

“But a Thin Veil of Paper”
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**64th Presidential Address of the
Society of American Archivists**

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Good afternoon. Thank you, Danna Bell-Russel, for your introduction.

Let me begin by thanking each of you for giving me the privilege of serving as president of our Society. There is no better place to learn about our profession and the people who populate it than by serving in the position you have given me. I am thankful to you for the opportunity.

I am also thankful to the SAA members who, along with me over the past year, have led the organization. SAA's other elected officers, Council members, and the large number of individuals who serve in volunteer posts throughout the Society all give of themselves with extraordinary generosity and with extraordinary effect. I am extraordinarily grateful to each of you who has chosen to serve SAA in some capacity.

I am also extraordinarily grateful to the SAA staff. Quite candidly, I think it is very hard to convey just how talented and how dedicated they are. They truly deserve my praise and your thanks.

And, like my predecessors, I am particularly grateful for the help and support of SAA's executive director, Nancy Beaumont, someone I have communicated with in one way or another pretty much every day for the past year. The Society is vastly better for the contributions she makes to our collective welfare, and my presidency was vastly improved by the contributions she made to it. Thank you, Nancy, not the least for the weather, which makes this one of the few times when

suffering through a president's address in an air-conditioned ballroom is infinitely preferable to taking a walk in 100-degree heat.

Let me begin my remarks today by explaining that what I will share with you is not the speech I had originally intended to give. Like all those who have preceded me on this podium, I had dedicated considerable time to writing my remarks. I will flatter myself by thinking that what I had written had some good points, some good jokes, and included a few cheap shots, which one can only get away with when you're the president of SAA. However, like the columns I have written for *Archival Outlook*, while I set out to write one thing, circumstances intervened and led me to write something very different. Similarly today, circumstances changed what I wanted to share with you.

In all our lives there are moments that cause one to pause and reflect about whether or not in the grand scheme of things what one does makes any difference. Recently my family experienced such a moment. Because of it I put aside what I had been working on and rather quickly wrote something very different. And I will foreshadow my closing words by simply saying that when you consider the role of archivists in society, all of us in this room are fortunate to have a career that does make a difference, and that that difference, in the grand scheme of things, is profound.

I have spent a career as a person trained in history working in archives. I have been fortunate enough to write and speak on the subject, and I have a job that many envy as more play than work. I do not deny that most of the time what I do is fun. Most of the time I am happily engaged in recording history, or at least facilitating its recording by filling out yet another form, juggling budgets, and generally keeping the shop in business and on the good side of the powers that be.

But what I do and what you do is more than fun. Through a career in archives, each of us has preserved history. I recognize that in speaking of history there are some among us who will take

issue with me. They draw a line between history and archives, between manuscripts and records. They would say archivists document transactions. Archivists preserve records needed for administrative purposes. Archivists preserve material for reasons of legal and fiscal accountability. Some will tell me that history, in a classic sense of that word, is not the primary objective of archivists, and perhaps not even a secondary one.

While I respect and honor the importance of preserving records to document transactions, to serve administrative needs, and to establish accountability—all as part of our professional mission—I respectfully submit that in the end those activities are not the ultimate purpose that explains what archivists do. The need to document transactions slowly fades. Eventually no one cares.

Administrators and administrations move on. Eventually the past is so far removed that there is no administrative need to remember how they did it, or even why they did it. Eventually, even if eventually is a period of decades or, in some cases centuries, accounts are settled and legal documentation loses all purpose. The Soviet Union is gone. Pre-Revolutionary France has no standing in a court. The resolutions passed by the ancient Athenians no longer serve as law within the Acropolis.

What is left is history. It is the history of the Soviet Union, of royal France, and of Athenian democracy from which we as a people collectively learn and through which we as a people collectively continue to grow. It is a past we explore not because we need it for some immediate, practical reason, but rather because we require it for a broader, more meaningful purpose. It explains who we are. It explains why we are. It opens a window to our individual and collective soul.

Archives are, and will remain, that place where, above everything else, the soul of a person and of a community is both preserved and laid bare. Insofar as any human can find truth, truth is in our holdings. Insofar as any human can find immortality, immortality is in our stacks.

Because of this, this fundamental essence of humanity that resides within our repositories, those of us who work in archives are both privileged and significant. We are the selectors and the keepers of individual and collective memory. What archivists remember will be remembered. What archivists forget will be forgotten.

Appraisal is the key to all our endeavors. It is the professional tool that defines remembrance and forgetfulness. Selection sets the stage for everything else archivists do. And for this reason the discourse over selection is not an arcane, academic exercise with no impact on the real world. It has, rather, every impact on the real world and how that real world will be understood and interpreted. What archivists select assuredly establishes accountability, creates administrative continuity, and satisfies legal need, but when all else falls to dust, archives are the remembrance that will ennoble lives lived today and lives to be born tomorrow.

