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"On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia"

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2001
An
Archival Odyssey
*Four Centuries
of Archives*
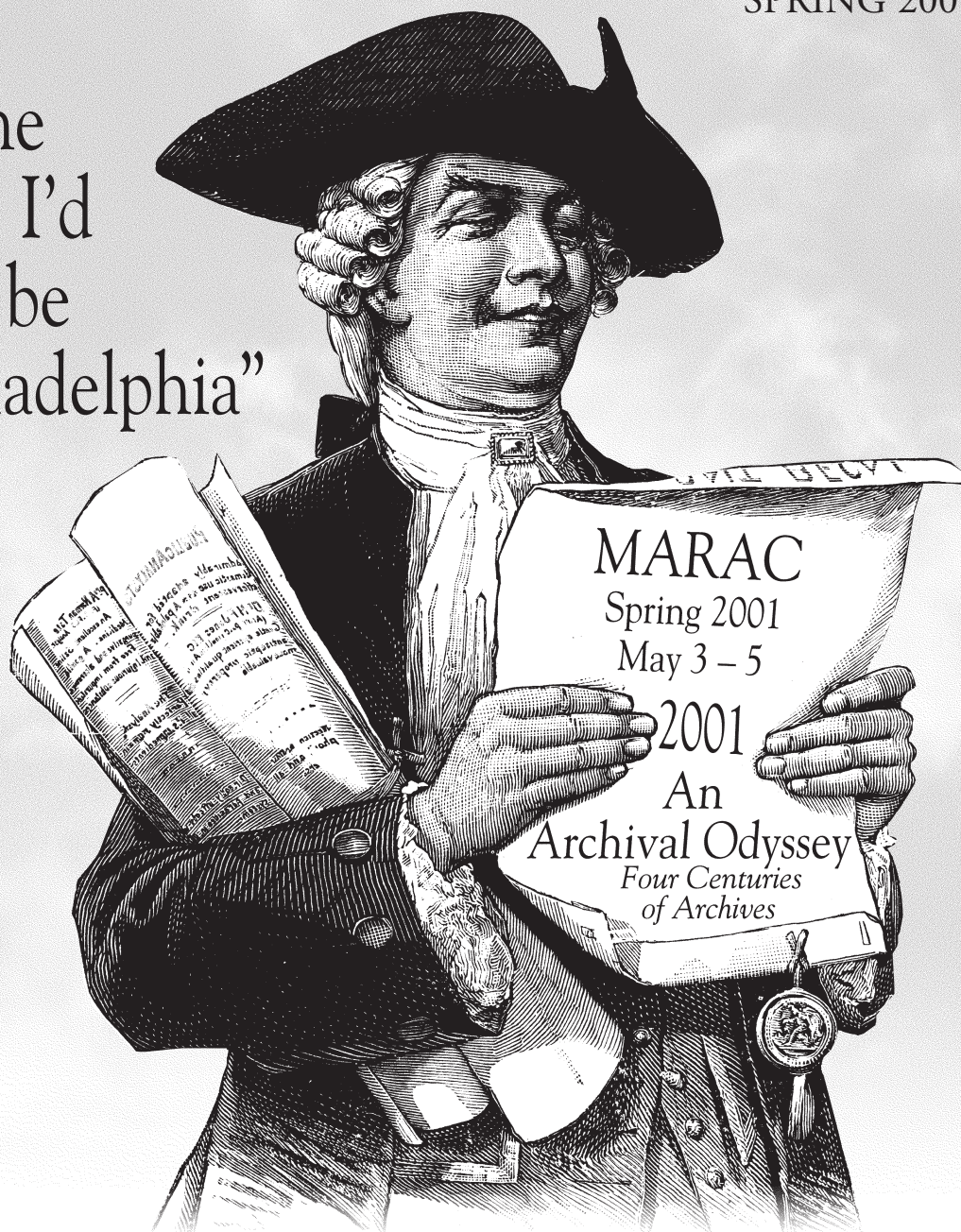
Session Abstracts — Fall 2000

The joint meeting of MAC and MARAC in the Fall of 2000 gave us new formats for continuing conversations. In break-out sessions and point-counterpoint debates, we joined our heartland colleagues in discussions of the material in our care, of our researchers and employers, of our shared professional concerns and our common digital future. Here are a select set of session abstracts from Cleveland.

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Researchers' & Archivists' Summit

Moderator: Stephen Charter, Bowling Green State University.
Speakers: Mark Tebeau, Cleveland State University; Barbara Waitkus Billings, Western Reserve Historical Society; Dave Davis, Cleveland Plain Dealer

Charter opened with a typical archival problem: researchers who need answers yesterday, who can't understand why full-text primary sources aren't on the web, and why files can't be immediately emailed; researchers who just don't understand. How, he asked panelists and audience alike, can archivist and researcher move toward a common understanding? Tebeau suggested "profiling" researchers by their interests and needs, noting that while they may be unable to describe it, most researchers can recognize what is relevant. Because the reference interview can be painful, Tebeau said, archivists need better mechanisms for using researchers' knowledge. For example, some might help process unorganized collections.

