F. Gerald Ham: Jeremiah to the Profession

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ABSTRACT
For three decades, F. Gerald Ham was a forceful, energetic, incisive, and energizing presence at the annual meeting podium, in the pages of The American Archivist, and in the ranks of the Society’s leadership. In all of these venues, he urged us to set aside our outdated custodial mindset, take more seriously our role in selecting an archival record for the future, implement strategies of planning and coordination, overcome our isolation and proprietary habits, and, above all, think critically and make the difficult decisions necessary in a new archival era. This article traces Ham’s career and reviews his writings for insights into a critical time in our recent professional past, his contributions to the profession, and the ways his ideas remain relevant today.

KEY WORDS
Archival Selection, Social Justice, Archival History
In popular culture today, the biblical prophet Jeremiah is remembered more for his “woeful complaining” and “denunciations of his people” than for his words of “encouragement and of hope.” The archival prophet, F. Gerald Ham, could be unsparing in his criticism of our profession, but his eye was always on where we were headed and how we might better pursue our larger mission. For archivists new to the profession since Ham retired twenty years ago, his name may be most associated with his presidential address, “The Archival Edge,” or with the graduate scholarship fund endowed in his and his wife’s names. For archivists with longer memories, Ham was, for three decades, a forceful, energetic, incisive, and energizing presence at the annual meeting podium, in the pages of The American Archivist, in the ranks the Society’s leadership, in the graduate classroom, and within the state of Wisconsin and its State Historical Society. In all of these venues, Ham urged us to set aside our outdated custodial mindset, overcome our isolation and proprietary habits, adopt a “more active and perhaps more creative role,” take more seriously our role in selecting a “more useful and more representative” archival record for the future, and, above all, think critically and make the difficult decisions necessary in a new archival era.

This article traces Ham’s career and reviews his writings for insights into his thinking and a critical era in our recent professional past. While the focus is on his writings, these were always informed by his experiences as an archivist and administrator, a leader within SAA, a teacher, and a consultant to scores of programs across the country. The archives profession has been transformed in the past two decades, especially by the consequences and opportunities created by new information technologies. Much of what Ham wrote in the 1970s and 1980s was prescient about these changes, and many of his prescriptions for archivists in this new era remain relevant today. These ideas inspired, and continue to inspire, Ham’s generation and, especially, the generations that followed. Ham’s successors created new approaches to selecting and managing the archival record in an age of information abundance. They picked up on the social justice themes that he had sounded, especially in calling for a “representative” record, and they pursued collaboration among archival institutions and programs in service of the larger goals of the profession. In sum, they became “activist archivists,” entering the “postcustodial” era and reshaping the archival landscape forever.

F. Gerald Ham was born in Toms River, New Jersey, in 1930 and was raised there and in Peekskill, New York. His father was a Baptist minister and, as Ham wrote in a brief autobiographical essay, “a pervasive evangelical faith dominated our family.” Ham’s parents overrode Oberlin as his college choice, but at Wheaton College in Illinois, “the so-called Harvard for fundamentalists” (in Ham’s words), he gained a love of American history and, in Elsie Magill, a
lifetime partner. Ham interrupted his formal graduate work at the University of Kentucky in 1955 with nearly two years in the Counter Intelligence Corps, but during his posting in Washington, D.C., he continued his dissertation research on a history of the Shakers, working two half-days a week at the Library of Congress.

Back at Kentucky, Ham’s first step toward becoming what he called “an accidental archivist” was a fellowship to work part time in the library’s special collections. Two years later, while completing his dissertation, he found a position with West Virginia University Library’s West Virginia Collection. It paid well for the day—$5,200, left him free from lecture preparation, and enabled him to crisscross the state building the library’s manuscripts holdings. In 2012, he recalled for the SAA Oral History Project: “. . . when I was at West Virginia, really my favorite thing was collecting. I liked to collect . . . The ‘Archival Edge’ grew out of my experience collecting.” During his six years in West Virginia, Ham completed his Ph.D., taught American history survey courses, and compiled a guide to the West Virginia Collection. He also joined SAA, attended his first
annual meeting in 1961, and became a member of the College and University Archives Committee.

In the fall of 1963, the “accidental archivist” made a momentous choice for himself and for the archives profession. “... My ambivalence over a career in archives or teaching history was resolved,” Ham remembered, “when I was offered the position of state archivist of Wisconsin and head of the division of Archives and Manuscripts ...” The Wisconsin Historical Society, formed in 1846, two years before statehood, had long been among the nation’s leading historical agencies, with exceptional archival collections and a library second only to the Library of Congress in its North American history holdings. The society also had collaborative ties, through a network of archival research centers, with eight state university campuses. In the early 1960s, the professional archives staff doubled and archival storage tripled to seventy-five thousand cubic feet. To the new archivist, “the scope of ... responsibilities seemed vast,” and Ham was soon engaged not only with familiar state and local manuscripts, but with massive records of national labor unions and businesses; of theater and broadcasting notables; and of state, county, and local governments. These holdings ranged from early nineteenth-century papers gathered by the society’s first director, Lyman C. Draper, to documentation generated by civil rights workers during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and subsequent campaigns and collected by society field workers between 1965 and 1968. The society also held extensive collections of photographs, films, sound recordings, and other nontextual records, and Ham’s writings always reflected his awareness of the diversity of the archival record. Whatever the managerial challenges of this immersive introduction to the extent and complexity of the archival record in a major, modern repository, for Ham it also was an intellectual challenge. For the next quarter-century, Ham analyzed these issues and set out his conclusions for the entire profession to consider.

