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## Reconstructing a Life: The Archival Challenges of Women's History

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### ABSTRACT

The field of women's history emerged and developed through the joint efforts of scholars, librarians, and archivists. When the field emerged in the early 1970s, the combined labor of individuals in these academic disciplines unearthed otherwise obscure archival evidence, shaped a new framework for research, and fueled dynamic inquiry into the historic experiences and modern understandings of women's lives. Despite such collaborative origins, historians do not always incorporate a broad understanding of library and archive practice into their scholarship. By illustrating efforts to reconstruct the life of one eighteenth-century woman on the Kentucky frontier, this essay illustrates how knowledge of archival collection and provenance provides vital perspective on historic experience. Given the long tradition of collaboration between librarians, archivists, and women's historians, this essay suggests that renewed attention to such relationships will provide important new opportunities for future research.

The work of women's history brings the ordinary, the forgotten, the pedestrian, and the subtle realities of experience into sharper focus. By filling in silences and challenging basic narratives, scholars over several decades reshaped what we consider historically important. Scholars dug into archives to uncover the plodding regularity of housework, the private acts of reading or writing, the everyday acts of resistance, the hidden histories of sex and sexuality. Through dogged efforts to navigate archives designed to obscure such topics, women's historians located such evidence and explored its significance. Although the methodological approaches that framed such projects changes significantly with each generation of

scholars, the basic impulse to dig deeply into archives and revive elusive evidence remains constant.

The work was not always easy. Locating evidence for any minority population in archival resources requires a certain level of suspicion. Searching for a needle in a haystack was part of the job. Scholars must reconcile the fact that certain subjects were not deemed historically important or worthy of preservation for many generations of scholars. Given such shortcomings, scholars learned to “read against the grain” of documents to tease out hidden stories or to point out the ubiquity of things so ordinary they are rarely seen.

Even today, searching for such evidence is not always a clearly marked endeavor and, as a result, an essential part of research in women’s history involves creative collaboration with librarians and archivists. Doing such research involves reading the subtexts of card catalogs and online database entries for evidence of what they conceal. It means reading finding aids for what they gloss over more than for what they reveal. It involves seeking out the collections and documents that are deemed unimportant or uninteresting. Most importantly, it involves a level of reliance on librarians and archivists to provide roadmaps to rich and complex collections.

The importance of collaborations between scholars, librarians, and archivists cannot be understated. When the emergence of feminist politics in the late 1960s inspired historians to question assumptions about women’s past lives, so too did librarians and archivists revisit the conventions of their own profession. The ways that libraries and archives sort, value, and present collections today is deeply connected to the efforts inspired by the social revolutions of the 1960s. Research institutions revised their card catalogs, finding aids, and collections in order to tell a new story. They began to change what they collected, how they structured guides, and how they conceived of and presented collections. They created a new landscape that contained valued, rather than obscured, documents by and about women.

Despite the centrality of archivists to the historian’s craft, few seriously engage their work today. There is little scholarship about how the changes within libraries and archives facilitated more effective research in women’s history. When women’s historians talk about documents, they focus primarily on creative ways to *read* documents. Scholars discuss, for example, how to think about law as narrative, or how to read diaries as self-consciously constructed documents, or how to consider material objects as embodiments of cultural moments. They seldom question the broader processes by which such evidence came to be saved, placed in an archive, cataloged by a professional, and listed in a card catalog.

In this essay, I suggest that a fuller understanding of archival history and practice can help provide scholars with a richer understanding of their own subjects. I describe how my own efforts to reconstruct the life

of one eighteenth-century woman, Anne Henry Christian, sent me into unexpected questions about provenance and documentation that fundamentally changed how I understood her life specifically and women's history broadly. Understanding "Annie" Christian's life, I discovered, was contingent upon understanding why her material survived, who collected it, and how it was cataloged. Tracking down the history of her collections led me to larger questions about the way we value documents by and about women and how such values have changed over time. Ultimately, I suggest here that historians take a closer look at their long-standing collaborations with librarians and archivists and use the knowledge of such relationships to help better navigate source material and understand its shortcomings.

Historians could learn important lessons from archival practice. Archivist Susan Grigg, for example, claims that a better understanding of archival provenance would open valuable avenues for historical research. She criticizes the "juridical" model of research that most historians engage. In this model, the historian acts as "judge" over the "testimony" contained in documents. It is a binary relationship in which the historian is focused solely on the narrative contained within the text of their evidence. This approach, she argues, fails to take into account the concept of provenance that traces the broader circumstances in which a document was produced and saved. Taking such issues into account illuminates "the growth of [archival] collections has been as much a historical process as the events they document and the scholarship they foster" (Grigg, 1991, p. 234).

