

Finding a Sustainable Place for Archivists within the American Library Association: A Historical Survey

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Introduction and literature review

The convergence trend compels many archivists, librarians and museum professionals to work together closely. Although some claim this trend is caused by digital technology, many of the issues influencing collaboration have a long history. An investigation into the attempts to find a place for archivists within the American Library Association (ALA) offers a compelling portrait of how archivist-librarian relationships develop over time. This investigation offers lessons both for individual archivists and for SAA in their attempts to build bridges across contemporary professional divides.

In terms of research methods, this paper "reads" archival history through the lens of "outsiders" by focusing not on archives and archivists themselves, but rather on how archives and archivists have been perceived and positioned in other societal venues over time. The theory grounding this research comes from **Louise Craven** of The National Archives, UK. Craven recently posited that archivists should seek to externalize their profession to find answers to contemporary problems: "[by] looking outwards, rather than from the inside [comes] a new set of answers to the question 'What are archives?'" This research also draws on the work of **David B. Gracy, II**, and his 1984 SAA presidential focus on "Archives in Society." Finally, **Robert L. Brubaker** was in 1976 the first to chart the history of interactions between ALA and archives/archivists.

Findings

1) The rise and fall of the Archives and Libraries Committee

Dates: 1935-1955

Why did it begin?: The committee's emergence can be attributed to two main factors: 1) the dynamic leadership of **A.F. Kuhlman** and 2) the initial energy of the nascent National Archives.

Early Influence of the National Archives: The idea of the committee originated in a letter sent by **Dorsey W. Hyde**, director of archival service at the National Archives, who wanted to replicate at the national level the success **Margaret C. Norton** had achieved working within the library community at the state level. In his proposal for the committee he charged it to "study and make recommendations for the proper extension of service, by the National Archives, to accredited research libraries" and to "study and make recommendations for the proper extension of service, by such accredited research libraries, to the National Archives." Members of ALA's Council were also excited to pursue this partnership, looking to the National Archives as a possible source of assistance for librarians with archival collections.

Kuhlman takes the helm: After its creation the National Archives played a much more muted role in the committee's activities. One could speculate that the National Archives transferred their energies to the nascent SAA. In any case, the committee found a powerful sponsor in A.F. Kuhlman, who for the last five years had revitalized the activities of the Public Documents Committee within ALA. Kuhlman organized joint meetings with archival and historical associations, with programs focusing on present issues faced by archivists.

How were archives perceived?: Kuhlman initially saw archives as merely another facet of government documents. In the first "statement of purpose" of the committee Kuhlman wrote "broadly speaking, a public document represents published archives, and archives are unpublished documents ... under pressure of economy, hundreds of state and federal serial documents are now remaining unpublished and are reverting to the status of archives." In such a definition the term "archives" merely signifies unpublished manuscripts.

Kuhlman learned more about archives during his tenure as committee director. In 1938 he attempted to survey all "those who are working with historical manuscripts and archives – official and private" suggesting his earlier definition had been modified. Furthermore, he was so inspired by hearing about the work of the Historical Records Survey that he proposed changing the committee's name to the "Committee on Historical Manuscripts and Archives" in 1940. It is much more difficult to discern how the rank-and-file membership's conceptualization of archives changed because of the committee.

Why did it end?: Although it is certainly true that the creation of the Society of American Archivists in 1936 drained some of the committee's initial energy, the archival record suggests other reasons ultimately doomed the committee. Kuhlman felt his efforts were not being supported by the ALA leadership. He first had to endure a long and difficult struggle to get the Archives and Libraries Committee upgraded from an ad hoc research committee to a standing committee. He then had to fight to get the funding necessary to support his vision. His leadership came to an end because of finances. Warning the ALA Comptroller in 1940 that "Either these projects are worthwhile and deserve a responsible proportion of A.L.A. income or they should frankly be dropped simply because the A.L.A. does not have the money to support them," Kuhlman resigned in 1941. The work of the committee was subsequently directed by individuals such as **Robert W. Hill**, **Margaret C. Norton**, **Julian P. Boyd** during the 1940s and 1950s, but it never regained its initial energy and never published any more of its meager proceedings.

A second possible reason for the committee's march into obscurity can be found in **Susan Lee Grabler's** history of ALA's Public Documents Committee. She notes that the Archives and Libraries Committee "pursued its own independent agenda relatively unhindered by the concerns of librarians" (60). One could speculate that despite the title "Archives and Libraries," efforts were not made to truly connect the two professions – rather the committee merely represented a passable forum for archivists to share their work – but not to share and compare their methodologies with librarians.

