community archives are often independent grassroots organizations primarily run by volunteers. Archival educator Andrew Flinn, founding member of the UK Community Archives website¹, notes that "The defining characteristic of a community archives is the active participation of the community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality **on their own terms.**"²

However, different regions and countries using the term Community archives assign it significantly different meanings. Although in the United Kingdom, for example, a community archives has been generally defined as a grassroots, bottom-up movement where the community creates its own, very local, archives, in New Zealand and in Canada, community archives are advised and sometimes established by the National Archives – the government helps to create the archive with and for the community.³ If, as it appears, understandings of community archives may be region-specific, then what constitutes a community archive in an American context?

The experiences of my students, though limited both by geography and numbers, suggest that in the United States the term "community archives" embraces a more inclusive vision and is therefore more difficult to define. A community archives in the United States may be grass roots as well as elitist, historical as well as contemporary, topical as well as general, public and even governmental as well as private and not-for-profit. And importantly as much concerned with preserving historical values, personal and group identity and collective memories as with social issues. Community Archives are found in many different kinds of community groups – civic, organizations around shared interests,

¹ Community Archives and Heritage Group, <http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/>.

² Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream," *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 71.

³ See for example "The Community Archive," a website supported by Archives New Zealand at <http://thecomcommunityarchive.org.nz/>.

issues or concerns, historical societies, even municipal offices – in fact all the categories of "community" referenced above.

Before giving a few examples of these, I would like to address my second agenda item – Why, as archivists should we care about communities? And I think we care, not only because all of us are part of communities but also because in archival terms, all communities are communities of records and of memories. Understanding those records and that memory and creating relationships between archivists and communities is critical if archivists hope to document society in holistic and inclusive ways.

Communities of Records and Memory

And here I'd like to briefly consider records and memory a little further in the context of relationships between archivists and communities. For archivists, creating meaningful relationships with communities means not only acknowledging the close ties between communities and their collective memories and identity, but also recognizing the implications for archives within that acknowledgement.

Thinking about locating the great diversity of communities within the archives might require a shift in approaches to some core archival thinking. For example, we customarily think of provenance as it is defined in the SAA Glossary, where, "provenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection."⁴ But what about if we thought about provenance more expansively? What about if we thought of a community itself as a collective creator of its records where the community is the provenance rather than the individuals, families or organizations within it?

While any community will always be more than the sum of its parts, it is the community's memory of itself that often transcends the collective, providing both a framework for group identity and a lens through which individual members locate themselves. For archivists, this lens offers strategies for documenting communities in ways that capture the overarching ethos and spirit of the group.

The core archival mission of documenting society implies

⁴ Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Society of American Archivists, 2005), <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p>.

both a commitment and an obligation towards the inclusion of all modes and manners of recording within the archives because society documents itself in so many diverse ways. This mission further suggests that documenting society refers equally to the communities as well as the individuals who make up society. Achieving this broad inclusion poses challenges for archivists at least partially because communities, as groups, do not always express themselves in traditional records formats. In fact they tend to coalesce around rituals, celebrations, oral traditions and other forms of remembrance that are difficult to capture in conventional archival ways. Although the events and activities of a community may be expressed through individuals, its identity, culture and spirit is more likely to be expressed in the aggregate through a commemorative parade, a monument in a town square, or a website of personal stories. Often, cultural expressions of groups and communities align more with the ephemeral traces of memory than with the more permanent records of history.

And so we care because the many different types of records that communities create generally parallel the active life of the community itself. Perhaps archives have obligations to communities that might include the following:

- Recognizing that the records are not only textual but may be oral and artifactual and that all forms of records can be accommodated within the Archives
- Recognizing the community's need to write its own history, know its own roots and foster its own traditions.
- Providing the documentation for both the master and the minor narratives of the community
- Understanding that records in all forms are a part of the patrimony of a state, a nation or a community

The How

How can archivists make those connections with communities that enhance both archives and communities and that foster the sharing of histories and memories? I'd like to give a few examples of possible approaches from different types of archival entities – from a university archives on creating community, from a historical society on documenting community, from a grassroots

organization constructing community around social issues, and finally, an educational institution sharing archival knowledge. You'll notice that all of these examples are in New England but I am sure you can think of comparable examples in Georgia.

Mass Memories Roadshow⁵

The Mass Memories Roadshow is a community-based project sponsored by the University Archives at the University of Massachusetts, Boston that documents Massachusetts people and places through the contributions of individuals who bring their photos and stories to be digitized at planned public events throughout the state. Launched in 2004, the Mass Memories Roadshow has visited over 45 communities, inviting them to share photographs and memories. Its guiding principles include the acknowledgment that "the Road Show events themselves play a vital role in creating an understanding of communal history." The organizers note that, "particularly in large, diverse cities, individuals and organizations may not be aware of the larger historical and contemporary context of their community. Yet all of the people arriving at their local Road Show with photos in hand have in common their connection to that physical location and its history, regardless of their age, ethnic, economic or religious background; all "belong" simply by virtue of their involvement (present or past) in this place."⁶ And so the Mass Memories project serves multiple purposes that enrich both the communities and the academy: it creates an awareness of the diverse peoples that comprise the state of Massachusetts, it provides valuable community documentation for researchers in the university archives, it supports the social justice mission of the university, and, perhaps most importantly, it renews community identity and sense of both self and group for the participants.

