

NHPRC and Promoting Archives*

Richard A. Cameron

Director for State Programs

National Historical Publications & Records Commission (NHPRC)

National Archives & Records Administration

Washington, DC, U.S.A.

Abstract

This paper explores the value of archives and records, why they are created and maintained, and the importance of communicating their value to a broad range of individuals. It argues that promoting archives means more than just publicizing archival collections and requires the active efforts of archivists, at local, state, and national levels. It examines the role of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission in the United States and the activities it supports to promote archives. It concludes that to promote archives, archivists must understand the value of records, communicate their importance, and demonstrate their usefulness by serving the needs of many different users.

Keywords : *Value of records; Promoting archives; Historical records; Grants*

In visiting the Web pages of the City of Lakeland, Florida on the Internet I was impressed by how much this city has to offer visitors. I was especially struck, however, by the fact that the City, in its opening descriptive paragraph, uses its history and its status as a Florida Centennial community to convey to all the quality of life that it offers its citizens.¹ The leaders of Lakeland clearly understand that the city's history and cultural opportunities are central to its sense of community, and that in turn has an important impact on its economic development and tourism. To me as an archivist, that spoke directly to why archives are important.

The value of archives and records is why archivists are so passionate about what we do. Nevertheless, the values that archives bring to our communities, our states and our nation are not so obvious to many in government and in our communities. For that reason, I think a concern that we all share is how do we make the case for archives and archival programs. With this in mind, I want to talk this afternoon about the NHPRC, some of the worthwhile programs we have recently or currently support in Florida and the funding opportunities that are available from our agency, but also about the broader question of how we promote archival programs.

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A more basic question is, “Why do we bother about archives?” I was talking recently with a family member about the situation in Iraq, and I expressed my sadness and frustration over the destruction of libraries, museums, and archives in the turmoil that followed the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s government. Some of the oldest records of Western Civilization appeared to be threatened or to already have been lost—victims of thieves, looters, years of suffering under a repressive regime, and perhaps, a lack of understanding about the values of archives. Many of you probably had similar reactions to mine, but my relative, although he admitted that it was sad, said matter-of-factly, “Yeah, but it is more important to turn the water on.” This brought me up short, and hesitatingly, I agreed with him. Certainly restoring basic services that support life and health is more important than any records or artifacts, but after we ended our conversation I kept returning to this question of importance and the nagging feeling that sometimes we archivists still don’t articulate well just how important archives and records are. How do we respond when we are asked to place the value of archives in the wider scheme of things?

Certainly, the preservation of life is more important than the protection of any archival documents, yet, in some cases people die or suffer great harm for the lack of the proper documentation or sometimes because of documentation. In this case, the archival profession, both at the national and international level, moved quickly to pass thoughtful statements urging that coalition forces respond to this threat and provide help in recovering and repairing the damage.² This and other instances of destruction can serve some purpose, however, if they cause us as professionals to think again about why archives are important and to articulate clearly the many values that archives and records have for society.

There are a number of ways that archivists have described the value of records. One of the standard texts of archival management is T. R. Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives Principles and Techniques*. His discussion of the primary and secondary values of records provides an uncluttered but hardly captivating explication of records values. Records are usually created as the result of the conduct of business and their primary value is the value that they serve while they are kept by the agency or individual that created them. After they have served that original purpose, some records have secondary values that are different from the reasons for which they were created, and that result in their having enduring or archival value.³ For instance, birth records originally recorded by the government for public health purposes and to document citizenship, retain value during a person’s lifetime as evidence of eligibility for certain benefits like social security.

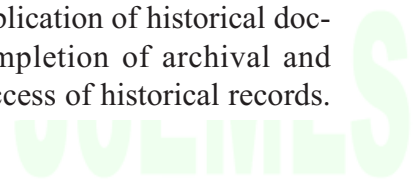
However, their value extends beyond the life of the particular individual involved to document parentage and relationships, providing important links to family and identity for generations to come.

A more dynamic discussion of the reasons we create and keep records is James O'Toole's SAA manual *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*. This volume can serve as an excellent introduction to our profession; it provides a succinct statement of why we do what we do and how we got to where we are as a profession. O'Toole discusses six reasons for recording information: personal, social, economic, legal, instrumental, and symbolic. He gives examples of each like personal letters and diaries, records of organizations or churches, ledgers and accounts, legal matters like deeds or incorporation papers, diagrams maps and drawings, and family Bibles. He makes two other points in that section of the manual worth noting here. First, a record's values are likely to change over time. The reason for creating a record and the reason for keeping it may not be the same.⁴ Ultimately, the value of all records and the reasons for keeping them boils down to use. We keep records and archives because they are useful and serve our purposes — whether individual, organizational, societal or cultural.

Understanding the values and uses of records and being able to articulate them to a wide range of individuals and audiences is fundamental to promoting archives, but is that all we mean by the phrase? For many of us the term promote conjures up images like Don King, the boxing promoter or Ron Popeil and his telemarketing of portable fishing gear or rotisserie grills. While marketing is one meaning of the word “promote”, the term as used here and in the Commission's mission is much broader: “to advance or to contribute to the growth or prosperity of.”⁵ Promoting in this sense includes marketing and public relations, but it encompasses a much wider range of possible activities.

