

The Concept of Public Memory and Its Impact on Archival Public Programming

by RICHARD J. COX

Introduction

Public or collective memory (which, for the purposes of this essay, we can generally define as the perceptions and uses of the past by the public—including both government and citizens) has, in recent years, become a topic of great interest for American and other historians. An interesting collaboration between more traditional intellectual history (the history of ideas), political and institutional history, and social history (the history of the people) that draws on anthropology, sociology, and related disciplines, research in American public memory has now produced some major studies. In the last several years three books on this topic have appeared that are important for North American archivists to know about and to consider, especially in their public programmes and advocacy work.¹

What these books offer the archivist is somewhat counterbalanced by what their authors have missed or neglected about the nature of archival work. In this sense, such an outcome or circumstance is very similar to what occurred when the self-anointed public historians of two decades ago neglected the legacy and efforts of the archival profession and believed they had invented something new.² However, these studies on public memory still have much to say to archivists, especially in the realm of how the archival community has tried to publicize the importance of its work—the core aspect of archival public programming. This essay will attempt to consider the nature of public memory and its importance for archival work, especially in the aspect of archival public programming, by examining the recent studies on this topic by historians John Bodnar, David Glassberg, and Michael Kammen. This essay will also suggest why archivists need to document their own work in a manner in which historians and other researchers can gain an understanding of the mission and practice of the archival profession—certainly a respectable goal for the advocates of an enhanced public profile for archives and their holdings. It is important, however, to place these works within the context of archival functions such as public outreach.

Public Programming as an Archival Function

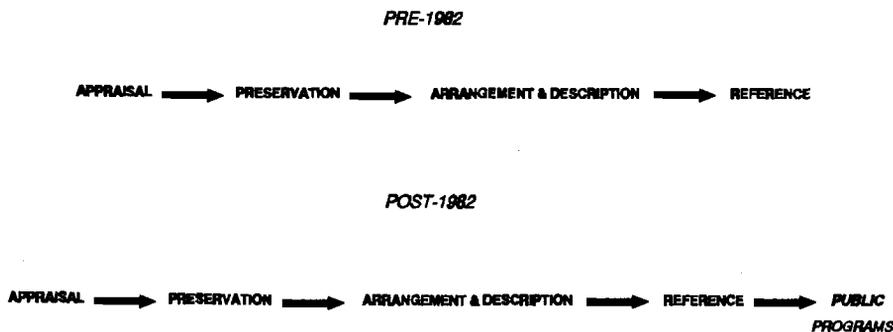
It could be taken for granted that the notion of public memory has had a continuing and significant influence on archival activity. As a non-archivist recently reminded archivists, “archives are sometimes said to be society’s collective memory”; Kenneth Foote also suggested that archivists must be aware of how their practice consciously (or unconsciously) reflects public memory.³ Archivists have also drawn upon the notion of memory. As Terry Eastwood stated, one of the fundamental principles of an archives is that it is “set aside consciously as memorial of the action or actions giving it existence”; in other words, “archives provide material for the extension of human memory.”⁴ While Foote and Eastwood focused more on the archival function of appraisal, it is the intention of this essay to look at another important activity in regards to public memory—archivists’ efforts to win support for their professional mission; that is, the shifting interests of the public in the past as the context in which archivists work for greater recognition and support.

The increasing attention paid by archivists in the past twenty years to public programming and advocacy is directly related to what these historians of public memory are examining; in fact, although their references to archives and historical manuscript repositories are definitely spotty at best, they generally relate to how these documentary institutions have drawn on or reflected public interest and support—a matter that is discussed more fully below.

While there has been no history of the archival preoccupation with public programmes and advocacy, there are a few logical bench-marks that can provide a framework for seeing how archivists have viewed this matter. In the 1970s archivists began to have their consciousness about public perception and programmes raised by a few individuals, most notably Elsie Freeman. Freeman issued various rallying cries for greater attention to the matter of archival public programming. For a considerable period of time, however, she seemed to be a literal voice in the wilderness. Her presentation at the 1982 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting effectively summarized her concerns that archivists must adopt a more client-centered approach to the administration of their holdings. In effect, Freeman stated that archivists must pay more attention to users of archives and their needs.⁵

The year 1982 was obviously a watershed in the discovery by archivists of public programming. Not only did they hear Freeman’s spirited rationale for focusing on public service, but they also received a basic manual on the subject and were immersed in a campaign to regain the administrative independence of the United States National Archives. Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline’s contribution on public programmes to the Society of American Archivists’ Basic Manual Series essentially remains the main dividing point between it and earlier views and is also the starting point for any archivist wishing to read about this topic.⁶ Prior to this general manual, most American archivists perceived their basic functions without any inclusion of public service except as it was imbedded in reference services (see **Figure 1**). In the beginning of their volume, the authors listed a number of examples of public programmes and then noted that, in a survey undertaken in 1976, “sponsors of each of these activities reported ‘no public programmes’” in a poll, which led the authors to conclude “that many archivists are involved in outreach efforts even though they may not identify them as such.”⁷ This manual certainly represents the point where public programming became more widely accepted as a fundamental archival function.

