Research Article

The Symbolic Significance of Archives

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Abstract: Although most archival records are created to accomplish a practical, utilitarian purpose, this essay explores some of the more "symbolic" aspects of recordmaking and recordkeeping. It argues that archivists should understand such issues as: the mixture of practical and symbolic values in records; the effects of symbolic meaning on the forms that records take; the occasions when the act of recordmaking is more significant than the record itself; the ceremonial uses of records; and both the reverence for and the hatred of records as objects.

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MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, Frank Burke called on archivists to ponder some of the fundamental issues of their profession. Rather than focus so exclusively on the day-to-day tasks of appraising, arranging, describing, and providing reference services for documentary collections, Burke urged his colleagues to raise their sights to consider larger questions, questions that had no simple answers. Why are there archival records in the first place? Why do humans make written records so abundantly, and why do they leave them behind for future uses? "Is the impulse a purely practical one," he wondered, "or is there something in the human psyche that dictates the keeping of a record, and what is the motivation for that act?" Why, in short, is there anything on which we may work our archival magic?[1]

Burke's challenge has gone largely unaddressed, and some have even doubted the benefit of any inquiry that reaches beyond the urgent but pedestrian demands of daily professional practice. No less a figure than Lester Cappon, a member of the founding generation of American archivists, believed that, in the end, there was very little for archivists to theorize about. Others have resorted to a grosser and more waspish anti-intellectualism. Those who waste time on larger questions, they maintain, suffer from a status anxiety so acute that they will resort to any tactic to make archival work seem more important than it really is. "Shut up," they seem to say, "and just shuffle the damn papers."[2]

This naysaying to the contrary notwithstanding, some archivists have periodically attempted to address the questions of where archives come from and why. In doing so, they have exhibited a remarkable unanimity of opinion by emphasizing, as Burke noted, the inescapably practical nature of the recordmaking and recordkeeping processes. Works of the leading archival theorists have all emphasized the utilitarian motivations for the making of written records. These records, they say, provide immediate advantages not available to purely oral cultures. Sir Hilary Jenkinson, still acknowledged as the premier writer on archives in English even though he is infrequently read in the United States today, began his classic study by defining archives as records that had been "drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private)." His American disciple, T. R. Schellenberg, concurred. Records are compiled by an institution "in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business." Records constitute "evidence of its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities," and when they acquire additional usefulness for "reference and research purposes," Schellenberg said, they truly become archives. The recordmaking process is the result of "purposive and organized activity," usually relating to administration, business, or the demands of the legal system. Even with personal papers, "purposive" activities are responsible for creating the records that might eventually be deposited in an archives. The very words made the point:

[1]Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40–46; the quotation is on p. 42.

[2]Lester J. Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?" *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 19–25. For the hostility toward posing larger questions, see, for example, the letter to the editor by Laura K. O'Keefe, "Forum," *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 4. In just two sentences, O'Keefe (who boasts that she has never read an article in a professional archives journal) manages to call archival theory "unnecessary," "counter-productive," "foolish," and "self-deluded," and she accuses (on the basis of what evidence is not clear) those who attempt it of being motivated solely by a desire to impress non-archivists. Another "Forum" letter writer (Richard Lytle) in the same issue celebrates the "attack" on archival theory, concluding bluntly: "there isn't any."

transaction, policies, evidence, administrative, proper business. Archives are straightforward and inevitably practical.[3]

Explorations of archival history seemed to confirm the belief that these motives for records creation were paramount. Surveying what was then known of archives in the ancient world, Ernst Posner concluded that the desire for "control of material, men, and man-made installations" was responsible for the production and accumulation of archives. In the process, he identified six "constants in record creation": the laws of a particular jurisdiction; records of administrative precedent; financial records of all kinds; land records; records that asserted control over individuals (tax and military service obligations, for instance); and "notarial" records through which the state certified and endorsed transactions between individuals.[4] More recently, Trudy Peterson found "counting and accounting," which she called the "most fundamental acts of an organized people," to be at the core of recordkeeping.[5] Perhaps because these and other prominent archival writers came predominantly from government records backgrounds, they tended to focus almost entirely on those practical aspects of human affairs which demanded that some record be left behind for future reference, convenience, precedent, or other pragmatic purpose.

Today, scholars in several areas of specialization have begun to address the broad subject of literacy in history, exploring the ways different societies have made the transition from a purely oral culture to one in which writing is available and even commonplace. In the process, they are expanding significantly our understanding of the role that written records and archives play in human affairs. William V. Harris, for instance, studying literacy in ancient Greece and Rome, has added considerably to Posner's six "constants." The utilitarian purposes of records are all there (in rather more detail than in Posner), Harris acknowledges: records may indeed be used to prove ownership, to maintain financial accounts, to provide receipts, and so on. Beyond these, however, other purposes are also evident: records honor distinguished persons; they commemorate brave individuals and deeds; they dedicate objects and people to the gods; they fix the religious calendar and prescribe the precise form of prayers; they even increase the potency of curses. Another classicist, Rosalind Thomas, has explored the ways in which literacy may be used primarily to supplement oral communication, and she has identified a number of "nonliterate" and even "non-documentary" uses for writing, including the ceremonial and purely decorative.[6]

Medievalists, too, have begun to examine the motivations behind recordmaking which show up in sharp relief in societies making the transition (never smooth, complete, or linear) from orality to literacy. Those human activities that formerly could be transacted only by word of mouth could

[3]Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Lund Humphries, 1966; reissue of revised 2nd edition, 1922), 11; T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 16, 13, 68. These same themes of the legal and administrative purposes of archives were repeated by Schellenberg's contemporary, Margaret Norton; see *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management*, edited by Thorton W. Mitchell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), especially 3–31.

[4]Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 3–4. For an important challenge to Posner's "rationalist" view of ancient archives, see Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 93–100.

[5]Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Counting and Accounting: A Speculation on Change in Recordkeeping Practices," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 131–34.

[6]William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 26–28, 50–56, and 66–93. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 74–88.

now be accomplished in writing as well; watching societies decide, in effect, when to speak and when to write could highlight the different roles of the two forms of communication. In the process, a good many nonpractical aspects of recordmaking began to emerge. M. T. Clanchy, whose work has enjoyed something of a vogue among archivists, has discussed these dynamics in Norman England. Monastic chronicles were seen by their authors as demonstrations of divine providence, for example, while, in a merging of mundane and higher concerns, practical documents like deeds and charters were often kept in shrines, chapels, and reliquaries. Not only were such places relatively secure in a generally uncertain world, but the physical proximity of the documents to the relics of the saint under whose patronage they had been assembled also symbolized their importance. The quintessential written record, the Domesday Book, had a meaning far beyond its inventories of property and feudal obligation, and it was, in its first few centuries, used only infrequently in practical administration. For the Normans, it was important principally as a "majestic and unchangeable memorial" of their triumph. For the Saxons, it was a pointed and humiliating reminder of their defeat: even their domestic animals were now subject to William the Conqueror and his successors.[7] Rosamund McKitterick and Brian Stock have extended this study to continental Europe. McKitterick has shown that the mere possession of books and manuscripts was a sign of status in Carolingian France and that, in times of war, they were protected physically with as much care as art work and church plate. Stock maintains that, by the twelfth century, even saints' relics generally needed some kind of accompanying documentation if they were to be considered valid and thus efficacious.[8]

Archivists can profit from this recent scholarship by thinking again about the human needs and activities that call records into being. Jenkinson, Schellenberg, Posner, and the rest are right in identifying the utilitarian and functional nature of some (perhaps even most) archival records, but we are beginning to appreciate that that is only part of the story. Hugh Taylor, for instance, has argued that many human "acts and deeds" were first memorialized in ceremonies involving highly symbolic documents, which took on practical import and usefulness only later.[9] Archivists should now focus attention on those aspects of the records-creation process which are not practical, if only because such an expanded view will be valuable to them in their daily work. Appraisal decisions, for example, must be founded on a reasonably complete understanding of the nature of records and the roles they have played; if some of those roles are ignored, the appraisal will necessarily be flawed. Similarly, archival description that slights the significance and possible uses of records will remain imperfect. In preservation planning, the archivist must always balance the survival of the information and the survival of the record conveying it. Sometimes (with most newspaper clippings, for instance) one cares only about the former, but sometimes (with an organization's "founding documents," perhaps) one will care about both. Out-

[7]M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7, 18, 125–27.

