Edme de la Poix de Fréminville (1680–1773) was among the most important and frequently cited authorities on practical feudal law in mid eighteenth-century France.¹ In 1746, he published what turned out to be a standard manual on seigneurial administration, *La Pratique universelle pour la rénovation des terriers et des droits seigneuriaux*. A century later, when discussing aspects of the Ancien Régime’s feudal society, Alexis de Tocqueville still relied heavily, though not uncritically, on Fréminville.² Throughout the five extensive volumes of *La Pratique*, archives played an important role. Habitually Fréminville mentioned individual repositories that he himself had visited or had heard about. In occasionally colourful detail, his book documents the astonishing degree to which he thought archives to be an important and somewhat self-evident component of provincial French feudal society.³ Yet, as Fréminville knew well, French seigneurial archives did present many problems:

> There are only a few territories (terres) where the titles and archives are well organized, that is in a condition so that one may find and collect in one moment all the documents pertaining to a single legal claim... In reality the archives of most landlords (seigneurs) are in a


³ Edme de la Poix de Fréminville, *La Pratique universelle pour la rénovation des terriers et des droits seigneuriaux*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1746), i, 435–6: Fréminville discusses what to do if an archive is too far away from a legal court (where it should be used) to be securely transported. These remarks most likely came out of some practical experience.
state of confusion and it is not possible to find easily the documents that are needed.4

Fréminville’s statements indicate a growing archival consciousness in provincial France. His book bears witness to the fact that all over France was an abundance of small or medium-size archives, in the hands of noble families, small towns and communities, monasteries and abbeys. Judging from Fréminville’s many offhand references to individual repositories and to archives in general, he seems to have taken for granted that French rural feudal society was (or, rather, should be) inherently based on and structured by the realities of archival life. But the remark quoted above also shows that archival reality was often far from perfect. Fréminville was right, and it would be easy to document the sorry state of many local noble, communal or church archives in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. Things had to change, thought Fréminville, if archives were to live up to their potential for organizing and structuring social life, and so he followed his lament with a few practical suggestions aimed at improving archival performance.5 For him, this mostly meant professionalizing the ‘archivist’. This needed to be a man with considerable expertise in ancient handwriting and the Latin language; he needed to ‘know ancient documents’ and had to be well versed in different chronological systems in order to date charters and titles properly; seals should also be one of his specialities for they helped to authenticate and explain documents. This essay will show how such a group of men emerged in the mid eighteenth century, the so-called feudistes. These were mostly men of modest origins, often strongly attached in their work, if not always by birth, to a specific region or town. They had at best weak ties to the social sphere of academic erudition, yet they considered their activities as an important contribution to the emerging culture of expert handling of archives. Fréminville’s forceful diagnosis of archival potential remained an important source of inspiration for them.

I
A ‘SOCIAL HISTORY OF ARCHIVES’

The feudistes are not only interesting in themselves as an under-studied aspect of early modern record-keeping. They can also serve as an excellent case study in a larger methodological contribution to a social history of archives. Such a history concerns itself particularly with studying the manifold processes that

4 Fréminville, La Pratique universelle, i, 22; quoted by Pierre Camille Le Moine, Diplomatique–pratique, ou traité de l’arrangement des archives et trésors des chartes (Metz, 1765), iv.
5 Fréminville, La Pratique universelle, i, 23–6.
made archives socially meaningful institutions, and turned the process of archiving into an increasingly widespread and habitualized routine. It focuses on how society at large became acquainted, familiarized and, indeed, thoroughly impregnated with archival activities. A social history of archives focuses on the modes and forms through which archives were incorporated into daily routines. It tries to grasp why it was necessary for people to ‘reckon with archives’, and how they did so. For better or worse, people came to anticipate that documents would be archived, and that archived documents could potentially be reused, to their advantage or disadvantage. This was, indeed, one of the major developments since the emergence of European archives in the later Middle Ages. A social history of archives concerns itself with studying the impact of organized record-keeping on mental frameworks, basic expectations and the daily social practices of men and women.

A social history that attempts to study the impact of archives on broader social behaviour has to include, but also move beyond, the ‘usual suspects’ of the history of archives. Existing scholarship in the field is usually focused on great institutions — whether the imposing Spanish institution at Simancas, the Secret Archives of the Popes, or the many larger dynastic archives of the European monarchies. These flagship institutions did have tremendous impact, yet they were part of a much broader and much more colourful landscape of archives and archival practices that also contributed significantly to turning European societies and cultures archival. In fact, no single archive, archival practice or administrative routine will be sufficient to account for the overwhelming impact that organized record-keeping and record-using ultimately came to have on European societies. No single driving force can account for the rise of archives in Europe. Rather, Europe became archival because archives originated and became embedded in myriad different local and social circumstances. Following the lead of previous social histories of ‘skepticism’, ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’, or ‘the book’, the social history of archives

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6 Two very recent examples in this vein include Marc-André Grebe, Akten, Archive, Absolutismus? Das Kronarchiv von Simancas im Herrschaftsgefüge der spanischen Habsburger 1540–1598 (Frankfurt am Main, 2012); Michael Hochedlinger, Österreichische Archivgeschichte: Vom Spätmittelalter bis zum Ende des Papierzeitalters (München, 2013); see also John C. Rule and Ben S. Trotter, A World of Paper: Louis XIV, Colbert de Torcy and the Rise of the Information State (Montreal, 2014); and for a broader perspective, Markus Friedrich, Die Geburt des Archivs: Eine Wissensgeschichte (München, 2013).

