

From *American Archivist* Editorial Board

We are writing to offer reflections on our experiences as Editorial Board members throughout the process of *American Archivist* accepting Frank Boles' article for publication in the *American Archivist* 82:2 issue, selection of the article for a Brown Bag discussion at the 2019 Annual Meeting, and subsequent communications between the Editor, author, and SAA members, in the hope it will lend increased transparency and openness to our organization. Our stated role as Editorial Board members is to advise and assist the Editor in the review and production of the journal; if this role is to have a meaningful impact in the future, we must acknowledge where human and structural failures occurred, and identify how the journal can better serve our members and profession going forward.

Frank Boles' article in this issue has alienated many SAA members, including many who have already felt marginalized, by questioning the professional legitimacy of their motivations and work. As Editorial Board members, we recognize and apologize for the harm this experience has caused, and likewise we acknowledge the ways in which it damaged the journal's credibility and reputation.

We would first like to acknowledge the thoughtful feedback, representing a range of individual email messages, Twitter conversations, listserv postings, and blog posts, that the Editorial Board, Editor, and SAA publications staff compiled from a wide range of sources in advance of our meeting held in Chicago in late October 2019 to address the controversy.

In multiple instances—our December 2019 statement in the SAA *Off the Record* blog,¹ for example—we have stated that the Editorial Board has been or is doing a great deal of listening. We want to explicitly acknowledge some of the patterns and concerns that we noted in this feedback, but that were not covered in the Editor's introduction. For example:

- Many of the concerns challenged the decision to accept the article not based on the author's stance on social justice, but on concerns that the article lacked intellectual rigor, contained sourcing and tone problems, and reflected a lack of engagement with the existing literature on social justice, which called into question aspects of the *American Archivist* editorial process.
- Some expressed a desire to have the pre-print removed, while others felt the pre-print should remain publicly accessible in order to properly provide context for this controversy. Some expressed a desire to see *American Archivist* provide more explicit evidence of what was changed between the pre-print and final version.

- Many people have asked us what the journal is doing to intentionally and proactively seek additional voices on the topics of social justice and diversity, as well as to center the perspectives of marginalized voices moving forward.
- It was noted that social justice and diversity are not currently listed as Areas of Expertise in the reviewer system, and so could not have been used to identify reviewers for articles related to these topics.

As Board members, our ability to meaningfully respond to the issues raised by this controversy has been limited by structural weaknesses in how the Board operates and interacts. We have not been in a position to speak directly to the editorial decisions that attended the process of peer review and editing that led to Boles' article being accepted for publication or selected for the Brown Bag. These were actions and decisions taken by the Editor, in line with past editorial practice, and we learned of them at the same time as the general membership. As well, the decision to publish the article, even after concerns were raised by membership and many Board members, rested solely with the Editor (again, in line with editorial policy and past practice). We believe that making meaningful structural changes starts with acknowledging the harmful effects of adopting and continuing past practices.

Complicating our ability to respond to concerns in a timely manner, the Board is not in frequent contact. We have traditionally met annually; the current Editor introduced an additional in-person meeting and quarterly calls. The Board likewise does not have direct access to communications with the author and members who shared feedback, nor any dedicated mechanism for communicating with membership.

It is clear to us from this experience that improving the way the Board operates and communicates is essential to addressing member concerns about the publishing process, and ensuring the health of the journal moving forward.

As Board members, we have not done enough thus far to call out and confront these structural problems, but since the October meeting we have taken several steps to attempt to address them:

- We have added a statement to the *American Archivist* editorial guidelines to reflect alignment with SAA's value statements: <https://www2.archivists.org/american-archivist/editorialpolicy>.
- We are developing improvements to the peer review process and rubric, and we plan to request feedback from SAA membership about changes and revisions.
- We are beginning to reach out more regularly to individuals and communities within and beyond SAA to encourage contributions from authors and reviewers that center the perspectives of marginalized

voices, and who could provide a more informed discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and social justice.

- In addition to creating a more welcoming venue for these topics generally, we are also exploring the creation of a special section of a forthcoming issue to be explicitly focused on dismantling white supremacy, and on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), accessibility, and social justice.
- We have committed to adding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), accessibility, and social justice as Areas of Expertise in the reviewer system, so the Editor can identify reviewers for articles related to these topics.
- We have committed that the selection of future articles for the *American Archivist* Brown Bag lunch discussion will be determined by a vote of the membership.
- We are exploring an *American Archivist* Forum at the 2020 Annual Meeting.
- We are working on a proposal to submit to Council for the creation of two independent task forces, including a task force on publication ethics (in close collaboration with the Diversity Committee and the Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility) and a task force on professional mediation, facilitation, and conflict management.
- We are creating onboarding documentation to guide new Board members in their roles and how the Board supports the mission of the journal, which will be amended to reflect future changes to these roles.
- SAA has created a general email address (editorialboard@archivists.org) for members to share feedback directly with us. We will also schedule an open discussion forum for members to ask questions of the Board or share feedback.

We do not believe these steps are nearly sufficient. The journal represents just one piece of the organization, but in order to operate more effectively and move the organization towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in alignment with the values of its membership, the roles and responsibilities of the Editor and Board members will need to be reviewed and clarified to fix the structural issues identified above.

Finally, we recognize that our apology and efforts to date are only the first steps towards repair and rebuilding trust with our readers. While we anticipate that there will be further conversations, this letter has been added to the issue deliberately to include context about this situation for readers now and into the

future. We welcome additional discussion and suggestions. Please contact us at editorialboard@archivists.org or reach out to us directly.

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NOTE

- ¹ “American Archivist Editorial Board Responds to Article Controversy: Listening, Learning, and Building a Stronger, More Inclusive SAA,” *Off the Record* blog post, December 16, 2019, <https://offtherecord.archivists.org/2019/12/16/american-archivist-editorial-board-responds-to-article-controversy-listening-learning-and-building-a-stronger-more-inclusive-saa/>.