

The Roving Archivist

Have you ever considered sharing an archivist with another organization? I recommend this to towns and institutions who can not support an archivist on their own. "Roving archivists" make sense for organizations that cannot immediately justify a full time archives employee and can make the idea of a permanent archives program within your institution tenable. If non-profit institutions wish to institute collaborative archives programs that don't lead to dead ends, now is the time to explore the option of the roving archivist. It is time for repositories to use their voices to make those in government understand the importance of caring for archival material.

Firstly, in previous newsletters I have detailed the reasons for valuing our archives. In short, besides embodying the history we as students of culture cherish, they also help preserve the ideals upon which this country was founded. (If you have been paying any attention to the news lately, you are familiar with the Presidential Records Act, claims of executive privilege by the previous president, and the executive order reinstating the authority of the act by President Barack Obama.) The unique circumstances in which we find ourselves today open the door for cultural heritage professionals to

make it clear to their governments that their records must receive the funding necessary to promote democracy.

Secondly, I am disheartened by how many special archives programs that received support in the last twenty years have just died when the grant money ran out. It is time for this to stop. It is time to ensure that there is follow-through when archives are surveyed, preservation plans are written, and grant money is given to propel the maintenance of archives within a town.

Too many towns want to pay more attention to the records in their care, but do not have the time, expertise, job title, or money to tackle archives management. Non-profits are notoriously short-staffed. How many institutions have employees who wear multiple hats — i.e. you already serve as the institution's curator and were educated in museum studies, but your director just told you that your job description will be changed and you are now the "new" archivist as well? How many organizations are run by volunteers who have time to attend only so many training sessions? Archives management seems foreign and unwieldy to those not prepared for it. Is this lack of training, lack of attention, and second class status which we give to our archives appropriate for materials upon which rest the tenets of freedom and our cultural heritage?

Below are some possibilities for implementation of roving archives programs:

1. Encourage state governments to provide funding for roving archivists, employed by the state, to help towns care for their records.
2. Establish collaborative archives networks to employ roving archivists.
3. Piggyback any already established state library networks. Recognizing the interconnectedness of library science and archives management, the networks can assist with the establishment of valuable archives programs that employ roving archivists.
4. Establish roving archivist programs through Universities interested in the idea of promoting knowledge and research.

Each of these ideas has positive and negative aspects. For example, I know the possibility of state involvement will be distasteful to some who believe in the idea of the sanctity of each town's individualism. I also know that the idea of piggybacking libraries will be difficult for networks that exist to serve libraries and not town governments or other non-library entities. Whatever the solution, it is time to work toward it and for big heads in a wide variety of settings to discuss these issues. Collaboration is necessary for success. The establishment of clear goals is mandatory before this unique moment passes and our archives continue to be ravaged by time until they are lost forever.

Roving Archivists

Back in November, I sent Governor Duval Patrick of Massachusetts the following letter:

Dear Governor Patrick:

Recently I listened to you on the “Egan and Braude” radio program. On the show you discussed your desire to consolidate certain public services to increase efficiency. You cited the example of emergency call centers. At your suggestion, I am writing to present an idea that I think fits with your proposition to increase collaboration among communities. Though it is an industry unrelated to that you discussed, I see your idea well-suited to the needs of cultural resources in the Commonwealth.

I have worked as an archives consultant in Massachusetts for eight years and previous to that time, served as the archivist



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For more information about ArchivesInfo and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

Join the discussion on Facebook with the group Cross Professional Collaboration in Museums, Libraries, and Archives

of the Waltham Public Library. During my career, I have learned that despite having a rich and important history, Massachusetts struggles to care for its archives. Even with regulations that attempt to protect documents, most communities do not have the money or staff to properly follow or enforce them. Every day, millions of historical records are lost or are in danger of destruction due to neglect, mishandling, and poor preservation practices.

A collaborative model can greatly help towns care for historical records with relatively minimal costs. This past week, I chaired a session at the New England Museum Association conference titled *Sustaining Our Heritage: Collaborative Historical Records Projects and the Local Museum*. Speaking on my panel were representatives from the towns of Winchester, Topsfield, and Carlisle. Within their respective communities, diverse organizations have collaborated to gain control of their archives and to raise awareness about the needs of cultural resources. I know of a handful of other towns within Massachusetts that can also serve as models. I would like to see their examples move beyond localized efforts to more multi-town collaboratives.

I have proposed to numerous clients the idea of hiring “roving archivists” who can serve networks of towns rather than individual institutions. The idea has been well-received, but towns do not know where to turn to push-through and implement this idea. Massachusetts once had a strong program for Documentary Heritage programs that served as an impetus for towns to better manage their archives. I propose that the Commonwealth considers using the structure in place through the Massachusetts’ Archives and State Records Center to assist communities with collaboration and in finding appropriate professionals to help them.

Sharing the cost of a full-time professional to travel “the circuit” -- much as judges and doctors once did -- would greatly benefit communities. It would allow them to preserve their archives with a minimal impact on their budgets. I believe that at this time, the state government has the best resources in place to assist the structuring of such collaboratives. I hope that you will consider this idea and contact me if you have questions. Thank you for your time.

The Governor’s office politely referred me to the State Records Center with my idea. Now is the time to reach out and tell them it is time for the Commonwealth to care for their historical records the way they must be cared for before we lose the valuable history we all cherish and know is so important.

Links to make you think:

Rethinking Town Independence <http://www.nhpr.org/node/23686>

Views from Vermont’s Northwest Kingdom—The St. Johnsbury Project (p. 1) and Montana’s Traveling Archivist Project (p. 6)

<http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/annotation/pdf/2001-mar.pdf>