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AMERICAN ARCHIVIST



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About the Cover

As backlogs of unprocessed materials grow and threaten to overwhelm us, archivists may feel like the image in Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream*. In "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner review the state of processing and offer a set of proposals that they argue will keep archivists from throwing up their hands in despair and also make records available to researchers in a more timely fashion. (Image concept by Paul Eisloffel, Nebraska State Historical Society. Photo by Dennis Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society. Composite created by Vicki Schuster, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.)

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FROM THE EDITOR

Making an Impact on the Archival Profession

Readers of the *American Archivist* probably regard its content as useful in a variety of ways: for keeping up with current research, for learning about different aspects of archival work, for reading reviews of the newest books of interest to archivists, and as the journal of record for things like the SAA president's annual address and the minutes of Council meetings. Undoubtedly it is a useful resource and becomes a more valuable resource as each issue gradually builds an imposing presence on the shelves of our offices. But can the *American Archivist* have a more specific, direct, and lasting impact on the archival profession?

This issue contains an article that may provide an answer to that question. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner have conducted a study of the current state of archival processing. They carried out their research against the backdrop of ever-growing backlogs of unprocessed, and therefore unavailable, materials in many archival repositories. Their conclusion is that we need to make radical changes in the ways we process collections, particularly those large collections that archives increasingly accessioned in the late twentieth century. Some of their suggestions will go against practices that are deeply ingrained archival habits—automatically rehousing records in acid-neutral folders, for example. No doubt their arguments will ruffle many feathers, but their proposed changes promise significant cost savings for archives with minimal impact on researchers or on the health and well-being of the records themselves. If their proposals end up making significant alterations in archival processing, these changes will come in part as a result of the widespread hearing their arguments received in the pages of the *American Archivist*.

While Greene and Meissner's proposal to revamp archival processing will likely provoke a spirited counter-argument, it's hard to imagine that any archivists will have trouble applauding the proposals Richard Cox makes in his

article on the Secretary's Office at Colonial Williamsburg. Cox's writings are often more contentious, but here he tells an interesting tale of the first building for public records in what became the United States, its vicissitudes over time, and the apparent difficulty Colonial Williamsburg has had in adequately interpreting the building to the public. He describes a vision of the building as the home for a permanent exhibit on records, both their creation and their preservation. Can any reader of the *American Archivist* doubt that such an exhibit in a major tourist attraction would have a positive impact on the public's understanding of records and archives? Might this not be a campaign in which *all* archivists can unite, no matter the particular sector of the archival profession they represent? Should SAA launch a letter-writing campaign to the powers that be in Williamsburg?

The other contributions to this issue may pose less dramatic challenges to archivists, but they are nonetheless engaging in their coverage of a range of archival topics. Heather MacNeil brings a fresh perspective to archival description by comparing it to the work of textual editors. She views the efforts to construct the best representation of archival records as analogous to the work of textual editors to establish the best incarnation of the text of a work. MacNeil's paper contributes to the ongoing discussion of how archival description helps shape our understanding of, indeed the meaning of, the records themselves.

Dwayne Cox follows up on his earlier article in the *American Archivist* on the topic of open access to public records. In his latest contribution, he reviews a series of cases in which state courts grappled with the issue of how to set appropriate limits on the newly recognized right of open access to public records. While Cox addresses problems of open access, Joel Blanco-Rivera writes about the problems of secret records. He recounts the story of the surveillance files created and maintained by the police in Puerto Rico on supporters of independence for the island. It is a story that reinforces our sense of the power of records, albeit the dark side of that power.

This issue also continues the "Reconsidering Archival Classics" series of articles, featuring the introductions to the volumes published in SAA's Archival Classics series. Angelika Menne-Haritz brings her deep knowledge of German archival theory and practice to introduce Ernst Posner's collection of essays, *Archives and the Public Interest*. SAA will publish the book in 2006, so publication of the Menne-Haritz introduction here comes in advance of its book publication. In doing so, the *American Archivist* continues a longstanding publishing tradition, for book publishers have long helped publicize their new books by publishing part or all of the text in periodicals. For example, in 1934 Scribner's serialized F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* in *Scribner's Magazine* in advance of the book publication as a way of helping to publicize the novel. Similarly, I hope that publishing these introductions to the Archival

Classics in the *American Archivist* will help stimulate readers' interest in the books themselves.

The reviews section in this issue is particularly robust, and it is noteworthy that four of the nine books under review are published by SAA. This is a testimony to the remarkable growth in the Society's publishing program over the past few years. In addition to books directly related to archival theory and practice, there are reviews of two books on the very public problems that have beset the historical profession and a book looking at the story of one of the most familiar of records, the passport.

This issue marks the end of my ten years as editor of the *American Archivist*. These have been important years of change for the journal. We moved from quarterly to semi-annual publication in 1998 and at the same time introduced a brand new design for the journal. Moving to semi-annual publication helped overcome what had been a longstanding problem for the *American Archivist*—timely publication. Happily for readers, advertisers, serial librarians, and the SAA office, the journal is now published on schedule. I was mightily assisted in the daunting task of catching up by the work of talented guest editors who took responsibility for several special issues—architectural records, business records, state archival programs, diplomatics, Encoded Archival Description, and graduate archival education. This is an impressively diverse list of topics, and I hope that I have been able to create a similar kind of diversity in the content of all those “nonspecial” issues published during my editorial tenure.

Another perennial problem that I, as well as my predecessors, have had to deal with is the low rate of submissions from which to select the content of the journal. The reasons for this are many, I suspect, but the evidence of the last few years suggests that at long last the problem may be starting to abate. This is a particularly gratifying fact given that the *American Archivist* now faces increased competition for submissions from several new journals. (Just as the proliferation of coffee shops seems to increase the number of coffee drinkers, perhaps the increase in archival journals produces more articles on archives.) This may be a hopeful sign of maturation in the profession. I'm sure my successor, Mary Jo Pugh, hopes that the upward trend continues.

Editing a journal is truly a collaborative enterprise. I want to thank all those who have assisted me over the past decade, including members of the editorial board, colleagues who responded to requests to review manuscripts, my editorial assistants and copy editors, and of course all those who submitted manuscripts to the journal. It has been a very special pleasure to work with Teresa Brinati, SAA's director of publishing. Her efficiency, attention to detail, and high standards are evident in the *American Archivist* as well as in all of SAA's publications. And her good humor is invaluable in getting through all those little problems that inevitably occur in any publishing effort.

Let me close this farewell column by posing a variation on the question asked earlier in relation to the Greene and Meissner article on processing practices. What kind of impact can the *American Archivist* have on the archival profession? In the end, of course, it depends on individuals—those who read the articles in the journal as well as those who write them. As I said in one of my first “From the Editor” columns, the journal (and the profession) requires engaged readers. But it also needs writers capable of engaging those readers. Because it is the most widely circulated English-language archival journal, the *American Archivist* is uniquely positioned to influence archival theory and practice. As I step down from the editor’s chair, nothing would give me greater pleasure in the future than to be able to think that my last issue—or any of the issues I edited—made contributions to the archival literature that helped the profession strengthen its abilities to carry out the essential work of managing and preserving our documentary heritage.

PHILIP B. EPPARD