

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

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The current consensus on the history of the American archival profession traces its roots to the two traditions of public archives and historical manuscripts collecting. The “two traditions” thesis claims that the 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. For some writers, like Mary Jo Pugh, Richard Cox and James O’Toole, the most important aspect of the public archives tradition was its adherence to the principle of democratic public access to records. Others, including Mark Greene, Richard Berner and Kathleen Roe, view the public archives tradition as not only committed to public access, but also the principles of provenance and original order. The historical manuscripts tradition, on the other hand, focused on the collection, preservation and dissemination (generally through editing and publication) of artificial collections of historical materials by historical societies and libraries.

Two fundamental flaws handicap this literature. The first is that there was no tradition of public archives in the United States before the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the second is that the difference between the two traditions as they exist today lies not in practice but in ideology. While early Americans may have assumed that the “government authorities at both the local and the colony-wide levels, as representatives of the whole community, would be creators and maintainers of records,”<sup>1</sup> the preservation practices that developed over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were

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<sup>1</sup> James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* (Society of American Archivists: Chicago, 2006), 53.

quite different. Effective recordkeeping, even of public records, fell to the purview of historical societies whose goal was “documenting...accomplishments, not creating an evidential trail of government action.”<sup>2</sup> Even those records that remained in the custody of the federal government were maintained for historical researchers, as the 1893-1894 argument over access to the records of the State Department highlights. Andrew Herbert Allen, the department’s Chief of the Bureau of Rolls and Library, refuted charges of the mistreatment of and limitation of access to records brought by the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1893. The State Department, Allen said, felt it held its archives “in trust” for the use of the historical writer and student, and augmented this trust by actively purchasing other documents “priceless to the historical researcher.”<sup>3</sup> The State Department was the only agency that “treated old archives scientifically, and the papers, restored and bound, speak for themselves.” In fact, the Bureau’s goal was the same the AHA’s—“the promotion of the study and knowledge of the history of the nation and the preservation of its records.”<sup>4</sup>

None of the defining characteristics of the public archives tradition are evident in Allen’s paper because they had yet to enter the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The origins of this tradition can be found not in the somewhat amorphous commitment to public records on the part of the early European settlers of North America, but rather in the efforts of a group of early twentieth century historians to transmit European archival practices to the United States after carrying out research projects in the national repositories of Europe.

In light of the goals of the group of historians responsible for its introduction to North America, it is ironic that the public archives tradition has become associated with the idea that an archivist’s exclusive function is to preserve evidence of transactions and other records of legal

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Society of American Archivists: Chicago, 2004), 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1894* (Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1895), 281, 283.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 291, 296.

import. The early members of the Public Archives Commission (PAC) were not archivists. Instead, they were historians, like Waldo Leland, John Franklin Jameson and Charles MacLean Andrews, who became familiar with the concepts of provenance and original order through their extensive use of European archival repositories. John Franklin Jameson was a professor at Brown University before taking over the Department of History at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, DC, in 1905. Under Jameson's supervision, the Carnegie funded the work of such researchers as Andrews and Leland and published guides to historical material relating to the United States found in various institutions in a number of other countries. At the same time, Jameson lobbied tirelessly for the establishment of a national archival repository.

During first twenty years of the PAC Andrews and Leland were two of the strongest advocates for the use of European archival principles. Andrews, a history professor at Yale University, sat on the PAC from 1901 to 1914, and authored, among other works, two multivolume guides to records found in Great Britain that are source material for American colonial history. The influence of European archival practice is readily seen in the chapter "Archives" he drafted for the proposed Primer for Archivists of the PAC. Andrews says, differ from historical manuscripts because they are not a "mass of papers and parchments fortuitously gathered and arranged...Archives proper are governmental documents only, preserved in official hands arranged in the order and according to the conditions of their origin. All archives are historical manuscripts, but not all historical manuscripts are archives."<sup>5</sup>

Like Andrews, Leland was an extremely active member of the AHA. He served as its Secretary from 1909-1920, organized the Conference of Historical Societies from 1910-1915 and sat on the PAC for 5 years in the 1920s. His experience with European archives came from the

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Andrews, "Archives," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1913* (Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1914), I 262-263.

more than ten years he spent in France compiling his *Guide to Materials for American History found in the Libraries and Archives of Paris* and this experience informs all of his writings about archives. He found that the U.S. was “immeasurably behind [other countries] in all that pertains to archives” with its “archives...neglected if not completely ignored” but felt that “the principles of archive economy evolved in European practice are applicable to American archives.”<sup>6</sup>

All three of these historians, along with their contemporaries, recognized fundamental and important differences between historical manuscript collections and public records. The distinguishing factor, however, was the manner in which the documents were created, not the ways in which they were used. These historians agitated on local, state and national levels for the scientific preservation of public records according to the principles of provenance and original order. They felt that history and history writers would be better served by provenance, original order, public access and government support than the existing methods, which varied from agency to agency but ranged from storing records in boiler rooms and attics to binding, reorganizing and publishing them. It was not until the next wave of archival activists came to dominate the profession in the 1930s that evidential nature of the archivist came to be emphasized over the facilitation of historical research.

Richard Berner, a manuscript librarian at the University of Washington, first explicitly articulated the two traditions thesis in the early 1980s in *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis*. His narrative of the history of the profession mirrors the histories found in the series of professional manuals the SAA published in the 1970s. These manuals were the first codification of archival theory and practice, and they were written to include both archives and manuscript repositories. Frank Boles and Roe point to this first series

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<sup>6</sup> Waldo G. Leland, “Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives,” Report of the Fourth Conference of Archivists in Annual report for the American Historical Association for 1912 (Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1913), 264.

as one of the major signs of the merger of the two traditions. In their view, the practices of the historical manuscripts tradition became increasingly inadequate after the exponential growth of personal manuscript collections over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The literature of the past two decades, especially as a result of development of evidential appraisal methods for electronic records that argue for the preservation only of those records needed for risk management and institutional accountability, underscores the differences in ideology between the two traditions. The gulf between the branch of the profession that serves an ever-more diverse population of cultural, institutional and national memory seekers and the one that serves to preserve evidence of transactions and records of legal import solely for its employer is seen by many to be widening. Interestingly, it is only as the gap grows that narratives of the professions history, like that of O'Toole and Cox, find the history of the public archives tradition in the United States to extend back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Berner, in his original formulation of the thesis, was quite explicit in marking the public archives tradition in the United States as a twentieth century phenomenon.

Mark Greene is merely one of the most recent writers to address a debate that has been around longer than the SAA. In a paper read at the 1951 annual conference of the SAA, Lester Cappon talked of the impact the establishment of the SAA had on the American archival profession. When discussing the relationship between archives and manuscripts, he reminded his listeners that an early discussion of terminology devolved into a highly unprofessional debate that closely resembled a farce. In the decades since, the debate may have become more decorous, but it has not become any less contentious.

The past thirty years saw remarkable, successful steps towards the standardization of archival practice. A consensus was reached about archival practice, but despite all the talk of

professionalization no consensus was ever reached as to who, exactly, is an archivist. The divide between the two archival traditions remains today and might possibly even be growing. Greene would not feel the need to make professional identity the topic of his Presidential Address at this conference if the question was settled. Archivists will always be made up of people whose titles range from manuscripts curator to records manager, but perhaps the next thirty years will see the ideology of the archival profession reach a level of unity equal to its current standardization of practice.