7 Brandan Dooley, The Social History of Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture (Baltimore, 1999); Steven Shapin, A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England (Chicago, 1999); Peter Burke, A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot (Cambridge, 2002); Peter Burke, A Social
will consider archives as historically specific infrastructures of knowledge that were made socially meaningful through complicated and contingent, highly localized processes and actors.

The ‘social history of archives’ is therefore related to, but not identical with a history of state or church bureaucracy. The *feudistes* will be shown to have contributed significantly to making the thousands of small local feudal archives a more and more consciously acknowledged, even tangible reality of everyday social life — yet it seems doubtful if this dynamic process of archival intensification in provincial France can be meaningfully called ‘bureaucratization’ except in the most general sense. There was little broad-scale formalization in the *feudistes*’ way of proceeding. The paper technologies they used, to work in and with the archives, were often idiosyncratic and not standardized and they were, as a professional group, certainly never part of a larger organization. A social history of archives will need to question the precise relationship between archives and bureaucratization rather than simply assume it existed. Instead of equating archives and bureaucracy, such an approach must ask if, when, how, and to what degree archives actually became supportive of bureaucracies. It should also ask how they could be socially and culturally meaningful without necessarily being part of bureaucratic forms of social organization.

This is not to deny that powerful state institutions and their archival practices could have important influences on broader developments. In the case under consideration here, for instance, it seems possible that the feudal lords of France in fact took inspiration from the king in tightening their grip on the archival basis of their seigneurial rights. Louis XIV, through his minister and ‘information master’ Jean-Baptiste Colbert, had started a campaign to assess critically the royal domain well before 1700 — it became known as the *renovation du terrier du roi.*8 This was backed by vast efforts to search local archives for evidence of illegally withholding dues and payments to the king. These campaigns were not only forceful demonstrations of royal claims to power, but they also surely drove home the point about the legal value of archives for feudal affairs. Yet the feudal lords’ reactions were uncoordinated, extremely pluriiform, often unsustainable and fragmentary. The archivalization of feudal interactions increased throughout France, but a close causal relationship of these individual initiatives with the rise of the information state should not be

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*8* Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor, 2010), who does not discuss, however, the *terrier du roi.*
simply assumed as a self-evident explanation but rather needs to be investigated on a case-by-case basis.

II
FEUDISTES: FREELANCE ARCHIVAL ENTREPRENEURS

If a person were known as a feudiste, this could indicate one of several things. Fréminville, for instance, used the word mostly as a composite, such as 'docteurs feudistes'. In this sense it applied to scholarly, often academic authors writing on feudal law — just as a canoniste was an authority in canon law or a romaniste was someone teaching Roman law. While a solid knowledge of feudal law remained crucial for the feudistes of the later eighteenth century, the term increasingly shifted from meaning an academic legal expert, potentially writing large treatises, perhaps even in Latin, to someone who was adept at managing the legal affairs of seigneurial estates on a day-to-day basis.

Although only a few feudistes left extensive personal papers, and the personal lives of many of them are thus quite hard to reconstruct in any detail, at least a rough picture of their social background still emerges.9 Feudistes were men who were usually attached to a particular town or region. They were mostly grounded in local rural social contexts and many, though not all of them, worked in or close to their birthplace. They frequently came from middling backgrounds, but there were also several feudistes who hailed from poor and illiterate milieux. For quite a few of them, becoming a feudiste and learning to handle the culture of (old and new) writing actually seems to have been a way out from the constraints of poverty. François-Noël Babeuf, soon to become the well-known revolutionary of the early 1790s, in his pre-revolutionary youth found a feudiste’s daily burden of paperwork a ‘means to support myself much less painfully’ than digging canals, as he had done previously.10 Jean-Baptiste Larcher, a feudiste from Tarbes in southern France who left enormous quantities of papers, illustrates the profession’s continuing connection to poor rural milieux particularly well. He married as his second wife a woman barely able to write (and perhaps unable to read, too). Once Larcher had died, she married again, this time an illiterate man.

9 Among the better documented feudistes this paper draws on are Pierre Camille Le Moine, Jean-Baptiste Larcher and Joseph Batteney.
Although embodying the early modern world of writing, the *feudistes* retained ties to the rural milieux of illiterate society.\(^\text{11}\)

Larcher seems to have had occasional difficulties in supporting his family, although he was well known and frequently contacted for help. At one point in his career, he even had to cut back severely on food, presumably to save living costs.\(^\text{12}\) Joseph Batteney, too, was plagued by economic hardship for long stretches of his life.\(^\text{13}\) Others, though, were more successful. Auguste Labry, in Angers, worked out of a large office with several assistants, indicating a rather successful business.\(^\text{14}\) Pierre Camille Le Moine, who was one of the most prominent *feudistes*, ultimately moved beyond the rural world of local feudal culture by becoming a nationally sought-after archivist. He ended up becoming a member of several provincial academies, being a respected (if certainly not a widely famous) author, and seemingly marrying above his social status.\(^\text{15}\) Both the social origins and the social potential of being a *feudiste* thus varied. Nevertheless, a lifelong connection to rural and feudal milieux of generally modest means seems to be characteristic of most *feudistes*.

*Feudistes* worked for feudal lords all over France. Yet they were not estate managers involved in agricultural improvements and economic stewardship, but rather were expert legal consultants. In the eighteenth century, this necessarily included dealing with vast amounts of paperwork. Feudal relationships had become more and more controlled by the emerging culture of writing ever since the later Middle Ages. Extensive legal connections existed between lords and tenants, all (in theory) documented by papers and parchments of various types. It was all too common in eighteenth-century France, however, that seigneurial lords only had provisional, erroneous and incomplete knowledge of this legal documentation and its content. Rarely did the

\(^{11}\) *Feudiste* Pierre Desportes also came from an illiterate family; see Cécile Masala, ‘Les feudistes angevins, ancêtres des archivistes?’, in J.-L. Marais (ed.), *Historiens de l’Anjou* (Rennes, 2012), 78.