[8]Rosamund McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 155–57; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 244–46.

[9]Hugh Taylor, "'My Very Act and Deed': Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Human Affairs," *American Archivist* 51 (Fall 1988): 456–69. I have explored some of the motivations for recordmaking very briefly in *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 10–13.

reach and exhibit programs that feature only the records of "counting and accounting" will be pretty dull stuff. Without denying the importance of immediate and enduring utility in the making of records, archivists should think about the polar opposite of that motivation: not the practical, but the *im*practical reasons for the creation of records.

What follows is a preliminary exploration of this nonpractical side of the equation—what I am calling, for lack of a better term, the "symbolic" nature of archival records. When does the true significance and meaning of a record derive less from what appears in its surface text and more from its symbolic standing-in for something else?[10] Are there cases in which records contain practical information, but in which the real significance is larger and more symbolic? When are records made in such a way that their symbolic nature is emphasized over their practical character? When is the act of recordmaking more important than the record that is made? When and how are records put to ceremonial and even religious purposes? When are records revered primarily as objects, with their content and meaning de-emphasized, and, conversely, when are records despised? Examining these questions can offer archivists a fuller sense of the context, and ultimately the meaning, of the materials in their care.

[10]By phrasing the question in this way, I mean deliberately to separate this inquiry from one founded more explicitly in diplomatics, the "old science" for which Luciana Duranti has been teaching us to find "new uses." See her multipart work, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," in *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 7–27; 29 (Winter 1989–1990): 4–17; 30 (Summer 1990): 4–20; 31 (Winter 1990–1991): 10–25; 32 (Summer 1991): 6–24; 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 6–24. Duranti herself limits the strict applicability of diplomatics (the internal analysis and criticism of documents) to those records "which result from a practical administrative activity," though she seems open to the possibility that the diplomatic outlook may also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to some private documents as well; see 28 (Summer 1989): 15–16. In any event, the symbolism I mean to explore here relates more to records as records than to their internal, textual, and narrative structures.

Practical Values and Symbolic Values

Any archivist who has supervised a collection knows that an ingenious researcher can find uses for records that no creator, collector, or curator ever imagined. Thus, virtually any archival record, no matter how esoteric or bizarre, might be put to a use that could be fairly characterized as practical. Even so, there are certain kinds of records in which the symbolic values outweigh the practical values. These are records that may indeed contain practical information, information that may be used to answer direct questions, but their symbolic character is nonetheless predominant.

Most obvious of these are common family Bible records. Someone—usually successive generations of someones—records the names and dates of births, marriages, and deaths, often together with other information, in the family Bible. Some of these Bibles (or just the pages containing the family data) eventually show up in archival collections. The personal information recorded in the family Bible may indeed be put to a practical purpose—When was Uncle Louis born? When did he marry Aunt Louise?—even though that same information is usually recorded elsewhere, often more reliably and certainly more officially, by public authorities. Still, the family Bible may be put to a practical use. We can check the records whenever we want, without having to travel to the county record office or the state vital statistics bureau, waiting for them to open, and perhaps having to pay a fee to learn what we want to know.

The real significance of the family Bible record, however, is larger than that. Like family quilts or other keepsakes, the Bible is part record, part artifact. We make and value these records because of the way they reconstruct the family across time and space.

There they all are, relatives we ourselves may never have known, assembled together by name with their biographical details duly noted. What is more, by making such records, we make the family ours. "There's my grandmother," we say, feeling the personal link and wanting often to touch the name written on the page. The responsibility for entering new information (at the time of major passages in our families' lives) is usually taken seriously, with completeness and accuracy highly prized. The people whose names are thus recorded are different from the mass of humanity because they are our people. The power of that symbolic reconstruction of the family is substantial and, often, emotional.[11]

School diplomas are another example of records that, though they contain some practical information, are usually put to a symbolic rather than practical purpose. The diploma does indeed convey some specific facts about its subject: that an academic program at a specified school has been completed and a particular degree or rank has been received at a given date. The text of the diploma often contains some language about the bearer being entitled to all the "rights and privileges" that come with the degree, though most recipients would be hard pressed to identify what those are. Because of their formulaic nature, diplomas may also contain some information that is either untrue or questionable: references to the graduate as a "youth," for example, are increasingly inaccurate in the age of the "nontraditional" student. Despite this apparently high level of information content, however, diplomas have a very limited practical usefulness. Potential employers might possibly ask to see a copy of an applicant's grade transcript, but seldom do they want to see a copy of the diploma.[12] Even if they were to do so, using the diploma would be problematic, since often these documents are written in a language (Latin) that most people cannot read. And yet which of these two records do we prize? Do we frame our transcript and hang it on the wall? No, it is the diploma that we value, the framed diploma that we want the reassurance of seeing in our lawyer's or dentist's office. The diploma is symbolic of achievement. It represents the years of hard work, the long nights of study. It conveys the prestige of the institution granting it. What is more, we demand a certain "look" from diplomas: even when printed and mass-produced, they must appear to be original, hand-lettered manuscripts. The diploma is important for these symbolic reasons, not for the particular information it contains.

Wills and epitaphs may be highly symbolic records. Wills, which became common in Western culture in the twelfth century, surely have a direct and practical purpose: that of ensuring that the deceased's wishes on the distribution of property are carried out. For most of its history, however, the will had a larger purpose. It was a religious as well as legal document. A will not only provided for one's heirs; it also offered the occasion to confess one's faith, to acknowledge one's sins, and to

[11]On the nature and use of family Bible records, see Gilbert H. Doane, *Searching for Your Ancestors: The How and Why of Genealogy*, 5th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), and Ralph J. Crandall, *Shaking Your Family Tree: A Basic Guide to Tracing Your Family's Genealogy* (Camden, Maine: Yankee Books, 1986). An even more graphic reconstruction of the family can be seen in the multigenerational forms, often called "fan charts," in which family members are represented as spreading out from a single individual (often the compiler). For examples of "family group forms" and "pedigree forms," see the appendixes to Crandall's manual and Val D. Greenwood, *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1990), 47–48.

