Social History and Local Records: Historical Methods, Archival Theory, and the Library of Virginia

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ABSTRACT. Local records are the foundation upon which social history is constructed. However, in an era when most historians categorize themselves as social historians, it is amazing to note how much these primary resources appear to be underutilized in scholarly works. This essay attempts to understand why this is so by understanding how it is that historians seek resources and how archivists make them available. It then proposes possible solutions, beneficial to both the institutions and the researchers alike on how to make the most of these often difficult to access records.

In late summer 2005, a Virginia historian posted a query to the Virginia History Listserv. His question concerned a Virginia resident who had complained to him that on a recent visit to his county’s courthouse, the records and volumes appeared to be unkempt and in a state of
disrepair. In essence, he wanted to know why the state was not involved in maintaining and/or preserving the county’s older records. This query came as quite a surprise to the archivists in the Local Records Services Branch at the Library of Virginia, the unit charged with maintaining and preserving the city and county court records of the Commonwealth of Virginia. More disturbing was the fact that the person posting the query was not just any historian, but was the executive director of his county’s historical society, a position that would seemingly make him the most knowledgeable person concerning the county’s historical resources. If this expert in his county’s history was unaware of the state-run program that houses over 600 cubic feet and more than 500 volumes of pre-1913 records from his county, then it is no wonder that the papers in the Local Records Collection at the Library of Virginia appear to be severely underutilized in historical and other scholarly research.

This phenomenon is all the more puzzling as local records are useful resources for numerous aspects of Virginia history, not to mention the fact that, at their very core, they are the building blocks with which social history is constructed. The local records held at the Library of Virginia consist of any official documents generated by the governments in Virginia’s localities, generally prior to 1913. The bulk of these historical records are case files consisting of court cases such as judgments, chancery, and Commonwealth (or criminal) causes. However, local records also include other documents covering numerous aspects of the daily lives of Virginians, such as: free Negro and slave records, military and pension records, marriage and vital statistics, bonds of obligation, official’s bonds, wills, deeds, land grants, claims and accounts, road and bridge papers, and many more. If a person was born, resided in, or died in a Virginia city or county, the chances are pretty good that, if the records survive, the individuals are documented in these local records in some way. These records are fundamental resources in social history research. How
does one tell the story of a person who would not or could not write letters or keep a diary? By no means can a complete picture of these unknown persons be drawn, however many aspects of their lives can be told using the documents generated in their local courthouses.

The records of Virginia’s localities and other state agencies have been housed at the state library from its inception in 1823. In essence, the Library of Virginia, formerly known as the Virginia State Library and Archives, has always been the repository of last resort for the court records of all the localities in the state. Until recently a large number of Virginia’s governmental agencies, both state and local, kept their own business records. However, the natural growth of governmental bureaucracy, compounded by the increase in paper work associated with modern governmental administration, has forced many state agencies and local governments to remove their older records to the state library for safekeeping. The Library’s Local Records Program was formally implemented in the early 1970s as a direct result of a fire at the Botetourt County Courthouse in 1970. After that, in cases where adequate onsite storage could not be provided, the clerks were encouraged to transfer the records to the state library for safekeeping. This very often resulted in the removal of materials from ancient courthouse’s damp basements and musty attics to a climate controlled, fire protected, and structurally sound environment. Once the records were transferred and in the library’s care, they could then be arranged and described, stored in acid-free containers and scheduled for microfilm duplication.

From its inception, the Local Records Program focused on the protection and security of the records; however, over the years this branch—now Local Records Services—has made description and access, in addition to physical security, a major component of its mission. In 2000, the library implemented a statewide database to index chancery court records. This database, especially useful for genealogists, provides only surname access; if researchers know
the name of the person they are looking for, they may have success with the database. However, if researchers are looking for a certain type of suit, such as a divorce or estate settlement, they must pull each box from the shelf and go through the cases, folder by folder.

In addition, the problems that any researcher might face utilizing local records are very often the same problems that the archivists face processing them; namely, the lack of uniformity between the various localities. The quirkiness of each of the locality’s clerks over the centuries, combined with the various record series having different names in different localities at different time, presents challenges for archivist and researchers alike.

