

A *window* into the



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The annual commemoration of National Archives Week (6-10 May 2013) provides an important platform to recognise the intricate role of archives. As the Archive Service will be opened to the general public for excursions, interactive activities and workshops, it is hoped to draw attention to the significance of the archives repository as a guardian and safekeeper of historical records and emphatically, to our common heritage.

The Western Cape Archives and Records Service, situated at 72 Roeland Street, Cape Town, represents the first archives repository in South Africa with the oldest documents dating back to 1651. Ever since the establishment of Cape Town the majority of records arising from the governmental departments or institutions on basically all matters of life, have been recorded and preserved largely intact. These records enable us to reflect on the past, and to understand the processes and circumstances of past realities. Thus, with the usual questions being raised as to the relevance of archives, it is evident that there could be no substantial grounds for writing a truthful history without the existence of archives.¹ No archives, no history.

In philosophical debates there have been many wide-ranging opinions or expressions about the relative importance of archives. One opinion is that archives have no inherent meaning, significance or value for the basic reason that records cannot speak for themselves. Arguments have been made that archives are simply repositories and the custodians of

records. The responsibility therefore rests on the researcher, archivist or historian to carefully analyse and interpret records in order to convey the meaning of records. As the historical context or background within which archival records have been created is open-ended, the researcher should consider the contextual circumstances of its creation. As these records were produced for some immediate purposes, ranging from administrative, functional or political reasons, it had a short term value, but as time went by, the enduring value of some records increased. They then required permanent accommodation in an archives repository. Verne Harris, former deputy director in the National Archives, elaborated on the need of archives as it, in reality, resembles a 'window into process, and that it reflects reality'.² By using 'window' as a metaphor for archives, Harris described that 'the window is not only a medium through which light travels, it also reflects light, transposing images from "this side" and disturbing images from the "other side"'. Harris came to the conclusion that the archives provides us with a window into realities, but due to various factors such as archival processes, intervention, classification and the decision of archivists on what will be preserved, it offers the researcher or investigator only with a 'sliver of a sliver'.³

In this regard, the archives repository could also be perceived as a place where memory of centuries gone by could be captured and 'saved for the future'. Although there is much argument on the fragile nature of memory, archival records could be utilised to uncover traces from the past or to provide accurate information which would otherwise have been forgotten. These records, which were created primarily to communicate events, processes or correspondences can rightfully be regarded as by-products of human activity. The end result of these



◀ Learners of Langa High School during National Archives Week, 8 May 2012

records that are selected, indexed and catalogued by archivists leads to the creation of an enormous memory bank. Pivotal historical records, such as the Freedom Charter, enable us to rekindle memories or to commemorate important aspects of the past and foster reconciliation or mutual understanding.

As a consequence of the information revolution, rapidly advancing technologies and computerisation, the overall demand for easily accessible information increased. As repositories for storing records, archives services thus need to adapt to these changes to ensure that past records, even preserved in digital electronic format, are being made available to users. In a discussion on archives and memory, a French historian, Pierre Nora, stated that 'modern memory is, above all, archival ... and relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, [and] the visibility of the image'.⁴ The archivist has an inescapable duty of selecting or discarding records on the grounds of authenticity, reliability and trustworthiness. Altogether this results in an essential and usable form of archival memory.⁵ It indirectly influences our perceptions of memory on, for instance, certain historical events or personalities.

The most precious permanent collections being housed in the Western Cape Archives are those of the records of the Dutch East India Company or the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), the Batavian Republic, the period after the Second British Occupation of the Cape in 1806, and records after the unification of South Africa in 1910. Parliamentary and Imperial Blue Books, together with the voluminous records of the Colonial Office, are likewise but a few of the countless valuable records being kept in the stack rooms of the archives repository.⁶ As these records are irreplaceable it is invaluable and everything in the archivist's power should be done to

ensure its proper maintenance for future reference or research.

As a measure to limit the risks to damage or neglect through the physical handling of historical records, various projects and digitisation processes have been undertaken. TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership Project), for example, was an outstanding example of a purposeful project wherein original primary sources were made available electronically. The project comprised a group of people who painstakingly converted the mostly unreadable and difficult text of the Resolutions of the Council of Policy of the Cape of Good Hope during the VOC-period into an accessible digital format.

In order to combat the gradual deterioration of records due to age and handling, constant efforts are being made to repair and restore old, damaged, brittle or fractured records. Specialised conservation techniques and skills are used by trained conservators for restoration purposes. The preservation section of the archives repository therefore forms an intricate part of the archives service. The archives repository also comprises a library and ultimately serves as a concise reference source to historical-related subjects through book, journal or manuscript sources. The library material can furthermore be regarded as supplementary material to the primary archival sources.