Maine Memory⁷

The Maine Memory Network shares similar features with the Mass Memories Roadshow but is a more focused and complex

⁵ The Mass Memories Road Show website is at <http://www.massmemories.net/>.

⁶ The Mass. Memories Road Show Project Handbook, A Planning Guide for Local Communities (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2014): 5.

<http://blogs.umb.edu/archives/files/2013/01/MMRS-Handbook-2015-15hklfb.pdf>

⁷ Maine Memory Network, <http://www.mainememory.net/aboutus/index.shtml>.

project. It has been an important feature of the Maine Historical Society since 1999 and, while Mass Memories focuses on individuals within a place, the Maine Memory Network is a successful example of an effort to create community and identity around a place itself. Historical societies, libraries, and other cultural institutions across the Maine are invited to upload digital copies of historic items from their collections into one centralized, web-accessible database. The Historical Society catalogs, organizes, and manages the items, often making them components of larger exhibits. The definition of an appropriate exhibit or historic item is left up to the submitting society or cultural institution although of course it must be about Maine.

Currently this site contains over 45,000 items contributed by 270 partners. The resulting collections of letters, maps, artifacts, photographs, etc. on the one hand seems like a hodgepodge, on the other, describes multiple facets of a location – Maine – providing a collective identity for Mainers, and an understanding of that collective identity for the rest of us. This community is described and presented by the residents themselves who inevitably privilege those aspects that are meaningful to them. These records mirror the community that they see and want to project. Through this network, the Historical Society locates itself at the center of its community.

The History Project – Independent Archive⁸

The History Project, an independent community archives located in Boston, was established in 1980 by a group of historians, activists and archivists and is primarily volunteer-based. Its focus is on preserving the history of Boston's LGBT community, on making that history accessible to present and future generations and on giving the LGBT community a place to share its memories and consolidate its identity. The founders of The History Project note on their website that preservation of LGBT history is

of paramount importance for the LGBT community, which is often excluded from history ... Since the documentation of the gay and lesbian experience is fragmentary and scattered, it has remained largely inaccessible to researchers, educators, the general

⁸ The History Project website is at <http://www.historyproject.org/>.

public, and even the gay community itself. Through its mission, The History Project seeks to provide an accurate portrayal of the contributions our community has made to the political, cultural and economic life of the region.⁹

For archivists as well as the LGBT community, The History Project is also a place where archival knowledge, records and social justice come together.

Massachusetts Municipal Records¹⁰

Communities are defined in many ways, but one trenchant definition is through geography. This geographically shared element can profoundly affect records. In Massachusetts, state law mandates that town records must remain in the towns in which they were created. No matter the age of the records or of the town, records cannot be sent to the central state archives. There are 351 towns in Massachusetts, many of them established in the 1600s. All of the towns, no matter the size, have a town clerk's office where vital statistics, various licenses, marriages certificates and other town activities are recorded – a system similar to that in many states. Few of these towns have archives buildings and so records are stored in offices, most of which have a vault for historical materials – although not necessarily climate controlled, organized or archivally secure. The placement of these archival materials within the town that created them assures that they will not only be continually held in the same location among the population whom they are about, but that they will also remain within the environment in which they are most meaningful and where they continue to tell the narrative of the town and support its population.

However, keeping records close to the place where they were created has its hazards as well as its values and it was these hazards that motivated the Massachusetts State Archives to ask the Simmons archives faculty for assistance in educating town clerks about the care, management and preservation of archival records. In 2012 we at Simmons applied for and received an NHPRC grant to create a

⁹ "About the History Project," <http://www.historyproject.org/about/about.php>.

¹⁰ The Massachusetts Municipal Clerks Archival Education Program, <http://slis.simmons.edu/mmcarp/>.

program to provide archival education to Municipal Clerks. We are now entering our third year of the grant. I bring this program to you as an example of how archivists can affect local community records through educating the people who care for records on just how to do that, and through using our special archival knowledge to care for records no matter where they may be held.

This local records education program is online, modular and in two parts. Year One is an introduction consisting of five modules including basic archival principles, such as provenance and original order, and essential archival functions such as appraisal, description, preservation and outreach. Year Two, also five modules, is an advanced course that focuses on electronic records. Each module includes exercises, simulations and assignments that initially model the content of that particular unit and then asks the Municipal Clerks to go back to their own repositories and use their own records to complete the assignments. In this way they begin to think archivally in their own shops.

To date, 24 clerks have completed Year One and are moving on to Year Two. We are beginning a second round for Year One and 25 clerks have registered. As part of our commitment to NHPRC, we are creating a public website of the entire program to share with states around the nation. I would be very interested in hearing your thoughts on bringing this kind of outreach education to Georgia. Archivists sharing education and knowledge can open up fruitful community connections as well as paths to increasing archival knowledge and records preservation.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which archivists and communities can connect. I've offered only a few examples and I am sure that this conference will show us others. Through the affordances of technology, connecting in 2015 seems both relevant and achievable in ways that did not seem possible in earlier decades. Today there are as many ways to bring the archives into communities and communities into archives as our creativity, proactivity and bandwidth will take us.

But regardless of bandwidth, perhaps the most important things for archivists to keep in mind is that establishing and maintaining positive connections between archivists and

communities is essential, not only for the holistic and balanced documenting of our collections and the preservation of the many and varied diverse records that communities create, but also for the sharing of histories and memories across our society. All voices belong in the archives but we can only connect with those voices if we know where they are, if we are willing to seek and engage them and, most importantly, if we are prepared to listen.

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