

Annotation

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DOCUMENTING DEMOCRACY

National Historical Publications and Records Commission

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Preservation and Access: Either One or the Other?

Archivists have long held the view that there is a fundamental tension between the archival principles of preservation and access. Perfect preservation, so goes the argument, requires no access or use, while optimal access soon results in diminished or destroyed archival holdings. The challenge is to find the right balance, assessing risks and taking steps to mitigate them.

These tensions certainly exist at the micro, or document, level. While the needs of our customers must be balanced against our responsibility for protecting and preserving archives, perhaps there is another way to look at this issue.

Viewing the question from the macro, or repository, level can reframe the entire issue. I suggest we consider what may seem like a logical paradox, that *access is preservation*. Archives kept perfectly pickled for preservation purposes might as well not exist at all, as far as the public is concerned. Yes, there may be an intellectual understanding that keeping historical records is a public good for its own sake. However, most people would agree that archives are kept primarily to be used, even if many people will likely not actively use original documents themselves. Public support for archives comes from a widely held perception that archives are producing a public good by ensuring present and future users open access to the records that document our national experience.

Fortunately, we live in an age in which it is relatively easy to preserve the contents of documents by publishing them. The NHPRC supports programs to do just that, including our long-time documentary editing grant programs. Documentary editors turn collections of historical records into books by carefully transcribing and annotating some of the most important sources that document American democracy. The products of many of these projects are beginning to find their way onto the World Wide

Web, promising to reach for the first time audiences of non-scholars, including teachers and their students.

Publishing is more than books of edited documents, however. The NHPRC mass digitization pilot project addresses the needs of archival institutions to publish their collections as comprehensive sets of digital images, without transcription or annotation, but with limited metadata. We expect the three projects we funded last year—the Michigan State Archives Civil War Muster Rolls, the Troupe County (Georgia) Court Records, and the Aldo Leopold Papers—to test and further demonstrate the usefulness and cost-effectiveness of this approach, and to begin to establish processes and best practices. We expect that this pilot project will become a regular NHPRC program. Check the grant opportunity announcements on our web site in the near future.

Many archives are considering opportunities developed by online content providers that offer to digitize archival holdings at no cost. Archives are approaching this gift horse with some caution. The Council of State Archivists (CoSA) has recently issued guidelines on digital access partnerships for archival institutions to consider. CoSA wants to make sure this gift is not a Trojan horse.

The caution expressed is well founded. All these publishing activities—producing documentary editions, digitizing and/or microfilming records, and making archival holdings more easily available—fulfill our obligation to preserve records and make them accessible. However, the larger needs of archival institutions are not well served when document images become separated from the repositories that continue to preserve the originals. The question may be, in part, one of branding in order to make it clear that publishing in each of these forms is built upon the foundation of thorough, disciplined, and thoughtful archival activities. Furthermore, what is published represents literally the tip of an enormous iceberg consisting of tens of *billions* of pages that will not likely find their way to the Web, but that are part of a “long tail” of historical materials.

Can publishing online a relatively few records for the many promote a deeper understanding of the roles of the nation's archives? Perhaps, but only if we become smarter and develop

THE INFORMATION ECOLOGIES AND THE NHPRC

The art of history is always provisional. Drawing on a range of primary sources and tertiary commentary and observation, even the most comprehensive history relies upon sifting for detail, analysis, and selection to create a story, an edited and arranged narrative filtered through the web of an individual mind. The more stories that are preserved, the more complex and provisional our understanding becomes. Rather than establishing a single grand history, the work of preservationists encourages more questions, challenges to authority, and debate—the democratic and egalitarian clash of ideas.

The rise of new technologies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has made creating, preserving, and disseminating these ideas, paradoxically, both easier and more difficult. On the one hand, digitization and the Internet have created a whole world of publishers from traditional multimedia organizations to the daily bloggers—at least 100 million—who have created between 15 and 30 billion pages and an exponential number of documents.

Writing in the November 5, 2007, issue of *The New Yorker*, Anthony Grafton provides a healthy tonic against the utopian vision of “a universal archive that will contain not only all books and articles but all documents anywhere—the basis for a total history of the human race.” While his essay focuses primarily on efforts to digitize and publish books, Grafton argues:

The rush to digitize the written record is one of a number of critical moments in the long saga of our drive to accumulate, store, and retrieve information efficiently. It will result not in the infotopia that the prophets conjure up but in one in a long series of new information ecologies, all of them challenging, in which readers, writers, and producers of texts have learned to survive.

