This a talk about the archival enterprise. It draws on thirty years of professional experience and it is delivered by an archivist trained, initially, in the discipline of history. But this is not a history. Rather, it is a reflection on the experience of dramatic change and on some enduring values of our profession which I believe will see us through future decades.

The demands of public rhetoric require that I present myself and my ideas with bold voice, strong assertion, and confident air. And I will accede to those conventions. But, in truth, I offer these reflections in a spirit of deep humility. Today’s near chaotic world of burgeoning technologies and profound social changes more often leaves me shaking my head in disbelief than admiring the wisdom of my insights. My purpose, then, is not to be definitive, but to encourage each of us to consider our own experiences of this change, to draw our own lessons from it, and to enter a dialogue about our shared future.

The first portion of my talk I title: “Not Your Father’s Archives” (with apologies to Oldsmobile) or, alternatively, “Archivists Who Live in Glass Houses”

Sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s I had my first personal brush with computers, a summer school introductory course. It didn’t come easy. I dropped out after repeatedly making typing errors on the punch cards that I had to submit dutifully for overnight processing by the unforgiving computer. Sure, computers were going to change the archival world, a few visionaries like Frank Burke were promising, but it all seemed pretty remote to me. I wanted to know if I’d ever get a real job and when the Vietnam War would end.

A decade later, a librarian colleague took me into the cataloging back room and revealed the new OCLC terminal. Using a sure-fire librarian’s trick, he searched out the computer record for my SAA manual on records surveys amazing me with a display of the full bibliographic and holdings data. I tried to cover my disappointment at how few copies of the booklet were actually out there, but my “gee-whizz” reaction to the technology really was genuine. Of course, more savvy archivists than I already had begun to see the potential of archives throwing in with libraries to exploit the new potential of networked information. I was just delighted that our Wang computer terminal, installed about that time, could be used as a smart typewriter, freeing me from recurring attacks of writer’s block and poor typing skills and churning out good looking finding aids for the reference room filing cabinets.

Fast forward now another decade, and rather than merely providing an amusing anecdote in a professional career, information technology, instead, has profoundly transformed the archives program I manage, the archives profession, and the entire archival enterprise. One analogy I fall back on to describe these dramatic changes is of the “old archives” as a closed vault with a
single, heavily barred door, opened for a few hours to those privileged to make their way to it; the “new archives” is a highly publicized, brightly lit glass house, open and day and night, where everyone -- not least my professional colleagues -- can see inside, inspect my catalog records and finding aids in depth and at leisure, review my policies, and professional practices, and pepper me with questions -- and answers -- at the tap of a keystroke.

As archivists we can take pride in the ways in which the profession has seized upon the opportunities presented us by the information technology revolution. Our on-line catalogs, databases, websites, virtual libraries and exhibits, and use of email are all dramatic extensions of our services once -- not very long ago -- limited to on-site visitors. But I am also struck by the circularity of these developments as our successes reinforce the rising expectations, indeed demands, of our customers and clients. They insist that archives -- like banks, book stores, and airlines -- recognize their information needs and respond even more fully, quickly, and effectively. And, even more extraordinarily, we are reaching new audiences, people whose faces we likely will never see, but who enter into our “glass houses” to satisfy school assignments, avocational pursuits, literary interests, and a diversity of other human curiosities. In my shop, at least, we don’t yet know much about these visitors individually but, our servers record their “hits” by the thousands and we receive their email inquiries by the scores every month.

Reinforcing demands upon us by the general public are the social and political pressures on our institutions to manage themselves more efficiently and with greater accountability. This has hit very close to home at the Smithsonian, an institution which, for most of its 154 years, operated with remarkably little management. In his installation speech on January 24th, our new Secretary, Lawrence Small, a former banker and the first Smithsonian head not a scientist or scholar, used words which must sound familiar to most of you, but which sent an unmistakable, unprecedented wake-up call to us: “Above all, we must be clear about what we intend to accomplish....we must be specific about the means we shall use to gauge and assess our progress.” And, continuing, “We must be prepared to apply to our activities some of the same kinds of strict standards that other entities -- units of government, not-for-profit organizations, companies and services in the commercial sector -- are increasingly using to measure success.” He went on with examples like these: “How many visitors are new?...How pleased were they with our exhibitions?...[with] the state of the physical premises? [with] the willingness of the staff to assist? What disappointed them?” I don’t have answers to the archival equivalents of many of those questions. I will need to get them.

