

Counterpoint

Archivists and Historians: A View From the United States

by RICHARD J. COX

The recent debate over history and archives in *Archivaria* is indicative of problems and questions that archivists everywhere continue to have as a profession. At the same time as George Bolotenko stressed the necessity of the "historian-archivist," a contributor to the *American Archivist* endeavoured to demonstrate the past and continuing significance of historians in the archival profession.¹ Few of us really question the importance of historical perspective and training in the work of the archivist. Bolotenko, however, went far beyond that point by displaying remarkable misunderstanding of the nature and current problems of the archival profession: continuing lack of resources to preserve documentation of enduring value, the weakness of archival theory, and the great diversity of users of archives.² If we adopt Bolotenko's views, we accept perpetuation of the most serious of our problems and doom our profession to stagnation and even obsolescence.

Resources and the Mission of the Archival Profession

The ultimate mission of the archival profession is to identify, preserve, and make available records that possess enduring value. George Bolotenko is committed to this, but believes that weakening the role of the archivist as historian and scholar seriously threatens the mission. He does not understand, however, that it is *already* jeopardized for completely different reasons. In the United States, twenty-seven state archival assessment and reporting projects (funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission) reveal that the archival profession is in very serious trouble because it lacks resources to fulfil even its most basic responsibilities. There is inadequate legislation and support for the proper administration of public records; the poverty of archival education and theory undermines the profession's goals; few states possess leadership capable of identifying needs or developing solutions; and the vast majority

1 George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 5-25; Mattie U. Russell, "The Influence of Historians on the Archival Profession in the United States," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983), pp. 277-85.

2 Carl Spadoni, Anthony L. Rees, R. Scott James, and Bob Taylor-Vaisey identified other problems with Bolotenko's ideas in *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 291-95, 301-03, 305-08.

of archival repositories cannot provide even the most basic care for their holdings.³ Even though these reports represent the most comprehensive analysis of the profession's condition in the United States, their findings are similar to those we have been hearing since the mythical halcyon days of the "historian-archivist" Bolotenko wistfully yearns to recapture.⁴

Judge Bolotenko's argument by the present condition of the archival profession. Our colleague is worried that it is only "trendy" to emphasize specialization and professionalism.⁵ As a result, he proposes a strategy that has proven its inability to identify and preserve all significant historical records. Archivists have not been accorded an important position in society — at least not one that provides the resources required to fulfil their basic mission.⁶ Union or cooperation with the profession of records management or information science attempt to strengthen our ability to ensure the preservation of historical records. They do not amount to a sellout. The notion of the archivist as scholarly historian does not necessarily deal with the fact that we lack adequate resources to appraise, arrange and describe, and provide reference to historical records. Even now, very few archivists publish anything,⁷ and if they do it is often on historical rather than archival subjects. Nothing should divert us from our most important tasks — even intimacy with the scholarly historical community.

Not only do we lack these resources but we often neglect to use what we do possess in the best manner. Most of us, for instance, do not see planning and management as essential components of our work. The profession has greatly emphasized instead the "lone arranger" who usually does not have the time to plan or even manage.⁸ The recent assessment and reporting projects reveal the same problem even in our larger institutions. Who is planning for the future of our institutions and profession? Who identifies their needs and establishes mechanisms for meeting those needs? Who is responsible for fostering multi-institutional cooperation for the development of documentation strategies which will ensure that the most important historical records are saved and used? Can a closer relationship with the historical profession really help us solve any of these problems when they are generally not recognized as crucial issues in the historical profession? There is more to be gained from cooperation with information scientists and librarians because they are more interested in effective

3 For a summary of these reports see Lisa B. Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States, Consultant Reports Presented at the Conference of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission Assessment and Reporting Grantees, Atlanta, Georgia June 24-25, 1983* (New York, 1984).

4 For example, see Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago, 1964) and H. G. Jones, "The Pink Elephant Revisited," *American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980), pp. 473-83.

5 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 7.

6 David B. Gracy II, "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984), pp. 7-10.

7 See, for example, Richard J. Cox, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983), pp. 31-41.

8 See, for example, the definition of the archival manager who does everything but manage in William J. Maher, "Measurement and Analysis of Processing Costs in Academic Archives," *College & Research Libraries* 43 (January 1982), pp. 59-67.

planning and management.⁹ Is George Bolotenko, therefore, justified in criticizing these moves to strengthen the archival profession and its main mission?

