

Why Archives?

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Kathleen D. Roe of the New York State Archives served as the 70th president of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2014–2015. Her presidential address was delivered on August 21, 2015, during the SAA Annual Meeting at the Cleveland Convention Center in Cleveland, Ohio.

In his 1984 address, “Archives and Society,” SAA president David B. Gracy lamented the lack of understanding about archivists and what we do, and regaled his audience with the many variant misinterpretations of the word “archivist.” From anarchist to orchidvist, the variations brought laughter and chagrin.¹ More important, he urged us all to focus on raising awareness of the value of archives. Since that time and through the efforts of previous presidents and members of SAA, progress has been made in drawing attention to the value of archives and the contributions of archivists. But let’s be honest—it really hasn’t been enough. When people are asked to comment on or describe archives, the answers often involve words like “fascinating,” “interesting,” “fun,” “treasures.” Compare that to Bishop Desmond Tutu’s observation that “Archives are the bulwark of a free society.”² Which would you rather be: a fascinating treasure or a bulwark of freedom?

We continue to focus, as in fact we must, on exploring best practices, procedures, methodology, and the operational work of archivists. As a profession, we have focused long and hard on addressing the challenges of appraisal, description and access, electronic records, responding to disasters, dealing with copyright, and exploring the multitude of opportunities that technology offers us in presenting information, creating digital collections, using social media, and dealing with EAD, EAC, OAIS, checksums. You each can chime in with many issues of professional practice.

We need to do this work and it needs to continue—but here’s the concern. Ultimately, while it is important, productive, and satisfying to address these challenges, they *alone* will not move us forward as a profession. The most sophisticated archival processes will not ensure that we have the resources and support in our archives to fulfill the important purposes for which we keep and ensure the accessibility of records. Our technical approaches will not help key opinion leaders, stakeholders, users, or the public recognize the essential importance of archives.

The critical need for archivists to focus attention on the primacy of awareness and advocacy for archives led to the initiative I introduced at last year's business meeting in Washington, D.C., "A Year of Living Dangerously for Archives."³ While the title may seem a bit frivolous or tongue-in-cheek, the intent has been entirely serious—to demonstrate to all of us that we as a profession *must* recognize the essential role of advocacy and awareness and that we have "the words" and the data, as incoming president Dennis Meissner has suggested in his remarks,⁴ to demonstrate the value and importance of archives. It has been both rewarding and a relief to see this being taken seriously by individual archivists who have responded to various challenges, to groups within SAA that have pushed forward in demonstrable ways, through the efforts of the Committee on Public Awareness and the SAA office in piloting public information and a public relations campaign, and Council's own strategic plan emphasis on advocacy and awareness.⁵

Considering all that has transpired over the last year reflecting advocacy and awareness efforts, whether connected to our initiative or not, it is clear that our ability to sustain and expand our efforts in the future will be grounded in our ability to answer one essential question and then to convey our answers to a wide range of users, stakeholders, legislators, managers, the general public—in fact, to every single person we can reach.

My favorite college professor, Dr. William J. Brazill Jr., began each semester by challenging his students with the imperative that "You should only worry about the big questions, and there is only one big question—'why?'"⁶ In the context of archives, the variations on that question include

- Why do we keep what we keep?
- Why should people care?
- Why do archives matter?

No doubt, some of you are skeptical and muttering "That's sophomoric. Why does answering the question 'why' matter? It would have more impact for me to talk about the amazing things in our archives, to demonstrate our technical sophistication in providing access." Let me share with you some thoughts from a very compelling and cogent approach that originated in a Ted Talk by Simon Sinek, later followed by his book, *Start with Why*.⁷ Sinek observed that most people can talk about *what* they do and *how* they do it. Many, many fewer can explain *why*. Yet, talking about "why" is what leads us to be inspired about what we do *and then* to inspire others to understand, value, and support it. Archives are, in fact and in reality, the essential evidence of our society. It is absolutely critical that an even and representative archival record first survives and then is made available to any and all possible users. So, indeed, archives and archivists need to be understood, valued, and supported.

People who are inspired, who inspire others, are the ones who can have real impact, accomplish real change. A quick story: at the turn of the twentieth century, Samuel Pierpont Langley, a senior officer at the Smithsonian,

mathematics professor at Harvard, and all-around smart guy, was driven by the desire to be the first to achieve human flight. With \$50,000 from the War Department and support from Andrew Carnegie and Alexander Graham Bell, he assembled a “dream team” of educated, talented minds. Awaiting his achievements, the press followed his team everywhere.

