

Being Clear on Their Role Is Key for Archivists

The work of an archivist is specialized, and it is critical to understand what they do and do not do, versus the work of several related professions. For an archivist to operate in these other fields—that of historian, collector, and conservator—runs risks that include damage to holdings and crossing a fine line on ethics.

Archivist

According to the Society of American Archivists (SAA), “the primary task of the archivist is to establish and maintain control, both physical and intellectual, over records of enduring value.” Typically, an archivist must master a great deal of specialized knowledge. Archivists are also guided in their work by a code of ethics.

Archival collections may contain various types of records, including paper, books, photographs, film and video, audio recordings, microfiche, and, increasingly, electronic records—so archivists must know how to preserve and organize all of these materials. “Archival records are the product of everyday activity,” the SAA points out, and this is true: ordinary letters, diaries, tapes, and photos make up archival collections.

One simple way to think about archives work is to consider that archivists do five things related to their collections:

Gather them: collect all relevant, permanent records;

Organize them: sort the collection somehow in a sensible manner;

Catalog them: create a searchable list or inventory describing the collection;

Preserve them: perform simple preservation tasks to prolong the life of the items;

Let people know about them: create exhibits and displays, write about the archives, provide information, and offer researchers access to the collection.

These tasks are time-consuming, labor intensive, and can be costly.

Historian

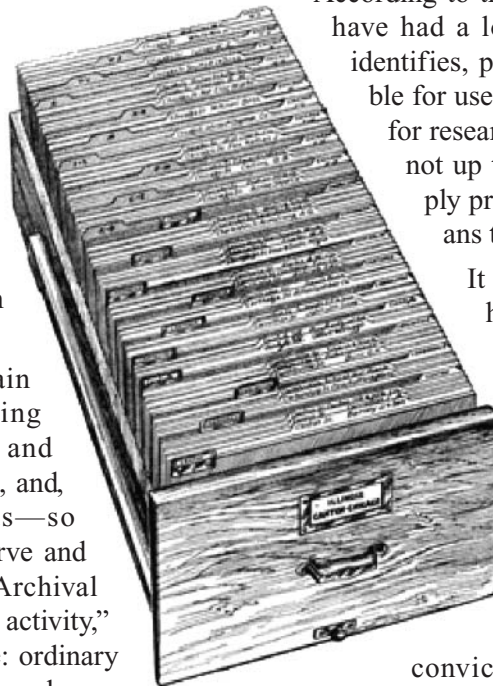
According to the SAA, “The archivist and the historian have had a longstanding relationship; the archivist identifies, preserves, and makes the records accessible for use, while the historian uses archival records for research.” This is an important distinction. It is not up to archivists to interpret history; we simply preserve it and make it available for historians to do this work.

It is true that often archivists have to write histories, create timelines and chronologies, or give a summary account of events. This is natural. But it can be dangerous for archivists to engage too much in the work of an historian. When archivists begin writing history, explaining history, interpreting history, there may be consequences.

Archivists behaving as historians may develop points of view and personal convictions that can get in the way of them being fair, open-minded, and objective. An historian with a point of view using archives to develop a thesis of historical events is a wonderful thing. But an archivist with a particular point of view may be tempted to hide documents that argue an opposite viewpoint. Archivists cannot let this happen.

Collector

Private collectors in the world of A.A. search out rare and unusual items from A.A.’s history. Commonly their collections contain early and rare A.A. literature, such as first edition Big Books, early pamphlets, manuscripts, and other works. They also frequently collect signed



memorabilia, photographs, audio recordings, and more.

There are many differences between archivists and collectors, but this does not mean we have to be in opposition. For the most part, archivists and collectors are not doing the same work nor pursuing the same collections. Although there may be a few exceptions, most collectors are legitimate, careful, and passionate about the items they collect.

Collectors often buy and sell items through rare books dealers and Internet auctions. Conversely, archivists don't normally purchase materials, but instead receive them as donations. There is a thriving market for rare A.A. materials, and it is likely there always will be. But this can and should remain outside the realm of archives. Most of what we try to collect in archives does not have *financial* value at all, but has *informational* value. Archivists should always be more interested in records with high informational value, and, generally, less interested in materials with a high financial value but little new information.

Collectors sometimes exhibit their collections at A.A. events or offer access to them to interested parties, even providing copies on occasion. Sometimes, though, these collections remain privately held and little access is possible. Collectors can decide whether to provide access—and that is their right. An archivist cannot make this decision, but must provide the highest possible level of access to all.

In general, an archivist should not also be a collector of A.A. memorabilia and literature. While, of course, many archivists may have their own small collection of old Big Books or other materials, it can be problematic to be both an archivist and a collector. There is an innate conflict of interest—the heart of a collector wants to *own* rare materials, whereas the archivist must merely be a steward.