The Limitations of Archival Theory

Archival theory is severely limited, weak, and only improving extremely slowly. Richard C. Berner, in his important analysis of the development of American archival theory and practice, concluded that “too few [archivists] have raised themselves above narrow mastery of mere technique borrowed from myriad institutional settings;” without improvement in education, he added, “there is no reason to believe that the future will be different from the past.” Berner castigated the archival profession’s inability to learn from other disciplines, lack of leadership, and stress upon practice rather than theory. Most disturbing, however, is his neglect of appraisal, perhaps the most important responsibility of the archivist, because of the “primitive nature of its development.”¹⁰

George Bolotenko assumes that historical training plus the current state of archival education are sufficient; he never examines how well we are identifying and preserving historical records or disseminating information about them. Instead, he worries about the historian-archivist speaking “gibberish” and “trendy windbagery.” But what is an archivist? Bolotenko claims an archivist “should be a representative of the world of research in the world of administration — skilled in the trends, techniques, personalities, and developments of that world.”¹¹ That is acceptable only if the theory supporting the work of the archivist is adequate. Bolotenko, unfortunately, is especially adept at overstating dangers to the profession, and that can divert us from our real needs and problems.

What are the problems with archival theory? Frank Burke argues that we need to understand better the nature of records, their creators, the processes of decision-making and how we capture these processes, and the nature of historical research. The most important part of Burke’s analysis, however, is his comment on the failure of our profession to grapple with these issues. Our educational programmes are “producing a large corps of parish priests when no one has bothered to devise a theology under whose standard they can act.” Burke stresses that we must remedy this problem if our profession is to possess a future. Interestingly, he sees the placement of the archival education system within academic history departments, but his historian-archivists are concerned with the very questions Bolotenko either wishes to ignore or views as dangerous because they supposedly separate the archivist from the historian.¹²

9 The best hope of reviving the archivist’s links with historians might lie with the recent emergence of public or applied history; see Richard J. Cox, “Archivists and Public History,” *Institute News: Newsletter of the North Carolina Institute of Applied History* 3 (March 1984), pp. 3-6.

10 Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle, 1983), pp. 5, 119.

11 Bolotenko, “Archivists and Historians,” p. 20.

12 Frank Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 40-46.

The weakness of Bolotenko's historian-archivist is most evident in his characterization of records management. "The ethos of the [archivist and the records manager] are antithetical: the records manager seeks to destroy, the archivist to preserve. The former bends his talents to the rapidity with which he moves out large quantities of paper . . . while the latter concerns himself with a meticulous search and analysis of records, retaining as much as possible."¹³ In the worse sense, this might be true. However, Bolotenko does not realize that the archivist and records manager are the "obverse sides of the same coin," more so than even the historian and archivist.¹⁴ Without the historical perspective of the archivist, a records management programme can do irreparable harm, destroying historical records in the name of efficiency and economy.¹⁵ On the other hand, archivists without records management are severely limited in their ability to appraise and retrieve records of enduring value. Consider the experience of the first three decades of the Public Archives of Canada as portrayed recently by Ian Wilson. Overemphasis upon the cultural importance of the institution undermined its ability to preserve the historical records of the Canadian government.¹⁶ The archivist must be able to learn from his or her own past.

Archives and Users

Again and again George Bolotenko writes of the essential relationship between the archivist and the historian. But who is that "historian"? For Bolotenko, it is the historian as scholar (although he claims to include amateur historians as well). The scholar, however, is the smallest portion of our constituency. Our reference rooms are crowded with amateur genealogists, family historians, local historians, and government or administrative researchers, most of whom have not been professionally trained to do research and, hence, have very different needs from their scholarly colleagues. Indeed, these researchers do the most popular form of historical research today, and it is difficult to understand how a close alliance with the scholarly community is really that relevant to their needs.¹⁷

That Bolotenko has missed this important fact is evident in his curious statement that the "drive to rationalize and standardize" is questionable. Does it really matter "if various institutions have various finding aids and classification systems as long as the record is well-arranged with respect for *provenance*, well-described, and easily retrievable"?¹⁸ Of course it matters; even scholarly

13 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 21.

14 Frank B. Evans, "Archivists and Records Managers: Variations on a Theme," *American Archivist* 30 (January 1967), pp. 45-58.

15 For a case study of this problem see Richard J. Cox, "The Need for Comprehensive Records Programs in Local Government: Learning by Mistakes in Baltimore, 1947-1982," *Provenance* 1 (Fall 1983), pp. 14-34.

16 Ian Wilson, "'A Noble Dream': The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-83), pp. 16-35.

17 Phebe R. Jacobsen, "'The World Turned Upside Down': Reference Priorities and the State Archives," *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981), pp. 341-45; Richard J. Cox, "Genealogy and Public History: New Genealogical Guides and Their Implications for *Public Historians*," *The Public Historian* 6 (Spring 1984), pp. 89-96.