But you’ve probably never heard of Langley. You do know Orville and Wilbur Wright, the Ohio brothers who owned a bicycle shop, were self-funded, and assembled a small team with not one single college graduate on it. You know how the story ends. The Wright brothers achieved human flight. What did they have that Langley didn’t? They knew *why* they wanted to do this—they believed *passionately* that flight would change the world, and they inspired their team to share their dream and achieve their goal. Upon hearing of their flight at Kitty Hawk, Langley immediately discontinued his efforts. He was after the “what”—being first, not the goal, the “why.”⁸

People Want to Be Inspired

Current and very fascinating neurological research supports and demonstrates this. The human brain literally responds and is motivated by the limbic brain—not the neocortex, which is the “rational” portion of the brain, but the “heart” of “heart and mind.”⁹ We need to reach the “rational” part of the brain with the data and evidence that Dennis Meissner has suggested when we talk about the value of archives, and we also need to reach people in their “hearts.” That’s where commitment comes from. And commitment, as all of you Chicago Cubs or New York Mets fans know, is not based entirely on rationality.

Rationally, based on facts and figures, how can we make the case to a resource allocator, or a taxpayer, or, in particular, to certain members of Congress for the costs needed to keep thousands of boxes of records for decades, in fact centuries, based on the belief that they “might” be used. It’s just our educated guess. And even when they are, how much use justifies the cost? We are asking people and institutions to invest in staffing, facility, and stewardship costs that last literally forever. There are indeed some ways to represent the cost saving and return on investment for archives, but this alone is not our strongest approach. Rationality-based arguments need to be made, and we need the data for them. It is critical that we get people’s attention and get them to listen—and to do that, we need to convince them of the value of archives.

Archives and the essential work of archivists can be justified and explained to others effectively and in a compelling way that speaks to the limbic brain or “the heart” when we talk about *why*. Once we’ve caught people’s hearts with *why*, then we can more effectively address the rational issues of how and what archives and archivists are and do. It provides the groundwork for addressing the rational, data-driven reasons for the value of archives—our argument cannot

be based on either alone, however. Gaining support and understanding takes a multithreaded approach, and the string we have most neglected is perhaps our strongest fiber: the impact and outcomes of the use of archives, the demonstration of why “archives matter.”

We have answers and stories that tell why. Several of the “Year of Living Dangerously” challenges offered different routes to getting us to “use our words” to talk about this. Here are a few very brief examples of what we told each other were our answers to “why archives matter.”

Archives Provide Essential Evidence

Archives protect the rights and privileges of people in our society; they hold government accountable and ensure transparency. Those are fine words that appeal to the rational mind—but what does that mean in reality?

National Public Radio featured an investigative story in June about secret experiments during World War II in which the U.S. military conducted tests exposing African American, Japanese American, and Puerto Rican troops to chemical weapons.¹⁰ When the story of these tests broke in 1991, the Veterans Administration promised to provide benefits to veterans injured in the mustard gas experiments.¹¹ More than twenty years later, they had contacted only 610 of the over 4,000 veterans, maintaining that test records were incomplete and others could not be identified. NPR research librarian Barbara Van Woerkom found her way to records in the National Archives that in fact led reporters to many, many more of these veterans. Demands for an apology and further action have been introduced in Congress. The essential evidence to substantiate these experiments and provide literally the names, faces, and health impact on those veterans is critical to the core issue of government accountability.

Archives Support the Creation of New Knowledge

Archives are the raw materials of research, they foster discovery, give voice to previous perspectives, support our ability to learn from the past. Again, what does that mean in reality? What practical outcomes have resulted from this?

United States Geological Survey research geologist Bruce Molnia is part of an international effort to study changes in glaciers. Drawing from historic images and data from archives like the National Snow and Ice Data Center’s Barry Archives, Molnia’s research goal is to provide “unequivocal, unambiguous, visual documentation of the effects of changing climate and to share this information as broadly as possible.”¹² His research in archives has done just that: it resulted in the published study, *Glaciers of Alaska*. One pair of the archival images he located has been reproduced more than five hundred times and even

appears on refrigerator magnets and postcards; another dozen are the basis of a National Center for Atmospheric Research game designed to raise public awareness about climate change. Furthermore, he has served as a senior legislative fellow in the U.S. Senate focusing on policy issues. The new knowledge resulting from his archival research is influencing public awareness and policy. None of that could have happened without archives and archivists.

Archives Provide a Laboratory for Students to Understand the Human Experience

With all the emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education, it bears noting that, in fact, archival records provide the raw materials for students to study the behavior and reactions of humans interacting in different times and spaces. Critical thinking, consideration of different perspectives, and contact with real voices and experiences are potent educational tools that archives and archivists can provide.