At about the same time that the library’s Local Records Program was getting started, a new method of historical research was coming to fruition. “Social history” was spawned as an outgrowth of both historical and social science research in the 1960s. In this approach, society, rather than the individual, became the focus of research. Social history methods can incorporate statistical, quantitative, demographic, and/or analytical approaches. Historians use this data to reveal evolving social trends and common experiences within society. A social historian works to synthesize economic, legal and other aspects of civil society, demonstrating the development of social norms and other behaviors in order to produce a fuller or better-rounded picture of the people in a society of a bygone era. Sometimes termed “history from the bottom up,” it is a conscious effort by historians to move away from political, institutional, and military history, or the so-called histories of the “great white men,” and seek out information on the lives of the untold masses, with special consideration to women, African Americans, Native Americans, and other minority groups. In more recent investigations, social historians have addressed urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of consumer culture.
INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF HISTORIANS

For an archive such as the Library of Virginia to know how to better serve historians it is important that the archivists understand the information seeking behavior of these researchers. An almost unconscious essential first step in the historical research process is categorization. Historians divide their fields and label relevant concepts. These demarcations can be categorized into time periods (including thematic eras or date ranges), subject or topic, and geographical. These groupings can be broken down even further into what is sometimes referred to as “micro” history. In this way, historians are seen as narrowing their focus from very broad to researchable topics. Consequently, historians use these demarcations in order to categorize their own specific field, area, or specialty. According a recent survey of 600 historians, the most frequently reported themes were social history (358 respondents), cultural history (288), and political history (284). These were followed by gender (159), religious (133), economic (138), and military history (107). After these were smaller—but not inconsequential—categories, such as labor, science and technology, medicine, business, Native Americans, and transportation. Undoubtedly, some historians cast themselves in more than one category and admittedly, the order, as well as the categorizations are subjective or cognitive ones imposed by historians. As artificial as these categories might appear to be, they serve as access points, however broad, for historical research, defining both researchers and the scope of their investigation.

All research is an individualized and subjective process in which intuition and imagination are important elements. There is no formula to take a researcher from broad categorizations, background reading and topic development, to searches of indexes, catalogs, and finding aids, and then ultimately to the articles, books, and manuscripts. More often than not, in the initial stages of their research, historians may appear vague or uncertain about what they are looking
for. Their methods may even appear haphazard or disjointed, as they groove their way through their research, stumbling onto relevant material as they proceed. But, according to Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson, however disorganized their approaches may appear to be, historians are systematic and purposeful in the way they go about building context, which enables them to find and interpret relevant material. Although the building of contextual knowledge is time-consuming, requiring broad searches through vast amounts of archival material, it appears to be an essential part of the historical method.\(^4\)

In this way, historians develop a context or foundation for the research that helps them to identify relevant information. As their expertise and cognitive knowledge increases, historians are able to refine their search strategies, directing them to the sources that might yield the most relevant information. As a result of these early stages of prep work, it is hoped that the historians come to the library or archives with an abundance of knowledge concerning topics, literature, and people. According to D. O. Case, “The logic of their work is reconstructed afterward, in an idealized fashion, reflecting a highly rationalized process that may not have actually taken place.”\(^5\)

The next step in the process for historians is identifying potential sources. The most common and preferred means of locating relevant research materials are footnote chasing or backward chaining, and citation searching. Although this method may appear random and unsystematic, it is the most “effective means of retrieving the most relevant and highest quality secondary sources in the shortest period of time.” Other studies confirm these findings. Helen Tibbo’s survey shows that “Ninety-eight percent of the historians indicated that they found materials by following leads and citations in printed sources.” Wendy Duff, B. Craig, and J. Cherry found that
colleagues ranked as the second most important source, and that there is a growing reliance on online alternatives, such as e-mail and lists.  

