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Review of The American Archivist Online Supplement to Volume 74

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Review of *The American Archivist Online Supplement to Volume 74*

By William E. Landis, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012. Online. <http://www2.archivists.org/american-archivist/supplement/aaos74>

The American Archivist Online Supplement to Volume 74, the first supplement to this professional journal published by the Society of American Archivists (SAA), brings conference presentations into the peer-reviewed journal environment. The result, while giving conference content a longer life and broader audience, is a bit of a culture clash. The supplement attempts to uphold the standards of a professional journal with diverse topics addressed by respected archivists, but the worthy experiment falls short.

Posted online asynchronously between August 2012 and December 2013, the supplement contains content from nine sessions held at the August 2011 Society of American Archivists 75th anniversary conference in Chicago. The conference theme that year, *ARCHIVES 360°*, intended to be a feedback process, encouraging reflection on SAA's past and preparation for its future. A track of special sessions focused on the organization's 75th anniversary, examining various aspects of SAA's history in relation to the archival profession.

This special track served as the inspiration for this first-ever journal supplement. Since it is the first and (so far) only supplement, it can easily be found through the link from the SAA webpage describing *The American Archivist*. The direct link is <http://www2.archivists.org/american-archivist/supplement/aaos74>. Articles from the supplement also appear when searching SAA's MetaPress site at <http://archivists.metapress.com/home/main.mpx>. Upon posting, content was not embargoed from non-members as usual, and print copies were not sent out.

The supplement's guest editor is William E. Landis, the head of Special Collections Research and Instructional Services at the Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Landis has previously worked at the Yale University Library, the California Digital Library, the University of California, Irvine, and JSTOR, a large-scale scholarly journal digitization project. Landis is an SAA Council member, an SAA fellow, and has been active with SAA, teaching workshops and serving on several committees, mostly involving archival description. He has also served on the *American Archivist* Editorial Board and the Publications Board.

Landis's four-page introduction to the volume is part of the eight-page PDF file which contains the typical printed journal front matter. It should be read by

anyone reading the associated content. Among the points Landis makes is that repurposing content from past SAA annual meetings has been a challenge in recent years as few presenters have submitted papers to the journal. He gives statistics of the increasing number of PowerPoint presentations posted to conference webpages and entirely dismisses “traditional, purchased session recordings” as an adequate way of capturing content.

While I agree that neither of those approaches is ideal, readers should note that session recordings for the 2011 annual meeting are freely available through that year’s website at <http://www2.archivists.org/conference/2011/chicago/2011-annual-meeting-recordings>. This includes the presentations published in this supplement. The recordings of course do not include the citations important in many of the published versions, nor are they keyword searchable.

Another of Landis’ points in the introduction deserves quotation: “The rigorous review of session proposals by the Program Committee served in lieu of traditional blind peer review in assuring the relevance and quality of content in these articles” (p. viii). Knowing that the Program Committee reviews abstracts as session proposals, with names and professional affiliations attached, and that final presentations can vary widely from what is proposed, I contend that this is not an equivalent substitution for peer review. Publishing conference presentations is valuable and an important way to share knowledge across the profession, but neither Landis nor the Editorial Board should pretend that these equate to articles vetted by the blind peer review process.

Landis also states that part of the goal of creating an online supplement containing conference presentations was to share them “in a timely way” (p. viii). Since some of the articles went online more than two full years after the 2011 conference, and knowing there was no print equivalent to distribute, this goal was clearly not achieved. Likewise, as an experiment in publishing conference content, one wonders if SAA saw the supplement as successful since there has been none published of 2012 conference presentations.

To achieve this supplement, content from the 75th anniversary sessions were targeted for invitations, but not all chose to participate. Landis does not detail how or why additional sessions were chosen. The nine articles in the supplement cover the topics of being a lone arranger; educating about archives; the Congressional Papers Roundtable; the founding of the archives profession; reference, access, and outreach; international women’s collections; access restrictions on collections; regional associations; and descriptive standards. Many of these articles relate the topic to SAA’s involvement and nicely carry out the 75th anniversary theme. Three seem more tangential. In examining the 2011 conference program, I discovered six of the nine articles were 75th anniversary special sessions. The three tangential ones were general sessions.

The articles are delivered as discrete PDF files, listed as links through the supplement’s web page in order of original conference session number. There are no

bells and whistles that typical online-only journals feature. While these are not necessary for accessing the content, their absence does indicate that SAA is not prepared to deliver such content in a technically savvy way at this time. Indeed, some links open in place and others open in a new browser tab, indicating a variance in coding.

Each article is a compilation of a whole session, and most are in the range of 30 pages. Sometimes an introduction from a chair is given, and sometimes audience questions or comments are included at the end. An “About the Panelists” section can be found at the end of each article. Forty authors are published in these nine articles. Many of them are leading names in the field, including Mark Greene, John Fleckner, Mary Jo Pugh, Danna Bell-Russel, Paul Conway, and Dennis Meissner.

Just as SAA sessions vary in style, so do these articles. Some are formal presentations, written in advance and liberally peppered with citations, while others are more informal discussions transcribed to be articles. Many of the former could be standalone fully developed peer-reviewed articles and seem to be what Landis was aiming for in proposing this supplement. The few illustrations and tables included with various articles are helpful and nice additions.

To me, the best contributions to the volume are two articles that critically examine the historical underpinnings and evolution of the archival profession and practices. The first of these is “Founding Brothers: Leland, Buck, and Cappon and the Formation of the Archives Profession” by archival luminaries Richard J. Cox, Charles Dollar, Rebecca Hirsch, and Peter J. Wosh. Hirsch provides an introduction while the three gentlemen draw on their previous research to present condensed biographies of three founders of the American archival profession: Waldo Leland, Solon Buck, and Lester Cappon.

The second of these articles is “Thirty Years On: SAA and Descriptive Standards” by Steven L. Hensen, William E. Landis, Kathleen D. Roe, Michael Rush, William Stocking, and Victoria Irons Walch. Hensen, one of the leaders in the development of archival descriptive standards, gives an introduction as well as concluding thoughts. Less important in print than at the session itself, Walch presented Roe’s paper and Landis presented both his own and Rush’s. All clearly point out that SAA was not as involved with shaping descriptive standards for archival materials as it could have been, though that has been changing in recent years. Stocking shares his perspective from the United Kingdom, which provides an interesting contrast of parallel but separate developments. Audience comments and questions conclude the piece.

Overall, the supplement is less useful as a coherent volume than as standalone articles, of interest to people focused on specific subjects or with defined research purposes. Most future use of the content of this supplement will likely not be as a unified volume. Rather, people will search the online site and come upon a particular article of interest. Those readers who do not seek and examine the

supplement's front matter will not know the special circumstances that led to the supplement's publication.

The supplement nonetheless is an important contribution to the archival literature. The positive outcome of choosing to publish conference presentations as a supplement to a scholarly professional journal is that the community has captured more conference content than usual. It is great to see the work of so many presenters live on, integrated into the professional literature, even if not fully up to scholarly journal standards. Perhaps the supplement's most important contribution is its experimental nature, giving future conference presenters and journal editors some lessons from which to learn.

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