The Wisconsin Historical Society, notable for its major research collections, is also physically and socially at the heart of the University of Wisconsin—Madison campus. The university long had been a seat of progressive, and sometimes radical, political views, especially in its history department. In the 1960s and 1970s, the historical society was, in the words of archivist Patrick Quinn, “a refuge not only for reds of various persuasions but also for individuals who preferred a gentler sort of life than the ‘real world’ offered.” As in Berkeley, Ann Arbor, and other university towns in the late 1960s and 1970s, the Madison campus was wracked with protests, and sometimes the society was literally a refuge as tear gas drifted through downtown streets and even into the society’s grand headquarters building. In this environment, Ham found his own political perspective gradually becoming “more liberal,” although, he emphasized, he experienced no single moment of “seeing the light.”
In 1966, the university’s School of Library and Information Studies invited Ham to create a graduate education program in archives administration. The initial one-course offering in 1967 expanded to three in 1970 and was cross-listed to permit its use as a minor within the PhD program. As Timothy Ericson remembers, Ham used his seminar especially, “to test out some of his ideas . . . and steered students to do research and writing in such areas as appraisal, collection development and documentation strategies.”10 By 1991, when Ham retired, “Jerry’s kids,” as some called themselves, numbered 364, and Ham counted among them four SAA presidents, numerous Council members (at one time six served together for a year), and many Fellows. He considers both his students and his writings as his “legacy to the profession.”11

Along with Ham’s move to Madison, his swift immersion in the life and politics of SAA also shaped his understanding of the world of archives. In the fall of 1964, he attended just his second annual meeting, renewing acquaintances with Philip Mason and others of the thirty-something-year-old generation who soon would seize the Society’s leadership.12 Ham also read a paper evaluating the effectiveness of eleven public records programs then located in state historical societies against the standards presented in Ernst Posner’s *American State Archives*. Although he had been his state’s archivist for less than one year, Ham’s critique was blunt: “One of the ironies of the history of archives administration in the United States is that the institution most directly concerned with the preservation of historical resources has generally proved to be the least effective archival agency.” He found that too often the archives at these societies were “relegated . . . to the status of Cinderella” and their operations were “rudimentary at best.”13

In 1966, the “accidental archivist” became the “accidental” SAA Council member when he was appointed to fill a vacancy brought about by Mason’s maneuvering. Three years as SAA secretary (and concurrent service on the Committee for the Seventies) followed in quick succession and two years (1972–1974) as president-elect and president. It was often an exhausting regimen, but it provided Ham with an extraordinary national exposure to archivists, archival institutions, and the issues of the archives profession that pervaded all his writings. It is a breadth that few professionals could achieve today.

Before 1974, when SAA finally created a paid professional office, the SAA secretary was effectively the Society’s executive director. The secretary’s highest-profile responsibility was an extended report read to the annual meeting and published in *The American Archivist*. Ham used these opportunities to reflect critically on the Society and the profession. His first message in 1969 set the tone: “. . . Your secretary could carefully select evidence to show that the Society is getting better as it is getting bigger . . . or cite the accomplishments of a few committees to imply the work of the majority. I do not believe that this would...
be a particularly helpful or a particularly honest way to report. Let us instead focus on the true strengths and weaknesses of our programs.”

Some of the “truths” Ham conveyed in his three reports were flattering: the Society’s membership had doubled in a decade, at least twenty-six institutions now offered some kind of archival education and training, and ties with allied professions were strengthening. The makeup of the membership also was changing with a majority of members now in “nongovernmental archives and so-called manuscript collections” not in the public archives sector. Reviewing the decade of the 1960s, he wrote: “By 1970, then, we had come a long way toward becoming a stronger, more coherent profession and a larger, more active, more broadly representative society. . . .”

Yet major problems remained. Some were internal, especially an unproductive committee system, the lack of a strong institutional voice for the profession, and the unsustainability of all-volunteer management of an association with over two thousand members and subscribers. Other problems plagued the
entire profession. “Almost alone among the scholarly professions, archivists still lack a comprehensive program of education and training for entrants to professional archival work,” Ham wrote, while acknowledging that there was no consensus among archival educators on curriculum and methods. More troubling was the lack of “discernible development of archival theory and the concomitant refinement of practice in the last generation.” “Our profession,” Ham said, “has not come to grips with a number of fundamental problems created by the nature of contemporary records and by the impact of a changing technology. . . .” The list of these problems included complexity, access, privacy, and “the need to select an increasingly smaller percentage of records, which contain more useful and representative documentation of American life and culture.” The evidence that Ham saw most directly as SAA secretary was the lack of competition for SAA’s publications awards and the absence of publications with which to respond to the onslaught of requests for “information on all aspects of contemporary archives administration.” He urged SAA to publish “a series of informational and technical pamphlets . . . to provide the practical, technical requests for, and theoretical knowledge our profession so desperately needs. . . .”

In the penultimate paragraph of his final report as secretary, Ham made an even more damning judgment. Summarizing the written comments by some 130 SAA respondents to a survey of members, he found, “conspicuously missing . . . any suggestion that archivists live a life that is totally integrated with the world about them.” Repeating the refrain, “No one suggested,” he reeled off the silences: “that we take cognizance of the dramatic social changes of the past decade”; “that we combat discrimination in service to and employment of individuals of all minority groups”; or “that we give special attention to the recruitment and training of members of minority groups.” Archivists also were silent about the profession’s role in promoting access to public records, protecting individual privacy, and cooperating with other associations, like the ALA, on public policy advocacy “to improve the society in which we live and work.”

