Archival History Roundtable Newsletter

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IN THIS ISSUE

- AHRT in Pittsburgh
- New Chair
- Archival History Sessions at the Denver SAA Convention
- AHRT Meeting in Denver
- Concern for the Public Record: Federal records and the 1810 Committee on Archives
- Archival History Publication

AHRT in Pittsburgh

About 30 people gathered for the Archival History Roundtable meeting at the Society of American Archivists Conference in Pittsburgh. Papers were presented by Ellen Engseth (North Park University) and Jeannette Bastian (University of Pittsburgh/Simmons College). Abstracts of these presentations are in this newsletter.

New Chair

Jeannette Bastian will take over as chair of AHRT after the meeting in Denver. Ms. Bastian is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Archives Program in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. Formerly the Director of the Libraries and Archives of the United States Virgin Islands from 1987-1998, she holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences, an M. Phil. from the University of the West Indies in Caribbean Literature, MLS from Shippensburg and a BA from New York University. Jeannette has published primarily in the areas of Caribbean Literature and government archives. At last year’s meeting of the SAA Archival History Roundtable, she presented a paper based on her dissertation research, “A Question of Custody: The Archives of the United States Virgin Island.”

Archival History Sessions at the Denver SAA Convention

Two sessions at the Denver SAA meeting focus on archival history. A session on Thursday, 31 August 3:30 - 5:00 is entitled “Culture, Administration, or Information?: Thee Archival Procession Search of a Mission.” Papers will be presented about Dunbar Rowland of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Thomas Owen of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and Margaret Cross Norton of the Illinois Archives Division. The second session looking at archival history meets Saturday 2 September 11:00 - 12:30. “Thirty Year’s Perspective: Evolution in Managing Archival Electronic Records at the National Archives and Records Administration” will have papers which consider the evolution of appraisal, description, and reference service regarding electronic records. Both of these sessions are scheduled to be taped which will allow those who cannot attend the meetings to still be able to purchase the recordings and listen to the papers.
ABSTRACT

A Question of Custody:
A Case Study of the Historical Records of the United States Virgin Islands

(Synopsis of a paper given by Jeannette Allis Bastian of the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the Archival History Round Table meeting in Pittsburgh. This paper presents a portion of the research results of a Ph.D. dissertation, "Defining Custody: The Impact of Archival Custody on the Relationship Between Communities and their Historical Records in the Information Age: A Case Study of the United States Virgin Islands," submitted to the University of Pittsburgh in 1999.)

On March 31, 1917, the Danish West Indies, consisting of three islands in the Caribbean Sea, St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John, were sold to the United States by Denmark and renamed the United States Virgin Islands. The Danish West Indies had been a colony of Denmark since the seventeenth century. At the time of the sale, the majority of the historical records created in the islands before 1900 were transferred by Denmark to the Danish National Archives. In 1937, the remaining records were collected by an archivist from the United States National Archives and sent to Washington. From that time until the 1950’s, small deposits of records were sent to the National Archives by federal archivists. This paper describes the details of these various transfers and the effect that lack of custody, and consequent lack of access to historical records had on the collective memory of the community of the Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands were originally discovered by Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. The Spanish never attempted to colonize them leaving it to the Danes to establish the first colony on St. Thomas in 1665. Early settlement on St. Thomas was sponsored by the Danish West Indies Company, a commercial venture chartered by the Danish crown to develop trading areas for Denmark in the Caribbean. Eventually, the Danish West Indies Company acquired St. John and then St. Croix together with a trading post on the coast of West Africa. These properties were taken over by the Danish Crown in 1754. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, enslaved Africans were brought from West Africa to labor on the sugar plantations of the Danish West Indies as part of a profitable triangular trade. The enslaved Africans soon formed the majority of a population which also included European settlers, primarily Dutch and English, with Danes in a minority. Denmark officially abolished its slave trade in 1803.

Following a bloodless rebellion and an official declaration of Emancipation in 1848, Denmark continued to rule the colony and in 1867 began negotiations with the United States for the sale of the islands. An agreement was finally reached in 1916 and the Danish West Indies was sold to the United States for twenty-five million dollars. The terms of the treaty included a provision for the disposition of records stating that the cession should include “any government archives, records, papers or documents which relate to the cession or to the rights and property of the inhabitants of the islands ceded.” The records themselves were primarily written in Danish, a language that was not accessible to the majority of the Virgin Islands population. Danish had never been the lingua franca of the population. By the end of the nineteenth century, English was the primary language in the colonies. The records themselves document every aspect of colonial life. The Danes were assiduous and conscientious record keepers and their records give a very comprehensive and detailed account of over two hundred and fifty years of colonial development. continued on p. 4

AHRT Meeting in Denver

The Archival History Roundtable meeting during the SAA convention at Denver Adams-Mark Hotel is scheduled on Friday 1 September 1, 3:30 - 5:00. Two pages will be presented. Sara Harwell (Vanderbilt University) will give a paper, “Carrying the Torch for the Titanic: Archives and Historical Memory.” The second paper was written by Heather Muir (Immigration History Research Center) for an archives course at University of Wisconsin-Madison. She wrote about the career of Delores Renze, especially her work with the Society of American Archivists archives when it was housed in Colorado. Since Ms. Renze was a Colorado archivist, this paper is especially appropriate for a meeting in Denver. Please attend the roundtable meeting and invite others to come.
Concern for the Public Record: Federal records and the 1810 Committee on Archives

(Synopsis based on the presentation at the Archives History Roundtable, Society of American Archivists 1999 Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pa. Ellen Engseth, Director of Archives, North Park University)

In 1810, 124 years before the establishment of the National Archives, a Congressional Committee surveyed the condition of the federal public records and recommended for their care. Showing great appreciation for the records' important roles to the government and its citizens, they addressed issues of physical care, arrangement, and access. This episode challenges our general understanding of the nineteenth century as one devoid of any true archival activity at the national level.

