

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)


Documentary Editing, Association for

1980

Editors' Concern With Archivists in Crisis

Lester J. Cappon
The Newberry Library

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Cappon, Lester J., "Editors' Concern With Archivists in Crisis" (1980). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 115.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/115>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Editors' Concern With Archivists in Crisis

LESTER J. CAPPON

When the National Archives, by Act of Congress in 1950, was converted to the National Archives and Records Service, including records administration, it lost its independence as a separate agency responsible to the president and became subordinate to General Services Administration, the housekeeping arm of the government. Unlike the records manager, interested only in current or near-current records, the archivist seeks to anticipate by archival and historical appraisal which record groups, or segments of them, should be transferred in due time to the National Archives or its regional record centers

for permanent preservation. In his appraisal with historical perspective the archivist is inclined toward the conservative point of view, that is, when in doubt, save rather than destroy.

During the first quarter-century of NARS, the successive administrators of GSA, whose knowledge of archival principles and practices was virtually *nil*, gave their full attention to governmental property, repairs, and supplies. Meanwhile the archivist of the United States and his staff continued efficiently to serve government employees, scholars, and the general public frequenting the National Archives, the regional records offices, and the presidential libraries. Nevertheless, the possibility of unprofessional interference in the name of GSA's gods of Efficiency and Economy posed a perennial threat to NARS, whose own

*Lester J. Cappon, of the Newberry Library, is president of the Association for Documentary Editing.

reputation was tarnished in the aftermath of Watergate.

On 2 July 1979 a new administrator of GSA, Admiral Rowland G. Freeman III, took office after a distinguished operational and administrative career in the Navy, including a recent "college presidency" as commandant of the Defense Systems Management College at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He has assembled the facts of life concerning NARS with the aid of detailed memoranda from the acting archivist, who has unobtrusively injected between the lines some much-needed advice. In pursuing his willful course the administrator does not have to contend with a knowledgeable archivist of the United States, since the position is vacant. Besides, by law the archivist is the appointee of the administrator.

If "a little learning is a dangerous thing," what are the prospects under the new regime? Admiral Freeman has stated his intention to appoint as archivist a "manager" rather than a scholar of known administrative ability. In the name of Efficiency he inaugurated a policy of decentralization that called for arbitrary transfer of certain record groups to regional records centers which, as the name implies, were established to serve the program of retention and disposal of records created in those regions. In the face of vigorous criticism he has now suspended this decentralization, not on principle, but because "it hasn't been managed very well by the archivists," thus passing the blame to his subordinates.

The admiral has also modified his position regarding the presidential libraries, which he had proposed to place under control of GSA regional administrators. Instead, they are to remain under direct control of NARS, their

supervision perhaps "relocated," though for no announced reason. He has proposed a microfilm publication program on such a large scale as to require diversion of funds from various educational programs in NARS. (Archivists learned from experience long ago that wholesale microfilming is not the cure-all solution to related problems of preservation, accessibility, and demands by users.) It is evident from one of his directives that the admiral has not yet learned that the historical value of a corpus of records cannot be determined by the frequency of its use, whether during ten years or fifty.

The current tempest in NARS (and the potential destruction in its wake) derives fundamentally from the vulnerable administrative position of the archivist of the United States. The National Archives must regain its original status as an independent agency, equal in status with the government's two other distinguished cultural organizations, the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, all of them *served* by the General Services Administration.

The tempest has a bearing on current projects in historical editing, many of which are dependent, in whole or in part, upon grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, creature of NARS. These editorial projects represent the chief scholarly function of NARS's operations. Their continued support will be assured with most certainty, not from a managerial administrator, but from a historian-archivist who lends support to scholarship through his role on the commission. The stake of documentary editors in the current archival crisis is high.