2) Abortive effort: An archives committee in the Reference Division

Dates: 1954-1962

Why did it begin?: In 1954, ALA hired a consulting firm to study its current organizational structure and to recommend a new organizational paradigm. This reorganization led to the dissolution of the then largely dormant Archives and Libraries Committee. It also led to a seven-year conversation within the ALA leadership about how archives related to libraries and how archives could be included within ALA's new hierarchy.

How were archives perceived?: One of the loudest voices arguing for the continuation of some kind of archives committee within ALA was **Ralph Hudson**, state librarian and archivist of Oklahoma. Hudson wrote to the ALA director: "Librarians and libraries have managed archival materials (and I think they have done a competent job) for a thousand years. They should not now refuse to accept responsibility...Archival materials are a part of the whole and I feel that we have no choice but to accept the job." In Hudson's letters, the archives profession simply doesn't exist. Rather, it is part-and-parcel of an indissoluble library profession.

Hudson's championship of archives in librarianship led to the recommendation that the new Reference and Users Division (RSD) take up the "responsibility" for archives within ALA. Many in the RSD leadership were very confused about why they were being asked to address the issue of archives within the new ALA. At a board meeting on the topic on June 21, 1959 the topic was discussed in-depth. The transcription of this meeting is a rich source for contemporary conceptions among librarians of archives and archivists.

One of the main issues with which the board struggled was whether archivists are or are not separate from librarians. Some members refer to an archival responsibility or the responsibility for archives as if, following Hudson, librarians were the natural individuals to manage these collections. Others point out that "other organizations are already active outside the ALA organization." But throughout the meeting archivists as separate professionals are rarely mentioned.

Why did it end?: The proposed archives committee never got started. The new history section did sponsor a number of activities related to archives during the 1960s, including a "special archives manual subcommittee" active in 1961 (which lead to nothing). The history section also worked with SAA and the American Association for State and Local History for various programs, yet a focused conversation about the relation between archives and libraries failed to emerge.

3) Manuscripts in Rare Book Libraries

Dates: 1967-1984

Why did it begin?: The Manuscript Collections Committee within the Rare Books Section (RBS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries emerged because of the energies of **Richard Berner** and **Arline Custer**. Motivated by their experiences working with the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, they felt that the training of manuscript curators needed to be improved, and that the best way to do so would be by launching a forum for manuscript curators within a library organization. Berner and Custer did not initially approach the RBS with their idea. They initially approached the Special Libraries Association, then the Subject Specialists Group within ACRL. Only after a significant amount of back-and-forth negotiation did they settle on the RBS, indicating an ambivalent relationship to the field of Rare Book Librarianship.

How were archives perceived?: In an early appeal for the committee, Berner wrote that "administrators of manuscript collections stand professionally in two fields, as librarians, and/or archivists. Yet they are of little influence in either." Berner wanted to give manuscript curators the power to make their voices heard within ALA, where most of their employers congregated.

Such a belief was reinforced by **Andrew H. Horn's** assessment of the proposed committee's first organizational meeting. Horn, then dean of the School of Library Science at UCLA, noted that "Mrs. Custer and Mr. Berner were heard, but not understood. Each [RBS, SAA and the Manuscript Society] felt that his organization was meeting the needs and problems in the management of manuscript collections." Yet the discontent of those manuscript curators present suggests otherwise. In Horn's view, manuscript curators are seen as an in-between profession. Struggles over the "souls" of manuscript curators became a frequent topic of discussion at Manuscript Committee meetings. Some claimed they were essentially archivists while others, such as **Clyde Walton**, felt that the committee's focus "should be on libraries, rather than archives ... there was a great need for representation for people who work in manuscripts, but are not actual archivists." Walton's position recognizes the existence of archivists but denies them monopoly over the management of manuscript material.

Why did it end?: After ten years of strong activity, which peaked in 1972 with the Rare Book Section becoming the Rare Book and Manuscript Section, the Manuscript Collections Committee began to lose steam. There are two main reasons: 1) SAA began paying more attention to the needs of manuscript curators within libraries, and 2) the Joint Committee between SAA and ALA accomplished much of what the manuscripts committee was charged to achieve. The last document of the committee, prepared by **Lisa Browar** and **Ellen Dunlap** in 1984, argued that the committee's energy should be re-directed to support the SAA/ALA joint committee.

