

Unifying The Archives Profession: A Proposal

SAA President's Plenary Talk 2010 Joint Annual Meeting

From time to time we hear within our archives associations calls for closer ties to allied professions such as ARMA, Inc., the American Library Association, the Association of American Museums, or the historians' groups. These calls certainly make sense; we should have effective alliances with associations in several professions that share our concerns with records, cultural heritage, digital curation, teaching and writing history, and several others. But these calls to develop stronger working relationships with allied professions make me wonder why we *generally* hear fewer voices in favor of stronger connections among the members of our own family—the archival associations throughout the United States? Rarely since the late 1980s and early 1990s have archivists discussed this particular goal.

I think the time has come for all of us in the archives profession to actively explore the relationship among our associations, and I want to use my talk to share with you some ideas about how we might do this and why it is important for us to try. This joint meeting of three of our associations in the nation's capital, with Archivist of the United States David Ferriero giving us his own plenary talk and the National Archives serving as one of our hosts, makes this an appropriate time and place to talk about unification. Here in Washington, where our organizations have been more active recently in the process of appointing a new Archivist of the United States, in trying to move the Preserve the American Historical Record legislation through Congress, and in advocating for the

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reauthorization of NHPRC, we have the appropriate setting for considering why unification is important and what it could enable us to do.

For me, this idea also has a more personal side that I would explain in terms of my own archives career. With graduate degrees in American history, I got my first archives position in the West Virginia Collection at West Virginia University Library. A strong regional collection of both published and primary source materials, the archives includes manuscripts as well as court and local government records. My next position took me to Penn State University where I directed a manuscript collection with strengths in Pennsylvania industrial and labor history. A final move brought me to the Wisconsin Historical Society and the position of state archivist of Wisconsin that I currently hold. My varied roles at the Historical Society include administering a government records repository, chairing a state historical records advisory board, and managing a large research collection of personal, family, and organizational papers. In Madison, WI a street runs from the University of Wisconsin campus where my repository's reading rooms and collections are located, to the state capitol building. To carry out my Historical Society roles, I have walked the length of that street back and forth so many times that I finally realized it represents the spectrum of my career, with traditional research interests on one end and government records and information management on the other.

The archives associations I have joined and worked with parallel my career path. Enrolling initially in SAA and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Association, I later transferred to the Midwest Archives Conference when I moved to Wisconsin. Through

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the Historical Society's membership in NAGARA, I started participating in that organization as soon as I got to Wisconsin and almost simultaneously joined the state archivists' organization, then called the Council of State Historic Records Coordinators. In 2004, SAA members gave me an opportunity to serve on the SAA Council, and I have been privileged to continue as a member of their leadership group with one short break right down to today.

Perhaps my moving from one kind of job to another and working in several associations sounds downright promiscuous to you, but I describe my professional journey only to point out that the notion of unifying our archives associations reflects my professional experience and has an almost intuitive appeal for me. My career may not be typical, but on the other hand I do not think it is unique. I am by no means the only archivist whose responsibilities have bridged government archives or organizational records as well as manuscripts. As the A*Census enumeration of archivists has shown, a large proportion of us belong to more than one association. Clearly I have good company in maintaining activity in several archives organizations, and this is partly because of the way the landscape of archival associations has evolved.

In the U.S. we have an amazing jig saw puzzle of separate and independent archives associations at the national, regional, state and local level. Figuring out how these pieces fit together (or whether, in fact, they fit together) would be challenging enough if their numbers were stable. But there seem to be more and more every year. Around 2000, the National Forum on Archival Continuing Education counted a total of sixty-one. The SAA

website currently lists sixty-four. The 2004 national census of archivists says that we have at least twenty more associations than SAA counts. We cannot be sure that all of the archives associations found by the census project still exist, but realizing that this number does not account for other programs like the archives institutes and the archives student chapters, we can still surely say that our organizational cup overfloweth.

