

Q&A

The Visitor's Corner with Trudy Huskamp Peterson

Trudy Huskamp Peterson is an archival consultant and certified archivist. She holds a PhD in history from the University of Iowa. She spent twenty-four years with the U.S. National Archives, including more than two years as Acting Archivist of the United States. After retiring from the U.S. government, she was the founding Executive Director of the Open Society Archives in Budapest, Hungary, and then the director of Archives and Records Management for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She is a past president of the International Conference of the Round Table on Archives (1993–1995) and the Society of American Archivists (1990–1991) and chaired the International Council on Archives (ICA)'s Human Rights Working Group (2009–2016). She has consulted with the truth commissions in South Africa and Honduras, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and worked for over three years with the police archives in Guatemala, training the staff in archival processes.

Among her many publications are Final Acts: A Guide to Preserving the Records of Truth Commissions, a study of the records of twenty truth commissions; Temporary Courts, Permanent Records, a study of the records of five temporary international criminal courts; and “Securing Police Archives,” which contains advice on managing records of police forces from former repressive regimes. In August 2023, MAH editorial board member Adriane Lentz-Smith sat down with Peterson to discuss the ability of archives to transform lives as well as enrich our understanding of the past, the myriad threats archives face in the United States and around the world, and her favorite archival collection.

People invoke archives as storehouses of memory—literal and figurative, official and organic. What is an archive, and have you seen its definition change over time?

Let's start from the beginning. A document—usually called an item—has a base (paper, plastic, metal, etc.), an impression on it made by manual or mechanical means, and conveys information. Records are documents created by an institution or organization in the course of its business, and an archives (plural, just like scissors) is the portion of those records determined to have long-term value and retained by the institution or its successor. Items created by an individual are personal materials, not institutional records, and therefore are not, technically, archives.

Institutions holding archives and personal materials take their titles from the focus of the materials they hold: a university archives holds the records of the university as an institution, while the university's rare books and manuscripts unit holds materials gathered from outside sources, which can be either the archives of an external institution or personal materials.

The difference between archives and manuscript collections has always been permeable, but the advent of the digital age exacerbated linguistic confusion. Apparently searching for a fancier term than “save,” the computer world began to talk about “archiving” digital materials. This also changed the term from a plural noun (an archives building, an archives institution, the holdings that make up an archives) to a singular verb: to archive. And the singular crept

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

back into the noun form, although an archives by its nature holds many items, not just one, just as a scissors has two blades and trousers have two legs. My teeth still grate on the singular noun, but that is where the language is today.

A yet further change is the use of “archive” to mean any group of things historical: an archives of barns or Amati violins. This simply ignores and confuses the professional meaning, as B. M. Watson wrote in a piece for the American Historical Association’s *Perspectives Daily*.¹

You have spoken a lot about risks to archives. What are the risks posed in our current moment?

Notwithstanding the focus on archives in the Trump documents case, archives are undervalued, underfunded, and given too little public support. There is a general misunderstanding that digitization will solve all archival problems, not recognizing that the cost of preserving digital materials equals or exceeds the cost of maintaining paper or film. Grants are given to digitize archival holdings, but without part of the grant devoted to underwriting the long-term preservation actions that are required.

In some parts of the world, other risks are apparent: war, civil unrest, repressive regimes seizing and destroying archives, climate change that floods or burns archives. Finding safe havens for archives at risk is not easy, although some governments have been willing to take on the burden of preserving at least small bodies of archives from other countries.

You have worked in a dizzying array of international, national, and nongovernmental archives. Are there archival practices or theories that are distinctive to the United States?

Fundamental archival principles are nearly universal: the importance of maintaining provenance of materials, the necessity to document decisions to retain or dispose of materials, the need to register and describe holdings and—to some extent—the need to provide access to the archives. These are areas in which the International Council on Archives, the archival profession’s main international organization and its formal liaison to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has been able to promulgate standards for worldwide acceptance. While digital archives have changed archival techniques, these foundational principles continue to be valid.