Using the broad categorical approaches when searching for information usually guarantees that large numbers of resources would be retrieved. As historians continue their investigations, they continue to gain knowledge and build context for their research. As they delve deeper into their research, they gain their insight from narrower and more detailed sources. According to B. C. Orbach, “Researchers wanted to get more directly to specific materials as their research progressed and their knowledge of the sources accumulated. This may also explain why one historian expressed more desire for subject access in the early part of research.” This insight can come in the form of other archival materials, communication with archivists and colleagues, or based on previous research experiences. The historians surveyed in the Duff and Johnson study, constructed their “background or contextual knowledge in the archives by consulting with an archivist, studying the finding aids, and examining the material itself.”

The preceding steps all contribute to the historians’ refining or whittling down the focus of their research. In the early stages, the historian is seeking out information and resources in a broad way, digging deeper as he or she accumulates knowledge. By this standard, the more the historian knows, the narrower or more detailed their search for information and resources becomes. It is an unfortunate fact, however, that as researchers more narrowly define the scope of their research, the finding aids and other resources provided by archives and other information centers become less useful. Again, according to Duff and Johnson, “Historians seeking a known item or known material type (for example, wills) often want ready access to these sources. However, because collections are usually described at a high level in finding aids, the whereabouts of particular items are often difficult to determine.” In a way, the unfortunate
situation is such that the *usability* of the archives works in inverse proportion as the historian hone in on his or her subject or topic. Again, according to Duff and Johnson, “Many of the historians interviewed, particularly the social historians, suggested subject indexes, keyword searches, or identification of themes would help them with their research. Unfortunately, archives rarely provide this type of access.” The historians surveyed indicated that, as a result of this, consulting with the archivists was one of the most preferred methods of getting at the resources of a repository.  

The process, then, once at the archives, appears to be for historians to work their way through the bibliographies, finding aids, and other published works as they spiral into their subject or topic of interest. As the focus narrows, historians move away from these formal information channels to the institutional knowledge held by the individual archivists in their attempt to cover all angles, prior to delving into the manuscripts and records themselves.

**SOCIAL HISTORY**

It is apparent today that both historians and archivists need to reshape their methods to reflect the new dynamics of social history, in which, “the content or story of the past has widened dramatically to include new voices and new activities. . . . Within the professions of history and archives, it is simply no longer possible to rely on old ways of viewing the content and voices of the past.” And while political and military history is not going to be supplanted by social history, a large portion of these traditional research topics have been influenced by historians’ investigations of ordinary people. Historical research today is often the study of political or military history within the context of social history, or more aptly put, how ordinary people’s lives were affected by political or military decisions and events.
Records and resources that, in the past, were considered mundane and uninteresting have now been thrust to the forefront through the use of quantitative analysis. As Frederic Miller asserted, “Because social history often takes as its subject common human experience, social historians are theoretically interested in everything; ordinariness is a positive virtue.”

In her 1991 study, Barbara Orbach queried historians on their preference for subject or name access, both in identifying archives with useful holdings and in working with a repository’s finding aids and other access tools. It became apparent that because social historians seek to illuminate the lives of ordinary people whose names are not known at the beginning of their research, they would desire a subject approach or subject access, more so than other historians who might be more concerned with the thought and actions of known individuals. And very often, even when names were known, the historians expressed a preference for subject indexing. In some instances, the names the historians were interested in were such minor players that the only way information about them could be found was through subject indexes (or with the help of the archivist).

Complicating the theory of subject access or subject indexing is that fact, when using a repository’s subject access terms, the results are often hit or miss. According to Orbach, historians needed to be creative in their search strategies. Name indexing is relatively straightforward, however, subject indexing is determined by the archivist or other information provider and can sometimes be inconsistent. Further complicating matters is the fact that common, simplistic and/or broad subject access via traditional finding aids is of little use to professional or accomplished historians. Case noted that historians may be less well served by standard classification and indexing than any other academic field:
Libraries and bibliographic tools are designed for those who are unfamiliar, or only partly familiar, with the knowledge they seek. The accomplished scholar—and particularly the historian—is not often aided by the disciplinary boundaries that library classification schemes enforce. The needs of historians present a dilemma to the librarian.\(^\text{12}\)