I would have appreciated a fuller understanding of such issues when I began my research into the lives of women in eighteenth-century Kentucky. When I told archivists that I was researching women on the eighteenth-century frontier, they would apologize and tell me that there was simply not much material. There is much better material for nineteenth-century women, they explained. Have you considered moving your project forward in time? Then they would point me to the "w" section of their card catalog and inform me that that is where I would find the women. At the time, the "w" section of the card catalog seemed like a natural enough place to look for women's documents.

When I first began work in the archives, however, I had not considered that I entered a highly constructed world with a history all its own. In hindsight, my project would have been much better served had I entered the archives with a better understanding of how, why, and when women's records got relegated to the "w" section of the card catalog in the first place and how the meaning of who constituted a legitimate "w" changed over time. As my research soon revealed, not all women are represented in the "w" file in the card catalog. Historically, the women represented within this particular file were, for the most part, upper-middle class white women who engaged in nineteenth-century reform movements. As feminist activists and scholars drew greater attention to the ways that race, class, ethnicity,

and sexuality marked differences between women, the language of those represented within the “w” file became increasingly diverse.

Despite such changes, card catalogs could not possibly document all women. Entries in card catalogs represent, in many ways, small historic documents themselves. Before the advent of online databases and search engines transformed the way we locate documents, the card catalog was the primary resource for scholars. Their content describes the kind of source, the author, the date, and sometimes the location in which it was produced and brief note about content. Although the content of such cards can be cross-listed to cover multiple topics, the medium privileges literate authors of particular narrative forms. I therefore found many more sources on women in the “w” file from the nineteenth century, after women’s educational opportunities expanded literacy rates and letters and diaries became more narrative in style. Eighteenth-century women on the Kentucky frontier, in contrast, were comparatively less literate and were more likely to appear within documents written by male authors—as customers in account books, as witnesses to transactions, background figures in letters. Such women rarely got their own cards.

Although questions about provenance and cataloging are quite central to the historiography of the new social history that emerged in the 1960s, few teach or write about such relationships. Throughout my training in women’s history, for example, I was always aware of the founding relationship between women’s history and second-wave feminism. Like many related fields of social history, women’s history sought to remedy the silences of the past. The emergence of feminism inspired scholars to identify and revise assumptions about women’s experience that were pervasive in the traditional historical narrative.

What I did not know about were the ways that such political transformations similarly affected archivists and librarians to rethink their own professional conventions. I did not know, for example, about the intense collaborations that took place during the early 1970s between women’s historians and archivists that fundamentally changed the ways that people engaged in all kinds of historical research. The publication of Andrea Hinding’s massive two-volume collection, *Women’s History Sources* in 1979, for example, represented such a collaborative effort. Although Hinding’s document guide crucially shaped scholarship in women’s history throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as student conducting research in the new millennium, I had never heard of it. Trained in an era of digital databases, searchable texts, and online libraries, I never had reason to use *Women’s History Sources*. Raised in an age in which access to information is taken for granted, I never learned about the exhaustive and collaborative labor that helped unearth such information from obscurity in the first place.

Although all historians rely crucially on their experiences in the archives, they tend to diminish or obscure such experiences in their schol-

arship. As Susan Grigg (1991) points out, historians regularly think about collections and their origins in the early stages of research, yet “few publish this phase of their experience, much less abstract it as a teaching” (p. 233). I suggest here that taking a more comprehensive perspective on the research process generally and on the structure, organization, and provenance of document collections specifically can help us better navigate and understand the universe of information before us and, ultimately, the history we tell.

### A LIFE IN DOCUMENTS

The importance of provenance and archival practice became crucial to my research into the life of one eighteenth-century woman, Anne Henry Christian. Reviving “Annie” Christian’s life from obscurity would have been impossible without the combined efforts of scholars and archivists. Almost all the existing documents about Annie Christian ended up together through the work of numerous different people over the course of many decades. Her material changed hands multiple times throughout two centuries of occasional care and regular neglect. Some of her writing was preserved by distant family members, while the ephemeral material of her daily life was stored by kin who simply did not know what else to do with it. That any of her material ended up in archives at all is the result of serendipitous decisions and indirect choices.