The U.S. does have some distinctive practices, however. One is the impact of federalism on the responsibility for archives. As long ago as 1945, legendary archivist Margaret Cross Norton wrote,

An archivist from a country with a highly centralized government cannot understand why the records most important to individuals—title records, marriage registers, probate records, and vital statistics—should be left to the unsupervised custody of what appear petty officials of the lowest grade politically and professionally. . . . We try to explain that public records in a democracy belong to the people . . . that the origins of the custom of placing our most important records in the hands of county officials was to be able to watch over them and control them as officials of a remote central bureau could not be watched and controlled.²

¹B. M. Watson, “Please Stop Calling Things Archives: An Archivist’s Plea,” *Perspectives Daily*, Jan. 22, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/january-2021/please-stop-calling-things-archives-an-archivists-plea>.

²Margaret Cross Norton, “Some Legal Aspects of Archives,” *The American Archivist*, 8 (Jan. 1945): 1–11.

Unlike a centralized country like France, where the national archives sets the policy for all government records down to those of a commune, the U.S. National Archives has no authority to tell states or cities how to manage their records.

Another variance is that the United States does not use the idea of continuous custody as does, for example, the United Kingdom (UK), where if a document is ever out of the hands of the creating institution it is no longer considered archival. The U.S. National Archives clearly took the Trump records from Mar-a-Lago back into custody, and when I was at the National Archives, a missing volume of Civil War military records was turned over, which fit happily into the series of records where it belonged.

In the context of national archives, the U.S. is quite unique in having a unitary federal archives system; it holds the records of all three branches of government and all physical types of records. A survey of European national archives showed that a majority does not hold either the records of the nation's military or those of the foreign ministry. In many countries, a separate archives holds film and sound recordings.

And, finally, the U.S. system of presidential libraries (archives) and the law on presidential records are unique. Some countries, for better or worse, have copied the United States, constructing large presidential museums and archives, such as the one for former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, which is owned by Obasanjo himself, and Mexico's Vicente Fox Center of Studies, Library and Museum, which is funded by the Fox Center Civil Association. How these will fare when the president is long dead is uncertain.

You spent over two decades in the National Archives and Records Administration, two of them as Acting Archivist of the United States. Why are *national* archives important, not just for scholars but for everyday people?

A peaceful, functional state requires bottom-up participation, not just top-down action. Records in a national archives give insight into what happened in the society as a whole. They give individuals a means to discover the past, to deal with it, and to move to assert rights proactively and to insist on repair for rights violated.

Conflicts worldwide stem from the state's laws and practices, including bitter conflicts over land rights, identity, and health and safety concerns. For just three examples, records of land titles in indigenous areas in the Amazon are violently contested; Myanmar is refusing to provide identity documents to people who identify as Rohingya; and residents of the U.S. State of Louisiana's "cancer alley" are suing in Federal court to try to enforce safety standards on air pollution from petrochemical plants. In each case, records—contested, lacking, being created—play a role. Using records in a national archives can help resolve fates of the missing, provide the dignity of an identity, and affirm title to communal land—all of which are essential for peace keeping in a nation-state.

Military and civil service records can guarantee pensions and health care and can help identify the recovered remains of U.S. military lost in prior conflicts. U.S. Department of Agriculture records show the government discriminating against Black farmers, which led to massive economic losses and loss of lands. Records of colonial and national government departments relating to native peoples show the existential persecution of tribes, the removal of children to educate in special schools, and the destruction of cultures. National records can provide benchmarks against which to measure the impact of climate change, from records of weather to mapping of shorelines.

Lest this focus on rights abridged seems too gloomy, remember that national archives also provide people with a sense of place (who built the lighthouse, when was my post office established), a sense of family (when did my ancestors immigrate), a link to national and global events (a photo of the ship my great-grandfather served on during World War II).

As an aside, researchers should understand that there are basically three organizational placements for national archives, each with advantages and drawbacks. First, as in the United States and Russia, the national archives reports directly to the head of government, giving status but also political vulnerability. A second pattern is reporting to a ministry of culture or education, as in Italy, which often means that public-facing activities are strong but “hard” agencies like police and military will not turn records over to an entity they perceive as “soft” and not sufficiently aware of security issues. The third pattern, found in Eastern Europe especially during the communist years, is to report to a “hard” ministry, often the interior ministry, which enables the archives to hold those important ministerial records but may make access for researchers more difficult.

Historians and anthropologists have given a lot of thought to the feeling and practice of working in archives that were never intended to shed light on their subjects—be those enslaved people, colonial subjects, or non-elite women. Do you have thoughts about working against the grain in the archives?

