American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities

RICHARD J. COX

Archivists, in their selection, description, and interpretation of historical records, must employ all the best qualities of the historian. It is, then, with irony that we view the poor condition of the study of American archival history. Only over the past decade and a half have archivists begun to seriously consider the history of their own vocation. I do not mean to imply that little has been written and published on this subject. The literature is voluminous and dates back to the primeval period of American archives, the late 19th century. A careful scrutiny, however, reveals an uneven coverage in both quality and subject, a truly lamentable situation. It is vital that we know as much as possible about the development of the profession to aid our continued self-study, reevaluation, and progress, especially in time of unusual stress and change. We need to direct the historian's perspective not only to the records under our care but to our profession as well.

This essay is intended to examine the trends of research on the history of American archives, to assess its strengths and weaknesses, and to suggest some areas for future research. One additional preliminary note needs to be stated. My definition of the archival profession, as will be seen below, is broad. I consider its originators—even if this necessitates an overly long gestation period—to be the pioneer manuscript collectors and first historical societies of more than two centuries past. Those professional historians and historically-trained archivists who preemptively write of the American archival movement as solely the manifestation of a professionalization of history ignore a main line of its ancestry, one still in evidence and vitally important today.

The pioneer essays in American archival history appeared between the last years of the 19th century and the 1920s. By then private collectors and historical societies had been active in the United States for a century. The formation of an historical profession, emphasizing the critical use of sources via intensive seminar training, in these same years

The author is archivist and records manager, Baltimore City Archives.
focused a new attention on the early institutional and individual manuscript collectors. The historians' interest primarily emanated from the need to know of the locations of records, but, being historians, it is not surprising to see this interest expanded to the history of repositories and biographies of collectors and documentary editors. Justin Winsor's 1887 essay on the "conspicuous collections extant," based upon his monumental eight-volume Narrative and Critical History of America, devotes equal space to the careers of Jared Sparks, Peter Force, and George Bancroft.\(^1\) Herbert Baxter Adams, the leading advocate of scientific history while at the Johns Hopkins University from 1876 to 1901, also thought highly enough of Sparks to compose a twovolume biography, a work still valuable today for its liberal publication of his letters and journals.\(^2\) These efforts by Winsor and Adams were among the best of a literature that was large even in these early years.

The historical profession was a strong impetus for studying the formation of early manuscript collections and record keeping practices. The American Historical Association's sponsorship of a Historical Manuscripts Commission and Public Archives Commission, in 1895 and 1899, respectively, also encouraged the gathering of data on these subjects. An essay on the "dispersion" of George Washington's papers, a scathing attack on the lack of care of the state records of New York, and a review of the initial two decades of the Public Archives Commission all were written to encourage historians to fight for the better preservation of American historical records, but each also provided information on the history of American archives.\(^3\) This was especially evident by the 1920s. The Public Archives Commission was a catalyst in the formation of state archives among Southern states, and two decades later, in the North Carolina Historical Review issued between 1926 and 1929, summary essays on these programs were published.\(^4\) Although they were generally only catalogues of earlier legislation and often included saccharine predictions of the future, these essays constituted the first serious regional survey of the


\(^2\)The Life and Writings of Jared Sparks: Comprising Selections from His Journals and Correspondence, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893). It is surprising, and regrettable, that Sparks still has not been the subject of a modern biography.


history of the archival profession and were the primary sources for two later excellent composites of archival development in the South.\(^5\)

Without the leadership of a national archival body and professional society or the convenient forum of a specialized journal, however, research and writing on American archival history, or on any other archival subject, was severely limited. This problem was rectified quickly in the mid-1930s with the opening of the National Archives (1934), the establishment of the Society of American Archivists (1936), and the start of the quarterly *American Archivist* (1938). The National Archives provided a national perspective to hitherto scattered records programs and the SAA concentrated on professional issues and concerns; the existence of a journal enabled a consistent dissemination of information on such matters. From the late 1930s through the 1950s the *American Archivist* featured numerous essays on the histories of state and federal programs, as fledgling national and state programs, the onslaught of the Second World War, and the unprecedented proliferation of government records forced archivists to grapple with issues ranging from disposition of records to dissemination of vital information. A common methodology for resolving records problems was historical research on records legislation and earlier procedures.\(^6\)