4) The best of both worlds?: The SAA-ALA joint committee

Dates: 1970-present (modified to Committee on Archives, Libraries, Museums in 2003)

Why did it begin?: As suggested above, SAA responded to the threat posed by the Manuscript Collections Committee by directing more energy to archivists working in libraries. This energy resulted in a 1970 luncheon proposed and largely organized by then SAA president **Herman Kahn** entitled "Libraries and Archivists: Joint Problems in the Training of Archivists and the administration of Archives." Out of this luncheon grew the joint committee on archives-library relations. Although the idea of a joint committee had been suggested as early as 1950, this committee represented the first sustained forum for the two professions.

How were archives perceived?: When the idea of the luncheon was initially suggested **David Cliff**, ALA director, issued a circular calling for proposals. In response **J. Donald Thomas** suggested the joint meeting's "first step should be [to] clarify] what, exactly, an archivist is." Confused by rifts among archivists, manuscript curators, record managers and others, Thomas articulates the difficulty librarians have parsing out what archivists actually are.

A clear "ALA" perception of archives in the committee is muddled by the fact that by 1970 a significant number of individuals identified themselves as both librarians and archivists. At the first meeting over one-third of those in attendance were members of both SAA and ALA, suggesting the emergence of a hybrid, converged profession defying easy classification.

What issues does the committee face?: Since the joint committee remains active, I will instead focus on some of the different obstacles the committee faces. Perhaps one of the most critical is funding. In 1976 **Robert Wedgworth**, ALA president, informed **Mattie Russell** that ALA placed its own members' needs first, and thus would not provide funds for "those outside the association" to attend ALA meetings. This correspondence suggests the joint committee struggled to break the guild mentality to create professional synergy.

A second important issue the committee faces relates to power. Later in 1976 **Julie Virgo** asked Wedgworth if the joint committee served as the official conduit between the two bodies. She was confused about what role the committee was being given. In response to concerns such as these, the committee's charge was revised in 1985. However, its role between the two (now three) professions still remains ambiguous. The previously mentioned Browar-Dunlap report suggested that instead of a monolithic joint committee SAA and ALA should instead consider integrating cooperation between sub-divisions of their respective organizational bureaucracies. The two professional groups do work together at a high level, but it remains an open question whether this high-level of cooperation has translated into joint work and collaboration among the rank-and-file membership.

Conclusion and suggestions for further work

Reading the history of archives from the "outside" reveals new perspectives on archives and archivists. We can either discount these perspectives as misinformed, or we can seek to understand how such perceptions came about. This latter path allows archivists to approach inter-professional alliances, collaborations and convergences from a more historically grounded perspective.

This poster has merely sketched what in reality has been a large, complex and multi-faceted pattern of inter-professional collaboration. Much more administrative correspondence, especially from the 1960s and 1970s, should be integrated into future work to produce a more nuanced portrait of how archives have been perceived within ALA, and how this perception has shaped the way archivists achieve their missions within ALA and within the library profession. As the newly proposed Public Library Archives Roundtable illustrates archive-library relations are not going away. The more we know of this past the better we can respond in the present.

Timeline

Within ALA

T.R. Schellenberg speaks to Public Documents Committee

Archives and Libraries Committee begins

Archives and Libraries proceedings begin publication

Publications cease; A.F. Kuhlman leaves committee

Ad hoc Committee on Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections emerges within ACRL

Archives and Libraries committee abolished

Rare Book Section replaces ad hoc RBMSC Committee

Archives Committee proposed within History Section of Reference Services Division (1958-1961)

Manuscript Collections committee begins in Rare Book Section

Ad hoc SAA/ALA Joint Committee begins

Rare Books Section becomes Rare Books and Manuscripts Section

SAA/ALA Joint Committee made standing committee

Manuscript Collections Committee demoted to ad hoc committee

Manuscript Collections Committee abolished

Joint Committee expands to include American Association of Museums

Outside ALA

National Archives established

Historical Records Survey begins

Society of American Archivists established

Archives course at Columbia Library School

Historical Records Survey ends

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections proposed

Schellenberg publishes *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*

NUCMC formally commences

University of Texas Library School sponsors Institute on Archival Management

SAA establishes Manuscripts Committee

Manuscripts Committee renamed Collecting Manuscripts Committee

"Libraries and Archivists: Joint Problems in the Training of Archivists and the administration of Archives" luncheon

Archive-Library Relations edited by Robert L. Clark, Jr., published

Archives and Library Administration: Divergent Traditions and Common Concerns, edited by

Lawrence J. McCrank, published

40 percent of archivists report holding Masters of Library Science degree