As SAA secretary, Ham had a bully pulpit to express his views to the profession, but it was not a foundation from which to launch the changes that he and many SAA members and leaders believed necessary. That opportunity came with the Committee for the Seventies, an eight-member group appointed in 1970 by President Mason and funded for six meetings over the next two years by a Council on Library Resources grant. The Society’s adoption of most of the recommendations in the “Report of the Committee for the Seventies,” in the words of J. Frank Cook, “permanently alter[ed] the Society and its operations.” Although technically an ex officio member of the committee, Ham participated fully in its deliberations and coauthored two key sections. For the most part, these dealt with internal SAA matters—creation of a paid staff, elections,
regional affiliates, and membership recruitment, but one paragraph addressed Mason’s objective of making “the Society more democratic, responsive, and more relevant to its members” in ways perhaps not expected by those members. Paragraph three of the section on “Member Relations and Development,” entitled “Social Relevance,” proclaimed: “SAA should be actively committed to the social goals of racial justice, equal employment, and reasonable access to research materials.” It called for a “standing committee on minority groups to press for the rights and advancement of minorities in the archival profession” and cited issues of “overrestriction” and “overclassification” of archival materials, “violations of confidentiality of records for political or other unworthy purposes, and elitism in manuscript collections.” On these and other public issues, “however controversial,” the committee believed, “SAA has a moral obligation to take official positions . . .”  

Ham’s years as president-elect and president were largely consumed with implementing the many changes recommended by the Committee for the Seventies, especially recruiting and hiring the first paid executive director and negotiating placement of the SAA office at the University of Illinois–Chicago Circle. Yet Ham never lost sight of the unique opportunity afforded to SAA presidents in the tradition of the presidential address, a highlight of the annual meeting’s formal banquet and a message assured publication in The American Archivist. In “The Archival Edge,” delivered in Toronto in 1974, he ignored SAA governance issues of the moment to draw into a more coherent, compelling, and very polished whole his ideas on the fundamental purposes of archival work and on the urgent need for archivists to change how they accomplish that work. “The Archival Edge” won standing applause and still is frequently cited and used in classrooms. Ham followed this with two other well-received essays, “Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era,” a 1980 SAA plenary address, and “Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance,” a core session at the 1982 meeting and winner of the Posner Prize. Although never intended as a trilogy, they are complementary, each contributing to complete a larger whole. Three broad themes pervade Ham’s view of the archival landscape in these works: first, its dynamic character; second, the failures of the custodial approach; and, third, strategies and actions necessary to make the work of archivists useful and effective.

Ham saw both larger social forces and new information technologies reshaping the nature of the archival record and the world of archives. For one, “the process of institutionalizing and nationalizing decision-making . . . has had a profound impact on documentation, making the archives of associations, pressure groups, protest organizations, and institutions of all sorts relatively more important than the papers of individuals and families.” Associated with
this was, on the one hand, the growing bulk and redundancy of the record and a decrease in the value of the information contained in it and, on the other hand, the fragility of the new record formats and vulnerability of documentation, such as that produced by civil rights protests, “that has little chance of aging into vintage archives. . . .”24 The “information revolution,” as Ham labeled it—meaning both electronic records and sound and moving image recordings—had “created records that are fluid, amendable, and reusable” as well as more complex and information dense.

The implications for archivists were unmistakable: they must abandon the attitudes and practices of the custodial past to be effective in the “post-custodial era.”25 The custodial archivist was a product of a time when “the mass of records . . . was relatively small” and “the technology of their creation, storage, and retrieval fairly simple . . .” Custodial archivists, Ham explained, were content to adopt “a passive role in shaping the documentary record.” They also were “uncommonly introspective . . . too little aware of the larger historical and social landscape” surrounding them and often obsessed with the “‘nuts and bolts’ or craft aspects” of their work. Introspection fostered both isolation from other archivists and a proprietary, sometimes competitive, relationship with other archives. Too often the passive, isolated, custodial archivist simply followed “the dictates of conventional wisdom and unexamined habit.”26

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**Figure 3.** F. Gerald Ham receives Fellows Certificate from Herb Angel, at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Ottawa, 1968. From the Archives Department, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Society of American Archivists Records, Collection no. 172, photo #160.
Ham identified two continuing “institutional” responses to this “new world of information”: the proliferation of archival programs and the decentralization of holdings. He cited the increase in college and university archives programs from 561 to 940 between 1966 and 1980, a notable growth in municipal records programs stimulated by federal funds, and the spread of the National Archives’ regional programs. Undoubtedly, these largely unplanned developments brought more resources to archival activities and aided the growth and maturation of the profession, but they left many of the problems of the new archival era unsolved and the custodial traditions unchanged.27