[12]The only instance I am aware of in which persons had to produce photocopies of their diplomas was in the process of certification of archivists by petition, apparently to forestall the possibility that petitioners would lie about their credentials; see "Certified Archivist Petition," *SAA Newsletter*, July 1989. This practical usefulness of diplomas is too silly to warrant further comment.

support various pious causes. Making out a will was, therefore, "a religious, almost sacramental act."[13] Epitaphs, too, may convey useful information. Westerners of all ranks of society revived the classical aristocratic practice of writing epitaphs in the twelfth century and, over time, these inscriptions became increasingly informative. They presented the basic data of the subject's life and death, but they also often invited "a dialogue between the dead writer and the living reader." One could put them to a practical purpose—Who is buried here? What were the facts of their lives (birth, death, family relationship)?—but their symbolic evocation of the deceased was at least as important. They were, says the leading historian of Western attitudes toward death, "an invitation not only to prayer but to literal memory, to the recollection of a life with its peculiar characteristics and actions, a biography."[14] Useful information was surely present in these records, but their real meaning was more symbolic than practical.

Record Form and Symbolic Meaning

Some records are created to perform useful purposes, but their physical form and the way they are made invest them with an equally important symbolic meaning. Religious archivists of many denominations, for example, collect the membership and sacramental records from local parish churches or congregations. In some religious traditions, these records have a direct and practical usefulness. In order to be married in the church, for instance, one may be required to produce a copy of one's baptismal record. With the passage of time, these records take on a secondary practical use, that of supporting genealogical research. Quite often, however, these practical records are made in a very impractical way. The record books are often huge and heavy: an archives where the author once worked held a volume of parish baptismal records that measured 11 by 17.5 inches and weighed sixteen pounds. Such a book is difficult to use because of its heft, and it presents a number of preservation challenges to the archives. It is so ungainly that its covers give out, its spine cracks, and pages tear loose from the binding.[15] Most county courthouses could provide similar examples of the registration of land titles, deeds, or probated wills kept in such outsized volumes.

Is it purely accidental that the late-nineteenth-century priests keeping those baptismal records had chosen to do so in such a big book? To be sure, they may well have had some practical considerations in mind, buying a big book so they would not have to buy a succession of small ones; nor should we minimize the effect of inertia, in which recordkeepers continue to rely on certain forms simply because "we've always done it this way."[16] Might there not also have been, however, an unspoken connection between the record being made and the way it was made? Might there not have been an intention to underline the authority of the record by giving it a physically impressive appearance?[17] Surely a baptismal record in

[13]Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, translated by Helen Weaver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 196; see his entire discussion of wills, pp. 188–201.

[14]Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*, 230; see his full discussion of epitaphs, pp. 216–33. I am told that the latest innovation in this regard is a videotaped message from the deceased, recorded prior to death.

[15]This was a volume of baptismal records, 1871–1887, for Saint Mary's parish, Lawrence, Massachusetts, now held by the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston. The archives holds a number of such books, some with larger physical dimensions than this one, weighing between 10 and 20 pounds.

[16]On inertia and resistance to change in recordkeeping, see JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 21–22, 271–74.

[17]For an interesting parallel, see the discussion in Rhys Isaac, "Books and the Social Authority of

such a volume was official, and lasting, and *true*—perhaps even "more true" than if it had a different, less imposing form. Making records that were thought to have an enduring effect and applicability in such a solid, apparently (though seldom really) permanent form was not coincidental.

Furthermore, is it not possible or even probable that the image of the biblical Book of Life provided an unconscious model for these kinds of records? The notion of a "master record" in which each person's actions are set down is an ancient one, deriving from both the Hebrew (Daniel 12:1ff., for example) and Christian (Revelation 5:1ff., for example) Scriptures. By the thirteenth century, popular belief, supported by ritual and iconography, held that every individual had a metaphysical book in which the good and evil deeds of life were itemized. The traditional funeral hymn, *Dies Irae*, painted the role of such records in the Last Judgment vividly: *"Liber scriptus proferetur, / In quo totum continetur, / Unde mundus judicetur"* ("Lo! the book exactly worded, / Wherein all hath been recorded, / Whence shall judgment be awarded"). A more modern hymn, popular in several Protestant denominations, asks, "In the book of Thy kingdom / With its pages so fair, / Tell me, Jesus, my Saviour, / Is my name written there?" A sixteenth-century fresco depicted the judgment of the dead, each with a small book worn around the neck like an identification badge.[18] Such images have lodged in the popular mind: think of *New Yorker* cartoons in which the deceased faces Saint Peter at the pearly gates, with the gatekeeper sitting at a tall scribe's desk, consulting the contents of a large volume and rendering his decision on admission to heaven. With sacramental records, the manner of recording was obviously intended to send a message that was as important as content. The medium was not the only message, but it was a message of at least equal importance.

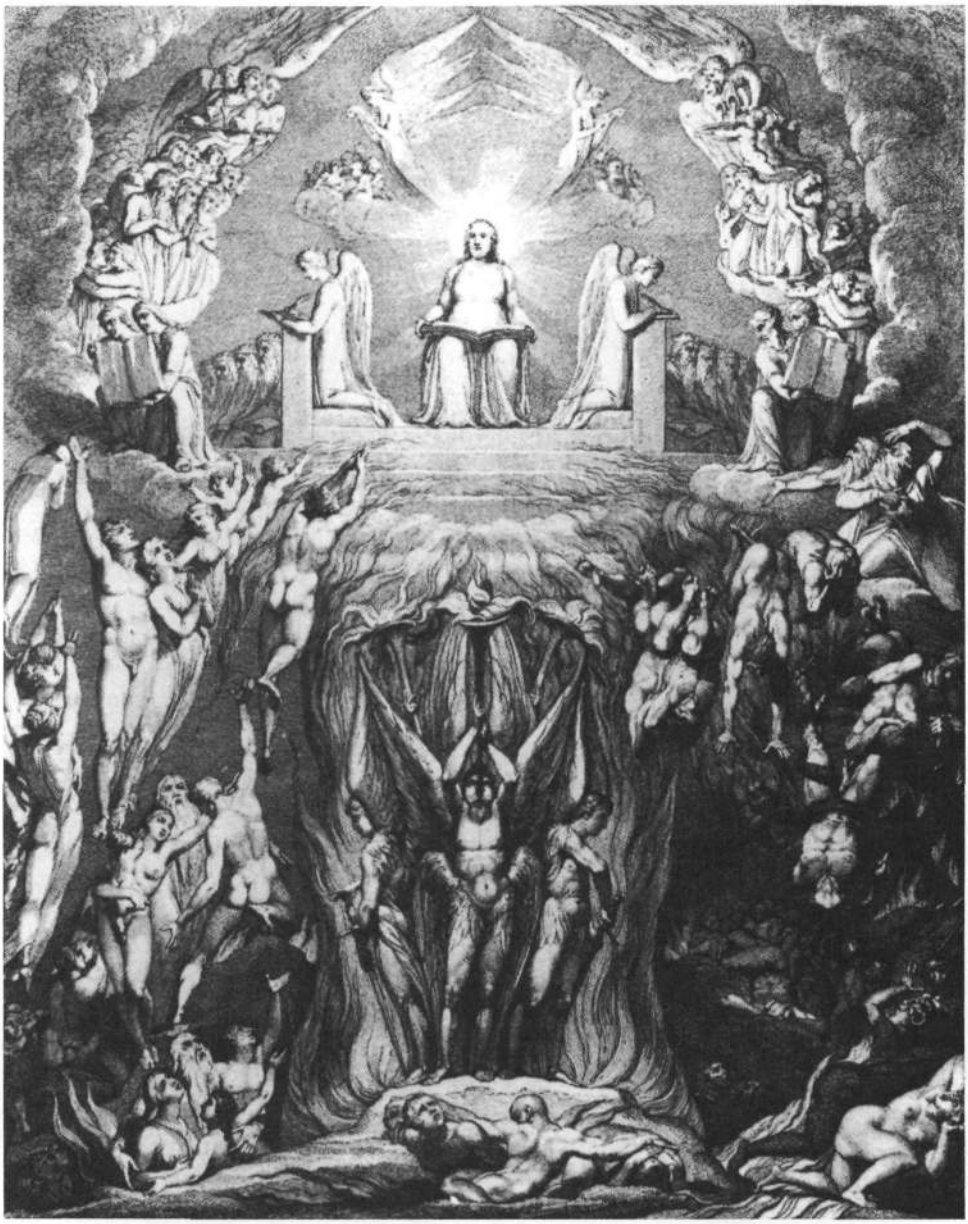
Seals and other aspects of the appearance of documents also affect the symbolic significance of the records. Diplomas are prepared with elaborate calligraphy or are at least printed with an unusual typeface; somehow, a common typewriter or computer printer just will not do for such occasions. They frequently include two-dimensional representations of seals. Clanchy has argued that the expanding use of seals in Norman England helped make charters of all kinds more acceptable in a culture just emerging into literacy. Seals did have a practical aspect, helping to prevent forgery and ensure legitimacy. Beyond that, though, impressed wax looked more majestic than simple written letters and, since seals had originally been the exclusive prerogative of kings and nobles, they added the weight of traditional authority. A seal looked (usually wrongly, as things turned out) as though it would last longer than the parchment to which it was affixed, thereby preserving more successfully the intentions of those who drew up and received the document. The seal was, in short, "a relic, which could be seen and touched in order to obtain from it that authentic view and feel of a donor's wishes which no writing could adequately convey."[19]

