Thank you for your introduction and for this invitation to join you for this happy event.

(When Ron Becker asked me to speak I promised two things: First, to say something useful about the role of special collections and archives and to be brief. You must judge the first, but I can assure now on the second point.)

A dedication, such as, this is one of those all too infrequent opportunities to reflect publicly on the longer-term significance of the business we are about. This act of dedication also is one of those rare occasions which evokes a sense of continuity and permanence, a sense far too fleeting in the late twentieth century. The dedication of an archives and special collections has a special call on our sense of timelessness. After all, here is a program whose express function is to protect and preserve for the future those elements of the present and past that we deem most significant.
Yet there is a paradox in this expectation. For what we preserve in our archives, and what our researchers come to study, is the very evidence of past change. And no one should know better than the archivist -- who is, in part, a kind of historian -- that the archival enterprise itself is as much subject to the forces of change as the documents we so carefully manage are a record of it. [The remainder of these remarks spins out this paradox of permanence and change in history and the historical record.]

The keeping of archives -- and throughout I use the term in the very inclusive meaning of special collections and archives as you intend it here -- is a very ancient undertaking. Archaeologists have uncovered precisely stacked clay tablets containing the accounting secrets of the Assyrian empires. We know too of the great libraries of the ancient and medieval worlds. Since those far times much has changed. The invention of cheap paper, the proliferation of commerce, the growth of ever larger and more complex societies, the spread of literacy -- all factors in the explosion of recorded information.

But the geometrical growth in the quantity of information is only the most obvious change. Modern societies demand ever more rapid access to and communication of information. Beginning in the 19th century, a series of inventions enabled us to produce,
transmit, and record information electronically. So now, in the era of the computer revolution, vast amounts of recorded information have no visible, physical or tangible existence at all.

Profound changes have occurred on the consumption side, as well as on the production side of the information equation. In the early years of the democratic revolutions, the written record -- in the form of constitutions and laws, real estate documents, and the papers of legal proceedings -- was essential to securing the rights of citizens, even if most of them were unable to read it. (Of course, it still plays that role.) In the 19th century, that "official" record, along with documentation of institutional and personal life, became essential source material for writing of history in the modern, scholarly sense. And, as literacy spread, the notion of history itself was democratized. Even the most ordinary family, community, group, and institution can -- and frequently does -- lay claim to its right to tell the story of its past and to preserve the documentation of that story.

Beginning in the 19th century, new institutions -- and new programs within older institutions -- emerged to meet a growing demand for preserving at least a portion of the outpouring of recorded information. In the midwest the state historical society was created as a public/private partnership, sometimes
even before the state itself was admitted. Elsewhere, state
governments established state departments of archives and
history. And in many places -- like New Jersey -- the state's
higher education institutions took on the role of preserving
documentary resources on behalf of the state's citizens. Today,
archives and special collections continue to manage the legacy of
irreplaceable documents saved for us by past generations of
curators, librarians, and archivists.

As heirs to that legacy, like generations before us, we still
identify, select, catalog, and otherwise care for our holdings.
Yet, in many essential respects, what we do now, and how we do
it, is profoundly different -- the result of new economic and
institutional environments, of changes in the creation and use of
the historical record, and of the information technology
revolution. (And as we stand on the edge, really still at the
beginning of the new Information Age, we can only anticipate even
more dramatic changes.)

I would like to touch on five changes that already have
transformed our business:

First, consider the proliferation of physical media in which
information of historical significance is now embedded. The
history of New Jersey, to use an example central to this program,
was once exclusively recorded in manuscripts, broadsides, newspapers, books and other forms of paper. To those sources we must now add photographs, motion picture film and videotape, audio recordings of many types, and -- increasingly -- disks, tapes, and other digital media.

A second fundamental change is in the very notion of what constitutes history. Today we demand a history that is far more inclusive of diverse cultures, interests, and perspectives. The lives of ordinary people, the nature of work, the origins of a consumption based society, and the meanings of race and gender are only a few of the current historical topics that were largely unexplored a generation or two ago. Today, scholars and students routinely expect that our archives and special collections will provide them evidence bearing on these concerns.