I want to touch on another change, one which I can neither ignore nor adequately begin to grasp. The very nature of the archival record is changing inexorably. Two decades ago computers mostly held masses of data about matters like accounts receivable, payroll, and driver licenses. All very important for day-to-day living but of long term concern to very few of us. Today, most textual information, and much of the aural and visual record is created, transmitted, and stored in digital form. It can be endlessly replicated, effortlessly transformed, readily erased, and permanently lost -- and all without a visible trace. It can be disseminated, virtually without cost, to nearly anywhere on earth. I wish that I could offer some flash of insight, some formulation of words that would appear to make sense of this profound transformation; I can’t.
This is the challenge we face -- the challenge, especially, that those of you in the middle and the beginning of your archival careers will meet.

As I reflect on these decades of change mostly I picture opportunities taken and challenges remaining. But a look back also evokes, for me, some small sense of nostalgia and loss. The craft traditions of our profession fade in the face of new, less tangible record formats, the exploding volume of the record, and diminished resources available for our work. As the hours of commuting and the work demands increase, there is less time too for informal sociability and for contemplation. Time for volunteer professional service becomes harder to find. As a nation, we are a people in a great rush and nowhere is this truer than in our work lives.

The second part of this talk might be titled “Enduring Values” and it looks at four characteristics of our profession which will serve us well into the future. These are fundamentals which define our sense of mission and guide our choices of strategies and tactics, methods and practices.

First, we are a profoundly humanistic profession. Our core mission -- to identify, assess, manage, preserve, and make accessible a useable record of the past -- rests on a basic human need: to locate ourselves in space and time in an otherwise alienating universe. We want to know who we are as families, as members of ethnic, geographic, political, and occupational communities.

This impulse -- one might even call it a “need” -- always has been one of the great inspirations for humanistic scholarship. Current trends in that scholarship place the historical record, and its integrity, in an even more central role. For example, studies of the “construction” of history give special attention to careful reading of texts and precise understandings of whose voice is speaking through the historical record. Exploration of concepts like “authenticity” and “memory” open new perspectives on the archival record and on the very idea of “history”.

Humanistic study is not the exclusive province of scholars and intellectuals. Creative teachers -- from elementary school through graduate school -- long have recognized the extraordinary educational potential in introducing students to the study of our past through documents. Students, excited by breaking through the bounds of the textbook, and confronting the original evidence directly, learn basic critical thinking skills as well as sophisticated research techniques. Problems of access and logistics have always limited student use of archives; today’s new electronic media eliminate these obstacles, creating learning opportunities unimaginable in linear, hard copy forms. The development of these new media projects will be a complex and collaborative process, but it is an opportunity for us to reach vast new audiences.

A second, enduring characteristic of archivists is that we are a thinking, inquiring, learning profession. At the heart of our engagement with the record, and with the users of the record, is an on-going, interactive learning experience.

It is not only trite, but it is also true, that each body of records we confront is unique, each to be considered on its own terms as well as in context. And the records we confront -- whether we are institutional archivists or keepers of personal papers and collected materials -- will, over
time, include a head-spinning variety of forms, formats, and subjects. If you wish to know more and more about less and less, this is not a profession for you. If you are willing to be a generalist and a quick study, willing to acknowledge the limits of your knowledge, eager to learn something new nearly every day, archival work will bring satisfaction. In my own years of archival work, I have been immersed in areas as diverse as trial court legal processes, naturalization records, Congressional papers, Native American archives, records of invention, music manuscripts, greeting cards, the creation of consumer product brand identities, and the archives of photographic studios -- and this does not exhaust the list.

Archivists draw on historical knowledge and skills -- capabilities like the analysis of documentary evidence and the development of multiple perspectives -- to make sense of the context, content, and organization of the records we confront. Along with an understanding of archival principles and institutional missions and objectives, these are essential to archival appraisal and selection decisions which define our archives. Similarly, our descriptive practice blends archival theory and technical guidelines and standards -- cataloging conventions, controlled vocabularies, and the like -- with fundamental critical thinking skills of analysis, argument, and clear expression.