On February 21, 1810, Congressman Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts moved to create a committee "to inquire into the State of the ancient public records and archives of the United States, with authority to consider whether any, and what, provision be necessary for a more safe and orderly preservation of them..." Quincy, with Representatives Jacob Swoope and Archibald Van Horn, swiftly conducted surveys of government records. In person and by letter, they inquired as to "the state of all the public records, recent, ans well as ancient" in the Departments of State, War, and Navy, the General and City Post Offices, the Superintendent of the City, the Surveyor of the City, and the Patent Office. In just over a month the Quincy Committee drew their conclusions and reported back to Congress. Their final three page report began:

"The Committee directed to inquire into the state of the ancient public records and archives of the United States, and to consider whether any, and what provision be necessary for a more safe and orderly preservation of them, have attended that service. They find all the public records and papers, belonging to the period, antecedent to the adoption of the present constitution of the United States, in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe or convenient nor honorable to the nation. Your committee therefore, are of the opinion that provision ought to be made, without delay, for their preservation and orderly arrangement."  

The final resolutions of the Quincy Committee Report offered detailed space planning and referred only to physical space. President Madison signed a bill one month later which authorized the addition of fireproof rooms to house the records of the State, War and Navy Departments, new housing for the Post and Patent Offices, and the relocation of the City Post Office and the Surveyor and Superintendents of the City. Congress appropriated $23,000 for these actions.  

The archival historians who have glanced at the 1810 Committee and the resulting Act conclude that this was an unsophisticated attempt to merely create more storage space for inactive records.  

Certainly, on one level, these critiques are sound. The Archives Act did not articulate any conception of the role of archives in the civic realm, nor did it discuss the records' relevance to the nation. Proper management of the national public record was not addressed. At first glance, then the Archives Act of 1810 is further evidence that American legislators' only conception of archives was simply that of a storehouse for inactive records, requiring only physical space, rather than administration and accessibility.

With a closer reading, however, the events of 1810 reveal an understanding of the public record and an aptitude for archival issues. These are evident in the Committee's efforts, and in the language of the report. Contemporary concerns for improved physical control, intellectual control, security, and access are obvious, conveyed with the words "accommodation," "suitable," and "useful and accessible arrangement." The committee disparaged the fact that they found governmental records in buildings that did not contain sufficient room for the general accommodation of those departments; nor can enable a safe and orderly disposition of the public records..."  

The Committee recommended physical space in their final resolutions because space allowed for order. Control and improved usage would follow physical accommodation. Throughout this report and the accompanying documents, the call for arrangement and accessibility is unmistakable; intentions for increased intellectual control are clear.

Unfortunately the Committee failed to articulate their greater intentions and the consequent Archives Act merely increased and rearranged the space allotted for departmental records. On the surface, the events of 1810 seem to be further example of our government's poor commitment to the national historical record and a testament to their tradition of neglect. However, a closer reading of the Quincy Committee Report reveals a Congressional Committee displaying surprising advocacy for the public record.

In 1810, concern briefly replaced neglect.

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2 Ibid., 4.


5 Quincy, "Report," 4-5.
A Question of Custody continued from p. 2

The Danish government was initially prepared to negotiate for the records since Danish historical societies lobbied heavily for the sending of records to Denmark. However, U.S. Navy officers, who had taken control of the islands after the transfer, not reading Danish, essentially ignored the treaty and the records, allowing Denmark to take what it wanted. Consequently, the majority of the records created in the colony were removed to the Danish National Archives. Property records as well as some legal records remained in the islands. In 1937, as part of the Survey of Federal Records Project, an archivist was sent to the Virgin Islands to claim custody of whatever records he could find. All of these excluding property records, were sent to the National Archives to form Record Group 55. The initial shipment was 1,260 linear feet. Subsequent small shipments brought the total to 2,070. The National Archives stopped taking in Virgin Islands records in the 1950’s.

Examination of the custody claims of both Denmark and the United States indicate that both parties felt legally entitled to the records, Denmark by virtue of provenance and the United States by virtue of the treaty and the transfer of ownership. Less clear but no less worthy of consideration is a possible claim by the Virgin Islands as the location of record creation. What is clear is that these competing custodial claims caused fragmentation and alienation of the records. More importantly perhaps, the lack of custody and therefore the lack of access to historical records has made it impossible for the Virgin Islands community to fully construct its collective memory. The consequences of that lack of access, both physical, and intellectual (due to the language), is notably seen in difficulties in the production and writing of Virgin Islands history and in the heavy reliance upon oral memory.

Archival History Publications

Richard Cox, University of Pittsburgh, has two new publications issued by Greenwood Press, which look at archival and records management history from different perspectives. Closing on Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management will be issued in August, 2000. The second publication, Managing Records as Evidence and Information contains some historical allusions. This work is due out in December.

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