

Student Name
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Thesis Prospectus

Topic:

Archivists have long been aware of their critical role in the creation of cultural memory. In the 1960s and 1970s, shifts in historiography prompted archivists to reconsider their dual position as both keepers and creators of the historical record. Since then, the profession has continued to discuss the necessity of maintaining historically and culturally responsible records. In recent years, this discussion has focused on inclusivity; in particular, the need to have culturally sensitive collection policies; as well as accountability, or, the promotion of open access laws that provide checks on our governing bodies and institutions. In the middle of this debate falls an additional responsibility that has been surprisingly overlooked by the archival community. At one point or another, most archivists – and particularly those who work in the museum or public services field - provide documentation for exhibits and installations. As the archival literature can attest to, many of these archivists endeavor to provide the most fair and inclusive raw material for discussion. But when there are culturally or historically sensitive issues being interpreted in a public setting, controversy is bound to arise. These controversies are significant reflections of our cultural landscape. It is essential that archivists acknowledge the value to be found in these controversies.

Hypothesis:

When an exhibit controversy arises, it creates a dialogue between the public and those in power, i.e. museum directors, curators, scholars, and even archivists and librarians. The documentation that arises from this dialogue is essential to understanding the development of society's collective beliefs and values. With this in mind, I believe that archivists must prioritize the collection of materials associated with their institution's controversial exhibits. These materials include online articles, newspaper clippings, meeting minutes from roundtables and public meetings, as well as letters and emails of response. In addition, archivists should endeavor to make these materials available to researchers as soon as possible. As a suggestion for the future, institutions might collaborate to create an online research center based around museum and library exhibit controversies. The online center could potentially include digitized material and cross-collection references. Public historians could be very influential in making a case for the value of an online research center of this nature.

Methodology:

This paper will discuss the archivist's role in documenting museum and exhibit controversies. Our case study will be the highly controversial President's House site in Philadelphia. First, I plan to discuss the anatomy of a controversy, including the players involved and the evolution of events. In the case of the President's House, this involves a discussion of the National Park Service (NPS), the City of Philadelphia, particular community groups, like the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC), and historians

like Gary Nash and Michael Coard. We will then examine the controversy itself, using a timeline of events reconstructed from original materials including NPS documents, meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. These materials can be found online through the President's House website and from the Independence National Historical Park archives. I would also like to compare the President's House site controversy to museum controversies in the past, like the failed Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The Enola Gay exhibit is very relevant to this discussion; not only does it exemplify a situation similar to the President's House site, but it is also a missed opportunity for a discussion of archives and museum controversy.

Secondly, we will discuss the public history issues involved in museum controversies. For the President's House site, this involves the intersection of two "loaded" historical issues: slavery and the Founding Fathers. These tricky subjects are compounded by the cultural landscape of Philadelphia – a volatile city with a history of uneasy interactions. I also plan to discuss issues of civil religion, collective memory, and how we commemorate space. This territory has been well covered by a number of public historians, librarians, and archivists who have written on the President's House and on issues of collective memory, cultural history, and commemoration.

Lastly, I plan to discuss how controversial exhibits like the President's House impact the archives. This includes how the material from past exhibit controversies, like the *Enola Gay*, was archived, as well as how the archivists for the NPS, the City of Philadelphia, and community groups like ATAC are preserving their exhibit documentation. I will discuss what types of materials are generated by controversies like this. I also plan to make suggestions for how archivists can best collect and catalogue the documentation that develops from these public history conversations. Lastly, I will propose a means for institutions to collaboratively make these conversations available for further and more widespread discussion. For this discussion I will rely on archival literature, as well as discussions with archivists from the Philadelphia area.

Preliminary Outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Anatomy of a controversy: The President's House in Philadelphia
 - a. Participants
 - b. Timeline of events
 - c. Comparable exhibits
- III. Public history issues
 - a. Creation of collective memory
 - b. Slavery
 - c. Founding Fathers and civil religion
 - d. Commemorating space
- IV. Impact on archives
 - a. Types of documentation
 - b. Collecting and processing
 - c. Past experiences
- V. Conclusion
 - a. Future suggestions

Preliminary Bibliography:

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Archives and Websites

Independence National Historical Park Library and Archives

National Air and Space Museum Archives Division

Philadelphia City Archives

Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives

<http://www.neh.gov/>

<http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/>