Announcements:

- House Subcommittee Restores NHPRC Funding; Senate Is Next Step!
- Update on Efforts to Save NHPRC Funding (May '05)
- Providing Public Testimony on NHPRC
- SAA Appointments—Get Involved!

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Copyright: The Archivist and the Law
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Security in Archives & Manuscript Repositories (EXPANDED)
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MARC According to DACS: Archival Cataloging to the New Descriptive Standard (REVISED)
New Orleans, LA
8/15/2005–8/16/2005

Describing Photographs in

Society and Archives

by WILLIAM J. MAHER, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
53rd president of the Society of American Archivists

The following incoming presidential address was delivered on August 30, 1997, during SAA's 61st annual meeting in Chicago, IL, Fairmont Hotel.

At the closing luncheon of the 1983 SAA meeting in Minneapolis, David B. Gracy launched one of the most focused presidencies and SAA programs in the modern era. Under the banner of "Archives and Society," he called for a concerted campaign to increase the resources provided to archives by directing attention to archivists' need for greater recognition from society for the value of what they do. Gracy's presidency is often pointed to as a model of success. Several public programs were launched in support of "archives and society," but if the initiative succeeded, it did so because it pushed archivists to reassess themselves and their work in terms of public relations and to appreciate the enormous importance of good public relations to the betterment of archival programs.

As an organization, SAA has played a significant role in fulfilling the mandate laid down by Gracy. At the same time, the task of securing more resources and a better public image of archives is really never complete, and we all must admit that there are some archives which are no better off today than they were before David delivered his vision to SAA. Collectively, we are still very much subject to the cycle of poverty that he identified as inhibiting the best intentions and efforts of archivists. What's worse is that with the advent of electronic records systems, there is a new challenge capable of putting us even further behind than we were before with the significant danger that without control of electronic records, we will no longer even hold the historical and cultural capital to claim a distinctive and important role in society.

With the increasingly complex and competitive information environment within which archives exist, we are in fact in the rather strange position of being at risk of

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losing the archivist in archives. In the years since Gracy spoke, we have witnessed society as a whole become increasingly focused on information, and increasingly interested in using information in non-conventional forms. In such an information age, one would think that archives should prosper, but most programs are still grossly under-supported, often under-used, and archivists remain under-compensated and still marginalized on key issues of information policy.

Our tenuous position can be illustrated, at least partially, by the increasing public use, or should I say misuse, of the very word "archives." Perhaps through no fault of our own, we have lost control of the word "archives." It has been seized and used by computer specialists, librarians, advertising copywriters, academic faculty, newspapers, and electronic media to cover all manner of information gatherings that really are quite clearly not archives. On a personal level, I find that I have to spell and explain the pronunciation of "archives" far less than I did a decade and a half ago. In academic circles, I find I do not have to answer questions about whether archives are old artifacts and museum objects because there is a ready understanding that "archives" are information. In fact, according to my analysis of citations in the Newspaper Abstracts database there is a threefold increase of the use of the word archives in the news media from 1985 to 1996. In our current multimedia age, there is also the appreciation that "archives" comprise not just manuscripts but documents in all forms and formats.

Despite the increased popular use of the word "archives," there is clear evidence that the misuse of the term is not decreasing. My review of Newspaper Abstracts for 1985 and 1996 shows that the percentage of inappropriate or clearly incorrect uses of "archives" has remained relatively constant. One of my personal favorites was in an article by *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter Mike Kiley who, in writing about the Chicago Bears' poor track record in their second-round NFL draft picks, must have been looking for some way to elevate his diatribe above opinion when he wrote that the Bear's "second-round archives" were littered with lackluster talent and broken hearts. We also note the use of the word "archives" in the popular culture media, such as the cable TV oldies service titled "VH1 Archives." A quick Alta-Vista or Yahoo search of the Internet for the word "archives" will show over 2 million "hits," many of which are references to professionally operated archives and manuscript repositories, but many more that are little more than some Internet junkie's personal backfiles of top forty tunes, Baywatch stars' vital statistics, or logs of government conspiracies.

Although we have some of the same institutional problems as when David Gracy spoke, one can see the evolution of the language as a positive sign for archivists. Instead of archives not being understood and valued, we have rather the opposite problem archives are seen as something so desirable that many people believe they

understand them quite readily.

Many university faculty I encounter, in fact, have a strong interest in developing their own so-called "archive" of personal documents and/or research material. Almost invariably their project consists of scanning documents and images collected through their research and, increasingly drawn on a highly selective basis from the processed holdings of an established archival repository. These academics seek their place in the scholarly firmament as they compile a product such as the definitive "Virtual Archive of Central Illinois Alpine Skiing." As suggested by this example, there are collateral tendencies to use the word "archives" minus its North American requisite terminal "s" and to "verbify" the noun.