Surprisingly, this basic aspect of archival work is largely ignored. As an archival apprentice I was fortunate to have rigorous editors who insisted that my writing be informative, yet concise, and that my finding aids answer readers’ questions not merely add to them. Today, in our world of unmediated access to information by virtually unlimited audiences, cogent analysis and articulate expression are especially visible and valuable as we strive to communicate more effectively.

The thinking basis of our profession extends to the very nature of the field itself. This is most immediately apparent in the ways we have prepared ourselves to exploit the emerging information technologies. Not only have we reworked our graduate school offerings for new archivists, we have produced -- and consumed -- a steady diet of workshops, seminars, continuing education courses, and self-study to give us knowledge and skills necessary as practicing information professionals.

But our professional learning has not been confined to information technology matters. Colleagues like David Bearman, Jim O’Toole, Richard Cox -- to name just a few -- have challenged our thinking about the very core mission of the field and our methods for pursuing it. In the past decade, others have rigorously examined the actual work archivists do and articulated the range of archival knowledge and skills that are necessary to successful performance. The results of this study are now embodied in the published products of the Academy of Certified Archivists and in the Academy’s examination program. Similarly, graduate educators of archivists have examined their curricula and agreed upon a framework of theory, principles, and practice they believe are the underpinnings of professional competence. Finally, a major, new professional initiative is underway right now -- the National Forum for Continuing Archival Education -- supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Representatives from more than a dozen archival associations -- including New England Archivists -- and from some two dozen allied groups are examining continuing education needs...
My third assertion is that we are an ethical profession. This is true in the narrow sense that we have a code of ethics -- although I suspect few of us could put our hands it on quickly. The code specifies appropriate behavior in our relationships with users of archives, colleagues, and employers. Our code also commits us to high standards of impartiality, fairness, integrity, and honesty in our relationship to the archival record.

But even more important than our own code are the public’s perceptions and high expectations for our faithfulness to the trust placed in us. Although dated, the SAA report on social perception of archivists -- familiarly “the Levy report” -- is probably still accurate in depicting the paradox of great confidence in the integrity of archives but little inclination among the funders of archives to increase support for our virtuous institutions. Still, we must not dismiss the importance of this public trust as a genuine asset and one requiring our continuing stewardship. These public expectations are all the more powerful because we live in an era of suspicion, even cynicism, about all institutions. Fueled by revelations of Cold War excesses and by the relativistic effects of post-modern thought, these suspicions make our dedication to openness and transparency in the conduct of our business an urgent concern.

Two cases recently reported in the newspapers make these points painfully clear. In 1997 archivists at the Ohio Historical Society, the state archival agency, destroyed several hundred cubic feet of previously microfilmed state government records including state prison registers. This routine archival decision became a major, continuing news story when a concerned citizen challenged the action. “For anyone to destroy protected state records is a travesty and a crime,” he argued, “But it is simply unbelievable that the entity entrusted by the state of Ohio and its citizens, the state archives, has actually destroyed them.” The dispute continues, at least in part, because between the state law and state records schedules are inconsistent over the authority to destroy these records. In addition, the state and the historical society -- which is a private, non-profit agency -- had failed to meet the requirements of a decade-old state law to develop administrative rules governing the state archives function.

The second example involves a private institution’s handling of privately donated papers, but papers of great symbolic importance whose provenance and ownership were clouded. In June, 1945, shortly after the Allied victory in Europe, General George Patton gave to the Huntington Library in his hometown of Pasadena, California, an envelope of documents turned over to him by an American counterintelligence agent. The typed pages, in an envelope sealed with red wax swastikas were, as the Washington Post reported last month, “the infamous Nuremberg Laws, drafted hastily over a weekend in 1935 to legalize discrimination against Jews....nothing less than the legal blueprint for the marginalization and, ultimately, the destruction of European Jewry.” What happened then at the Huntington is poorly documented but the Nuremberg Laws were never accessioned and remained unknown to researchers until last year. Patton, whose racist and anti-semitic views are well known, did not want publicity for the documents. The current Huntington director, Robert Skotheim, speculates that the institution hoped this was the first installment of a donation of Patton’s papers, but six months later Patton died in an
automobile accident and this never happened. Skotheim also acknowledges, in his words, that “the documents were loot that probably should have been handed over to a government body.” Today the papers are on permanent loan to and display at the Skirball Jewish Cultural Center in Los Angeles but the questions remain. Some speculate that in putting the documents out of sight, despite their historical significance, the Huntington was reflecting the racist views of some of its officials and the surrounding community. Tony Platt, a fellow at the Huntington who researched the story, made the point in the Post article: “There should be a full accounting of what took place over the fifty years they had the document. They had a responsibility to check out who owned it, and to understand the history of the document in their own institution.”

