

# Something New

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*American Archivist*, established in 1938, has been a mainstay of archival theory, scholarship, and practice. The journal has arrived in our mailboxes over the years like clockwork. We have anticipated these arrivals and toted the hard copies around with us. We have favorite covers—mine happens to be summer 1997 and fall 1997, the special issues on EAD that featured an encoded Big Bird on the cover. The physical issues may still be lined up on our bookshelves or bound in the library stacks that we frequent. *American Archivist* has always been a physical presence. Even when the journal launched as a digital product in early 2008, most of us still received a hard copy.

Until this issue.

As the first entirely digital issue, volume 84, number 1 marks a turn in the history of *American Archivist*. This is not because of the content—the articles that appear in this issue have been through the same rigorous process of double blind peer review, revision, thorough copyediting, more revision, and design that has been the trademark of the journal. The authors still come from among our colleagues—archivists, archival educators, and affiliated professionals who have devoted hours upon hours of their time, thought, worry, curiosity, intellect, and, above all, care, to write the content that we are privileged to share. The Editorial Board's chair has transitioned, but the journal still represents the work of a devoted Editorial Board, committed to providing an excellent forum for our professional literature. All of this remains constant.

Yet you are, of course, reading something new. The format is different—entirely digital. You are only reading this on some device—a laptop, a reader, a phone. An interface is coming between you and the printed word. Of course, some of us have been reading *American Archivist* primarily online for nearly twenty years. For others, it's the end of the world as we know it and maybe we

don't *quite* feel fine.<sup>1</sup> . . . Personally, I feel fortunate to have been able to participate in every iteration of the journal: I was on the committee that worked through the first digital launch in 2010, I was part of the group that found our second digital provider in 2014, and now, as Editor, I have the opportunity to engage readers with a completely digital format. Some are going to love it, others are going to be less enamored, but I am *energized*. In conversations with SAA groups, colleagues, and the Editorial Board, we are only just beginning to explore new ways to engage with our written texts. As we continue down this road with the journal on a new platform and with an updated look, I hope readers will find our journal to be more accessible, more interactive, more closely connected to other sources of scholarship. I hope authors will consider innovative ways to present data, provide illustrations, invite exploration of links to other related materials—all to enhance the experience of reading their work. We will see changes as our digital presence develops. I hope that you all find this new *American Archivist* as exciting and as full of promise as I do.

### In This Issue . . .

This issue contains Dr. Meredith Evans's presidential address given at ARCHIVES\*RECORDS 2020, SAA's virtual annual conference is a rallying cry for understanding and the recognition that *we* are SAA. She makes a powerful statement about our commonalities in professional practice and professional values. She highlights the importance of our membership, as well as the critical juncture where we find SAA as an organization. Evans is ultimately hopeful that "SAA will remain a relevant global leader in and about our profession. We are SAA" (p. 11).

In a somewhat new approach, we have our first opportunity to explore flexibility in our publishing stream. Usually a feature in the spring/summer issue, the winning article for the Theodore Calvin Pease Award, which recognizes superior writing by students of archival studies, was delayed for publication. Rather than shifting to include it in the fall/winter issue, we will bring this award-winning article to readers "between issues." Bridget Malley's piece, "Nothing About Us Without Us': Documenting Disability History in Western Pennsylvania," will be published this summer. Malley's article draws attention to the archival record of those with disabilities. She notes that "Much discussion of disability in the archival field centers on access; little of the literature explores the complexities of appraisal and other practical issues involved with bringing disability history records into the archive" (draft, p. 3). Malley's article goes on to discuss how a documentation strategy approach can be applied to a successful grassroots effort to preserve disability history in western Pennsylvania. Her close examination of this effort leads readers to consider the need for

interdisciplinary research in archival theory and practice, and disability studies, calling for accessibility to become “a continuous process rather than an infrequently applied afterthought” (draft, p. 19). *American Archivist* will announce the publication of the article as soon as it becomes available.

It is humbling to pull together this first digital issue during the full impact of the global coronavirus pandemic, and I must express gratitude to all authors who have worked through a full menu of extenuating circumstances to contribute a rich assortment of fine articles. Kimberly Anderson and Jessica Maddox have authored an excellent case study that provides a methodology for a collections survey establishing the University of Nevada, Reno’s alignment with the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*. The authors’ observations put a framework around the “unsettling” process and “keep in mind that no actions are neutral and that striving toward restorative practice is better than seeking to avoid disruption and recognition of our role as settler archivists in a land-grant university” (p. 50).

