

The History of the Recordkeeper

The History of the Recordkeeper Public Faith

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Abstract

The purpose of this document is to explain the significance of the record-keeper throughout history. Since there is a significant amount of history to cover, we will focus on the key points that make the profession it has become today. We start with the early formations of the profession, going through history to the Mesopotamian society. We then explain the height of the profession's success in Mesopotamia and Greek/Roman society and how the profession fell out of favor. We then describe the recovery and establishment of the official recordkeeping profession in Rome. Then we finally discuss some of the modern issues and concerns that the profession is dealing with today. The profession may no longer be in the spotlight that it once was, but is poised to carry the knowledge of civilization to its very end.

The History of the Recordkeeper

A long time ago, there was a profession that dictated the power of a kingdom. It preserved the culture through wealth and luxury. It stood next to the ruler of the kingdom. That profession was that of the high priest. On the other side of the ruler was an individual who studied a significant amount of knowledge that was equivalent to a university degree. In this paper I will discuss some key points in the history of the Recordkeeper. I had initially wanted to cover all the history of the recordkeeping profession; However, I think that pointing out some of the highlights of the development of the recordkeeper will illustrate the profession in a more interesting way. I will start the analysis by discussing a brief beginning in the record profession. I will talk about the significance of Rome at the height of the profession and the decline of the profession occurring in that civilization. The next point of interest will focus on the archival practice that took place in England and Europe and how its development was useful during the Post Renaissance period. Finally, we will discuss the practice of recordkeeping today and how it is viewed. By analyzing these points, I hope to give the reader a concise understanding of the profession and help the viewer understand its significance through history. Change is a necessary step in the advancement of human civilization, and recordkeeping may not continue to be the renowned profession it used to be.

The recordkeeper we know now is incredibly different from those in the past. Enjoying the renown that is reserved for a higher class in society such as the literati in ancient China (Wells, 2014) or the Samurai of ancient Japan (Wells, 2014), the recordkeeper was a significant individual who stood next to the king as well as the high priest. Where the high priest focused on the religious ceremonies, the recordkeeper focused on a more historical preservation route. The initial record keeper had to memorize specific events and make sure that they were passed on to

the students or disciples of the civilization (Daulby, 2018). This method unfortunately would not be a permanent one because the profession realized then that a better method of recording could be done on documentation rather than relying on an individual to speak it out loud. As society developed, the recordkeeper would develop new ways to preserve records to keep up with society's need to preserve its culture. At one point, the knowledge base of the recordkeeper included a large variety of information and study. "That, in modern terms, is comparable to the study of law, of political science, or administration, management, financial accounting, classification, information retrieval, and indexing" (Daubly, 2018). Many individuals today struggle with mastering all these subjects. After completing this degree I will probably have less than fifty percent understanding of all of those fields, and that's an optimistic estimation.

The earliest form of recordkeeping was not intentional or even rationally planned, but rather a result of human nature. You stated in your first session "Our first records of human communication are in the form of paintings, often in caves or in religiously significant locations, made to communicate across the generations. When man first learned to communicate across distance, he used drums, smoke signals, and hand motions to extend the impact of language" (Daubly, 2018). Whether intentional or not, you must concede that our ancestors and previous forms of life often made a significant effort to acknowledge their own existence. A French philosopher by the name of Jacques Derrida wrote a text called *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* which explains the nature of recordkeeping itself. Yale in her analysis of Jacques stated: "Archive Fever is not so much a study of a particular archive or archives. Rather it illuminates the impulse to archive, to record, to seek some kind of immoveable historical foundation" (Yale, 2015). It is our intention to be acknowledged and from that acknowledgement

we can see early patterns of record keeping that became essential for the development of civilization.

As civilization developed there were a few groups of civilizations that utilized the necessity of the art of record keeping before the common era. One example starts as early as the Mesopotamia period around 3200 BC (Daubly, 2018). These individuals were part of a system which we translate to a *court system*, and separate from the *priest system* which was one of the branch systems in the Babylonian and Egyptian empires. (Wells, 2014). What makes this branch stand out from the rest of the other ones is its influence on the nobility of the civilizations. H.G Wells stated “The nobility of the old river valley civilizations arose out of the court system. It was, therefore, a different thing in its origins from the nobility of the early Aryans, which was a republican nobility of elders and leading men” (Wells, 2014). It was during this period that civilization knew where to focus its resources when developing leadership. The most significant leader was an educated one. This civilization had a forward-thinking concept that we would only understand sometime in the 18th century: reason over royalty.