When Ham evaluated the legacy of this custodial past, he found that we had paid a high price. Most famously, he excoriated our failure to shape “the national archival record” into “a national mosaic that will bequeath to the future an eminently useable past.” Or, put more poetically, “a mirror for mankind . . . helping people understand the world they live in.” Rather than “a representative record of human experience in our time,” Ham found a “distorted national record” shaped by a random, fragmented, uncoordinated, and often accidental selection process. This record evidenced a structural bias toward preserving the records of politicians and academic institutions while leaving great gaps in other areas. Ham cited historians Howard Zinn and Sam Bass Warner and archivist Gould Colman in making his argument.28 He also drew on his own experience, including his role as expert witness in a trial challenging the Internal Revenue Service’s rejection of the appraisal valuation of the papers of former Illinois governor Otto Kerner Jr. The more than 750 cubic feet of records, Ham testified, “reveal nothing about the man, his thought processes, or his style of life, whether political or administrative” and 80 percent were “either duplicate or of marginal worth.” Yet these records occupied more than 50 percent of the shelf storage at the Illinois State Historical Library and, Ham reasoned, “As a result of this emphasis, many other aspects of state history necessarily must go undocumented.”29 The custodial approach had additional costs. Scarce resources were wasted in competition to acquire collections, and “many large and complex collections go unattended while huge sums are invested in processing others to unnecessary and wasteful levels of detail.” Two decades later, Dennis Meissner and Mark Greene cited this observation in famously arguing for “more product and less process.”30

The passion and clarity of Ham’s dissection of the custodial tradition continues to generate memorable quotations in the archival literature, but the bulk of his writing was given over to guiding the profession toward a more productive future. His recommendations were never cast as simple recipes or abstract ruminations. Indeed, he mocked those archivists who believed that matters were only “a bit out of kilter.” “They say a simple formula of more cooperation, less competition, increased governmental largess and bigger and better records
surveys,” would suffice. Ham called for more fundamental changes, transforming the passive archivist into a “more active and perhaps more creative role,” willing to make choices and to take risks.31

One essential element of this transformation would be a mobilization of intellectual resources to address critical concerns such as acquisition guidelines. In 1975, Ham found the existing archival writings “either inadequate or irrelevant when they deal with contemporary archives. . . . Without needed conceptual and empirical studies, archivists must continue to make their critical choices in intellectual solitary confinement.” Following the mandate that “conceptualization must precede collection,” Ham proposed—as an example—that church archivists might “determine the documentation needed to study contemporary religious life, thought, and change” and then integrate this into their records selection processes.32 Colleges and universities might undertake empirical studies of their documentation, a point that Helen Samuels cites in her classic work, Varsity Letters.33 Even in the earliest days of planning for archival bibliographic systems, Ham recognized the potential they offered for analysis of the documentary record.34 As a full-time administrator and part-time teacher, Ham was well aware of the obstacles to archival research, but he recognized that it “is necessary in almost every area of our work,” from understanding researchers’ behaviors, to creating records-sampling models, to measuring records-processing activities, and developing model legislation.35 While Ham could be unsparing in his criticism, he also was quick to recognize positive developments, for example the publication in 1980 and 1981 of two book-length reports on appraisal and sampling projects for the records of the Massachusetts Superior Court and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.36

Transcending the boundaries of individual archives programs to create linkages and coordination was a second pervasive theme in Ham’s writing. He pointed to examples of interinstitutional cooperation among libraries and in document conservation but found special promise in the statewide regional archival networks. “The network concept and structure offer not only a means to document society more systematically, but also to utilize better the limited resources of participating archival units.”37 With more coordination, shared information, and no wasteful competition, archival units in a network could develop more “representative and comprehensive” holdings. The idea might be further developed into cooperation based on institutional type and subject area.38 To foster cooperation and to provide archival services more effectively, Ham called for archival institutions, “at all levels,” to become “archival centers.” These centers could provide technical services such as micrographics and records processing but also training and consultation on program development and administration.
Ham recognized that federal funding from the NHPRC and NEH—$4 million annually in 1980—could help alter “the structure of the archival world” by promoting coordination, integration, and cooperation. In the state historical records advisory boards, created by the 1975 legislation that added a records program to the documentary editing and publications mandate of the NHPRC, Ham found “new and potent structures for . . . bringing together diverse, sometimes competing, interests in a setting that permits coordinated planning and action.” In Wisconsin, Ham built an active board program, and he served as a consultant to at least eight other state boards. But he also understood the real difficulties in making these new entities into productive bodies. In 1989, he reviewed a round of assessment reports developed by state boards and acknowledged that compared to the efforts of a decade earlier, these were “a real advance in the process of developing cooperative intrastate archival planning.” Still, too often he found the reports were “litanies of woe, compendiums of data (useful and otherwise), and proposals for a new archival order within the states,” but not the “strategic plans of action with operational consequences.”

Between 1983 and 1986, Ham served as the chair of the Task Force on Goals and Priorities (GAP), making what he called his “last major contribution to the SAA.” In 1984, in yet another SAA plenary address, he explained that our greatest “vulnerability” as a profession was our “lack of a clear and shared vision of what we need to do to meet [today’s] challenges.” The GAP project would provide “an intellectual framework for planning and decision-making” and a means to institutionalize planning for the future. Nineteen task force and working group members hashed out GAP’s final report, Planning for the Archival Profession. Ham wrote none of the report, but he skilfully facilitated a host of meetings and, with Timothy Ericson, spent days editing it. His influence, both in style and substance, is unmistakable. Goal 1, “The Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value,” called for research on the creation and use of records by their initial creators and other users, for shared appraisal guidelines, and “the development of coordinated and cooperative documentation strategies” across repository lines. Goal 2, “The Administration of Archival Programs,” called for research, cooperation with allied professions, and “cooperation and sharing of expertise and resources among the archival community,” including technical assistance and program development training and guidance. Research, innovation, and cooperation, especially in increasing access to information about archival materials, were also major themes in the third goal area, “Use of Records.”

