

Have You Justified Your Archives Lately?

by Melissa Mannon

An archival program is usually one of the lowest priorities on the list for funding in an institution or town. As an American, this astounds me. We so freely accept whatever “truth” the media feeds us. We accept government’s re-writing of history—no matter with what party we consider ourselves affiliated. In other words, we seek answers from those who deem to present it to us. How often do we seek the truth for ourselves? How many people even know where to go to find the truth?

Archives harbor the “primary” sources of information that help us elicit the truth for ourselves. Primary sources are the original documents created to define an event. They include such records as meeting minutes, communications, financial records, and diaries. These are the materials created as part of an activity and piecing them together helps us see the big picture—the TRUTH. We should never swallow someone else’s interpretations wholeheartedly without reservation. Our archives are the institutions upon which our democracy stands. This should not be

taken lightly, nor should it be short-funded in favor of our town’s sports programs or even our library’s secondary sources. I’m not setting out to pit myself against other programs. I am an avid sports fan and participant. And, no one loves libraries more than I. But it seems to me that every program (even others that are under-funded such as our libraries) take precedence over the archives. This is shameful and dangerous.

It is easy for many to see historical records as old / outdated things that should be disregarded. That leaves it up to the managers of historical records to show their current value to society. If we lose our historical records, we lose any chance we have of obtaining the truth. Our whole civilization will be built on secondary sources. Most historical records don’t have the luxury of being duplicated as many times as the Constitution. Could you imagine trying to run the country without our constitution? What happens if you need to go back to the original writings of your town’s founding fathers to settle a boundary

dispute with a neighboring town. Would you know where to find these records?

Yesterday, a friend related to me that her husband who works in construction driving trucks is serving jury duty in New Hampshire. He is not a salaried employee and rather is paid for the hours he puts in. My friend’s husband was chosen for a jury and has served all week thus far. My friend called his office to ensure that he would be paid for the week because the couple has three children to feed and live paycheck to paycheck. She was told that the company never dealt with this issue before and they were not sure that they could pay him. They would get back to her. Well, my friend did not like this answer. She went to her personal archives and found the employee handbook where it clearly states that all employees serving jury duty will be paid their regular wages as if they were working. What recourse would she have if she didn’t have that employee handbook?

Our archives are our handbook for our lives as free people. Whatever rights we have are defined in these records. If we lose them, we have no rights or recourse.

When I served as the archivist at the Waltham Public Library, many of the people who visited the archives were fighting for their rights. I remember a woman who wanted to rent out part of her home since it was originally a two-family unit. She was told by the City that this was not the case and her home was a single family home. She came to the archives to prove otherwise and she did. I also remember a man who visited who had been in one of the local “feeble-minded” hospitals as a child. He remembered being experimented on and wanted to prove it. He too sought information in the archives.

Looking at some foreign governments, we find evidence of information suppression that we would find unthinkable in this country. Tianamen Square was the first example that came to my mind. I have heard stories about the Chinese government covering up the official number of deaths and even claiming the incident didn’t happen. A perusal

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of the Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiananmen_Square_protests_of_1989 on this subject elaborates on the government's cover-up. Even their school text books make no mention of the monumental incident. What has the Chinese government done with government communications and other primary documents related to the event?

In the U.S. we take for granted our free access to information, yet we allow our original documents to rot away. How much information are we

missing about ourselves? How many details of our history have been obliterated by neglect? How many things do we really KNOW and how much do we just assume? How much are we told that we take for granted? How much do we want to change, but think we can't because that's just the way it is?

Materials are quickly deteriorating in neglected storage areas all over the country. We are in danger of losing the truth—the primary evidence of human activity—forever. It is easy to justify computerization in the modern

world, yet how much are we leaving behind by rushing ahead? We need to make sure basic levels of preservation and description of our primary resources are achieved before they are forgotten and lost forever. Link the value of your institutions' efforts to common American values. Access to information is what sustains us and keeps us a free people.

Please think about your freedom and peace during this holiday season.

Best Wishes for a Happy Holiday,
- Melissa Mannon



Archives and Information Consultant Melissa Mannon is owner of ArchivesInfo. Please send questions and comments to melissa@mannon.org. For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

Tips for Maintaining Records

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) was created in the 1940s to promote international cooperation and information dissemination. They succinctly describe the importance of archives in their web pages: "All records received or created by units of government are normally considered to be public property. It is from this vast pool of documentation that the archives are selected. Only a small proportion of the records--often no more than two to five percent--has sufficient value for administrative, legal, or research purposes to warrant permanent retention as archives. But this small core of documentation possesses tremendous value. The information it contains is essential as evidence of important legal and administrative transactions and obligations, and has value for purposes other than those which led to its creation. The archives will include records that document wars and natural phenomena, the migration of peoples, the birth and development of the national identity, the efforts of government to improve the lot of the people economically and socially, and the successes and failures that are the result of all sustained human activity."

- In your outreach efforts, focus on your "information." The word "history" can conjure up thoughts of school classes through which many painfully sat. People can more easily see the value of "Information."
- Discuss how your materials are prime candidates for automation and progressive computerization efforts. To this tie the need to organize records and to preserve those that serve as original documentary evidence. (Some records need not be retained in their original form.) One successful automation project is the Adams Papers that combines preservation of original documents with automation efforts http://www.masshist.org/adams_editorial.
- Make your efforts local and interesting. Dig up little known information about your town from your archives and publicize it. Discuss the need to preserve specific papers and focus on a little at a time. (The Shirley Historical Society in Massachusetts has mastered this technique by describing the importance of individual collections to grantors and by seeking funding for one collection at a time.)