Because of the profound importance of appraisal within the broader society, I am saddened and pained that so many archivists seem to avoid selection or seek to limit it through narrowly construed criteria. I understand that appraisal is difficult, challenging, and even under the best of circumstances often problematic. Mistakes, sometimes irreversible mistakes, will be made. Knowing that, and knowing the justifiable concerns and fear this can generate among archivists, nevertheless if not us, if not archivists, than who will make these choices for society? A clerk emptying out an old filing room, more interested in tonight's baseball game than the records passing before her? A computer technician purging files, whose selection criteria are size of file, age of file, and number of recent uses? A distant cousin emptying out a child's bedroom, concerned more that he might miss the flight he booked than miss papers that tell the story of a beloved son?

Destruction is the Faustian bargain archivists make when they take on responsibility for selection. But one way or another the devil will get his—society will forget—and the archival responsibility is to make the best of the deal. The archival responsibility is to do all in our power to mock the devil by ensuring remembrance.

And we can mock the devil. We can cheat death. I commend all of us to take heart, to hold the vision we and we alone are granted through our education and our experience, and to employ that vision to shape a documentary universe and make it the best possible record we can construct for our successors. As I have already acknowledged, I know it will not be perfect. I know that whatever we do, someone in the future will find flaws in our decisions. But I also know that if you accept the challenge of selection, if you face the fear we all have in saying “yes,” or, worse, saying “no,” then you will do society the noble service our profession educates us to do, calls on us to perform, and which you and you alone can do better than anyone else within your organization and within your community, if you chose to do it.

Like appraisal, arrangement and description are vital. The act of selecting is essential, but to select without making the resulting documentation available is to harvest fruit but forego its sweetness. It makes no sense. I do not pretend to understand arrangement and description as I do appraisal.

Indeed as someone lacking a library school degree I sometimes find myself embarrassed by not fully comprehending the sea of acronyms that today flow through archival description. Creating a finding aid in EAD and linking it to an appropriately created MARC record, using proper EAC coding, is far beyond my skills.

But I do know this: That unarranged, undescribed records might as well have been left in the trash beside the road. I know that while a detailed list is helpful, a broad description is critical. If librarians

are gardeners carefully tending the individual plantings of various authors, then archivists are foresters watching over vast stands of intellectual timber. We must use techniques and tools, rules, protocols, and best practices that make it possible to see and care for the entirety of our forest of documentation, while not become lost among the individual trees.

And I know this as well: That I am often saddened as I try to read the literature about description and increasingly see it dominated by technical concerns and vocabulary issues. I know it is important to define terms carefully. I know it is important to get the semicolons in the right place. But I, too, often feel the definitions and the punctuation have become ends in themselves, rather than a means to an end; formulaic precision in place of a generous descriptive vision.

I appreciate the challenges that incorporating this broad vision into systematic description can create for those who do this task. Rules, protocols, and best practices call for precision—but precision often is interpreted through practices focused largely on methodology. Constructing archival description is hard. Librarians may never accept what archivists do as really good enough. Records managers may consider what archivists do as a waste of resources. But archivists know that how we arrange and describe are neither.

Archivists know that archival description creates a unique bridge, sometimes narrow and tenuous, often less than perfectly engineered and, in all honesty, more rickety than we would care to admit, but for all its shortcomings, a bridge always helping the user move from what they know to what they wish to learn.

Building in such a manner, I know that archival description will inevitably err. Walking across our bridge the researcher may miss a rare flower on the forest floor and, on occasion, misidentify an entire stand of trees—but knowing that let us, as archivists, not adopt rules, protocols, and best

descriptive practices designed to minimize potential criticisms for such errors, but rather err in a way that privileges the greatest flow of information to those who seek it. Our goal is to make description work for the users, not necessarily to make it neat, tidy, and above criticism from professionals in related disciplines.

I know it is a hard thing to do. Like appraisal, we need not to live in fear of the consequences of the errors we might make, but rather we should celebrate the breath of vision we can give. I know the talent you collectively bring to description. I know the education regarding descriptive technique you collectively share. If we dare to use our talent and education, our vision and our practical savvy, I know archivists can create and implement useful descriptive systems that eliminate the curse of backlogs. In the end, we must do this for we cannot only preserve the soul of our society, we must guide those looking for that essence to the place where they will find the knowledge they seek.

Documents and data in electronic formats offer many challenges very similar to those found in description and arrangement. However, the situation is even more complicated—in that sea of acronyms is added an ever-changing technological base. Clearly archivists are uncertain what to do with this new media and clearly many of us, including myself, tend to sit on the sidelines hoping that in some way good luck will solve our problems. But if luck is that place where hard work and opportunity meet, we each need to do the work to be prepared when opportunity presents itself.

