ARCHIVAL HISTORY ROUNDTABLE

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

Volume 4 No. 1  April 1990

Annual Meeting of Roundtable in St. Louis, August, 1989:

The annual meeting of the Archival History Roundtable held October 26, 1989 in St. Louis during the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists had 19 attendees. Greg Bradsher noted sessions of potential interest to Roundtable members at the St. Louis and reported on the past year's activities of the Roundtable. James Corsaro became Coordinator of the Roundtable at this meeting and chaired the remainder of the meeting. Reports were made about several topics.

Thanks to Greg, Michelle and Rod:

All Archival History Roundtable members extend their thanks to Greg Bradsher, Michelle Pacifico and Rod Ross for a fine job leading the Roundtable during its first three years.

Mission Statement of the Archival History Roundtable:

Jim mentioned that the SAA Council Committee on Task Forces and Roundtables would like roundtables to periodically publish a statement in the SAA Newsletter in order to inform potential members about the mission of the roundtable. A draft statement follows. If you have any comments or suggestions about it, please send them to the roundtable coordinator. A final mission statement will be published in the August newsletter.

Draft Mission Statement:

The ARCHIVAL HISTORY ROUNDTABLE was founded in 1987 and was approved by SAA Council in 1988. The Roundtable’s purpose is to promote interest in the history of archives, archival administration and the archival profession by (1) providing a forum for the presentation of papers on these topics at their Roundtable meetings; (2) encouraging the presentation of papers at Society of American Archivists annual meetings (3) encouraging the publication of archival history research in the American Archivist and in other forums and (4) publication of a newsletter with news of archival history research. Coordinator of Roundtable is James Corsaro, Associate Librarian, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12230.
Library History and Archival History

Since many archival repositories are part of libraries the importance of the archives of these institutions may be significant for archival history as well as libraries. Bob Martin and Jim Corsaro reported on the meeting of the SAA Task Force on the Archives of Libraries which discussed means of raising the consciousness of librarians about the importance of their historical records. Bob noted that the Library History Round Table of the American Library Association has issued a Statement on History in Education for Library and Information Science. The Statement advocates that historical methodology and historical context should inform the entire curriculum of library and information science education and makes several recommendations including that library schools should offer at least one course annually related to the history of library or information science. Anyone interested in having copies of the Statement may contact Bob or Jim.

Jim mentioned that the New York State Archives has issued an Information Leaflet No. 6 which explains New York State regulations relating to the retention and disposition of library and library system records. He also mentioned a grant funded oral history project at the New York State Library which is documenting the 20th century history of the library by interviews of 30 former library staff.

Related to library history, it was announced that Roundtable member Frederick Stielow had won the American Library Association Library History Roundtable's Justin Winsor Prize for 1989 and his article "Librarians, Warriors and Rapprochement: Carl Milam, Archibald MacLeish, and World War II" will be published in Libraries and Culture.

SAA Session in Seattle

There will be at least one session at the SAA Seattle meeting related to archival history. "Documenting the Society of American Archivists, 1935 to the Present" will feature Frank B. Evans, J. Frank Cook and William W. Moss discussing how SAA's is being documented and the uses of the SAA historical record not only for the history of SAA, but for the history of professional organizations.

Now is the time for anyone who would like to present a brief (15 minutes or so) paper at the Seattle meeting of the Roundtable to step forward. If you would like to present a paper on your research or can suggest someone who might like to do so, please let me know.

Who Was Who? or a Dictionary of Archival Biography

Fred Stielow reported on progress of planning for a Dictionary of Archival Biography. Fred would act as the General Editor for the project and editing chores would be carried on at the School of Library and Information Science at the Catholic University of America. There would be an advisory board which would select authors and subjects of biographies.
The exact scope and inclusive dates of the Dictionary are not set in stone and Fred would be happy to hear from anyone with suggestions regarding these issues or concerning means of funding the project. A resolution of support was voted by the attendees. Jim Corsaro will write a letter of support for the project to the SAA Editorial Board on behalf of the Roundtable when more of the details of the publication project are worked out.

Membership in Roundtable:

Current membership in the Roundtable is 85 members. If you know someone who would like to attend Roundtable meetings or receive the newsletter, they should write to James Corsaro, Coordinator, Archival History Roundtable, New York State Library, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12230.

Philadelphia in 1991:

Archival history needs greater representation at SAA meetings. Since the lead time for session proposal submittal will probably be fairly short after the Seattle meeting, it is a good time to begin to think about potential topics and speakers for sessions. If you have done some interesting research, don't hide it under a basket, let others know about it. I will be happy to coordinate any suggestions and help find other papers for particular sessions. One suggestion: how about a session about the proposed Dictionary of Archival Biography which would include a couple of biographical studies of important archivists? Anybody interested?

New Publications in Archival History:

A new publication American Library History: A Comprehensive Guide to the Literature by Donald G. Davis, Jr. and John Mark Tucker, ABC-CLIO Press, 1989, includes an bibliographical essay and bibliography of publications about the "Archival Enterprise," by James Gregory Bradsher and Frederick J. Stielow, two Roundtable members. This is an excellent brief introduction to the literature of the entire field. The bibliography is arranged by approximate twenty year periods. The period from 1972-1986 has the largest number of references since the work updates an earlier edition of the guide as well as bibliographical guides by Frank Evans and others.

