

Historical Development of Caribbean Archives and Record Keeping 1950 to Present

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ABSTRACT

“Through archived documents we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its meaning through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end.”

Verne Harris

This paper will explore and analyze the historical development of archives in the Caribbean region including inter alia the management and preservation of archives; training of the region's archivists; drafting appropriate legislation regarding the scope and authority of archival practice in the English-speaking Caribbean and the role of the university in so doing. It would also seek to highlight similarities or differences that appear regarding the history of archives in the international sphere.

Sviluppo storico degli archivi dei Caraibi e della gestione documentale dal 1950 ad oggi

SINTESI

“Attraverso i documenti archiviati ci vengono offerti pezzi di tempo da comporre, frammenti di vita da mettere in ordine l'uno dopo l'altro, in un tentativo di formulare una storia che acquisisca il proprio significato attraverso l'abilità di formare connessioni fra l'inizio e la fine.”

Verne Harris

Il presente articolo esplorerà e analizzerà lo sviluppo storico degli archivi nella regione caribica includendo tra l'altro la gestione e la conservazione degli archivi, la formazione degli archivisti della regione, la redazione di appropriate leggi riguardanti il fine e l'autorità della pratica archivistica nei Caraibi di lingua inglese ed il ruolo dell'università nel far ciò. Si cercherà inoltre di porre in luce le somiglianze e le differenze che s'incontrano riguardanti la storia degli archivi in un contesto internazionale.

Zgodovinski razvoj karibskih arhivov in hrambe arhivskega gradiva od leta 1950 do danes

IZVLEČEK

“Ko poskušamo oblikovati zgodbo, ki dobiva svoj pomen na osnovi ustvarjenih povezav med začetkom in koncem nas arhivirani dokumenti soočajo s koščki časa, ki ga je potrebno sestaviti in z drobci življenja, ki ga je potrebno razvrstiti po vrstnem redu.”

Verne Harris

Prispevek predstavlja in analizira zgodovinski razvoj arhivov v Karibih pri čemer obravnava tudi upravljanje in hrambo arhivskega gradiva, usposabljanje arhivistov, pripravo ustrezne zakonodaje v skladu z arhivsko prakso na angleško govorečem področju Karibov in vloga univerze pri tem. Prav tako članek osvetljuje podobnosti ali razlike, ki se pojavljajo v zvezi z zgodovino arhivov v mednarodnem okolju.

What are archives? The term may refer to buildings/repositories which are generally infrastructure of the state or of an institution or organisation. Nevertheless, the term 'archives' is usually understood as records of enduring value preserved within such buildings. According to the noted South African archivist Verne Harris, “through archived documents we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its meaning through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end”.

This dimension of archiving is political and societal in one in that we are all instrumental in its making.

The misconception about archives and record keeping is that it had its genesis in modern day bureaucracies which had become overwhelmed by voluminous records creation in the post World War Two era. However, Ernst Posner in his seminal work, "Archives in the Ancient World" traced the lineage of record keeping much further, citing the practices of the Sumerians who kept records as far back as 2112 to 2004 BC. Accordingly, it was found that the archives of the ancient world seemed to have much in common with those of our times.

Posner highlighted six constants that were applicable then and these are still applicable now, namely the collection in whatever format (clay tablets, papyrus, royal skins, registers and chancery rolls) of records relating to laws of the land, records of administrative actions, financial and other accounting records, records of the authority relating to property and taxes, records of control over persons and "notarial" records.

Thus, ancient record keeping practices have lingered on in a significant way from antiquity to modern times providing the basis for many of today's approaches. These practices extended to early business archives as well where Assyrian businessmen trading in Kanis in faraway Cappadocia organized themselves as a karum (what we refer to today as a Chamber of Commerce), establishing a joint repository for their records.

So too, the records of the Egibi banking family in Babylon is another example of the documentation of the activities of six generations of that family from 690 to 480 B.C. The excavation records appear to indicate that in all spheres of human activity the care and preservation of records assumed high importance. The clay tablets were sun dried or fire baked making them almost indestructible. Additional security measures included enclosing them in clay "envelopes" on which the text of the transaction was entered again in identical terms, and the building of special "safe" rooms (an example of this is the House of Tablets at Ur) within the business offices.

The environmental concerns were taken care of by construction of the rooms with grooved floors, low brick walls with furrows between them which would allow for water to flow and evaporate - almost an ancient air-conditioning and humidification device.