Going back to technology advances in the pre-common era, the civilization evolved from using cave paintings and smoke signals to using written materials. In Mesopotamian society, their primary source of preserving information involved the use of clay tablets (Daubly, 2018). It may not have been the most efficient method of preserving records and it was not the most convenient material for transportation or storage space, but it did have something that other record formats did not have at the time: preservation. When comparing this record material to the Greek’s and Roman’s papyrus, it clearly beat the material in longevity of preservation. Even they had to admit that the material was better for their more important records, but still used papyrus for more temporary records that were not as significant as rulings and imperial decrees (Daubly

2018). This is another example of humanity's desire to preserve knowledge either about themselves or the community. We want to keep records of ourselves and use the correct materials and information for the sake of context. It was during these times that we began consciously or unconsciously to realize that context mattered for the purposes of recordkeeping.

Something else to note before moving on to the next point of interest in the history of recordkeeping is the way that information was stored in Greek and Roman societies. The statement from this semester "the Greeks developed the centralized records office holding both public and private records, in Rome private records offices were in the houses of all those involved in the public service in business and public records offices were slow in developing" (Daubly, 2018) is a very important detail when analyzing the cultural differences in both societies. Greek culture reflected that most information should be accessible at one place instead of scattering it all around the province. Depending on the province you hailed from, you may have had difficulties accessing records in the Roman Empire because of your location. If you lived in an outskirt town, there was a high chance you had little to no idea about any relevant information outside of your province because there was not a centralized record system for your town. You can make a similar argument that distant towns in Greek society may have had the same difficulty finding information outside as well, but hypothetically, an information gatherer would have an easier time searching one centralized database rather than running around the entire province looking for multiple sources in multiple buildings.

The height of the recordkeeper's renown was in the Greek/Roman Empire. The evidence of this can be seen through beliefs and religion. Both civilizations had a deity dedicated specifically for recordkeeping. The Roman deity Fides, however, was more significant for reasons many often misunderstand. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "Fides was honoured

with a temple built near ... Capitoline Hill in 254 BC. In symbolic recognition of the secret, inviolable trust between gods and mortals, attendants presented sacrificial offerings to her with covered hands” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). While she was not revered as much as Jupiter or Mars, she also was the symbol of public faith or “Fides Publica” as she was called by senators and record keepers. Whenever there were documents being made, preserved, transferred, or simply being viewed, there was a guarantee that senators, record keepers and officials involved in the recordkeeping profession were worshipping Fides. I talked with one of my former colleagues who attended San Diego Mesa Community College and asked him how I should have approached my mythology class many years ago. I also asked him about the significance of Roman Gods. He told me: “A deity’s power is made by those who remember them and continue to worship them today. Christ is only as powerful as he is today because the population wants to believe it. If nobody talked about him, his influence would perish” (John Partika Personal Interview 2018). That is a significant point when you think about it. It is fitting to see that the deity that enticed many individuals in the record keeping profession in Rome, have a place in history. A tip I remembered in my mythology class was that there are always repeating patterns in mythology. Elements that we consider original in our society were probably already taken from other cultures thousands of years ago.

What brought the record keeping profession out of the spotlight is ironically the same influence that endorsed it in the first place: the executive power of the government. My hypothesis on why the Greek empire was taken over by the Roman empire is probably the result of the way they handled their information. I talked earlier about how the Greek system for records was more centralized and the Roman ones were spread out for the buildings that needed them. If I were a spy trying to find information about my enemy, there would be a multitude of

buildings I would have to infiltrate in Rome to find out more about them. In the case of the Greek building, I would only have to search one building for the significant amount of information that I am currently looking for. The reason the recordkeeping profession was falling out of the spotlight in Rome was because record management in Rome was flawed. The reason for this was because “As power became more and more centralized in the hands of emperor and the notions of the democracy and public accountability of government declined, so too did the standards of record keeping at the state level” (Daubly, 2018). This instance of placing too much power into the executive leadership and letting them decide how information is released is what destroys civilizations and free speech. This pattern feels incredibly familiar and almost recent, but I cannot remember the name of the individual who employed this tactic recently. Lowering the standards of a profession cheapens it and makes its value incredibly difficult to admire. You would not eat at a restaurant if you heard that the FDA gave approval to use any means necessary to prepare food. That could lead to a multitude of lawsuits and health code violations that lawyers would be struggling to maintain.