The demand for seals became and has remained a cultural commonplace. Even in our own literate age, when written documents are so numerous and so readily ac-

Learning: The Case of Mid-Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Printing and Society in Early America,* edited by William L. Joyce, et al. (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 228–49.

[18]Most of these examples are from Ariès, *Hour of Our Death,* 104–05. Ariès also cites a pious manual from the eighteenth century in which each person is described as possessing two books, one for good deeds and the other for bad. I am grateful to Timothy Ericson for providing me with a copy of the words and music to "Is My Name Written There?"

[19]Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* 229, 245.



Records and the Last Judgment. Written records figure prominently in William Blake's painting *The Day of Judgment* (1808), depicted in this contemporary engraving. God holds an open book on his lap, while angelscribes record the judgment scene. Other figures display record books specifying the fate of the saved (*left*) and of the damned (*right*). (From *Heaven: A History* by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang)

ceptable, we still seem to feel that certain documents require them or other symbolic trappings. A colleague at the Vermont State Archives has called an example of this perception to my attention. Notaries public in Vermont are not required by statute to own and use a seal; in fact, some of them do, but many do not, and this can create problems. How, without this expected symbol of office, is one who encounters a notarized document to know that the notarization is valid? Other records must be used to fill the "symbolism gap." The state archives does so and is called upon regularly—about a thousand times each year—to verify that such and such a person was indeed a notary at the time indicated. What is more, in the process of making these certifications, the archives often receives complaints that the notarized documents just do not "look right." One foreign consul in particular complained that the document should have been sealed with wax and festooned with colorful ribbons.[20]

The general appearance of records has been important to their meaning from the beginning of their widespread use and acceptability, and this remains true today. In the Middle Ages, scribes devoted themselves not merely to the transmission of information in documents, but also to more aesthetic concerns. Works such as the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels were prepared not so much for their usable information (the even-then readily available Gospels) as for the devotional nature of preparing them. Making such objects was, Clanchy concludes, "an act of worship in itself," and the writing was "aimed at God's eye more often than at communicating information to fellow human beings." Elsewhere, the use of various kinds of color—royal manuscripts written in gold letters on parchment sheets dyed purple, for example—underlined the authority of documents and enhanced their force.[21] Even today, citations of various kinds are prepared with a similar concern for visual appearance: award certificates; commendations to retiring employees; collective expressions of gratitude; documents on paper manufactured to look something like parchment and contained in leather folders. The significance of the appearance of such physical objects as seals is implicit in the twofold meaning of the word *impress*: to stamp with a seal in wax, and to have a noticeable and lasting impact on the mind.

Recordmaking and the Record Made

In many instances, the symbolic significance of records derives from the act of recordmaking rather than from the record that results. Writing one's congressional representative is the most obvious example. Only the naive assume that the legislator actually opens the mail, reads and ponders individual constituent opinion, and decides how to vote on that basis. Simply writing the letter is what is important here. Once received, the incoming mail is typically collected, tabulated, and summarized by the staff: so many constituents urge a "yes" vote, so many want a "no." There is even, as Hugh Taylor has pointed out, a kind of implicit hierarchy of value: handwritten, "personalized" letters carry more weight, telegrams and telephone calls somewhat less, and preprinted postcards

[20]D. Gregory Sanford to author, 18 December 1989, in author's possession. Notaries in Vermont had formerly been required to use seals, but this provision was repealed in 1983; see *Vermont Statutes Annotated* (Cumulative Pocket Supplement, 1991), Title 24, chapter 5, section 444. The movement for change came from police officers, who were ex officio notaries but who found it cumbersome to affix a seal to every statement they took from a victim, witness, or suspect.

[21]Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 226; McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word*, 143–44.

Symbolic Recordmaking. Zephorene L. Stickney (*left*), archivist of Wheaton College (Massachusetts), displays the scroll compiled during the college's anniversary celebration. The scroll, 169 feet long, is draped down a three-story stairwell. *(Toby Pearce Photo, Gebbie Archives and Special Collections, Wheaton College, Norton, Mass.)*

count practically not at all.[22] Letters of recommendation may sometimes operate under the same dynamic. Do we really read them line for line and consider their contents? Are we not more inclined to note simply that they do or do not exist? Are we not often impressed merely by who has (or has not) written them? In all such cases, the act of writing is as important as the message or information conveyed.[23]

Signing one's name may sometimes be a largely symbolic act. To be sure, signatures most often have a practical importance. The autograph at the bottom of a check is what the bank uses to determine whether to honor it—though as for that, the bank will accept the obviously printed, nonoriginal signature on your payroll check, even as it hands over to you in return paper currency that bears something made to look like an autograph signature, even though it plainly is not. Signing guest books of various kinds (at funerals, for example) is a way of expressing presence, solidarity, and sympathy, but the subsequent use of such books to determine who attended, while certainly possible, is probably rare. The archivist of a small women's college has told me that at her institution's recent sesquicentennial celebration, attendees at each of the various events were asked to sign a scroll, headed by the date and a description of the event. At the end of the anniversary

[22]Taylor, "'My Very Act and Deed,'" 468. The groups (unions, political lobbying organizations, etc.) to which the author belongs generally urge him to "personalize" letters when writing a public official in the hope that this will win a better hearing.