\(^{12}\) Marthe Larcher to Larcher, 3 July 1774: Archives départementales (hereafter AD) Gers, Auch, not catalogued (serie I, liasse ‘Larcher’, ancient call number 1116): his current standard of living is a ‘sistema de suicides’.

\(^{13}\) Batteney’s difficulties have been chronicled by Maurice Lecomte, ‘Batteney de Bonvouloir’, *Le Bibliographe moderne*, xviii (1916/17).


\(^{15}\) He married the cousin of a member of Toul’s cathedral chapter and the local bishop agreed to serve as a witness for the bride: Jacques Choux, ‘Les archives du chapitre de la cathédrale de Toul’, *Annales de l’Est, 5th ser.*, ix (1958), 205–6.
seigneurs have adequate knowledge about what they were legally owed. Fréminville seemed to suggest to his readers that improving archives would improve the seigneur’s knowledge about the legal status quo, which in turn would usually work in his economic favour. This idea caught on and the feudistes emerged as a professional class precisely to implement such projects. The feudistes were hired to organize, study and exploit archives to support their lords’ feudal rights. Thus, they developed and provided a highly practical set of skills for working in and with archives. They knew, in the first place, how to read and decipher older types of handwriting. As well as this palaeographic knowledge, a feudiste understood the medieval legal documents’ language, terminology and chronology. If required, he had a strategy at hand to transform boxes or rooms filled with chaotic piles of paper into meaningful and ordered stacks of well-organized documents ready to be deployed in his employer’s favour. In addition, a good feudiste would have an overview of the many different archives in the region and would know how and where to search for additional relevant documents. A feudiste could be relied on to bring the right mind-set to such an enterprise. He would be assumed to be patient and tenacious enough to pursue the time-consuming and sometimes unrewarding task of searching for documentation.

This type of ‘archival literacy’, it needs to be noted, was not a given in eighteenth-century France. It would be wrong to assume that men and women of the Ancien Régime were fluent readers of medieval or sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century documents: ‘Our abbess does not know our documents and cannot consult them’, as a nun from the abbey of Nyoiseau explained when the feudiste Aubin from Angers was hired.16 ‘The document that I sent to you has given me and some others a lot of pain while reading it entirely’, a noble Frenchman admitted around 1750.17 By employing a feudiste, such difficulties could be overcome and owners of archives could thus participate in this type of advanced ‘archival literacy’. Skills in palaeography, chronology and diplomatics became, with the rise of the feudistes, available to a much wider audience.

These skills were required, by all but the largest seigneurs, only for a limited time. Feudistes were hired for specific tasks and for a fixed number of days, months or years. To find employment, they frequently offered their services through classified advertisements in local journals. The people of Poitiers, for instance, could read one day in 1776 in the Affiches de Poitou:

A young man seeks employment as seigneurial manager (régisseur). He fulfils the positions of archivist, feudiste, and surveyor, he draws

16 AD Maine-et-Loire, Angers, E 1506, unpaged.
17 Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), M 609, no folios (1750).
maps, knows how to manage terriers, knows about evaluating do-
mains etc. Please address all inquiries to the sieur Bricheteau, first
Clark of Monsieur Montaubin, Procurator, rue du Gervis-vert.18

Potential employers might use the same channels of communication to re-
quest help from *feudistes*. In 1786, the Comte de Waroquier de Combles
placed an advertisement in the *Journal Général de France* asking

all *feudistes*, archivists, and other persons and individuals involved
in doing research to kindly forward and mention to the said Comte
all documents that might be helpful in learning more about his
proper name, *Waroquier* or *Varoquier*, *Varquier*, *Valroquier* etc.19

Obviously, a small but vigorous market for archival labour had come into
existence. Pertinent skills could support a career as a freelance archival expert.

This last example shows that the *feudistes*, by the end of the *Ancien Régime*,
had expanded their activities well beyond the confines of rural seigneurial
archives. They had evolved into freelance experts for different document-

Based activities. Several *feudistes*, for instance, became crucially involved in
facilitating genealogical research. Others, such as Guillaume Doyen in
Chartres, had combined their archival experiences from early on with in-
creasingly sophisticated expertise in the mathematical arts of surveying and
map-making.20 Pierre Camille Le Moine (1723–1800), one of the most prom-
inent members of this group of professionals, had in the early part of his
career combined archival work with surveying.21 Even late in his life he was
still proudly drawing on his mathematical knowledge.22

Le Moine indicates yet another line of development that a *feudiste*’s career
might take, for he moved from practical feudal management to being an
archivist. He established a reputation as a highly capable organizer of

18 *Affiches de Poitou*, 1 Feb. 1776 (Poitiers), 20. Additional examples can be found in Béchu,
‘Un feudiste et ses clients à la veille de la Révolution’, 191–4; and Jean Nicolas, ‘Le paysan
et son seigneur en Dauphiné à la veille de la Révolution’, in Alain Croix (ed.), *La France
ii, 497–8.


20 See Guillaume Doyen, *Géométrie de l’arpenteur, ou pratique de la géométrie, en ce qui a
rapport à l’arpentage, aux plans et aux cartes topographiques* (Paris, 1769).