Yet, the story of how decisions shaped Annie Christian’s material past has significantly shaped how we remember her. Her material past—by which I mean the provenance of document collections and the specific histories of collected evidence—is as much a part of her broader history as any actual events of her past. In other words, her remembered experience is not just a series of linked moments, frozen in time. It is, rather, a series of moments written down, then saved or discarded, stored or neglected, bought or sold, auctioned or bequeathed, valued or forgotten. The particular ways that the material of her life has emerged over many decades in various hands, in different archives, for diverse scholars has shaped very distinct portraits of her personality.

I first found Annie Christian mentioned in the work of other scholars interested in eighteenth-century western expansion (Fischer & Kelly, 2000; Terry, 1992; Teute, 1988). The basic outline of her experience is clear. In 1785, Annie Christian left her Virginia family to settle land claims in Kentucky owned by her husband, Colonel William Christian. William had acquired land in Kentucky as payment from Virginia for his service during the Seven Years’ War. William and Annie moved with their children and slaves to the Beargrass region of Jefferson County, Kentucky, near present-day Louisville. The Christians were part of a much larger migration of Easterners heading west to Kentucky after the end of the American Revolution seeking to settle or acquire land and fortune on the new frontier.

Most of what scholars know about her life comes from her regular letters home to Virginia, most of which resides at the Virginia Historical Society (VHS) as part of the Hugh Blair Grigsby Collection. She wrote regularly to her sister-in-law Anne Fleming, her mother-in-law Elizabeth Christian, and to her more famous brother, Patrick Henry. Her letters trace the family's passage to Kentucky and describe their life there. From her letters, we learn that her husband, William, died shortly after their arrival in Kentucky and left her with considerable financial burdens. After William's death, Annie wrote regularly to his friends and business associates—most often Caleb Wallace and William Fleming—for assistance in settling debts.

The voice that emerges from the particular letters stored at the Virginia Historical Society is one filled with conflict and hardship. Her letters describe the physical difficulty of frontier life, her despondence after her husband's death, and her struggle to understand his finances. In 1785, for example, she wrote home to her sister-in-law Anne Fleming about her passage and arrival in Kentucky. As her family "came through the wilderness," she observed how "the roads are bad beyond any description & the weather so violently hot & such great scarcity of water."<sup>1</sup> Both she and William were unhappy with rough conditions and Kentucky. Shortly after her arrival, Annie confessed to her mother-in-law that she "never saw any trouble until I came to this country."<sup>2</sup>

The personality that emerges from the particular letters in the Hugh Blair Grigsby Collection is a beleaguered, dependent victim of a zealous husband's decision to move west. Several scholars have mined this material for evidence of women's experiences in the early West and many have used her to illustrate women's dependence on their husband's economic and physical protection on the frontier. Historian Gail Terry described the marriage between Annie and William Christian as "mostly traditional," citing as evidence Annie's lack of "influence on the decisions-making process" during her marriage and her "need for a male protector" after William's death (Terry, 1992, pp. 196, 204, 200, 221). Similarly, historians David Hackett Fischer and James Kelly found in Annie's correspondence a "litany of woe" that reflected how frontier women were "devastated by breaking home ties" in the process of migration (Fischer & Kelly, 2000, pp. 220, 221).

Although the content of Annie Christian's letters certainly does give the impression that her life in Kentucky was marked by hardship and struggle, the provenance of the collection that houses them helped shape this characterization. Her collection of letters is far from complete, due to the fact that they were collected in no particular order. The letters at the VHS came together through the efforts of nineteenth-century collector, Hugh Blair Grigsby. Grigsby, an early president of the VHS, had no particular family connection to the Christians. Rather, he was an avid collector

of material about the American Revolution and the constitutional period with particularly strong interests in Annie's brother, Patrick Henry, her brother-in-law, William Fleming, and her friend, Caleb Wallace. Grigsby collected Annie's letters, therefore, because of who she wrote to rather than who she was.

This was not unusual during the period when Grigsby collected. As the revolutionary generation began to die off during the 1830s and 1840s, collectors and antiquarians sought to preserve their memory of the nation's origins. The result was the creation of significant historical societies that portrayed a particular kind of political history. The men who founded the VHS in 1831, for example, included among them John Marshall and James Madison—men invested with preserving a narrative of the political significance of the founding era. Similarly, the seminal documents of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin came together largely through the efforts of one man, Lyman Copeland Draper, who sought to collect the dying memories of early frontier settlers. Draper sought out stories of military exploits and frontier adventure. Such collection efforts largely obscured the social and cultural history that women's historians would later seek to recapture.