[23]Keeping a diary may be another expression of this impulse; see Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1984).

year, all the separate scrolls were pasted together, one after another, to form one single scroll that is 169 feet long![24] No one could argue that this is primarily a practical record. What mattered here was the act of making the record, all those alumnae signifying their participation, principally to one another, while they were still there. The impact of signing was emotional.

Social historians who study the level of literacy in a given society have long understood the difficulties of using signatures alone as a measure. Some people may be able to sign their name without being able to read or write anything else. Some may be able to sign their name but, for a variety of reasons, do not do so. A modern business executive's correspondence may be signed (with or without identifying initials) by a secretary, for example, or even signed with a signature stamp or by a machine. Similarly, the absence of an autograph on a medieval or early modern document may tell us nothing about the literacy of its originator.[25] In other instances, the use of a signature may be what one historian has called "a socially significant sign." Consider, for example, the case of an early-eighteenth-century New England farmer who had achieved enough success to need at last to keep an account book. This was an important achievement, and he demonstrated its intensely personal meaning by writing inside the cover of the book the following inscription: "John Gould his Book of accounts I say my Book my owne book and I gave one shillin and four pence for it so much and no more."[26] A farmer who was barely getting by had no need to keep a written record of his financial condition; he knew it all too well. This more successful farmer had practical reasons for keeping accounts, but these did not exclude or overwhelm the larger significance entailed in his having to make records. The fact of making the entries in the account book represented social and economic success.

Even records that might have a use in upholding tradition or establishing precedent could be valuable primarily for the act of making them. The classicist Mary Beard has described one such example from ancient Rome. The Arval Brotherhood, a priestly cult devoted to prayer and sacrifice on behalf of abundant crops and the health of the emperor and his family, kept a regular chronicle of its rituals. These annual inscriptions, dating from about 40 B.C.E. to 300 C.E., became increasingly detailed and "informative" over time, but there is no evidence that they were ever actually read or used in any way once they had been made. In 14 C.E., for example, a tree collapsed in the brotherhood's sacred grove, a serious ritual defilement of the space. To cleanse the sanctuary, the tree was burned where it fell and none of its wood carried off; the procedure describing this purification was dutifully recorded in that year's chronicle. When other trees fell in the same spot, however, first twenty-five and again seventy years later, they were simply chopped up and the wood put to another use. The record of the first procedure provided no precedent or necessary prescription for the future and was apparently never

[24]Zephorene L. Stickney to author, 11 December 1989, in author's possession. The final scroll was, Stickney points out with undeniable understatement, "a nightmare to assemble."

[25]The literature on this subject is enormous. For some interesting discussions of the problem, see P. Collinson, "The Significance of Signatures," *Times Literary Supplement,* 8 January 1981, 31; David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: Norton, 1974).

[26]Quoted in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 44; original in Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts. On this topic, see also Franz Bräuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Speculum* 55 (April 1980): 237–65.

even referred to after the fact. "The activity of the writing was part of the activity of the ritual," Beard concludes, "and not an external, utilitarian record of it."[27]

Ceremonial and Religious Uses of Records

If the making of records can be an action full of symbolic significance, so can their use. Records are often put to a number of broadly ceremonial and even expressly religious purposes. Just as the alumnae signified their presence at the college anniversary events by ceremonially signing the long scroll, so other records may be created or used in various sorts of ritual procedure. In such cases, the record is valued not principally for the information it contains but rather for its symbolic or liturgical character.

From the first, writing has often been associated with religious and even magical powers. Saints Cyril and Methodius, the "apostles to the Slavs," whose bags were packed with both a written alphabet (Cyrillic) and the Christian religion, understood this connection. In practice, the teaching and use of writing was often reserved to the priestly classes, but beyond that, those religions which made use of writing usually proved to be successful and enduring. The great "Religions of the Book"—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, certainly; but even Buddhism and Hinduism—were easier to spread because their basic texts and tenets could be written down, preserved intact, and distributed geographically. What is more, since religious texts were believed to capture and fix God's own words and intentions, they possessed an authority that was harder to challenge than purely oral traditions. Interpretations of particular passages might vary, but the text itself remained firm. Indeed, no small amount of effort went into its preservation, word for word, in "authorized" versions. Praying became a matter of repeating certain phrases precisely, as in the case of the Lord's Prayer, even if its language ("hallowed be Thy name," for instance) became increasingly distinct from everyday speech. Writing had the pragmatic value of helping to spread particular religious beliefs, but it also promoted their authority and acceptability.[28]

Given such a close association between religion and writing, one should expect to find written records and books put to use in religious ceremonies of all kinds. In Greece and Rome, written prophecies, complex spells, and instructions on what to do and not do at particular shrines were common. Jewish Torah and law scrolls were treated as cultic objects, handled with great care when in use, and buried in cemeteries when damaged or replaced. Early Christian writings, which were probably responsible for the ultimate triumph of the codex over the scroll, were invested from the first with religious significance. Processions led by

[27]Mary Beard, "Writing and Ritual: A Study of Diversity and Expansion in the Arval Acta," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 53 (1985): 114–62. The story of the trees is on pp. 138–39. Beard suggests that there may have been a connection between recordmaking and social status, that more detailed records were made as the social and economic position of the Arval priests declined, with recordmaking becoming a form of validation; see pp. 147–49.

[28]For a good overview of the connections between writing and religion, see Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), especially chapter 1. See also Goody's discussion of the spread of Islam in Africa around the year 1000 C.E. in his *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125–38. For introductory discussions of the liturgical significance of the written word in early Christianity, see George Galavaris, "Manuscripts and the Liturgy," *Illuminated Greek Manuscripts from American Collections,* edited by Gary Vikan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 20–25, and Otto Pacht, *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10–12.

someone carrying aloft a book or scroll (often elaborately decorated), the ceremonial kissing of written holy words, the distribution of texts to scattered sectarian communities (as in the Epistles of Saint Paul), all offer evidence of the connection between records and ritual.[29]

These connections were not confined to ancient times but may still be seen in religious practices today, especially in denominations that retain a high degree of ritual. Weekly Jewish sabbath services, for example, have a ceremonial display of and reading from the Torah at their core. Accompanied by the chanting of the congregation, the scroll of the Torah is taken from the Holy Ark and leads a procession to the reader's desk; members of the congregation come forward and reverence it by kissing it with their fingers, prayer shawls, or (in some instances) their own prayer books. After the reading, the scroll is lifted up, some of its text exposed to view, then rerolled and returned to its place of honor. Some yearly Jewish festivals (Simhat Torah, for example, celebrated every autumn) are devoted not only to the reading of the content of the revelation but also to acts of ceremony honoring the object itself. In another example of the ceremonial use of documents, Jewish marriage ceremonies include the ritual signing of a document called a *ketubah* by the bride and groom in front of the witnesses. This document is the lineal descendant of the civil marriage "contract," but its practical uses today are limited. The parties still need a marriage license from the state, and the *ketubah* is written in Aramaic, a language few can read.[30]

Records also play an important role in Roman Catholic and Episcopal ceremonies, especially during the ordination of priests and bishops. At the ordination of a Catholic bishop, the presiding celebrant asks the officers attending the bishop-elect whether he has a mandate of appointment from the pope. The document, usually a hand-lettered and sealed parchment, is then produced. It is first ceremonially shown to those participating on the altar and then held up before the entire congregation, ostensibly for them to satisfy themselves that the document, and therefore the appointment, is valid, before its contents are read aloud. Later, the presiding officer places an open book of the Gospels on the head of the bishop-elect while the prayer of consecration is said. Immediately thereafter, the head is anointed while two other priests hold the book over it. In Episcopal ceremonies, the procedure is similar. Documents attesting to the valid election of the new bishop are read, a declaration of loyalty is signed by him ("in the sight of all present," the prayer book prescribes), and a copy of the Bible is presented.[31]

[29]Harris, *Ancient Literacy,* 154, 218–21; Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 15–20; Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), especially chapters 8 to 11. For a discussion of the darker side of the connections among writing, religion, and magic, see the examples offered in John G. Gager, ed., *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[30]For a discussion of all these ceremonies, see Abraham E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), 179–81, and 327–28.