Let me make two points about this associational landscape. First, multiple archives organizations bring benefits and represent potential. Archivists clearly gain when there are associations for various branches of the profession. Today's national archival associations offer fellowship and services to film archivists, government archivists, religious archivists, and certified archivists. The regional, state and local archives organizations bring the benefits of association services and networking closer to archivists' homes and places of work, and though the student chapters are parts of SAA rather than separate entities, they make an important contribution by fostering a professional identity among archivists from the time they start taking their first course in a graduate archives education program. The second and fairly obvious point is that there are historical reasons why we have sprouted all our organizations. Since the 1960s, there has not been a national archives association capable of encompassing all the various interests and needs of an increasingly differentiated and numerous profession. It's not the broadening and specialization of our profession that differs from many other professions, it's the fact that these trends have gone on outside the framework of a single national archives association.

This fragmented characteristic of organized archives professionals became noticeable in the 1970s, when the government archivists created their own national organization and the earliest regional associations emerged. The trend began at the state level even earlier, when first archivists in Michigan organized their own association in 1958, followed in the next decade by their counterparts in Georgia and then Ohio. The Midwest Archives Conference held its founding meeting in 1972, as did the MidAtlantic Regional Archives Conference. Seeking fellowship and professional services closer to home, some of the geographical groups consciously opposed what they felt was the formality and remoteness of the Society of American Archivists.

The extension of archival organizations beyond the bounds of a unifying framework continued in the 1980s and 1990s. Additional state and regional associations joined the pioneers, while both the Academy of Certified Archivists and the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators got organized in 1989. The Association of Moving Image Archivists followed soon after in 1991 by formalizing an earlier advisory committee on film and television archives that already had international membership. This was not a simple process of new groups appearing completely unrelated and independent from existing ones. Before the ACA achieved its own organization, it had developed within SAA. COSHRC began with the sponsorship of NHPRC but decided in 2001 to stand on its own as a fully independent organization--the Council of State Archivists—meeting in conjunction with NAGARA. By the turn of the century, the continuing processes of differentiation and proliferation had yielded about eighty-five archives associations with no overarching structure to connect them.

The lack of a single, unifying national organization for archivists can be deceiving, in two ways. First, regardless how many associations we form for all the different kinds of repositories and archives specializations we work in, there is just one archives profession. At the core of this profession we have a body of knowledge and practice that underlies all the various applications we employ them for. We also share professional values and ethics that identify us as archivists and distinguish us from other professions. These fundamentals of course do not make all archivists look, talk and act the same—as a group we are much more varied and interesting than that! But there is much more in our professional roles, daily problems, and aspirations that unite us than our many separate associations would suggest.

Second, while our organizational map seems fractured, the memberships of our associations actually overlap to a considerable extent. The A*Census study found a widespread pattern of respondents belonging to more than one organization. Not surprisingly, nearly eighty percent of CoSA members were enrolled in NAGARA; roughly ten percent of many regional association's members belonged to ALA's Rare Books and Manuscripts section; and between three-fifths and two-thirds of CoSA, NAGARA and many regional associations' members were also SAA members. What this suggests is that though our organizations have split and multiplied, they are often sharing the same members.

Does it make sense today to try serving a core membership with more than seven dozen independent archives associations? In the bounding economy before 2008 it may have seemed defensible. Employment of archivists grew, new repositories were founded and existing ones expanded, graduate archival education programs spread, and the process of professional specialization appeared to require more and more separate organizations. The sharply changed economic realities since 2008 call this into question.

Simply put, the crowded field of separate archives associations stretches the resources for widely shared goals too thin. Though we collaborate on some important work, we still duplicate our efforts in other ways. SAA, CoSA and NAGARA all have ambitions to provide clearinghouses of information for archivists and we all continue to offer continuing education to professionals, as do many state, local and regional associations, without a national framework to define and rationalize our respective roles. As a result of these overlapping programs and because of inadequate budgets even when the economy is expanding rapidly, the increasing number of archives organizations means that we are not making the best possible use of our resources. CoSA's and NAGARA's strategic plans include goals to address sustainable finances. While SAA seeks the right balance between earned income and other revenue for its budget, its current resources constrain its ambitions and its progress on its own strategic priorities.

