THE ARCHIVIST AND THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

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Although we do not often connect in our minds the realm of books and papers with the secular concerns of environmental management, the keepers of archives, manuscripts, and documentary collections can play an important role in the conservation of the natural and cultural resources that make up the world we inhabit. In fact, archivists and librarians are and always have been "environmentalists." They take care of an important part of that category of cultural resources known as "objects," which along with sites, structures, and districts significant in history, archaeology, architecture, or culture, comprise the *tangible* cultural heritage of our communities, states, and nation—an integral, prevalent, fragile, and very significant part of the human environment. The "objects"—that is, the books, manuscripts, and documents—that archivists and librarians safeguard are especially important, for uniquely among cultural resources they communicate to us in human language. Upon their conservation depends the longevity of our *intangible* cultural heritage, the language, information, and traditions that are the principal means by which we can appreciate the value and significance of the tangible.

The document custodian shares many concerns with those who manage other cultural resources, not the least of them being management philosophy, policy, and techniques. But archivists have not limited their range or their concerns to their repositories—or at least they did not so restrict themselves in the early days. The people who began the major efforts to preserve papers and documents important in our history, especially those in state and local historical societies, were also prominent in the early

historic preservation movement. Their role was crucial in identifying, marking, and protecting places important in local or regional history at a time when historic preservation was associated chiefly with the monumentation of a few nationally significant properties.

As guardians of the collective memory, leaders of historical societies were most aware of the changes their communities had undergone. They were the ones who could prove that there were once forests nearby, or that the land had formerly teemed with game. They knew perhaps better than others the price their communities had paid for "progress," even as they guarded the records of social and economic progress. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to know that among the people who established archival and manuscripts collections were many who played important roles in founding programs for the recovery of wildlife, the designation of parks, the regulation of tree-cutting, and other concerns now encompassed by our broad use of the term "conservation."[1]

As our concepts of conservation, of the range of things that comprise the human environment, and of environmental "quality" have expanded, so have the programs, procedures, and activities—from basic research to plain red tape—that sprout inevitably around any substantial public interest. It is those manifestations of public concern with environmental quality—as opposed to the environment itself—to which the archivist increasingly must respond. The following is a brief survey of activities that we associate with environmentalism and the kinds of relevant materials that the archivist may have in his collection—or may not have but whose conservation he should encourage—to which he might steer various users who often will be unfamiliar with the existence or potential value of such records.

To a certain extent the story is one of materials whose value has not been generally appreciated. Perhaps that is because the archival trade is chiefly a historical one, and its most influential clients are academic historians, whose interests are often narrow. Generally speaking, academics are most comfortable with the written word in its most prosaic array; they are not inclined as a rule to conduct their research in technical reports or documents, in graphics, in professional records, in legislative and judicial

records, in the literature and records of other fields, or in documents that pack a maximum of data into a minimum of space by eliminating verbiage—that is, ledgers, accounts, tabulated or daily observations, or other documents that systematically record empirical data with little or no analysis.

For example, the Gifford Pinchot Papers comprise probably the largest collection of private papers in the Library of Congress. That collection, and the smaller but still massive ones of Gifford's brother Amos and wife Cornelia Pinchot, represent a substantial share of the Library's manuscript holdings. But despite the appearance of completeness, the family's financial records—their meticulous accounting of income and expenses, receipts, cancelled checks, and the like—apparently were not regarded as being of historical value, and were left at Grey Towers, the family's home in Pennsylvania. Fortunately, those records still survive there, and have proven of inestimable value in research for the historic structure report and other investigations undertaken to support the restoration, refurnishing, and public interpretation of Grey Towers as a national historic landmark.[2] Moreover, their value goes beyond the needs of historic preservation. Anyone curious about how the genteel rich handled their money and other wealth in the 19th and early 20th centuries will find that collection unequalled.

Such records contain vital facts about historic properties that cannot be found elsewhere. Yet in most such projects we must work without family financial records even when other family papers exist. A notable and instructive exception is the William Howard Taft Collection, also at the Library of Congress, which includes family financial records so meticulous that they permit us to know every item of furnishing in the President's boyhood home. But despite such happy accidents, too often such material is culled from a collection in the mistaken belief that only letters, diaries, and the like have historical value.