Figure 1
Archival Functions as a Continuum



In the same period as the publication of this manual, then-SAA president, David Gracy, made “Archives and Society” his theme, and his speeches, articles, and task force and committee assignments pushed public programming and—more important in his case—advocacy into mainstream archival discussion and activity.⁸ Like Freeman, Gracy’s role was to raise the consciousness of archivists about the public, although his focus was more introspective (concentrated on archival image) than that of Freeman. No recent basic archival text ignores the topic,⁹ although some archivists continue to lament the manner in which it is perceived and handled by their colleagues.¹⁰ It has also been discussed enough that it has influenced archival theory and methodology, such as in the matter of appraisal and more general archival principles.¹¹ In general, it is possible to state that public programmes have been elevated to a new form of theoretical respectability.

This new respectability can be seen in at least two recent publications. James O’Toole’s contribution to the new SAA Archival Fundamentals Series partly rests on the importance of public memory. He commences his essay with this observation:

Recording information and finding ways to keep and use it for long periods of time are very old problems for human culture. In its more or less insatiable desire to gather, comprehend, and utilize data, humanity has long sought means to fix knowledge in such a way that it can be called back to mind when necessary or desirable.¹²

Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, in an article a few years ago, show a fundamentally different perspective on public programmes, calling for the “integration of public programmes into what have been regarded as core archival functions....” They also develop “four key concepts” supporting public programming: “image, awareness, education, and use.”¹³ While I certainly do not disagree with the notion of integrating public programmes into archival work, I believe that the degree to which Blais and Enns have taken it may ignore some other equally important concerns — or, as Terry Cook has stated, they may have led us to “reveal the tip of a deep and dangerous theoretical iceberg.”¹⁴ Cook wants us to go back and remember the purpose, nature, and elements of archives and archival work. We return, thus, to the theme of archives and historical records as a form of public memory.

Given such concerns, it is necessary to wonder whether the other major writings by historians on public or collective memory have provided any additional insights into the nature and contributions of archival and historical manuscript repositories. Unfortunately, as already suggested, the answer is “no”—*if* looked at for this purpose. However, these recent studies can

provide another framework for archivists in which to consider the origins of their institutions, explain the subsequent development of these programmes, and realize ways in which they should view the public's perception of their archives and historical manuscripts.

Public Memory in the Early Twentieth Century: Case Studies in the Intersection of the Official and the Vernacular

John Bodnar's *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* is the most compact of these three recent studies. Bodnar's book opens with a brief essay on the controversy surrounding the design and completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. This initial case study is offered in order to demonstrate the conflicting tensions within the United States regarding the country's past and the fact that these tensions have continued up to the present. The remainder of Bodnar's book demonstrates the thesis that is presented in the introductory chapter: "Public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions."¹⁵ Bodnar contests the general assumption that public memory emerges from political discussion concentrated upon economic or moral problems—such as Americans were prone to witness during the Ronald Reagan Presidency—and sees, instead, public memory emerging from "fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present."¹⁶ Current problems, according to Bodnar, stimulate the discussions regarding the uses of the past.

In presenting his thesis, Bodnar provides a well-structured narrative and a tightly-focused argument. He presents a chapter on the notion of public memory in the nineteenth-century nation, stressing the importance of the developing nation-state to the point where the national government and the concept of the nation came, in the twentieth century, to be the dominant emphases and controllers of public memory. Bodnar then provides three major discourses on aspects of public memory in his book: communal forums (ethnic celebrations and urban commemorations), regional forums (the Midwest before and after World War II), and national forums (the work of the National Park Service and the Civil War centennial and the American Revolution bicentennial). Throughout these essays, which consist of mostly lengthy descriptions of specific celebrations and events, Bodnar returns again and again to the nature of public memory in twentieth-century America.

What are the main aspects of recent American public memory? In his assessment of the role of ethnicity in public memory, Bodnar carefully asserts that "what began early in the twentieth century as a restatement of the value of ethnic customs and institutions increasingly became a collective performance for profit and boosterism."¹⁷ One of the striking changes in these ethnic efforts was their increasing emphasis on the "inevitable and painless transformation of diverse folk cultures into a unified American culture," a far cry from the earliest stress on ethnic pride and identity.¹⁸ "Nonpolitical aspects" of these groups' past—such as "folk dances and music, folk attire, and food"—were emphasized as the twentieth century wore on.¹⁹ In the communal and regional forums, Bodnar similarly notes how local interests became subsumed by national and other controlling political issues and, furthermore, how the celebrations changed from group identity and pride to recreation and leisure activities:

Linked by elements of a shared past and participation in similar economic activity, geographic areas such as the Midwest were the scene of widespread commemorations that were infused with a multivocal quality. Cultural leaders such as professionals, businessmen, and government officials eagerly sought to use patriotism to foster citizen unity and loyalty to existing structures of power. Ordinary people continued to use symbols such as pioneers as a defense of local and personal concerns and frequently viewed commemorative activities as opportunities for simple entertainment and leisure.²⁰

