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Jessica Wagner Webster
CUNY Bernard M. Baruch College

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“Filling the Gaps”: Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011

Jessica Wagner Webster

ABSTRACT

During the 1970s and 1980s, archivists and historians discussed, in their literature, the ways that oral histories could be used to fill in the documentary record with stories from all parts of society, not just stories from white men of means, whose stories often were retained as part of business, government, and university records. This article analyzes pieces from the journal *The American Archivist* to determine how frequently archivists actually published about using oral history techniques to document people of color, women, the working class, and other consistently underdocumented populations. A survey also was conducted to determine whether archivists undertake oral history projects currently, and if so, to what extent they focus on these underdocumented groups.

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KEY WORDS

Underdocumented, Oral history, Scholarship, Women, People of color,
Minorities

Oral history has long been a tool used by historians, archivists, and other scholars to help fill gaps in the documentary record by providing first-hand accounts of events and experiences that may not show up in the paper collections archivists work with every day. Oral history is a popular technique to document employees' experiences at an institution; the memories of a long-standing member of a university's board of trustees, for example, may provide useful insights into the interpersonal dimensions of university governance and leadership. Oral history can be an effective way to document events, people, and places; interviewing participants in a labor strike, for example, can provide a personalized account of the events. Oral history, however, has also come to be seen as a way to fulfill an important ideological mission: to include the voices of marginalized or underrepresented groups in the historical record.

In the second half of the twentieth century, in particular, scholars turned toward studying women, people of color, the working class, and other groups whose experiences had previously been underdocumented.¹ Archival literature of the period explored many approaches archivists could employ to document society and institutions more holistically: archivists could use techniques like oral history and photography to create records of underdocumented groups and use methods like documentation strategy and functional analysis to create a broader picture of the records created by groups, institutions, or communities, and collect around those. The "activist archivist" movement of the 1970s and 1980s argued that this work could be seen as a moral imperative, central to the archivist's mission. Indeed, as archivist F. Gerald Ham declared, if an archivist has "a limited view of what constitutes the archival record, the collections that he acquires will never hold up a mirror for mankind. And if we are not holding up that mirror, if we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important."²

As I will show, oral history came to be seen as a useful tool that archivists could use to fulfill this mission. By conducting oral histories with a wider array of individuals and groups, historians and archivists could create a record of their experiences and support the research agendas of scholars seeking source materials for their work. However, though archivists have been involved with the oral history movement from its early days, archival professional literature is surprisingly sparse in its presentation of oral history case studies, which led to the investigation presented in this study.

This project shows that while the pages of *The American Archivist* frequently mention oral history, and while the archival literature champions it as a tool to document underdocumented groups, very few articles actually illustrate how

archivists conduct oral histories, particularly of these groups. I also report on a survey of current archival practitioners to show that while many archivists do conduct oral histories as part of their work and feel that oral histories are valuable additions to the archival record, few scope their oral histories to specifically focus on marginalized populations. Finally, I consider why the archival literature does not seem to follow through on the goals for oral history set out by the activist archivist movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Literature Review

Archivists and historians initially viewed oral history as a way to supplement a documentary record that contained information on prominent people and institutions.³ As Rebecca Sharpless outlined in her summary of the development of the oral history movement in the United States, oral histories were initially seen as unscientific and biased; conducting interviews ran counter to the late nineteenth-century impulse to be as scientific and objective as possible in the writing of history. Some scholars, like Hubert Howe Bancroft in California, recognized the benefits of supplementing the written record with interviews. The Federal Writers' Project of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration was one of the first widespread programs to support the conducting of oral history; it developed out of a New Deal-era emphasis on celebrating and exploring the diversity of the United States.⁴ The Columbia Oral History Research Office, founded in 1948, supported this goal. The Oral History Association (OHA), founded in 1967, strove to highlight ways archives and libraries could create oral histories to build their collections and fill in gap areas.⁵ As Ellen Swain pointed out, many leaders in the OHA were also archivists active in the Society of American Archivists (SAA), linking the two organizations. Indeed, two years later, in 1969, the SAA founded an oral history committee of its own.⁶