Annie Christian's letters, thus, survived because of Hugh Blair Grigsby's collection interest in particular and important figures of the Revolutionary era, not because of his interest in Annie Christian. Annie wrote most regularly to Anne Fleming, whom she considered her closest confidant. She leaned as much on her friend Caleb Wallace, her closest advisor on financial matters. This particular set of correspondence, therefore, represents letters written to the people she trusted most with her emotional and financial problems. Their content, therefore, reflects a particular slice of Annie Christian's frontier experience, one in which personal and financial struggles ring through with particular honesty and poignancy. A personality emerges from these letters because a collector chose these particular documents for specific reasons and placed them side by side in an archive. Annie's characterization in scholarship is as much a product of the process of archival collection as it is the result of her own words.

A contrasting set of documents that came together for very different reasons surfaced in the archives only recently. Annie Christian's lived experience became far more complex when her descendents released new material about her in the 1990s. Annie's daughter, Priscilla, married a prominent early Kentuckian named Alexander Scott Bullitt. In the 1790s, Bullitt built an impressive estate just outside Louisville that he called Oxmoor, which has remained the family home ever since. After the death of an elder Bullitt heir in 1991, the trustees of the Bullitt estate opened up the family papers for archival review. Archivists from the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, Kentucky went into Oxmoor and began to catalog the new material.

As archivists began to search through the Oxmoor library—as well as the basement, attic, desk drawers, closets, and anything else they could think of—they discovered that bits and pieces of the family history had been saved and organized by various members of the Bullitt lineage over the past two centuries. A Bullitt heir and avid genealogist, William Marshall Bullitt, compiled the bulk of the material in the early twentieth century. Bullitt was, by all characterizations, obsessed with his family history. He wrote to distant relatives for information, bought related materials at auctions, copied letters from archives and created individual files for each of his ancestors. Tragically, the pride of his collection—his grandfather's Civil War material—perished in a fire in 1943. Most of the eighteenth-century documents, fortunately, remained locked in a safe and unscathed in the family library.

Not everybody in the Bullitt family shared William Marshall's passion for history and genealogy. After William Marshall Bullitt died in 1957, his son inherited the massive collection of documents. The son, however, had no interest in the material. He emptied the materials out of their resting place in the library safe, stuck them in a filing cabinet and placed them in the basement. There they remained, subject to leaking pipes and flooded floors for the next several decades until archivists came to appraise the collection in 1991.

When this new document collection became available at the Filson Historical Society, they revealed an entirely new side of Annie Christian's experience. This was due largely to the fact that the material stored by the Bullitt family was particular in scope. The documents that William Marshall Bullitt compiled and organized survived because they related to wills and estates. They addressed financial matters, land purchases, business accounts, and related correspondence. Most of the material relating to Annie Christian in the collection reflects such matters.

The Oxmoor collection describes Annie Christian as a financially active woman deeply engaged in the frontier economy. After Annie's husband, William, died in 1786, for example, she inherited a salt manufactory on the family property. The Bullitt's Lick saltworks was one of the largest and most important early industries in Kentucky. Salt was a vital commodity on the early frontier. Settlers used it to preserve food through the winter months. Militia units required salt to store and carry food over long forays into the Northwest Territory. It was so important that settlers often used salt as a form of cash. Annie Christian, for example, paid the many workers at the saltworks in bags of salt and used it to settle her accounts with local merchants.<sup>3</sup>

Annie's correspondence describes her efforts to legally secure the saltworks for her son's inheritance. During the short period of time that Annie controlled the saltworks, the ownership of the property was not entirely secure. Her son-in-law, Alexander Scott Bullitt, wanted to control

the saltworks himself and made gestures to take management away from her. Bullitt went over her head and complained to Elizabeth Christian, Annie's mother-in-law, about her management. Annie's letters describe the tensions that developed between she and her son-in-law and her efforts to maintain a firm grip on her business. She explained Bullitt's gestures as "highly ungenerous," as he endeavored "to throw the blame upon me in deceiving him, which would have been in fact the highest Injustice in me, and an Action most detestable."<sup>4</sup>