We take pride in holding joint annual meetings like this one, and we should. Over the past twelve months, I have had a front row seat on the work that volunteers and paid staff in our national organizations devote to putting together a meeting for the whole archives

profession, and I can tell you that it takes an entire year of sustained work. But we also have to realize that building one broad stage on which all archivists can come together once a year is also logical and important and something we should try to do **every** year, just like many other professions do. We should also realize that current communications and information technology has the potential to blur the boundaries separating our archives associations. This could encourage particularly the younger members of the profession to follow their lifelong habits and use the Internet to select the professional resources they want and need, regardless which organization offers them. Rather than forge connections with just one or two associations, newer members might tend to look for the best available virtual services and support for their interests. The logic behind their approach to membership and professional identity could collide with the way we are trying to build and maintain our organizations

The challenge we face today is not that we have many organizations, it's that we have little or no connections among them, no framework to bring them together and to focus our resources and our efforts on our highest priorities. We might imagine several ways to respond to this challenge. One conceivable approach that I think makes no sense at all would be a grand merger of our associations into a single larger organization with a consolidated membership. Dissolving our associations and trying to regroup on a new basis would be a complete non-starter. In fact, it would uproot deep organizational loyalties that long-term members formed over decades that sustain a great deal of productive work for archivists and for our profession. It would fully merit the ridicule

and resistance it would receive from all of us who value the organizations where we have our primary connections.

A second approach to forging connections that we could imagine would be keeping all our associations separate and independent but resolving to collaborate regularly on key issues. Collaboration works well in the right circumstances and for relatively short and highly focused efforts. As experienced archivists and other experts have pointed out, however, collaborative work requires extensive preparation by participants and thorough understanding of organizational aims and project goals. To unify our profession through repeated collaborations seems cumbersome, time-consuming and costly.

There is another way that I want to propose, and that is a federation of archives organizations. When I say “federation” I simply mean a new national organization that our existing associations could voluntarily join, with which those associations would align in terms of basic policies, and to which they would commit support in the interests of serving all members—their own as well as the federation’s—and pursue agreed-on goals.

This would not be a simple solution if we decided to adopt it. It would require big changes for all the archives organizations that would participate, but it offers two enormous advantages. First, a federated structure provides a way to unify the archives profession in pursuit of widely shared and long-held goals. Second, it depends for success on our current associations continuing their roles and services in the archives field. A

federation could be a natural way to build on the growth of our associations and to gain strength for our profession from the last forty years of organization-building. We have organizational blueprints in allied professions that suggest what our associations could try through federation.

The American Library Association offers one model. Let's keep in mind that ALA is not a federation, so its example is not one we can simply copy to connect our many separate associations. ALA is also much larger than all archival organizations combined. On the other hand, it is an organization that spans the wide variety of professional library specializations, sub-specializations, and state and regional chapters, supports the work of these units, and at the same time unites them in one national organization.

The American Library Association itself resembles an umbrella under which a complex network of component groups operate. Members pursue their specializations through major divisions like the American Association of School Librarians, Library Leadership and Management Association, and the Public Library Association. Though these are all units of ALA, they in fact function fairly autonomously beneath the national umbrella, supported by dues of their members. They hold their own meetings, conduct their own business, and in some cases publish their own journals. The larger ones also spawn sections, interest groups or forums that offer a focus for still greater specialization among their members.

Of equal interest here are the ALA chapters. These are independent state, regional and territorial library associations affiliated with ALA but conducting their own business in their respective jurisdictions. They gain the status of a component group when ALA's governing body approves their voluntary request to affiliate. They cooperate with the national organization to promote library service and librarianship in their geographic areas, add a level of geographic representation within ALA's governance structure, and coordinate advocacy on key issues with other chapters and with ALA itself. ALA provides staffing to support and strengthen chapters. While the chapters themselves pay annual dues to ALA, their members do not have to become individual ALA members.

Divisions and chapters constitute only part of ALA's elaborate organization. There are also committees, affiliates, and roundtables that represent other library interests and levels of participation. Keeping such a diversified organization intact and on track no doubt requires constant effort and unending adjustments. What we should note, though, is that within one broad organization, ALA has found a way, perhaps tenuous and certainly prone to continual stresses, to combine a variety of professional library specializations, interests, and geographic groups in a single structure. Though acting with considerable freedom, these groups both support the national organization (financially and otherwise) and adhere to the policies set by the organization's governing body. When ALA needs to make its views heard in national debates and when it wants to coordinate national public relations campaigns or develop standards for library work, it can draw on all parts of its expansive structure. This is one example our archival organizations could examine for

ways to unite on shared interests without surrendering our separate activities and identities.