It has become common that social historians seek information in a particular type of record such as governmental, administrative or institutional, rather than known items, such as correspondences, diaries, and other personal papers. Each type of record contains certain kinds of information. Very often, social historians seek what, in the past, seemed like inconsequential records such as case files, court records, or vital statistics such as birth and death records; not in the hope of teasing out some narrative on the life of an individual, but for the investigation of trends within the society of an era. This type of research is most useful in telling the stories of marginalized or less documented individuals. Armed with this information, historians are better able to document the social characteristics and changes within society. Thomas Nesmith believes the mass of records that fall within the scope of social historians’ research necessitates the narrowing of scope into “local microstudies” of an area or region. Miller substantiates Nesmith’s theory regarding social historians, in their “attempt to reconstruct life in detail often leads to a concentration on small groups or communities”

\ldots Their desire for comparable results and their attempt to discern patterns over time produce a widely varying dependence on numerical data, testable hypotheses, and model building. Their orientation toward the vast, mute segments of society demands a reinterpretation of traditional written sources in terms of unintended meanings and hidden evidence.\(^\text{13}\)
The dilemma for social historians, according to Miller, is that most archival collections are seen as, “useless or, worse, positively misleading.”

. . . . Researchers who ignore archives or manuscripts bearing on their topics are usually not unaware of the existence of the materials, and public relations efforts cannot force them to use the collections. The building blocks of social history continue to be the census, tax and probate records, city directories, property atlases, rollbooks, membership ledgers, and case files, materials which give some consistent access to the average individual and family.14

If archivists and other information providers want their records to be used as “something other than frosting on a quantified cake,” they will have to initiate change in archival policies, beginning with acquisitions and appraisal.15

**LOCAL RECORDS**

Miller’s research illustrates that “state and local archives are probably the most obviously underutilized resource in the nation’s archival system.” His statement appears to hold true concerning historical research in the Local Records Collection at the Library of Virginia. Within the city and county court records housed at the Library of Virginia are the previously specified building blocks of social history that can serve to document the lives of the “ordinary people.”

As noted in Terri L. Snyder’s study of the legal history of the Colonial South, these courts were the important social and legal institutions that handled, not only the judicial matters of the inhabitants, but people’s everyday civil affairs. Especially in earlier times, the court and the law were at the very center of life in the South, and the courthouses “were keepers of the ‘collective memory’ of the county.”16
Still it remains that local records are the records of government, weighed down with all the bureaucratic formalities that traditionally accompany such records. And it should be no surprise that as the years go by and as the size of government and population increases, so too do the volume of records. By Nesmith’s account,

A government record, even in far simpler nature than a census, comes to rest in an archives after having been borne along by a constantly evolving administrative system which must be understood before the record can either be located or used properly. And unlike the physical extent of an individual’s personal papers, which may be set soon after the donor’s retirement or death, the ongoing relationship an archives had with a private association or the institution sponsoring the archives means their records can become so voluminous, even after documents without historical or lasting value have been destroyed, that they easily become unmanageable for a single researcher. More often than not, researchers will be unable to examine them all and may actually miss many of the most important records for their project.\(^{17}\)

Concerning these voluminous records, Miller wrote, “social historians are often most likely users of last resort.”\(^{18}\)

For all the negatives however, Miller’s analysis of the use of archival collections revealed that on a scale of intensity of use, case files and related records, and census and related records were mined more heavily than any other documents, including personal papers, financial records, personal correspondences, and diaries. “These figures suggest that the relatively low total use of public records is mitigated by the intensity with which such records are employed when they are consulted.” Fully one-half of all the record series fundamental to the 214 scholarly articles surveyed by Miller were case files, census records or related materials cited in articles on
specific population groups or social and demographic structures. Miller’s study suggests that however hesitant social historians are to use local records, once pulled for research, historians “mine such records intensively.” According to Miller, “Like the search for quantifiable information about groups of people, this intensive use of surviving documentation is a key archival practice of many social historians.”

