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Flesher: American Archivist - A review article
**THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST—
A REVIEW ARTICLE**

by
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The Summer, 1982, issue of *The American Archivist* magazine was a special issue devoted to business archives. Because of the importance of business archives to accounting historians, we thought it would be informative to review the articles which appeared in that special issue. Accounting historians may want to inform the archivists with whom they are familiar about the importance of this special issue.

The American Archivist is published quarterly by the Society of American Archivists (330 S. Wells, Suite 810, Chicago, IL 60606). Non-archivists may become associate members of the Society at a dues rate of \$40 per year (a sum substantially less than what archivists have to pay). In addition to numerous articles, the typical issue of *The American Archivist* contains news about new archival holdings and cataloged materials at libraries and private archives throughout the country. A reading of these new holdings might serve to give accounting historians ideas for future research projects. The remainder of this article summarizes the contents of the special issue on business archives.

"Business Archives Guidelines," by Linda Edgerly

Early in this century little attention was paid to preserving business records. With the expanded interest in financial and economic issues, historical interest has also increased. Records, other than those required by law or regulatory agencies, are now being preserved to "reconstruct the process and circumstances of decision making and the mutually dependent relationship of business and society."

Business archives are growing rapidly with a 52 percent increase from 1969 to 1980 of businesses entered in the Directory of Business Archives in the United States and Canada. Internal use of business archives has proved useful to managers, legal staffs, speech writers, corporate planners, public relations personnel and many others. Archives are also successfully supplying many members of society with business information.

One important project of the Business Archives Affinity Group is the formulation of broad, practical guidelines to develop Business Archives. There are many common goals between business archives and other archives, however the guidelines point out some differences for businesses.

"An Historical Look at Business Archives," by David R. Smith

The construction of the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. (1934), marks the formal beginning of archival history in America. Staffing was accomplished by historians trained in research. It was during this period that the Society of American Archivists was organized. The passage in 1950 of the Federal Records Act noted the time when records management was given a greater interest by the National Archives. At this same time, other groups became interested in archives, such as state and local government, businesses, churches and universities.

The awareness of the historians of the importance of business records spread. This awareness was accepted by one government archivist in stating that we recognize two capitals, Washington and Wall Street, yet we preserve the records of only one capital. As the growth of records created large amounts of paperwork, records managers began to hastily dispose of them as quickly as possible until executives became concerned about this "wholesale disposal." In 1943, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company became the first company to actively establish a business archive.

Because of the inability of libraries to store business records and only a slight interest from the business world, the establishment of business archives was slow. Archivists realized their job would be to show businesses how to set up program and persuade them to do it. The first big push was in 1969 by the SAA by sending out 700

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questionnaires to encourage business to think of the importance of their records. With an increased interest, maybe due to upcoming anniversaries or increasing lawsuits, the number of business archives doubled and business archivists quadrupled.

"Corporate Archives Today," by Douglas A. Bakker

Bakker points out that just because a corporation reports having an archive does not mean it can produce information for decision making. Many archives are maintained by a favorite old employee or may consist of a drawer in a filing cabinet.

Bakker noted six archival programs, Ford Motor Company, Boeing Company, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, Deere and Company, and International Harvester, which vary in style and activities. Staffs may range from one to four with space for records from 1,000 to 5,000 cubic feet.

Common myths are the belief that archives preserve every record and that archives will automatically lead to lawsuits. Successful corporate archives must have a purpose, be evaluated and given the same budgetary consideration as other corporate units.

"Dusting off the Cobwebs: Turning the Business Archives into a Managerial Tool," by George David Smith

Mr. Smith describes current business archives as mostly unused dusty deposits of a variety of papers and artifacts, which are only used for special occasions such as anniversaries. This problem is derived from the lack of information of how archives can best be used by the company. Companies see the cost of maintaining a business archive as outweighing the benefits.

Examples were given of the utility of business archives. For example, Coca-Cola Company has successfully litigated the preservation of trademarks and defense of antitrust cases with the use of carefully preserved historical records.

Decisions and policies of the past can be studied to formulate new policies and decisions. Studies of the past also help in training management and promoting future managers. Histories of companies provide reactions to public regulation, therefore, preparing the company for future regulations. The implication for archivists is an increased effort at supplying information to persuade companies to develop business archives.

"Commentary II," by Deborah S. Gardner

Ms. Gardner concurs with George Smith concerning the relationship of cost/benefits with business archives. However, the benefits can only be realized if the archivist has power and authority. This power and authority can be realized by the "archivist's credentials, position of the archives in the firm's organization, the value of the archival function and personal relationships." The archivist's credentials and his ability to report to top management are the most influential for the archives. The use of archival information by scholars and for research should accent the status of the archives. In other words, the utilitarian value should be known.

"Access Policies for Corporate Archives," by Anne Van Camp

SAA has adopted a set of standards for access to archives to promote accessibility to records. Scholars have given negative reactions to business archives because of the inability to have access due to non-compliance with SAA's standards. The problem is viewed as the small number of firms who have policies for access. The possibility of personal liability for the archivist and the business is a reason for this neglect.

The following elements should be included in an access policy. "Clear description of restrictions, time limits on restrictions, procedures for determining restrictions and a statement regarding lines of administrative authority." Ms. Camp concludes that the policy should be equitable, protective and easy to administer. There are risks in maintaining a business archive, but the benefits outweigh the risks.

"Business Archives Literature," by Karen Benedict

Ms. Benedict categorizes business archive literature. One conclusion reached is that the literature is mostly pragmatic, workable, solutions for operating and maintaining archives. The groups are as follows:

1. Descriptive literature for record keeping, processing, reference and access policies, with a history of the establishment of archives.
2. Articles persuading management to develop archives.
3. Articles explaining reasons for little interest of businesses in history.
4. Articles relating the obligation or social responsibility for preserving and providing access to business archives.
5. Articles for professional ethics.
6. Articles discussing growth of business archives and usefulness of corporate history.