My final point about archivists is that we are collaborative profession. The mission we espouse as individuals and institutions can only be pursued effectively through collaboration among ourselves as archivists and with allied professions. This has always been true of archival work but in our current era of electronic information technology it has become paramount. Over the past two decades, collaborations among archivists and with librarians and others has produced standards for information exchange like MARC and EAD which have become the foundations of our modern professional practice. Whatever solutions emerge for the long term management of information in electronic form surely will come from further collaborations of archivists, records managers, systems designers and administrators and a host of others with a stake in information creation and retention.

There are further opportunities for us in the new information age. The abstract concept of a universe of documentation -- a larger body of information that is the context for a specific group of records and for archival choices about those records -- is now far more tangible as our institutional databases and electronic finding aids are linked ever more effectively through the worldwide web. The Cultural Materials Initiative announced in January by Research Library Group greatly expands this concept. Cultural materials, for this purpose, are “published and unpublished texts, images of many types, artifacts and other objects” and the goal of this project is to provide electronic access to a significant body of images and descriptions of these materials to stimulate substantial scholarship and learning. The project will be challenged technically to deal with diverse descriptive levels and standards and diverse digital objects (various types of images, encoded text, and motion files). But it also will challenge century old boundaries between libraries, archives, and museums to assert a wholeness of the record of the past that we long ago lost in our scramble to distinguish our professions and their scope. In our focus on the challenges and opportunities of information technology we should not lose sight of another group of individuals who share our goals but not our professional identifications. Here I means those people who from conviction or habit or avocation are the savers, the unofficial archivists, the advocates for the record. They exist in every community, corporation, organization, and family. I am thinking of the curator in my museum who realized how much of the record of past exhibition work has been lost. In an unprecedented step, he allocated scarce exhibition funds at the end of a recent project to have an assistant, with direction from the archives, gather the scattered records from the multi-unit team which did the work and prepare them for transfer. I am thinking too of Carroll Wilson who joined the Hills Bros. Coffee company during the Coolidge administration, worked his way up to vice-president over a forty year career, and then devoted his “retirement” to assembling an extraordinary body of records...
and artifacts documenting the firm’s marketing history. I met Carroll when he was in his nineties, walking with two canes and slowed by near-blindness, but he knew by memory the contents of every shelf and drawer in his large storage area and he was still sufficiently energetic to oversee the donation of his life work to the Smithsonian and even to cajole his parent company into modest financial support for the records.

I want to conclude these remarks this morning with a message which might be summed up with this admonition: Face the future with humility and fearlessness.

I have tried here to reflect on my experience of the changing archival enterprise over the past several decades. I have suggested some of the promise these changes have brought and the challenges they present. I also have suggested that our grasp of the future is often illusory, a conclusion dramatically reinforced for me by a talk I heard just two weeks ago by the scientist and author Ray Kurzweil. The new century, he believes, will see 20,000 years of progress in 100, and before it is a third completed he expects molecular-level technologies will give us computers a million times faster and smarter. Developments such as these underlie the prediction in the title of Kurzweil’s new book, The Age of Spiritual Machines, machines which not only think but mimic human behavior in more profound ways. Kurzweil may be right or he may be wildly inaccurate, but in a world in which anyone’s guess seems as good as the next, prediction seem not to be a very fruitful line of inquiry.

In this talk I have also reflected on what I hold -- and also hope -- to be enduring as our profession moves forward into the future. I have argued that we are a humanistic profession, concerned with fundamental matters of meaning, identity, authority, and authenticity that are not time bound. We are also a thinking and learning profession, concerned with technique but not to the neglect of mission and purpose. We are an ethical profession, charged with a high public trust. And, lastly, we are a collaborative profession, inclined to seek out friends, in many places, who embrace our goals.