The problem, however, is getting at the records. Nesmith has stated that

The amount of textual material alone is so great . . . that even an experienced academic researcher cannot be expected to know where to plunge into the documents without considerable preparation made in consultation with an archivist who, by virtue of a sustained relationship with the records, is the only one in a position to be of direct assistance.

So how then, do the archival professionals work to make these important resources available to scholarly historians and other researchers?

ARCHIVAL THEORY

Since the 1940s archivists have bemoaned the fact that historians are no longer willing to put in the time needed for the tedious task of sifting through records, box by box, with the thoroughness necessary to obtain all the relevant materials related to their research topic. Instead, researchers are becoming more and more accustomed to demanding immediate access to all relevant materials. For the historian, topic or subject oriented research can be problematic in today’s archives. Determined researchers must be creative in circumventing the numerous time-consuming obstacles that modern archival theory may provide. And again, more often than not, in order to get around these hindrances, historians rely on the advice of the experienced archivist
to guide them when possible. According to one historian that Duff and Johnson interviewed, “There has to be a way that people can find things without having to know who generates them so that keywords will search across different provenances of things.”

If it is true, as Miller points out, that archivists are the caretakers of society’s collective memory or cultural heritage; and if it is the research value of the records in the archivist care that brings scholars, genealogists, historians, and the general public through the doors each day; and if facilitating the use of the records in their care is an archive’s “central reason for being” then it is up to the archivist to assess the research value and use potential of the holdings in their care in order to best facilitate their use. One of the best ways to facilitate the use of the records within their care is lower level finding aids, such as name and subject indexes. To produce finding aids that historians will use, archivists need to approach the appraisal of the collection with an understanding of the historian’s needs.

Miller believes there are flaws in modern archival principles that will hinder the use of documents as resources for social historians. Provenance, the guiding principle in archival theory for the organization of archival materials, states that items in a collection only have meaning within the context of other items within that collection. Consequently, if the items are reorganized much of the original information may be lost. Provenance has great value as a practical organizing principle and it is undoubtedly the “most efficient solution to the problem of physical arrangement posed by the records of massive bureaucracies both public and private.” However, in the context of present research and technology, its limitations are apparent. After provenance, it is customary to retain the original filing order (or original order) as established by the creator of the documents, in what Miller calls, “the possibly misplaced faith that filing order reveals some important information in itself.” Although Miller acknowledges these practices as
valid and logical, as indexing techniques they provide “limited help to anyone doing non-biographical or non-narrative research. The system does little to elucidate the contents of the most common series, such as correspondence, reports, minutes, and memoranda.” To compound matters, Miller noted the “lack of common professional standards and terminology. One repository’s series is another’s collection, while subgroups and subseries proliferate. Some National Archives series are larger than entire academic research collections.”

By following these standard organizing principles, then, if a historian is looking for a subject, that subject is not explicitly stated but must be deduced from the provenance-related information. “While subject indexing in a library makes sense since books and other secondary sources contained in a library are usually about something,” according to Duff and Johnson, then “records in an archive are not records about an activity, but records of an activity.” In this way the subject of the records may “be interpreted differently by different users, and these interpretations are likely to differ as well from those of the creators of the records themselves.”

According to Tibbo, “Given the resources that are and will be devoted to making finding aids and actual primary source materials digitally available, it is clearly time for the archival world to embrace user-oriented design.” However, Charles Cole’s 2000 article on the information retrieval habits of historians emphasizes the challenges that archivists face in attempting to construct name (or subject) based access points in that the terms will be subjective. The problem is that each historian comes at their information in different ways. That said, any subject access is better than no subject access at all. And if historians have become relatively adept at working the system as it is, it would take even less imagination to track down resources with only an authority list of rudimentary subject access terms provided.

According to Miller, social historians’ methods generally dictate that they prefer to scour
voluminous records to small collections, standardized bits of comparable data to extended
descriptions, original questionnaires to summarized tabulations, and above all, the typical
to the unique. None of these preferences coincides with the conventional canons of
appraisal. Yet all are fundamental to the study of social history.27

Social historians are looking for large quantities of the same type of information in order to seek
inferences and trends in society. One diarist’s recollections provide insight into the life of the
writer. However, vast quantities of data, spread over a region or date range can provide insight
into cultural shifts and trends.

