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Mary Catherine Kahl Conference
Session 2: History Careers Beyond the Classroom: A Symposium
February 28, 2009

What Do Archivists Do?

An Essay by Nadia Nasr, University Archivist & Digital Collections Librarian

Good morning everyone. I'd like to thank Dr. Stallsmith for her kind introduction and the Kahl Conference coordinators for the invitation to speak to you all today about the archives profession and the opportunities that it provides for those interested in applying their historical knowledge to careers beyond the classroom.

Introduction

As Dr. Stallsmith mentioned I am currently the University Archivist & Digital Collections Librarian here at Towson University. Since 1866 Towson has existed under five different names, relocated its facilities three times to accommodate growth and development, and thrived under the leadership of twelve principals and presidents. It has a very long history in teaching and education, and as its archivist I am the keeper of its collective and institutional memory contained in the documents and other records left behind by previous administrators, faculty, and staff.

Profession Defined

By definition, an archivist is an individual responsible for appraising, acquiring, arranging, describing, preserving, and providing access to records of enduring value¹. A record is a written

¹ Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A glossary of archival & records terminology*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.

or printed work of a legal or official nature that may be used as evidence or proof. It is data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability. Records are often created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference². Some examples of records that I work with on a regular basis include photographs that date back to the beginning of the school, various committee meeting minutes, some of which document important decisions relating to the establishment of departments and programs here on campus; the correspondence of past principals and presidents of the school, and a full run of student newspapers that date back to the early 1920s. For those of you who complete a master's or doctoral degree here at Towson, the archives will retain a copy of your thesis or dissertation as evidence of your scholarly activities.

The question of what constitutes the concept of the enduring value of records depends on a number of factors. When surveying a body of records to discern their enduring value one might consider the following questions:

- Who or what organization is responsible for creating the records? Where did they live or where was the organization located? What did that person do or what was the nature of the organization's business? Were these records the result of a personal hobby, work for hire, or – in the case of an organization – simply the byproduct of conducting daily business?

² *ibid.*

- Who or what organization is responsible for collecting the records? In some cases the collector is not always the creator of the records. When that is the case it is as important to know the background of the collector as it is to know that same information about the creator. Also, what was the nature of the relationship between the collector and the creator of the records? For example, was it friendly or antagonistic?
- What are the contents of the records and how is this significant? In other words, what do the records tell you about that person or organization's day to day activities? What don't they tell you, or do they tell you anything at all?
- What is the relationship of these records to other records already in the archives or in other collections at other archival institutions? Are they similar or dissimilar? Do they introduce a new scholarly perspective on an historical event?

Another factor to take into consideration when surveying a body of records is the collecting mission of the institution that is considering the acquisition of those records. To illustrate this idea I'd like to share an anecdote from my own experience. I was recently trying to find out more information about how the archives came to be in possession of a 34-star American flag created sometime between 1863 and 1865. It turns out that this flag flew over the Maryland State Normal School (now Towson University) when it first opened its doors in downtown Baltimore. The flag, along with a portrait of M.A. Newell, the first principal of the Normal School, was donated to us by Newell's great granddaughter, Anna Newell Armstrong Buzzell. According to archives correspondence files Mrs. Buzzell first approached a local historical society to see if they were interested in acquiring the two items. The historical society was

interested in the flag but declined the offer of the portrait, since it was not an item that fit with its collecting mission. It was Mrs. Buzzell's desire that the portrait and the flag not be separated so she next approached the Normal School to see if they would be interested in the items. Considering Mrs. Buzzell's relationship to the Normal School's first principal, and since both items were artifacts related to the history of the institution the Normal School accepted them and the rest is history. As an aside, the flag and Principal Newell's portrait or on permanent display here in the library's leisure reading area.

Once enduring value has been determined and materials have been accepted the archivist then begins the process of describing the collection for the purpose of documenting the acquisition and making the materials in the collection accessible to researchers. Tools of the trade are meta-records such as : accession registers, finding aids (collection register, inventory), digital collections.

An archivist is not necessarily a historian. A historian writes up history whereas the archivist gathers the records and other intellectual capital to fund historical research. Certainly, however, an understanding of the historical context, both past and present, of the institution, is a vital component of being an archivist.

1. Show and tell – an overview of some items in our archives collection presented to inform discussion about the archives profession:
 - a. Gantt Papers
 - i. What is it?
 - ii. What is its context?
 - b. 34-star American Flag
 - i. What is it?
 - ii. What is its context?
 - c. Selected photograph?
 - i. What is it?
 - ii. What is its context?
2. Primary function/duties of archivist:
 - a. Maintain physical and intellectual control over, and access to, archival records³; in simple terms this means organizing and rehousing collections in archival storage material, describing collections and the creators of those collections, and making that information accessible to interested users
 - i. Typically maintain original order, unless materials arrive in no discernible order
 - ii. Archival boxes are acid-free, and sometimes treated
 - iii. Describing collections involves discovering and documenting the arrangement of the materials within a collection, the scope and contents, dates, and a biographical or historical sketch of the individual or corporate creator and/or collector of the records
 - b. Goal is achieved by paying special attention to
 - i. The inter-relatedness of records
 - ii. The context in which records were created
 - iii. The purposes for which records will be used, and
 - iv. The function of records as unique testaments or evidence⁴
 - c. Archival records definition:

“Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs that are preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator.”⁵

³ Davis, Gillian. “A Career in Archival Science” retrieved from http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/librarians_information_science/74202/2 on 2/16/2009 at 11:47 AM.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Society of American Archivists. Glossary of Archival Terminology retrieved from http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=292 on 2/16/2009 at 1:18pm.

3. Archival education – typically a master’s degree in library and information science is the core education needed, often supplemented by additional advanced degrees depending on the subject collecting area of the institution: for example, MA and/or PhD in civil rights history if an archives has a large body of civil rights related material

Archives of Towson University primarily contain records that date back to the school’s founding in 1866. We also have among our collections things more commonly found in museums, such as antique furniture,