In conducting research on historic structures, many odd categories of documents can be useful. Builder's contracts, employment records of construction personnel, lists and accounts of materials used in construction, insurance accounts and appraisals, tax assessments, building or utility or alteration permits, bills of sale, trade catalogs, photographs, city views,

records of divorces, probates of wills, records of lawsuits or other judicial proceedings, abstracts of titles, reports of building inspectors, and of course the drawings and specifications for construction or alteration—all these, and others, can provide unique and very valuable clues to the physical character and evolution, occupation, maintenance, use, and significance of a historic structure. They may be crucial to the successful pursuit of a restoration or other development for public benefit. The recent growth of architectural archives is therefore pleasing to the historic preservationist.

Structural investigation, of course, is only part of historic preservation. Historians and archaeologists use state archaeological inventories, rosters of state historical markers, the WPA inventories of public buildings, and other such collections to begin work that will result in the identification of properties that require attention for their cultural value.

But other valuable sources of information on past human occupation of a given landscape tend not to survive. For example, acquisition of large areas by the federal and state governments is preceded by examination of the lands to describe and appraise them before purchase. Yet the National Archives and Records Service and most state depositories apparently do not consider the records of those examinations to be worthy of permanent retention. All over the country they are being discarded in the belief that only the instruments of purchase—deeds and bills of sale—have permanent value, and even those only in the event of possible challenges to ownership.[3] Into the dumps are going descriptive materials on lands, land use, family economics, vegetative cover, agriculture and grazing, soil conservation, merchantable timber and other resources, buildings and structures, and other facts. Such information has great potential value to historians, geographers, anthropologists, folklorists, architectural historians, archaeologists, agronomists, soils scientists, land and resources managers, planners, botanists, ecologists, hydrographers, geologists, economists, and political scientists—in short, to anyone who has any interest in the natural and cultural resources or the human occupation and alteration of a given landscape in the past, or who must understand those phenomena in the present against the background of their origins, or who must

plan, manage, use, develop, or preserve those lands and resources in the future. Since the bulk of those materials relates to parks, forests, recreation areas, and designated wildernesses—lands for which a major commitment to protecting resource values has been made—it is especially regrettable that we deprive ourselves of a valuable tool with which we might pursue that commitment.

Of course, there is always the problem of space in our depositories—a problem we share with nearly every other public program. But too often substantive material is discarded to make space for records that actually have little real content. Anyone who has had to wade through relatively recent government correspondence has found himself mired down in puffery and gobbledygook and nagged by the fear that what he sees may bear little relation to the actual conduct of government, which was probably pursued over the telephone. The solution, of course, is better records management—read "culling"—to insure that the worthwhile remains and the nonsense goes. Quick judgments that textual documents are automatically valuable and other kinds of records are not, should be avoided. The reverse is very often the case.

It is even more important to protect documents relating to the physical features of urban areas, for the range of plans and decisions involved is so much greater and affects many more people. In inventorying the cultural resources of a community in preparation for, say, the designation of a historic district or the development of preservation ordinances, it is important to appreciate that in recent years there has been a tendency—especially among architectural historians—to assess resources and recommend action solely on the grounds of current esthetics.[4] This is especially noticeable in the tendency to look principally for structures and districts that represent mainstream styles of architecture, and reflects to a great extent the failure in recent years of cultural historians to contribute fully to historic preservation. But esthetic or architectural history alone will not identify places that are significant in a community's history and culture for reasons not physically evident; nor will it relate the progressive social, political, and physical development of the community to its present conditions, good and bad.

Whether or not cultural (that is, historic, architectural, or archaeological) resources are involved, documents reflecting the

material culture of the past may be useful in urban planning and administration. Many of the categories of documents useful in describing a single structure can in a broader way apply to a cityscape.

Certainly, we ought to be more aggressive about preserving municipal records, especially those of a technical sort, for they say more about our communities in real terms than does any amount of political posturing in the city council. The reports, inspections, permits, and plans of city engineers, fire marshals, utility inspectors, building offices, highway superintendents, and the like tend to be very substantive and immediately useful for those who must work with the legacy of early occupants of those offices. For major public buildings and other structures, we ought to seek complete documentation on the physical (as opposed to the political, legislative, or economic) aspects of construction, use, management, and maintenance over the years. The recent discovery of the construction superintendent's set of annotated drawings and specifications for the Brooklyn Bridge has been of great importance for the continued maintenance of the structure, as well as for the more general interest in its historical and architectural significance.[5] For a number of public buildings, the availability of structural data derived from construction and maintenance documents has made the difference between continued use and demolition in favor of new construction. From another standpoint, it might be suggested that the explosion several years ago of an abandoned underground gasoline tank that killed several workers on the Washington, D. C., subway system could have been prevented if the city's records of such structures had been available or used.

