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CHARLES F. CARPENTIER
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HELENE H. ROGERS
ASSISTANT STATE LIBRARIAN

April 7, 1955

Dr. Wayne C. Grover, Chairman
SAA Committee on Professional
Standards and Training
The National Archives
Washington 25, D.C.

Dear Wayne:

The "Archivist's Code" is something we need, and I expect to circulate copies among my own staff.

As you see, I reacted strongly on two points in paragraphs 5 and 6. I do not attempt to rephrase these as I think they should be, but rather to suggest, from experience with my own staff, ways in which they might be modified to meet realistic problems.

Illinois, you will be interested to learn, is proposing to substitute for the old civil service system with its many weaknesses and limitations, a state personnel management system copied from private industry. Providing that this can be kept free from political pressures, and certainly the present administration is determined that it will be, I hope this will be a great improvement over the old system. This throws the State Library, which is not under the Governor, out from under civil service, but I have no fear that our jobs will immediately, or even eventually become mere political plums. One thing which the new system will attempt will be standardization of standards of salaries, etc. within the same scope of work; also preparation of job qualifications and specifications, something already worked upon by the Civil Service Commission.

As I have said before, I think our committee should do some work along that line. Certainly the Archivist's Code is something the Society needs.

Sincerely,
Margaret
MARGARET C. NOTTON
Archivist

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THE ARCHIVIST'S CODE

Comments by Margaret C. Norton, Member SAA Committee on Professional Standards and Training

5. The archivist should respond courteously and with a spirit of service to all requests. He should be strictly non-partisan in this service. He should assume that any records in his custody which contain information of interest to the inquirer should be produced, provided such use does not involve access to restricted records. He should not presume to assess the value of the information sought by the patron, though he should so far as in his power prevent its use for purposes of sensational journalism or in a manner which would be detrimental to the reputation or other interests of other persons. The rules and regulations of the archival agency should provide definite limitations as to the amount and character of the search to be made for individuals, also should establish priorities of governmental or private search requests. Such well defined regulations will prevent misunderstanding and prevent the exploitation of staff time for private purposes.

Comments:

Only by a strictly non-partisan attitude can the archivist win the confidence of fellow officials. In Illinois it is not an infrequent occurrence that the various elective officials whose records are in our custody, belong to opposite parties or to opposite factions in the same party. The archivist cannot withhold records or delay making of finding lists or otherwise show favoritism. Furthermore, though the archivist should hold himself above politics, he should not let any politician feel that that is because he feels superior to the politician. One of the difficult things to impress upon new staff members is that there shall be no making exceptions to rules or doing special favor for one's political friends, and that the politicians themselves will respect you for that attitude.

I do not like that phrase "he should not waste time responding in detail to frivolous or unreasonable inquiries." Most archivists dislike or take a patronizing attitude towards genealogy, for instance. I have had staff members talk loudly and publicly about that being "a waste of the tax-payer's money." We have the records; the National Archives gives no service to individuals on such records. It is not the fault of the patron that we have not had time to index all these records. We therefore set a limit on what we can do - not more than 2 names in not more than 2 counties for the years prior to and including 1850; for later records, we must have the location within the county pin-pointed. Outside those limits we give all the assistance we can, figuring that for every out of the state inquiry our Illinois citizens doubtless write at least one inquiry to some other state. We have built up a reputation for service all out of proportion to the amount of time we spend on such inquiries, and our patrons understand if sometimes our reference work for State officials

sometimes delays our reply for a few days. It is true that lots of our reference, such as answers to election bets, seems frivolous to us, but I do not think we have the right, being paid by that same public, to decide for them whether their inquiries are "worth-while." Since these code provisions, you say, are primarily directed towards instruction of beginning and lower grade archivists, I feel very strongly that this is a point which needs emphasis.

6. Last sentence. Substitute: The archivist should prepare ~~XXXX~~ finding aids, descriptions of unexploited historical materials in the archives, edited texts of documents, and publicity which will attract historians to the archives. He should not himself, except as extra curriculum activity, indulge in the writing of history; that is, his working day at the archives should be devoted to the care, preservation and preparation of the records for the use of patrons.

Comment:

95 % of the applications we receive for positions here imply that their principal interest in archival work is in writing history for a salary. When we explain the real nature of the work we do here they cool off rapidly. In library school we had a saying, "The librarian who reads is lost". I think we archivists need a saying, "The archivists who writes history books is lost." Probably one of the classical examples was the pioneer archivist Dunbar Rowland; most of know the condition of the archives he administered when his successor took over.

4. One of the ticklish problems of the archivist is preventing an amateur historian from spoiling a good subject which should be handled only by a first class man. Since the records are public records it is difficult to impose restrictions on the use of historical records. I do not think we can define this in terms suitable for the archivist's code, but this and other similar problems perhaps need mentioning.

General comment:

Probably this also does not belong in the code, but I would say that the most important single need for the archivist is for a strong sense for order. Disorder must worry him. I don't think enough emphasis has been placed upon this in the training of archivists.