H.G Wells probably gives the best summarization of the fall of Rome I have seen so far. “The essence of its failure was that it could not sustain unity. In its early stages its citizens, both patrician and plebeian, had a certain tradition of justice and good faith, and of the loyalty of all citizens to the law, and of the goodness of the law for all citizens; it clung to this idea of the importance of the law and of law-abidingness nearly into the first century B.C” (Wells, 2014). Now initially you feel comfortable with this statement because you can relate this to the development of our society in the United States. I too, once had a very strong faith in our government for all the potential good it was able to produce. Unfortunately, it is the second part of the statement that illustrates the reality and the possible decline of our society as well. He

wrote “But the unforeseen invention and development of money, the temptations and disruptions of imperial expansion, the entanglement of electoral methods, weakened and swamped this tradition by presenting old issues in new disguises under which the judgment did not recognize them, and by enabling men to be loyal to the professions of citizenship and disloyal to its spirit” (Wells, 2014). What this basically means, is that we allowed our desire for money to overshadow everything else, including our “Public Faith” in society. My faith in society was shattered during middle school when I came to school on September 11, 2001. By lunchtime, there were kids angry with each other because of religious bigotry. One of my friends at the time was of Indian descent and he was picked on by a Latino kid who claimed his family was working with the terrorists. At that time, I was convinced that critical thinking and tolerance was not the priority of my generation. I almost was convinced again of it when I saw that many of my former high school colleagues were either Trump supporters, or radical rebels who post about government overthrow.

To finalize this point, the recordkeeping profession went from being one of the top three influential figures in the state, to becoming one of the members of the intellectual class like the Literati in China. The difference between Rome’s Orators and China’s Literati is the influence that they held in each of their civilizations. H.G Wells stated “While the Roman world was still blind to the need of any universal mental organization, the Han emperors were setting up a uniform system of education and of literary degrees throughout China that has maintained the intellectual solidarity of that great and always expanding country into modern times” (Wells, 2014). The Literati class always produced more cultural work as well as bureaucratic work which resulted in the Chinese image being one of a dedicated individual of society.

It was not all terrible for the recordkeeping profession. Frankly the people that suffered the most in this profession were the very wealthy individuals who were basically running the place. If a recordkeeper was in low standing or out of the favor of the Roman Empire, the consequences of the barbarian invasion did little to sway them from trying to preserve it or even assist in the resistance. They were not alone in this thought process, because many individuals in the Roman Empire also did not have the motivation to help resist the empire. The serfs, slaves, and lower-class citizens did little or nothing to stop the barbarians from invading and sacking the once glorified Roman Empire (Wells, 2014). Despite the destruction of the civilization, the recordkeeping profession would encounter an evolution and adaptation because of the change that was forced upon the individuals. In the Byzantine Empire (East Rome) the new title was now notaries, who replaced the scribes in the work they did. Like the scribes of Rome before, their methods of recordkeeping and knowledge base was kept to members of their own organization (Daubly, 2018). The recordkeepers from the barbarian tribes however, were like Orators of Rome. Orators were public speakers who often debated cases similar to modern day lawyers. As stated in lecture week 2 “the invading barbarian’s method for settling the terms of legal transactions was through debate before a judge. Once the judge had listened to both sides of the argument, he would set the terms of the agreement” (Daubly 2018).

The recordkeeping profession would develop new formats of recordkeeping in the Post Rome era. During the 11th century the notaries would place documents into volumes by chronological order (Daubly, 2018) which made the appraisal process and context creation much easier. This crucial element of creating volumes and organization in chronological order would enhance the notaries and future successors of the profession to make searching for documents much easier. This achievement and future ones would eventually get the attention of businesses

and religious orders in Europe, specifically in Italian states (Daubly, 2018). To make professions like these official or significant in the noblemen's eyes, they needed to establish an academic structure or building that would make this profession necessary (Daubly 2018). "In 1158, the first university was founded in Bologna to provide a course of study in the notarial art" (Daubly, 2018). This changed everything for the profession as it finally gave an established set of rules and standards that was needed in the 12th century for business owners and religious orders to understand. What this university taught was "create documents according to legal and administrative rules, how to keep registries of annotations and drafts, how to use formula to create digests, how to organize documents for retrieval" (Daubly, 2018). Recordkeepers at this time had a significant amount of knowledge based on law, since they themselves were keeping records of legal transactions. It was this knowledge that would also carry them through the future centuries yet to come.