Much of this transformation of public memory was facilitated by the “expanding power of government.”²¹ Local, state, and federal government agencies increasingly sought to orchestrate commemorations and activities in order to ensure that the nation’s interests were paramount; for example, the government-supported mural programmes “provided local populations with a view of the past that was reassuring.” These “murals were generally nonpolitical and often portrayed a sense that history moved in distinct stages and slowly, thus calming fears of ‘imminent catastrophe’ or rapid social change.”²²

The chapters on the National Park Service and the national celebrations of the Civil War and American Revolution clearly demonstrate the increasing influence of the national government on public memory. For the National Park Service, especially, elaborate plans were made to govern interpretation in a professional manner as well as sustain patriotism and loyalty. The celebrations of the Civil War in the early 1960s and the American Revolution in the mid-1970s revealed similar aspirations. As Bodnar suggests, “they stood as massive cultural bookends that attempted to contain volumes of dissent and indifference to the civic messages of leaders.”²³

However, as Bodnar concludes, public memory has taken the American public back to a fundamental conflict between national (or official) and vernacular memory:

Cultural nationalism and a state-dominated memory system were most powerful during the first half of the twentieth century and were fostered by a continuing series of crises such as wars, class conflict, and economic depression, although vernacular interests endured with vigour and strength. In recent decades the power of the nation-state has been contested to a greater extent, and public expressions of vernacular memory have become more pronounced.²⁴

This conclusion suggests the complexity of public memory.

In Bodnar’s analysis, there are few references to archives and historical manuscripts repositories, a fact that may surprise many archivists and manuscript curators who have nurtured their programmes by drawing on aspects of the public memory. In his evaluation of the nineteenth-century notions of public memory, Bodnar briefly mentions the changing image of the Declaration of Independence into a “sacred document.”²⁵ In a Norwegian pageant, there is reference to a college professor’s call to create a repository for housing books, pamphlets, and newspapers published by Norwegian-Americans.²⁶ The activities of the American-Irish Historical Society are mentioned tersely in this ethnic group’s celebrations.²⁷ The State Historical Society of Wisconsin’s involvement in that state’s centennial celebrations are chronicled.²⁸ There is a brief reference to the fact that the Civil War centennial supported microfilming records.²⁹ And, finally, there is a reference to an archival and oral history project in Alabama that formed part of the American Revolution bicentennial celebration.³⁰

Should it be surprising that so little is said about archival and historical manuscript repositories? Since neither of the other two books being analyzed here provide much more detail on the place of archives in the changing patterns of public memory, and since the minor industry of historiographical studies also generally neglects the connection of historical research to archival developments,³¹ no archivist should be shocked by such slights. Still, the answer is unequivocally “yes” when one reconsiders the origin and nature of archival programmes. Many of these institutions—historical societies, state archives, and even the National Archives—are the definite products of public memory activities. The founding of the state government archives in Maryland was directly tied to the tercentenary celebration of the state’s colonial founding.³² The National Archives was the result of a long, hard-fought campaign that drew upon the strengths and energies of many patriotic groups and was marketed for a while as a war memorial.³³ Even the establishment of college and university archives is most typically the result of institutional anniversaries and other commemorative events.³⁴ It can logically be argued that a large portion of our archival and historical manuscript repositories are themselves artifacts (or documents?) of public memory discussions and activities.

Public Memory and Historical Pageantry in the Early Twentieth Century

David Glassberg's *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* is better focused than Bodnar's study in that it examines how one manifestation of public memory—historical pageantry—evolved and operated in the first four decades of this century. Glassberg is trying to answer the question “Where do Americans get their ideas about history?” by looking specifically at “public historical imagery.”³⁵ He sees such imagery as “both a reflection of the larger culture, and its prevailing ways of looking at the world, and a major element in the shaping of that culture.”³⁶

Glassberg starts his study with a review of historical pageantry at the very end of the nineteenth century. He looks at the rise of the “historical oration,” which was used to explain the “sacred as well as the worldly significance of past events,” adhering to and supporting a common view of progress.³⁷ These orations displayed tributes to the nation, but they were equally important as a means of stimulating local community development, corresponding to and supporting the burgeoning popular interest in local history. Displays of relics, monuments, publication of colourful souvenir books, parades, and reunions were all used in these activities:

Civic officials piled historical artifact, narrative, and image upon image in antiquarian detail to bring the full weight of tradition to bear upon their neighbours, discharging what they felt was their sacred duty to teach their beliefs and values to the public and to explain the present residents' unique place in a succession of past and future residents who together constituted the historical community.³⁸

Like Bodnar, Glassberg perceives that these celebrations, despite the diversity of participants and observers, often supported a “broadly conceived but loosely defined civic ideal.”³⁹ While it is true that particular groups could ignore the civic ideal and focus on their own matters, the ideal nevertheless existed and held great sway. Also like Bodnar, Glassberg detects the growing effort by government to control these pageants and to support overtly the civic ideal; he also notes that the individuals maintaining this, not surprisingly, came from the “economic, educational, and hereditary elite.”⁴⁰