An archivist should never profit from the records in his collection, and should avoid even commenting on the possible financial value of items in the collection.

Conservator

Conservation is a professional field in its own right, quite distinct from archives. A conservator is someone who, through specialized education, knowledge, training, and experience works to repair, restore, and conserve documents, books, film, photographs, artwork, and more. Conservators are trained for years to perform treatment on items that are damaged or fragile, and need stabilization. They clean, mend, and sew, using special tools, supplies and chemicals. Some of the work they do is quite sophisticated.



Organizing and cataloging material so that it can be accessed are among the main functions of archivists. These acid-free boxes are stored at the G.S.O. Archives.

For the most part, archivists should not attempt to do the work of a conservator. Archivists are trained to do no harm; to do nothing to a document that cannot be reversed and undone. Preservation work for archivists typically consists of careful, proper storage in a stable environment, using acid-free folders and boxes. Though archivists are often trained to do simple repairs on some items, most of the time archivists simply don't have the skills to do complex conservation work.

Archivists should always consult a conservator when faced with a particularly difficult problem (such as moldy documents, deteriorated film or cassettes, damaged or torn photographs, etc.), and not attempt to mend these items on their own.

For more information

(Note: The G.S.O. Archives does not endorse nor affirm the following articles, and has simply provided them as helpful external resources.)

“So You Want to Be an Archivist: An Overview of the Archival Profession,” The Society of American Archivists: <http://www.archivists.org/education/arprof.asp>

“Code of Ethics for Archivists,” The Society of American Archivists: http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.as

“The Archivist’s Code,” U.S. National Archives and Records Administration: <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/professionals/archivist-code.html>

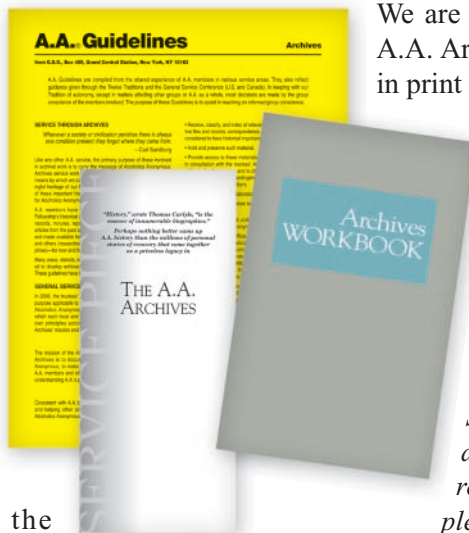
Passages from the Society of American Archivists’ article “So You Want to Be an Archivist” are reprinted with permission of the Society of American Archivists, www.archivists.org.

Revised Archives Workbook and Archives Guidelines Now Available

The Archives Workbook and Archives Guidelines have been revised and expanded, and are now available from your central office/Intergroup and from the General Service Office. Both are available on G.S.O.'s A.A. Website, www.aa.org. Look in the Archives portal, under "Resources for A.A. Archivists."

The revised Workbook contains new research request forms; a new Deed of Gift form; new "Shared Experience" from five area archives and one district archives; a greatly expanded section on collecting oral histories; an updated mission and purpose statement; new language about what to collect and why; and much more.

The Guidelines now contain a section called "Getting Started Locally," and expanded sections on "The Role of the Archivist," "Archival Procedures," and "Developing a Collection." The revised version also includes a new paragraph on the A.A. National Archives



Workshop, hosted annually by a different area each year, which brings together A.A. archivists from all over the U.S. and Canada to share their experience and learn from one another.

We are also revising the service piece "The A.A. Archives," which will soon be available in print and on the Website.

Any suggestions for improving these pieces, or to share archives experience for a future printing of the Archives Workbook, please contact us.

(Not sure if you have the most current printing? Check the back cover. Material published by A.A. World Services always shows the printing date on the back cover—for the newly revised Archives Workbook, for example, it is "6/07." If you think you have an outdated printing of any service piece, please call your central office/Intergroup or contact the G.S.O. to get a new one!)

The Beginnings of A.A. in Ottawa

Submitted by Dan McD., archivist, Ottawa A.A. Archives

It was in 1945 that Alcoholics Anonymous was first documented as coming to Ottawa, Ontario, the capital of Canada. A Catholic priest by the name of Father Geoffrey Dowcett returned from a trip to New York with a copy of the Twelve Steps. He and his friend Father Cornelius Herlihey were nonalcoholic members of the Oblate Order and became lifelong supporters of A.A. in Ottawa.

