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President's Letter: Looking Backward, Looking Forward

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President's Letter

LOOKING BACKWARD, LOOKING FORWARD



Michael Stevens

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Association for Documentary Editing, and it is a time to both celebrate our past and look forward to new directions. I recently took a look at the first volumes of *The ADE Newsletter* (predecessor of *Documentary Editing*) to refresh my memory of the ADE's first annual meeting. I was struck by how much has changed over the past three decades, as well as by how much has stayed the same.

I was a newly minted history PhD when I walked into the Nassau Inn in Princeton, New Jersey, for the ADE's first annual meeting. I had been hired by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to edit *The State Records of South Carolina* series. What I knew about documentary editing came from my experience working as a graduate student on *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* in Madison, Wisconsin. I also had attended Camp Edit under the tutelage of the faculty that included John Simon and Chuck Hobson.

A number of things stand out in my memory from that first ADE annual meeting in Princeton. Technology and its impact on documentary editing were at the forefront of the agenda. Larry Bland told a rapt audience

about word processing equipment (he called it an editing terminal) that allowed editors to save versions of a manuscript and do searches and replacement of words. Larry also reported on one of the latest innovations: new systems that actually "check the words in a document against a relatively large dictionary for spelling accuracy." David Chesnutt gave a paper on going electronic and noted that he was able to store 1,200 pages of typescript on only fifteen floppy disks. Although the dissemination of texts through the yet-to-be-invented Internet was beyond anyone's imagination, ADE members focused on technological change from the very beginning.

In his presidential address, Arthur Link called for creation of a manual on documentary editing. Now, thirty years later, ADE members are served by Mary-Jo Kline's *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, which will soon appear in a revised third edition, along with Steve Burg's and my *Editing Historical Documents*. Other issues discussed at that meeting were threats to federal funding and career opportunities for young editors.

My most striking memory from the Princeton meeting was the easy collegiality and helpfulness found among the members that crossed disciplines, projects, and generations. I knew only a few people when the meeting started but left with the feeling of having acquired many new friends. Senior editors such as Lester Cappon, Arthur Link, and George Rogers were cordial and encouraging, and it was heartening to see that many bright, energetic younger folks, such as Charlene Bickford and Ray Smock, already were playing active roles in the organization. Many of the young editors from that first meeting (such as myself) are now as gray as the senior editors I remember, and sadly, a few, such as Larry Bland, have passed on.

Today, on the cusp of the organization's thirtieth anniversary, we are no longer in awe of innovations such as spell check, but many of the fundamentals that made the ADE such a great organization are still present. Today's ADE still provides a forum for networking and exploring issues that documentary editors

share. It also is made up of caring and helpful individuals who are committed to their work and have a willingness to share their expertise with others.

On that note, I'd like to invite you to share your expertise and to participate in the ADE's efforts to both celebrate its past and look forward to the future. *Documentary Editing* appears under the direction of a new editor, Kent Calder. I'd urge you to sit down at your ancient "editing terminal" or your new Blackberry and send Kent your recollections of the Association's thirty years history. Kent is always looking for good contributions, but over the next month it would be wonderful if he could get material to include in a thirtieth anniversary issue of the journal.

I also invite you to visit the ADE's new website. We have been generously hosted by the University of Virginia in recent years, but we now have our own site and our own domain name. Visit www.documentaryediting.org and see the fine work of the redesigned site prepared by webmaster Jennifer Stertzler.

I hope to see many of you at the ADE's thirtieth annual meeting, to be held in Tucson, Arizona, October 23–25. Diana Hadley and the local arrangements committee have found a wonderful setting for us, and Cathy Moran Hajo and the program committee will have an interesting program. It will be a great opportunity for you, whether you are a thirty-year veteran of the ADE or a brand-new member.

The ADE is at an important crossroads. Much has changed in the documentary editing profession in the past three decades. New methods of publication have emerged; the era of large projects is diminishing; and the number of users of published historical documents has exploded as a result of the Web. Many more people are engaged in the practices that we call documentary editing (the selection, transcription, and explication of documents), but these same individuals don't define their work or their profession as such. Scholars use new and changing tools to produce their work in ways that weren't imaginable when the Association was formed in St. Louis in 1978.

This summer, the ADE planning committee will convene for a retreat in Madison to help plan for the organization's future. In a recent letter to the membership I reported in some detail on our planning efforts. For a healthy future, the ADE needs to make sure that it is the essential group for anyone interested in publishing primary source documents.

The questions to explore are many. In light of new technologies, who is a documentary editor? Why should documentary editors join the ADE? What benefits does the ADE need to provide its members? What value do we add to make nontraditional members want to join us? Should we go beyond simply adding as members the small numbers of individuals working on projects like our own, and redefine what we have to offer a much broader community? Can we actively woo scholars whose work overlaps with ours, find archivists, public historians, and professors who are working on projects, both in traditional print form and in digital publication, and invite them to join, pitching the organization in a more broad-based manner that encourages such participation? What services do they need? What should our journal, *Documentary Editing*, become? How do we better educate documentary editors? How does the ADE get more financial resources to do what it needs to do? How can the ADE take advantage of federal and private grants to implement its mission? How do we continue to advocate for documentary editing projects?

I'd urge you to reflect on these and other questions about the future of the ADE and send me your comments (preferably before June 12 when the retreat begins) at michael.stevens@wisconsinhistory.org. I will share them with the full planning committee.

Those who founded the ADE thirty years ago knew that change was needed to promote documentary editing and created our organization. We believe that in that same spirit, this is the time to meet the challenges of our own time.