A Tallahassee high school student used records relating to the investigation of murders at Florida State University by serial killer Ted Bundy to research a History Day project on changes to victims' rights laws resulting from those murders. The project won at the state level and went on to compete at the National History Day. The student, who had previously been uninterested in school, credited his research experience with igniting an interest in education, went on to complete law school, passed the Florida Bar, and is now practicing law in Florida.¹³

Importance to Cultural Heritage for Communities

An often-expressed value for archives is giving voice to the experiences of a wider range of individuals and groups in our society—beyond the “great white male politicians” who could read, write, and leave a documentary record. Again, a worthwhile purpose, but it becomes more compelling when seen from the perspective of a person whose community has in fact been largely silent in our history. I want to share with you part of a very touching email I received from a young archival colleague, Richard Jung Lee, about the value to nonarchivists of what we have and what we do:

I enjoyed your remark on trying to explain “why archives matter” to a Korean businessman. . . . That Korean businessman who is an insurmountable barrier of language and customs is actually my own father who to this day is not entirely knowledgeable about my profession. This probably has to do with my lack of a strong Korean vocabulary and the faulty way fathers often communicate with their sons and vice versa. Regardless, he too believes that history can move people and through its exploration enrich lives. Lately, in our heart

to heart conversations at night he chides to me in a low voice “Chaek-eul suh rae. Oohri yaeki mahl hae rae.” “Write a book. Tell them our story.” A book that cannot exist without archives or archivists.¹⁴

There are other stories, other reasons “why” archives matter. I’ve shared just a few to give you a sense of this, and hopefully you are sitting there and saying to yourself “I know that. I can do that. That’s not such a big deal.”

The essential component to this, however, is not just that we know the value of archives—it’s what we *do* to share with others what we know. For many of us, the real act of “living dangerously” is to go beyond the facts of what we have in our archives, or how we preserve and make it accessible. We need to talk about the outcomes and values, the impact of archives, the kinds of stories that I have just shared with you. We need to get out of the “Archivists make it last longer” mode and reach to the heart of the matter and talk about “why archives.”

We need to make opportunities to do this—online, live, in writing, anywhere, and everywhere we can. We cannot wait around for someone to buttonhole us in an elevator and ask “so what’s an archivist? What’s an archives?” We cannot wait for our bosses to ask us what the archives actually contributes and why it needs resources; we cannot wait patiently for the researchers to find our websites or come to our repositories. We have to step forward and engage. That may mean providing others with the opportunities and stories to speak for archives, seeking out legislators, students and teachers, communities, our resource allocators, or even our own families. If we do not seek out ways to draw attention to the value and importance of archives and archivists, then in truth, I believe there will be consequences in time that we will need to own.

One of my favorite quotations from my dark, soul-searching days in college was Nietzsche’s claim that “God is dead. And we have killed him.”¹⁵ If we do not take advocacy and awareness of the value of archives as a regular, essential, and compelling role for each of us, then we can claim our own version: “Archives are dead. And we have killed them.” Librarians, digital humanitarians, historians, information officers, others will subsume archives and what we do.

SAA has a role in leading, providing resources, gathering data, serving as a network for ideas, and doing some of the public relations and speaking out for archives. But don’t be mistaken, it is not just about SAA doing it—it is an every archivist, every place, every day issue. We all have to step up and find the ways in which we will contribute. Each of us personally and professionally needs to make a concerted, concentrated commitment not for just a year, but as a regular component of our work. This is not age, experience, institution-type, or personality-type specific. “Each of us” means precisely that—every single one of us can and must contribute in some way. It will take work—and we need to step up and do that work, make that commitment for ourselves and in our professional organizations. It is not somebody else’s to do. I want to end with a personal story about the importance of making a commitment.

My father, Jack E. Roe, was a radio operator with the U.S. Army's 96th Infantry, 383rd Headquarters Company during World War II in the Pacific Front. His captain, Joe McCaffrey, was a committed leader of his men who strove to ensure their safety as much as humanly possible. He was known for taking considerable risks, but revered by his men for trying to lay communications lines that would provide critical information to help keep them safe. After losing two radio operators and wiremen in one single day at Kakazu Ridge, his sergeant came into the headquarters tent with the assignment to choose the next men to go out with the captain. He hung his head and said, "(expletives deleted) Somebody's gotta go with the captain. I don't want to have to do this. You could get killed with him." Silence. Then my loyal, loyal father emitted a few expletives of his own, and said, "I'll go. I can't let the old man down." Charlie Cunningham, a wireman, followed with "if Roe goes, I go." With the captain in the lead, and under heavy fire, they laid wire a long way out and communicated information back that, according to Joe McCaffrey who told me the story fifty years later, saved the lives of many, many men that day. Joe said, "We'll never know how many of these guys lived to get married and have a family, or what they contributed to the world because your dad and Charlie got those communication lines out there."¹⁶ But they did it. They changed lives.

