



An Archival Journey Through New York City:

Bridging the Gap Between Historians and Archivists

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In her 2016 article "'The Archive' is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," Michelle Caswell makes the argument that amongst humanities scholars there is a failure of interdisciplinarity when it comes to archival studies. Caswell draws a distinction between "the archive" as conceptualized by humanities scholars and "the archives" as conceptualized by archival studies scholars. The archive in the singular is a "hypothetical wonderland" that is often invoked in metaphorical terms whereas archives in the plural encompass not just the collection of records in their many forms but their physical location, the institutions that have brought them there, and the processes, including the labor of archivists, that have designated them to be archival. According to Caswell these two discussions "are happening on parallel tracks in which scholars in both disciplines are largely not taking part in the same conversations, not speaking the same conceptual languages, and not benefiting from each other's insights."^[1] Caswell goes on to theorize that the lack of engagement with the theory and scholarship of archival studies is largely due to the fact that the field has been construed as predominantly female, professional, and service-oriented and therefore decidedly non-academic.

The feminization of the profession, in which humanities scholars view archivists as "workers" or "service-providers" and not colleagues with graduate-level degrees who are worthy of intellectual exchange, has clearly worked to curtail interdisciplinary dialogue. According to Caswell however, this characterization was historically reinforced by archivists who often referred to themselves as "handmaidens to historians." This notion of archivists as handmaidens is jarring to twenty-first century ears but it emerged from nineteenth-century conceptions of archival neutrality in which archivists were positioned as caretakers of records that needed homes.^[2] In recent years many archival scholars have used feminist theory to confront gendered assumptions about the field. Jessica Lapp for example, posits that the handmaiden metaphor "becomes an interesting point of entry for exploring how archival work, once considered mechanical, servile and invisible, has become powerful and disruptive, offering opportunities for political intervention and social change."^[3] Lapp speaks to a crucial development in the field—archival theory no longer views archivists as neutral arbiters but rather active shapers of history, which comes with important social and political implications.

According to Caswell, the field of humanities has not kept up with these developments. Numerous

articles and books have been published by humanities scholars about “the archive” yet none of them cite the foundational works of archival studies. When archivists are acknowledged, they are seen as “mindless bureaucrats who hinder rather than aid access to records.”^[4] This quote in particular struck me. As a graduate student of both history and library science I am uniquely positioned to engage with both sides of the parallel discussions that are happening between humanities and archival studies scholars. My personal experience thus far in history circles very much backs up Caswell’s argument. I have frequently heard historians speak negatively about archivists. While I never thought it came from a truly malicious place, Caswell’s article helped color my understanding of the phenomenon. Rather than thinking of archivists as colleagues in the process of accessing archives, my observations have led me to believe that many historians tend to view archivists as professionals rather than scholars and as roadblocks rather than guides. That is not to say that historians have not encountered frustrating and perhaps avoidable challenges when it comes to archival research, however the lack of engagement with archival studies as a scholarly field feels like a missed opportunity.

Especially given that in the twenty-first century the first contact with an archive tends to be through a computer screen, it becomes even more valuable to encourage interdisciplinarity and intellectual exchange. In her article, Caswell advocates for workshops, collaborative scholarships, and co-taught courses to help bridge this gap.^[5] As a graduate student I have yet to have an experience that embodies any of Caswell’s recommendations though I have discussed archives in my two separate programs. At the beginning of this semester, I was assigned to begin research on what will ultimately become my master’s thesis. Shortly after I began my initial research, I was assigned Caswell’s article. Although I am only at the beginning of my archival story, attempting to approach this process as both a historian and an archivist felt like a valuable first step on an individual level to realize Caswell’s recommendations. Therefore, I decided to document my archival journey through New York City with the hope that the process of reflection I start here can grow into a lifelong project and passion throughout my career.





RIVERSIDE CHURCH ARCHIVES, *Morningside Heights*

FACTS:

The Riverside Church Archives require appointments. There is a link through their website to schedule an appointment however as of May 2024 the online calendar is not active. Alternatively, there is contact information to email an archivist or submit a question through an online form. An online search through the Digital Archive platforms yields both collections available online and those that can be viewed in person. The website has no information about the reading room's hours.

Search the collection [here](#).

EXPERIENCE:

Riverside Archives was the first archive I hoped to visit as I embarked upon my thesis research. As the only active sanctuary church in New York City, a fact I was aware of based upon the research I had done for my undergraduate thesis about the sanctuary movement, I was ecstatic to discover the church has a very active online presence including access to its digital collections. Through the online search function, I identified a collection related to the church's involvement in the sanctuary movement. I attempted to make an appointment, but the online calendar said there were no appointments available at all. Panicked, I sent an email to the address provided on the website but never heard anything back. Finally, I decided to call the church and the receptionist attempted to put me through to the archives, but I could only leave a message. After a lot of back and forth (it turned out the archives' phone didn't work) I was able to get the direct email of the archivist, Justin, to email him and set up an appointment.

The Reading Room is located on the 16th floor of the Church's tower overlooking the Hudson River and the George Washington Bridge. According to the archive's website, there were three boxes in the Sanctuary Collection. However, when I arrived, the archivist told me he had discovered at least 15 more boxes in the collection. He also asked me what I was looking for specifically, pointed me towards some relevant resources in the digital archive that I had not discovered during my initial search, and talked through everything he knew about the church's involvement in the sanctuary movement.