21 For more on Le Moine and his life and career see Markus Friedrich, ‘Being an Archivist in
Provincial Enlightenment France: The Case of Pierre Camille Le Moine (1723–1800)’,
*Central European History*, xlvi (2016), 568–89.

22 See his offer to teach ‘géographie’ and ‘sphère’ to the citizens of Reims (1796): Archives
municipales (hereafter AM) Reims, FR 1r4, unpaged.
communal and ecclesiastic repositories. During the many decades of his professional life he held positions with some of the most prestigious and ancient church institutions in France and was employed to rearrange, inventory and clean the records: Toul, Lyon, Meaux and Reims were but a few of the many posts he held during his career. Le Moine’s acquaintance and sometime competitor Joseph Batteney led a similarly itinerant life as an archivist. He worked, among other places, in Lyon, Ainay and Paris, inventorying archives of ecclesiastic bodies or military orders and offering his expertise to agents of royal power interested in more advanced knowledge of provincial archives.

Contemporaries were well aware of the particularly entrepreneurial approach to archival work displayed by men such as Batteney. Critical voices suspected that the feudistes’ constant rhetoric of archival neglect was at least in part self-serving. One person who looked sceptically on recent projects of archival refurbishment in Lyon — of which both Batteney and Le Moine were to benefit shortly after — argued, not without reason, that those who promoted new archival standards were spirited people, full of truth, yet unemployed [oisif] who attempt nothing but create advantageous employment for themselves . . . This applies, too, to the projects of archival rearrangement. They are budgeted with 8,000 livres, yet God alone knows how high the sum might rise. And as soon as one person disturbs the [newly created] archival economy, we will have to start all over again.

Given the sometimes rather aggressive strategies of self-promotion that the feudistes adopted to secure employment, this assessment was certainly not entirely unfounded, no matter how disorderly many archives actually were. The feudistes and the archivistes who grew out of this profession were clearly not just satisfying pre-existing demand but consciously creating new archival desires.

Feudistes acquired their expertise through practical apprenticeship. Babeuf, for instance, entered the office of the feudiste Hullin in Flixe´court in 1779 and remained for two years. A contract was set up stipulating the details of his daily life. During his apprenticeship he lived with his new master

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23 Lecomte, ‘Batteney de Bonvouloir’.
24 Batteney, like Le Moine and other feudistes, established contact with Nicolas Moreau, head of the newly founded royal Cabinet des titres in Paris; see the letters in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (hereafter BnF), Moreau 343.
26 Lecomte, ‘Batteney de Bonvouloir’, 178.
and his wife ‘just like one of their children’. He ate at their table and thus, presumably, picked up new pieces of knowledge about archives, feudal law and, in his case, surveying and map-making. This was no isolated case. Well-established feudistes such as Auguste Labry (b.1733) in Angers or Guillaume Roussel (fl. 1750–70) in Tours over the years trained and educated several feudistes of the next generation. Frequently knowledge was also passed on within families; fathers trained sons, as in the case Delion senior and junior in Troyes, or uncles worked with nephews as in the case of Labry in Angers or Roussel in Tours. Others, such as Le Moine, acquired the necessary expertise in different ways — he had trained with the Benedictines of St. Maur in Marmoutiers. Almost none of the feudistes, however, seem to have depended deeply on university training for their profession. While a few members of the profession may have attended institutions of higher learning, their papers rarely document a direct connection between their everyday activities and the more erudite traditions of the study of documents. They also exhibited only a very limited intention to institutionalize the transmission of their expert knowledge. Larcher famously founded an École de paléographie in Pau in 1735, yet the institution had to close after a short time. Le Moine, in post-revolutionary Reims, attempted to set up ‘Courses of advanced education’ in 1796, offering classes in ‘Reading, Writing, Orthography, Geography, Spheres, History, Arithmetics, Surveying’. Other than that, few hints of a more organized education for future feudistes have emerged.

Such largely uninstitutionalized modes of transmitting archival expertise suited the feudistes because they considered themselves emphatically to be practitioners. They were not interested in theoretical speculation about archives per se, and were not dedicated to purely erudite engagement with documents of the past. There were only few and weak ties to academic circles. Larcher, for instance, attempted to correspond with Dom Pernier, the erudite librarian of St. Martin des Champs: he did receive an answer, but only after

27 Oeuvres de Babeuf, i, ed. Dalin, Saitta and Soboul, 44–5 (12 May 1779), 46–7 (26 May 1780).
28 Friedrich, ‘Being an Archivist in Provincial Enlightenment France’.
30 AM Reims, FR 1r4, unpaged. As Le Moine stated explicitly ‘on ne recevra point d’Élèves qui n’ayent des commencemens de lecture et d’écriture’, the first of these classes were of advanced character. Perhaps they did include some rudimentary palaeographical training. These courses were initially to be free, since Le Moine wanted to show his ‘gratuité’ as a ‘citoyen adoptif’ of the city of Reims. Unfortunately, however, his economic circumstances had deteriorated so that he would have to take a little fee.
two years. Le Moine, gradually leaving behind the rural world of the feudistes as his career moved on, had more extensive ties to scholarly circles. He was familiar with the scholarly debates about diplomatics, palaeography and other fields soon to be called ‘auxiliary sciences’. He wanted to improve the feudistes’ daily work by drawing on relevant academic knowledge. Yet, Le Moine too insisted on the purely ‘practical’ dimension of his diplomatic skills. He suggested boiling down the scholarly tradition of diplomatics to a brief set of practical rules for feudistes and archivistes working in local repositories. They needed easily applicable guidelines, for instance, to determine which document was a forgery and how to establish a reliable chronology of different pieces. In 1765, Le Moine published his well-known treatise, Diplomatique-pratique, which was, among many other things, such a handbook and toolbox for practitioners. In this way, too, archival work became part of the professional and social landscape even of provincial towns. Even modest seigneurs in rural France now had access to ‘archival literacy’ if they hired a feudiste. These professionals thus contributed significantly to turning rural French society archival.