[31]For a description of the Catholic ceremony, see *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1980), 87–100. There is a similar procedure in consecrating the leaders of religious and monastic communities of both men and women, in which those being installed receive a copy of the rule of the order; *Rites,* 122, 130–31. For the Episcopal ceremony, see *The Book of Common Prayer* (Kingsport, Tenn.: Kingsport Press, 1977), 513–21. Earlier practice in the Church of England called for a Bible to be placed on the neck of the bishop-elect as he knelt in prayer, symbolizing the burden of responsibility that came with the office; see Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 529.

Ritual Uses of Records. An open book of the gospels is placed like a yoke on the shoulders of Jeremiah J. Minihan during his consecration as an auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston in 1954. *(Photo: Archives, Archdiocese of Boston)*

Colleges and universities are equally good places to observe the ceremonial use of records, frequently focused on the diploma. At some institutions the text of the degree is read during the commencement ceremony, often in the original Latin and without translation. For most participants, the high point of any graduation exercise comes as their name is called and the diploma is received. Parents and friends crowd around, eager to record on film the precise moment at which the diploma is handed over. So central is this symbolic act involving the document that the ceremony may even be arranged to create a deliberately false impression. At the author's own university, students march across the stage as their names are called and receive from the dean the large, flat leather folders containing their diplomas—except that the diplomas are not actually in them! The folders are empty. Only after all grades have been recorded and averages computed (and library fines paid, of course), usually weeks after the graduation ceremony itself, does the diploma arrive at each student's house by mail. In some cases, students will have failed classes, and their degrees will remain to be completed, even though they have already participated in the ceremony and thereby appeared to have graduated. There are other document-based university rituals. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, new presidents are installed in a ceremony that includes the handing over of a copy of the school's charter as a symbol of their taking office. This copy has no practical or legal significance; the president probably does not read it, then or ever, and the original alone (a legislative document kept in the state archives) constitutes "the record." The only certain result is to multiply the number of copies of the charter, all of them useless, in the presidents' papers in the institute's archives. Still, the installation ceremony is deemed to be incomplete without this ritual use of the document.[32]

Records Revered as Objects

Where documents are put to religious and ceremonial uses, the records are revered as objects in themselves more than they are valued for their contents. Such reverence is not attached to all records, to be sure, but with those special enough to warrant it, the sentiment is genuine and lasting. The aura surrounding the Domesday Book offers a good example.

The Domesday survey was compiled by agents of William the Norman just twenty years after his conquest of England, and the resulting record became important in royal administration. Its precise practical uses changed with time, however. The particulars of feudal obligation went out of date quickly, but the completeness of the survey meant that its record of lands and rights had an enduring utility. In 1256, for example, almost two hundred years after its compilation, it was used in a legal case to force the inhabitants of Chester to pay for the repair of a bridge, since the Domesday Book indicated that maintaining the bridge had always been their obligation. Well into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries, the book was still being cited in court proceedings. By that time, its pages had pretty much ceased to yield up any relevant evidence, but litigants and lawyers continued to search it in the increasingly vain hope of supporting their case. The universal and almost mythic respect which had, by that time, grown up around it made it seem the logical starting point for all inquiries.[33]

The more purely historical meaning of the Domesday Book emerged gradually, and

[32]Helen W. Samuels to author, 1 November 1989, in author's possession.

[33]The best history of Domesday and its meaning is Elizabeth M. Hallam, *Domesday Book Through Nine Centuries* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986). For the changing uses of the book, see pp. 32–73.

in that it achieved an unrivaled symbolic value. Not just any primary source, it was so comprehensive and so ancient that it came to occupy a central psychological position, even when it was cited in support of patently ridiculous assertions. In 1919, an editorial writer called for efforts to preserve an oak tree in Essex on the grounds that the tree had been specifically mentioned in Domesday. The document's name said it all. A twelfth-century administrator, writing when the book was only ninety years old, recognized this. "The book is metaphorically called by the native English, Domesday, i.e., the Day of Judgment," said Richard Fitz Neal, Henry II's treasurer. "For as the sentence of that strict and terrible last account cannot be evaded by any subterfuge, so when this book is appealed to on those matters which it contains, its sentence cannot be quashed or set aside. . . . Its decisions, like those of the Last Judgment, are unalterable."[34] Even the procedure for making copies of information from the Domesday Book was designed to reinforce its symbolic centrality. Well into the seventeenth century, clerks making copies or extracts from it were required to do so in a script that mimicked that of the original, a style of handwriting that had long since gone out of common use.[35]

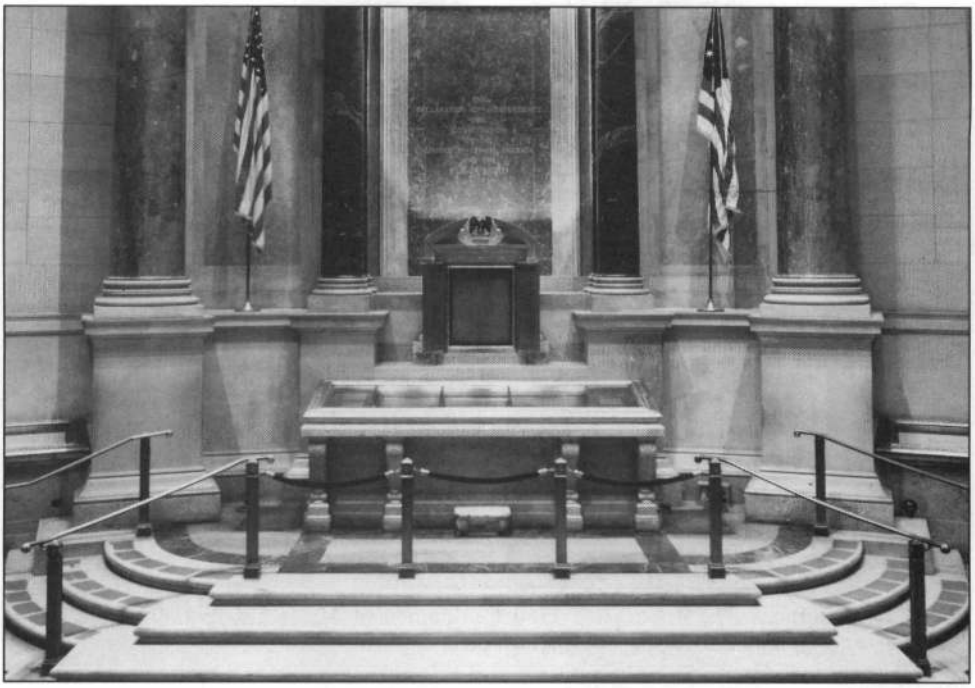
By the nineteenth century, Domesday had emerged as a largely symbolic museum piece with tremendous sentimental value attached to it. It was rebound several times between increasingly elaborate covers, and the first photographs of some of its pages were produced and sold in the 1860s. An "octocentennial" was held for it in 1886, inaugurating an ongoing pattern of exhibits, lectures, and even spoofs in *Punch*. During the First World War and again in the Second World War, it was stored in a prison in the countryside, far out of harm's way in London, and in 1952 it was the center of a minor controversy when the deputy keeper of public records—it was Hilary Jenkinson!—closed the museum where it was on display, claiming the impact of budget cutbacks.[36] The stature of the Domesday Book may be the exception rather than the rule, of course, but it still demonstrates the power of the impulse to revere some documents as objects.