With the casual comment that despite his use of online catalogs, he prefers the serendipitous anomalies of old-fashioned cards, Tebeau sparked a heated debate, from which several salient points emerged. The importance of professional ethics and psychological understanding came up: archivists should reassure patrons on confidentiality issues (who is researching what) and explain the purpose of the reference interview (to help the researcher). The exit interview was suggested as an important tool for greater understanding. Respect from historians for the credentials and professionalism of archivists was mentioned. Finally, it was suggested that archivists step into the researcher's role to experience the 'other' side.

Billings began by asking if the same rules applied to all researchers all the time. Her answer, yes and no: access does vary according to researcher and situation. In addition, researchers who make the effort to develop relationships with archivists find it easier to negotiate necessary exceptions. The role of fees and the definition of 'reasonable' underscored the inequality among researchers that charging for service creates. What commercial newspapers and documentary crews can easily afford may be beyond the means of educators, students and independent researchers. The audience again contributed: fees generally go back collection preservation; sliding fee scales help level the playing field; and better funding, especially to state archives, could eliminate fees. Billings concluded by noting that the huge increase in phone, fax, e-mail requests is frequently handled via triage.

Davis affirmed that the reporter's art is getting what is needed when it's needed. His approach — a phone call followed by a letter — often pays off with access to well-cared-for collections that may contain critical nuggets of information or gold mines of solid stories. Discussion ensued about ways the press can work with and support archivists. Audience members suggested citing collections and repositories properly, acknowledging use of photographs, consulting their own in-house libraries first, thanking archivists (or more importantly, their bosses), and providing final copies to the archives. Though many researchers' agreement stipulate the latter, archivists find it difficult to enforce. Researchers must be reminded that returning copies of their work to source repositories helps to support collections by proving their utility.

Are All Researchers Created Equal?

Moderator: Frank Boles, Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University. Speakers: Danna Bell-Russell, National Digital Library, Library of Congress; and John J. Treanor, Archdiocese of Chicago.

Answering the session title with a 'no,' Bell-Russell indicated that each institution must look at researchers through its own mission statement. The National Digital Library deals with their own constituency before helping others, professional ethics notwithstanding. Treanor recast the question: are all researchers given equal access? Treanor stated that open collections should be open to all. Further, he indicated that that if his superiors allowed someone access to records that are closed for use (such as sacramental records), he would quit.

The discussion moved to reference requests. Are certain researchers taken ahead of others, and how does that affect those passed by? Bell-Russell affirmed that a hierarchy exists. For example, donors' requests generally take precedence, possibly creating the impression that other patrons suffer, especially those who have never used an archives. Staff time with researchers is thus limited, but may be made up made up through handouts, workshops, websites, and other resources.

Next came the questions of donor-approved access to collections and defining 'qualified' researchers. After much debate, Treanor opined that a qualified researcher was anyone who walked into his archives and asked an intelligent question. Bell-Russell agreed with the unfairness of arbitrary donor approval, but pointed out that even the Library of Congress restricts researchers by age.

The discussion shifted to differences in handling requests by phone, mail, e-mail, and in person. Audience members stated that the method of contact often influenced the amount of time and effort spent on a give request. Treanor held that other issues, like cost, often lead to denying long-distance requests for large amounts of photocopying. Such a drain of resources on the archives may provide unequal access to patrons.

Electronic Epiphanies and Archival Description

Speakers: Jill Tatem, Case Western Reserve University; Bradley Westbrook, University of California-San Diego; and Nicolas Maftei, Nicolas Maftei Consulting

Tatem advocated user-centered finding aids, based on the archivist's observations and the idea that most users — the "hunter-gatherers" — prefer informal, easily accessible sources. Archivists should determine a researcher's domain knowledge (understanding of topics and sources); system knowledge (comprehension of provenance, familiarity with finding aids); and use frequency (previous visits). Challenges include defining the initial question and modifying the scope as research progresses from information need through system selection and orientation, data acquisition, and ultimate use. Tatem suggested that most users need a finding aid conducive to browsing, beginning with an overview and ordered by sub-topic.

Westbrook spoke about relational databases and Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Finding aids for archives and manuscript collections appear in both SGML and HTML with links to MARC records in UCSD's library catalog. The positive results of such integrated systems are lower training costs, enhanced reference service, authority control, data standardization and portability, and variable outputs such as statistical reports, collection guides, and collection abstracts. However, staff must have database and programming skills, software must be updated, and the limited options for collection arrangement/hierarchy must be considered.

