

# **DEFINING A DISCIPLINE**

SAA PREVIEW

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# DEFINING A DISCIPLINE

**Archival Research and Practice  
in the Twenty-First Century**

Essays in Honor of Richard J. Cox

Edited by Jeannette A. Bastian  
& Elizabeth Yakel



SOCIETY OF  
**American  
Archivists**

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**On the cover:** Richard J. Cox, *Distant Lighthouse*, Oil on Canvas, 2012.

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# Introduction

Jeannette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel

What makes a discipline, how is it professionalized, and how do we know when it has matured and been integrated into the wider society? There are many ways to chart this progress, such as establishing professional organizations, drafting ethical codes, designing educational curricula, and creating standards and norms in practice, just to name a few. But the outstanding hallmark of a discipline's maturity may be in the recognition and honoring of its own distinguished scholars. This collection of essays honors archival educator Richard J. Cox, a prolific author, a diligent researcher, a prescient thinker, a conscientious teacher, and, above all, a foremost contributor to the development of the archival discipline in the United States. Through fifteen books and more than a hundred articles and reviews, blogs, countless presentations both at conferences and in classrooms, and participation in the archival profession at the highest levels, Cox has championed the archival discipline. He has done this not only by addressing myriad aspects of archival theory and practice but also, and in particular, by focusing our attention outward on the importance of records in contemporary society.

## Honoring Richard Cox

Richard Cox began his career in the 1970s as a practicing historian and archivist at the Maryland Historical Society (1972–1978). He went on to work for the City of Baltimore (1978–1983), the Alabama Department of Archives and History (1983–1986), and the New York State Archives and Records Administration (1986–1988). In 1988 he joined the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Information as a lecturer, and, after receiving his doctorate in 1992, he became part of the faculty as a tenure-track professor. He went on to establish a premier archives program that became a model and exemplar for graduate archival education.

Active in the archival profession at the national level, Cox joined the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 1972. He went on to chair the SAA committee that drafted the first graduate archival education guidelines in 1988, and as a result he served on the new Committee on Education and Professional Development. In 1986, Cox was elected to the SAA Council. He was the editor of the *American Archivist* from 1991 to 1995; editor, from 2001 to 2007, of the *Records & Information Management Report* published by M. E. Sharpe; and the publications editor for SAA from 2004 to 2007. In 1989 his service to the profession was recognized when he was elected a Fellow of the SAA.

Cox began his career in academia as a doctoral student. His was one of the first doctoral dissertations that problematized the archives, diverging from the previous norm of candidates writing dissertations using historical methods and archival sources.<sup>1</sup> Through qualitative methodology that entailed gathering data from various segments of the archival community to gauge the readiness of the profession to manage electronic records, Cox concluded that, despite several decades of activity, archivists were not yet doing well in this critical records area. His early accomplishment signaled his intellectual focus on validating archives as its own distinct discipline. Cox maintained that an emphasis on the need for archival research, combined with the need for individuals with doctorates to focus on archives, was essential to the furtherance of graduate archival education. This conviction spurred him to build a highly successful and productive doctoral program at Pittsburgh. Richard Cox retired as professor emeritus in 2017.



Cox was not only an educator at Pittsburgh; he was a mentor, guide, and advisor to the entire archival discipline. Mentorship occurred through discussions (sometimes heated) at professional meetings and through blog postings. Perhaps his most widely read effort was his blog, *Reading Archives* (<http://readingarchives.blogspot.com/>). Between 2006 and 2009, Cox regaled us with his frequent posts about scholarship concerning archives and archival issues (broadly defined). Cox's commitment to dialoging with the wider archival community continued between 2015 and 2017 with his second blog, *Reading Archives and the Academy* (<https://readingarchivestheacademy.wordpress.com/>), where he discussed an even broader range of scholarship. His voracious reading, ability to identify archival issues in diverse literature, and in-depth reviews were gifts to the profession.

Although this book honors Cox, the essays are not about him; rather, they seek to carry his vision of an archival discipline and the transformational power of scholarship forward. At the same time they push this vision into new, related directions.

## Scholarship

How to explain in this short introduction the tremendous impact that Cox has had on the archives profession? One way may be to briefly look at the breadth and depth of his scholarship through his own writings. Of his fifteen books, three received the Waldo Gifford Leland Award—an annual award given by the Society of American Archivists for a monograph that “encourages and rewards writing of superior excellence and usefulness in the field of archival history, theory, or practice.”<sup>2</sup>

Cox's first book—and first award winner—was *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States*, which announced the focus that he pursued throughout his career: the growth of the archives profession as a discipline in its own right rather than as an accessory to history. In advocating that growth, he explored and encouraged research and theoretical development in a range of archival areas, including appraisal (*Documenting Localities: A Practical Model for American Archivists and Manuscripts Curators* 1996), and *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal*, 2004); evidence, accountability, and ethics (*Managing*

*Records as Evidence and Information*, 2001, and *Ethics, Accountability, and Recordkeeping in a Dangerous World*, 2006); and professionalization and education (*Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management*, 2000, and *Archives and Archivists in the Information Age*, 2005).