Glassberg then turns his attention to the actual historical pageants, the main topic of his study. He provides detailed descriptions of urban pageantry in the early twentieth century, considering tensions between various factions as to whether the pageants should be patriotic and civic in origin or primarily recreational. The shift to deliberate uses of the pageants was fairly rapid:

In a few short years [in the early twentieth century], historical pageantry had become not only a new medium for patriotic, moral, and aesthetic education envisioned by genteel intellectuals, but also an instrument for the reconstruction of American society and culture using progressive ideals.⁴¹

These uses were especially evident during World War I, when “pageantry...submerged the dramatic expression of local and regional identity in mass demonstrations of national loyalty.”⁴²

In the next two chapters, Glassberg chronicles how local communities perceived the value of the pageant. These events would be useful for placing “the spirit of unanimity around a unique local identity.”⁴³ “The historical pageant would depict tangibly not only what the community was but also what it might ideally become.”⁴⁴ Community development, along with a mix of patriotic and nationalistic themes, became the focus of these pageants as the twentieth century wore on. The craze for them, moreover, became sufficiently widespread that a growing corps of professional “pageant-masters” emerged, raising these events from amateurish productions to more sophisticated theatre. Yet there were distinct aspects tying these pageants together:

As a result of exposure through the national media and popular expectations raised by that media, historical pageants in different regions of the nation, places with apparently different local histories, displayed similar images of their past, present, and future. But this similarity of historical images and ritual action embedded in the pageant form also reflected concerns and desires - shared to varying degrees by the pageant-masters, their local sponsors, and their audiences across the nation - for promoting pious beliefs and virtuous behaviours, wholesome expressive recreation, local community cohesion, and a deep faith in orderly progress.⁴⁵

Tying all this together was the notion of progress: "The succession of episodes across the pageant grounds placed past, present, and future within a single framework, offering a coherent plot within which local residents could interpret their recent experiences and envision their future progress."⁴⁶ This was even reflected in the pageantry music, as "composers associated with pageantry blended music from various historical periods and ethnic sources within a single harmonious voice."⁴⁷

The study includes some discussion of organizations that came to play important roles in collecting elements of the documentary heritage. Glassberg considers the development of the patriotic and hereditary societies in the late nineteenth century, many of which eventually became repositories of historical documentation. Many pageants included direct pleas for bringing forward local manuscripts. The director of an historical pageant in one town in the early twentieth century "suggested," according to Glassberg, "that residents gather this information not only from published histories in libraries but also from trunks, attics, and the reminiscences of old people and former residents."⁴⁸ The directors of these pageants also argued for new research in local history and, as Glassberg suggests, "their research suggestions were remarkably broad based, foreshadowing many ideas of social historians later in the century."⁴⁹ In fact, Glassberg attributes the demise of the historical pageant to a loss of interest in this activity on the part of patriotic and hereditary societies. These groups turned their attention to such work as historic preservation and history museums,⁵⁰ while the pageant masters went on to other kinds of work, including convincing American Telephone and Telegraph Company of the importance of establishing an archives and historical library.⁵¹ In describing the demise of the historical pageant, Glassberg clearly shows the relationship between the pageant and new forms of public expression of interest in the past:

But most of all, pageantry by the late 1920s was overtaken by a changing public conception of the nature of history. Embedded in the pageant form of the 1910s was an emphasis on historical continuity; other forms of representing history in public were better suited to express the theme of dramatic discontinuity between generations that came into prominence in the 1920s and after. The use of historical imagery as a bulwark against modernity, implicit in pageantry from its inception, grew more prominent and overwhelmed its other uses. Historical pageants that survived in the 1930s and after... eventually took on the form of the folk play, the restored museum village, or the annual historical festival, forms that depicted the past as a separate world from the present.⁵²

Given that the United States National Archives and the Historical Records Survey, along with numerous other historical manuscript and archival records repositories, originated in the decades studied by Glassberg, it is possible that there is a connection between the movement that sustained historical pageantry and the founding of such programmes. It is also possible, of course, that in the two decades before World War II, there was a strong public historical interest that the fledgling archival profession could have utilized more extensively than it did. James Gregory Bradsher's study of the National Archives and the Freedom Train just after the War is one rare case study of the archival profession's utilizing the public's then strong interest in the past to build support for the preservation of historical manuscripts and archives.⁵³ None of these issues is considered by Glassberg, however, even those that are closely related to the notion of historical pageantry. Like Bodnar's study, Glassberg's work pays little attention to

the founding of archival and historical records programmes or the development of an archival profession. While on one hand this neglect does not seriously affect Glassberg's meeting his aim to decipher the notion of public memory in the early twentieth century, on the other hand it diminishes an opportunity for archivists to understand more fully how their own work fits into the greater public's understanding of, and interest in, the past. The last, most comprehensive study being reviewed here also reveals a similar lost opportunity.