In many cases, the non-professional appropriation of the term "archives" appears to be part of an attempt by the scholar or database builder to lend panache or cachet and an air of respectability to what otherwise might be little more than a personal hobby or collecting fetish. As archivists, should we simply welcome this popularization of the term "archives" or should we be bothered by the prevalence of its frequent misuse? Perhaps we should look only on the positive side and see that the growing amateur usage of "archives" reflects the sort of public recognition of the value and importance of documentation that Gracy sought. On the other hand, there is in the popularized use of "archives" a rather significant threat to the basic goals of the archival profession. Call it paranoia, but I always have the sense that when we see "archive" used as a verb, or the word "archives" used in a bastardized way to describe what is clearly a singular, idiosyncratic, and synthetic gathering of documents, we are being confronted with a challenge to our position as professional archivists. Is this just a guild-like reaction as we see others stake a claim to what has been our sacred territory? Or is it a defensiveness borne of concern that society's precious few resources will be drawn off by these rogue efforts while "real" archival work goes on in a cycle of poverty?

As your president for the next year, it would be remiss for me to dismiss criticisms of the bastardization of the term "archives" as petty and irrelevant. After all, our professional societies are indeed the latter-day equivalent of guilds, and if we as professional archivists are not prepared to vigorously defend our stake in the information landscape, we have little justification for our continued existence as a society. There are, however, more important reasons for being diligent and active in defense of the very terminology of our profession.

What is, in fact, so troubling about the many pseudo archives now being established is that they frequently lack several of the very core archival functions. In some cases, it is that they constitute private and idiosyncratic collections

developed ex post facto, and thus are far from the contextually based organic bodies of evidence that comprise most of the archives and manuscript collections among members of SAA. In other cases, they are little more than undifferentiated masses of electronically stored information, often compiled by accident of system design, for backups, and frequently occupying large quantities of computer space with a low value to volume ratio. However, what is most troubling in these pseudo archives is their lack of the professional and theory-based application of the seven major archival responsibilities. That is, what defines the professional core of archival work is the systematic and theoretically-based execution of seven highly interrelated responsibilities securing clear authority for the program and collection, authenticating the validity of the evidence held, appraising, arranging, describing, preserving, and promoting use. To help the non-archival world understand the value of what professionalism brings to archives and information, we must continue to emphasize how our expertise in each of these seven domains is necessary to ensure that a concise and authentic record of the past is preserved and made accessible as evidence to the future.

Can we stop the misappropriation of our nomenclature? Is this an important threat to us as professionals? What role can and should SAA play in this admittedly dicey area when we often become side-tracked into lengthy internal disputes over the meaning of such basic terms as "archives," "provenance," or "evidential value?" Rather than suggest that SAA or each of us become some sort of language police censuring each prominent misuse of archival terminology, we have a more positive and proactive role to play in the rapidly changing information environment. In brief, rather than trying to fight a rear-guard action, against public misuse of "archives," we should accept the positive benefits of greater societal recognition of archives but also use each such occasion to assert the professional dimension of society's use of "archives." For example, with the rapid growth in information technology and the growing bandwidth for information formats, we must be particularly watchful of public policy developments that will impact and impede our fundamental archival goals and responsibilities. In 1996-97, SAA Council has examined or has been presented with issues such as copyright limits on fair use, electronic records, and preservation for digitized documents. We need to play a primary role in stating the archival policy on issues involved in our fundamental archival responsibilities to provide for an accountable record of our institutions and secure a historical heritage for society.

SAA's recent involvement in several policy issues fits the model of the role I see us as needing to fulfill to provide critical advocacy at the dawn of a new century. These include: taking an unambiguous stance in opposition to proposed CONFU (Conference on Fair Use) guidelines on the "fair use" of digital images; signing on

as amicus curia in two archival-related lawsuits; adopting a policy statement on archival preservation issues involved in the digital preservation of conventional documentary materials; developing a clear public statement on behalf of the November 1996 NHPRC strategic plan priorities; providing specific recommendations to the Moynihan Committee to expedite the declassification of federal documents; and speaking out vigorously against the potential politicization of the position of chief of the California State Archives.

