

## NATIONAL BAHÁ'Í ARCHIVES

□ Wilmette, Illinois 60091

### ARCHIVES AS A CAREER

Many young Bahá'ís are searching for a profession that will encompass their enthusiasm for the making and preserving of history, especially Bahá'í history, and that will offer unique opportunities to serve the Faith. Shoghi Effendi often encouraged youth to study and be aware of the importance of history. He pointed out in letters to individual believers that the Bahá'í Faith casts an entirely new light upon the study of history and that such study aids in understanding the Bahá'í Faith (see *Bahá'í Youth: A Compilation*, p. 15). Shoghi Effendi's own writings constantly stress the understanding of the events of the Bahá'í era in their historical context. Moreover, he gave the Bahá'í world two major historical works—his translation of Nabil's narrative *The Dawn-breakers* and his own *God Passes By*.

The study of history, however, vitally depends upon the work of people who attempt to ensure the preservation of historical records. These people are professional archivists. The field of archives administration offers Bahá'ís close contact with history and gives them knowledge and skills that are increasingly in demand throughout the world, both inside and outside the Bahá'í community. The following sections answer frequently-asked questions about archives as a career.

#### What Is An Archivist?

An archivist is a person whose profession involves acquiring, preserving, and making available for research the original source materials of history. These materials include the records of institutions and organizations, as well as the private papers of individuals. These records and papers provide important evidence of what happened in the past and useful information on how and why events occurred. An archives is a collection of documents carefully selected for their historical value. These documents are usually unpublished and include the working files of institutions and organizations; personal correspondence, manuscripts, notes, and scrapbooks; photographs, maps, film, recordings, historical printed matter, and computer-generated records.

The archivist must discover what historical records and papers exist and where they are; he must also decide whether these records are worth preserving. In order to do this the archivist must have an understanding of the historical background of the documents, the circumstances under which they were produced, and how they relate to other available sources of information. Such an understanding enables him to determine how useful the documents are likely to be to researchers and thus to decide whether they are important enough to be preserved. If the materials are damaged, he must take steps to repair and protect them to ensure their physical preservation. The archivist must also arrange and describe the records to assist the researcher in finding the information he needs. In addition, he must publicize his holdings to inform researchers about their value and potential uses. The archivist often works closely with the researcher to make sure that the researcher has access to as complete documentation of his subject as possible.

Service to others in their search for information and knowledge is the chief goal of the archival profession. The rewards of the work derive from the archivist's being of assistance to many different types of people, including historical researchers, social scientists, students, administrators, journalists, and genealogists. The work also enables the archivist to increase his own knowledge of history. Many archivists take advantage of the historical resources available to them to produce scholarly articles and books.

### **Where Do Archivists Work?**

Archivists may be found working for colleges and universities in archives and manuscript collections and in research libraries; for governmental archival agencies on the federal, state, and local level; for archives of larger businesses and labor organizations; and for private organizations, such as religious institutions, ethnic organizations, and professional societies. They are often part of the professional staff of libraries, historical societies, museums, and records centers. Because archival institutions vary widely in size, structure, and type of holdings, an archivist may be part of a large department, working with other archivists and people involved in different aspects of historical research, or he may be the sole person charged with the preservation of the history of an organization, company, or institution.

### **What Personal Strengths Are Needed in Archives Work?**

The archivist must combine his desire to serve others with a talent for organizing and an ability to express thoughts precisely, both orally and in writing. He must have a fundamental enthusiasm for history and a detective's love for ferreting out seemingly well-concealed facts.

### **How Can a College Student Begin Preparation For a Career in Archives Work?**

A student entering or in college and considering the archival profession should think seriously about majoring, as an undergraduate, in history or one of the social sciences. Whether a student chooses American, European, African, or Asian history, or art, music, science, economic, social, or political history would depend upon his interests and the type of archives in which he would like to work. A history major will give the student a basic background, training, and experience in historical research essential for pursuing studies in archival administration.

### **What Professional Education Does an Archivist Need?**

Professional training for archives work usually occurs on the graduate level. In the past most archivists learned on the job, but it is to the advantage of the beginning archivist to secure as much professional training in school as possible. Very few educational institutions offer formal degree programs specifically in archives administration. However, the number of institutions offering training in archives work is growing. This training usually forms part of a master's degree program in either library science or history. The extent of training varies from one course giving a survey of the field to a sequence of courses including an internship and research in the field. Although at the present there are no generally accepted

standards of minimum academic qualifications and training for professional archives employment, a student wishing to be an archivist can best prepare himself by choosing a graduate school that offers as much opportunity as possible for training in both the theory and practice of archives administration. Whether the training is acquired as part of a master's degree program in history or library science depends primarily on the student's interest. Some students decide to study for both degrees, and more than one graduate school will allow a student to apply his archives coursework towards course requirements for both degrees. A student studying full time can obtain a master's degree in library science in twelve months at most United States institutions, and a master's degree in history in twelve to eighteen months depending on individual institutions' requirements.

Some students are able to supplement their academic training with part-time employment in an archives. Some institutions hire student help on an individual basis and others as part of a work/study program. Depending on the number of hours per week that the student works, such employment may make it necessary for him to pursue a degree over a longer period of time, but the experience provided by the work can be an invaluable part of a student's preparation for a career in archives.

### **What Other Opportunities Exist for Exposure to Archival Careers?**

In addition to courses of study in archival administration forming part of a formal academic degree program, some archival institutions and universities also offer, independently, seminars and institutes in archives administration. These programs, varying in length from one to six weeks, provide practical experience as well as basic introductions to archival principles. They are often open only to those already working in archives and libraries.

### **Where May Further Information Be Obtained?**

A list of educational possibilities in the archives field is maintained by the Society of American Archivists. It can be found on the Society's website at [www.archivists.com](http://www.archivists.com).

Interested students should contact the educational institutions listed for specific and current information about their programs. Since new programs are coming into being every year, the Society frequently revises its listing.

International opportunities can be found on the websites of national archival associations. A good source of information is the website of the International Council on Archives, [www.ica.org](http://www.ica.org). For schools offering archival instruction in the United Kingdom, see [www.archives.org.uk/training/](http://www.archives.org.uk/training/)

### **Conclusion**

Bahá'ís who choose the profession of archivist as their career will discover that the field gives them an opportunity to serve others while being intimately involved in the preservation of the history of the past and the present. They will find that they will also be able to offer their talents to the Bahá'í community by assisting in the preservation of Bahá'í history on the local, regional, national, and international levels.