

## **WHY ARCHIVES? AN ADVOCATE'S ROLE**

It is a great honor to be here this morning and to give one of the keynote addresses. While a bit daunting, this is also an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of archives as I conclude 37 years at the National Archives. More importantly, this is also an opportunity to look at the challenges and opportunities confronting those who lead archival and preservation programs.

Though I will focus most of my comments on archives, I want to draw the outlines of the strong bonds that unite the three pillars of the information community: archives, libraries, and museums. Though there are differences in the holdings of each type of institution, and how the materials are created or collected, used, and preserved, each deals with information of enduring value. Archives are the materials (files, records) created or received by a person, family, or organization in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value in the information they contain and as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creators. Libraries contain collections of books, magazines and sometimes manuscript collections in a variety of formats that are preserved because of the enduring value contained in the holdings. Museums collect, preserve, and display works of art and historic artifacts of lasting interest or value. The “why” that unites the three pillars is that society depends on the information of enduring value preserved in these institutions.

A key component undergirding the whole enterprise is the work of preservation administrators, conservators, and preservation specialists. I see the preservation community as an integral part of the broader information community. It is all part of the continuum of creating or collecting, using, and preserving information of enduring value.

Thesis: “Because of technology, rising user demands, and tremendous pressure on public funding, archival programs (and libraries and museums as well) across the country at every level of government confront serious challenges. There needs to be a much deeper collaboration and integration in the information community of archives, libraries, and museums with the preservation community.” Without an effective collaboration professional, institutional, and societal goals cannot be achieved.

To focus on archives let's begin with a basic question: “Why Archives” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Then we will look at what collaboration among the varied elements of the information community would entail.

### **Background**

Challenges have confronted archives since the beginning of record keeping. These age-old challenges include losses from wars, looting, floods, and the physical degradation of archival materials. The great archives of Egypt and Rome, for example, disappeared with only fragmentary remains. These issues have confronted archives ever since.

Contemporary challenges include all the above and more. Unprecedented technological and communication advances have dramatically altered the creation, use, and archiving of the historical record. Social media is only the latest manifestation of these advances. More will

surely follow. Of course, there is increasing demand that records be digitized and available on the internet.

There are also tremendous preservation concerns whether archival records are in traditional formats, digitized from traditional formats, or born digital. The complexity and cost of transformation is truly extraordinary. So, across the records life cycle there are unprecedented challenges for records creators and preservers.

There is another factor which must be noted—the volume of archival holdings. At the National Archives, for example, there are over 4 million cubic feet of textual and audio-visual (approximately 9-10 billion pages) and over 122 terabytes of electronic records. The volume of electronic records will grow exponentially as the National Archives increases its focus on accessioning electronic records. At every level of government, archival holdings continue to increase as citizen demands for access to records, preferably on the internet, grow.

There are numerous challenges facing the archival and preservation community. For digital records, of course, the preservation challenges involved with long-term migration and transformation are complex and serious. Large volumes of digital records requiring screening for National Security information—at the Federal level—and for privacy—at all levels of government—pose a very significant challenge. Archivists and records managers are caught between the sometimes contradictory imperatives for preservation, access, and privacy. None of these imperatives can be managed in black or white terms, but only by balancing complex trade-offs.

All these issues must be confronted at a time of unparalleled fiscal crisis affecting all public sector budgets. The results of the Great Recession have taken a toll on archival and records management programs at the state and local level. The Federal Government is currently embroiled in what will be a protracted struggle over budget priorities. Governors in many states have huge deficits to fill. Will it be Medicaid, public safety, transportation, or records programs that will have a number one priority? At the Federal level, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution confront program needs already underfunded, as well as numerous and expensive physical plant and facility maintenance issues. The battle for resources at the Federal level will be just as fierce and ugly as in the states.

### **Why Archives?**

Therefore, it is critical that the leaders in the archival and preservation community be able to articulate why archives play a critical role in society that needs to be recognized and supported.

