

Alternatives to the Academic Job Market—Archival Work

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Archival careers.

What does an archivist do, anyway?

As archivists, we have a dual responsibility—to preserve the often-fragile evidence of the past and to make it available to researchers. We select and keep documents, photographs, sound recordings, and other records that have enduring value as reliable memories of the past. We also help people find and understand the information they need in those records—a family in the 1930 census (and whether or not they had a radio), letters written from jail by a militant suffragist, detective reports on racetrack gambling, or a Confederate pension traced with the outline of the applicant’s crippled hand. When researchers have questions, we have answers.

Who works in archives?

My coworkers came to archives work in two distinct ways. I fall into the “old school” group—those with a history degree trained on the job in archival theory and practice, and apprenticed to (and mentored by) more senior staff with extensive collection knowledge. Younger staff members are generally part of the “new school”—those with coursework, or degrees, in history or public history with a concentration in archives, library science, or archival administration.

A graduate degree in history does help.

It gives applicants invaluable experience in research and writing, combined with a working knowledge of what records exist, and how to use them.

All of those liberal arts qualities help, too.

The “liberal arts” suite of skills is helpful, too: the ability to express yourself in writing and in presentations; to exercise effective interpersonal skills with staff and patrons; to take on projects in an efficient, organized, and thorough manner; to manage your time, deadlines, and multiple projects; and to give consistently good service. These skills also transfer well to other jobs.

Experience helps.

Look for internships, volunteer work, part-time jobs, and practicums in processing and public service. What do you really like to do? Finding out now can be important later on.

A mentor is a good thing.

Designed to facilitate communication and to cultivate career development between archival generations, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) mentoring program

brings together members with expertise in subjects and members who want to build their knowledge within those subject areas. Mentors may suggest appropriate continuing education coursework, workshops, or annual meeting program sessions; introduce you to other professional colleagues; and serve as a resource for policies, procedures, and other information. To find out more, go to www.archivists.org.

Less formal on-on-the-job mentoring can likewise be a valuable tool in learning the profession and achieving your career goals. Senior staff members have a lot to offer new hires—you can learn about the collections, learn policies and institutional history, and observe them as they work. How do they deal with patrons? What resources do they consult when tackling reference questions? What reading, projects, or coursework would they suggest for you? Often they know, through years of experience and trial and error, what has worked for them, and can offer you encouragement, constructive criticism, and invaluable advice.

You can make your job your own.

Apply your own unique skills to the task at hand, work hard, and volunteer for what interests you as time permits. You can take on a project, offer to help a colleague, or explore a research topic related to your institution's collections. All of this will help broaden your skill set, allow you to learn something new, and make you a valuable contributor. Archivists are by necessity lifelong learners.

Look for projects along the way.

In order to learn the Library's collections, I actively sought out projects. I compiled guides and bibliographies, and arranged, described, and indexed archival collections (including the Equal Suffrage League and Confederate Disability Applications). I wrote articles for *Virginia Cavalcade* and wrote biographical sketches for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. I also contributed sketches to historical dictionaries and encyclopedias, wrote book reviews, served on exhibit committees at the Library, gave tours, presentations, and conference papers, and worked as an editor for the Southern Association for Women Historian's online discussion list.

Remember that continuity and institutional memory are important.

It takes time and experience to learn archival collections, so be prepared to stay for a while.

The Archival Job Search.

Seriously prepare for the interview.

Don't eliminate yourself from consideration for interesting jobs by doubting your qualifications and not applying. Instead, break down the advertisement and the job description if you have it, into their component parts, then match up your skills and experience to the employer's needs. Use note cards and be creative. Often archival jobs, especially those in public service, require that applicants be able to express themselves well verbally and in writing, so an interview gives a vitally important first impression. Be prepared to give a brief presentation and to present a portfolio of writing samples.