In *How to Make Computers Do the Encoding! A Database Strategy for the Automation of Finding Aids*, Maftei demonstrated an object oriented database management system (using GENCAT) which supports open hierarchical structures, automatically converts MARC records to SGML/EAD encoded finding aids, and permits online search and retrieval. The system is turnkey, but expensive.

Authenticity and Preservation of Electronic Records: US-InterPARES

Moderator: Beth Yakel, University of Michigan. Speakers: Fynnette Eaton, Smithsonian Institution; Ciaran Trace, University of California-Los Angeles; and Mark Giguere, NARA

Eaton related the history of Inter-PARES, its goals and mission, and the four major research domains. She described the case study methodology in detail and discussed the considerable challenge of developing an internationally accepted set of archival terminology. Phil Eppard read Ciaran Trace's paper on the UCLA's data analysis team, which has conducted 16 studies analyzing electronic document and data structure in order to build a template for future analysis using conventions such as evidential, organizational and empiric information. The team's goal is to describe the elements common to all electronic records that are needed to verify reliability and authenticity.

Giguere, NARA's administrator and coordinator for the Inter-PARES project, gave an overview of the study groups. Drawing on his responsibility for assuring that the project's end results are usable in current archival systems, Giguere demonstrated how the IDEF modeling system allowed Inter-PARES to capture and analyze the structure and processes of electronic records systems.

Electronic Records: Access and Use

Moderator: Edward A. Galloway, Digital Research Library, University of Pittsburgh. **Speakers***: Nancy Deromedi, Bentley Library, University of Michigan; Mark Salling, Northern Ohio Data and Information Service, Cleveland State University; Virginia Ainslie, Ainslie & Associates; and Jack Licate, Cleveland Clinic Foundation*

Deromedi described the Bentley's first electronic acquisition, the James J. Duderstadt collection, comprising 14 linear feet of paper and 2500 digital files. Maintaining original format and allowing online access introduced the staff to complex issues such as designing a comprehensive system, searching and navigating the collection, providing reference service, using digital research tools, creating electronic interfaces, and formulating practices and policies. The questions of registering on-line users and conveying the fact that the records are original documents remain, but Deromedi welcomed the audience to visit http://www.umich.edu/~bhl and explore the collection.

Salling focused on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which he defined as software, hardware, data and people organized into a database system that captures, stores, retrieves, analyses and displays spatial data. More than a collection of maps, GIS is a way to create maps.

To illustrate, Salling pulled crime information from the city police, locations of abandoned buildings from the housing department and recent property prices from the recorder's office, then layered the data onto a map of a Cleveland ward, creating a graphical representation that succinctly replaces pages of narrative text and statistical tables.

Ainslie, a lobbyist for non-profits, medical institutions and Chambers of Commerce, discussed her use if the Federal Assistance Awards Data System. Elected officials rarely know how federal monies are distributed, according to Ainslie, so she draws on the Data System as back up to requests for government funding. One example was her advocacy for the City of Cleveland for bridge rehabilitation funds.

Licate, a historical geographer by training, suggested that speed of access is perhaps the most significant issue in the using electronic records. Contrasting research he undertook in various Mexican archives with the almost instantaneous access to electronic information, Licate teased out a few caveats. Researchers must use the same analytical and evaluative techniques — appraising the source, accuracy, strengths and weaknesses of the data, and authenticating and verifying the records — with electronic materials as they would with textual documents.

Appraisal Approaches to Electronic Records

Moderator: Robert Horton, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society. **Speakers***: Cal Lee, Kansas State Historical Society; Gregory S. Hunter, Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University; and Lee Stout, Penn State University Archives*

Discussing meaningful ways to mine the layers of data generated by

research, Lee suggested that computer-assisted searching be personalized through retrieval agents — small information filtering programs that reflect the needs and preferences of each researcher. Developed from existing software, such agents would utilize pattern matching, i.e. locating and prioritizing documents based on a model of previously selected information.

Hunter explored appraisal strategy for web sites through an overview of current practice, methods for determining value and ways to handle changing material to meet the requirements of archival preservation. Hunter focused on determining the accountability risks of a site — how much exposure does an organization risk in presenting material on its webpages. Though the website "snapshot" has become a common tool, Hunter suggested that it may be inadequate for high profile websites with deep, controversial, heavily interlinked and/or rapidly changing content.

Stout described the work of the American team of Inter-PARES, the international research project investigating methods of preserving the integrity and reliability of electronic records over time. The American Task Group has been exploring appraisal criteria and methods, Stout noted, with a critical emphasis on the need to appraise agency functions rather than individual records. Another finding of the group centers on timing: archival considerations should be built into electronic systems, as retrograde modifications puts the integrity of the system at risk.