Importantly, Cox also placed archival issues within a wider context, seeing records both as personal expressions (*Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations*, 2008) and critical components of larger societal issues, as demonstrated in *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society*, which he co-edited with David A. Wallace (2002), and *Flowers After the Funeral: Reflections on the Post-9/11 Digital Age* (2003). By continually making connections between archives and contemporary concerns in his writings and his presentations and by placing records within a broader civic context, Cox has been a leader in promoting an understanding of the centrality of records to contemporary ethical and social justice concerns.

## Teaching

His writings alone do not explain the influence of Richard Cox on the archives discipline. He has always put a premium on teaching and mentoring, and indeed, both of these activities have been critical elements of his impact. Throughout his long teaching career, in addition to educating hundreds of master's students, Cox mentored and supervised eighteen completed doctoral dissertations, a record for archival educators. His doctoral graduates went on to teach in such universities as the University of Toronto, the University of Michigan, Simmons University, SUNY Albany, the University of Puerto Rico, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Iowa, where they are now teaching a new generation of archivists. At the time of this writing, several of these professors have themselves guided doctoral students to completion, making Cox's intellectual genealogy one of the longest in the profession.

For those who know Richard Cox or have been his students, it would be remiss not to reference his personal impact as well. At meetings, at conferences, in the classroom, or over a glass of wine, Cox is outspoken, expressive, forthright and knowledgeable. A person with strong convictions and an immediate grasp of a discussion and

its implications, he convinces not just by force of personality but because he keeps the core values of the archival endeavor at the center of his vision. Although you might disagree with him, you will always respect him and learn from him.

## The Writing of This Book

This book was initiated in discussions between Cox's former doctoral students and other archival educator colleagues who wanted to honor his many significant contributions to the discipline. As a group, they determined that a collection of essays focusing on the continuing development of the themes that Cox himself championed and fostered would both recognize and contribute to realizing his vision. Defining and furthering the archival discipline was Cox's mission throughout his career. These essays carry that mission forward.

The essays are organized around themes that are of enduring importance to archivists: accountability and evidence, ethics and education, archival history, and memory. While these are not the only issues of significance, they are ones that Cox consistently explored in his research and writing. Former doctoral students as well as his educator colleagues were invited to submit essays in these categories. To involve as many former doctoral students as possible, the editors also invited commentaries on the essays.

"Accountability and Evidence," the first section of the book, includes essays by two of Cox's former doctoral students who are now professors, David Wallace and Wendy Duff (writing with Jefferson Sporn), and by fellow educators Luciana Duranti and Michelle Caswell (writing with Joyce Gabiola, Gracen Brilmyer, and Jimmy Zavala). In the introduction to *Archives and the Public Good*, Cox and Wallace write that "it is our contention that the chief value of records is, in fact, a broad accountability binding individuals with each other and with governments, organizations, and society across space and time."<sup>3</sup> Wallace explores that accountability through the government records of the Vietnam War. Duff and Sporn, also concerned with accountability, look at the validity of "witnessing" as archival evidence. Caswell and her UCLA colleagues report on the results of focus groups with users of community archives and their understanding of evidence and records. Duranti analyzes concepts of evidence from both an archival and a legal perspective. Heather Soyka,

another former doctoral student and current archival educator, offers an extended commentary on all four essays.

In the second section of the book, “Ethics and Education,” educator Heather MacNeil examines the concept of integrity as it relates both to ethics and to the archival profession, while Cox’s former doctoral student Eleanor Mattern examines ethics through the case of Hillary Clinton’s emails and the role of the US National Archives. These timely approaches echo Cox’s own concern expressed in 2013 that “Ethical issues in the archival profession have become a much more significant topic than anyone could have ever predicted, even just a decade or two ago. It is also a topic that has outraced professional structures and the complexities of dealing with information and recordkeeping technologies.”<sup>4</sup> In the final essay in this section, educators Anne Gilliland and Kathy Carbone look at archival education that crosses disciplinary areas, distance, and diasporas. Alison Langmead, Cox’s Pittsburgh colleague, ties ethics and education together in her commentary.

The three essays in this book’s third section deal with archival history, an area of abiding concern to Cox, who continually encouraged archivists to engage with their own history. He set his own example through extensive writings on Lester Cappon, presidential libraries, and archival history in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Cox’s former doctoral student, Donghee Sinn, who is now an educator, recounts and examines the conflicting historical memories of No Gun Ri, a mass killing incident during the Korean War, while another former doctoral student and current educator, Lindsay Kistler Mattock, explores records creation from Sir Hilary Jenkinson to MakerSpaces. Educator Patricia Galloway recalls Camp Pitt, an early electronic records education project that Cox helped to sponsor, and its impact on digital recordkeeping. Robert Riter, another former doctoral student, who is now an archival educator, offers commentary on these essays in light of Cox’s own writings on archival history.