In this audience, I am sure there are some who may disagree with some of the stances SAA has taken. However, what I hope everyone will appreciate is how each of these positions was developed to assert a professional response on a public matter involving a fundamental archival principle. In the case of the IRS suit, it was for compliance with the Federal Records Act and thus for accountability of public agencies. In the suit of Bruce Craig versus the United States, it was for reasonable scholarly access to historical grand jury records. In regard to declassification, it was to advocate for a more effective governmental policy and a more realistic way to administer the declassification of old national security documents. In the case of NHPRC's priorities, it was for the need to fund archival projects, especially those dealing with electronic records. In the case of the position of director of the California state archives, it was for professional preconditions of employment. In the case of the CONFU guidelines, it was for copyright policies that would not inhibit archival and research work to disseminate historical information using the latest information technology. In the preservation guidelines, it was the need to recognize the distinctiveness of archival from library or technical issues when employing digital technologies for preservation.

Such activities are merely illustrative of what we hope will be a more active SAA in advocacy. Rather, to paraphrase the epithet of University of Illinois' founding regent John Milton Gregory, borrowed from Christopher Wren--"if you seek the monument, just look around"--"If you seek the definition of SAA, you only need review these advocacy examples." They define us as a profession and as a society that sees its mission as service to society at large.

An equally critical defining characteristic of these efforts has been that in many respects, these advocacy positions have been responsive rather than proactive initiatives. In most cases, we were asked for a reaction or opinion on a policy question that others were considering. Some years ago, the emphasis on being proactive might have censured these efforts as being reactive and thus retrograde at best. In many cases, it is better to be proactive, but in the current information policy environment, we simply cannot review every possible information policy matter to identify concerns of interest to SAA. Instead, we have been blessed by an

active membership and set of coalition partners who are aware of our interests and who value our support on key issues. Even in a matter so basic and traditional as the advocacy on behalf of professional employment credentials, we are dependent on, and we succeed because of the initiative and preparedness of individual members who alert us to the issues and actively help articulate the position or policy statement that SAA ultimately issues.

In all cases, significant progress on public issues requires diligence and considerable effort by Council members who may spend hours reading background documents, preparing discussion documents or seminar sessions, and drafting the ultimate policy statement. This work has been most effective and encouraging, but at the same time, Council realizes that it must do more even if only to signal the kinds of policy problems it wishes to consider for formal positions. Consequently, we have recently considered a policy statement on our vision for archival advocacy which outlines the key principles and general policy areas we wish to emphasize and advance.

This statement appears on SAA's website and in *Archival Outlook*, but as a preview, I note the following. SAA is particularly concerned that the archival dimensions of the following issues related to technology, commercial developments, and governmental policy be addressed:

- mechanisms for the creation of reliable, authentic, identifiable, accessible, and manageable records of government, institutions, and society in general;
- the sustainability and viability of electronic documentary formats and media;
- intellectual property regulations that promote the use of new technologies to expand access to records and other documentary materials;
- development and adoption of standards and protocols that facilitate identification, description, communication, longevity, and access for both traditional and electronic forms of documentation;
- provision of adequate financial and policy support to fulfill legal, institutional, and societal mandates;
- mechanisms and policies that ensure the prompt declassification of federal records whose secrecy requirements have passed;
- assurance that the management of individual archival programs follows the norms of the profession so that the archivist's distinct role and responsibilities are not compromised by political, institutional, or other considerations; and
- accessibility of public records and documentary cultural property, regardless of format, to the public at a reasonable cost.

Developing a more active and focused position for SAA to advocate on behalf of archival issues will require more than just Council action, and more than just additional funding for SAA's support of advocacy groups and lobbying agencies. What is most critical is the involvement of individual members in a two-part process. On the one hand, members need to alert Council and the executive office to issues on which a clear archival policy statement is needed. This can be done both individually as well as through SAA constituent groups such as committees, sections, roundtables, and representatives. On the other hand, once SAA has adopted a statement, it behooves each of us as professional archivists to incorporate the item within our own repository guidelines and policies. At the least, each of us bears a special responsibility to disseminate archival policy positions at our home institutions. If we wish to ensure that archivists remain in society's view of archives, it is archivists who must place themselves at the center of society's perception of archives. Through such efforts, we will define ourselves, and in the spirit of Christopher Wren and John Milton Gregory, create the "archives" that society will seek.

Afterword

I would like to close with a final favorite example of the public misuse of the word "archives," which aptly illustrates the mixed feelings we all must have as we see "archives" embraced by society and commerce.

Sometime ago, I returned a mail-in rebate coupon from the distillers of Glenlivit, my regular brand of single-malt scotch. I have subsequently been on the mailing list of the Glenlivit Society and receive periodic promotions from its "concierge." A recent mailing encouraged me to visit the distillery in Banffshire, Scotland and included a special invitation entitling me and my guests to several privileges--free admission, inscription in the V.I.P. guestbook, and a V.I.P. private tasting of "the Glenlivit Archive" a special bottling not available to the public. So rather than curse the corruption of the language, I propose that we engage in the "archives" of society and impose on it our archival principles, spirit, and values.

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