With regard to storage, wooden shelving was used based on the wood ashes which have been found. According to Posner, there is evidence of use of the pigeon hole, the open-shelf and the container systems which we are much accustomed to in the English speaking Caribbean. Within these, boxes made of wood or clay or clay jars and vats or sometimes baskets housed the tablets. These were identifiable by the use of clay labels.

Luciana Duranti in her wide ranging article also posited that record keepers were to be found in the classical great civilizations in Greece and Rome and these were respected men of high status. Duranti refers to Alexander the Great who gave his record keeper high rank and trusted him with the administration of his empire. This certainly demonstrates that from ancient civilizations, record keepers were highly prized "professionals" whose skills set them apart from the masses. These "professionals" underwent rigorous training in "tablet houses", and became quite influential on the management of public affairs for these were the same persons who read the mail to the rulers and prepared the replies.

Why are archives particularly important in the Caribbean context? It is because archival records are an important resource for individuals, organisations, and the wider community. They are created in the course of the functions and activities of organisations and in the personal lives of individuals and they are preserved and maintained to support business and accountability and for cultural use underscoring the need for their preservation and ultimate access to Caribbean peoples. Further, they provide evidence of, and information about, the actions of their creators and the environment in which those actions occurred. According to Geoffrey Yeo, they extend and corroborate human and corporate memory and play a critical role in maintaining awareness of how the present is shaped by the past. Armed with such an understanding, it is expected that societies can prepare themselves to anticipate and better position themselves for the future.

The Caribbean region is diverse, comprising of some 23 countries which span from Belize in Central America to Suriname in South America and whose archival development or non-development were influenced by the political, economic and social dynamics of slavery, emancipation, colonialism, and integration movements over time. This diversity has given rise to different approaches, variations, growth and weaknesses in archival practice across the region.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, records were either transported to Britain to be held in the custody of colonial civil servants or kept in the territories for administrative reasons. In some cases, these records were destroyed in the territories after their active use. In many instances, the development of an archiving infrastructure in the Anglophone islands for the preservation of their records in their natural habitat was postponed due to a lack of funding.

The concern still exists today that scholars from the Caribbean region have to travel at great expense to the United Kingdom to research their own history as a substantial percentage of the original records reside outside their territory with no immediate concern for repatriation or sharing of copies of such records. Nevertheless, there is a strong Public Office tradition in all of the English-speaking Caribbean where the British Registry System is almost entrenched. But I would like to claim the watershed period for Caribbean archival development as the 1950s when investigations into the status of Anglophone-based records began in earnest on the islands.

In 1950, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the British Keeper of the Records, visited Jamaica to assist the island with record keeping. After Jenkinson's visit, Dr. Theodore Schellenburg, the American archivist was contracted by the Government of Jamaica to provide archival services to the island. Schellenburg's services made such an impact on the island's archival preservation measures that plans were quickly put in place to appoint Mr. Clinton Black, Archivist of Jamaica.

Upon his appointment, Black traveled to Trinidad and Barbados to survey the existing archives on those islands. On the conclusion of his visit, Black made recommendations on the following matters: managing archives; training the region's archivists; and drafting appropriate legislation regarding the scope and authority of archival practice in the English-speaking Caribbean. It is noteworthy that the three countries for which interventionist measures were taken in the 1950's are the three countries where the four campuses of The University of the West Indies (UWI) now exist.

John Aarons' paper noted the 1958 approval by University F& GPC of the Senate Committee on Archives which was chaired by Professor Thornton and included William Gocking- Librarian and Drs Elsa Goveia and Roy Augier of the History Department. This University Committee initiated the project which was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and resulted in the appointment of Michael Chandler who was attached to the Department of History on the UCWI to undertake a two year project to survey archival records of the region and have them microfilmed.

The 1965 Caribbean Archives Conference was held with the general cooperation of the government of Jamaica and the University of the West Indies' Department of History under the chairmanship of Dr. Elsa Goveia. This conference was convened to discuss the question of making available in the West Indies - the source materials needed for the study of West Indian History. The main functions of the Caribbean Archives Conference were defined as follows:

1. To bring together archivists both from within and without the Caribbean in order to discuss and as far as practicable resolve their common problems.
2. To find the means of making available:
 - a. archival material relating to the Caribbean, but located abroad and
 - b. archival material relating to the Caribbean and located in the region.
3. To emphasize the need to preserve the records of today which are the archives of tomorrow.
4. To strengthen awareness of the historical heritage of the Caribbean countries.
5. To act as a stimulus to the co-operative effort needed to make available throughout the region those records of its past which are to be found in the area and abroad.

