

Voice from the Vault

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A Thumbnail History of Public Archives

From the Hittite kings to the Ptolemy rulers of Egypt, the emperors of Rome and China, and the reign of Charlemagne, the control of recorded knowledge was viewed as one of the pillars of a government's legitimacy. This remained true even into 19th century Vermont where Governor Erastus Fairbanks rallied support for the Civil War by telling a special legislative session that the national archives were threatened by rebel forces.

These were heady times for knowledge professionals whether referred to as royal scribes, librarians or archivists. Of course there were trade-offs. If control of recorded knowledge legitimized a regime, the succeeding regime often wanted nothing to do with the records it inherited. When Emperor Shi Huangdi consolidated his power over the Chinese empire in 213 B.C. he ordered the destruction of the previous regime's Heavenly Archives, which contained early Confucian and Taoist texts. He then replaced it with a repository more directly related to his government. The Mongols burned the great Arab repositories, while Charles V destroyed the libraries of the Spanish Moors. In the 16th century Spanish conquistadors destroyed the writings of the Aztecs and Central American cultures.

These successive losses of recorded information were devastating, particularly since vast record collections were consolidated within a few repositories. In some cultures the keepers of the records fared no better than their holdings. There is, for example, an ongoing debate whether the royal scribes of conquered Mayan city states had their fingers broken and their fingernails pulled out before being sacrificed; had the pads of their fingers cut off; or were simply sold into slavery. While I celebrate the central role archivists

once held in government, the possibility of being maimed, killed or sold into slavery probably would have influenced my career decisions.

Over time, however, perceptions of the legitimizing force of government archives declined. At some point (and one can imagine a Mayan archivist playing a role here) archives became perceived as dark and dusty preserves for historians, overseen by non-threatening, mole-like archivists.

Archival theory as it developed through the early 20th century underscored a non-interventionist role where archivists simply described what records they



received. Indeed, under the concept known as the life cycle of management of records, the archivist's role did not kick in until records no longer had an active administrative role. In the first part of the life cycle the record creator controlled how the records were managed. Once the records' administrative role diminished, record managers assigned a value to groups of records directing how long the records had to be kept.

Archivists only came into play when records were eligible for disposal. They would determine which records were archival and then create finding aids, perform conservation work, and provide access and reference services, usually to a small group of academic historians. In performing their duties archivists often worked at the item level, developing detailed knowledge of their records.

That comfortable, non-activist view of archives and archivists was never as pure as some practitioners would have us believe. Decisions about which records were archival, how they were described, or how they were made known all influenced what we knew about, and how we used, records.

As the volume of public records increased, the flaws in the life cycle approach became more evident. In Vermont, under the life cycle approach, agencies turned to the Public Records Division only when inactive records became a storage space problem. Then the Public Records Advisory Board (PRAB) would review agency requests for disposal of records on a case by case basis. Consequently similar records from different agencies or even different departments within an agency might be assigned different values and retention periods. Similar records might also be described differently, while long neglected records, whose creators were no longer around, might be lumped together under such non-descriptive descriptions as "miscellaneous" or "historical." Archivists, confronting voluminous, often inadequately described record series, could not keep up with item level processing.

These problems were exacerbated with the advent of information technologies that made the presentation of records and information dependent on rapidly changing formats and media. Failure to manage records from point of creation often meant the records were lost, left behind on obsolete technologies or irretrievable because of idiosyncratic file naming conventions.

Responses to these problems include the concept of the record continuum, functional analysis, and controlled vocabularies. A record continuum approach differs from life cycle management by having archivists and records professionals work with agencies from the beginning so that decisions about record values are incorporated into the design of recordkeeping systems. Functional analysis focuses on what we do rather than who does it. This provides stability for managing records in an environment where agencies are constantly renamed or restructured. Finally, controlled vocabularies provide a way to consistently describe functions, activities and record types across bureaucratic boundaries. For more information on functional analysis and controlled vocabularies visit our website at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/vclas/thesaurus.htm>

These approaches allow us to develop general schedules governing activities and records common to all agencies. A general schedule provides agencies with a common framework for determining how long records must be kept.

Managing records from point of creation reduces the amount of processing since archival records have already been appraised and organized prior to arrival at the archives. To further address processing workloads, the focus is now on initially providing brief descriptive and contextual information on record series rather than more detailed descriptions requiring the physical handling every individual record. This alerts potential users to what archival series exist without having to wait for processing backlogs to be addressed. There is also the possibility that future users can help flesh out these brief series descriptions by sharing what they discover during their research.

Some of this work can now be seen on the Archives website. For example we now provide an online, and ongoing, database to archival record series (<http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>), while we also have a section on managing records (<http://vermont-archives.org/records/>).

The Archives is also part of a volunteer collaborative effort with the Department of Information and Innovation and with the Public Records Division within the Department of Buildings and General Services to provide consistent professional advice to agencies on records issues. We hope to soon have a monthly newsletter for reporting on the work of that collaboration.

These are exciting times within the archival profession. As information and records are better managed it becomes easier to weave the knowledge they represent into government decision making. We are excited, while trying to keep our sacrifices metaphoric and our fingers intact.