As the archives metaphorically represent a window into past lives and events, it also sheds light on a multitude of subjects ranging from governmental to private family matters. Official state records are vital for historical study and as evidence to prove the truth from the past records.⁷ Researchers, historians, legal practitioners and other investigators rely

on the archives to provide a window into past lives and events, it also sheds light on a multitude of subjects ranging from governmental to private family matters. Official state records are vital for historical study and as evidence to prove the truth from the past records.⁷ Researchers, historians, legal practitioners and other investigators rely



▶ Dr Ivan Meyer, Minister of Cultural Affairs and Sport, Western Cape, with learners from Serepta Secondary School in a stack room of the Western Cape Archives and Records Service



◀ Valuable restoration work being done in the preservation section of the archives.

mostly on the original sources and its integrity as contemporaneous and reliable sources. Dr PJ Venter, former chief archivist, explained the essential need for the preservation of state records as 'onontbeerlik vir die effektiewe administrasie van openbare sake, en die bewaring van die regte en vryhede van die volk. Hulle verskaf presedente wat vir amptenare as rigsnoer kan dien in die beheer van hedendaagse aangeleenthede en waarin argumente gevind kan word ter ondersteuning van die regte en vryhede van die nasie in sy betrekking met ander nasies. Hulle is die belangrikste beskerming van die regering teen ongegronde en bedrieglike aansprake, en omgekeerd, bevat hulle getuienis ter ondersteuning van regmatige eise wat die burgers teen die staat mag hê'.⁸ Although it is the Archives Service's unbinding responsibility to conserve and safeguard these records, it is also their obligation to make the archives accessible and transparent to the general public, as it is the democratic right of each citizen to consult the archives.

As Dr Venter indicated in his article *Skatte in ons argiewe* (Treasures in our archives), 'die dokument is die fundamentele bron in die geskiedskrywing. Hulle is die spore wat die verlede nagelaat het, en deur middel waarvan die geskiedskrywer dit kan laat herleef'.⁹ Numerous in-depth studies in the archives by students, academic researchers and authors have led, or contributed to, the publication of dissertations, projects and film documentaries. Yet, it is not only the historian who seeks the most benefits from the archival sources, but also other academic professions such as political scientists, economists and sociologists who unquestionably require the necessary sources as background or contextual information.

Political scientists or economic historians who conduct research into the 18th and 19th centuries will, for instance, have sources to illustrate the comparative wealth of the Cape as a British Colony, and relating aspects such as labour,

currency, imports and exports of goods and supplies and laws regulating land tenure. Trends in industrial or agricultural development could likewise be derived from the relevant financial sources.¹⁰ The great population movement from the west to the east of South Africa after the 18th century, which involved the 'trekking' of colonists and farmers into the interior; and the various reasons thereof, could all be traced back to records in the archives repository. The sociologist and anthropologist will find the sources revolving around the ordinary lives of people in the early Cape society helpful in their understanding of the

culture, organisation and development of society. The close contact between Europeans and people from the East Indies, as well as slaves and prisoners, had an indirect effect on the behaviours and customs of the society as a whole. Other aspects, such as social stratification and class distinction between rich and poor; could also be revealed through archival sources.

Geographers and city planners would likewise benefit from the vast map and cartographic collection which illustrates the development and urban sprawl of Cape Town and the Western Cape Province.

As a result of a worldwide tendency by people to engage and delve into their respective family histories, the pursuit of genealogical research has also increased remarkably. This type of research is regarded as some of the most intense, tedious and difficult, because of a wide range of reasons. The archives repository nevertheless has substantial records, most notably birth, marriage and death records, in its possession. Without these records the genealogist would be unable to comprehend or undertake family research.



▶ A perfect setting for the elegant building that houses the Western Cape Archives and Records Service



◀ Nomaza Dingayo, Director of Library and Archives Services, and Prof Peires at the National Archives Week launch on 4 May 2012

Non-public records and private collections of a purely personal type are being kept as a means to fill the gap where there are no sufficient governmental records or primary sources on a given subject. Information about the inner life of people could, for example, be portrayed through a diary of a voyage to the Cape in 1798 which tells us of life on an East Indian ship.¹¹ Personal notes, ledgers or manuscript books also provide us with clues or indications of what the social life in the past was like, and how incidents or daily lives were experienced.

With all the abovementioned archival records in the custody of the Western Cape Archives, it is evident that, due to the age and priceless nature of some of the historical records, it could be considered as national treasures of the highest value. It is these vast records of historical significance, not merely about a person's own country, but also that of his family, that will draw the attention of generations to come. The archives allow us, as citizens, the opportunity to view the past through a 'window', and simultaneously broaden our understanding of the past.

As National Archives Week will take place from 6 to 10 May 2013, the Western Cape Archives Service encourages the public to visit and participate in activities such as workshops and group tours that will be presented by the Archives Service. For more information or inquiries please contact Lunette Lourens on telephone: (021) 483-0403 or email: Lunette.Lourens@westerncape.gov.za

Sources

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▶ A display of primary sources from the Court of Justice records



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