The latest issue of Provenance (vol. 7, no. 2, Fall 1989) includes an article by Maynard Brichford entitled "The Provenance of Provenance in Germanic Areas", which discusses the history of provenance in various German states in the 18th and 19th century.

An article related to archival history is "Information Science in Wartime: Pioneer Documentation Activities in World War II" by Pamela Spence Richards in the Journal of the American Society for Information Science, vol. 39, no. 5, September 1988, pp. 301-306. For those of you interested in the history of information science, the entire September 1987 issue of this journal is devoted to the topic.
Standards and Chronology

If you were wondering when the first repository guide to manuscripts was published, you may have your answer soon. The Working Group on Standards for Archival Description has prepared and will publish in its final report a chronology of significant events in the continuing evolution of descriptive standards for archives. Look for it in the American Archivist.

Three-Year Plan for the Roundtable.

The SAA Council upon a recommendation of the Committee on Goals and Priorities has asked all sections, roundtables and so forth to submit a three-year plan. I completed the Reporting Form and if anyone would like a copy, I will be happy to send it to you. Briefly, the form requests information on the roundtable's activities during the past year, and requests information on plans for the next three years. The goals which I identified include: promotion of research and presentation of archival history topics; strong efforts to encourage speakers on these topics at SAA and regional archival meetings and publication of the Newsletter twice annually. I also stated that the Roundtable will encourage the publication of the proposed the Dictionary of Archival Biography.

Arnold Johan Ferdinand Van Laer, New York State Archivist: Some Biographical Notes.

Anyone interested in the history of New Netherland, that is, the Dutch colonial period of New York State's history, is probably familiar with the name A.J.F. Van Laer because it was Van Laer with his excellent linguistic skills and knowledge of both Dutch history and Dutch colonial history who began the modern translation of the earliest documentary heritage of the state. His numerous publications and translations are indispensable for anyone studying the first half century of New York State's history. However, it is unlikely that these colonial historians know anything of Van Laer's importance as an archivist and one wonders how many archivists know of his accomplishments. T.R. Schellenberg knew of his work, however. He notes that Van Laer was the first to make known the principle of provenance in the United States because of his knowledge of the Dutch archival practice. Waldo G. Leland knew Van Laer as an archivist. In a letter dated June 2, 1911, expressing his condolences respecting the State Library Fire of 1911, Leland also notes he "cannot sufficiently express my admiration for your paper...(that is, Van Laer's paper on archival theory presented at the 2nd meeting of the Public Archives Commission in 1910) It is ...the best thing the Association has ever printed on archives." In 1911, Van Laer published his report about the disastrous fire in the State Library of March 29, 1911 and included a number of recommendations for the better storage of administrative records of government, chief of which was that a proper archival building is necessary for safe storage of important records.

John Franklin Jameson was also well acquainted with Van Laer's linguistic skills and knowledge of New York's Dutch heritage. Jameson asked Van Laer to edit the New Netherland volume of the Original Narratives of Early American History and Van Laer
at first agreed. However, upon further reflection, Van Laer regretfully informed Jameson that the press of his other translation and archival work precluded editing the entire work. Van Laer did, however, assist with the translation of some words and phrases when Jameson turned to him for assistance.

Arthur H. Leavitt of the National Archives also knew of Van Laer's knowledge and skills and called upon him frequently for assistance in translating S. Muller Fz., J.A. Feith and R. Fruin Th. Az.'s work Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives, published originally in the Netherlands in 1898. The correspondence of Leavitt and Van Laer related to Van Laer's assistance in the translation of Muller, Feith and Fruin is available in the State Library. Van Laer expressed his concern that Leavitt who did not know Dutch was translating the Manual from the French translation. According to Van Laer, the French translation differed from the original Dutch. Van Laer's major concern, as expressed in a letter dated March 10, 1938, was that the technical terms upon which the Manual's entire thesis depended were not adequately translated. Van Laer believed that this was not exclusively a simple translation problem, but that the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Terminology had not yet proposed a set of definitions of technical terms. Without such definitions, he believed that an English translation of the Manual "will only create confusion."

Van Laer was born in Utrecht in 1869, was educated as a Mechanical Engineer at the University of Delft, and after travel in Europe and America, he settled in Albany, New York in 1897. While attending Melvil Dewey's library school in the New York State Library, Archivist George R. Howell requested his assistance in translating Dutch documents. In 1899 he became State Archivist, which he remained for the next forty years. His career was mainly devoted to the translation and publication of the Dutch Colonial documents of the early history of New York, although he was involved in other historical research as well. His experiences as an archivist include some incidents with a familiar ring to present-day archivists. In 1919, when Van Laer was to travel to Holland to compile information for a guide to Dutch archives related to United States history, he found it necessary to write a letter to the Bureau of Citizenship requesting a correction in his passport, which listed his occupation as "State Architect" instead of "State Archivist."

A.J.F. Van Laer is a good example of what is probably a large group of professional archivists, who remain generally unknown to the profession, but whose careers laid the basis for much of our current theoretical and practical work. Study of these archival careers may help to shed light on our present archival situation.

The Archival History Newsletter is published twice yearly by the SAA Archival History Roundtable. Any communications, articles or other material of interest to the membership and available for inclusion in the Newsletter should be sent to James Corsaro, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12230.