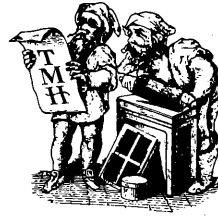


# THE MARYLAND HISTORIAN



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## BANK HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

Having always associated History Departments with Universities, I was quite surprised when I discovered that the Wells Fargo Bank had its own History Department and was seeking professionally trained historians and archivists to help manage its historical resources. As the assistant corporate archivist I am now part of the twelve-member department which cares for the records, photographs and artifacts which comprise the Wells Fargo historical collection. Our group includes three members with PhDs in history (two of whom are also trained as archivists), one with an MLS (Master of Library Science) and professional training as an archivist, one with professional training in museum and exhibit work, one with advanced training in conservation work and six others with diverse history-related capabilities. Together we are a small but important part of a major financial institution that has nearly 13,000 employees, manages assets approaching \$17 billion, and has business operations around the world.

Since 1852, when Wells Fargo began express and banking operations in San Francisco, the men and women who made it famous seem to have sensed the importance of the company's role in the development of the American West. Consequently, some of them set aside many of the artifacts and records which detail the growth and development of the company.

About forty years ago some of these historical materials were gathered together to form the nucleus of the Wells Fargo History Room, a museum designed to display the highlights of Wells Fargo's history, as well as the history of gold mining, staging and California. Yet the History Room represented only part of Wells Fargo's history-related activities. Many individuals and departments found themselves immersed in Wells Fargo's history for a variety of reasons. Employees from the areas of public relations, public and governmental affairs, real property management, marketing, advertising, retail banking, personnel, corporate contributions and the legal department tried to cope with the accumulated historical records.

In 1975, on the recommendation of an ad hoc History Task Force, the Bank decided that its history, as an important corporate asset, deserved to be managed with the same care that financial assets received. Thus, Wells Fargo centralized its major history-related activities by creating a History Department.

The History Department now has responsibility for the Bank's museum and historical exhibit program, history library, corporate archives, historical research/publications program, oral history program and stagecoach appearance program. It serves as the authoritative source for historical information about Wells Fargo, and provides research and

reference service to all units of the Bank and the holding company. It is used most heavily by the marketing, public relations and legal departments. It also provides assistance to numerous outside researchers who write, call, and visit every day with specific requests for information. It participates in restoration programs sponsored by the State of California Parks and Recreation Department. And it supports many historical societies in California with institutional sponsorship.

As assistant corporate archivist, I have primary responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the corporate archives. I am involved in designing archival systems which are flexible enough to accommodate the 4,000 cubic feet of corporate records (correspondence, reports, ledgers, journals, promotional and advertising material, papers of executive officers, memorabilia, etc.) that have already been set aside, as well as the micro-reprographic material that is anticipated in the future.

Almost every day the archives receives material from past and current operations as more and more people within our organization recognize that today's paperwork is tomorrow's historical record. Equally, most people within the organization have recognized that the preservation of a corporate memory in the form of an archives is a worthwhile pursuit. In addition, since "flexibility" has been the watchword of the History Department since its inception, the staff of the Department, including myself, has had an opportunity to gain experience in all areas of our program beyond the ones for which we are individually responsible. Such variety of experience provides exposure to many different and useful areas of historical and corporate activity.

As an undergraduate history major at Villanova University in the 1960s, I, like so many others at the time, read the American Historical Association's *History as a Career: To Undergraduates Choosing a Profession*: a booklet "designed to help you decide whether you want to make college teaching a career." The future seemed bright in that area, so at the time I hardly noticed the paragraph on "Historians Who are Not College Teachers" in the sixteen-page booklet.

Optimistic about a career in history, I chose graduate work at Ohio State University instead of law school, though I was offered fellowships for both, and wrote a masters thesis on seventeenth-century French mysticism. From there I went to Paris for a year and-a-half to continue my research. The work led to a Teaching and Research Fellowship at Stanford University where I wrote most of my PhD dissertation, "The Police of Paris under Louis XIV."

By that time it was apparent that the bears had the bulls by the horns and that the teaching market for historians had fairly well collapsed. As so often happens at critical points in one's life, chance played an important role in my getting a job. I began work at a newly-funded National Endowment for the Humanities position in the Archives Department at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at the Stanford campus. While employed at the Hoover, I had an opportunity to go back to Washington, D.C. to attend the Archives Institute of the National Archives and Records Service and the Library of Congress, and thus obtained additional professional training as an archivist. Then, just as the NEH grant at the Hoover was coming to an end, Wells Fargo Bank advertised its need for additional professional staff for its History Department.