It is time now, in the few minutes left in this plenary session, and in the remainder of the day and in the days ahead, for you to consider this matter of who we are and where we are going. What changes have affected you most? Changes in your day to day work? In the role of your archives? What new demands challenge you? What new concerns? And what do you make of the soon-to-be-all-digital-world? What of our history endures for you? What truths do you draw on from your formal professional education? What lessons have you drawn from your day to day professional experiences? From your failures? From your successes? And, lastly, what messages will you pass along to the generations of archivists who will follow in our footsteps?
Relating Through Time, Space, and Smudged Glass: A Reflection on John Fleckner’s 2000 Keynote


By Brenna Edwards, Manager for Digital Archives, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Shaping archival literature is an honor, but how have foundational readings, lectures, and keynotes fared over time? The world and our profession have drastically changed in the last twenty years, yet some aspects remain the same. At the New England Archivists spring conference in 2000, John Fleckner gave a keynote address entitled “Enduring Values Within Glass Houses,” in which he offered advice on how archivists should approach the new millennium and technologies while maintaining their core values.

Fleckner structured his keynote in two parts: part one, “Not Your Father’s Archives/Archivists Who Live in Glass Houses,” and part two, “Enduring Values.” Part one focuses on how technology had begun to change the archival world, from OCLC terminals and networked connectivity to the public peering into the inner workings of archives through close inspections of online cataloging records, finding aids, and policies. Part two reflects on what Fleckner considers the four core values of the archival profession, which he defines as humanistic; centered on thinking, inquiring, and learning; ethical; and collaborative. Fleckner describes how archivists embody each value through their skills and practices, while also discussing how advances in technology might impact and potentially improve their work. Overall, the keynote is optimistic about the ways technology and archives can intersect and grow, while also being cautious about archivists maintaining their core values.
In this review, I reflect on these themes and how they are still relevant to archival work today. I also offer personal anecdotes as a digital archivist and thoughts about how other digital archivists might interpret and build upon Fleckner’s ideas.

**Part One: Not Your Father’s Archives/Archivists Who Live in Glass Houses**

Fleckner begins his address by describing personal encounters with technology from the 1960s to the 1990s, speaking about how his perceptions changed from frustration with punch cards to delight with networked information and pride in how librarians and archives embraced the “information technology revolution” (p. 2). While these changes have been positive, they have also led to an increase in demands from the public because more information is readily available, according to Fleckner. He also discusses how the “very nature of the archival record is changing inexorably” (p. 2), how archives should be prepared to store electronic information long-term, and what challenges might arise with electronic records. Part one ends on a nostalgic note, with Fleckner reflecting on the loss of “craft traditions . . . in the face of new, less tangible record formats” (p. 3) and observing how fast the world is moving with no slowdown in sight.

While his statements about how the world keeps moving and concern about “diminished resources available for our work” (p. 3) certainly ring true today, especially in terms of staffing and salaries, Fleckner also appeared to have an all-or-nothing approach to electronic records. He believed that archival collections would be solely electronic and that analog collections would no longer be accessioned. While many people adjacent to the archival profession have expressed this sentiment over the years, archives, in my experience, are still accessioning mostly analog material and only receive a small amount of electronic material. For example, for every ten banker boxes of analog material we accession at my institution, we only accession about five gigabytes of born-digital material. Although the exact proportion of analog to born-digital material changes depending on the collection, my institution only has a few collections that are majority born-digital materials. However, as archives collect more contemporary materials, archivists expect these collections to become majority electronic with small amounts of physical materials, which is in line with Fleckner’s predictions—even if we aren’t there quite yet.

Fleckner characterizes the pre-information technology era in archives as a “closed vault” (p. 1), with archives imposing restrictions on who could access materials, and the information technology era as a “publicized, brightly lit glass house” (p. 2), where everyone, the public and archives professionals, can peek inside archives at any time and see what they contain. Considering this address was given a year and a half after Google was founded but only months before it exploded in popularity when Yahoo! chose it as its default search engine,¹ I was surprised to learn that

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archives had embraced technology relatively early to share information about their collections. Fleckner expands on this idea by listing how archives and libraries utilized multiple avenues, like virtual exhibits and reference help through websites and email, to share different aspects of their collections. Suddenly, there was a way to find what you wanted without having to visit the library or archives in person—you just needed a computer, keyboard, and the internet!