The third change I want to describe remains the most astonishing to me, perhaps because it has come upon us so quickly and because we can barely glimpse its full ramifications. Through our on-line computer networks, we now disseminate information about our archives and special collections to every corner of the world, virtually instantaneously. The precious descriptions we once captured so carefully on library catalog cards and on single sheets of paper, and then filed so carefully in drawers and file cabinets, have been liberated, freed like birds from their cage.
And liberated too are the potential users of our collections who no longer must have the privilege of on-site inspection to plan their work.

The fourth change that has transformed us is a paradigm change in the minds of archivists and librarians, a change that on-line networks have speeded but not created. We have left the era of the isolated, often highly competitive, individual repository, replacing it with notions of institutional cooperation, networked information, the virtual library, and the universe of documentation.

And lastly -- for the purposes of this talk -- we must recognize the relentless demand that our archives and special collections -- like the rest of our institutions -- be managed more effectively, work more productively, and demonstrate their value more convincingly. To accomplish this we must improve our micro-management, that is the ways we accomplish every day tasks from registering researchers to ordering photographs. But even more critically we must articulate and reiterate the contributions we make. And we must identify and make common cause with those friends and supporters who have a stake in our continued presence.

In the face of all this change and challenge, can we say anything
about permanence, continuity, enduring value? Well, I remain unshaken in my conviction that there exists an unflagging, profoundly human, desire -- one might dare to call it a human "need" -- to locate one's historical roots in an otherwise alienating universe. We want to know who we are as families, as members of ethnic, geographic, and occupational communities, as institutions and organizations. We want to locate ourselves in space and time.

Surely this has always been one of the great inspirations for scholarship in the humanities. And current trends in that scholarship only place the historical record and its integrity in a more central role. I am thinking, for example, of new understandings of what is termed the "construction" of history and of the attention this approach gives to careful reading of texts and precise understandings of whose voice is speaking through the historical record.

Creative teachers -- from high school through graduate school -- have long recognized the extraordinary educational potential in introducing students to the study of the past through the primary sources from that past, the archives and other documents. Students excited by breaking through the bounds of the textbook and confronting the original evidence directly, learn basic critical thinking skills and as well as sophisticated research
techniques. Unfortunately, problems of access and logistics have always limited student use. Today's new electronic media, such as CD ROMs and electronic textbases, can overcome these problems and create learning opportunities unimaginable in linear forms like books. The creation of these new media products will be a complex and collaborative process, but I believe we must seize this opportunity to reach a vast potential audience.

Fortunately, for you here at Rutgers, your Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities is already an international leader in these developments.

The potential for exciting new audiences about old documents is not limited to interactive media or to students. I marvel at the Ken Burns' gift for bringing the past -- largely through its surviving documents -- to life for mass audiences. Burns truly is a singular talent, but his success and the techniques he has developed, will inspire others (along with the opportunities in a 500 channel world, including the new "history channel"). Again, archives and special collections will need to stretch themselves to work with media producers but the effort promises the reward of far greater wider understanding and appreciation of our mission.

I want to conclude with this reiteration: For all the changes -- indeed the transformation of the very nature of the historical
record and how we use and care for it -- in dedicating this special collections and archives we assert our confidence in the enduring value of preserving that record. As friends of the institution, as contributors to its support, and as administrators, librarians, curators, and archivists we accept the burden of stewardship passed along to us by our predecessors. And we confidently look forward to maintaining this historical legacy for future generations.

Thank you again.
[We turn to many sources in our search for historical context: "reading" the facades of old buildings and the outlines of natural landscapes; studying human-made objects for evidence of method and intention; listening to the oral testimony of historical actors; recalling our own recollections. But the historical documents in our archives and special collections have a special place in this search for the past. They transcend living memory and surviving three dimensional evidence. Often they comprise an unintentional record, created for the present and not the future and thereby all the more revealing as historical evidence.]

To conclude, then, this act of dedication is, in fact, a leap of faith into a future whose only certainty is that it will be different from the present.
Building Bridges between Past and Future: Reflections on John Fleckner's “The Paradox of Change and Continuity”

Review of John Fleckner's speech “The Paradox of Change and Continuity.” Dedication of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University, 1994.