18 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 18.

historians know the difficulty of effectively using what does exist!¹⁹ The quest for standardization is essential if we hope to develop regional, national, and international finding aids that stimulate greater and better use of historical records by all users of archives.²⁰ It will also help document the course of social change through networking and cooperative appraisal and arrangement and description from the local level to the national. Ten years ago F. Gerald Ham worried about archivists being little more than a “weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography;” more recently Edward Weldon feared that we will fail to document the very nature of societal change as “historians in our own time.”²¹ The effort to keep pace with change has led to questions about the old historian-archivist and the evolution of the archivist-records manager-information scientist-administrator. This presents not a danger but a challenge.

Afterword: A Model Historian-Archivist

It is appropriate to conclude this brief comment on George Bolotenko’s essay with an example of a “model” historian-archivist whose career even fits Bolotenko’s notion. Lester J. Cappon’s archival career extended over six decades as a university archivist, director of state Historical Records Survey and Second World War History projects, documentary editor, and President of the Society of American Archivists.²² Equally impressive is his lengthy list of scholarly, often ground-breaking, and definitive archival essays, all attesting to his strong belief that the archivist should be trained as an historian and possess the historian’s perspective. The topics of these publications range from collecting, historical indexing, arrangement and description, and historical bibliography to the nature of the archival profession, genealogical research, historical editing, religious archives, and the work of the American cartographer.²³ If ever an archivist deserves to have his writings gathered and published as a memorial, it is Cappon.

Two of Cappon’s essays deserve to be described in detail. His 1957 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists went to the very heart of the debate

19 Margaret F. Steig, “The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians,” *College & Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981), pp. 549-60.

20 David Bearman, “Toward National Information Systems for Archives and Manuscript Repositories,” *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982), pp. 53-56.

21 F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975), pp. 5-13; and Edward Weldon, “Archives and the Challenges of Change,” *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983), pp. 125-34.

22 For a brief summary of Cappon’s career, see James Morton Smith, “Lester Jesse Cappon,” *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982), pp. 105-08.

23 Cappon’s most important essays include “The National Archives and the Historical Profession,” *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1969), pp. 477-99; “Why Presidential Libraries?” *Yale Review* 67 (October 1978), pp. 11-34; “Historical Manuscripts as Archives: Some Definitions and Their Applications,” *American Archivist* 19 (April 1956), pp. 101-10; “Genealogy, Handmaid of History,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 45 (March 1957), pp. 1-9; “A Rationale for Historical Editing Past and Present,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (July 1973), pp. 375-400; and “Walter R. Benjamin and the Autograph Trade at the Turn of the Century,” *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings* 78 (January/December 1966), pp. 20-37.

over the archivist as scholar and historian.²⁴ The address, like Bolotenko's article, was, in part, a reaction to the increasing emphasis on the archivist as records manager and administrator. But Cappon criticized his colleagues for their poor performance, interest in producing finding aids that stimulated historical research, and their preoccupation with administrative chores which weakened their ability to keep pace with historical research trends. What Bolotenko has observed is not new to the profession, especially when we consider that Cappon was summarizing the work of its first half-century.

Cappon, unlike Bolotenko, did not fear change within the profession or society. Twenty-five years after his presidential address, Cappon composed one of his last essays.²⁵ It reaffirmed his belief that the "archivist is at heart an historian" and urged strengthening the ties between the two professions. Yet, he recognized that records possess an administrative as well as an historical value, and he accepted the necessity of an alliance with records management. Cappon, in fact, believed the development of records management was one of the most significant events in the history of the profession: "The most notable contribution of Americans to the discipline of archives has been the concept and development of records administration . . . to prepare for intelligent retention and disposal of non-current records with respect to their value as archives."²⁶ More importantly, Cappon also urged continuance of the archival profession's separate identity from the historical: "In such an alliance [between history and archives], however, let us not compromise the status of archives as a separate discipline, maintaining the *integrity* of the records as its first principle."²⁷ Lester Cappon championed the notion of a dynamic archival profession while upholding the concept of the archivist as historian and scholar. I stake my professional future on the vision of the archivist's professional integrity without sacrificing his relevance to a modern, complex society. George Bolotenko's archivist is virtually obsolete and will (and should!) be extinct within a generation.

24 Cappon, "Tardy Scholars Among the Archivists," *American Archivist* 21 (January 1958), pp. 3-16.

25 Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?" *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982), pp. 19-25.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 25.