“A long series of new information ecologies” encompasses as well those who care for the records, both the librarian and archivist. In their 1999 book, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, Bonnie Nardi and Vicky O’Day analyzed the role of librarians—and by extension all records caretakers—as “keynote species” a term borrowed from biology that identifies those species “central to the robust functioning of the ecosystems” (90). This metaphor was pushed further by Jessica George, Lisa Stillwell, and Marjorie Warmkessel in their report “The Essential Librarian? An Exploration of Academic Librarians as a Keystone Species” for the 2003 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) National Conference.

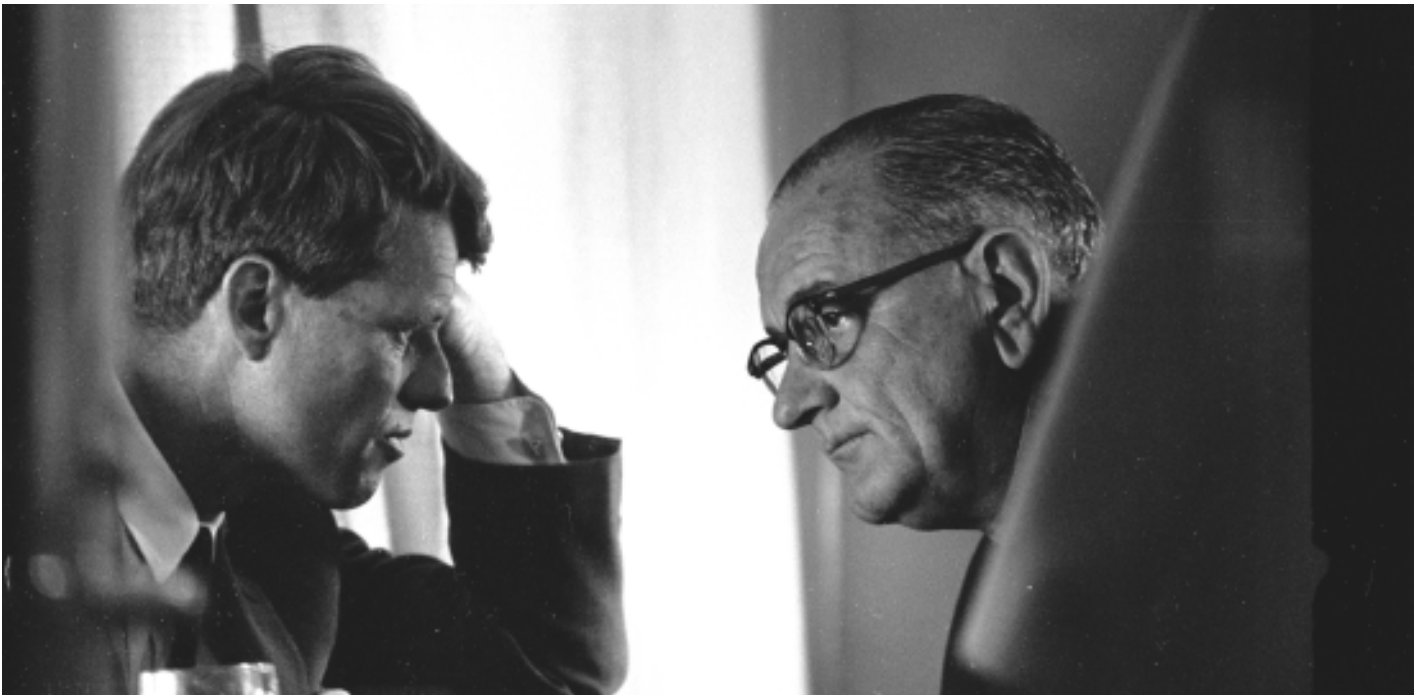
perhaps not surprisingly, point to the value of librarians: “from their complex character blend of the *human zeitgeist*. . . . The librarian essence is *interpretive of knowledge*, a quality that enables librarians ‘to help clients air their own needs’ and to ‘lead clients to more than they know how to ask for.’”

Librarians, archivists, and records managers will continue to serve as keystone species within the information ecologies, particularly in helping researchers understand what they are looking for as well as leading to what’s hidden within collections, and the long-term task of shaping, managing, and preserving collections. At the same time, however, the Internet is reshaping the relationship between the record keepers and those seeking information. Online self-retrieval of information is a step toward disintermediation—I’ll find it myself—and in the anonymity of the Web, it is hard to help lead people “to more than they know how to ask for.” Or, put another way, the archivist cannot show the way to hidden collections if the researchers themselves are hidden on the other side of a monitor.