According to Case, “While we cannot easily reorder our archives and library collections, we
may be able to bridge them through special services and tools for the scholar. . . . That is, how
can an index reflect the ‘point of view’ or ‘context’ that is so often the central concern in
discussions of historical problems?”28

Miller suggests that the archivist must approach processing as the first step in information
retrieval. In Miller’s scenario, arrangement is much less important than description, particularly
below the basic record group or collection level. Through computer databases, we have the
opportunity to organize the records intellectually without arranging them in as much detail
physically. In the database, folders can be manipulated to produce traditional inventories or
subject listings without regard to any original order. In this way, we can more easily reveal the
information within our collection, regardless of hierarchical level, and at the same time, bring
together resources on the same subject from different collections and record groups. Miller
continues:

Our accepted procedures divide the world up by provenance and filing system, while
research cuts straight across the lines we so carefully establish. It should be possible for
us to retain the general divisions mandated by provenance, put less emphasis on lower levels of physical arrangement, and recognize that our major responsibility is to provide information.\textsuperscript{29}

And in 1986 Miller added:

It is quite possible that archivists can make as much material available through processing or rewriting and automating their descriptions of existing holdings as they can through making new acquisitions. For example, the relatively high use of personal papers in social history may be largely due to the fact that they are easy to use and comparatively well-processed. Conversely, the underutilization of state archives must in part be due not to the lack of important holdings, but to the lack of effective arrangement and description. . . . Computerized subject access for all archival holdings should increase use by social historians, for whom provenance is often an unusable guide to resources.\textsuperscript{30}

Miller has written that, “A less drastic way of adapting to social history involves user relations rather than internal finding aids.” Archives that cannot for practical reasons fully automate, “can instead develop subject-oriented finding aids. The usual hierarchy envisions guides as summaries of inventories. It may be more useful to prepare guides describing information rather than collections, cutting across internal boundaries and addressing specific issues such as education, the family, work, or immigrant life.”\textsuperscript{31}

Consequently, archivists need to be more creative in the use of their access terms. When indexing, archivists need to take not only subject matters into consideration, but they need to put themselves in the place of the historian, identifying many possible access terms, including units of time and space as well. When complete, there should be authority lists for personal and
corporate names and thesauri for subject phrases. The expansion of these access terms is essential if archivists are going to continue to improve access to archival and manuscript holdings. “The development of analytically precise finding aids enriched by multiple access points increases the usefulness of the information that archivists can glean from their holdings. . . . More simply, improved systems of intellectual control of archives will promote readier access.” In the long run, more precise access terms will be a wiser use of both the archivist’s and the researcher’s time.

Miller believes that because social science methodology rejects provenance and other archival practices as unsystematic, unrepresentative and time consuming, it is incumbent upon repositories to shift to file level indexing, combined with a more elaborative description of quantifiable information within series. “More importantly,” Miller writes, “an external outreach program would have to overcome the aversion to all non-quantifiable sources, which seems inherent in social science methodology.”

ARCHIVAL OUTREACH

If a repository goes so far as to change how it makes its records accessible, it then needs to make these changes known to its patrons and, specifically, in the scholarly research community. Archives—most especially regional, state, and local archives—need to make themselves meccas for all things historical pertaining to their subject or region. The Library of Virginia needs to be considered the first resource for all things related to Virginia history and there are ways of promoting this image that will, in turn, facilitate historical research. The Library is the epicenter for Virginia’s cultural heritage and there are numerous ways to promote this ideal.