Several different practices are implicated in the phrase “working against the grain.” First, it is reading the records for a purpose utterly different from that of the original authors. This is standard practice when archivists appraise records (to decide which to keep and which to toss): the initial or primary value of the records is to the creating entity, but archivists assess whether records have a secondary value to others than the creator, as in, to provide evidence of the organization’s origins, structure, functions, significant transactions and activities, and to document the persons, places, things, phenomena, or matters dealt with by the organization. For example, when U.S. Union Civil War veterans applied for a pension, they did not think their records could be used for genealogy in 150 years, nor did the pension evaluators. But those records are indispensable for some family histories. For another example, the records of the U.S. Census are used to determine the distribution of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, but these, too, are used for genealogical and legal purposes entirely apart from the redistricting process. Historians and other researchers have, in this sense, always worked against the grain.

A second “against the grain” is the analysis of language used in the records. Gendered languages make this type of analysis quite easy, but even English shows the use of “man” as the universal, the identification of ships as “she,” and so on. Epithets, too, shout silently on the page, as do the adjectives used to describe the structures and practices of native peoples and the characteristics of women and unpopular minorities. Captions on photographs sometimes can tell a story at an angle from the image.

A third “working against the grain” is the issue of silences in the archives, the things that are not documented although known to have occurred: the names of mothers not recorded on birth certificates in Afghanistan until 2020, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) issues not included in diplomatic reports on human rights practices, mining company reports not including information on native peoples living in the proposed mining area, deaths of migrants not recorded in national registries, and so on. These unseen people exist, but the optics of the writer did not include them, whether intentionally (the Afghan example) or because of bias or callous disregard or indifference.

Archives cannot compensate for the silences in the archives; they provide the picture as it was seen by the people of the creating entity. Programs such as oral histories, solicitation and acquisition of personal materials, and comparative data analysis can help fill silences, but archival institutions may not have the resources to embark on oral history programs or the authority to acquire materials from outside sources (for instance, the U.S. National Archives has very limited authority to acquire materials from non-federal sources, and the United Nations (UN) archives has no authority to take non-UN items).

History and memory remain ever-contested terrain. Across the United States and beyond, we have seen attempts to suppress or simplify some of the most complicated parts of human history. How do archives and archival records factor into these kinds of political struggles?

Alex Boraine was the deputy chairperson of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In his book on the Commission, he reflected on the tension between looking at the past and the desire for political amnesia. The Commission, he wrote, "accepted that it was necessary to turn the page of history but first we needed to read that page."³ Archives hold the pages to be read. The issues often are read when and read by whom. Access policies are at the heart of these struggles.

I chaired the International Council on Archives' working group that developed the international "Principles of Access to Archives," adopted in 2012 by unanimous vote of the ICA's general assembly.⁴ This is a voluntary standard, and many archives around the world are unable to fully live up to it, but the ten enumerated principles do serve as a benchmark and a standard that enable a researcher to assert a right of access.

Several kinds of pressures are brought to bear on archivists to obfuscate the existence or contents of archives. The first is simply a refusal by entities whose records are within the archival institution's authority to turn over records to the archives; an archival institution typically has little clout within an organization to force transfer. An unwilling entity can simply ignore the archives, usually with impunity.

A second issue is hierarchy. Archives typically are embedded in a larger organization, whether university, corporation, faith-based organization, nongovernmental organization (NGO), or government. Just as laws form the framework for access to government records, in other organizations the policy on access often must be approved by external senior administrators or board members, who may have an intense interest in ensuring that some archives are not made available to the public. Corporations have been especially reluctant to open records, although the business sector has perpetrated serious abuses. In the United States, for example, litigation has been required to gain access to such archives as the records of tobacco and pharmaceutical companies and the records of sexual abuse by members of a church or the Boy Scouts.

A third is the threat to the archivist's employment. In a Russian case, the colonel heading the Interior Ministry archives of the Arkhangelsk region was arrested, charged with exceeding his authority when he gave a researcher access to archives of the victims of Soviet repression, primarily the basic biographical details of ethnic Germans deported to the Arkhangelsk Region in

³Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Oxford, UK, 2000), 5.

⁴Principles of Access to Archives, International Council on Archives, https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_Access-principles_EN.pdf (accessed Aug. 27, 2023).

the 1930s–1940s (he received a one-year suspended sentence). In another Russian case, an archivist was demoted after giving access to records relating to the controversial World War II Panfilov 28 unit. Less dramatic measures are threatening, too: a contract not renewed, archives units reorganized or transferred, finances slashed. Troubling the leadership is not a good career move.