By far the most interesting part of the collection, however, is not the correspondence. Rather, the executors of the Bullitt estate managed to keep track of many of Annie Christian's receipts of orders placed at the saltworks. It is impossible to know if the collection of receipts is comprehensive—it is incredible that they survived at all. They are little more than small, torn strips of paper. They were folded and refolded many times and passed through many hands en route to and from the saltworks. They said very little and merely dictated business matters to the men and women working at the salt pits. The work orders were simple and direct: "Madam—Please let Capt Hord have 4 bushels of salt on my Account. Annie Christian," or "Sir—Please let Major Grays boy have 6 bushels of Salt. A. Christian," or "Please to let Mrs Lusk have two of the old kettles at the Lick that is out of use—I am, Annie Christian."<sup>5</sup>

The receipts saved within the Oxmoor collection reveal Annie Christian's economic life specifically because her records related to management of the family estate. Reading through her business records gives the impression that she devoted much of her time and mental energy to the management of her inherited industry. This impression is the direct result of the shape and purpose of this particular collection. The kinds of documents collected, the reasons they remained together, the care with which they were saved all concerned estate planning. As a result, we get a very different impression of Annie Christian from the Oxmoor collection than from her correspondence alone. Her business papers reflect the mundane and ordinary cycles of her daily life in ways that her correspondence does not. The personality that shines through these financial records takes shape because the family compiled this particular collection for a specific reason.

Other forces shaped the Oxmoor collection as well. William Marshall Bullitt's interests in genealogy also guided the way the documents survived. In his quest to track down his ancestors, Bullitt added a considerable amount of material to the estate papers and organized them in the way he saw fit. He purchased correspondence at auctions. He collected and transcribed stories from elder family members. Often, Bullitt would travel to archives and copy down material that he could not otherwise collect or purchase. When he copied letters and other documents, he would readily edit material according to what he found valuable. Some letters,

copied in his own hand, condense large portions of text to a simple declaration that the author reported “nothing but gossip.”

Although such editorial moments are utterly frustrating to the historian, they are fundamentally part of the larger story that the collection reveals. Despite the limitations—or more accurately, because of them—the documents from the Oxmoor estate give us a specific perspective on one woman’s personality. It is, however, a selective and constructed personality produced over a long period of time during which values about collection and preservation changed dramatically. The woman that emerges from the Oxmoor documents little resembles the financially helpless, emotionally exhausted woman that emerges from the Hugh Blair Grigsby letters in Virginia. Personal matters did not appear on receipts. Homesickness was not revealed in business transactions. “Gossip” did not register as important.

The recently released documents from the Oxmoor estate do far more than just add another level of complexity to Annie Christian’s eighteenth-century life. Considered within the larger universe of her material past, they tell as much about the dynamic experience of her memory. As I began to look through her collections, I found that the way she has been portrayed by historians was contingent upon the ways that her material was compiled and arranged. Archivists and collectors took different kinds of documents and organized them in different ways and such choices produced distinct historic narratives. I could not separate—nor even truly distinguish—her lived experience from the material past of her life in the archives.

The full memory of Annie Christian’s life cannot be found within the text of her writing alone. Rather, the experiences that emerge through the provenance of her collection are equally important. The static content of her writings and receipts provides us with isolated snapshots of her life. We can only speculate and make educated, highly researched assumptions about the context in which such snapshots occurred. The dynamic context of her collections, in contrast, explains the place of these snapshots within her broader legacy. Approaching documents as living artifacts whose history as material objects continues long after the events they record took place can, ultimately, provide new perspective on the ways that we remember, shape and understand the past.

### COLLABORATIVE HISTORY

My experiences researching Annie Christian’s life brought to light many of my own methodological shortcomings about how to approach the archive. Although all historians deal with archives at some point in their research, few have much formal knowledge or training in archival practice or methodology. Similarly, few give significant credit, if any, to the collaborative process between archivists, librarians, and scholars. At the most basic level, it is these processes that form the foundations of historical scholarship. In ways that are both obvious and subtle, the combined

efforts of historians, librarians, and archivists have created important new opportunities for research.

Nowhere were such collaborations more valuable than in the development of the field of women's history in the early 1970s. For the first generation of women's historians, the process of discovering records otherwise buried in archives was crucial. The work involved rethinking the nature of what existed in the archives and how it got there. In order to locate women's presence in documents, they needed to work closely with archivists and librarians to locate, shape, and understand the history of women who had been obscured by historical assumptions about their contributions.

