“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 2021.1 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. 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.” 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,” 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. 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. 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 writers, “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,
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”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.”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.”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.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.”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.

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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