By Amanda Greenwood, Bigelow Project Archivist, Union College

Dedicated to the Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers University, John Fleckner's 1994 speech “The Paradox of Change and Continuity” presents a thought-provoking exploration of the future of archives. Fleckner explores the tension and interplay between two opposing forces: change and continuity. He suggests that while change is inevitable and necessary for progress and growth, continuity and stability are also vital for maintaining identity and coherence. Through perspicacity and prescience, Fleckner urges his audience to envision transformations that may occur within archival practices and institutions. He adeptly highlights the tension between embracing change while maintaining continuity, which becomes increasingly relevant as the archival landscape continues to evolve. Although contemporary readers may not have attended the live presentation, Fleckner's construction of thought and word choice is compelling and continues to be relevant to the profession today.

Fleckner's decision to use the word “change” is succinctly relevant to my experience as an archivist. As an emerging archives professional, this piece deeply resonates with my personal journey of navigating change and continuity. I have difficulty fighting off impostor syndrome and often face challenges embracing my new professional evolution while gradually letting go of my past career. Having spent the last fifteen years teaching literature in South Korea and the US, I have primarily experienced archives from a user perspective through my roles as a university lecturer and researcher. Nonetheless, by transitioning from a user to an information professional, I have become more aware of the intricacies and gratification inherent in the archival field.
Fleckner begins his speech by stating that continuity and permanence are “too fleeting” (p. 1); his musings about the ephemeral nature of the late twentieth century are even truer today as technological efforts in our profession have become more focused on capturing and preserving the ever-changing formats of social media and web content. By using these ephemeral, technical formats as evidence of change and continuity in our profession, Fleckner demonstrates examples of paradoxical elements that represent the permanence and significance of our field. At the center of this piece are questions about what we preserve in archives and how users access this information, as these concepts are "the very evidence of past change" (p. 2). Fleckner prompts us to contemplate how we can actively contribute to a better future through our work and proactively tackle challenges in our field. As the inevitable forces of change continuously shape the archival landscape, there is a lingering demand that archivists must adapt to the evolving practice of our field while preserving the present and past for future generations (p. 2). Fleckner highlights this dynamic nature through thoughtful examples, such as the discovery of clay tablets by archaeologists and the existence of ancient libraries (p. 2). These examples serve to remind readers that the care and management of collections require an iterative and ever-evolving approach that is intricately tied to the unique characteristics of the materials. Fleckner's overall point is this: we must adapt to changing technology, materials, and tools if we want to collect and preserve the change around us.

As history progresses, modern technology forces new archival practices, and Fleckner points out that the most obvious change in “geometrical growth” is the quantity of information (p. 2). This leads us to think of how we can adequately appraise and preserve information available to us. The demands for rapid access to, and communication of, information in our current society is most obvious in web content and applications. However, “in the era of the computer revolution, vast amounts of recorded information have no visible, physical or tangible existence at all” because digital technology has obviated past ways of recording data (p. 3). Moreover, the production of information begets the consumption of information (p. 3); quite simply, we do not have the funding, space, and dedicated staff members to collect it all.¹ Fleckner states that in the times of early democratic jacqueries, collecting legal and business records were “essential to securing the rights of citizens” (p. 3). By the 1800s, personal records became primary source material for scholarship, and any person or group "lay claim to its right to tell the story of its past and to preserve the documentation of that story" (p. 3). With the creation of new records and formats in recorded information, there was a growing demand for preserving this information (p. 3). Fleckner explains that state historical societies were created prior to the establishment of state government archives; following that,

universities adopted the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage on the state’s behalf; thus special collections and archives departments were born (p. 4). Preservation is still an essential element of our work, and despite the monumental task of recording and preserving information, our efforts are ongoing. While we acknowledge our responsibilities as archivists to be stewards of the collections we care for, we must also pivot to think about the paradox of change we are faced with as a profession.

Fleckner segues into five changes he believes have transformed our profession. First is the “proliferation of physical media in which information of historical significance is now embedded” (p. 4). History, once solely recorded in various paper formats, is now increasingly recorded in born-digital formats (p. 5); this allows us to offer researchers a clearer picture of the topics they explore through various multimedia. As technology encompasses programs and systems, how artificial intelligence\(^2\) fits into the future of our profession will continue to be an ongoing conversation. Experimental programs such as ChatGPT, or AI-powered platforms like Transkribus, are resources archivists can employ to improve our workflows, appraisal and selection, and metadata creation. In my position at Union College, I worked with Transkribus while supervising an undergraduate research fellow during a digital humanities summer program. We learned the program together, which was beneficial in weighing the positives and negatives of human-powered versus AI-powered transcription. The student learned that the program was helpful, but it required a lot of maintenance and management to achieve their desired results. Ten years after Fleckner delivered this speech, he was already thinking about the paradox of technology as it applies to our field,\(^3\) so I am curious what his response to AI technology is today.

