



Intergenerational Conversations 2026: Reflecting on Change

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If anything troubles archivists, it is change. Our days are devoted to minimizing the effects of change upon the materials we care for. . . . We pay homage to permanence, to constancy, to stability, and to structure. . . . but in the occupational concern with gaining stability and control, we often forget that the most constant condition in our lives is change.

—Edward Weldon, “Archives and the Challenges of Change” (1983)¹

Open nearly any issue of *American Archivist* from the 1980s or 1990s, and you will find the archives profession grappling with rapid technological, political, and cultural change. The spread of computers demanded strategies for preserving electronic records.² Shrinking budgets for archival programs necessitated creativity in advocacy and outreach.³ Shifting user demographics and research interests

¹ Edward Weldon, “Archives and the Challenges of Change,” *American Archivist* 46, no. 2 (1983): 126, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.46.2.g91733970404m01p>.

² See, for example, Margaret Hedstrom, “Understanding Electronic Incunabula: A Framework for Research on Electronic Records,” *American Archivist* 54, no. 3 (1991): 334–54, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.54.3.125253r60389r011>; and Frederick Stielow, “Archival Theory and the Preservation of Electronic Media: Opportunities and Standards Below the Cutting Edge,” *American Archivist* 55, no. 2 (1992): 332–43, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.55.2.441761203017172k>. *American Archivist* also devoted several issues to exploring the impact of computer technologies on archival practice, including 47, no. 4 (1984), <https://american-archivist.kglmeridian.com/view/journals/aarc/47/4/aarc.47.issue-4.xml>; 56, no. 3 (1993), <https://american-archivist.kglmeridian.com/view/journals/aarc/56/3/aarc.56.issue-3.xml>; and 58, no. 2 (1995), <https://american-archivist.kglmeridian.com/view/journals/aarc/58/2/aarc.58.issue-2.xml>.

³ See, for example, Andrea Hinding, “Of Archivists and Other Termites,” *American Archivist* 56, no. 1 (1992): 54–61, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.56.1.a752462722210517>; and John Grabowski, “Keepers, Users, and Funders: Building an Awareness of Archival Value,” *American Archivist* 55, no. 3 (1992): 464–72, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.55.3.r9gmpj0rj8530811>. Many presidents of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) also addressed resource challenges and advocacy needs in their

required reexamination of traditional archival practices.⁴ Archivists debated these changes and the best paths forward across dozens of articles and thousands of pages. In fact, were it not for the occasional reference to outdated technologies and practices, many articles from this era could easily be mistaken for articles from our own.

Change is, by definition, disruptive. But as our colleagues from the 1980s and 1990s show us, change is also an opportunity for reevaluation—not only of day-to-day programs and priorities, but of core elements of archival theory and practice and of the very role of archives in society. In this iteration of Intergenerational Conversations, our contributors return to some of the key archival literature from the late twentieth century that reevaluated the power and meaning of archives amidst widespread societal change. From Helen Samuels’s 1986 article, “Who Controls the Past,”⁵ to Carolyn Heald’s 1995 article, “Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?”⁶ contributors will examine articles that laid a foundation for many of our current conversations around archives’ role in social history, social memory, and social justice. Reflecting on these articles now reminds us that the profession has weathered significant change before and indeed flowered in its wake, as archivists cultivated new ideas, approaches, and collaborations to tackle emerging challenges. We look forward to sharing these reflections with you.

annual presidential addresses, which are published in *American Archivist* and also available on SAA’s website: <https://www2.archivists.org/history/leaders/presidential-addresses>.

⁴ See, for example, Fredric Miller, “Social History and Archival Practice,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 2 (1981): 113–24, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.44.2.r5x54qq0r71275w4>; Dale Mayer, “The New Social History: Implications for Archivists,” *American Archivist* 48, no. 4 (1985): 388–99, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.48.4.1107660916858k13>; and Elizabeth Lockwood, “Imponderable Matters: The Influence of New Trends in History on Appraisal at the National Archives,” *American Archivist* 53, no. 3 (1990): 394–405, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.53.3.w66t31032j7528t4>. *American Archivist* also devoted 48, no. 3 (1985), <https://american-archivist.kglmeridian.com/view/journals/aarc/48/3/aarc.48.issue-3.xml>, to discussing records of ethnic groups.

⁵ Helen Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–24, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.49.2.t76m2130txw40746>

⁶ Carolyn Heald, “Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?” *American Archivist* 59, no. 1 (1995): 88–101, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.59.1.u854130x02844653>.