The NHPRC and its mission can help us think further about what it means to promote archives. First, let me give a quick overview of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for those of you who are not familiar with the Commission and its programs.⁶ The NHPRC is a statutory Federal agency affiliated with the National Archives and Records Administration. Its mission is “to ensure understanding of our nation's past **by promoting** {emphasis mine}, nationwide, the identification, preservation, and dissemination of essential historical documentation.”

The NHPRC carries out its mission to promote archives by making grants in two primary areas: 1. the creation and publication of historical documentary editions, and 2. the initiation and completion of archival and records projects addressing the preservation and access of historical records.



The Commission also supports professional education in both documentary editing and archival management through fellowships, an institute, conferences, workshops, curriculum development and many other means. Many of you may be familiar with the editions NHPRC supports like the papers of Washington, Jefferson, Adams and other figures from the founding era of our country. But you may not be aware that the NHPRC also has or does support editions on such crucial topics as slavery, women's rights, the environment, labor, political movements, and business. Good examples of these are: *Freedom, A Documentary History of Emancipation*, the *Black Abolitionist Papers* (an edition prepared at Florida State), *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, *John Muir Papers, 1856-1942* (a microfilm edition), and more recent projects focusing on Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Martin Luther King Papers. One final microfilm edition that pertains to Florida and the Southeast deserves mention here. The Papers of Panton, Leslie and Company collected from public and private collections in both Europe and the United States about 10,000 documents relating to the activities of the firm whose trading posts conducted much of the trade with the American Indian tribes of the Southeast during the 18th century. Thanks to NHPRC projects these editions are available in many libraries.⁷

On the records side of the program the Commission supports projects in state archives, local governments, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations and institutions of all types. Current Florida projects include a project at the Florida Moving Image Archive to preserve and make accessible three collections which comprise the remainder of the earliest surviving television records documenting South Florida. Another active project will help develop an archives for the University of Florida's Health Science Center and College of Medicine, focusing on appraising and processing a number of key series relating to the establishment and administration of the Center. Finally, a project sponsored by the Florida State Historical Records Advisory Board will provide statewide training in disaster preparedness and recovery and develop a more effective statewide network for archival and records repositories to respond to disasters.

The Commission is a small agency by Federal standards. Chaired by the Archivist of the U.S. its 15 members represent all of the branches of the Federal government and six national archival and historical professional associations. Its members serve without additional pay. The NHPRC has a staff of eleven and an annual budget that has been flat for the last several years at between \$6 and \$6.5 million.

It may seem presumptuous or foolhardy for such a small program to

stake out for its mission “promoting nationwide the identification, preservation and dissemination of essential historical documentation.” But archival and historical programs have never allowed limited resources to restrict our vision or completely dictate our goals. At the same time, my experience in the archival and records profession has been that, for the most part, we are a pragmatic lot. Recognizing the need to temper NHPRC’s goals so that they are attainable, the Commission has emphasized planning and relied on partnerships, at both the state and national level, to accomplish our work. In a very real sense then our work is your work.

The NHPRC has emphasized planning at a number of levels. First, for the past decade the Commission has developed, evaluated, and revised its own strategic plan. That plan has three equal strategic goals. In brief they are: 1. completing eight documentary editions focusing on the founding era, 2. sponsoring research and development in the area of electronic records, and 3. working with the states through state historical records advisory boards. The Commission has also reserved 40% of its grant funding for projects that fall outside of these three strategic areas but within its wider program. The Commission did not delineate further priorities in its own plan for each of these strategic goals, but it has supported planning at the national level by professional organizations such as the Society of American Archivists, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, and the Association for Documentary Editing. It has also engaged a wide range of professionals in planning at the national level around key topics such as archival descriptive standards, electronic records, archival continuing education, documentation of immigration, and American Indian archives.

In addition to these national efforts, the Commission has reserved its largest planning effort for its partnership with the states, working both collectively with all of the states through the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators and with the states individually through their state historical records advisory boards. Over the past decade 41 states have produced strategic plans for their historical records repositories identifying strategic goals and funding priorities for historical records.

Led by gubernatorially appointed State Historical Records Coordinators these boards serve a number of roles beyond planning. They coordinate archival and records programs and efforts within their states as well as review records grant proposals coming from their state to the NHPRC. In many states these boards provide key professional continuing education and in some less populous states they represent the primary, if not the only, cooperative link among repositories in the state. All this planning is for

naught, if it doesn't lead to action, concrete efforts to establish, develop, improve, and sustain our archival and records programs. That is why the NHPRC has funded a planning effort in every state willing to undertake one and has encouraged states to engage as many professionals and citizens as it can in these efforts. Plans should be vehicles for advocacy and tools for change. In many states, boards serve as advocates for archival and records programs and issues in the state. They can take positions and can communicate these to the governor or appointing authority, but most importantly to their own partners in the state—organizations of archivists, records managers and allied professionals like librarians and clerks of court, genealogists and others who have a stake in records issues. For broad political advocacy, boards must depend on their partners in the state and the members of these organizations acting as individual citizens to make their concerns and views known.