The archival literature of the 1940s and early 1950s brought forth few new or definitive studies. Leslie Dunlap’s 1944 analysis of the early development of American historical societies, concentrating on their role as institutions “organized primarily to collect, preserve, and make available the materials for the history of the United States or a section of it,” was by far the best of this period.\(^7\) By the end of the 1940s, however, the literature was improving rapidly. Roscoe P. Hill’s 1951 history of searches for American records in foreign archives, as well as William B. Hesseltine’s biography of collector and historical society administrator Lyman Copeland Draper a few years later, provided, along with Dunlap’s study, a

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The *American Archivist* has never had a monopoly on the archival literature. In these early years a number of other noteworthy studies appeared in other journals including, for example, Dallas Irvine, “The Genesis of the Official Records,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 24 (1937): 221–29; “The Fate of Confederate Archives,” *American Historical Review* 44 (July 1939): 823–41; and “The Archives Office of the War Department, Repository of Captured Confederate Archives, 1865–1881,” *Military Affairs* 10 (Spring 1946): 93–111. I would strongly contend, however, that the vast quantity of such studies has appeared in this single journal and that such articles are far more widely read in it because of easier and wider access to the archival profession.

\(^{7}\)American Historical Societies, 1790-1860 (Madison, Wisconsin: privately printed, 1944).
good introduction to the 19th-century origins of the modern archives movement. The 20th anniversary of the National Archives, its controversial placement under the General Services Administration, the unfortunate schism between archivists and records managers, the memoirs of a few elder archival statesmen, and the diversification of the profession stimulated the preparation of a small group of other useful archival histories.

The increasing attention to the history of American archives in these years was, perhaps, a minor part of the search for the common and unifying elements of a profession that had become far more complex than its originators had ever imagined. All through the 1950s and early 1960s the presidents of the Society of American Archivists harped upon this theme until, in 1965, W. Kaye Lamb officially "resigned" the profession to the fact that it was "so broad and varied that no one person can any longer claim to have a detailed knowledge of all its aspects." Nevertheless, some of the profession's chroniclers strived to connect the disparate elements of the archival movement in this country. Companion essays by Lyman H. Butterfield and Francis L. Berkeley in the 1954 Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society traced the American concern for records preservation from the outburst of nationalism in the early 19th century to the work of professional archivists, editors, and historians a century later; Berkeley's essay was an admirable summary of the efforts to establish intellectual control over historical manuscripts with national surveys and the publica-

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A few years later, the first single-volume history of the archival profession in all of its variety appeared in the guise of a festschrift for Herbert A. Kellar. With essays on public archives, pioneer organizations and collectors, historical editing, microphotography, and the first analysis of the Historical Records Survey, this tome was primarily a reflection of Kellar's career that, due to the multiplicity of his interests, also accurately portrayed the diverse parameters of the profession.

The Kellar volume also was representative of another transitional stage in the profession, the passing of a generation of leadership. In some cases, as with Herbert A. Kellar, there was pause and honor. More broadly, however, there was a serious reevaluation of accepted methods and the presentation of and experimentation with new techniques. The result was a triumvirate of massive, official studies of the predominant archival establishments in this country—historical societies, state archives, and the National Archives—that called for specific actions of all kinds, including more serious study of their history. These three books—Walter Muir Whitehill's *Independent Historical Societies*, Ernst Posner's *American State Archives*, and H. G. Jones's *The Records of a Nation*—are, with little debate, among the most significant publications concerning this profession. Few who brand themselves archivists have not perused these writings. Whitehill, Posner, and Jones each were sponsored by professional organizations to examine specific problems and summarize the current conditions of the respective institutions. Whitehill explored the "financial crisis" and mandate of American historical societies, Posner the reasons for the dramatically uneven quality of state archives, and Jones the controversial placement of the National Archives under the General Services Administration. The success of these books was mixed not because the authors missed their assigned mark but, especially in the case of Posner's work, because the profession ignored their findings.