The Origins of the Public Past in the United States: An Encyclopedic View

Michael Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* is the most ambitious of recent studies on American public memory. Kammen's book is intended to answer the question, "When and how did the United States become a land of the past, a culture with a discernible memory (or with a configuration of recognized pasts)?"⁵⁴ The result is less a specific answer to this query than a detailed, almost encyclopedic, chronicle of how Americans have generally viewed their past. As Kammen states at an early point in his study, "I am fascinated by the phenomenon of a society becoming its own historian—for better and for worse."⁵⁵ Part of his interest is also derived from his recognition that, despite the professionalization of history in the twentieth century, it is popular or public memory that is most relevant to most Americans. *Mystic Chords of Memory* (a title derived from Abraham Lincoln's 1861 inauguration address) is a personal exploration of this phenomenon by a pre-eminent professional historian.

Kammen divides his work into a quartet of long discourses on chronological segments of the American past. He examines the idea of tradition in America before 1870, a period when there was a premium on innovation and no notable interest in the public perception of the past by government at any level. He states that "from the very outset of American history...vacillation between experimentalism and traditionalism came to be established as an enduring pattern,"⁵⁶ a dualism that Kammen emphasizes at key points throughout this study and that is a theme in many of his other writings.⁵⁷ Yet, as Kammen suggests, during most of the nineteenth century Americans did not pay much attention to anything approaching a public memory; activities that suggest such an interest were isolated.

Kammen then examines the periods 1870-1915, 1915-1945, and 1945-1990. Throughout his descriptions of these periods, the reader sees Kammen's insistence on the dualisms of American attitudes, as well as an increasing interest in, and refinement of, the public memory. Although Kammen's encyclopedic detail tends to overwhelm the discernment of precise answers to the questions he posed at the outset of his book, his attention to archives, manuscript acquisition, and related activities is much more comprehensive than what was seen in Bodnar and Glassberg.

Throughout Kammen's *Mystic Chords*, there are many references to the development of historical records and archival repositories. Kammen makes reference to the pre-1870 founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Philadelphia collector John Fanning Watson, the American neglect of government records, the burgeoning development of state and local historical societies, early efforts by the federal government to care for its records, the work of collector and editor Peter Force, etc.⁵⁸ Throughout his text, Kammen has interweaved the American interest in the preservation of historical sources in a manner that will please most archivists and assist them to understand how their early repositories were affected by general developments in the interest in history in American society. Still, this aspect of Kammen's story has been well if not better documented in other studies. His comment about "tradition-oriented organizations [including historical societies] that arose to promote the remembrance of national and local roots in a physically mobile society"⁵⁹ is certainly astute, but has already been made by others such as David D. Van Tassel and George Callcott.⁶⁰

Throughout the remainder of the book, Kammen makes many references to archives and historical manuscripts, but the coverage is uneven and disappointing in a number of respects. The period 1870-1915, for example, was the era of the rise of state government archives and the origins of the modern American archival profession (which was closely associated with the professionalization of both history and librarianship). However, the reader discovers only miscellaneous references to such events as the creation of some specialized archives (such as the Schomburg Research Center at the New York Public Library and the Burton Library in Detroit), the proliferation of patriotic and historical societies, and a somewhat increased government interest in history.⁶¹

The neglect is even more obvious for the years 1915-1945 and from the end of World War II until the present. While the state archives movement was fully under way and the quest leading to a National Archives—along with many related developments—fell in this period, Kammen's coverage is still limited to incidental references to the establishment of particular archival programmes and the work of individual collectors.⁶² Kammen deals with the increasing level of activity by noting its varied nature: for example, "collecting...was generally **not** the sort of rational, orderly, and prudent activity that we tend to assume it always must have been"⁶³; or the "decentralization of resources played a significant part in the democratization of tradition in the United States during the 1930s and '40s."⁶⁴ The entire movement for a National Archives, however, already described as a significant public movement on behalf of the past, is discussed in a few pages.⁶⁵

Kammen attends to the more recent past, since 1945, in much the same manner, referring to a miscellany of archival and historical manuscript programmes, the work of collectors, the role of National Parks as repositories, the establishment of Presidential Libraries, and the impact of significant events (such as Watergate and Alex Haley's *Roots*) on the care and management of archives.⁶⁶ Kammen's most comprehensive comments are reserved for the Freedom Train, mentioned earlier in this article. He provides a rather straightforward narrative about the Freedom Train, noting that this event made "'Our American Heritage' a hackneyed phrase that appeared relentlessly from orations to upbeat cartoons—a legacy that has endured for more than four decades."⁶⁷

Kammen's study is a valuable reference source for the manner in which Americans have tended to perceive their past. More than the other two studies, *Mystic Chords of Memory* clearly reveals how perceptions of the past shift and move from generation to generation. As with the other two studies, the impact of public memory on archives and manuscripts repositories and the development of such programmes and the supporting profession are not considered to any great extent. Nevertheless, Michael Kammen, John Bodnar, and David Glassberg have all three produced studies that archivists will find useful in understanding the nature of their promotional efforts to secure support for, and use of, their documentary holdings.