There are others; many cultural resources and information professions follow the librarians' example of inclusive national organizations with significant numbers of affiliated groups. The American Association of Museums incorporates independently-chartered regional museum associations and has affiliations with several dozen organizations representing all kinds of museums. The AAM offers its new members a range of interest groups, most of which require additional dues to join. The Society for American Archaeology similarly has a broad international organization that invites affiliation from state, local and special-interest archaeological groups and provides representation for these affiliates in its structure. ARMA also features regions within which are chapters of the parent organization.

The point of all these examples is that librarians are not unusually adept in their organization building. On the contrary, it *suggests* that we archivists with our plethora of separate, disconnected organizations may be the outliers. Examples from other professions give us concrete models of tiered organizations, policies and governance practices that enable them to combine independent action by the limbs and branches with a strong central supporting trunk. We cannot of course adopt one of these alternate structures wholesale for our own profession, as though we were putting on a change of clothing. But we can draw on elements that would work for our circumstances and for our

values and we can follow certain principles of organization that have allowed other professions to unify.

So what would a unified archives profession look like, how would it get work done, and what difference would it make to archivists and archives? Let's think about a national archives federation, because unlike the professional organizations I have been describing, whose component groups developed *within* or in close connection to a single association, we start with our disassembled jigsaw of about eighty-five pieces. Our goal should be to build the right kinds of connections and relationships among our associations so that we gain a single national organization with the strength to pursue a national agenda that also allows its constituent groups to continue serving members in ways they are best equipped to do.

An American archives federation could resemble other professions' associations in having both geographically-based chapters, units based on archival functions and repository types, and affiliated organizations. All of these would have their own individual and institutional members who in most cases would also belong to the federation and receive benefits as federation members. No existing archives organization would need to change its current mission or functions in order to join the federation, unless it chose to do so. Although its policies and positions on key archival issues would need to be consistent with those of the federation itself, it could otherwise continue to operate much as it does today, within the framework of a national body. NAGARA could continue as NAGARA; in fact, an American archives federation without a government

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archivists/records administrators group would be quite an odd thing indeed. CoSA could continue as CoSA; a federation would be much stronger and more effective with the state archivists working in it as a component group. Regional, state and local archives associations could likewise continue as they currently do, and they in particular would give the federation broad-based participation and balance.

While the devil always lurks in the many details of such a proposal, a plenary talk is not a good way to address them. In order to avoid sounding merely superficial and blithe, however, let me very briefly touch on the weighty matter of governance. All of our archives associations have small governing bodies. We probably do not need larger ones, but it is striking that they are all fairly similar in size when the memberships they represent range in number from a few dozen to several thousand. To steer a larger and more complex national federation, we would need to investigate a tiered governance arrangement in which policy and other major decisions rest with a representative council or assembly much larger than any of our current governing bodies. We would also need a much smaller executive group to make operating decisions between council sessions. We could ensure representation from the various components of our federation through formulas that assign one or more council seats to chapters, interest units, and affiliated organizations. Decisions on dues and changes to the constitution or by-laws could be reserved to decisions of the entire membership. Members would also cast votes for the federation's national officers.

Again, let's recognize that working out the blueprint, to say nothing of putting it into practice and making it function, would be challenging. The point we need to remember is that larger and more complex professions have evolved similar structures. We need to make the effort, and we could start by forming a joint commission or federation to which our associations would send representatives to adopt organizational principles, governance structures, membership categories, and financial plans. While the commission members would shoulder the responsibility to produce a proposal covering all these things, the commission itself needs a clear and definite charge, a timeline to complete its work, and resources to support its meetings and deliberations. Even more, it needs participation from both our national organizations and from enough regional, state and local associations to forge an agreement that represents critical mass in the profession and that has momentum. On the other hand, I see no reason why all the archival organizations that might ever join a federation need to participate in its initial formation. As we know from the rapid technological developments taking place all around us, early adopters gain some advantages, but not exclusive ones.

