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Coming Together: Unity and Diversity

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Coming Together: Unity and Diversity

The following address was presented during the closing plenary session of the SAA Annual Meeting on August 7, 2004.

As archivists we all share some essential common values and perspectives, we have many of the same aspirations, and we are united in a profession that performs an essential function in society.

We are a diverse profession. We celebrate our differences and our special areas of expertise. SAA has long recognized these affinities, and has created sections, roundtables, and other groups to allow us to meet with those from similar institutions, or those who share the same functional responsibilities or particular interests. It is important for us to have these gatherings and to learn from each other.

However, at our annual meetings, such as this one in Boston, I think it is essential, both symbolically and spiritually, for us to open and close our common gathering by meeting in one room. At these plenary sessions we celebrate our unity, our common values, our shared interests, and our dedication to pursue the professional goals we hold as the Society of American Archivists.

As always there are differences that divide us and threaten that shared purpose we hold dear. It is easy at times to focus on these specializations and not

the broader and sometimes more abstract values that we share with all other archivists. Some of us must necessarily view the records in our care as legal and administrative tools essential for evidence and accountability. In some repositories the archival materials we manage are used primarily for historical or cultural purposes. It is tempting to define the archival world as one or the other—legal or historical; public or private; evidence or information; administrative or cultural. However, I think it is essential to remember our unity of purpose and vision.

We are small in number, but we are great in spirit. We are dedicated to common values. In his 1990 presidential address John Fleckner articulated what many of us feel to be the essential truths and values of the archival profession. He reminded us that, "what we archivists do is essential to the well-being of an enlightened and democratic society." Speaking of the satisfaction he had found as an archivist, he said, ". . . this is

my joy in doing archives. To be, at once, a master practitioner—with esoteric knowledge and uncommon skills—and a participant in the most profoundly and universally human of all undertakings: to understand and preserve the past on behalf of the future."

In similar spirit one of the people who completed this year's A*CENSUS survey added this final comment:

This is the single most entertaining profession I can imagine. It combines the past and future in the current moment. It ranges from minute detail to broadest perspective. It is personal and social. It spans human experience. It provides a way to know people who lived long before you and the chance to affect people who come after. I love what I do.

I like to think that any one of us could have written this—that each of us is capable of feeling the joy and fulfillment of our work as archivists.

If we can unite around our core values as archivists, we can fulfill our vital role in society. We can protect the rights of citizens, hold our public leaders accountable, and ensure the preservation of documents that can be used and interpreted to scuttle efforts to create an "official" history that perverts the truth.

United as a profession of archivists, we can build stronger alliances with those who share many of our goals and values—librarians, records managers, historians, museum curators, historical editors, oral historians, but also consumer advocates, legal investigators, government officials, religious leaders, and public citizens, who depend on accurate and reliable records and on the cultural information they may also contain.

With these stronger alliances we can become more effective as public advocates on behalf of records and archives. In the past year SAA has further strengthened both our commitment to public advocacy—a momentum that has been building for several years—and our role as an organization that can work effectively in alliances with other groups. A few examples:

- SAA's advocacy for the District of Columbia Archives has focused attention on the plight of our capital city's neglect of its records; the result

continued on page 26

Archives can ensure not a more diverse or more just society, but at least one in which the rights and interests of all social groups—even the most marginalized and neglected—are protected and documented.

President's Message

continued from page 3

has been DC Council support for funding of a proposed new facility and for increased staffing.

- SAA's advocacy for enhanced funding of the National Archives and Records Administration and NHPRC has resulted in some short-term improvements in federal support for archival needs. But once again we need to send letters and phone calls to Congress to reverse the Bush administration's proposed funding cutbacks for NHPRC.
- SAA's advocacy for open access to government records has shone a spotlight on these important means of protecting citizens' rights. We have repeatedly issued position statements and sent letters to newspaper and journal editors demanding an end to governmental secrecy and limits on classification and restricted access to the public's records.
- SAA's advocacy has resulted in a coalition of more than two dozen allied organizations demanding an open hearing regarding the nomination of a new Archivist of the United States. With our partners, we have had an impact in ensuring an open and full nomination process.
- Our coalition continues to broaden and expand. The American Historical Association annual meeting in January 2005 will focus on the theme "Archives and Artifacts." SAA will be one of four allied professional organizations represented on a special panel on public advocacy.

SAA will continue to play a vital leadership role in bringing archival concerns to public attention and in advocating for better funding and increased attention to the requirements of recordkeeping and documentation in a democratic society. We can do so only by speaking with one voice as a united profession, and by forming alliances and partnerships with all organizations and groups committed to protecting the records and documents of our society.

We should embrace the power of archives. Archivists are *not* handmaidens of history, passive guardians of cultural treasures, or gatekeepers limiting access to endangered documents. As recent writers discussing the implications for archivists of postmodern thinking have declared, archivists play an active and essential role in shaping the contents of our repositories, in interpreting them (through finding aids, for example), and in either encouraging or limiting various types of access to "our" records.

This power carries a solemn obligation to use it wisely, to acknowledge that neutrality and objectivity are desirable but unattainable in a pure form, and to ensure that archives protect the public interest rather than the privileges of the political, economic, social, or intellectual elite.

Our archives—either at the level of individual repositories or at least collectively on a national level—should represent all people in our democratic society. The interests, perspectives, and stories of the common man and woman deserve to be protected and preserved, along with the records of government,

business, organized labor, religious institutions, and cultural organizations. Archives can speak truth to power, but only if we ensure their voices are heard. Archives can ensure not a more diverse or more just society, but at least one in which the rights and interests of all social groups—even the most marginalized and neglected—are protected and documented. We need to heed the call made a generation ago by Gerry Ham, Helen Samuels, Patrick Quinn, Gilda Lerner, Howard Zinn, and others to be activists in ensuring the preservation of these unheard voices.

As a profession we have made important progress in documenting previously marginalized groups. But just as in our broader society's quest for civil rights, there remains much to be done. Two years ago Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth spoke at our Annual Meeting in Birmingham, where he had led the local civil rights struggles a generation ago. A slip of the tongue led him to address us not as archivists but as "activists." But he then stated that *as archivists* we should also *be activists*.

We can start by reaffirming our Society's commitment to diversity. The SAA Committee on Diversity has begun an active agenda to meet its charge, approved by Council in June 1999, which states:

The Society of American Archivists is committed to integrating diversity concerns and perspectives into all aspects of its activities and into the fabric of the profession as a whole. SAA is also committed to the goal of a Society membership that reflects the broad diversity of American society. SAA believes that these commitments are essential to the effective pursuit of the archival mission "to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of the nation's historical record."

Finally, as we look forward to the coming year let us resolve together to renew our commitment to our shared values as archivists.

Let us not forget our specialized interests and diverse perspectives, but let us affirm our common goals and our determination to work together in new and stronger alliances.

Let us celebrate our own diversity, and commit ourselves to building an archival profession that truly and accurately reflects the diversity within our society—in our membership, in our archival programs, and in the activities of SAA.

Let us determine to be archival advocates—to speak out actively when the archival interests and needs of our society are threatened or neglected.

While we pursue these lofty goals, let us not lose our senses of humor, nor forget the sheer joy we feel as we revel in the professional career we have chosen. Let us embrace the excitement of discovery, the satisfaction of doing important work, the thrill of discovery, and the success that comes with every new triumph.

As we look forward to meeting together again next year in New Orleans, let us celebrate our diversity—and our unity as the Society of American Archivists. ❖