

Reading Log Week 14-18 :

The Question for Discussion: Explain some (or even one good one) of the “bedrock ideas” that make up the theory of Archives and how they developed over time and across two continents. Or, if you are already in an archives or have been to your adopted archives, you could use some of the readings on how archives have developed to explore something in your archives that seems related to that development.

Posner’s article states: There are 3 bedrock ideas that appear to be the basis of current archival theory. These ideas started in Europe and are attributed as an outcome of the French Revolution. The three ideas are that nations need a public archives administration; that governments need to support the archives and care for ‘the documentary heritage of the past’ even if it is not of their making; and that archives should be open to the public. ¹

Posner also gives evidence to what I would call the great debate among archivists. This debate, division, or strained relationship is evident throughout the reading material and is present even today. Posner sheds light on this division when he mentions that government (archive) clerks were replaced with scholars in the early 1800’s, but that the scholars neglected the government documents to the point of having legislation passed in 1840 that brought archives back to a more administrative than scholarly management. This distinction between administrative and scholarly ‘record keeping’ will be discussed further on in this reading log. ²

Panitch’s article is based on Posner’s but argues that development was not as smooth as Posner would have you believe. She brings up one other archival tenet that came about as a result of the destructiveness of the French Revolution. This tenet was alluded to last week in the articles of Foote and O’Toole concerning archives in relation to keeping or destroying (with Foote,) and archival records that lose their ‘practicality’ and become symbols (with O’Toole.) Panitch uses this quote from O’Toole that I found appropriate in supporting her position:

“Particularly striking about the Revolutionary era is the way in which some records (principally the founding documents of the new order) appear invested of equal parts practicality and symbolism, while the significance of others (remnants of the Old Regime) shifted abruptly and entirely from the realm of practicality to that of pure symbolism.”³

This quote relates to the Foote article and explains how archives can change over the years. Those records that are not destroyed may be instead divested of their ‘practical’ value in society and changed according to society’s needs. Panitch supposes that it is the nature of public memory and how that memory shapes the archives that is the prevailing tenet of the French revolution. The following quotes need further investigating into the nature of memory itself but they serve to sum up Panitch’s idea nicely.

“...the true significance of any “lieu de memoire,”...is societally determined. Their significance (archives and memory) may consequently alter, increase, or vanish altogether, as the society which invests them with meaning itself evolves.” ⁴

"...archives instead appear somewhat fragile, eternally subject to the judgment of the society in which they exist. Neither atemporal nor absolute, the meaning they convey may be manipulated, misinterpreted, or suppressed. That the archives of the past are also the mutable creations of the present is perhaps one of the most enduring and vivid lessons of the French Revolution."⁵

The Gilliland-Swetland article brings us back to the division between the scholars and the administrators. He explains the differences in archival 'professional' tradition more clearly as "historian, scholars with a responsibility to interpret the documents in their care" vs. "gatekeepers for materials under their control." He goes on to credit Berner with indentifying American archival tradition as "indigenous historical manuscript tradition drawn from private collections with item level descriptive control" and the European archival tradition as the "public archives tradition of France and Prussia using the concept of provenance (keeping records 'as nearly as possible in the same order of classification as obtained in the offices of origin,') for management of official records of state government."⁶

Gilliland-Swetland purports that the European archival tradition is the 'bedrock' of the current US archival system. He explains that the European concept of provenance is a threefold approach to organizing archival collections: It is the practice of describing records at the series level (a direct application of the principle of provenance); it provided an alternative to item-level manuscript cataloging; and it progressed toward replacing numerous disconnected access tools with an interconnected hierarchy of finding aids (another extension of the principle of provenance.)⁷

According to Gilliland-Swetland and other readings, European provenance did indeed become the standard for archival organization, and was championed by the administrators. The scholars also accepted it as a better way to organize, but did so for different reasons: "In 1945 manuscripts holding became 'gutted' with paper and adopted public archive arrangement practices but not the "outlook of public archives (preserving records for administrative and public needs.") P167/168"...Understanding the context of historical materials (the provenance part) was important to the manuscripts holdings and was how they used the principles of provenance to suit their own needs."⁸

Even though both sides were using similar means, the division remained and did not seem to get better until University archives became more prevalent or institutionalized. Gilliland-Swetland explains the growth of the University archives and the blending of manuscript collections with government collections (public records). This sounded great when I first read it, but further readings and my experience with my adopted archives this afternoon tells a different story that relates more to the last article concerning the SAA and to the history as related in the text.

The article by Cook relates to Gilliland-Swetland's article in that the later introduced the SAA (Society of American Archivists) within the realms of what is an archivist and where is the profession within the larger context of archival history and the former article explains the development and history of the SAA. The text encompasses both articles into the larger framework of archives history. I mention this connection because the division between

administrators and scholars has not gone away, the Gilliland-Swetland article mentions how advocates of public archives 'edited out' information pertaining to manuscript archives in national publications, it also mentions how some manuscript holdings didn't like the idea of public access, and he left it up to the reader to question "what is the nature and role in society of the archivist as professional?"⁹

The Cook¹⁰ article explains the SAA and how they have come to define the 'professional archivist' and the text goes on to explain the development (and what I would call final separation of the public archives from the historic manuscripts) of the National Association of Government Archives and Records. My visit to my adopted archive showed this division; the archives were one half of a whole, the other half was called Records Management. Records management dealt with the daily operations records of the institution and the archives dealt with manuscripts (faculty lectures/papers and donations), visual materials, and rare books.

I find it interesting to see this division and to read the documentation about its continued history, but I also cannot help but see a relationship to other ideals (admittedly romantic ones) and to side one way over the other. The text quotes from a very old article concerning historical manuscript institutions:

"The treatment of historical records was more like that given to precious physical artifacts, and, in many instances, there was little distinction made between organizational records, personal papers, decorative arts, material culture, and even the often odd mementos that reflected the antiquarian bent of these institutions."¹¹

It may be just me, but those kinds of records sound like fun.

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¹Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution", *American Archivist*, Vol 3 (July 1940) 159

²Posner, "Some Aspects" 167

³Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity? Some archival lessons from the case of the French Revolution", *American Archivist*, Vol 59 (Winter 1996) 45

⁴Panitch, "Liberty" 46

⁵Panitch, "Liberty" 47

⁶Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History", *American Archivist*, Vol 54 (Spring 1991) 160

⁷Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance", 160

⁸Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance", 168

⁹Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance", 168

¹⁰J. Frank Cook, "The Blessings of Providence on an Association of archivists", *American Archivist*, Vol 46, No. 4 (Fall 1983) 374-399

¹¹William J. Gilmore. *Reading Becomes as Neccessity of life: Material and Cultural life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1989) 35-37. Quoted in James O'Toole & Richard Cox, *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 59