The first documented Ottawa contact was made by Jack F., communicating with Tom G. of the Toronto group on April 19, 1945. On August 3, a plan for the city's first A.A. group took form at a meeting in Ottawa's Lord Elgin Hotel.

A couple of months later, on October 30, the first formally recorded meeting of A.A. in Ottawa took place. The Ottawa Group grew quickly and by the end of May 1946, membership had increased to 47. Out of this meeting came the Tuesday Friday Group, which is the oldest continuing meeting in Ottawa.

In January 1946, the following advertisement was approved to run for three days in the personnel column of the *Ottawa Citizen*: "Liquor may interfere with a normal mode of living. Write Alcoholics Anonymous, Ottawa Club, P.O. Box 38."

In that same month, *Reader's Digest* published an article called "My Return from the Half-World of Alcoholism," which described the program of Alcoholics Anonymous and received international attention. Soon after, the *Ottawa Citizen* printed the first newspaper article about A.A. in Ottawa.

On March 29, the meeting welcomed the first two women as Ottawa A.A. members, and on May 13, the first open meeting was held, with 100 people in attendance.

In April 1948 the Uptown Group was formed and continues to meet on Monday nights. Three early members of the Uptown group were women.

The first Eastern Ontario Conference was held in November 1952 over three days, with each day at a different location. Why? Because no establishment would agree to allowing A.A. meetings on their premises three days running.

This history is in large part based on a draft prepared in 1991 by three A.A. members. Their account is largely anecdotal with some access to documentation, especially a minute record maintained by another A.A. member.



The listening post recently installed in the reception area of the General Service Office in New York offers visitors six short talks from A.A.'s history. There are digital audio clips of Bill W., Dr. Bob, and Ebby T. from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. They range in length from 90 seconds to just under five minutes. More recordings will be added over time, and they will be rotated periodically.

Notice: Past General Service Conference Reports Available for the Asking from G.S.O. Archives

The G.S.O. Archives has extra copies of past *Final Reports* from the General Service Conferences that we want to give away to Archives that need them. We have *Reports* from the 1970s through 2006, and would be happy to send them out to your district, area, or Intergroup/central office archives, free of charge.

So that we have enough to go around, we ask that you request *only* those copies of the *specific Reports* that are missing from your collection. In other words, please inventory your collection of G.S.C. Reports before you contact us, and create a list of the *Reports* you're requesting, so we can send you exactly what you need.

First come, first served!

Please call or email us with your request at 212-870-3400, or archives@aa.org.

Grave Marker for One of A.A.'s First Woman Members

In our Spring 2007 issue, the Archives Committee of the Washington (D.C.) Area Intergroup Association reported that after a lot of detective work, they had found the gravesite of Florence R., one of the first women to get sober in A.A. ("Found: Burial Place of Florence R."). She was also the only woman whose story was printed in the first edition of the Big Book.



The Archives Committee reported that Florence's gravesite in the George Washington Cemetery in Prince George's County, Maryland, lacked a gravestone, and was unmarked and unkempt. The WAIA subsequently approved a motion to purchase a gravestone for Florence, using private funds rather than A.A. money.

Florence now has a beautiful marker, commemorating her Big Book story: "A Feminine Victory."

Donated to G.S.O. Archives This Year:

JANUARY: Documents relating to the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous in New Mexico.

Large collection of cassette recordings relating to AA's history—Bill W., Ebby T., Ruth Hock, Lois W., and many more on master cassettes.

Large collection dating back to the earliest days in A.A. (See Summer 2007 issue of *Markings* for article with details of this donation: "Surviving Daughter of an A.A. Pioneer Sends Trove of A.A. Material to G.S.O. Archives").

FEBRUARY: Area History Booklet: *A History of Alcoholics Anonymous in San Antonio*.

APRIL: History of A.A. in Delaware County, Indiana: histories, photos of archival displays, meeting lists, etc.

JULY: The History of AA in Indianapolis.

Area History Booklet: "The Twelfth Step: 50 Years of A.A. in India, 5th May 1957—5th May 2007." April-May 2007, vol. 5, issue 6.

AUGUST: Two CDs: Jim B. on the history of AA in Sacramento, CA (6/15/1957); and Nancy B., of Denton, TX, speaking at Biloxi, MS on 8/19/2007.

Oral History interviews with AA pioneers in Richmond, Indiana: Sam M., Hiram P., Jerry M., and Tom and Thelma R.; on four CDs.

SEPTEMBER: CDs from early history in Oklahoma: 3 CDs containing letters and correspondence between early Oklahoma AA members, July-September 1946 (as JPEGs); CD of Area 57 (Oklahoma) Bulletins, 1959-1966; Area 57 Archives Catalog (database in MS Access).