There are three basic components in the archival role in society. While these elements are articulated in the mission statement of the National Archives, I believe they are relevant to archives at all levels of government, and indeed for all institutional archives (corporate, university, church). In any complex society, records are needed to document the activities of the government (or organization). Citizens need to know what government has done in order to hold officials accountable, which is a bedrock principle in a democratic system. Also, citizens have basic rights and benefits, and recordkeeping is at the heart of meeting governmental responsibility. Then there is the need to preserve the historical record so that generations to come understand what happened and why.

Let me provide some examples from the holdings of the National Archives to illustrate these three elements in why archives are a critical societal need. You have heard about the case of Eloise Cobell and others who joined in her suit against the Federal Government for misuse of funds administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on behalf of Native Americans. BIA and Treasury Department records were at the heart of proving government accountability and documenting the benefits owed to Native Americans. Preservation and access to these records also opened the record to historical review focusing on the long and painful story of the government's interaction with Native Americans.

Records created by the U.S. Army, the Department of State, and the Treasury Department of often obscure units or programs were critical in opening up and resolving issues related to Nazi-looted assets. Records were again at the heart of the matter. Records preserved and available played a critical role in historical accountability and in resolving long-standing compensation claims. Classified records opened up as a result of the work of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Nazi War Crimes revealed the interaction of the U.S. Government with war criminals. The records provided the context for evaluating what occurred and why.

### **Archival Records Can Also Serve Business Needs**

On a daily basis military service and unit records are used to protect the rights and benefits of veterans and their families. Questions of citizenship are addressed by referencing immigration and naturalization records. Military historians combed the records of the U.S. occupations of Germany and Japan for lessons learned prior to the invasion of Iraq.

While I have given examples at the Federal level, the need to document government activities, protect citizens' rights and benefits, and preserve the historical record is just as significant at the state and local level, and in private sector institutions as well. Land records, court records, and records of organizational departments are all critical for effective local communities.

Clearly, archives at every level of government are integral to the fabric of society and democracy. Users approach the archives with various needs. Some are looking for an individual item or piece of information—a land record or military service file. Others seek to understand the context of particular situations or events. Whatever the need, the archives have great value. Lawyers, historians, veterans, family historians, scientists, among many others, depend on the availability and preservation of archives.

### **Advocate's Role**

There is an expectation that archives will be preserved and readily available. For the reasons I mentioned earlier in my talk this is not necessarily a sound assumption. Given all the pressures bearing in on archives, the archival and preservation community need to construct a strategic alliance to build support for archives. This alliance must cross institutional, governmental, and professional boundaries to develop a sustained initiative focused on advocacy for archives and the other pillars of the information community: libraries and museums. An advocacy forum is needed that works with creators, users, user groups, media, resource allocators, and the general public to hammer the point that information—whether in an archives, library, or museum—is vital as the life blood of democracy.

The broader information community needs to tie-in user groups and the technology and science communities to advance the cause of archives, libraries, and museums through sustained research, partnerships, and protecting or obtaining resources. Only a major, concerted effort can ensure that the true value of archives, libraries, and museums is appreciated as vital pillars of our democracy.

There are a number of professional organizations, such as the Society of American Archivists, the American Library Association, the American Association of Museums, the American Institute for Conservation, and Heritage Preservation, which, among other functions, have an advocacy role. There is the National Coalition for History which has 60 member organizations that serve as the advocacy voice for the historical and archival professions in Washington, D.C. But, to the best of my knowledge, there is no forum that brings together the various pillars, of the information community: archives, libraries, museums, and preservation.

I propose that the heads of the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution meet with their counterparts from the professional organizations for a series of discussions to consider the needs of the entire information community and, most specifically, how to inform key actors (creators, users, user groups, media, resource allocators) about the information of enduring value that is at risk and is vital to our democracy. This dialog should begin small to initially explore issues of common concern and possible advocacy strategies. Over time the dialog must be expanded to include appropriate Federal grants-making organizations, the National Coalition for History, and relevant elements of the technology and science communities.

I realize that Federal agencies cannot lobby Congress for resources. However, what I envision has broader objectives. Institutionally and professionally we work in silos. There is more commonality than differences in the information community if we understand this to mean preserving and making available information of enduring value. How to do this should be at the heart of the dialog. Working together over the long haul will help ensure that the information most vital for our democratic way of life exists for generations to come.