As a small universe of scholars began to publish new titles in women's history during the late 1960s and early 1970s, their efforts reflect a struggle against limited archival resources. Before the field emerged in the late 1960s, the narrative of women's history focused on the story of women's suffrage. Some limited work existed on women's involvement in other reform movements and a handful of famous women or wives of famous men had received attention from biographers. For the most part, historians before the late 1960s valued the appearance of women in scholarship based on a conceptual framework that privileged a very limited spectrum of male political, social and economic activity.

As a result, these initial forays into writing women's history were in dialogue with existing understandings of women's historical significance and focused on the political reforms and collective actions of middle-class white women. Faced with archival resources organized around women's formal political activity and important individual figures, historians set out to understand such records with new perspective. Foundational titles such as Gerda Lerner's *Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (1967), Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (1970), William Chafe's *American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920–1970* (1972), and Kathryn Kish Sklar's *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (1973) came about as the result of scholars' efforts to mine existing resources and scholarship for a new understanding.

The archival resources that scholars had to work with were organized along similar understandings of historiography. Before the social movements of the 1960s helped to radically shift thinking about what defined historical significance, archives approached the collection, organization, and preservation of women's source materials with attention to important figures and formal political activities. A few archives were entirely devoted to resources on the history of women, most notably the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. These collections, however, focused their collections on an understanding of women's history that associated women's historical impact with nineteenth-century reform movements.

At the time that scholars began to research and write women's history, the very idea of a special collection on the history of women was considered by some to be anachronistic. According to Barbara Haber (1978), who joined the Schlesinger Library in 1968, many critics thought that the very existence of a women's archive was merely a "mental holdover from the nineteenth-century suffrage movement" (p. ix). Given the dearth of existing scholarship in women's history before the 1970s, the library largely acquired books to complement manuscript collections. Collection policies focused on manuscripts of important women as well as popular magazines like *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, or *Vogue*. Books on the history of women were largely supplemental.

The impact of the women's movement changed the collection policies and practices of such libraries substantially. The number of book and periodical titles grew dramatically with the emergence of feminism. As a result, the landscape of possibility for future research changed in fundamental ways. At the Schlesinger Library, for example, revised collection policies helped document feminism through the acquisition of papers and periodicals by activist groups. Collectors actively sought out new periodicals such as *Off Our Backs*, *Ain't I a Woman*, and *No More Fun and Games*. At the same time, feminist criticism opened up whole new areas for possible research and collection. As the politics of the 1970s helped create the intellectual foundation of women's studies, libraries began to seek out new literature widely dispersed across fields such as art history, literary criticism, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

Collections devoted exclusively to the history of women, however, were by far the exception rather than the rule. Most historians interested in studying the lives of women ventured into large research institutions that offered little guidance to women's varied experiences within their finding aids, card catalogs, and bibliographies. They found that libraries had a limited lexicon with which to catalog women's varied experiences. Card catalogs did not contain enough relevant headings to point scholars toward women's resources. The "w" file was fraught with what librarian Sandy Berman called "prejudices and antipathies." Berman critiqued the biases and assumptions in such subject headings and suggested revised alternatives. He suggested that headings like "sexual perversion" be removed from entries on "homosexuality" or "lesbianism," and that new headings such as "Women's Liberation Movement" be updated alongside existing labels on "rights of women" (Berman, 1971, pp. 182, 178).

In the early 1970s, several scholars combined their research interests with similarly inclined archivists to remedy such deeply entrenched research obstacles. They conceived of an ambitious project to survey archives nationwide for source material on women. In doing so, they intended "to advance intellectual control over primary sources that serve as a base for research in women's history" (Hinding & Bower, 1979, p.

ix). They sent out surveys intending to locate and describe sources based on seven major areas of importance: (1) papers of a woman; (2) records of a women's organization; (3) records of an organization, institution, or movement in which women played a significant but not exclusive part; (4) records of an organization, institution, or movement that significantly affected women; (5) groups of materials assembled by a collector around a theme or type of records that relates to women; (6) papers of a family (in which there are papers of female members); and (7) collections with "hidden" women (collections that contain significant or extensive material about women but whose titles or main emphases do not indicate the presence of such material (Hinding & Bower, 1979, p. x).