Examining the work of Whitehill, Posner, and Jones from a different perspective, as studies of American archival history, makes all three unqualified successes. Before and since Whitehill, with the one single exception of Dunlap's earlier book, the studies of American historical societies have tended to be largely commemorative ventures, celebrating donors and patrons,
and isolated to purely institutional concerns often in needless minutiae.\textsuperscript{16} Much of Whitehill's book consists of brief institutional sketches, but the author, with a lively style and great affection, also carefully relates institutional and regional variations and subtleties to the reader. It remains the one single volume that must be read on this subject. Posner did the same for state archives. Until Posner the profession had been fed a steady diet of brief, administrative histories that had changed little in three decades or more.\textsuperscript{17} \textit{American State Archives}, however, provided a lengthy chapter on their "genesis and evolution," a state-by-state evaluation, and a careful summary of findings. Not only did this book become a standard source on this subject, it pleaded throughout for further study. Jones's book on the National Archives was very similar to Posner's work, providing not only an excellent history of the federal program but also an evaluation of its status within the federal bureaucracy; the individual interested in either subject can read with equal profit.


Lawrence Burnette, and Walter Rundell liberally included archives in histories of American historical writing and research, a relationship that our historical colleagues had rarely appreciated prior to this time. After the works of Whitehill, Posner, and Jones, the literature on the history of the profession expanded in both quantity and variety, keeping pace for a time with the growing and widening archival world. On one hand historians of archives returned to traditional topics and studied them anew and in greater depth. The 1970s was a time of thorough analysis of Southern state archives and the National Archives, persistent subjects of such writing for two generations. Historical editing, written about by its pioneer modern practitioners since the early 1950s, also was treated afresh, primarily because of this field's dramatic growth, spurred by the revitalization of the National Historical Publications Commission (now the National Historical Publications and Records Commission) since the mid-1960s. Lester Cappon's three essays, published from 1966 to 1978, provide the most complete and authoritative description of this subject. The rediscovery of the


Historical Records Survey in the mid-1970s was but another example. Archivists interested in the reference value of the massive, unpublished, and underutilized records inventories of this 1930s project soon studied its history as well. And, finally, a few explored the profession's formative period under the wings of the academic historians. By the end of the 1970s archivists, historians, and graduate history students all seemed to be flocking to a newly discovered virgin territory of research.

Progress on researching the history of American archives has been substantial, especially since the mid-1960s. Much, however, remains to be done. The vast proportion of excellent histories concerns only historical societies, federal records, and Southern state archives, leaving gaps in our knowledge impossible to disregard. Despite a number of studies on colonial record keeping, no one has endeavored to trace the European precedents and influences; this is especially unfortunate since there is sufficient literature on European practices to draw upon. Autograph collecting, a popular avocation since the early 19th century and extremely important for the preservation of historical records before the advent of professional archives, has been treated only in a few studies of early collectors and dealers. Perhaps a greater understanding of the avocation could have helped us to avoid the unfortunate hoopla about replevin in very recent years. Even the vast literature on American state archives has shortchanged local government records.


And, finally, college and university archives, one of the fastest growing components of the profession during the past two decades, have been the subject of less than a handful of historical studies. Add to this list other neglected subjects of archival theory and practice — arrangement and description, training, conservation, reprographics, archival architecture, and records management (other than federal), to name only a few — and the weakness of the literature on American archival history becomes all too readily apparent. Perhaps its holes are too large and numerous even to allow at present the preparation of a full history of the profession.