An attempt was made at this conference to assess archival development in the Caribbean countries and to recapture the climate of opinion and some matters of agreement regarding the care and use

of archival materials and to the consideration of records management in countries which did not have any archival agency as well as to the operation of archival agencies. Among the initiatives which started after this conference were the Reproduction and Exchange of Archival Material relating to Caribbean Countries and the establishment of a Caribbean Historical Association.

Schellenburg delivered a paper on archival training in the Caribbean and enunciated that training facilities for Caribbean archivists should be located either in a Library school or in the History department of the University insisting that the courses must be properly taught regardless of the site of training but warning about the dangers of librarians and historians as archival trainers in the following words “Both historians and librarians can teach archival courses effectively if they take the pains to probe the arcane of the archival profession, and if they restrain the proclivities developed in their own profession. The historian must restrain their penchant for definitive historical research and the librarians their penchant for methodological exactitude.”

Participants called for apprenticeships and exchanges with foreign established archives. Despite, the enthusiasm and fervour displayed at that conference, it was not until the late eighties that the university reaffirmed its commitment to the promotion of archives and funding was set aside for the recruitment by the University of an experienced archivist - Brian Speirs. In 1991, the University established an integrated Archives and Records Management Programme (UARMP) under the general direction of a University Archivist based at the Jamaica Campus.

Once appointed, the University archivist quickly worked to establish a summer school training programme in Records Management and Archives to address the crying needs of the Caribbean body politic and the response was overwhelming with each offer being over-subscribed. He felt that the university's first thrust should be within the area of records management in order to set the stage for the accrual of records of enduring value.

The primary target audience was the middle manager and support staff however the student enrollment saw a spread of applicants ranging from persons with Master's Degrees in other subject areas as well as students with secondary school graduation who were employed in government registries and clerical departments of the private and banking sector. During the period 1996-2012, 206 students were trained on the Mona Campus and for the period 2000-2012, 184 students were trained at the Cave Hill Campus. The Certificate Programme students hailed from as far as Belize in the north to Guyana in the south.

The programme content served to equip the participants with essential tools for efficiently managing current records within their care. In 1995 and 1996 the University archivist established university archives and programmes on the Trinidad and Barbados Campuses respectively. So too, at the Cave Hill Campus the West Indies Federal Archives Centre was established in 2001 as part of the university archives and records programme to house the Federal Archives, the Cave Hill Campus Archives as well as archives of other regional movements and entities.

Speirs left the University in 1997 and was succeeded by Victoria Lemieux who continued the training programme as structured by him with some modifications and an upgrade of the Technologies module. In 1999 however, the Campus Records Manager/Archivist on the Cave Hill Campus coordinated another stream of the summer programme in response to calls from the people of the southerly islands in the Caribbean. When Elizabeth Williams assumed as University Archivist in 2002, she promoted and further developed the Certificate programme together with Campus Records Manager Sonia Black and the programme has continued to be viable under the new University Archivist John Aarons.

The need for in-house training on the Campuses led to “operation clean-ups” and training for departmental staff on the campuses in both departments and faculties, to ensure that there was efficient control and maintenance of active records and that the records of enduring value of those departments accrued to the archives.

So too, a Heritage Studies programme was started on the three face to face Campuses under the auspices of the History Department and encompassed courses in History, Archaeology, Museums and Archives. The archival staff is involved in the teaching of the Archives component and all three Cam-

pusers devote some of their time towards assisting government departments as well as other institutions and associations through records management and archival consultancies as well as pro bono work according to the situation at hand. To date, other regional bodies such as CARICOM, CXC, CDB, OECS and CEDA and local bodies such as government ministries, trade unions and banks have benefited from advisory services given by UARMP Professional Staff.

The early 90's CARBICA survey showed that there were only ten countries with formal records and information management programmes namely; Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cayman Islands, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Trinidad & Tobago. Of these countries only seven have integrated programmes covering all or most government records - Bahamas, Belize, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Martinique, St Lucia, and Trinidad & Tobago. Interestingly, eight Caribbean countries have vested responsibility for records management with their respective National Archives - Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Martinique, St Lucia and Trinidad & Tobago. Thus, we see a disparity in the authority for archives and records management and one of the reasons for this could be a lack of adequate legislation re record keeping on the whole. Where the National Archives or archival department had responsibility the standard of record keeping appeared to be of a higher quality.