This level of access, however, has a downside as well. With more accessibility comes more demands for archivists’ time, attention, and resources—a world we know all too well in 2023 and a phenomenon felt even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. When most archives shifted to online and remote work during the height of the pandemic, archivists and librarians relied on the internet to reach out to the communities they served. They transitioned programs to online formats, launched collecting initiatives to capture content about the pandemic experience, and connected to colleagues in work-from-home settings; many of these practices are still in use today. An example of a collecting initiative was the Theatre 2020 Project by the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, which focused on theatre companies’ reactions and practices during the height of the pandemic. From September 2020 to October 2022, project coordinators collected initial communications during shutdowns in March 2020, Zoom performances and oral interviews, digital programs, and documents and communications about reopening planning. I began project development with the performing arts curator when I started at the Ransom Center in July 2020, and it was a learning experience in born-digital collecting through the use of university-supported commercial products like Box. It was also fascinating to see what individuals and companies created during this tumultuous time and how creativity persevered. While I don’t believe a pandemic is what Fleckner envisioned when talking about how computers would be “very important for day-to-day living” (p. 8), I do think this level of connectivity is the closest to what he envisioned the world would be like in the new millennium, in terms of technology and the role it plays in the archival world, from his view in the year 2000.

Part Two: Enduring Values

In the second part of his address, Fleckner focuses on the “four characteristics of our profession which will serve us well into the future” (p. 3) and outlines each of them. In many ways, Fleckner’s characteristics presage the Core Values of Archivists statement that the Society of American Archivists (SAA) created in May 2011 and updated in August 2020. The Core Values “articulates a set of principles that serve

both as a reminder of how archivists should strive to engage professionally and as a primer for contextualizing archivists’ role in a greater societal sense.” The core values that SAA identifies are access and use, accountability, advocacy, diversity, history and memory, preservation, responsible stewardship, selection, service, social responsibility, and sustainability. While these themes are present in Fleckner’s address, archivists have expanded upon his ideas of the profession’s core values over the past twenty-three years.

Before going into each characteristic more thoroughly, I want to quickly point out that much of what Fleckner discusses rings true today, including some of the problems and concerns he raised about the profession. Technology continues to develop and improve at an accelerated pace, but at the heart of this profession are humans. We have flaws, and those flaws can be perpetuated in the technology we produce and maintain. Recent movements advocate revisiting aids and conscientiously editing them, creating new collecting initiatives, and expanding representation in our collections to counteract white supremacy and fascism in the United States, which should not be ignored. Efforts to diversify archives, both public and inward facing, are important as archives should reflect the country we live in and confront ugly truths about the past. Diversifying the archives profession is just as important. Though archival theory and practice have mostly remained the same over the years, the people who make up our profession increasingly come from different backgrounds, as evidenced in the 2022 A*CENSUS II report. The percentage of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) doubled since 2004, and the percentage of self-identifying women in the profession increased by 6 percent. This demographic shift continues to encourage progress towards fixing the problems Fleckner identifies, while also strengthening the characteristics he describes.

**Characteristic One: Humanistic Profession**

Fleckner’s first characteristic states that archives are a humanistic profession. He says that our mission “to identify, assess, manage, preserve, and make accessible a useable record of the past” fulfills a human “need” “to locate ourselves in space and time in an otherwise alienating universe” (p. 3). This idea of wanting to belong and see ourselves reflected in history is a strong one and extends into the communities

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4 “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”
we build as archivists through networking, social media, and conferences. Building community and feeling a part of something is important to the human experience, and we have more ways to interact with each other than ever. We help each other make the profession better and challenge its existing structures and beliefs together, a concept I will revisit in the section on the collaborative value of the archival profession.

Even as we acknowledge that we all want to belong, we must also consider the right to be forgotten—not everyone wants to be remembered or associated with certain parts of history, such as activity in protests or social movements. This concept has arisen as social media has become omnipresent in our society. As archivists, we (mostly) accept that not everything will be or should be saved, and we respect the wishes of those inadvertently included in archives; these tenets fall under the SAA Core Values of social responsibility and accountability. An example is when archivists document social movements through social media capture; most people participating in social movements do not know that archivists may share content about them and that the content may impact them later in life. Many institutions that make social media collections publicly available also have a take-down policy, which allows people to request for the content to be removed or restricted for a specific length of time.