I'm telling you this story because it is one that inspires me. It touches my limbic brain, it spurs me in my own small way to step up sometimes, even when those times are rarely convenient or safe, not knowing what will be the entire impact, just that it can make a difference. Taking the risk, living dangerously, and taking action to move things forward matters. Every time someone uses archives, something happens. It may be a small change in knowledge, it may be information that truly changes lives. No matter what, it makes a difference, each and every time. Archives have impact, archives matter—and it is up to us to show people the truth of that, to give them the opportunity and benefit of what archives can do. We all, each of us, need to step forward and take action on behalf of archives, on behalf of our profession, for the benefit of our society.

The time is now.

The choice is yours.

What will you do?

NOTES

- ¹ David B. Gracy II, "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution," *The American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 6–10.
- ² ICA.org, "Transcription of Speech by Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the 37th Annual Citra Conference: 21 October 2003," new.ica.org/3715/reference-documents/archbishop-desmond-tutu-keynote-capetwon-south-africa-21-october-2003.html.
- ³ Kathleen Roe, "Incoming Presidential Remarks: The Year of Living Dangerously for Archives," Society of American Archivists, August 16, 2014, www2.archivists.org/history/leaders/kathleen-d-roe/incoming-presidential-remarks-the-year-of-living-dangerously-for-archives.
- ⁴ Dennis Meissner, Incoming Presidential Remarks, Society of American Archivists, August 21, 2015, <http://archivists.org/am2015/leadership-plenary-video#Vr4QHlKULkY>. Meissner's remarks begin at 19:32.

- ⁵ “Strategic Plan 2014–2018,” Society of American Archivists, www2.archivists.org/governance/strategic-plan/2014-2018.
- ⁶ Author’s class notes, “European Intellectual History,” Michigan State University, 1971.
- ⁷ Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” TED, September 2009, www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en and Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).
- ⁸ David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 398.
- ⁹ For discussion of neurological research on the brain, see “Storytelling: It Can Change Your Mind” (St. Louis, MO: PGAV Destinations), 21–24; Richard Restak, MD, *The Naked Brain: How the Emerging Neurosociety Is Changing How We Live, Work, and Love* (New York: Harmony, 2006), 121–36; and Sinek, *Start with Why*, 56–64.
- ¹⁰ Caitlin Dickerson, “Secret World War II Chemical Experiments Tested Troops by Race,” National Public Radio, June 22, 2015, www.npr.org/2015/06/22/415194765/u-s-troops-tested-by-race-in-secret-world-war-ii-chemical-experiments.
- ¹¹ *Department of Defense Mustard Gas Testing: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Compensation, Pension, and Insurance of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Second Congress, Second Session, March 10, 1993*, <https://archive.org/stream/departmentofdefe1993unit#page/n1/mode/2up>.
- ¹² “2009 GSA Public Service Award,” *Geological Society of America*, <http://www.geosociety.org/news/pr/09-64.htm>.
- ¹³ Elisabeth Golding, “Success Stories,” email to author, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Richard Jung Lee, “Archives Matter,” email to author, 2015.
- ¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
- ¹⁶ Joseph McCaffrey, “96th Infantry,” interview by author, July 17, 2001.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kathleen D. Roe is the director of archives and records management operations for the New York State Archives where she oversees programs operating the State Archives archival facility holding over 200,000 cubic feet of state government records as well as statewide programs to provide training and advisory services to 4,000 local governments and historical records programs. She holds advanced degrees in history from Michigan State University, and in library science/archival administration from Wayne State University where she was mentored by previous SAA president, Philip P. Mason. She is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and received Wayne State University’s Distinguished Alumna Award.

She has served her archival colleagues and profession by chairing the SAA Committee on Education and Professional Development, the Committee on Archival Information Exchange, the Appointments Committee, and the Government Affairs Working Group. She also has served as president of the Council of State Archivists, the national association for state archives, and on various committees for regional archival associations. She participated in a number of national projects to develop and implement archival descriptive standards, as well as efforts to establish online access to archival records. She has consulted, published, and taught extensively in the areas of archival descriptive practices and advocating for archival programs.

Roe was president of the Society of American Archivists from 2014 to 2015. In that capacity, she challenged archivists to spend a “Year of Living Dangerously for Archives” by getting out of their comfort zones to focus on raising awareness of and advocating for archives. Her presidential year reflects the energy and efforts of this profession to demonstrate that “archives change lives.”