In the American context, the symbolic analogs to Domesday are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In their early history, both documents moved around with the Continental Congress or the seat of government. In the nineteenth century, the Constitution's travels were particularly wide-ranging and not necessarily happy. During the evacuation of Washington in 1814, for instance, it was thrown into a linen sack with some other loose papers and stored in a vacant grist mill a few miles up the Potomac River. Later on, it continued to move from here to there, and at midcentury it was kept (probably without intentional irony) at the Washington Orphan Asylum. Only gradually, as interest in "tradition" increased, did concern for the document itself grow. By the 1920s, both the Constitution and the Declaration were on display at the Library of Congress, but the dedication of the National Archives building in 1933 touched off a twenty-year tug of war between the two federal agencies for the rights to possess and exhibit them. When the library finally gave them up to the National Archives in 1952, the

[34]Quoted in Hallam, *Domesday Book,* 32. The use of the Judgment Day metaphor indicates that the image of the all-inclusive Book of Life (above, n. 18) was common even then.

[35]Hallam, *Domesday Book,* 60, 114. The preservation and use of an ancient script would also be evident later, even after the perfection of movable type printing. Many early type fonts were designed to look like particular styles of handwriting; see Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800,* translated by David Gerard (London: NLB, 1976), 78–83.

[36]On the physical care of Domesday and its modern adventures, see Hallam, *Domesday Book,* 153–72.

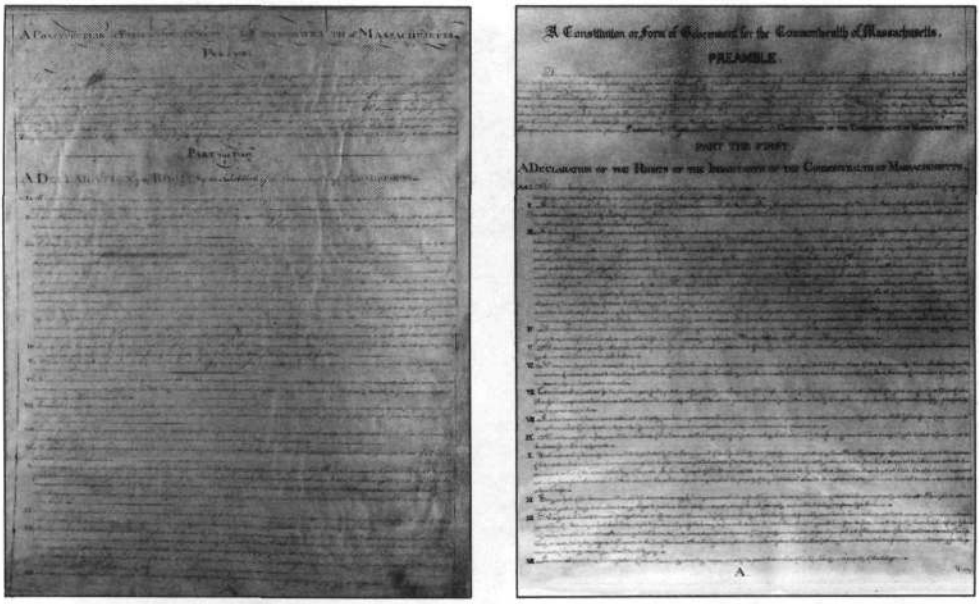


Shrines for Records. The "high altar" in the main hall of the National Archives, Washington, D.C. This reliquary displays the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. *(Photo courtesy of the National Archives)*

transfer was accomplished with all the pomp and solemnity of a medieval procession of saintly relics. The boxed pages were brought down the library steps through an honor guard of eighty-eight servicewomen, loaded into an armored personnel carrier, and escorted down Pennsylvania Avenue by the army and air force bands. Once at the archives, they were greeted by the president and chief justice and installed in exhibit cases, appropriately called the "Shrine of Freedom," specially built to hold them. "We are engaged here today in a symbolic act," President Harry S Truman said. "We are enshrining these documents for future ages."[37]

Truman said more than he knew, and there is much work still to be done in understanding the easy equation, explicit in his remark and implicit in much architectural practice, of archives and shrines. Why are so many archives buildings massive and fortresslike? Why is such solidity (stolidity?) the not-so-subtle message of their designers and occupants? Why do we feel that

[37]On the early travels of the Constitution and Declaration, see Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 72–75. For the slowly emerging interest in them as objects, compare Kammen's accounts of the 1887 centennial and the 1937 sesquicentennial of the Constitution in his *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 445, 457. On the twentieth-century bureaucratic struggle for the two documents, see Milton O. Gustafson, "The Empty Shrine: The Transfer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to the National Archives," *American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 271–85; the same story is told, in not quite so lively a way, in Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934–1968* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 254–56.



Two Constitutions. The deteriorated 1780 Constitution of Massachusetts (*left*) and its 1894 "perfect" copy. *(Photo courtesy of the Massachusetts Archives)*

the importance of the documents that archives hold is best served by imposing physical surroundings? What messages do these structures send about the accessibility and "user-friendliness" of archives?

As with the empty diploma folders, constitutions are important enough as revered objects that we may even be willing to deceive the public at large in order to preserve the aura that surrounds them. The story of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 offers a good example. Massachusetts boasts the oldest written constitution in the world which is still in effect; it is largely the work of John Adams. The original was written on nine sheets of parchment, each more than two feet square, shortly after its adoption, and it was stored and occasionally displayed throughout the nineteenth century by the secretary of the commonwealth. In 1893, the secretary reported to the legislature that the original manuscript of the Constitution was "in such a condition that, in my judgment, it should be copied without delay. In several places the ink has faded so as to be hardly visible." The legislature authorized the making of a copy and specifically invested that copy with "the same force and effect as the original." Within a year, a "perfect" copy had been made. "Parchment of the same size as the original was procured," the secretary reported after the work had been completed, "on which the copy was written line for line, with interlineations and marginal notes wherever such appeared in the original, and with special care to reproduce punctuation and capitalization."[38] The copy was exact, literally "line for line": Even when a word was divided over two lines in the original, it was rendered that way in the copy. Though

[38]*Second Report of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the Year Ending December 31, 1893* (Boston, 1894), 13; Chapter 58 of the Resolves of 1894, original papers, Archives, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Boston; *Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the Year Ending December 31, 1894* (Boston, 1895), 15. I am grateful to Albert H. Whitaker, archivist of the commonwealth, for permitting me to examine both the original constitution and the copy.

they did not attempt to replicate eighteenth-century orthography, the craftsmen who copied the Massachusetts Constitution more than a century after it was written were scrupulous in making their work look as much like the original as they could. A mere transcription or printed version of the text for legal or informational purposes was not sufficient; the document was important enough as a document that the copy had to be as nearly "perfect," visually and physically, as possible.