Many boards have moved beyond their planning and advisory roles and worked with the Commission to initiate jointly funded programs to implement key goals in their plans. They become important actors undertaking projects themselves and seeking additional funding both from the Commission and from state and other non-Federal resources. In addition to funding planning efforts, the Commission provides state boards with three other types of funding: regrants, special projects to implement their plans, and small amounts of basic administrative support. It is important to emphasize that the state coordinator and the members of the board, contribute their time. Moreover, because of NHPRC's own limited funds, state boards compete for all of the grant funds they receive. There is no automatic or formula funding for any state board activities. Applications must be written and submitted (usually by the state coordinator), reviewed by peer reviewers and the Commission, and are funded based on merit. All of this places a special burden on the coordinator and the state archives as well as members of the board.

Is NHPRC successful in persuading the boards to become not simply advisory groups but active agents of change within their state archival communities? We have had mixed success nationally in accomplishing this transition, in part because the payoffs are small relative to other Federal grant programs for historic preservation or humanities projects. The Florida Board, however, is a good example of the more active and consistent boards in the country, identifying strategic goals and then taking active steps to achieve those goals. I hope that many of your programs have benefited from the SHRAB's activities. I think especially of the state program, established several years ago with the help of NHPRC regrants. That grant program has

been eliminated in the current budget crisis, but if you see the benefit of such programs, you as citizens of Florida can work to make them a reality again in the future and NHPRC will be glad to work with you in leveraging those dollars. These statewide efforts, combining local, state, and national resources and talents are one very effective means for promoting archives, but they depend on commitment at every level.

There is much that can be accomplished at a state level with small amounts of funding, a collaborative spirit and a belief in the importance of archives. Finally, however, it is at the local community and individual repository level that promoting archives is most important, and here the greatest burden devolves to individual professionals. The Commission encourages all archival programs to plan effectively by asking every applicant to justify their project requests based on established plans and to undertake their work using established professional practices and standards. In addition to the jointly funded programs supported through the states, the Commission funds roughly another \$1.2 million in direct grants to individual repositories and organizations. These grants help establish and develop archival and records programs, arrange and describe important collections, encourage collaborative efforts at local, state and national levels on archival projects.

Of course, making the case for archival programs cannot simply be done by getting a grant to start an archives, but NHPRC continues to welcome and fund such requests. To be successful, these efforts must be well timed and build on a solid foundation of education and support at the institutional and personal level. A grant project cannot be the sole impetus for a successful program or project, but it can provide the necessary seed money to bring a project or program into being or to assist an established program in offering new or expanded services. The grant application process is, in itself, an opportunity to promote archives, to make the case for the importance of an archives and records program to the health and well being of the organization. Grant projects can also provide an opportunity to emphasize the wider significance of collections, not just to the granting agency, but to other organizations and individuals within your community. Successful projects are opportunities to promote your program and to demonstrate the importance of archives.

Not every eligible program can compete at the national level. You must be able to make a case for the state, regional or national significance of your program and the collections involved. You will need to demonstrate thoughtful planning; a sound professional approach, qualified staff and a reasonable budget based on real, not “guestimated” costs. You will find

help in the NHPRC staff and the State Coordinators with whom we work. Providing frank and sound advice on potential projects is one of the ways we can promote archives at the local or institutional level.

We create records and maintain archives for many reasons from the personal to the economic to the symbolic. We promote archives by understanding archives and records, communicating their value and importance, and serving the many and varied needs of our users. To do this we must work professionally within our institutions and programs, work collaboratively within our communities, and work collectively with our colleagues at the local, state, and national levels. We at the Commission are proud to have a role in partnerships at all of those levels, and we look forward to continuing our work with you to ensure the preservation and use of our documentary heritage.

Notes

- 1 City of Lakeland. Homepage: "Welcome to the City of Lakeland," <http://www.lakelandgov.net/home.html> (June 2003).
- 2 See the Society of American Archivists, "Statement on Iraqi Archives," <http://www.archivists.org/statements/archives.asp> (April 2003); and the International Council on Archives, "ICA Call to Protect Records and Archives in Iraq," <http://www.ica.org/new.php?pnnewsid=61&planguage=eng> (April 2003).
- 3 T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Midway Reprint, 1975), pp.13-16.
- 4 James O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), pp.10-15, 23-25. The NHPRC provided funding for the Archival Fundamental Series of which this volume is a part.
- 5 *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Press Co., 1953), p.676.
- 6 See the National Historical Records and Publications Homepage, <http://www.archives.gov/grants/about/nhprc/aboutnhprc.html> (June 2003).
- 7 For a complete listing of NHPRC-sponsored documentary editions see National Archives and Records Administration, *Historical Documentary Editions Supported or Endorsed by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission* (Washington, 2000).
http://www.archives.gov/grants/documentary_editing/documentary_editions_catalog.pdf.