The agenda for the archives profession, as expressed in the GAP report of 1986, very much resembled the archival landscape that Ham had been envisioning for the previous twenty years.

For two decades, Ham played center stage in the archives profession. He had an exceptional breadth of experience and understanding of archival records...
Figure 4. F. Gerald Ham, photographed on September 28, 1988, by Bob Granflaten. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# 11727.
and of the landscape of archival institutions and the profession. He was a polished writer and an effective speaker, and his energetic presence, quick intelligence, and social manner supported his message.

We archivists recognized the truths in Ham’s blunt critiques of our performance, especially in the areas of appraisal and selection, and we were inspired by him to do better. Mark Greene called “The Archival Edge” “a very unnerving bombshell” on “the relatively quiet . . . appraisal front.” Richard Cox called it “the opening salvo in this reconsideration of collecting by archivists” and “a foundation for an entire generation of new musings about and practices in archival appraisal.” For Bruce Dearstyne, it was “a turning point for the American archival enterprise.” Frank Boles cited it as a stimulus for “a new generation of archivists to rethink the question of selection.” Ham summarized much of the new work he had inspired in his own 1991 prize-winning contribution to SAA’s Archival Fundamentals series.42

Ham’s words announced, and helped to usher in, a new era in American archives history, but not all archivists found them convincing and inspiring. Just two years after Ham delivered “The Archival Edge,” Lester Cappon, an admired founding SAA member and past president, published a full-length rebuttal in The American Archivist. Ham greatly respected Cappon, a long-time professional friend, and he believes that Cappon’s essay helped draw attention to “The Archival Edge.”43 Cappon argued that little was new in Ham’s address and that past collecting practices needed no major revision. As Cappon’s biographer Richard Cox has written, Cappon saw Ham’s address “as a repudiation of his own work and career.”44 A decade after Cappon’s article, John Roberts focused on Ham and Frank Burke in a full-bore denunciation of the idea of archival theory, a backhanded tribute to the two as the most significant exponents of this misguided notion. “The Archival Edge,” he wrote, “is quite plainly the product of an historiographical tradition that is already a trifle hackneyed,” and Ham’s ideas on “creative acquisitions policies, archives networks, and specialized archives . . . are still the nuts and bolts Ham thinks he is avoiding . . . [and merely] searching for more efficient practices.” Unsurprisingly, Roberts’s dismissal of archival theory as “a rather superfluous and uncompromising diversion” has not spawned the degree of attention and critical thinking generated by Ham’s writings.45

If the ground proved fertile for Ham’s ideas on shaping the archival record, it has proven less so for some of his other ideas. Archivists have collaborated to create descriptive standards and to implement information technologies, but the landscape of archival institutions seems no more integrated and coordinated than Ham found it. The decrease in public funds has shrunk the ambitions of archival repositories and funding agencies. We have given no systematic attention, analysis, or direction to what a “useful and representative” historical record

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might look like. Instead, we continue to identify and preserve a national historical record through a patchwork of private and public institutions, laws and regulations, and professions and professional practices. We lack any substantial means for building the capacity and sustainability of archival institutions. We can only hope that this assemblage will assure us the reliable, authentic, secure, and accessible historical record to which we believe we are entitled.

These misfortunes of the moment make it all the more important to listen to Ham’s message about the larger purposes of our work, which he left us in his writings and which he summarized, in a sense, in 1998 when he endowed the Ham Scholarship: “Don’t let the lure of the process—the technical or hands-on aspect of archival activity—obscure and dilute the intellectual aspects . . . such as determining the content of the historical record and understanding its potential uses. Don’t confuse tools with goals.”

**Notes**

The author is grateful to Jerry Ham for providing documentary materials, for several interviews by telephone and one in his home, and for his years as mentor and friend. He also thanks Timothy Ericson, Susan Davis, the editor and peer reviewers of *The American Archivist*, and other friends and colleagues who read versions of this paper.


2. Randall Jimerson cites Ham’s presidential address, “The Archival Edge,” and places him in “a small but influential cadre of archivists [who] heeded the call to social activism and sought to define their own profession’s perspective.” *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 110. Mark Greene begins his recent critique of Jimerson’s views on social justice and the archives profession with an analysis of the term “activist archivist” and its association with Ham’s presidential address. “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We’re Doing that’s All That Important?,” *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 303, 325. The subtitle of this article draws on one of Ham’s most frequently quoted phrases as used by Jimerson.


4. “Followup Q&A with Dr. F. Gerald Ham,” conducted by Lauren Kata (by telephone), February 18, 2012, the SAA Oral History Project, p. 9.

5. F. Gerald Ham, untitled autobiographical essay submitted to the SAA Oral History Project, p. 3.


8. To celebrate the society’s 150th anniversary, its journal published a series of recollections, including Patrick M. Quinn’s, *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 79, no. 4 (1996): 329. In the same publication, Josephine Harper Darling, an SAA Fellow and thirty-five-year veteran at the society, recalled Jerry Ham as, “Energetic, dynamic, creative, and articulate. . . . Under stress he could be mercurial, but he could also inspire and stimulate us to new heights,” 279.