And, of course, there is the complete closure of archival institutions holding sensitive records. The Russian government forcibly closed Memorial, the human rights organization that documented the atrocities and political repression under Joseph Stalin. In El Salvador the Catholic Archdiocese closed the human rights office Tutela Legal, which held testimonials and evidence of war crimes committed during the country's civil war, and someone set fire to the archives held by Probusqueda Association for Missing Children. These acts dramatically underscore the importance of archives for the exercise of human rights.

Some archives are closed to research because the creators fear that the records will be misused by succeeding regimes. For example, the truth commission records of both Guatemala and El Salvador are closed, held by the UN archives in New York, far away from the roiling politics of those two states.

And, finally, when dealing with records of military, intelligence, police, and foreign ministry agencies, there is the matter of records closed for reasons of national security. Declassification is nearly always outside the control of the archival institution; the general rule is that the entity that classified the item is the only one that can declassify it. Researchers use freedom of information acts, now quite common around the world, to try to liberate classified records.

Archivists are trained in different ways. How did your doctoral degree in U.S. history inform your career as an archivist? As a human rights advocate?

In so many ways. When you are deciding whether to save or destroy records, knowing the possible uses of such records in research is fundamental. Having used records yourself as a researcher informs that judgment. When you are describing archives, you think about what you would want to know as a user, whether academic, legal, or genealogical. Those functions—appraisal and description—are the two powers of the archivist, for they control what evidence will be available and what the potential user will know about it. And having a history degree certainly helps when working with researchers, particularly with those who are formulating unusual research topics. As an archivist, I drew on my historian background every day. (A PhD also gives you credibility when dealing with lawyers and senior academics, but that is a different use!)

As a human rights advocate, it is essential to know the background to the issue you are confronting. When I worked in a country I had not previously visited, I often contacted an historian who is a specialist in that region and asked for recommended readings. In every case, people have been generous, pointing me to sources that I could trust. You really do not want to deal with the records of truth commissions, for instance, without understanding the conflict and its deep roots!

What kinds of things must one consider when building human rights archives? Are the primary considerations ethical? Legal? Both? Neither?

There are two basic types of human rights archives: those that are the archives of a human rights body and maintained by it (Amnesty International, UN High Commissioner for

Refugees) and those that announce that they collect materials from human rights groups (often in a university setting). The first group does not build an archives; rather, it holds the evidence that the organization creates as it does its work. For the second, the immediate question is to define what it hopes to acquire. When I became the founding director of the Open Society Archives in Budapest, Hungary, the archival team developed an acquisition policy, stating both what it planned to seek and, equally importantly, what it did not want to obtain. I visited the national archives in Hungary and the neighboring countries to reassure those institutions that we did not plan to compete with them for acquisitions, either from government or private sector sources. If one is establishing a new human rights archives, it is essential to be clear about the objective and to state it openly in as many ways as possible, and that includes making the acquisition policy public.

Do you have a favorite collection? Are there archives or collections that you consider revealing but underused?

Virtually all archives are underused! And the situation seems to be getting worse, as people think that if it is not online, it does not exist. The volume of holdings to the amount of material digitized is usually like the iceberg: most of it is unseen. Many were the days when I worked at the U.S. National Archives that I wanted to go out on the street, take someone by the shoulders, and tell them to come in and see the magnificent holdings!

If forced to pick one source that is terribly underused, I pick the archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR staff members are neutrals, and from the field they report regularly to headquarters, often giving a view that includes both government and opposition positions. With work in virtually every country that hosts refugees, the UNHCR archives has amazing records: Mozambique's struggle for independence, the massive dislocations of the twentieth-century wars in Southeast Asia, the records of the property owned by the Ugandan Asians when Idi Amin forced them from the country. The records of the UNHCR offices in the Balkans during the wars of the 1990s are superb sources: anyone writing about that period and those wars absolutely should use the UNHCR archives.

To end this Corner, here is a phrase from the Mayan poem used as the epigraph of the Report of the Truth Commission of El Salvador: "All these things happened among us." Indeed, they did, and access to archives empowers people to know and acknowledge and deal with the past in all its tumult and messy truth.