This led to the confirmation that the Archives and Records Management programme at the UWI must provide the necessary education for the development of archival theory and practice that fits within the rich history and culture of the Caribbean whilst providing a wealth of intellectual growth and opportunities for its peoples. Looking at the dynamic scenario in which records systems are evolving and the new environment in which we have to live, we need to continue to assess our achievements and needs in order to rise to the challenges and constant technological changes which continues to be a difficult but stimulating proposition.

There are also a number of on-going initiatives in the Caribbean that seem to forecast a fairly bright future in terms of archives and record keeping and which involves the staff of the university's programmes. The Caribbean branch of the ICA has been instrumental in up-dating the archivists of the region in terms of records management and electronic record keeping. The International Records Management Trust (IRMT) has organized seminars and video conferences for the archivists and records managers in collaboration with the region's archival educators. They have also provided consultants and developed training modules in records management. The Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM) has provided seminars and meetings resulting in resolutions being passed with the aim of strengthening the profession of archives and records and information management. The Jamaica Chapter of ARMA International (JARMA) and the Barbados Association of Records and Information Management (BARIM) have been keeping educational sessions and breakfast meetings which inform on standardization, risk management and electronic records keeping. JARMA in particular has been a pressure group for a career path for records and information management (RIM) staff and BARIM has raised awareness of the importance of record keeping in the community. Today, international organisations such as UN Agencies, IMF, IADB, World Bank and the EU to name a few do provide triggers regarding legislation and regulations such as archives and records acts, FOI, data protection and privacy and compliance with standards.

Within the governments themselves, there have been administrative reform programmes which hinge particularly on accountability and transparency in record keeping and the regional standards bureau has also agreed to look at the ISO 15489 RM standard with a view to its adoption within the Caribbean community. Jamaica followed by Barbados has done the most work in this regard in a spirited attempt to tailor the standard to their jurisdictional needs.

Several records management and archival bodies have made significant contributions in reviewing and strengthening records management in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. These include the Jamaica Archives and Records Department (JARD), which has been instrumental in the establishment of a career path for records management professionals in the public sector; CARBICA, the Caribbean section of the International Council on Archives (ICA), which has taken initiatives to develop a framework for developing records management programs in the region; JARMA the Jamaica Chapter of ARMA International, the Trinidad & Tobago ARMA branch and BARIM the Barbados equivalent which have created networks of professionals actively pursuing solutions to records management issues and challenges, in particular developing avenues for professional training.

However, despite significant strides, as a region the Caribbean records community remains somewhat dissatisfied with the seemingly slow rate of change. Records professionals are mostly frustrated by the lack of recognition for the role of records management as an integral part of strategic decision-making in organizations; and the non-integration of record-keeping requirements in the adoption of new technologies.

The UWI Centre's collaboration with the ICA and other educational institutions to continually train archivists and records managers through workshops and Conferences is confirmation of commitment to the development of archives although funds are scarce and government support is still not high on their priority list. Some organisations are still hard-pressed to expend resources on archives and records despite the high regulatory environment in which we now operate. Why is this? Maybe there should be sanctions that have "teeth"... However, all is not lost as we can be assured that there have been some positive movements in the last 20 years with archival repositories seeking to strengthen their human resources and physical infrastructure.

The realization of archival repositories within the university's campuses, the university archives and records programme and its staff who provide regional and international outreach is evidence of The UWI's thrust towards supporting the region's archives and record keeping programmes. Thus, despite the challenges and financial constraints, The UWI was and is still ideally poised and authorized to play a leading role in the evolvement of archives and records management practices in the region.

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SUMMARY

The watershed period regarding archival development in the English speaking Caribbean according to this author occurred during the 1950's. It was in this period that investigations were launched into the status of record keeping in the islands triggered by invitations to and visits by Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore Schellenberg of Britain and the United States respectively. Shortly after, Jamaica appointed Mr. Clinton Black as Archivist and he took on the role of surveyor of existing island archives. By 1958, the regional University College established a Senate Committee on Archives and the first Caribbean Archives Conference took place in 1965 at the university, paving the way for collaboration

between historians and archivists in the region. Since that time, the University of the West Indies, Caribbean governments and other international bodies collectively have contributed in a significant way to Caribbean archival development. Nevertheless, the archival and information community is still somewhat dissatisfied with the slow rate of change, lack of recognition for the role of record keeping as an integral part of strategic decision-making in organisations and the non-integration of record keeping requirements in the adoption of new technologies. These challenges are however seen as opportunities to rekindle the need for adequately preserving the rights and values of the society going forward and by extension, further propelling the development of the archival endeavour in the region.

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