Libraries and archives have been struggling to find their role in the new digital, online world. If, as Grafton argues, most research begins by Googling, then many students, historians, and patrons of archives and libraries have already developed and revised their expectations of access to records and information. *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, a 2005 study by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), substantiates the trend, pointing to the need for libraries to rejuvenate the “Library” brand. And the parallels for archives are self-evident.

Rejuvenating the brand depends on reconstructing the experience of using the library. While the need for localized points of distribution for content that is no longer available in just physical form is likely to become less relevant, the need for libraries to be gathering places within the community or university has not decreased. The data is clear. When prompted, information consumers see libraries’ role in the community as *a place to learn, as a place to read, as a place to make information freely available, as a place to support literacy, as a place to provide research support, as a place to provide free computer/Internet access* and more. These library services are relevant and differentiated. Libraries will continue to share an expanding infosphere with an increasing number of content producers, providers and consumers. Information consumers will continue to self-serve from a growing information smorgasbord. The challenge for libraries is to clearly define and market their relevant place in that infosphere—their services and collections both physical and virtual.

The keystone species of the information ecologies—librarians, archivists, documentary editors, and others—provide stewardship for records and public service for historians and researchers. How they respond to the latest ongoing phase to digitization and online access will determine the



Attorney General Robert Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson confer at an October 1964 meeting. The Presidential Recording Project at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, is preserving audiotapes through print transcriptions and audiofiles on their web site <http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/academic/presidentialrecordings/>. Photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto, *courtesy LBJ Library*.

Preservation through copying into another medium had been a long-accepted and funded process, as early as the 1960s when microfilm publishing projects were funded, but because of the rapid expansion and associated costs of

digitization, the NHPRC was reluctant to spread already thin resources for these purposes. A pilot program was announced in 2006, and three grants were awarded to the Troup County (Georgia) Historical Society, the

Archives of Michigan, and the Aldo Leopold Foundation (see “Digitizing Aldo”). The singular advantage of digitization over microfilm is that the NHPRC guidelines call for the collections to be freely available on the Internet.

THE FOUR MODES OF PRESERVATION

At the heart of the mission of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission is the preservation of, and access to, America’s historical records. The NHPRC funds projects along four principal modes of preservation: fixing, maintaining, copying, and educating.

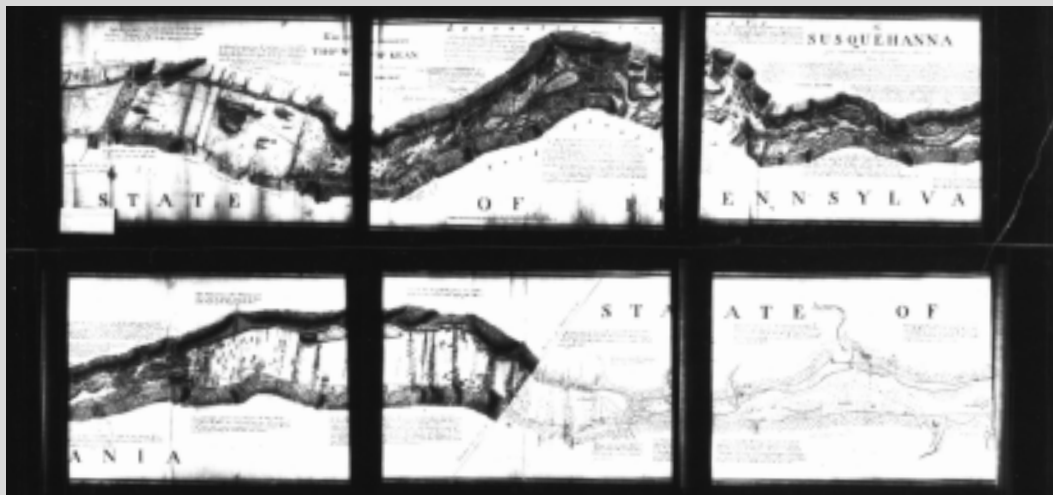
Preservation by Fixing

Perhaps the idea most often associated with preservation is that of “fixing” a physical object, that is, preventing it from changing, or freezing it in time. The original etymological sense of preservation stems from the processes for treating food to prevent decay. Meat and fish were salted; fruits were cooked

Microfilm—such as this edition of the Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe—preserves originals by copying into a different medium.

in sugar and water syrups to keep their shape and flavor. Vinegar pickled everything from cucumbers to hard-boiled eggs. An interesting paradox, however, is that efforts to “fix” an object always add new ingredients and that fixed objects continue to change, relentlessly albeit more solely.