III
CREATING A PRINTED ARCHIVAL DISCOURSE

The social role and relevance of record-keeping is strongly shaped by the contexts and ways in which archives are talked and written about. A social history of archives should therefore consider carefully how archives and archive-related practices entered different realms of public discourse. From this perspective it is important to note that French printed archival discourse was to a large degree shaped by the feudistes. Their printed publications included Le Moine’s Diplomatique-pratique (1765), Batteney’s L’Archiviste français (1775), Jean-Guillaume de Chevrière’s Nouvel archiviste (1775), Antoine d’Estienne’s Archiviste citoyen, and M. Marieé’s Traité des archives (1779). A range of smaller texts or chapters on feudal record-keeping completes this discourse. While in Germany, for instance, a significant tradition of academic publications on archives existed, in France the place of prominence was taken by the feudistes and their books.

32 This is the general idea of Le Moine, Diplomatique-pratique.
33 See, for example, ‘Me´moire instructif pour la confection des Terriers’, in Journal oeco-nomique (March 1751), 147–74.
34 Markus Friedrich, ‘Das Alte Reich und seine Archive im Spiegel reichspublizistischer und reichsrechtlicher Literatur. Ius archivi, gerichtliche Beweiskraft und...
The feudistes’ textbooks were mostly practical in purpose. They provided guidance on reading documents and organizing chaotic archives and were often targeted specifically at the itinerant feudistes moving from one employment to the next. The books clearly reflected the specific and often precarious position of the low-key local archival expert. Authors provided practical tips on how to negotiate contracts with employers, for instance. They also provided experienced advice on estimating the workload likely to be involved in a project. Some, like M. Mariée in his Traité, displayed a keen awareness of potential mental stress that archival work could exert, particularly for someone working under considerable time pressure. Several authors explicitly used the first person singular to convey that their advice was based on direct personal experience. With such practical insights, the literature by and for the feudistes helped to shape their own professional understanding as well as social expectations of what archival experts were. The feudistes used these texts to position themselves as a professional and experienced group.

Besides promoting and providing a role-model for feudal archive-managers, the texts are full of technical advice aimed at immediate practical utility. The feudistes offered specific rules and suggestions about how to organize archival work. They provided templates of inventories, presented case studies on individual problems and helped with solutions to difficulties they anticipated. Material issues of record-keeping were of great concern to these authors. A specific problem that several of these publications tackled explicitly was palaeography. Le Moine and Batteney, for instance, both printed engraved facsimiles of several medieval types of handwriting that could serve as orientations for inexperienced readers. Others, like the sieur de Chevrières, included simple chronological information. Nothing they printed in the realm of palaeography, diplomatics or chronology reached the quality of erudite and academic research in the developing auxiliary
sciences, as some scholarly experts complained; but this was not the feudistes’ goal or intention. Rather, they wanted to indicate the relevance of well-ordered feudal record-keeping and they wanted to help practitioners with practical advice based frequently on decades of experience. In this way, they became arguably the dominant voice in publicly available printed archival discourse in France for quite some time to come.

IV

GENEALOGY AND SEIGNEURIAL ARCHIVES

The rise of archival consciousness that the feudistes facilitated occurred in eighteenth-century France for several reasons, some of which were social, others economic. One of the most important motives for taking better care of records was genealogy. It has long been recognized that genealogy, while already having a long tradition, entered a new phase in the late sixteenth century. This had two dimensions. One the one hand, according to contemporary ‘erudite’ standards, genealogies had to be founded more and more exclusively on written (that is, archival) evidence; on the other hand the juridical pressure on noblemen to produce well-researched archive-based genealogies was also growing. The French nobility in particular were forced much more frequently than at earlier times to ‘prove’ their noble lineage by presenting dossiers of archival documents supporting their claim to noble descent. While this development has attracted considerable attention from social historians, its important implications for the history of European archival culture have not yet been sufficiently recognized. The constant pressure to prove their status according to increasingly demanding documentary criteria forced the nobility to acknowledge that archives were a key infrastructure for their struggle to support their social status.

38 See a review of Le Moine’s book by Gatterer in Allgemeine historische Bibliothek von Mitgliedern des königlichen Instituts der historischen Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, viii (1768), 82–129; also Ludwig Wachler, Geschichte der historischen Forschung und Kunst seit der Wiederherstellung der litterarischen Cultur in Europa, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1818), ii, 515–16. Both reviews were generally favourable, even if Gatterer criticized the lack of systematic research on diplomatics.


40 Benoît Defauconpret, Les preuves de noblesse au XVIIIe siècle: la réaction aristocratique, avec un recueil de tous les ordres, honneurs, fonctions, écoles, chapitres, réservés à la noblesse (Paris, 1999).
In rural France, the *feudistes* were key experts who helped the regional aristocracy to research genealogies and prepare their ‘proofs’ when required. There were other groups of experts, too, who helped to accommodate the nobility’s ‘genealogical craze’, yet the *feudistes* remained strongly involved in local and regional genealogical markets. They executed research in provincial archives for non-resident noblemen, as one *feudiste* wrote in the mid eighteenth century:

> Since you have left for Paris I neglected nothing in my search for titles that might serve as proofs for your noble family . . . During the revision that we did in your châteaux de Ses of all the documents that might potentially prove your ancienneté, I have found a very ancient document

Such tireless and proactive involvement in an aristocrat’s genealogical needs was often crucial for the nobility to fulfil the high demands of proof placed upon them.