This issue also offers room for us to ponder digital collections, with two articles that speak to their utility and ability to expand access and one article that tests their limitations. “How to Wrangle Multiple Discrete Collections from One Donor,” by Laura M. Gentry, Erin Ryan, Jessica Rayman, and Martha Bace, explores a practical project in which physical consolidation of analog materials and the merging of digital collections improved research access to all material. Adele Fournet’s “Bit Rosie: A Case Study in Transforming Web-Based Multimedia Research into Digital Archives” considers a collaboration among archivist, researcher, and repository to enhance accessibility and long-term preservation of Bit Rosie,<sup>2</sup> a website created specifically to represent female and gender-nonconforming home studio producers who engage in a male-dominated industry (p. 120). While both of these articles prize access and ongoing preservation of digital objects as a responsibility of archivists today, Donald Force and Randy Smith argue that “Archivists have not sufficiently addressed the relationship between digital surrogates and their original objects” (p. 91). While digital surrogates are commonplace, and archivists continue to feel the pressure of researchers who are demanding greater online access to materials, Force and Smith observe that metadata is key to preserving archival context and that archivists “have a responsibility to make users aware of gaps in collections, which will affect users’ understanding of the context of the archives in a digital environment” (p. 106). Archivists, they argue, must reexamine their use of metadata to provide richer context that will enhance the understanding of the archival record.

As we continue to consider how we engage and enhance digital records, Marsha Gordon and Dino Everett remind us that the physical representation of archival materials is, at times, irreplaceable. Gordon and Everett’s “Dusting Off that Old Projector: Preservation through Projection” urges archivists to preserve

not only the content of old film, but to “perpetuate knowledge about the history of film technology” (p. 139). This is a fascinating consideration of the artifactual value of the archival record (in this case, film and the equipment that projects it)—and it’s important to note that our new digital format allows us to provide color images that add interest and a level of understanding to the article that would be missing in a print version limited to black-and-white images. This set of articles juxtaposes different archival values and asks us to acknowledge the contrasts that we may find daily in our work.

Pat Galloway’s article, “Providing Restricted Access to Mental Health Archives within Government Archives: The Subject Stakeholder,” in many ways ties all of these themes together. Galloway’s case study looks at the issues inherent in digitizing records from the first state psychiatric hospital for African Americans, founded in 1870 in Virginia. The author considers the hospital as a “Community of Records” reflecting the interests of multiple stakeholder groups (administrators, physicians, nurses and care staff, recordkeepers, patients, and their families). The context of these records, and access to them, ultimately becomes a question of who controls access to and the use of those materials. As Galloway notes, the results of her study “imply that archival concern for communities is gaining significant importance, along with a serious effort to understand how power relations are involved in the production and control of records” (p. 182). This article prods us to think about the ongoing tension between historic materials, privacy, community interest, research agendas, access to the historic record, and our role in all of these.

With its broad-based selection and a digital-only interface, this issue of *American Archivist* is the first iteration of what our professional journal can become. The format may be different, but, as you can see, *American Archivist* remains a resource: a window to new developments in archival practice, an invitation to consider the broad implications of our work, and a call to understand the place and responsibility of archivists and archives in society. My goal is to make sure that *American Archivist* continues to provoke, inform, educate, challenge, surprise, and even delight us, regardless of format. I count on working with the Editorial Board, with SAA’s publishing team, and with authors, peer reviewers, SAA members, and the journal’s readership to continue this tradition and to build on opportunities for the future. Thank you for the opportunity, and please don’t hesitate to reach out.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With apologies to R.E.M. for using a line from their 1987 release, “The End of the World as We Know It,” from the album *Document*. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s\\_the\\_End\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_as\\_We\\_Know\\_It\\_\(And\\_I\\_Feel\\_Fine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_the_End_of_the_World_as_We_Know_It_(And_I_Feel_Fine)) for a broad overview and an audio clip of the song.

<sup>2</sup> See Bit Rosie at <http://www.bitrosie.com>.