The resulting guide transformed the nature of research for the next generation of women's historians. Published in 1979, the massive, two-volume *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States* represented a monumental effort by archivists nationwide to rethink their holdings concerning women. The editors surveyed more than eleven thousand repositories and documented over eighteen thousand different manuscript collections. Organized by city and state, the guide described the holdings of major research institutions as well as small, lesser-known repositories.<sup>6</sup> The publication of Hinding's *Women's History Sources* brought such efforts to a national audience.

At the same time, large research institutions also began to rethink their collections and provide finding guides to women's resources. In 1975, for example, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) published its first edition of *Women's History Resources*, a small volume intended to help the growing number of scholars and students interested in women's history navigate their archival resources. Compiled by James P. Danky and Eleanor McKay (1975), this small publication captures some of the early ways that large research libraries began to rethink and reshape the role of their institutions alongside the changing academic climate. A similar effort to create a union list of women's periodicals emerged from Wisconsin in 1982. Also edited by James Danky, the resulting *Women's Periodicals and Newspapers from the Eighteenth Century to 1981* remains the largest, most comprehensive effort to catalog existing women's newspapers. Through such efforts, librarians and archivists participated in broader scholarly efforts to consider sources beyond those of elite, white, politically active women. Rather, they described the society's holding in labor history, mass communication, local history, photography, and film (Danky et al., 1982).

At the same time, a handful of librarians began to survey the first decade of the field and published bibliographies that complimented the work of archivists. Also in 1979, Esther Stineman and Catherine Loeb published *Women's Studies: A Recommended Core Bibliography* that described books appropriate for college libraries. Similarly, in 1978, Barbara Haber

published *Women in America: A Guide to Books, 1963–1975* that provided valuable annotations to existing scholarship.

For scholars, the publication of comprehensive document guides, combined with thorough bibliographies, transformed the field of women's history in several ways. First, such guides provided access to countless new topics of research. They highlighted previously obscure local repositories and provided access to women who had never before registered as historically significant. Second, the sheer size and number of resources contained by the guides vividly illustrated the ubiquity of resources on women and the variety of stories they contained. They opened the door to a revision of the field and its intentions. Finally, the sheer variety of resources listed in Hinding's guide forced scholars to think about their own assumptions about who constituted the category of "women" in the histories they wrote. The publication of this and subsequent research guides, thus, provided the foundation for the field to expand and develop.

At the same time, however, the very expansion of the field fostered by such archival projects forced scholars and archivists alike to challenge assumptions about the ways they constructed the history of womanhood. Increasingly, historians and librarians called attention to the ways that race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality complicated what defined "women" and complicated the assumptions of early feminist scholars. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, for example, librarians actively fostered and embraced the emerging complexity of the feminist movement in their own work. In the first volume of *Feminist Collections*, a UW publication dedicated to exploring library issues and women's studies, librarians addressed the tensions between ethnicity and gender when archiving source material. In a 1980 issue, for example, editors Linda Parker and Catherine Loeb described their research efforts in Chicana women's history and pointed out how card catalog language hindered research. "Sources *must* exist," the editors claimed, but "just as materials of Anglo women's history or black history, these sources will remain invisible until we . . . learn the relevant questions to ask" about what qualifies as source material and where to find it (p. 2).

The processes by which historians and librarians learned to ask relevant questions did not occur in a vacuum. Both fields were crucially linked together in their academic pursuits. Scholars brought new questions to source material while librarians and archivists invented new ways to identify and present documents. As a result, the contents of the "w" file became increasingly qualified and complex. Each professional impulse occurred within a shared political climate that facilitated new directions for academic work. Through collaboration and collective experience, scholars and archivists learned how to ask questions about the very nature of archival practice in ways that helped create a radically new understanding of the past.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1990s, the field of women's history again changed dramatically in ways that forced scholars, archivists, and librarians to rethink defini-

tions of source material and possibilities for research. Central to this change was the 1988 publication of Joan Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History*, which argued that identity was a construct articulated through relationships of power. Scott's work argued for a shift away from "women" as an exclusive subject of historical research to "gender" as a primary category of analysis. The scholarship that emerged from women's historians in the decade after Joan Scott's work reflected a radical shift away from the traditional conceptual frameworks of social history. New research reflected an increasing commitment to interdisciplinarity as historians drew from areas such as cultural studies, literary analysis, and material objects for new perspectives on women's past experiences.