Public Memory and Archival Public Programmes and Advocacy: Lessons Learned and to be Learned

There is little question that North American archivists perceive public programmes and advocacy to be an important part of their work. The topic is regularly featured in the archival journals and is a typical subject for discussion by archivists at their professional conferences. Moreover, as I indicated at the outset of this essay, the degree of attention suggests a major reorientation of emphasis by the archival community. Archivists may debate the degree of importance that public programmes and advocacy might have in relation to their other functions, but few seem prone to argue that such activities are inappropriate (if kept in their proper perspective).

The studies by Bodnar, Glassberg, and Kammen, despite their uneven treatment of archives, have much to say to archivists about such matters as public programming. On the simplest level, the omissions by these authors are an indication of how far archivists have yet to go to build a profile of their historic place in the development of North American society. Elsewhere I have argued that one of the reasons for careful scholarship by archivists on the history of their discipline, as well as of their institutions and activities, is that their role in society can be better documented and not ignored by social, intellectual, and political historians.⁶⁸ Not only is such scholarship by archivists a legitimate and valuable exercise for what can be learned about archival programmes and practices; it can also be seen as a form of public outreach in clarifying to the larger world the nature and purpose of archival institutions and the archival profession. Historians can learn about archival work because there is a more substantial body of scholarship on the origin, development, and current status of archival programmes and the profession.

There is a more important aspect of learning by archivists from these volumes on public memory. Kent Haworth, for example, has argued that the archival profession has been somewhat misguided in its zeal for promoting itself and its mission. Haworth has taken the seemingly higher road by suggesting that archivists need to return to their basic principles rather than merely stressing why they are important or nice to have around. He notes that arguments that archives are part of the collective memory are “formulated on the foundation of utility rather than on the *raison d’être* of the archival record and the principles which dictate its acquisition, preservation, and use.”⁶⁹ “Our purpose requires no justification; it requires,” he stresses, “instead, understanding, belief, and articulate assertion.”⁷⁰

Haworth’s argument has great validity in light of these histories of public memory, because they demonstrate that public interest in the past (both among citizens and within the government) can be fickle and vacillating. Haworth says that archivists must demonstrate the continuing importance of the evidence of archives, while many of the others who have written on public programming seem to suggest a continuing barrage of activities such as exhibitions, speeches, press releases, and so forth. Tim Ericson’s statement that the “fact of the matter is that everyone is interested in archival records—in history,” but “most people do not realize it yet”⁷¹ is probably true, though the nature of such interests (as these public memory studies reveal) is constantly changing. Such archival outreach activities will take root and sprout while the climate is right, but they will be greatly susceptible to mood swings by the public unless archivists build a solid appreciation of what they actually stand for in their work. Haworth says that the “purpose of the archivist is to hold in trust for society the evidence of the truth, the evidence of justice and injustice in the society our archives document.”⁷² Likewise, Terry Cook has written that

Archivists must search for forests, not trees, or, in archival terms, they must maintain provenance, order and context front and centre over facts, figures and content. They must continue, indeed enhance, their top-down rather than bottom-up perspectives in *all* archival functions, or, put another way, idealism and a sense of holistic vision rather than utilitarianism and a sense of market imperatives must prevail.⁷³

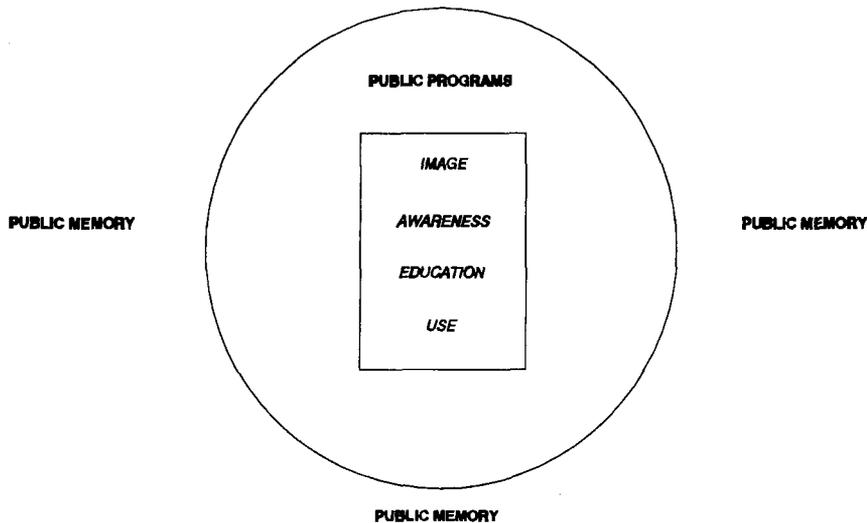
This makes more sense than to gain interest for archives in a society in which the “heightened appetite for the past reveals not so much engagement with history as either nostalgia and/or a means of celebrating the present.”⁷⁴

Archivists, committed to outreach, need to be students of their society in order to understand the impact that public programming might have on their institutions and their mission. As sociologist Edward Shils has noted, “a society which is strewn with pieces of its own past does not necessarily love them.”⁷⁵ Bodnar, Glassberg, and Kammen have provided some preliminary trail maps, which archivists can use in understanding how society may view the materials that they hold as a public trust.