Particularly well documented are the genealogical activities of the *feudiste* Jean-Baptiste Larcher. Larcher, for instance, was in close contact with the Podenas family, whose lineage and family relations he studied for many years. The Podenas were an important regional family with ties to other noble dynasties throughout the realm. Larcher acquired and collected much material about the Podenas and stored it in his multi-volume handwritten collection of archival excerpts and manuscript notices. Based on his deep knowledge of regional history and on his expertise about documents he collected genealogical evidence and made well-informed conjectures about who was related to whom and in what way. He critically discussed individual documents, wondered about palaeographic details and was suspicious about anachronisms. He thus applied a certain amount of practical criticism (along the lines of Le Moine) that was only loosely, if at all, connected to erudite diplomatics, yet helped in many ways to substantiate the genealogical

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42 *Feudiste* Ferré to the seigneur d’Aspet: AD Haute-Pyrénées, Tarbes, 65 J 386, unpaged.


44 BM Tarbes, MS 44, 317–40.

45 BM Tarbes, MS 44, 317: ‘Je ne crois pas que ce soit le Père de Guillaume [de Podenas]’.
reconstructions upon which his client’s noble status would ultimately come to rest.46

At least once, in 1766, Larcher had been granted access to the Podenas family’s private papers.47 Other examples, too, demonstrate that early modern genealogies were created by a very close co-operation between the genealogists or feudistes and the noble families for whom they worked. The noble employer and the feudiste would frequently consult on individual aspects. Larcher would draw preliminary conclusions from the archival materials he found which were then verified by Podenas, based on additional evidence presumably unavailable to (or hidden from) the feudiste: ‘Mr. de Podenas is asked to verify this genealogical descendancy with his documents’.48 Feudistes such as Larcher thus allow us at least a few glimpses at the lengthy conversations, both face-to-face and through letters, that archival expert and noble patron would have. Archives and archival documents were a regular, and for both parties quite familiar, concern in these exchanges about genealogical affairs. With the feudistes acting as important facilitators and mediators, noblemen such as Podenas became at least roughly acquainted with questions concerning the relevance and problems of archival records.

The work of these feudistes remained important once the Ancien Régime had collapsed. The Podenas’ papers, including those genealogical files produced by Larcher, were redeployed as valuable components and tools of regional history. In 1860, the reigning Comte de Podenas offered some of his original documents together with the pre-1800 genealogical memoirs to the newly founded ecclesiastical society for the history of the archdiocese of Auch.49 Podenas thought that the old notes could be ‘useful for you’ for ‘they seemed to have some interest from a local point of view of the wars of religion [of the sixteenth century]’. Larcher would probably have been delighted.

46 AD Hautes-Pyrénées, F 29/2, no folios (fascicle 5, no. 1).
47 AD Gers, I suppl. 464, unpaged: ‘Genealogie de M. le Marquis de la Roque-Podenas suivant les actes communiqués en 1766’. He goes on to quote, among other corroborating evidence, the ‘Tresoirie de Bourdeaux [!]’ and the ‘archives de l’Evêché de Condom’ — this gives at least a brief indication of how widely Larcher cast his net.
48 AD Gers, I suppl. 464, unpaged (on the bottom of the ‘Genealogie’ just quoted).
49 The following is based on a letter by the Comte de Podenas to the editor from 1 May 1860, printed in Bulletin du comité d’histoire et d’archéologie de la province ecclésiastique d’Auch, i (1860), 215–17. Strictly speaking, Podenas offered papers by the ‘abbé de Vergès’. Vergès had bought Larcher’s paper from his widow and had continued to work with the family Podenas. The papers of Vergès and Larcher are not always clearly separated, so chances are very high that Podenas’ offer included some of Larcher’s notes.
V

THE ARCHIVAL DIMENSION OF FRANCE’S ‘SEIGNEURIAL REACTION’

Feudistes like Marieé considered archives to be the foundations of peaceful social relationships. Through ‘reorganizing archives he [the feudiste] will give birth again to peace and unity between lords (seigneurs) and their vassals’.50 Peace and social unity through justice based on written evidence was a dream held by many archivists in early modern Europe. An ideal archive, they claimed, was the base from which to distinguish objectively between right and wrong, legal and illegal, permissive and usurped social ambitions.51 Rhetorical set-pieces such as Mariée’s advertisement thus imply an enormous and widespread trust in the power of writing to structure social life.

And yet, as the feudistes were equally eager to announce, their work in the archives was not directed towards promoting the general good in an abstract way. Their archival work was openly partisan. The feudistes worked to their employer’s advantage: ‘a well-ordered archive . . . helps one to avoid engaging in fruitless legal battles thinking [erroneously] that one’s position was well founded in legal titles; it also helps to never lose a worthwhile legal battle failing to find the titles supporting your position’.52 In other words, the feudistes helped the seigneurial lords to ascertain their positions vis-à-vis their tenants and vis-à-vis rivals.