Riverside certainly did not feel like a typical archive. I was the only person there and Justin was the only archivist. He even offered to stay late so I could finish the boxes I was looking at. As an archive of a specific institution, housed within the institution itself, I wondered if there would be more restrictions on the researcher. While Justin was interested in helping me with my research, I wasn't asked to explain what I was using it for or asking to sign any forms or record any of the photographs I took. I was also able



NEW YORK CITY MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES, *Industry City*

FACTS:

The New York City Municipal Archives require appointments. Researchers must first submit an online form indicating the collections they wish to view. Collection guides and the digital collection are easily accessible through their website and the turnaround for a response via email from an archivist is 3-7 business days. As of 2021, the Municipal Archives has a second location in Industry City so it is possible the collection a researcher might wish to view is not at their Chambers Street location. The reading room at both locations is open from 9am-12pm and 1pm-4pm.

Search the collection [here](#).

EXPERIENCE:

As my research and plans for my thesis shifted and expanded over the course of the semester, I realized I wanted to look at the Office of Immigrant Affairs Collection from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which is housed at the New York City Municipal Archives and split between the records of Mayors Ed Koch and David Dinkins. I easily found the finding aid online but to my disappointment the Office of Immigrant Affairs Collection within the Koch records was unprocessed and therefore I could not tell if it was able to be viewed or not. I submitted my online form, indicating that I wished to view both collections and anxiously awaited a response, as the semester was ticking away. After the seventh business day I had not received a reply and decided to go in person.

At the Municipal Archives I was able to speak with a librarian who told me there was a response to my request sitting in the drafts folder. She proceeded to inform me that the collections I wished to view were at the Industry City location, which I did not know existed, and then put me into contact with the Industry City librarian. After this initial weeklong hiccup everything proceeded smoothly. I was able to set up an appointment within a couple of days and begin researching.

The Industry City facility is housed in a converted warehouse and the reading room has a sweeping view of New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. I was able to request 10 boxes at a time including boxes from the unprocessed collection. Because I had only three hours at a time and was looking for very specific references to sanctuary city policies enacted by Mayors Koch and Dinkins I needed to sift through a lot of material quickly. Luckily the Municipal Archives allows you to have all your boxes on a cart next to your workspace which made it possible for me to scan through each box at the start of my research appointment and then go back and focus on what seemed relevant. This was especially helpful when working with the unprocessed collection, which was thirteen alphabetized boxes. As I discovered, while some of the folders within each box were labeled, many were not, and therefore being able to quickly page through the first couple of documents helped streamline the process, which otherwise would have been quite tedious.



SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, *Harlem*

FACTS:

The Schomburg Center Reading Room requires appointments. To make an appointment online researchers must have a NYPL library card and a Special Collections account. Appointments must be made at least seven days in advance and seem to fill up quickly. As part of the online appointment process researchers can select through the finding aids which boxes they wish to view.

Search the collection [here](#).

EXPERIENCE:

Using the NYPL's online catalog is not for the faint of heart. The system is so large that even if you know what you're looking for specifically it's hard to determine the correct webpage to conduct a search. For

example, I was looking for their collection of historical New York newspapers and I must have tried a search on at least five different web pages that were part of the NYPL domain. I had more luck conducting searches using keywords to determine if their collections had anything relevant to my research. Using a keyword search of the Archives and Manuscripts portal I determined that the Schomburg Center had material I was interested in. I had to wait nearly three weeks for my appointment because the schedule fills up quickly and you must make an appointment at least a week in advance so they have time to receive your request and pull the materials.

My appointment itself turned out to be my first archival failure. I had requested to view only one box and within that box I was only interested in one folder. The finding aid listed this folder as “Central American Information Week, 1983-1984.” I was assuming based on the scope of the collection and information I discovered at Riverside Archives that the records would be about the Central American Information Week that was hosted in New York. However, when I got to the reading room and opened the box, the folder was labeled “Central American Information Week, Indiana.” I still looked through the folder but ultimately, I left that day empty-handed. While NYPL is undoubtedly an amazing resource, especially for collections relating to New York City, in the future I would want to set up a research consultation to make the most out of the experience.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this experience is that despite the way technology has completely revolutionized the accessibility of archives—finding aids and entire collections are available online for example—there still seems to be a huge hurdle to accessing an archive for the first time. I had to be persistent in overcoming this initial hurdle with each of the three archives I visited this semester, whether it was faulty phones and online appointment booking systems or lack of a response, however once I was able to visit the archives, I found the archivists themselves more than willing and able to work with me.

Because I had to produce a twenty-page seminar paper based on my research by the end of the semester, I was in a bit of a time crunch. Part of the beauty of research is going where the material takes you; however, I didn’t feel I truly had the time to do that. While it is wonderful to search an archives’ holdings from home, as I move into the next stage of my thesis, I hope to take more advantage of the archivist’s knowledge by building relationships so that eventually my finished thesis represents not just a historical analysis of the politics of sanctuary in New York City but of an information sharing network built on the exchange of ideas and knowledge between historians and archivists.

NOTES

1. Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction* (Bowling Green, Ohio), 16, no. 1 (2016): 2. [↑](#)
2. Jessica M. Lapp, “‘Handmaidens of History’: Speculating on the Feminization of Archival Work,” *Archival Science* 19, no. 3 (2019): 216. [↑](#)
3. Jessica M. Lapp, “‘Handmaidens of History’: Speculating on the Feminization of Archival Work,” *Archival Science* 19, no. 3 (2019): 216. [↑](#)
4. Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction* (Bowling Green, Ohio), 16, no. 1 (2016): 2. [↑](#)

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ARTICLES AND PROJECTS