As with records of private enterprise generally, we have been less than diligent in safeguarding professional records of architects and engineers, despite the prominence of those professions in our society. Although there is a growing interest in the subject among architects, at least, and although advances in microphotography have simplified the storage problem, we have a long way to go. An especially sad story is that of the professional legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted, whose business and personal papers, along with those of his sons, his firms, and their successors, have been donated to the Library of Congress. The many thousands of drawings,

however, remain the property of a successor firm, in whose offices in recent years a substantial share of them have been destroyed by flooding.

That is in contrast, by the way, to the American Institute of Architects' enormous, simply staggering collection of drawings and related materials of the great architect Richard Morris Hunt and his sons, which is very well preserved—but without the slightest scrap of personal or business papers with which to place them in proper context. Since both Olmsted and Hunt had a great influence on our environmental consciousness, and because the constructions of both men remain important national resources, the incompleteness of their records is certainly regrettable.

There are other environmental concerns affecting society. It is to be hoped that uniform efforts are being made to protect the key factual records of hospitals, coroners, local and state public health agencies, insurance commissions, occupational safety agencies, and the like. There are a number of public health problems that can be met only as a result of good record keeping. Consider the issue of whether the widespread use of antibiotics is selecting out new, more lethal varieties of disease organisms. Ultimately, the question can be answered best if we can compare the records of drug distribution with the records of incidence of disease.

Better records ought to be kept of people and places affected by hazardous enterprises. Witness the difficulty the U. S. Army recently had in trying to locate former soldiers involved in atomic bomb tests that were made less than a generation ago. We may face even greater challenges when we try to track down the people and places affected by past uses of chemical pesticides. Will we have the documentary evidence to discern the full effects of the Three Mile Island incident a couple of generations from now?

When we mention the environment, most people think of a general concern for lands and natural resources or the deterioration of air and water quality. The records keeper has an important role in responding to that interest. But a large share of the most valuable material is of a sort that does not appeal to an academic historian, and may therefore not be recognized as being of potential value to others—the previously mentioned government realty appraisals, for instance.

A documents librarian may have in the mustier corners of his

collection reports dating far back into the 19th century on such subjects as the role of the buffalo in the prairie ecosystem, the effects of domestic grazing on range soils and vegetation, the role of fire in prairie and forest environments, the vitality and habitats of species now regarded as endangered, the mechanics of river flooding, and so on. These are subjects of great concern today, to scientists and citizens alike, but they were not invented this morning. Considerable money is being spent on research into questions that may have been answered long ago, or for which invaluable information may lie in old research records of federal, state, university, and independent investigators.

Much land use planning and management would be improved if it were based on a sounder understanding of the origins of present conditions. State and federal civilian and military records, which are generally well protected, offer a wealth of environmental data that unfortunately have not been used because the scientists don't know they exist and the historians don't understand them. Military post surgeons' records, for instance, include detailed weather observations for areas where it is generally assumed that such information is unavailable. The field notes of surveyers, and their lists of corner trees, may permit an ecologist to make a fair reconstruction of an ecosystem as it existed at the time of the survey. A variety of military and civilian records can provide clues on the early and recent role of man in various ecosystems, something utterly beyond the ken of too many ecologists and natural resources managers.

Valuable environmental data can be gleaned as well from private and industrial sources. In appreciating the present conditions of a natural area that a land manager may be trying to restore, a timber company's records detailing what was being cut, where and when, give us an unparalleled description of a forest prior to its removal. However, it has been the author's experience that too often just such industrial records—relating to field operations and production (the chief sources of environmental data)—are discarded in favor of head-office correspondence and the like. Even the reports of company timber cruisers, who located and made greatly detailed assessments of lands and timber deemed worthy of purchase, may be discarded as too technical or specific to be of interest.