You have been told often enough from platforms such as this one that electronic records are the future path which archivists must travel. I do not intend to offer yet another lecture on this well-visited subject, but rather to acknowledge what speakers who invoke this rhetoric often fail to fully admit: This is hard. This is challenging. This is a valley of darkness from which I, and many of you, would prefer to be delivered.

We are, after all, not being asked to adjust to a few minor changes in bureaucratic procedure, but rather to make informed decisions on the impact of a radical shift in recording media on our entire profession, from theory to practice, and do it in an incredibly short period of time, on-the-fly, while we attend to all the things we already need to do. But as I have already said in different ways, I believe firmly in the ability of those who proudly call themselves archivists to change and to adapt. If we are to save history, if we are to save that which binds generations, then despite the pain and difficulty, mastering electronic records is a task we must take upon ourselves. Not because we want to, but because we need to, to do what must be done.

Appraisal, description, technology. To this list of basic archival tasks one can quickly add preservation. Obviously, one of the things we do through our professional knowledge is to buy time for records—quite literally buy time by paying for expensive preservation-quality storage areas and similar tools. Increasingly, we buy time in other ways. For example, by investing in new technology that allows us to transform fragile items or old unstable media into new easily distributed electronic surrogates.

My mind is sometimes troubled when I speak with archivists who forget that we are buying that time and performing those expensive transformations for a purpose. Preservation, as well as conservation, is not an end to be automatically applied to archival material, but a tool which should be used selectively to ensure that the most essential core of our collective memory is passed down for others. Archivists know that they cannot save every document ever created, but we seem to often forget that likewise we cannot preserve in perpetuity every scrap of information that finds its way into the archives. Emotionally we often have trouble accepting this fact. I understand and I sympathize. We want to cling to what is emotionally dear to us, and our collections are dear. But in the end, we must continue to make the kind of choices that began with selection, and for which we

alone are educated. We must link resources to needs and make informed choices. We must, in Maynard Brichford's memorable phrase, "let it rot," at least some of it, selecting those things most dear as our remembrances to be passed down to the next generation, or perhaps the next millennium.

Much of the list of activities I have used to organize my presentation today are old standbys. Appraisal, arrangement, description, and preservation are functions we routinely rattle off when called upon to explain what an archivist does. Often forgotten is the responsibility for advocacy, particularly political advocacy. People sometimes shy away from advocacy, perhaps because they view it as self-serving, or even in some way demeaning. However, advocacy is not just about getting what we believe should be ours—hiring a lobbyist to get more federal dollars or passing privacy legislation that aids us in our work. The ultimate purpose of political advocacy is to create an environment that makes it possible for us to preserve history through appropriate means.

We advocate not out of some selfish motive, not because we would like a few more dollars in the paycheck or laws allowing us to eliminate a few forms, but because of the importance of the heritage that we preserve. As I have already said, what archivists remember is remembered. What archivists forget is forgotten. The core reason archivists advocate is to ensure we can carry forward our collective missions with sufficient resources and working within a positive and helpful legal framework. Advocacy isn't about us. It isn't about archivists. It is about archives. It is about history. It is about preserving, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, "the mystic chords of memory" that bind us to one another.

That word "memory" brings me to the closing thoughts of this speech. As I hope I have already clearly said, when we employ our professional skills, when we select, when we arrange, when we

describe, when we conserve, and when we advocate, we do these things not simply in pursuit of information linked to a clear functional need. What we accomplish is much greater. We cause to be remembered triumph and tragedy. We give voice to those who can no longer speak. We preserve memories for those who can no longer remember. Archivists weave a veil of paper, through which, however dimly, the present can see past and the living can hear the dead. We archivists are the stewards of humanity's legacy.

Our stewardship is a privilege, an honor, and an incredible burden. When we perform our stewardship well, we give memory and continuity to the most important aspects of our society and the most important individuals in our lives, sometimes by saving the records of institutions, often by preserving the stories of individuals. We accomplish this by exercising both diligence and breadth in our search for documentation. Remembrance is a peculiar thing and its best sources are never consistent with simple cookbooks of archival practice. What we seek may not be found in the official records of a president, but rather on the Facebook page of a high school student. To cope with this, ours is a profession that calls for deep learning and supple adjustment. We must know the ground well, but also be able to adjust quickly to the local weather.

When we as archivists are at our best in carrying out our stewardship, when we mix successfully our book knowledge and our street savvy, we do indeed make a profound difference. But to be at our best serving as an archivist is more than a job. Archives becomes a calling. And if you remember nothing else of what I have said, remember simply this, for this is what archivists most need to remember: Hear the archival calling. Hear it both in your head and in your heart, and chose to live it. Doing so gives archivists the vision and the power to link present to past, and living to dead. Doing so is the highest goal to which we aspire. Doing so truly is within your grasp if you choose to reach out.