Fleckner ends this section by discussing how the study of humans is “not the exclusive province of scholars and intellectuals” (p. 3) and how others, such as primary school educators, have expanded and interpreted new ways to include digital archival materials into lessons. From initiatives like the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective to small grant opportunities presented to students to create something new from archival material, people are using archives for more than research papers, books, and presentations. Sharing physical materials has become easier, with libraries and archives making scans and putting them online, as well as born-digital materials expanding the ideas of what an archive is.

However, there are still issues with access, as most institutions do not have adequate staff to make all their collections available online. Due to this limitation, and conditions of some materials rendering them unsafe to digitize, there is still a need for in-person visits to view most materials, which often require a photo ID to gain access to the reading room area. This is limiting and contrasts with Fleckner’s views about the audience archives are trying to reach outside traditional scholarly pursuits. Reaching communities outside of the physical building often is regulated to

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grant work and finite initiatives due to limited staff, time, training, and monetary resources.

Characteristic Two: Thinking, Inquiring, Learning Profession

Fleckner’s second characteristic is that archivists are a “thinking, inquiring, learning profession” (p. 3), and as a profession, archivists should be eager to continue learning how to be the most effective in our roles as stewards of our collections. Due to the nature of archival work, archivists encounter a “head-spinning variety of forms, formats, and subjects” (p. 4), and should accept that not knowing something is inevitable. This lack of knowing is proven true frequently in my own experience. While digital file formats have begun to standardize due to marketplace dominance of companies like Microsoft and Adobe, odd formats still appear in collections, either from recent specialized programs or older files that cannot be read easily. Willingness to go down the rabbit hole and learn about these types of formats, practices, and context surrounding them is part of being a digital archivist (and archivist generally). Even random tidbits you pick up from reading or just general knowledge encounters can help with this job in the most unexpected ways. I once went on a tangent about catgut and what it was used for when a bottle of it was found in a medical collection being put up for an exhibit! The idea of knowing “everything and nothing” applies to archives, as we cannot know “everything,” but we can learn about the gaps of “nothing” we are presented with in processing a newly acquired collection.

Fleckner continues by discussing how archival principles, along with appraisal and descriptive practices, are important to defining archives. At the end of this section, he states that “fundamental critical thinking skills of analysis, argument, and clear expression” (p. 4) are also important to consider when characterizing archival work. Fleckner also expresses surprise at how descriptive work, being clear and concise, was “largely ignored” by the archival community while also stating this work is more important than ever in the world of “unmediated access to information” (p. 4). Coming from a non-historian background, but raised by a technical editor, I found it interesting how archival writing and technical editing overlap and can play into initiatives such as conscientious editing and open documentation. Documentation is important, and being able to express information clearly, whether descriptive or technical, is central to others discovering and interpreting what is being described. As more people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences come into the archival profession, approaches to description will continue to evolve from their insights to implement change.

Characteristic Three: Ethical Profession

Thirdly, Fleckner states archivists are an “ethical profession . . . that [has] a code of ethics” (p. 5). While no official archivists’ code existed when Fleckner gave his address, there was an understanding of what was expected of archivists in their
work. SAA created their official Code of Ethics\(^{12}\) in 2005, five years after this address, and updated it twice since its inception, once in January 2012 and again in August 2020.\(^{13}\) Having the Code of Ethics online and accessible makes it easier for archivists to put their hands on it, read it, embody it, and make sure it is reflected in their day-to-day work. Archivists can even use the Internet Archive to see how the Code has changed over time, thanks to their web page-capturing work.\(^{14}\)

Fleckner mentions living in an era of “suspicion, even cynicism, about all institutions” (p. 5), which is fascinating given the timing of this address: post-Y2K, but before 9/11. With even more suspicion of institutions and companies today, thanks in part to technology and never-ending news streams, our profession’s move to be even more open and transparent about our processes and workflows is more important than ever. This is evident in the SAA Core Values of Access and Use, Advocacy, Service, and Sustainability—not only for our peers, but also for the public to fully understand the work that goes on “behind the scenes” when preparing materials. Open houses and tours fulfill this by showing what archivists do and how access works at our institutions. Acknowledging that institutions do not have the same workflows due to different resources available helps show the variability in our profession and the tools we use to successfully create workflows.\(^{15}\)