In the last section, “Memory,” the writers of the three essays have vastly different perspectives. All are former doctoral students of Cox’s, and all are now archival educators. Each draws inspiration from Cox’s own writings on memory.<sup>6</sup> Janet Ceja Alcalá takes Cox’s discussions of documentation strategy beyond the textual to document the living social memory of a Mexican religious ritual. Tonia Sutherland

builds on Cox's discussions of culture wars to examine contested oral memories around property and the African American community. Jeannette Bastian explores the changing role of memory in archival work. Joel Blanco-Rivera, also a former doctoral student, offers commentary as well as his own perspectives on memory.

The last essay in the book is by James O'Toole, an archival colleague and co-author with Cox of the second edition of SAA's Archives Fundamental Series, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (2006). O'Toole brings personal insights not only about Cox but about the archival generation that both represent.

Although each section has a specific focus, a number of ideas emerge that cut across all of the essays: community and engagement, moving the profession away from perceptions of neutrality and objectivity, urging archivists toward agency, advocating for archivists to engage with current events, and making archivists question not only how we relate to the records and evidence of those events but also to the events themselves. Many of these threads represent both the logical and evolutionary developments of the basic themes—and they are certainly further steps toward Cox's vision of an independent archival discipline.

The paintings on the front cover and throughout the text are by Cox, who started painting in the mid-2000s. Cox notes that he was “inspired by the beauty of mid-coast Maine and the aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement where land- and seascape painting went hand-in-hand with its furniture, pottery, and architecture designs.” Although he has principally pursued painting as a hobby, he has also exhibited and sold some of his work through local galleries. When asked about his motivations, he further notes that, “the therapeutic act of experimenting with color and design remains his main pursuit, especially as he settles into his retirement years.” One of his pleasures continues to be giving paintings to friends and colleagues.<sup>7</sup>

As always, Richard Cox would like the last word. In this case, it is fitting. Cox was a founding partner of the Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI), a project led by Anne Gilliland at UCLA and originally funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services to foster community and strengthen doctoral-level education and scholarship in the archival profession. Cox attended all of these events before his retirement. At the AERI meeting immediately

before his retirement, Cox presented a paper, “A New Landscape? The Archival Mission in the Post-Truth Era,” which he also posted on his *Reading Archives and the Academy* blog. In that presentation, Cox urged archivists—specifically, prospective archival educators—to transform advocacy to deal with political issues, emphasize the role of archives in democratic regimes, embrace the notion of evidence and truth, revisit archival ethics, and develop graduate curriculum and a research agenda that better prepares the next generation of archivists. In closing, he implored the audience,

We need new ideas and efforts, and these need to come from you, not my generation. . . . Personally, I am not concerned about being remembered. But I am concerned that we have a vigorous, relevant mission and people who are committed to it. . . . We need leadership, creativity, and light in the profession. And maybe nonviolent gadflies as well. . . . We need to create tension in our profession that enables the archival profession to speak more forcibly, be more visible, and carry more weight. We can accomplish this through our teaching, writing, presenting, and other activities.<sup>8</sup>

This volume seeks to answer Cox’s call for new ideas, original scholarship, and creative tension as the archival discipline continues to develop and define itself.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard J. Cox, “Archivists, Electronic Records, and the Modern Information Age: Re-examining Archival Institutions and Education in the United States, with Special Attention to State Archives and State Archivists” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1992).
- <sup>2</sup> Society of American Archivists, “Waldo Gifford Leland Award,” <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section12-leland>, captured at <https://perma.cc/N8AX-ZF5E>.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Richard J. Cox, “Rethinking Archival Ethics,” *Journal of Information Ethics* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 13–20.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Richard J. Cox, ed., *Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives and Scholarship in the Golden Age of Archival Theory* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004); “Lester J. Cappon and the Idea of the Public Scholar,” *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2017): 126–151; “On the Value of Archival History in the United States,” *Libraries & Culture*, 23, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 135–151; and “The Failure or Future of American Archival History: A Somewhat Unorthodox View,” *Libraries & Culture*, 35, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 141–154.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, “War, Memory, and Archives: Building a Framework,” *Library and Archival Security*, 25, no. 1 (2012): 21–57.
- <sup>7</sup> Cox, Richard. “Questions About the Book.” Email, 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Cox, “A New Landscape? The Archival Mission in the Post-Truth Era” (paper, AERI 2017, July 10–14, 2017, Toronto, Ontario, Canada).