Fleckner’s second change looks at “what constitutes history,” and he discusses how archivists work to emphasize underrepresented groups and unexplored topics in collections (p. 5). He states that “we demand a history that is far more inclusive of diverse cultures, interests, and perspectives” because people have an expectation that the records collected and made accessible by our special collections and archives will be reflective of their experience (p. 5). In the first twenty years since Fleckner delivered this speech, there seemed to be little progress on this front. However, in the past ten years, theories, practices, and scholarship in the areas of participatory and community archives,\(^4\) feminist

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\(^3\) John A. Fleckner, “The Last Revolution and the Next,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, nos. 1–2 (2004), [https://doi.org/10.1300/J130v02n01_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J130v02n01_02).

ethics,\textsuperscript{5} reductive and conscious description,\textsuperscript{6} inclusive linked data vocabulary,\textsuperscript{7} responsible and ethical curation,\textsuperscript{8} and anti-racist frameworks\textsuperscript{9} have become the industry standard in a collective effort to dismantle the white supremacist, patriarchal views and bias this society\textsuperscript{10} has imposed in archives and libraries.

While Fleckner acknowledges the gaps in diversity and inclusion in our field, I think he may have underestimated how central these efforts would become to the profession. Fleckner reminds us of how permanence, continuity, and enduring value measure against the challenges we face in archives (pp. 6–7). As humans, we have a desire to apply these qualities to satisfy our need to understand our histories and ourselves. Most of the time we seek this on our own, but we also “want to locate ourselves in space and time” and see ourselves recognized in history (p. 7). Not all histories and selves have been represented or recognized in records, but contemporary trends in libraries and archives have been working to remedy that. While there is still a lot of work to accomplish, efforts in the areas of reparative and conscious description, building inclusive and diverse collections, and the push to promote accountability and social justice have helped to open discussions about ethical problems and inequality in our field.\textsuperscript{11} Because of past unethical collecting practices,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” \textit{American Archivist} 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, http://dx.doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56;
  \item Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” \textit{Archivaria} 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687705;
  \item Lael Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies} 5, no. 6 (2018), https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6;
\end{itemize}

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Fleckner hints that archivists will see a flawed reflection when we hold up the cracked looking glass in the future. As we are currently experiencing the future Fleckner hinted at, his acumen in recognizing that these issues would prove to be problematic is fascinating.

The third and most remarkable change, according to Fleckner, is that of online computer networks. When Fleckner delivered this dedication in 1994, the World Wide Web was in its nascent stages, and the Internet was expanding at a rapid pace. As users could now instantly access information from anywhere in the world, collection descriptions that were once written on library catalog cards or sheets of paper could now be found with the click of a button (p. 5). Access became more equitable as users no longer needed physical access to research collections. Today, archivists use Semantic Web technologies and rely on linked data to improve description, assist with research, control inventory, and expand discoverability and accessibility of digital collections. Union College recently acquired Archipelago, a flexible, customizable, open-source repository. My colleagues and I have used this tool to collaboratively create descriptive metadata to make our content more globally discoverable. In the collection I am currently working with, numerous correspondents are prominent historical figures with authorized name records. Union’s Archipelago instance, renamed ARCHES, allows users to discover our collections through linked data entities. Like Fleckner, I find working with this technology remarkable because I have only previously used linked data as a researcher.

The fourth transformation Fleckner observes affecting the culture of libraries and archives is the move away from an isolated environment to a collaborative one. According to Fleckner, networks, consortiums, cooperatives, virtual collections, professional standards, and documentation in libraries and archives have helped us share information and not covet it (p. 6). Interdepartmental collaborations both within and between institutions have allowed us to not only share our resources but also shrewdly utilize our collaborators’ different skillsets to accomplish projects and goals. However, the current problems with the “marginalization of archivists’ labor” has led to underpaid and overworked archivists taking on several roles meant for one person, so newly hired archivists often need to acquire a variety of skills to be competitive candidates. I have personally seen this issue of taking on extra work exacerbated in web archiving.