William Joyce has suggested that:
Through presenting lectures, exhibitions, debates, and even interpretive performances for the general public, as well as seminars, conferences, and fellowships for specialists, a repository can enter what F. Gerald Ham has described as the post-custodial era. Effective outreach requires relinquishing the traditional passivity that has for too long characterized archives and beginning activity to shape the type of future research use and understanding of documents appropriate to the archives’ cultural mission.34

An important aspect of effective outreach means keeping researchers up-to-date on the latest acquisitions, processing and openings of collections. Joyce suggests that it is up to the archivists to make researchers aware of the holdings, and how they might be used. This entails “assuming a more direct role in interpreting and sponsoring use of records.”35 In addition, it behooves the archivists to keep up-to-date and be aware of the research interests and issues of historians and other scholarly researchers. Simply put, the archivists must play an active role in bringing the researchers and the records together and there must be continued dialogue between the two.

Historians and archivists have suggested that another way that an archive might work to redefine itself is by setting up training sessions to teach students and users in a more formal way how to conduct research in their collection. Miller goes a step further to suggest that archives subsidize historical research and develop programs to encourage and support research based on materials in their repositories. On this point, Orbach also agrees, suggesting that repositories offer fellowships to encourage the use of their holdings. Miller believes that a complete archival face-lift is in order:

Given the traditional reputation of musty antiquarianism that still clings to our profession, and the wide variety of information sources now available, it is not enough simply to open the door to scholars. They have to be attracted through relevant publications,
sponsored conferences, community outreach, and supported research which will involve
the archivist actively in the documentation of American social history. 36

Each repository must cater to the needs of all whom it aims to serve, however, Orbach
suggests that academic historians warrant special attention because they serve as the “gate
keepers” of historical research, and their teachings and scholarship spreads understanding of
historical methods and the historical experience. Tibbo agrees that even though historians are
only one group of users in an archive, and admittedly in most instances, a small minority, “in
many cases they are the most respected. Many archivists and curators see scholars as their most
important customers because of their published research and because they are training the next
generation of researchers.” 37 The added benefit of published research is the publicity the
repository receives through footnotes and bibliographies, which are very often the first place
researchers looks when exploring their topics.

J. J. Grabowski suggests that a repository’s staff needs to work closely “with local
university history departments in an effort to have professors interest their students in
undertaking primary research for papers in a variety of courses.” Others also suggest that
archives form a close working relationship with university history departments, noting that some
departments have placed graduate students in archival jobs and internships as a source of income
and more importantly, for the professional historical experience. “Such efforts should expand in
ways that more closely link the archival experience with the students’ graduate education.” 38 It
would seem reasonable for a prominent archives to offer these types of positions and internships
to history students in order to help to make the next crop of future historians aware of historical
and cultural resources available in their collection.
Another form of outreach libraries and archives can utilize are what has been termed the “electronic” or “invisible college” at work between historians, particularly for exchange of archival and other information resources. Case includes with this e-mail and computer bulletin boards (or more modern day listservs) that can facilitate the exchange of information among historians, archivists, and librarians concerning the location and use of historic resources. The formation of “invisible colleges” should, according to Case, be encouraged, and librarians and archivists need to take a prominent role within these groups. Orbach suggests that through the use of electronic information distribution such as these, not only could scholars be kept abreast of newly opened collections and finding aids available, but also, various access systems could be discussed and noted. Indeed the Library of Virginia sponsors a Virginia History Listserv where this type of discussion would seem appropriate. This interactive dialog between those who need the resources and those who provide them is essential.

In addition, studies have demonstrated that historians have not yet gotten a firm handle on all that the Internet, the World Wide Web, and digitization have to offer pertaining to archives and historical resources. Tibbo believes that, for the archivists, “Web pages, electronic finding aids, and MARC records—where descriptive practice meets access—must be part of the daily archival product and perspective. The Web site is the virtual front door and a very visible reflection of any repository.” Therefore, in order for a modern archives to increase visibility and, in turn, increase usage of its records, they must make a commitment to a substantial Web presence. The more online resources available, the more historians will come to view the Internet as a first stop in seeking resources for research. This, according to Tibbo, will be done through the availability of more and better online finding aids. Tibbo continues:
It is not important that historians know they are searching EAD finding aids, but it is important to facilitate the discovery and use of these tools. To accomplish this, repositories must move beyond provision of access and bibliographic instruction. Time and other resources must be allocated to user studies, use education, and especially, outreach within repository budgets. These should not be seen as dispensable add-ons. This is the business of the archival enterprise in the digital age.  