10 Timothy Ericson, electronic communication with author, October 31, 2013.
11 Ham, untitled autobiographical essay submitted to the SAA Oral History Project, pp. 3–4. Many of Ham’s students are well recognized in the profession, and some joined the historical society staff in some capacity, including Steven Hensen, Susan Davis, Michael Fox, Margaret Hedstrom, Timothy Ericson, Gregor Trinkaus-Randall, and Michael Stevens. Other prominent staff included Max Evans and George Talbot. These lists are only illustrative; a better memory would add many more names.
12 The best historical overview of this period in SAA history is J. Frank Cook, “The Blessing of Providence on an Association of Archivists,” The American Archivist 46 (Fall 1983): 374–99. Philip Mason was founding director of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.
26 Ham, “Archival Choices,” 22.
28 Zinn and Warner, in separate addresses to the 1970 SAA Annual Meeting, delivered what Patrick Quinn called “two of the most important critiques of archival practices in recent years. . . . ” Zinn “shocked and offended many in his audience. . . . ” Patrick M. Quinn, “The Times They Are A-Changing,” Midwestern Archivist 2, no. 2 (1977), http://libr.org/progarchs/documents/Quinn_Article_Mwa_1977 .html. Gould Colman’s brief critique of archival collecting was especially important to Ham who recalled that he was “thinking down the same track” but found Colman’s expression of these ideas especially compelling. Ham, telephone conversations with author, January 14, 2014, and December 23, 2013.
31 Ham, “Archival Edge,” 5, 8.
John A. Fleckner began his archival career as a graduate student in F. Gerald Ham’s introductory course. Ham hired him at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1971, and he served as local government records and statewide extension services archivist for eleven years. SAA published his volume on records surveys in the Basic Manual Series in 1977 and Native American Archives: An Introduction in 1984. Fleckner went to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History to establish its Archives Center in 1982. He served on the SAA’s Task Force on Goals and Priorities and later chaired the SAA Goals and Priorities Committee. Fleckner is an SAA Fellow and served as SAA president in 1989–1990. Fleckner retired from the Smithsonian in 2007 but continues to teach a graduate-level introduction to archives course in the collaborative program of the Smithsonian Institution and George Washington University’s Museum Studies Department. He delivered an abbreviated version of this paper at the SAA 2013 Annual Meeting in New Orleans in a panel entitled “Ideal and Real: Striving for Archival Perfection in an Imperfect World.”
“Meeting the Challenges that Come Our Way”


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John A. Fleckner’s 2014 article “F. Gerald Ham: Jeremiah to the Profession” tracks Ham’s career, looks at Ham’s contributions to the profession, and explores how Ham’s ideas and challenges to the archival community remain relevant today. Nine years later, Fleckner’s, and by extension Ham’s, insights and observations continue to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion within the field. This becomes apparent especially when we consider the burdens that new technologies bring to our traditional theories of processing and the opportunities afforded to archival professionals. Reexamining this piece allows us to question whether archivists are prepared for the challenges that new technologies are bringing to the field.

From the beginning of the article, it is evident that the piece acts as a biography, reviewing Ham’s career and sharing his contributions to the profession. In tracing his career, Fleckner draws attention to Ham’s self-identification as an “accidental archivist” (p. 379). This designation is striking. How many in the profession today would claim the same? Who among us knew we wanted to be an archivist as an eight-, ten-, or twelve-year-old? Instead, for many of us, an event in life exposed us to the archives profession. While some archivists actively sought out the profession, others, like Ham, were presented with opportunities and ended up so far down the archival path that we could not help but claim to be “accidental archivists.”

For myself, I always felt there was some level of serendipity to this career choice and the path it took. An undergraduate history class resulted in an internship at the Indiana State Archives; my first exposure to the day-to-day work of an archivist. That internship and continued volunteer hours led to graduate school applications
and courses where I had to make decisions on what kind of archives work I wanted to pursue. Would it be in an academic or university setting, a government archives, or somewhere else? Would I pursue processing work, archival reference, records management, digital and electronic recordkeeping, or some other specialty facet? Further internships and contract work continued to lead me down the path to government archives and records management. I was given the freedom to move around and work in local government records in Mississippi and as an electronic state publications librarianship in North Carolina. I eventually ended up in electronic records and digital preservation in the same institution where Ham and Fleckner once worked: the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

With its close ties to the University of Wisconsin-Madison and its iSchool, the WHS Library, Archives, and Museum Collections Division continues to provide undergraduate and graduate students with work study, practicum, and part-time opportunities in its library and archives. For some students, it is evident that these opportunities are just on-campus jobs while in school, but for others, they are the introduction to learning about the day-to-day work of the library and archives professions. How many “accidents” of working in a library or archives on campus have created “accidental archivists”?

In many ways, I was lucky and privileged to have the space to make the choices I have while continuing down this archival path. But what happens if the profession continues to produce highly educated individuals with large student debts and offers only a limited number of full-time jobs? And if a new graduate is lucky enough to find that elusive full-time job, will their salary be enough to support themselves, especially after carving out enough to pay back those student loans? As they progress in their career, will an archivist have opportunities for advancement within their organizations, or will they have to change jobs and geographical locations for more experience and better pay? Even as they fall into the profession and become “accidental archivists,” how many consider leaving or rerouting to adjacent professions? As much as archivists enjoy our work, how many would wholeheartedly encourage undergraduate or graduate students into the profession? How much cynicism would creep into our responses?

