

# **The Permanence of Provenance: The “Two Traditions” and the American Archival Profession**

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**Abstract:** “The Permanence of Provenance” defines and examines the “two traditions” thesis, which claims that the American archival profession owes its existence to the unique maturation of an historical manuscripts tradition and a public archives tradition over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I trace the development of this concept, focusing especially on its use in the three series of SAA basic manuals that have codified standard archival theory and practice since the 1970s. Two fundamental flaws handicap this literature. By using the annual reports of the American Historical Association, as well as the writings of early American archival theories, I discover that the origins of the American archival profession can mainly be located in a group of early twentieth century historians who transmitted European archival practices to the United States after carrying out research projects in the national repositories of London and Paris. The “public archives tradition,” usually characterized as adhering to often identified with such principles as democratic public access, provenance and original order, did not previously exist in the United States. I further examine how the “two traditions” thesis has been used by scholars in the recent past, and its implications for the future of archival profession identity in the United States.

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