Given my own career path, I do not know that I could recommend that anyone imitate me and expect to arrive at the same stopping-off point. However, on the basis of my own experience, I think I can offer some advice to those who are contemplating employment in a non-academic field such as business. My advice to historians still in training consists of two specific recommendations. First, above all else, submit your writing to critical evaluation by experienced writers and historians — and accept their criticism gracefully. One of the hardest things for anyone to do is to put one's thoughts on paper and then see them flagellated by someone with a red pen. Yet, in the long run you will look back with thanks to those persons who took the time to critique your work. Whether you wind up writing thousand-page monographs, multi-page project proposals, or one-page memos, clarity of thought and expression will always be a key to success. Second, take as many diversified skill-enhancing courses as your curriculum will permit. In other words, given a choice between additional courses in obscure fields of history and courses in computer science, or information processing, or archives administration, or an additional language, opt for the non-history courses. In the end, everyone who receives an MA or PhD in history will be assumed to have a basic knowledge of history. Not everyone, however, will know how to operate a computer, or do uniterm coordinate indexing, or process an archival collection, or speak Swedish. All things being equal among candidates for a job, diversification in your background might just make the difference that singles you out. And if you have any inclination whatsoever to work in the business world, training in accounting, economics and business administration are a major plus.

As for job-seeking techniques, again I have two recommendations. First, seek the advice of persons who are already employed in whatever profession, historical or otherwise, you are contemplating. You can read and imagine all you want about what a particular job might be like, but your most informative source will be a working member of the profession itself. The meetings of professional societies will give you a fair idea of the range of activities and concerns of those who work in any profession. In the case of archives, contact the Society of American Archivists (330 South Wells Street, Suite 810, Chicago, Illinois 60606) for the latest publications about the archival profession and for information about the frequent workshops and meetings they hold around the country. Read the *SAA Newsletter* for the latest information on professional opportunities, for you never know when you might just have the specialized knowledge and educational background that some archives desperately need. Contact local archival and historical societies. Usually they are composed of very friendly persons who are more than willing to share their knowledge about the profession with anyone who is interested. And most archivists are quite willing to conduct you on a tour of their facilities. Second, if you intend to apply for a position with a particular company, take the time to read its promotional literature and its annual report, or, in the case of a public corporation, the 10-K report it files annually with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Find out something about the company *before* you write. And when you do write, take the time to compose a neat, concise and coherent cover letter to accompany your resume. A resume by itself is simply not enough to get you a position. In a business environment, a well-written cover letter will be

your best introduction to those who ultimately decide whether or not to interview you.

As for the future development of corporate archives, I am hesitant to make any wild predictions. But I think it is safe to say that most of the major corporate archives in the U.S. and Canada have been established on a formal basis within the last ten years, and there is no reason to think that the trend to create them will not continue for the foreseeable future as more and more companies recognize the benefits to be derived from them. It also seems to me that the success of corporate archives in recent years has been aided in a significant way by the degree to which their staffs have had professional training as historians and archivists. Overseeing the documentary heritage of a corporate entity, particularly one which sees its past as an asset on which it can construct part of its future, is one of the most exciting and rewarding things one can do if trained in history. I only hope that more and more historians have an opportunity to use their imaginations and talents for the benefit of the archives profession as well as for the benefit of the discipline of history itself. As Samuel Eliot Morison noted years ago in a discourse to young historians:

"the quality of imagination, if properly restrained by the conditions of historical discipline, is of great assistance in enabling one to discover problems to be solved, to grasp the significance of facts, to form hypotheses, to discern causes in their first beginnings and, above all, to relate the past creatively to the present."

It is still a good statement about a worthy endeavor.

Finally, what is it like to make the transition from academia to the business world? Quite frankly, it requires a certain amount of mental readjustment. You suddenly find yourself much more a part of a greater whole, with a specific range of responsibilities and authority. In a corporate organization two things in particular are important to realize when you are starting out. First, every organization has its preferred pattern of hierarchical reporting relationships, both direct and indirect, to which one is expected to adhere; and, second, within that pattern of reporting relationships, one must develop the ability to communicate information rapidly and accurately to one's corporate managers. The dynamics of a growing corporate entity necessitate the upward flow of *precise* information. Today's corporate managers are constantly bombarded with mountains of extraneous information. If you can assist them by condensing those mountains into small but concise molehills, then your value might be recognized. At the same time, you have to learn how to juggle — not the books, but the fifteen different projects and requests that you will be faced with at any give time — and handle all of them without dropping any! If you think you can deal with all of these things, and you have at least a modicum of common sense, then you may have a future in the business world. One certainly does not compromise any sacred principles by working in the business world, though for some reason many academics fear that they must give up a measure of their freedom, or sell their souls, to join it. Freedom's fetters are the same, whether you are in academia, or in the business world.