The 2022 A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey provides context to some of these questions. Drawing on responses from just under 6,000 “archivists and memory workers across the United States,” A*CENSUS II provides a small glimpse into the archival profession in 2021. It demonstrates how highly educated the profession has become, with 86 percent of respondents having an advanced degree and more than one in four (27 percent) holding two or more advanced degrees. This correlates with the increased importance of an MLS/MIS degree in the archival profession and a rise in the likelihood of archivists graduating with student loan debt. Whereas the majority (61 percent) of reported full-time salaries fell between

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$40,000 and $79,999 annually, the majority of part-time positions brought in $29,999 or less each year.² And while the report cautions that context is key to the responses, it states that “one in five respondents are considering leaving the archives profession in the next five years and an additional one in four are not sure they will leave or stay, leaving just 55 percent of respondents who are confident they will stay in the archives profession in the next five years.”³ In light of these responses and our own anecdotal experiences, grappling with the questions and realities of educational requirements, career opportunities, salaries and student loan debt, and workforce attrition will continue to be a challenge for the profession, even as we continue to produce “accidental archivists.”

After covering Ham’s start in the profession, Fleckner tracks Ham’s rise in governance at the Society of American Archivists (SAA)—from Council Member to secretary to president-elect to president—and demonstrates how involvement in the professional organization allowed Ham to make observations about the field and call for change. Looking beyond a review of Ham’s most well-known work, “The Archival Edge,”⁴ Fleckner pulls in additional publications, Ham’s work within SAA, and his legacy of mentorship to other archival professionals. In particular, Fleckner draws attention to Ham’s teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s School of Library and Information Studies, which by 1991 had resulted in “four SAA presidents, numerous Council members . . . and many Fellows” (p. 381) among the students Ham had taught, thus highlighting the multitude of ways that archivists can lend their voice to the profession.

Opportunities within SAA still abound and provide a platform for archivists to connect with one another and shape the profession. As of 2023, there are forty-seven different sections, which not only provide communication between members of SAA on a particular topic but also offer leadership positions.⁵ These positions often lead to participation on SAA’s twenty-eight boards, committees, and subcommittees. Election to the SAA Council often results in an election to the position of SAA President-Elect and President.⁶ In addition to or outside of leadership positions, professionals and members of the community contribute to

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⁶ For example, four out of the five recently elected presidents all served on the SAA Council before becoming president-elect and then president. This includes incoming 2023–2024 President-elect Helen Wong Smith, Council member from 2013 to 2016; 2022–2023 President Terry Baxter, Council member from 2011 to 2014; 2021–2022 President Courtney Chartier, Council member from 2016 to 2019; and 2020–2021 President Rachel Vagts, Council member from 2014 to 2017. See the SAA website’s *SAA Election History – Candidates and Election (1991–2022)* page at https://www2.archivists.org/groups/nominating-committee/saa-election-history-candidates-and-election, captured at https://perma.cc/ZT34-RS2R, for more details and comparisons.
SAA’s various publications and, like Fleckner and Ham, add to the discourse around archival theory and practice.

However, archivists are not tied only to the professional development opportunities provided by SAA. My own participation in SAA consists primarily of involvement in the Mentoring Program early in my career and sporadic attendance and presentations at the annual meeting in the years since. This does not reflect a lack of interest in engaging with SAA, but demonstrates the limits placed on archivists who only receive a limited amount of professional development support from their workplace and, therefore, must weigh which conferences, workshops, and professional organizations most meet their needs. As my career has led me down many different paths, my involvement in professional organizations has moved beyond the options provided by SAA to organizations that work either within or adjacent to the archives profession. At various points, the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) and their State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI), the Digital Library Federation (DLF), the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA), the Best Practices Exchange (BPE), and the BitCurator Consortium (BCC) all received my attention. Participating in these groups and at their conferences challenged me to think beyond traditional archival conventions and practices and to be adaptive as I seek solutions to the challenges that technology brings to my archival work.

Similarly, Fleckner explores Ham’s major ideas and challenges to the archival community and how they remain relevant to the profession. Fleckner states, “Three broad themes pervade Ham’s view of the archival landscape in these works: first, its dynamic character; second, the failures of the custodial approach; and third, strategies and actions necessary to make the work of archivists useful and effective” (p. 384). One of Fleckner’s examples of post-custodial strategies for effective archival practice is the work of Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner and their argument for “more product, less process” (MPLP) as a method for working through large backlogs of unprocessed paper collections (p. 386). Since their 2005 article, the authors’ strategy has been adopted and applied by archivists to address the “bulk” of paper records identified by Ham.

However, the shift to electronic records and emerging technologies means that the “bulk” does not solely live in our paper collections. Fleckner writes, “Ham saw both larger social forces and new information technologies reshaping the nature of the archival record and the world of archives” (p. 384). Big data, artificial intelligence,

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machine learning, block chain, and linked data are just a few of the technology trends “forcing [the archivist] into a more active and perhaps more creative role.”

Today, archivists’ accession collections are made up of terabytes of data from a donor’s personal computer comprised of documents, photographs, videos, email accounts, and system data. Or a state agency will transfer gigabytes worth of database content and geographic information system (GIS) data alongside various “normal” office file formats. Email clients, social media platforms, enterprise-wide online file share systems, and cloud storage expand the spaces individuals work in and the types of file formats they create. All this new technology challenges the traditional archival record and the skill sets of traditionally trained “accidental archivists.”