Duff, Craig, and Cherry’s research agrees:

The implications for archives are clear; providing web access to complete and full finding aids and preparing digital reproductions carefully will materially assist the process of historical research. Clearly, the World Wide Web offers opportunities to expand and ‘democratize’ access to archival materials and to archival expertise. For historians, the greatest promise of the WWW is not that it replaces the need to use the original material, but rather that it supports researchers in becoming aware of and locating archival materials to be used in situ.  

Duff and Johnson suggest a perfect world scenario where online systems may facilitate this type of information seeking since, as archives databases are digitized, these items could readily be found through keyword searches. Online systems may also facilitate searching across collections, rather than requiring a search through one collection at a time to find items, as is the case with most print finding aids.

CONCLUSIONS
If the Library of Virginia wishes to increase the use of its resources by historians and other scholarly researchers it needs to understand who these researchers are, what types of information they are seeking, and then make their materials accessible accordingly. The majority of historians today define themselves as “social historians” in one way or another. This reinforces the notion that social history is the most common or prevalent method in modern historiography. Social historians seek out large quantities of standardized types of records, looking for pertinent information concerning “ordinary people.” Generally speaking, each of these types of records gives only a small amount of information concerning individuals; however, it is the totality of large numbers of small bits of information, in a quantitative form, which demonstrates trends within society. Today, not all social historians use these quantitative methods, however social history has its roots in statistics.

As a result of this sea change in historical methods, the standard archival organizing principle of provenance, which is obviously still needed, should be supplemented by interdisciplinary and subject-oriented standards to give researchers better and fuller access. Social historians all lament the fact that many repositories fail to offer subject access in anything other than the most general formats. Broad categorical finding aids are of little use to professional or scholarly historians who are experts in their subject areas. By offering detailed or lower-level finding aids in the form of subject indexes, modern archives do not have to scrap the time honored archival principle of provenance. Archives can continue to arrange their collections by traditional archival doctrine and at the same time take intellectual control over the records through the use of computers and databases. The archives can maintain original order and the historian can pull the records by subject from within the collection.
In seeking out historical materials it is common practice that historians first look to footnotes and bibliographies in published works. After that they seek out the advice of colleagues and other authorities within their field. Archives should consider taking a more aggressive role in interacting with college and university professors and history departments, making them aware of fellowships, internships, and job opportunities for students. In doing so, the next generation of historians is made aware of the resources that repositories, such as the Library of Virginia, have to offer. Archives should develop programs to encourage and support research based on materials in their repositories, and when feasible, consider going so far as to subsidize historical research using their collections. The more that materials from the Library of Virginia are used and cited by historians, the more the materials are in the mix for scholarly research in the future.

It is important that an archive work to redefine itself, transforming its image from a records warehouse to that of a dynamic historical and cultural research center. This is particularly true for specialty and regional repositories. These institutions should go out of their way in striving to become known as the ultimate institutional authority regarding their topics. Archives need to publicize their collections, and especially make known the acquisition of new items, and any changes regarding the accessing and indexing of records in their care. In this way, archives not only inform, but reform opinions of historians about collections and policies. The growth of “electronic colleges” in the form of listservs, blogs and other informative Internet resources, can easily serve as a vehicle for delivering such information. These topical archives should also have imaginative and informative Web site that serve as a clearinghouse for all information pertaining to their subject or region; they should offer online finding aids and databases for their repository, as well as links to other sources of information concerning their field. In addition, any other opportunities that an archive has to educate and enlighten whether it be in the form of lectures,
conferences or debates, should be taken. Outreach is a key component in any archives attempt to redefine itself.

These alterations in image and methods by modern archives and other repositories will serve to encourage a change in attitude among historians and can hopefully elevate state and local archives to the status they deserve throughout the history research community.
NOTES


15. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 388, 373.


27. Miller, “Social History,” 120.


34. Joyce, “Archivists and Research,” 133.

35. Ibid.