The remarkable features of this case do not end there. As noted, the copy was declared to be the legal equivalent of the original, which now became, in effect, irrelevant or unnecessary. The significance of that designation went beyond questions of constitutional law. Perhaps typically for anything involving Massachusetts government, an elaborate and apparently intentional deception then began. The original document was retired to a specially built walnut case—one is tempted to say "reliquary"—stored first in the secretary's own office and eventually in the state archives. The copy was then put on exhibit (where it remained until 1984) but without any indication that it was not the original. Thousands of tourists and schoolchildren were invited to look on their constitution without any knowledge that they were seeing an 1894 copy rather than the 1780 original. Few suspected, since it looked "old enough." The symbolic meaning of the document was so important that lying—or at least failing to tell the whole truth—was permissible to preserve its mystique.

Not every archival record is the Domesday Book or the Declaration of Independence, but these extreme examples highlight nonetheless the ways in which other, "lesser" records may be revered as objects. In virtually any institutional context, some documents may take on the character of a relic more for what they are than for the information they contain. The charter of a business organization, the original deed to the property of a hospital or social welfare institution, the handwritten diary of a founding religious missionary—all may be symbolic documents that are carefully preserved, pointed to and handled with awe, and taken out periodically to be shown to distinguished visitors. Virtually every archives has such documents, to which it accords a certain pride of place.

Hostility Toward Records

If records can be revered as talismanic objects, they may also be despised. Records may evoke as much hostility as reverence. A democratic revolution in first-century Greece led to the burning by a mob of the city archives, for instance, an action one historian has described as "certainly . . . not a unique event" in classical times. Opposition to central authority in the Roman Empire could likewise spawn local hostility toward the records of administration, perhaps taxation records in particular. During the French Revolution, any document written in fancy script and adorned with seals or other trappings was deemed to be ipso facto a legacy of feudal oppression and was therefore marked for destruction.[39]

Destroying records may be an important instrument of war, politics, or religion. The victorious frequently symbolize and even celebrate their victory by gathering up and destroying the books and records of the vanquished. An estimated 120,000 Christian manuscript books were thrown into the sea by the Islamic captors of Constantinople in 1453. During the Peasants' Revolt in Germany almost a century later, the destruction took a more deliberate and targeted form: Lutheran peasants attacked Catholic monasteries and religious houses, intent not only on the pious work of burn-

[39]Harris, *Ancient Literacy,* 128, 211; Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 161–62.

ing "idolatrous" books of the old faith but also, in the same stroke, eliminating evidence of debt and work obligations. During the wars of religion in sixteenth century France, book burning seemed to become a favorite type of "street theater," competing with rival processions for the most common form of party identification. In one instance, a Catholic mob hanged a Protestant printer and burned his "seditious" volumes as part of the same public ceremony.[40] Few actions are more symbolically straightforward than consigning the written words of an opponent to the flames. Is there a more graphically direct symbol for the destruction of ideas thought to be dangerous?

As Orwell knew, control of the past was critical to control of both the present and the future. The constant rewriting of the historical record, the annihilation of old, outdated "facts," and their replacement by the new ones of changing orthodoxies were all essential government monopolies in the negative utopia of *1984*. Such absolute controls, however, are by no means confined to fiction. The first Qin emperor of China, who unified the country and began construction of the Great Wall, reinforced his position at the head of a "new world order" by destroying all previous historical writings in 213 B.C.E. History would literally begin with him. When his successors sought to reconstruct the past around this deliberately created gap, they did so by carving classic Confucian texts in stone and placing them strategically around the empire, a practice that continued until the end of the eighteenth century. Even at that, the inscriptions remained controversial, and these tablets were periodically smashed during local uprisings.[41]

More recently, the political upheavals in Eastern Europe have offered examples of hatred toward written records. In January 1990, for instance, a mob stormed the headquarters of Stasi, the East German secret police. The protestors broke up the furniture, scattered the agency's surveillance files on the floor, and proceeded to stomp on them in what one newspaper temperately called "a show of popular frustration." Significantly, the mob did not destroy the files—indeed, just one month before, leaders of the democratic movement in East Germany had acted to prevent the destruction of secret police files in the interests of preserving evidence of government abuse and of identifying informers—but simply vented their wrath on them by physically abusing them.[42]

In this and in similar cases elsewhere in East Germany and in other collapsing Communist bloc countries, the records had great symbolic significance. They certainly had been created to accomplish a practical purpose—in this instance, the systematic violation of human rights by the government. To the democratic movements, however, the records had been transformed, at

[40]Marc Drogin, *Biblioclasm: The Mythical Origins, Magic Powers, and Perishability of the Written Word* (Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989), 74, 84; Barbara S. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 56, 65. See also the revisionist argument that it was the enduring religious hostility among pagans, Christians, and Moslems (rather than the cataclysm of warfare) that led to the destruction of the great ancient library, in Diana Delia's "From Romance to Rhetoric: The Alexandrian Library in Classical and Islamic Traditions," *American Historical Review* 97 (December 1992): 1449–67.

[41]Drogin, *Biblioclasm,* 82–83; see also John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1992), 54–57. Orwell's famous dictum—"Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past"—is in *1984* (New York: Signet, 1982), 32. There is a need for more study of hostility toward books and records, a study that might start with the treatment of the subject in works of fiction like *1984* and Ray Bradbury's science fiction classic, *Fahrenheit 451*.

[42]*New York Times,* 16 January 1990. For examples of the mob moving to protect the files from destruction (often by their fleeing Communist masters), see the *New York Times,* 6 and 8 December 1989.

least temporarily, into something else: symbols of all that was wrong with the regimes they were now overthrowing. To destroy the records, or at least to scatter them around on the floor and to feel the satisfaction of grinding them underfoot, had more to do with symbolism and psychology than with the utilitarian aspects of recordmaking and recordkeeping.

Conclusion

The argument throughout this exploration is not that archival records have symbolic meaning to the exclusion of practical meaning or use. Probably most of the records archivists encounter, especially those functional and instrumental records of modern bureaucratic organizations, will exhibit far more practical than symbolic characteristics. Those archival theorists and writers who concentrated on the records produced by "purposive" activities were not mistaken; they simply did not see the entire picture. As a corrective, we should begin to explore in further detail—in part, simply by multiplying the number and kind of examples considered here—the symbolic aspects of archival culture. One view is not "right" and the other "wrong"; what we need is a more balanced vision.

Such an exercise in balancing may have a usefulness to archivists even in their everyday practice. As noted at the outset, appraisal, arrangement, description, reference, and outreach programs may all be enhanced by a fuller understanding of the roles, both practical and symbolic, which records have played. More fundamentally, archivists have always maintained that they are interested first and foremost in the context of their records. They have taken the principles of provenance and original order, both of which require an understanding of the contexts in which records were originally created and used, as their central professional guides. To understand records, archivists say, one must understand as much as possible about the circumstances that produced them. Achieving that understanding demands that we look not only at the practical, utilitarian context of records but at the symbolic context and meaning as well. If we continue to overlook that aspect of our work, our task as archivists remains only half done.