At this point, the social history of archives intersects with a long-running debate in French historiography. Historians have debated for well over a century whether and when something like a ‘feudal reaction’, a tightening of seigneurial exploitation and an aggravation of the peasantry’s economic burden happened in the decades before 1789. The feudistes have famously been called the ‘technicians of the feudal reaction’.53 Whether or not the feudal reaction actually occurred and whether the feudistes actually contributed to accentuating the peasants burden, is to this day highly contested.54

51 For another version of this idea from a very different context, namely the Papal States of around 1600, see Markus Friedrich, ‘Notarial Archives in the Papal States: Central Control and Local Histories of Record-keeping in Early Modern Italy’, Mélanges de l’École Française à Rome, cxxiii (2011), 445–6.
52 Le Moine to the officials of Reims, 2 July 1785: AM Reims, FAC 801 L 162, no folios.
54 See, for example, Jean Gallet, ‘Réflexion sur la réaction seigneuriale et féodale en France au XVIIIe siècle’, in Dominique Dinet and Jean-Pierre Poussou (eds.), État et société en France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: mélanges offerts à Yves Durand (Paris, 2000). Critical is William Doyle, ‘Was there an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?’, Past and Present, no.57 (Nov. 1972), 114–20. Robert Forster has provided strong evidence in
Regardless, however, of whether such a reaction took place in social or economic developments we can clearly discern what could be called an ‘archival reaction’. For it is clear that the seigneurs stepped up their investment in the archival components of the feudal regime. This had a wide range of consequences.

First, this development manifested itself in the feudistes’ improvement of archival organization on behalf of their seigneurial employers. Frequently, this started with physical work, whereby the archival experts spent considerable time unfolding and cleaning the old manuscripts. Several of them left explicit remarks about the practicalities of opening scrolls and books and preventing document destruction in the process. Part of the material aspect of the feudistes’ work in seigneurial archives was also the preparation of envelopes or boxes as well as the proper labelling of the newly organized, bundles, ledgers or piles. Closely connected to this physical care for parchments and papers was the feudistes’ task of reading, summarizing and inventoring the documents. Inventories had certainly been produced in seigneurial archives well before the advent of the feudistes, yet the feudistes’ activities were much broader in scale and depth. Both in terms of quantity and quality the inventories produced by the feudistes usually surpassed previous work. The shape, form and logic of these inventories varied considerably, yet a few general traits can be observed. First, eighteenth-century inventories of seigneurial archives were usually not complete. The feudistes, for instance, frequently did not get access to the seigneur’s private papers nor pay much attention to the records of economic management. They almost always assumed that among the documents they were confronted with were scores of ‘useless’ pieces. Those were at best summarily mentioned in the inventories. In positive terms, the inventories were mostly concerned with the legally

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55 For example, Le Moine, Diplomatique-pratique, 27–30.

56 See, for instance, the contract between Le Moine and Reims in AM Reims, FAC 801 L 162, no folios (several copies), §6.

important titles, contracts and records. Secondly, part of the feudistes’ work was not only to list the pertinent documents in a meaningful order, but also to summarize, date and occasionally even comment upon the pieces. These inventories thus had at least a certain similarity with excerpt books and cartularies. This was an important part of the feudistes’ task, usually summarized under the idea of ‘analyzing all titles with utmost exactitude and extracting the substance of all necessary clauses’. Sometimes ‘the most important originals should be copied entirely [into the inventory]’. 58 Such an inventory, as Le Moine wrote, ‘helps to avoid the inconvenience of going to the archive each time one needs to find something’. 59 Moreover, if a fire destroyed the originals, the inventories could serve as a backup. 60 The inventory thus explicitly not only mirrored the archive but at least partially substituted for it. The inventory’s reader could learn, by browsing through the excerpts and summaries, about the range of possessions belonging to a seigneurie, its historical development and the different legal frameworks supporting and shaping the seigneurie. Inventories made the feudal holdings more palpable and integrated them into a meaningful whole.

A second aspect of archival improvement in the service of feudal organization involved the escalation of research activities. The feudistes provided largely unmatched research expertise, and this could be a threatening weapon for seigneurs. In early 1774 the Marquis de Marigny, for instance, ordered Jean Luc Rochet, who worked as feudiste for him, ‘to put Mr. Leddet in his place, for he deserves no mercy from me. I told him to produce a document supporting his position, since he cannot do so I will push my rights’. 61 Marigny felt sure of himself in his ‘battle (combat)’ with Leddet because of his vastly superior knowledge about documents gained by employing Rochet. Like Rochet, feudistes everywhere were hired to ‘extract . . . all important documents of our archive and of all other archives pertaining to our interests’ 62 and the feudistes did as they were told. They spent day after day visiting archives, checking documents and verifying information. In 1782, for instance, Jean-Jacques Eyraud worked for forty-one days in archives and with archival documents on behalf of the Cathedral Chapter of Du Puy. In the same year, in July, he spent another one and a half days in the archives.

58 This was the typical clause of Le Moine’s contract in Reims; see AM Reims, FAC 801 L 162, no folios (several copies), §3.
60 ‘Memoire’, 21 May 1787: AM Reims, FAC 801 L 162, no folios (§2).
61 AD Loir-et-Cher, Blois, F 523, 44.
checking related legal issues. The feudistes’ archival knowledge was thus often linked to considerable feats of endurance.

The feudistes were also willing and able to overcome significant infrastructural difficulties. Feudistes were archival nomads and constantly travelled to compile necessary documents. Over the years, they acquired a superb and locally largely unmatched knowledge of the location of documents in their region. They would know, for instance, which notaries had worked where and for how long and who owned the old registers now. They would know what had happened to a family’s papers once a family died out or moved. They would, through lifelong practice, travel and correspondence, turn isolated archives into connected deposits. To the feudistes rural France looked like a ‘landscape of documentation’ that had to be read as a coherent whole. On the basis of this integrated approach, they could execute fairly systematic searches for relevant archival materials at the behest of their employers. Extensive research into the legal framework surrounding individual feudal relationships, executed by experienced archive-users equipped with advanced reading skills thus became a routine feature of eighteenth-century estate management. By making archival knowledge readily available they helped shape local social relations and the character of French feudal society in general. Archival evidence and the need to think with archival evidence became a major concern and a practical reality in rural France not least through their activities.