For archivists, preservation by fixing is most often thought of as conservation. From the Declaration of Independence to nitrate films, National Archives conservation efforts are replicated throughout the country through state and local governments and other archives. The National



Electronic Records

One of the first Federal agencies to take up the challenges presented by the preservation of electronic records, the Commission adopted a research agenda in 1990, and over the next 15 years, it devoted considerable resources to research and development. Landmark projects such as the San Diego Supercomputer Center's Persistent Archival Testbed and the InterPARES project laid the groundwork for preservation services. A shift in policy occurred two years ago when the NHPRC moved toward assisting archives and other organizations in implementing programs. Four types of projects were supported to

1. Assess institutional capacity through program evaluation and planning
2. Create institutional capacity with program start-up support
3. Expand the scope of existing programs; and
4. Develop cooperative institutions that provide electronic records preservation services to repositories.

The first grants under these new guidelines will be awarded in 2008. Projects designed

to develop new tools for the field have now been shifted into the Strategies and Tools category (see below).

Professional Development

Since 1972, the Commission has funded the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents, known fondly as "Camp Edit," and in three dozen years, some 500 scholars have taken part in this weeklong program. At least 70 graduates have led important documentary projects, and many others have worked as full-time editors. Institute graduates include history faculty, editors, archivists, manuscript librarians, and government historians. In the summer of 2008 at the University of Wisconsin's training, a new group of archivists and records managers will be among the first class of the Archives Leadership Institute, run by the School of Library and Information Sciences. If archivists are a keystone species in the information ecologies, they deserve a place to hone their leadership skills.

This new grant category, expected to run annually, continues the NHPRC tradition of awarding grants for professional development purposes, which in addition to the Editing Institute, have included the

Society of American Archivists National Forum on Archival Continuing Education; an institute on electronic records for archives managers; and Archival Research Fellowships Programs.

Strategies and Tools

Another new category for the NHPRC, Strategies and Tools is designed to look across issues to develop new strategies and tools that can improve the preservation, public discovery, or use of historical records. Projects may also focus on techniques and tools that will improve the professional performance and effectiveness of those who work with such records, such as archivists, documentary editors, and records managers. The first grants in this category will be awarded in 2008.

State and National Archives Partnership

Legislation passed in 1974 fundamentally changed the mandate of the Commission to include in its scope records and archives projects in the states, and as part of the evolving information ecologies, the state archives have grown into a keystone of the national archival network. In the early years, funds went to the development of

Historical Publications and Records Commission has funded scores of conservation efforts since it first began to fund records projects in the mid-1970s. By stabilizing records—whether 18th-century paper to photographs to microfilm—preservations then move to the next form, maintaining records, usually by creating suitable environmental conditions.

Preservation by Maintaining

A second form of preservation, related to the first, is the central focus for the majority of records held in archives. Ideal storage conditions and media-specific standards are the hallmarks of good programs, and ancillary to preservation by maintaining is records recovery from disaster. The National Archives promulgates best practices, and the latest information on maintaining records can be found at [http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/](http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/index.html)

[index.html](http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/index.html) and through the Society of American Archivists.

Preservation by Copying

The third mode of preservation is copying the content to be preserved onto a new medium. Here the focus is not on preservation of the physical object, but rather on preserving the informational or cultural content of the original by making a surrogate from the original. Since ancient times, scribes have preserved documents by copying them, and copies also provide a mechanism for dissemination of content. Publishing is thought of today as a tool of dissemination, but it is equally appropriate to think of it as a radical means of preservation.

In the past century, techniques were developed to preserve the content of paper documents more scrupulously than by scribal copying. Some of these techniques are photographic: the printed page is photocopied onto another medium. Microfilm is a 20th-century form of preservation that strives to mimic the shape and content of the original printed page. Among the very first grants awarded by the NHPRC were for projects to microfilm historical documents.

Perhaps the most significant preservation effort has been through the publication of historical documentary editions. These

Documentary Editions—the collected papers of key figures or movements in American history—preserved through transcription and annotation in print publications.