There is yet another way to look at this issue. Blais and Enns, with their theory including four components of public programming, have given us much to think about. The most essential issue, however, may be that such aspects as image, awareness, education, and use operate within the context of how society views its past (see **Figure 2** for a representation of this). The degree to which archivists commit themselves to public programming may be a factor of the success that they have in this area, and this success may be a factor of society's broader perceptions of its past and interest in it.

Figure 2

Theoretical Elements of Archival Public Programming

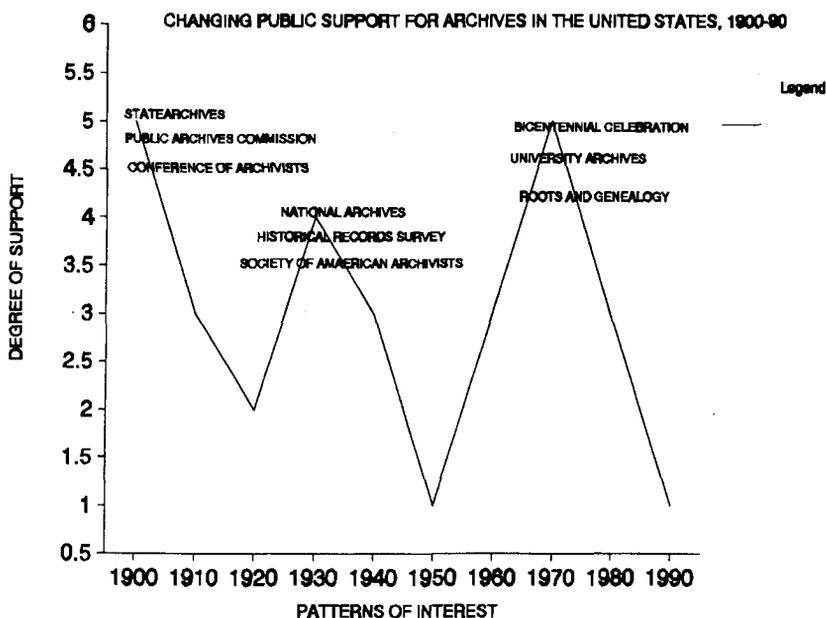


In another review of these books, John Gillis interpreted them as marking the end of the “era of national memory.”⁷⁶ But I see them as suggesting something much more profound—the natural ebb and flow of public interest in history. Historian Gillis at least had a sense of this when he wrote that

The best strategy seems to be to stay alert to the shifting shapes in which memory now presents itself. Memory has a way of escaping our grasp just when we think we have captured it on paper, in the archive, or on exhibit. It is not that the public is fickle, but rather that any attempt to fix the past automatically unsettles it. Memory is not a thing, but an interactive, interpretive process.⁷⁷

A crude representation of trends in public support for archives in the United States in the twentieth century demonstrates this viewpoint (see **Figure 3**).⁷⁸ In the early twentieth century there was heightened interest in the founding of state government archives, the survey and preservation of public records, and the formation of an archival profession. This degree of interest declined around World War I. Another increase in interest in archives came in the 1930s with the establishment of the National Archives and the work of the Historical Records Survey, and, of course, the formation of the Society of American Archivists. A further upsurge came forty years later with the growth in academic institutions and the founding of university archives; the United States Bicentennial celebration; and Alex Haley's *Roots* and the growth in interest in genealogical and family history research.

Figure 3



What all this may suggest (as a very crude description formulation in an area requiring far more research) is, as Cook and others have mentioned, that archivists should remain more focused on their primary responsibilities. This does not mean that they should abandon the idea of public programming, but that they should keep in mind priorities and not allow themselves to be caught in the changing winds of society's interests in the past. A generation ago Gerald Ham warned that archivists should not be subject to the weathervane of historiography⁷⁹; this advice can be applied in a larger sense to building public support.

Notes

- 1 The works in question are John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel, 1990); and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991). All three volumes concern public memory in the United States, the same perspective from which I write, but I am convinced that many of the points made by these historians are also relevant for Canadian archivists. There are other studies that could have been included in this essay, such as David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, 1989), but the volumes under discussion here provide a more than adequate sampling of the recent research and writing on this topic.
- 2 For the most direct statement on the notion of reinventing the wheel, see David A. Clary, "Trouble Is My Business: A Private View of 'Public' History," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring, 1981), pp. 105-12. For a more balanced view, see Richard J. Cox, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, 1990), Chapter Nine.
- 3 Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990), p. 379.
- 4 Terry Eastwood, "Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 74.
- 5 Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984), pp. 111-23.
- 6 Society of American Archivists, *Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs* (Chicago, 1982).

