

Reconsidering Archives

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In assembling the content for this issue of *The American Archivist*, I was struck by the fact that all of the articles ask us to reconsider both the guiding beliefs and daily practices of the archival profession. In the best tradition of editors, I then decided to understand more about the derivation of the word “reconsider,” in the hope that it would support the point I wished to make. According to the *Oxford Dictionaries*:

You used to consider with your eyes rather than your brain. Latin *considerare* meant “to observe or examine something,” but had an earlier meaning “to observe the stars” and was based on *sidus* “a star or constellation.” The earliest meaning of consider was “to look at something very carefully,” but this soon widened to the notion of thinking carefully about something.¹

It looks like my editor’s intuition was correct. Applying the definition of “reconsider” to *The American Archivist*, this issue of the journal asks us to look again at the “stars” that guide the archival profession. What encourages us to raise our heads from daily tasks to consider the bigger picture? Do we have a North Star that guides our professional activities? And, perhaps most fittingly, will our archival constellations stand the test of time and help achieve the archival mission in the future?

Kathleen Roe’s presidential address sets the stage for the issue by asking the fundamental question, “why archives?” She asks us to focus on the primacy of awareness and advocacy for the future of the profession; we must be able to answer the “why question” for a variety of stakeholders and other interested parties. Answering this question, however, involves more than just providing statistics of archival activities. We also must connect with people’s hearts and touch them on an emotional level.

Paige Hohmann, the winner of this year’s Theodore Calvin Pease Award, focuses on selection and appraisal, a primary star in the archival constellation. She also examines a “star” in the sense of a significant person. Her article discusses Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s views of “impartiality” and “interrelatedness” and seeks common ground with contemporary appraisal theory. She concludes that

Jenkinson remains an essential foundation for subsequent archival theory and practice.

Jennifer Douglas extends our reconsideration to the area of archival description. In “Toward More Honest Description,” Douglas discusses the various ways that archival collections are “shaped” and urges archivists to make this shaping apparent to researchers through finding aids. Archival collections are built by many hands and formed over time. An “honest” description acknowledges this fact.

Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez reconsider community archives. Their article, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” is a qualitative study of one community archive, the South Asian American Digital Archive. The authors document the personal and social impact of community archives. In particular, they detail how community archives are powerful forces in communities historically excluded from more formal and well-established institutions.

The next article in this issue is a reconsideration of some preservation assumptions and practices. Storage recommendations, which tend to focus on the best environment for paper, have not taken into consideration the ink present *on* the paper. Kristi Wright and Holly Herro report on a project at the National Library of Medicine to determine the chemistry of ballpoint pen ink and to define accurate but simple methods to identify, house, and conserve it. It is a technical topic with widespread implications for the archival profession.

Anna Chen asks archivists to reconsider the essential characteristics of records. Is “smell” a characteristic of records that archivists should be documenting? If so, how would we do it? In “Perfume and Vinegar: Olfactory Knowledge, Remembrance, and Recordkeeping,” Chen expands the definition of essential characteristics and explores the key role smell plays in personal remembrance and societal stereotypes. This is a fascinating essay about the archival possibilities of olfaction.

Anthony Cociolo’s article, “When Archivists and Digital Asset Managers Collide: Tensions and Ways Forward,” reconsiders professional roles in the digital age. This case study explores tensions between archivists and digital asset managers that result from a failure to recognize their different roles. The tension also stems from an intellectual disagreement about the course of digital recordkeeping over the next several decades.

Ine Fintland also reconsiders description of records based on a research project at the National Archives of Norway. In “Archival Descriptions through the Looking Glass: Paratexts in Wonderland,” Fintland considers archival descriptions to be both border and threshold and applies the concept of “paratext” to them. She concludes that textual design of description is as important

as its elements and content. The linguistic and rhetorical choices the archivist makes are significant and will influence the user's reception of the description.

This issue of *The American Archivist* also includes a special section that reconsiders digitizing archives. In "Archivists and Thesians: A Case Study and Reflections on Context and Authenticity in a Digitization Project," Matt Gorzalski notes that context and authenticity are not absolute but are rooted in the perspectives of different disciplines. When collaborating on digital projects, archivists must consider the perspectives and research needs of the intended audiences.

In the final article, Anna R. Craft, David Gwynn, and Kathelene McCarty Smith discuss a difficult challenge facing archivists: digitizing scrapbooks. "Uncovering Social History: An Interdepartmental Approach to Scrapbook Digitization" documents the challenges, workflows, and lessons learned in processing, preserving, digitizing, and creating metadata for scrapbooks.

The issue concludes with five reviews of books dealing with donors, preservation, diversity, corporate history, and the Holocaust. The reviewers are Geof Huth, Diane Vogt-O'Connor, Kären M. Mason, Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt, and Katharina Hering.

As both discipline and profession, archives covers a broad range of activities and affects all members of society. It is healthy—and necessary—for archivists to reconsider both guiding principles and daily practices on a regular basis. While "the past may be prologue," we continue to add new and revised pages to our professional narrative. I hope this issue of the journal will encourage a renewed look at the constellations and stars of the archival enterprise.



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NOTES

¹ *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "consider," http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/consider.