A brief comparison of this research with that on the history of the American historical profession is a telling indictment of our neglect. Not only have there been numerous general reviews of the historical profession's development, extending far back to the 1890s, but nearly every decade a major reevaluation of the current state of their craft appears. This phenomenon may be a product of their training, emphasizing the understanding of past work and searching for new interpretations of previously interpreted events. This can, and often does, produce sterile displays of erudi-


33 If one does not believe this, one may examine the most recent of these reevaluations, especially the editor's introductory essay; Michael Kammen, ed., The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).
tion devoid of original ideas and written for a coterie of colleagues. Nevertheless, such consistent self-appraisal is healthy. Its practitioners are fully aware of their profession’s history and such knowledge is often effectively utilized in current controversies and debates and experimentation with new techniques and methodologies. Considering that the vast majority of archivists are still trained as historians, however, it is surprising that we have not followed this precedent.

What, then, is the problem with archivists and the still scanty histories of this profession? Is such a historical perspective of so little value? The answer is, obviously, no to the latter question. Not only are most archivists trained as historians and all vitally concerned with the past in the preservation of its records, but nearly every archival study of any merit commences with some form of historical introduction. Many of the studies mentioned above were written and published primarily to come to terms with some professional issue. The problem of the unevenness of this literature, therefore, lies elsewhere.

The problem exhibited by a review of the historical literature is a reflection of some fundamental weaknesses of our profession, not including a disregard for its own history—although that is the ultimate result. Very few archivists publish anything, partly a reflection of and contributing factor to a poor professional self-image. The struggle by archivists for acceptance by their peers, the professional historians in academe, also has contributed to an emphasis on the uniqueness of archival work, an avoidance of other historical scholarship (even on their own profession), and isolation to preparing finding aids and assisting researchers; even much of what has been written is cast in the form of the administrative history normally expected as part of archival guides. Even the new “public history” movement, an event of unlimited potential for our profession, has been greeted with suspicion and blatant animosity by some archivists. Public history training in graduate schools and other new archival education programs also may provide what has been a missing stimulant to the intensive historical analysis of the archival profession: systematic classroom examination of the profession’s development and characteristics. Despite the seriousness of such professional flaws, all seem in the process of being resolved.

What, then, needs to be accomplished in the field of American archival history? First, there is a need for extensive state histories, like that by H. G. Jones, that explain the efforts and relationships of historical societies, private collectors and antiquarians, professional historians, public programs, and college and university archives. The local scene provides the best mechanism for carefully and exhaustively examining our origins, progress, and successes and failures. Institutional analyses will only

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36Karl L. Trever, “Administrative History in Federal Archives,” American Archivist 4 (July 1941): 159–69, a classic essay which has seemingly set the tone for succeeding generations of archivists.

be of value if their institution's development is consistently tied to a broader perspective of professional, cultural, and local developments. Second, using local histories, studies of the regional variations of archival repositories could be attempted. Why have the Southern states been so much more successful than most other regions? Why have local government programs been so neglected across the various regions? Third, it would be of tremendous value to have one single-volume synthesis of the history of American archives, whether composed by an individual or a team of researchers. Such a volume could endeavor to trace this history from the pioneer antiquarians, collectors, and editors through the professionalization of history and the birth of the modern archives movement to the present problems of the field. A work of this magnitude would be a substantial contribution to the knowledge of historical studies in the United States and an excellent reference for the continuing efforts to resolve contemporary problems and issues. The late Victor Gondos's book on Jameson's long lobbying effort for the establishment of a national archives, for example, has become highly relevant in light of recent federal financial policies seriously hampering our profession.38

The history of the American archival profession is, without question, an extremely important subject that requires our best and fullest attention. To those who contend that there are other priorities, I remind them of the much repeated, but perhaps little understood, dictum: the "past is prologue." The study of our professional past will enable a clear focus on the proper professional priorities; it is, in fact, a necessity for the future progress of the American archival profession.

38Gondos, Jameson. See note 22 for a full citation. Another example is a recent analysis of the Historical Records Survey primarily as a public welfare program of the Depression years, measuring its success in that light as well as its value to the historical community; Burl Noggle, Working With History: The Historical Records Survey in Louisiana and the Nation, 1936–1942 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).