This can be a good way for you to showcase a variety of skills—including the research, writing, and organization skills that most archival institutions are looking for. Being enthusiastic, prepared, and thoughtful in an interview is a definite plus. Remember, the interviewers want you to do well. Think about the questions and answer them completely to the best of your ability. Give specific examples, if you can, and don't rush through an answer—take a minute to reflect, if you need it, and remember to breathe and smile. Working with the job description and your resume ahead of time, and figuring out what you have to offer, makes for a more polished, confident interview.

Look for jobs and information on the Web.

Visit www.archivists.org

The Society of American Archivists Web site includes an online employment bulletin, an education calendar, and a directory of archival education, as well as a resources section with the society's journal, newsletter, and information on electronic mailing lists.

Visit www.nagara.org

The National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators is dedicated to the improvement of federal, state, and local government records and information management. Check the Web site for *Clearinghouse*, a quarterly newsletter with news on developments at the local, state, and federal level, and *Crossroads*, a quarterly bulletin on electronic records and information-policy issues.

For jobs in the federal government, visit <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov/>

Check the Web for state job listings, too. Visit Web sites for regional archival associations; for example, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC) Web site (<http://www.lib.umd.edu/MARAC/archives.html>) includes job opportunities, fellowships, and internships, as well as information on conferences, publications, and professional organizations. The MARAC Web site includes links to the Society of American Archivists Employment Bulletin, LIBJOBS, and federal jobs.

Visit <http://www.ifla.org/II/lists/libjobs.htm>

Jobs for library professionals are compiled by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions at LIBJOBS.

Visit <http://www.archives.gov/>

Check out the page devoted to jobs, internships, and training opportunities, as well as a calendar of workshops and talks.

Visit <http://online.onetcenter.org/>

The Occupational Information Network provides a useful summary of what archival work is all about, a catalog of the skills involved, and a perceptive overview of what qualities make good archivists:

Attention to Detail
Dependability

Initiative
Independence
Cooperation
Integrity
Persistence
Concern for Others
Analytical Thinking

Visit <http://www.careerinfonet.org/>
For information on occupations and a job bank.

Some Final Suggestions.

Join professional organizations.

For example, the Society of American Archivists (membership categories are based on annual salary). Smaller regional organizations abound, like the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (\$35/year, \$20 for students). You can get to know your colleagues this way and also gain valuable experience serving on committees and attending conferences.

Sign up for online discussion groups

Such as the Archives and Archivists listserv—several are listed on the SAA Web site. You can learn a lot this way, and network, too.

Read everything you can find.

For example, the *Archival Fundamentals Series*, published by the Society of American Archivists, includes indispensable volumes on reference, description, and management.

The Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice (1984), by Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walch, brings together classic essays of archival literature from 1940 through the early 1980s. The essays outline and define the basic theories of archives administration, re-examine basic concepts, and demonstrate the practical application of archival principles. The volume also includes a glossary and suggestions for further reading.

Visit the Council of State Archivists Web site at www.statearchivists.org

Even if you don't work in a state archives, you'll find useful information in the online Archives Resource Center, including lists of online collections and calendars of events and training opportunities.

Take a job—any job—in the institution where you are interested in working.

Once your foot is in the door, you can gain valuable experience, prove you're a hard worker who is willing to learn, and become eligible for internal job opportunities.

Attend the Modern Archives Institute at the National Archives.

To find out more, visit <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/modern-archives-institute/>.

The 2-week program is held twice a year and provides an introduction to archival principles and techniques for individuals who work with personal papers, as well as those who work with the records of public and private institutions and organizations. It is intended to help archivists acquire basic knowledge about caring for archival materials and making them available.

What other degrees would help?

See the Society of American Archivists Directory of Archival Education (www.archivists.org) for detailed information on degrees and programs.

In conclusion.

A good archivist is patient, organized, persistent, and thoughtful. She likes working with people, is excited by a challenge, is open to change, and appreciates variety. It's not really like *National Treasure*—but it is rewarding, and often exciting, work.

Just for fun, you can check out archivists on film and in fiction at <http://victoria.tc.ca/~mattison/ficarch/index.htm>.

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