In a recent article, Lise Jaillant states, “The world of big (digital) data is not so different from the world of big (paper) data. There is a danger of repeating the mistakes that we made in the twentieth century with large paper archives.” I find an element of truth in this. The WHS Archives collects both the official records of the state of Wisconsin and manuscript materials from individuals and organizations in paper and electronic formats. Of the terabytes of data accessioned into our collection, 79 percent of our born-digital objects are not accessible to researchers due to insufficient processing. Some of this backlog is due to prior staffing issues and current capacity, but complex file formats and lack of clarity in some aspects of electronic processing best practices contribute to a growing collection of unprocessed and inaccessible electronic records. It is not hard to imagine that our corpus of born-digital records will continue to grow as state government work and personal recordkeeping shift toward digital formats. Thus, where our paper records once—and to a certain extent continue—to “increase at an exponential rate,” so too are our electronic records in ever increasing numbers of formats and complexities.

To combat this electronic “bulk,” Jaillant suggests that archivists should shift toward a full MPLP approach to processing born-digital data by embracing the emergence of artificial intelligence and machine learning while also advocating for “a user-centered approach to born-digital archives: more data, less process, and more liberal attitude toward risk.” While I am intrigued and inspired by Jaillant’s argument, the practicalities and logistics of implementing an MPLP approach to processing born-digital records at times escape me. I find I am in agreement with Erin Faulder and Laura Uglean Jackson when they write that “digital processing exists at the intersection of two fields: analog archival processing and digital.

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preservation”\textsuperscript{18} and that “theoretical articles questioning fundamental processing concepts offer exciting ideas for the future, but contain little how-to guidance for practicing digital archivists.”\textsuperscript{19} These comments ring true not only for the processing steps for simple digital objects that Faulder and Uglean Jackson worked to document, but especially the complex digital objects and environments where “practicing archivists have few standard workflows or regular experience [and] such efforts are largely theoretical or unique projects rather than common practice.”\textsuperscript{20}

As an example, in Wisconsin, the management and transfer of state agency and local email messages is determined by its content. The state does not formally utilize the capstone approach, and there is no single retention schedule that covers all email. Instead, individual general or agency-specific retention schedules determine retention and disposition of a single email message, and entire email accounts can contain multiple retention lengths and dispositions. As a result, the WHS asks for and receives .pst files for entire accounts or .msg files for individual messages during transfers. WHS is in the early stages of figuring out our email processing, but as we do so the amount of email we receive continues to increase—much like the paper corpus highlighted by Ham.\textsuperscript{21} Accordingly, scalability and efficiency in our workflows is important as we consider the amount of email data we receive. But as Faulder and Uglean Jackson point out, even simple digital object processing workflows are not linear. Instead, they are a mix of traditional “steps archivists perform after accessioning to further arrange, describe, and prepare materials for access,” and “digital preservation tasks that are performed during accessioning and processing [that] can be repeated throughout the lifecycle of the materials.”\textsuperscript{22}

Consequently, I struggle to understand what to do with email data in terms of processing. How do we scale email processing without consuming too many resources? What does our final processed email product look like? Is it a MBOX file? In XML? Something else? If it is not a .pst, should we retain the original .pst file for potential technological developments? What are we going to do about the .msg files we receive? What do we give to our researchers and how do we provide access, especially when so much email can be subject to access restrictions due to state statutes or the presence of personally identifiable information? In sum, how do we conduct MPLP on a large corpus of email data when there are few standards and best practices available and the records are possibly mixed together in one large account? I have no real answers and, in many ways, these questions about email records are just the tip of the iceberg when we also consider the variety of new technologies and the new electronic records they create.

\textsuperscript{19} Faulder and Uglean Jackson, “Digital Processing,” 152.
\textsuperscript{20} Faulder and Uglean Jackson, “Digital Processing,” 155.
\textsuperscript{21} Ham, “The Archival Edge,” 9.
\textsuperscript{22} Faulder and Uglean Jackson, “Digital Processing,” 161.
In “The Archival Edge” Ham states, “Taken together, these five factors—institutionalization, bulk, missing data, vulnerable records, and technology—have expanded the universe of potential archival data, have given contemporaneous character to archival acquisition, and have permanently altered the job of the archivist, forcing him to make choices that he never had to make before.” In the electronic archival context that choice might mean moving away from our traditional, linear archival processing that works so readily in an analog context. Further reflecting on Fleckner's and Jaillant’s points highlighted previously, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and natural language processing may be the solution to our questions of how to manage electronic “bulk.” However, moving into these technologies also means that archivists will need to expand into areas beyond the archival field. This might include attending conferences other than SAA, taking on leadership roles in adjacent organizations, and developing skill sets beyond those often offered in MLS/MIS programs. What happens when “accidental archivists” become “accidental digital preservationists” or “accidental computer scientists”? Can a profession with highly educated practitioners retain its base? Especially when those practitioners will enter a tight job market with middling to low salaries but will also need to develop further skill sets in adjacent fields that often pay better, just to address the new technologies in the archival record.

I am optimistic about our ability to overcome the challenges presented by bulk data. For, as Fleckner reminds us, F. Gerald Ham, an “accidental archivist,” challenged the profession to recognize technology’s impact on archival practice almost fifty years ago. In the time since, Ham’s successors have engaged with his ideas and brought about change within the profession, of which the advent of MPLP is just one example. The profession continues to explore ways to adapt MPLP and other approaches to meet our processing needs as evidenced by Jaillant, Faulder, and Uglean Jackson. To meet the continued challenges presented by new technologies, archivists will need to ask some hard questions and make tough choices. There may be setbacks and the profession may experience some amount of attrition. However, by participating in the field and fields adjacent to ours, testing theories, sharing ideas, and creating new best practices, we can continue to respond to Ham’s ideas as technology evolves, eventually meeting the new challenges that come our way.

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