

The Archival Profession: Looking Backward and Looking Forward

Gregory S. Hunter

Welcome to the Fall/Winter issue of *The American Archivist*. Autumn is a season that forces us to look backward and forward. We look backward, recalling summer vacations and a respite—however brief—from our professional endeavors. The falling leaves also force us to look forward to a winter we know is coming, along with new challenges and opportunities in our professional lives.¹

As I assembled the content for this issue, I realized that the articles can be grouped along the backward/forward spectrum. I toyed with the idea of structuring the issue into “sections” reflecting this, but ultimately chose not to do so. Rather, I decided to use my column to present my thinking on the contents of the issue.

Three articles clearly ask us to look backward. Arranging them chronologically, Aleksandr Gelfand traces the development of archives in Russia. His article is entitled “As Vast as the Sea: An Overview of Archives and the Archival Profession in Russia from the Time of Ivan the Terrible to World War I.” This previously underexplored 350-year period of archival development in Russia demonstrates some of the shared roots of the archival profession and provides important lessons for today’s archivists.

Continuing the historical theme, two articles examine our professional literature and the insights it can provide into archival practices and priorities. Jessica Wagner Webster analyzes almost three-quarters of a century of *The American Archivist* in her article, “‘Filling the Gaps’: Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011.” This article was the subject of a lively “brown bag” luncheon discussion at the SAA Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Though concerned with oral history specifically, the article raises important questions about the effectiveness of our broader approaches to documenting a diverse society. It also shows the possibilities of additional analyses of articles in *The American Archivist*.

In the next historical article, Greg Bak analyzes the literature in another major archival journal, *Archivaria*. In “How Soon Is Now? Writings on Digital Archiving in Canada from the 1980s to 2011,” Bak explores a time of transition in archival thinking about digital records: from the era of “machine-readable archives,” through major research projects and re-engineering approaches of the 1990s, to a complex contemporary understanding that includes a renewed respect for early archival approaches. Those of us who came of professional age during the machine-readable archives era will find the article particularly interesting.

Two articles in this issue serve as transitions, since they look forward as well as backward. Laila Hussein Moustafa’s article, “Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Lessons from World War II and the Contemporary Conflict in the Middle East,” links the work of multiple generations of archivists. She argues that the cultural heritage of humanity threatened by conflict or war can be preserved if the professional cultural heritage community and other groups such as governmental and nongovernmental authorities, scholars, and citizens cooperate.

Caitlin Patterson’s article, “Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age,” begins by reviewing past public perceptions of archives, including the stereotypical twins, “dusty” and “musty.” She then reports on a survey exploring contemporary perceptions of archives among members of a university community. Her findings will be useful to future archivists as they attempt to influence perceptions, promote institutions, and assist members of the public.

The issue then shifts gears, with four articles clearly looking forward. Lorraine L. Richards discusses the emerging area of digital curation in “Teaching Data Creators How to Develop an OAIS-Compliant Digital Curation System: Colearning and Breakdowns in Support of Requirements Analysis.” Her article describes a joint project between Drexel University and a unit of the Federal Aviation Administration to develop requirements and a prototype for a digital records repository.

In the next article, Tonia Sutherland continues the discussion of prototyping but applies it to documenting a performing arts genre. “From (Archival) Page to (Virtual) Stage: The Virtual Vaudeville Prototype” explores the difficulties archivists face in capturing, preserving, and representing performance and other ephemeral or intangible cultural expressions. It also examines the applicability of existing archival theory and practice for reconstructing historical performances in digital environments.

How we connect our professional activities with the education of future generations is the subject of the next article by Sonia Yaco, Caroline Brown, and Lee Konrad. “Linking Special Collections to Classrooms: A Curriculum-to-Collection Crosswalk” focuses on higher education’s future. The article presents

a conceptual model mixing traditional methods and new data mining tools to increase access points for curricular content. The authors also evaluate a pilot curriculum-to-collection software crosswalk that matches course content to specialized primary source holdings.

The final article looks at crowdsourcing's present and future in an archival context. Lesley Parilla and Meghan Ferriter's case study is entitled "Social Media and Crowdsourced Transcription of Historical Materials at the Smithsonian Institution: Methods for Strengthening Community Engagement and Its Tie to Transcription Output." The authors explore the effect of highly structured experiences on volunteer engagement with the Smithsonian's Transcription Center. As you will read, the preliminary results are very encouraging.

The issue concludes with six reviews that continue the theme of looking both backward and forward. The reviews cover approaches to research, the evolving scholarly record, contested narratives, relationships with libraries, and rights in the digital era. The reviews of books and reports were written by Caryn Radick, Jordon Steele, Christopher M. Laico, William J. Maher, Mary K. Mannix, and Jean Dryden

Archivists constantly look backward and forward. However, it is more than just direction. As a profession, we look backward *in order to* look forward. We believe that materials from the past can inform contemporary society and inspire future generations. Engraved on a statue outside the National Archives building in Washington—a 1935 Robert Aitken statue titled *Future*—are the words, "What is past is prologue."² I hope that this issue of *The American Archivist* will help as you continue to connect past, present, and future in your daily professional practice.



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NOTES

¹ The metaphor of Janus, the Greek god who faces two ways and is the origin of the name of the month of January, has appeared in the archival literature. See Herbert Angel, "Archival Janus: The Records Center," *The American Archivist* 31 (January 1968): 5–12.

² For a photo of the statue, see <https://aotus.blogs.archives.gov/2013/12/06/what-is-past-is-prologue-appointing-the-first-historian-of-the-national-archives>.