While students at this new university had the ability to read and understand records and legal dialogue, the knowledge itself was not always intended for a public audience and often was kept quiet. This is not a new practice as it is often a repeated pattern in history. "Moreover, the tendency to keep things secret, to make a cult and mystery of them, and so to gain an advantage over the generality of men, has always been very strong in men's minds" (Wells, 2014). Every profession will have this inevitable realization where information shared often comes with the compromise of security. On the other hand, there were times you needed the knowledge to be made public in order for the court to understand the significance of the legal actions. MacNeil stated in his text "Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, charters were gradually transformed from an aide-memoire of an oral act to the indisputable proof of that act. By the twelfth century, written proof had become widespread, even in agreements between ordinary

people and by the late thirteenth century, written forms of proof had become a requirement for certain claims, including certain types of land claim” (Macneil, 2006). The recordkeeper’s legal presence was also prominent in other parts of Europe and eventually would be prominent in Great Britain. It’s ironically the reason that the feudal system was in decline. “In the early formative period before and after the Norman Conquest, the relationship of lord and man forms the basis of the social organization of the country, and the [land] tenures created form the bond of economic, military, and spiritual cooperation between high and low. With the decline in the value of fixed services and the rise of an economy based on contract and the payment of wages, the feudal structure tends to become an archaism (MacNeil, 2006)” (Simpson 1986, pp. 21–22). The reason for the decline of the prestige of the recordkeeper in the first place had to do with an increase of executive power. Now the recordkeeper was bringing out facts that basically proved the feudal system to be inadequate for a modern civilization. This is a sort of poetic justice for the intellectual class.

The recordkeeper today has a significant amount of responsibility, but not nearly as much prestige. There were many current events in this century that have made the recordkeeper relevant in today’s economy. Probably the most famous one in the 21st century is the Sarbanes Oxley Act. This was the act created in response to the Enron Scandal that occurred in the 21st century due to a multitude of wrongdoings. The most significant one though is the act of spoliation that took place on October 23, 2001 during which Arthur Andersen destroyed one ton of Enron-related documents (Gibney, 2005). Spoliation is one of the most severe crimes that a recordkeeping professional can commit. We have something in the record management business called the Life Cycle of records. Millar states: “In a records and archives environment, the concept that a record follows a cycle from ‘birth’ to ‘death’ (or ‘second life’ in archival care): a

record may be created, used for so long as it has continuing value and then disposed of by destruction or by transfer to an archival institution” (Millar, 2017, p. 299). As space is a limited resource, we cannot keep all the information that we retain in a collection. This rule helps us with the growing concern of space. The reason spoliation violates the lifecycle of records and the law in general is the time at which the document is destroyed. The lifecycle of records indicates that there is a death point for records in which they can be destroyed. Spoliation is often committed when the record is destroyed before the lifecycle has ended or when the record was supposed to be held for a federal investigation. Arthur Andersen’s destruction of the Enron-related documents about their finances is the biggest act of spoliation because it destroyed evidence of the real financial situation occurring in the company. This act resulted in Arthur Andersen losing all of its credibility and privilege to account for public corporations and by the fall of 2002 Arthur Andersen had fallen (Gibney, 2005).

Modern archivists have another challenge today that they face today and that is the practice of Cloud Storage. While the technology itself is promising, there are some concerns to consider. The National Archives of the United Kingdom released a guide recently that helps archivists understand the future of this technology and how it can be applied for their profession. In this example I will provide two examples of both positive and negatives of this new technology starting with the positive: “Cloud services can provide easy, automated replication to multiple locations and access to professionally managed digital storage and integrity checking. As a result bit preservation (durability) of digital information can be at least as good (or better) than can be achieved locally” (Beagrie, Charlesworth, & Miller, 2014). This is a significant boost to accessibility, one of the most important elements of a well-organized record. If you cannot access a record or let alone find one, then why have a recordkeeping business in the first place.

Another positive in this technology is the low cost that it can provide (Beagrie, Charlesworth, & Miller, 2014). When the only space you need to store a collection of records is a server box for the information versus many different rooms of documents that can be subject to damage from weather conditions, that is a great start. You could argue that the server box could also take damage from the elements of nature or a natural disaster, but the information is safely stored in the cloud and should an accident occur, you could place the information into another box.

The cloud technology is amazing when you hear about the storage space and flexibility to move records to different places, but there is a problem that is rooted in the recordkeeping profession itself: the record. The issue is described: “The Cloud is designed for flexibility and rapid change. Archives however are long-term. Cloud storage and service contracts need careful management through time to meet archive needs. Data held in archives must be expected to be both preserved and accessible beyond the commercial lifespan of any current technology or service provider” (Beagrie, Charlesworth, & Miller, 2014). The entire purpose of the recordkeeping profession is to figure out what records are kept and which ones are discarded. The problem with the Cloud is that it does lack the permanence that recordkeepers need in some of their more significant and historical archives. This technology is relatively useful for companies such as Amazon, Apple and Roku because their content cycles constantly and the material changes from time to time. This technology may not be as useful in a museum. The next negative stated: Use of Cloud services may raise data security issues, where the relevant data is ‘personal data’ (e.g. data that permits the identification of a living individual), these include determining responsibility for securing data and audit of providers, as well as about location of processing and the extent to which risks incurred by automation of service provision can be addressed by contract because of the security risks that come with it” (Beagrie, Charlesworth, & Miller,

2014). Bigger corporations can afford the costs of security risks whereas museums that rely on donations are not always guaranteed to have a safety net for their Cloud technology.