The theoretical changes that forced scholars to revise traditional models of social history and incorporate new understandings of gender were equally important to librarians and archivists. In some ways, such new theoretical frameworks made the work of archivists and librarians considerably more difficult. Unearthing women from collections of historical documents can be difficult, but is not impossible. Archiving relationships of power, in contrast, is a much different pursuit. New scholarly attention to gender created formidable challenges for the librarians and archivists who tried to meet and anticipate their demands.

At the same time, however, such intellectual shifts proved liberating to the method and practice of collection acquisition and presentation. As scholars began to expand the universe of documents for evidence of women's experience, it opened new possibilities for archivists and librarians to expand the nature of their collections. The most recent set of collection policies for the Schlesinger Library, for example, reflects the full impact of such new possibilities. The library now seeks to collect books and manuscripts on such diverse topics as environmentalism, masculinity, technology, teenagers, parenting, aging, and spirituality in addition to the traditional subjects like reproductive rights, social activism, workplace and household issues.

The work of women's historians, librarians, and archivists has been contingent and complementary since the field emerged four decades ago. The work of women's historians has been fundamentally shaped by the ability to access documents and question what qualifies as source material. Such inquiry would have been impossible without the collaboration and commitment of those in libraries and archives. As women's history continues to evolve, scholars would benefit from looking at the practical and intellectual relationships between documents, the archivists and librarians who organize them and the academics that read. As my own experiences in the archives suggest, a broad understanding of archival practice and history can help create a richer understanding of the past. Researching the archival history of Anne Henry Christian's material past illuminated how the collection and preservation of sources can shape historic memory.

Although collaborations between scholars, archivists, and librarians are not so obvious today within women's history as they were in the early 1970s, they remain no less important. More important, understanding such relationships can provide a valuable point of departure for new directions in thinking. Looking at the origins and the history of the "w" file, in particular, suggests the need to revise both the conceptual framework and the archival practice of women's history. When the field emerged in the late 1960s, the meaning of womanhood seemed obvious to historians, archivists, and librarians alike. Cataloging women's records meant simply placing a card in the "w" file. As the field matured, however, scholars in women's history and library sciences found that defining "women" was a very complex project. "Women" in the card catalog became qualified by an increasing number of defining features—race, religion, sexuality, profession, ethnicity, family status, just to name a few.

The original clarity of the category has become so fuzzy over time that it is often hard to weed through the layers of qualification to decipher primary significance. While both scholarship and archival practice have underscored the diversity of women's lives, such efforts remain framed—or possibly, confined—by their place in the "w" file. Future scholarship will benefit by rethinking both the material and the historical landscape in which we place women's experiences. It may be time to release "women" as a primary *category* in order to see the full complexity of women's historically contingent experiences more clearly. Rethinking this landscape will ultimately help us to shift our focus beyond the "w" file and potentially renew the dynamic collaborations between women's historians, librarians, and archivists that crucially shaped the field as we know it today.

## NOTES

1. Annie Christian to Anne Fleming, September 13, 1785, Hugh Blair Grigsby Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.
2. Annie Christian to Elizabeth Christian, September 18, 1786, Hugh Blair Grigsby Papers, Virginia Historical Society.
3. See, for example, Annie Christian to John Belli, December 20, 1786, Bullitt Family Papers, Oxmoor Collection, 1683–2003, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky; Richard Woolfolk and Annie Christian to Hannah Hinch, September 5, 1786, Filson Historical Society, Oxmoor Collection.
4. Annie Christian to Elizabeth Christian, January 1, 1788, Bullitt Family Papers, Oxmoor Collection.
5. Annie Christian to Hannah Hinch, April 3, 1787, Bullitt Family Papers, Oxmoor Collection; Annie Christian to James Asturgus, October 28, 1787, Bullitt Family Papers, Oxmoor Collection; Annie Christian to James Asturgus, November 25, 1787, Bullitt Family Papers, Oxmoor Collection.
6. A good review essay of the many important guides and bibliographies on women's history published in the late 1970s and early 1980s is Darlene Roth, "Growing Like Topsy: Research Guides to Women's History," *Journal of American History* 70 (June, 1983) 95–100.
7. Several women's historians—who were particularly indebted to Andrea Hinding's work—published on the creative ways to look at source materials. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Organized Womanhood: Archival Sources on Women and Progressive Reform," *Journal of American History* 75 (June, 88) 176–183; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Of Pens and Needles:

Sources in Early American Women's History," *Journal of American History* 77 (June, 1990) 200–207; Deborah Grey White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74 (June, 1987) 237–242.

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