A number of other records of state agencies are useful in natural resources management. Perhaps the best are those compiled by almost every state geological survey, whose staff observed and recorded competently nearly everything in and on the lands they examined, in many cases entire states. Through proper employment of these and other frequently obscure materials a number of possibilities emerge. For instance, by compiling a record of weather and climate, fires, human influences, and other aspects of a forest insect's habitat over the last century or so, we might afford to the entomologist a sounder understanding of the insect's place in the ecosystem, identify coincidences or sequences that may explain why we regard the bug as a pest, and perhaps suggest how to protect a timber resource without disturbing other environmental values. It should be possible for us to write a history of an ecosystem, to give to the ecologist a sounder understanding of the origins of present conditions and to the wilderness manager a tool for realistic management plans. We ought to be able to trace the history of an endangered species and its habitat, to determine if the species truly is endangered from a historical perspective, and if so, what are the possible causes of its endangerment.

In short, there is a wealth of material of immediate environmental import accessible to the archivist. By steering practitioners of a number of disciplines toward it, the archivist might thereby broaden the range of support for his program to include scientists, engineers, and others. At the same time, he might be able to refine the standards for the types of materials whose future preservation he will promote.

Finally, there is an especially important category of documents that is disappearing through simple failure to appreciate its importance. Apparently, the National Archives does not regard field and laboratory research notes as worthy of permanent retention; most are discarded after ten years, some surviving as long as twenty-five.[6] Perhaps that is an acknowledgement that most research now conducted by the federal government is pointless and self-indulgent, but I think not. Research notes are the only way to understand and verify the facts and conclusions of the research; their preservation is integral to the ethics of the scientific method. Additionally, they may offer information not reflected in any reports or publications that emerged from the

research. A geologist prospecting for gold a century ago might have noted the occurrence of pitchblende, but not reported it because it was not germane to his chief subject; only his notes, therefore, point us to this source of uranium. The scientist investigating the question of whether rain follows the plow may have recorded in great detail the flora and fauna, the population and agriculture, the weather, and other facts about the area he studied, but his report will focus chiefly on the main question. Today's scientist might be interested in everything *except* the report, since that question was put to rest long ago.

In short, archivists and librarians are both environmentalists and the guardians of environmental understanding. They are in a good position to perceive the wider potential of their collections and thereby expand the numbers and varieties of those who use the materials in their care. In doing so, they may have a profound impact on the natural and cultural resources that concern us all.

FOOTNOTES

1. Besides the many historical and genealogical societies that undertook to protect historic places, many individuals in the 19th century translated their knowledge of history into public action to protect natural values. George Perkins Marsh, historian and diplomat, produced in 1864 the book *Man and Nature*, revised and republished in 1874 as *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*—a work traditionally regarded as the fountainhead of the conservation movement. Franklin Benjamin Hough, a physician, became an important regional historian and archaeologist—not to mention anthropologist, folklorist, and a remarkable number of other categorizations—of upstate New York. While helping to found historical societies and establish protection for historic sites, in the 1870s he turned to forest conservation, spearheaded the drive for federal conservation legislation, and in 1876 became the first person ever appointed to a forestry-related position in the federal government. His multi-volume *Report Upon Forestry*, produced over several succeeding years, provided the real basis for forestry and conservation programs in the United States.
2. John G. Waite et al.,*Grey Towers Preliminary Historic Structure Report* (Albany, New York: Preservation/Design Group, 1978; reprinted Washinton: Government Printing Office, 1979), prepared under contract for the U. S. Forest Service, History Section, Washington, D. C.
3. This is based on the author's personal experience in the U. S. Forest Service, which has received massive returns of those and other materials from the records centers in recent years. Experience in certain other records retention incidents supports the comments below about research records.
4. The author has addressed this problem at length in several speeches and publications, including "Historic Preservation and Environmental Protection: The Role of the Historian," *The Public Historian* 1 (Fall 1978): 61-75.
5. A delightful recent account of the bridge drawings is David McCullough, "The Treasure from the Carpentry Shop: The Extraordinary Drawings of the Brooklyn Bridge," *American Heritage* 31 (December 1979): 19-29.
6. The only explanation I was ever able to get for this was that it was believed that the reported results of research were sufficient to safeguard the knowledge involved—and in any case, time marches on, and old science goes out of date. That is very wrong-headed, in my opinion. It is the conclusions and judgments in reports of research that go out of date. That is not true of the factual observations made during the course of research—they are unchanging, and can support revised conclusions.