The recordkeeper has gone through a significant transition through history and has been responsible for many of the changes that has brought modern civilizations to where it is today. The recordkeeper may not have always been in the spotlight like it was in Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece, but the existence of human civilization has been recorded and preserved because of our human desire to survive beyond the pages of history. A question I am often asked at my current grocery job is “What is significant about a recordkeeper/archivist?” After writing this paper I will say “Preserving the best and worst of humanity. The written word makes the achievements of an individual immortal where the dialogue of one turns it into a prolonged game of telephone and the information continues to be deformed and loses its original meaning after many years.”

I got this idea from a fascinating show called “The Last Kingdom” which portrays a fictional conflict between the Saxons and Danes in England. An incredible line from episode two comes from the character who would later become King Alfred the Great: “But do not underestimate the power of the written word. When a man dies, if nothing is written, then he is soon forgotten” (Murphy, 2015). This quote is one of the many reasons I enjoy the recordkeeping profession and hope to be involved into it someday. Whether society wishes to acknowledge it or not, recordkeepers are the individuals that immortalize civilizations. I do find it ironic that it was a monarch who said that line, but this was an individual who was known for his scholarly advantage among leaders. He ordered the creation of a book that stated: “Now I, King Alfred, have collected these laws, and have given orders for copies to be made of many of those which our predecessors observed and which I myself have approved of. But many of those I did not

approve of I have annulled, by the advice of my councilors, while [in other cases] I have ordered changes to be introduced. For I have not dared to presume to set down in writing many of my own, for I cannot tell what [innovations of mine] will meet with the approval of our successors” (Attenborough, 2000, p. 62). This king had the option to basically print what he wanted but also wanted the set of rules he placed to be in balance and not decreed just for himself. He wanted his successors to decide how the future should unfold rather than try to control it himself.

The archivist is initially in control of what occurs in the future by logging certain elements of the past. It should be our responsibility (if it is not already) to take the information given and let our viewers decide what they should do with the information. I quoted something earlier from H.G Wells that reflected a sad truth about the nature of humanity which was: “Moreover, the tendency to keep things secret, to make a cult and mystery of them, and so to gain an advantage over the generality of men, has always been very strong in men’s minds” (Wells, 2017). We desire the need to keep certain information secret and are often presented with a choice when it comes to information access: More publicly available data with security risks or more private information that is significantly secure. Many times, we have a blend of both, but misinformation is still at large and there are a few individuals who take advantage of that misinformation to profit. One friend plus a former UCSC colleague and I took a class together on the history of conspiracy theories in the United States. We often discussed Alex Jones and how his lack of politically correct demeanor was hazardous to the population. Our jobs as recordkeepers and record managers are to preserve information that is necessary and significant to the development of human history. Unfortunately, that also means retaining information of incorrect and controversial information as well.

The recordkeeper is not only a necessary profession, but a very powerful profession. The written word does immortalize achievements of human history and the archivist gets to choose which written word is kept and which is destroyed. There was a reason why the Greeks/Romans made a god of recordkeeping because deep down they knew her domain was one that immortalized all the individuals that stood in the council of Rome that day. Well, they thought she did until some of their records were destroyed. We are here because someone took an idea and decided to write it down and preserve that information for future generations to deliberate. Laws continue to evolve and reset themselves because of the work of a recordkeeper. We provide the evidence that history needed to decide what we tolerate as benevolent or what was not tolerated as malevolent. The Italian states knew that making an academy for the profession would suit their economic needs because they could better record the information that they used to believe through hearsay. Our profession may no longer have the prestige it once had, we may never be placed into the spotlight again, but we can rest comfortably knowing that it carried the weight and development of human civilization throughout all of history regardless of recognition. It is our information that decides where civilization will go next, it is our attention to detail that improves the context of our knowledge base, and it is the retention policies that we employ that decide what information is relevant and which information can be discarded. There is a saying in ancient Rome called “Roma Invicta” which means “Unconquered Rome”. What we really should be saying is “Scriniarii Invicta” because it was the archivist that survived the sacking of Rome. The recordkeeper is unconquered.

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