- 7 Ibid., p. 7.
- 8 See, for example, David B. Gracy II, "Our Future Is Now," *American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985), pp. 12-21; "What's Your Totem? Archival Images in the Public Mind," *Midwestern Archivist* 10, no. 1 (1985), pp. 17-23; and "Is There a Future in the Use of Archives?" *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1986), pp. 3-9.
- 9 Ann Pederson, ed., *Keeping Archives* (Sydney, 1987), Chapter 11; James Gregory Bradsher, ed., *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (Chicago, 1989), Chapter 16; William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Metuchen, 1992), pp. 315-31; and Richard J. Cox, *Managing Institutional Archives: Foundational Principles and Practices* (New York, 1992), Chapter Six.
- 10 Such as Timothy L. Ericson, "'Preoccupied with our own gardens': Outreach and Archivists," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 114-22.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Society of American Archivists, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts, Archival Fundamentals Series* (Chicago, 1990), p. 7.
- 13 Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 102 and 103.
- 14 Terry Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archival Public Programming," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), p. 124.
- 15 Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 13.
- 16 Ibid., p. 14.
- 17 Ibid., p. 55.
- 18 Ibid., p. 71.
- 19 Ibid., p. 73.
- 20 Ibid., p. 113.
- 21 Ibid., p. 114.
- 22 Ibid., p. 128.
- 23 Ibid., p. 206.
- 24 Ibid., p. 251.
- 25 Ibid., p. 23.
- 26 Ibid., p. 61.
- 27 Ibid., p. 69.
- 28 Ibid., p. 140.
- 29 Ibid., p. 208.
- 30 Ibid., p. 238.
- 31 For example, see Richard J. Cox, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983), pp. 31-41.
- 32 See Richard J. Cox, "A Century of Frustration: The Movement for a State Archives in Maryland, 1811-1935," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 78 (Summer 1983), pp. 106-17.
- 33 Victor Gondos, Jr., *J. Franklin Jameson and the Birth of the National Archives 1906-1926* (Philadelphia, 1981) is the fullest study of the movement to establish this institution.
- 34 Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives*, p. 8. For a specific case study, refer to Michael F. Kohl, "It Only Happens Once Every Hundred Years: Making the Most of the Centennial Opportunity," *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991), pp. 390-97.
- 35 Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, p. 1.
- 36 Ibid., p. 2.
- 37 Ibid., p. 9.
- 38 Ibid., p. 19.
- 39 Ibid., p. 23.
- 40 Ibid., p. 31.
- 41 Ibid., p. 67.
- 42 Ibid., p. 225.
- 43 Ibid., p. 225.
- 44 Ibid., p. 80.
- 45 Ibid., p. 123.
- 46 Ibid., p. 139.
- 47 Ibid., p. 146.
- 48 Ibid., p. 83.
- 49 Ibid., p. 117.
- 50 Ibid., p. 245.

- 51 Ibid., p. 247.
- 52 Ibid., p. 288.
- 53 "Taking America's Heritage to the People: The Freedom Train Story," *Prologue* 17 (Winter 1985), pp. 229-45.
- 54 Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, p. 7.
- 55 Ibid., p. 17.
- 56 Ibid., p. 41.
- 57 For example, Kammen states near the beginning of this book: "The prominence of ambiguities and dualisms in American values will also pervade the book" (p. 6). Towards the end of the book he asks, "Hasn't the relationship between history and memory always been fractured: in 1840, in 1890, in 1930, or in 1970? The eighteen chapters that preceded this one have tried to suggest exactly that. Nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt. Heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame. Although written history can never be complete, memory must inevitably be much less so. History and memory are not merely fractured. They are frequently at odds [p. 688].
- This is a theme that Kammen has written about in his other studies, most notably his award-winning *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York, 1973).
- 58 Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, pp. 48, 52-53, 55-57, 64, 72, 74-78.
- 59 Ibid., p. 74.
- 60 George H. Callcott, *History in the United States: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore, 1970) and David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of Historical Studies in America 1607-1884* (Chicago, 1960).
- 61 Kassen, *Mystic Chords*, pp. 96, 125, 148, 156, 183-85, 233, 247, 249, 272, and 277.
- 62 Ibid., pp. 343, 439, 440, and 461.
- 63 Ibid., p. 315.
- 64 Ibid., p. 317.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 446-47, 477-78.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 555, 566, 612-13, 632, 641, 643, 661, and 680.
- 67 Ibid., p. 581.
- 68 See Richard J. Cox, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, 1990), Chapter Eight.
- 69 Kent M. Haworth, "The Principles Speak for Themselves: Articulating a Language of Purpose for Archives," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination*, p. 93.
- 70 Ibid., p. 94.
- 71 Ericson, "'Preoccupied with our own gardens,'" p. 118.
- 72 Haworth, "The Principles Speak for Themselves," p. 94.
- 73 Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down," p. 130.
- 74 Harvey J. Kaye, *The Powers of the Past: Reflections on the Crisis and the Promise of History* (Minneapolis, 1991), p. 20.
- 75 Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981), p. 52.
- 76 John Gillis, "Remembering Memory: A Challenge for Public Historians in a Post-National Era," *Public Historian* 14 (Fall 1992), p. 93.
- 77 Ibid., p. 99.
- 78 **Figure 3** uses a scale of 5 to show strong support and 1 as low support. As this is a very crude effort to portray changing degrees of interest in the support of archives, I am hopeful that others will conduct research on this topic. It appears that such support could be mapped by levels of government funding and the establishment of archival programmes (to suggest two aspects).
- 79 F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975), pp. 5-13.