To set out on this road is to face a new set of challenges in place of the ones we deal with as a host of separate associations. Among others, a major challenge will be balancing the needs and interests of component groups with the imperative to strengthen the profession overall and to achieve a level of national influence without which we cannot reach long cherished goals. Because these challenges will be daunting, our organizations that enlist in the unification effort must bring an earnest commitment to the work. We cannot expect to succeed in this kind of endeavor if we are weighed down with too many conditions,

qualifications, reservations, and overly protective instincts. But since the delegates to a commission on federation must be accountable to their own associations, the associations themselves must instruct their delegates to produce results and the associations must have both the will and the patience to pursue the discussions to a successful conclusion.

So let me return to the fundamental question of why we would do this in the first place. What could we gain by the work it would require to bring our associations together and the inevitable compromises we would need to adopt in order to keep a new structure as inclusive as possible? I think we stand to gain in at least three areas: advocating for archives; defending archives; and enhancing our members' professional resources.

I believe that a unified archives profession gives all members a stronger and more persuasive voice on the issues that matter a great deal to us: state and national policies that affect archives and archivists, particularly access to records; state and federal funding for archives; professional standards; and the role and status of the National Archives and Records Administration. Our advocacy work is improving, but more often than not our agendas are still more expressions of hope than plans we can implement. We must progress much further, and having one united organization to speak for our highest priorities stands a better chance of getting attention from Congress, federal agencies, state and local governments, academic institutions, standards organizations, and similar sites of power.

We also need a unified profession and a single national organization to defend archives and archivists. We united in the 1980s to restore the independence of the National Archives, but we now and in the future need a single, powerful protective arm in many instances. Our repositories face political pressures and even frontal attacks more often than we like to think, and our many associations' dispersed leadership and membership often cannot respond quickly enough. Slumping budgets in states and localities are exposing many archives to consolidation and reorganization schemes that jeopardize their programmatic integrity. Financial hardships can threaten privately-funded archives, too. Political and even personal biases can also at times imperil archives and the public trust roles that archivists must play.

In another sense, we must defend our own status as professionals and advance the educational and training requirements and other standards that we have worked so long and hard to develop. I believe we are seriously mistaken if we think we have finished the work of developing standards for entry to the profession. Professional qualifications, values and standards go to the heart of what it means to be an archivist, and all of our organizations must come together to ensure that we can improve these standards and that we can increase our control over their development.

Finally, an association that unifies all archivists in one organization can do more to accomplish the fundamental purpose of any professional association, and that is to serve its members. From the late 1980s through the early years of the past decade, several of our national organizations devoted enormous efforts to improving continuing education

for archivists. These were important initiatives, but they were separate and uncoordinated.

We can better enrich our members' professional futures by developing a national continuing education program for professional archivists, in which we use our resources rationally to cover the varied knowledge and skills needed in our careers. A single national organization can effectively deliver this program through its chapters and component groups, and a national advisory committee with representation from all branches of the association can evaluate, assess and provide feedback to continually improve that program.

We also need much better Internet resources for professional archivists, aspiring archivists and everyone who needs information about our profession, and a unified federation could better pursue this goal than a range of separate organizations. Although many of our groups today maintain wonderful websites that could continue after unification, it makes little sense to expect archivists and members of the public to discern the most current and authoritative information from the welter of existing archives association websites that show up on results pages when we search on any number of topics, whether it is graduate-level or continuing education programs, conferences, archival standards, repository directories, job announcements, or general information about what we archivists do and where to learn more about us. Truly outstanding websites serve many purposes, but for a professional association they offer a powerful tool for enhancing members' professional lives, and focusing our resources on the effort to develop such a tool is another way that a united profession can serve its members.

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Our associations all do good work; occasionally we separately accomplish significant things. But we dream of doing more; indeed, we have committed to doing more. My recent predecessors as SAA presidents have talked about archives power at their plenary addresses. In a sense I am also talking about power, because I think that without greater power through unification we cannot achieve the larger goals to which we aspire. We believe that archives are not just good things; we believe that they are essential. We believe that a vibrant civic life in this country can no more exist without active and accessible archives than it could without engaged citizens. We know that archives protect Americans' democratic rights and entitlements, enrich their cultural lives, and keep their organizations accountable. Let us come together to support these beliefs, these professional principles, and with the power of unity and common purpose build a future where we turn our aspirations into accomplishments.

Thank you.