**Characteristic Four: Collaborative Profession**

Lastly, Fleckner points out that archivists are a “collaborative profession” (p. 6), which I find to be very true. The archivists I encounter are always excited to share processes, thoughts, and general brainstorms, whether in a public setting or over email or coffee. This also applies to those I have encountered in related professions, or as Fleckner puts it, “allied professions” (p. 6). Technology has helped a lot with those connections, especially social media—Twitter, Facebook, and Mastodon have all connected me to people in various professions where we learn from each other. Different viewpoints on a problem have resulted in creative solutions, especially in the digital archives world where solving coding issues makes workflows more efficient. Being aware of the challenges other archivists, librarians, and information professions are facing allows broader information sharing, advocacy, and preparation for potential backlash or unwanted attention on collections. From book bans and book challenges to funding problems and disaster recovery, knowing who to contact with questions is easier than ever thanks to technology.

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\(^{12}\) “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”

\(^{13}\) “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”


There are also opportunities to find solutions to problems information professionals face. For example, Fleckner mentions solutions to “long term management of information in electronic form” (p. 6). While I do not believe the digital professional community has devised a solution to this problem that works for everyone, what we have come up with in terms of workflows and storage protocols has been the result of many different institutions and professionals coming together to solve the problem. These solutions, such as implementing Box or Google Drive to act as remote viewing portals for materials, have also been shared through open access documentation and workflows, linked data projects, and conference presentations so others can discover and learn how to implement them.

Outside of institutional settings, there are many people who collect materials they care about in their own time. Fleckner calls them “the savers, the unofficial archivists, the advocates for the record,” and argues that we “should not lose sight of another group of individuals who share our goals but not professional identifications” (p. 6). This connects back to the first characteristic in this section of his address, about how humans want to be remembered and represented in their communities. Community archiving efforts, with and without institutional support, have always been around, but the rise of technology in our everyday lives has made it easier to make these archives available to a wider audience and for people to discover them organically or through recommendations, either by someone they know or electronically.

Platforms such as Omeka and WordPress have made sharing materials from community scanning events easier and allows those leading the effort to implement feedback on arrangement or metadata without having to go through bureaucracy. Technology also allows opportunities for these community archivists and advocates to connect with the community they are documenting and develop unique outcomes and projects institutions can learn from, such as the case of San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum (SAAACAM)\(^\text{16}\) and their partnership with the Southern Historical Collection (SHC) Community Driven Archives (CDA)\(^\text{17}\) project. In working together to start SAAACAM and have the local San Antonio community become involved, the SHC noted “historical erasures can only be remedied through full community control over one’s archives”\(^\text{18}\) and local partnerships would be more beneficial going forward to sustain the archives. Knowing when to step back and let a collaboration end is just as important as knowing when to start one.


Conclusion

Fleckner ends his address with a call for archivists to “face the future with humility and fearlessness” (p. 7), which is something I personally want on my office wall. Archival practice changed over the decades before Fleckner’s address and in the twenty years between the address and now, and it will continue to be modified in the future. Technology is not stable, and the rapid pace of technological development, from different types of connecting cables to the invention of file formats that are now obsolete, has shown us this. Being humble in our knowledge, willing to learn about new practices, and able to approach new technology from a place of curiosity and not fear is important. Some technologies that might affect the future of archives, near or far, are artificial intelligence, NFTs (non-fungible tokens), and the evolution of social media sites as people create new communities. How will we archive these new forms of digital objects? Should we archive them, and if we do, what safeguards can we put in place to protect ourselves from any legal moves should we need to? For example, ownership of NFTs, accidental copying of NFTs, or potential copyright and use issues with archived software are all legal issues that could arise in the future. These questions, along with the ones Fleckner poses in his last paragraph, are important to reflect on periodically to see how the profession’s approaches to our practices have changed over time. We can also use these questions to create new ways to reflect and integrate our findings at a core values level, personal or professional.

Overall, Fleckner presents a hopeful view of the archival profession’s future in 2000. While most of his predictions have come true, I think our society has not yet reached his full vision of where we might have been in the year 2023. Despite jokes about robots soon replacing humans, I believe archivists will remain irreplaceable. This profession has a certain heart because the people in it care so deeply about their work, the preservation of history, and capturing as many voices that make up the human experience as possible. Although archivists may preserve different materials now than when Fleckner gave his address, the heart of the profession remains, and both are worth fighting for.