Given their strong affiliation with the feudal system, quite a few feudistes were initially frightened by the events of the French Revolution. As the current state of research still provides only fragmentary insights into the archival developments after 1789, it is difficult to determine the fate of the feudistes as a social group with any precision. Yet the overall impression at this point is

63 AD Loir-et-Cher, 113 J 48, no folios.
64 For the term see Paolo Cammarosano, Italia medievale: struttura e geografia delle fonti scritte (Roma, 1995), 9–10.
that most of them did not suffer particularly from antagonism. That Claude-Louis-Marie Delion, from a well-known family of feuistes in Troyes, emigrated rather than co-operate with the new regime, was certainly not the rule and most likely a rare exception.\(^66\) Quite to the contrary, a notable number of ex-feuistes seemed to have simply switched sides and now put their expertise at the disposal of the different revolutionary archival administrations that came to be set up over the course of the 1790s. Delion’s own father, Jean-François, entered revolutionary public service in 1790 and retained different archive-related offices until 1806.\(^67\) Other similar cases could be named, such as Jean-Baptiste Moulinet senior and junior in Romans, or three members of the Pontois family in Poitiers, who worked in the archives départementales until 1808.\(^68\) Pierre Camille Le Moine continued to work as an archivist and ended his life as respected city archivist of Reims in 1800. The new archival agenda of these feuistes working for the revolutionary regime certainly included in several cases also the infamous selection of ‘useless’ papers that were wilfully destroyed on several occasions in 1792 and 1793.\(^69\) No explicit protests against this politics by any feuistes have come to light so far. What is more important, however, than their being part of the Revolution’s archival destruction is the fact that the feuistes certainly did help to transmit the Ancien Régime’s advanced archival knowledge and experience through the Revolution into the Restoration period.\(^70\) Although more research is required concerning the archival developments of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods, it seems likely that a considerable continuity connected the pre-revolutionary and the post-Napoleonic archival worlds.\(^71\)


\(^67\) Ibid., 371.


\(^69\) See, for example, Brodier, Archives de France, 327 (n. 3), 329.

\(^70\) A similar intuition was voiced by the late Lara Jennifer Moore, Restoring Order: The École des Chartes and the Organization of Archives and Libraries in France, 1820–1870 (Duluth, 2008), 42.

\(^71\) This comment contradicts tendencies to construct 1789 too neatly as a starting point for the ‘rise of heritage’; see Astrid Swenson, The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in
The March 1776 edition of the Affiches de Poitou, which circulated mostly in the region around Poitiers, ran yet another announcement by a local feudiste. A certain Hameau, feudiste, presented the following:

I am in possession of a rather large number of legal documents of interest to [the readers of this journal] of which several are older than two hundred years. I have found them in the office of Mr. Pierre Thouet, notary of the Comté de Passavant, lying in the said office. [Thouet] himself had found them among the useless papers concerning the succession of Mr. Neau, ancient curate of Passavant. I offer to give the papers back to whoever has a valid claim to them.72

Without putting too much stress on this single episode of an otherwise unknown feudiste, Hameau’s behaviour can still serve to highlight several points. For it is obvious how much he — and Thouet before him — cared about documents. The notary and the feudiste thus stand for a spreading awareness that papers and parchments were valuable objects. This, in turn, contrasts sharply with the obviously much less caring Neau and his heirs. They had left the cache of papers as ‘useless’. This episode unfolding in the small provincial town of Thouarcé captures the powerful growth of archival consciousness in provincial and rural France during the eighteenth century. Many other feudistes also embodied this preservationist mind-set.73 Pierre-Camille Le Moine went furthest and called for the diplomatic neutrality of archives in wartime — an early plea for the international protection of cultural heritage.74 If neither Hameau with his altruistic approach towards keeping papers nor Le Moine with his grandiose plea for changing international politics were entirely typical, they nevertheless demonstrate how deeply ingrained the

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72 Affiches de Poitou, 7 March 1776 (Poitiers), 40.
73 Though not all of them, for D’Estienne, L’archiviste citoyen, 13–14, clearly and strongly advocated the burning of ‘useless papers’ for various reasons. Even his book, though, clearly demonstrates just how concerned he was about preserving those papers he thought worthy of attention.
74 Consider the extraordinary passage in BM Metz, MS 1118, portfeuille 15, nr. 54/II–IV: ‘Aujourd’hui que les hommes se croyent moins barbares que les Goths et Vandales, ne devroit-il pas y avoir entre les souverains une convention de droit de Gens de ne jamais violer, bruler, piller ni detruire les depots publics, les monumens et d’avoir pour ces [!] les memes egards que pour les personnes sacré[s] des ambassadeurs’. 

concern for the preservation of written documents had become. The feudistes were a key group among the growing number of keepers of documents, hoarders of papers, readers of manuscripts and promoters of archives. None of this was their exclusive domain and in many areas other social groups had more advanced expertise. Yet the feudistes were many and they were everywhere and thus they contributed significantly to incorporating the culture of record-keeping into everyday social life in provincial France. A future ‘social history of the archive’ should include the feudistes as important figures.

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