The 2017 National Digital Stewardship Alliance survey reported that more than 50 percent of institutions dedicate only 0.25 FTE to web archives programs. This means archivists are completing main job responsibilities while adding web archiving to their required tasks. In a previous role, where I was managing more than thirty web archives collections in twenty hours a week, I was not able to maintain a sustainable program because of increasing maintenance load and scoping.

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labor. Sadly, the complexities of the current job market perhaps suggest that the “cycle of poverty,” as it relates to archival labor, is something that will continue into the near future.

The fifth change lies in the management of special collections and archives. Modern society demands that our institutions be “managed more effectively, work more productively, and demonstrate their value more convincingly,” all while receiving less funding (p. 6). Those who manage archives make budgetary decisions that can be transformational to an organization, and these decisions need to show those who support archives that we contribute significantly to our institutions and are worth the funding. Fleckner reminds us that we must “identify and make common cause with those friends and supporters” to accomplish this (p. 6). As someone who has worked in a historical house museum, a large state university library, a public library, and a small, private, liberal arts library, the common theme amongst all these institutions is that the organization must constantly prove its worth to its surrounding community. While this is no surprise to anyone in the archives field, the constant and exhausting struggle to convince others of our worth is reason enough for many archivists to leave the field. Perhaps some of the problem has its origins in graduate school programs producing too many archivists for far too few positions, mixed with the aforementioned problem of the competitive job market.

These five changes in our field may be challenging, but Fleckner encourages his audience to think about how archivists have endured through time because we have focused on preserving the historical record. Our dedication to preservation has encouraged others to take educational advantage of primary sources found in special collections and archives; teachers who work in all levels of education have always recognized the potential of using historical documents (p. 7). He also predicts that the promise of modern technologies will create many more opportunities for teaching and learning, but they will be complex. Fleckner concludes by reminding the audience that all the changes and transformations to the format of the historical record, and how we steward it as a profession, reflect the fact that we preserve these records for their enduring values (p. 9). All that we do now is to maintain a legacy for posterity. However, how do archivists understand the paradox of change and continuity in our profession? One way is to acknowledge that change is necessary and beneficial but also presents new challenges and problems.

If Fleckner were to present these comments today, he might have further revisions or additions. One major change I think Fleckner may have not considered is how our profession impacts the environment, and vice versa.

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intersection of archives, the environment, and climate change, Eira Tansey’s research\textsuperscript{19} has significantly contributed to a major area of scholarship in our field. Tansey's latest research often focuses on archives in the Anthropocene and raises questions such as:

How have material resources shaped our world and the objects we use? Does our future consist of climate chaos, or will it be the fulcrum on which humans reintegrate into a healthier relationship with our non-human kin? And how do local communities provide a foundation on which to weather a global problem?\textsuperscript{20}

These questions, when considered through the lens of archival work and combined with modern technology, require further rumination about how we can continue to advance our profession without doing further environmental damage or, at the very least, lessen the negative impact our profession has on the environment.

Additionally, if given the chance to give this speech again, I think Fleckner would focus more on the technology archivists employ today. He acknowledges his astonishment that technology such as online networks has “come upon us so quickly” and that he can “barely glimpse its full ramifications” (p. 5); his sentiments lead me to believe that a more modern version of this speech would be rich with both praise and damnation of the tools, programs, and systems we use. However, I am afraid that because of the speed with which society is advancing technologically, he may yet again state that we are only glimpsing the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Throughout Fleckner’s speech, his energy is joyful and hopeful, reflecting on the past to understand the present. As he marvels at the future of archives, the paradox becomes less of a contradictory situation and more of a deep exploration and contemplation into where archivists’ strengths lie. While there is undoubtedly tension between the need for transformation and the desire for endurance, Fleckner emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between these two forces to foster progress, innovation, and adaptation in our work while preserving our core values and ethics. As a newer archives professional, this article is inspiring and teaches me to be more accepting of change, more thoughtful about permanence, more forgiving of myself, and more hopeful of where the future of the field will take me.