The deployment of oral history was not without controversy. Many historians, especially early on, were skeptical about the accuracy of the memories of oral history subjects. However, beginning in the late 1960s, oral histories came to be seen as a way to do "history from the bottom up," documenting previously underdocumented groups and movements such as people of color, women, immigrants, and social justice movements.⁷ Universities established departments such as women's studies and African American studies to highlight and target scholarly interest in these topics. Sharpless explained that the shift in focus and support for oral history came in part from scholarly interest in contemporary social movements and, indeed, in part from a shift in technology: the portable tape recorder was invented in 1963, enabling scholars to interview subjects much more easily.⁸

This emphasis solidified further during the “activist archivist” period starting in the early 1970s and continuing through the 1980s. Historians like Howard Zinn wrote and spoke extensively of the need to document groups and peoples who fell outside of the traditional documentary record, which tended to center on institutions like government, universities, and businesses, areas where the powerful had influence and the experiences of the marginalized could easily be erased or forgotten.⁹ Zinn highlighted the fact that oral history, along with other documentation techniques, tended to favor elites at the expense of “ordinary people”: “[I would guess that...] the collection of records, papers, and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men, not women; white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men.”¹⁰ He lambasted the Columbia University Oral History program for documenting the powerful, arguing that it “has long ignored the poor, the obscure, the radicals, the outcasts—it has ignored movements and living events.” He provided an anecdote to support this assertion, describing an incident in which he asked the program for help documenting the civil rights movement in the American South, only to be denied; a short time later, the program reported that it was devoting resources to documenting the upper echelons of the United States military.¹¹ By highlighting these omissions, Zinn emphasized the fact that oral history could be a useful tool to document a wider swath of society.

Archivist F. Gerald Ham integrated these ideas into his SAA presidential address and subsequent article, “The Archival Edge.” Ham argued that archivists should shift away from viewing themselves solely as “collectors” or “custodians” who allow historians to dictate archival acquisitions according to their research interests. Instead, archivists should establish rigorous acquisitions methodologies to help ensure the documentation of a “broad spectrum of human experience.”¹² Borrowing a phrase from historian Sam Bass Warner, Ham encouraged each archivist to become “a historical reporter for his own time.” One of several methods he suggested to accomplish this was oral history: “As a reporter he can produce oral history, not as a painstakingly edited source for written texts about the Presidents and their men, but rather as documentation of the day to day decisions of lower echelon leaders and of the activities and attitudes of ordinary men and women.”¹³

However, the debate continued in the archival literature. The following year, archivist Lester J. Cappon issued a point-by-point refutation of “The Archival Edge” in his own article, “The Archivist as Collector.” In it, Cappon

suggested that archivists have been able to acquire materials reflecting the experience of underdocumented individuals during the course of traditional collecting (citing, as an example, a plantation records collection that contained “rich sources on Negro slavery, which have been mined by successive generations of historians from widely varying points of view.”)¹⁴ He also questioned the benefit of archivists generating records via oral history, photography, or other documentation techniques that Ham suggested; he found it an “intriguing, even startling, possibility.”¹⁵ He indicated that archivists as records creators might “become administrator[s] of Archives Unlimited with new, unmeasurable dimensions,” who are filling the documentary record with “new records ready-made for the researcher, in contrast with ‘innocent’ historical documents.”¹⁶ Oral history, then, still had its detractors among some archivists, who had philosophical concerns about the ways records creation could shift and alter the documentary record, even if the goal of such a shift was to document greater portions of society.

As the 1970s and 1980s continued, scholars were increasingly drawn to what was termed the “new social history” (NSH), which often used statistical analyses in conjunction with the documentary record to explore the lives and impact of so-called ordinary people. Dale C. Mayer, writing in *The American Archivist* in 1985, reported on a study conducted by the Organization of American Historians which highlighted NSH as the fastest-growing area of research among historians and indicated that archivists should adjust their appraisal, outreach, and reference techniques to help meet this need and expand the documentary record. According to Mayer, “Special efforts must be made to obtain those less readily available records which document the lives of poor blacks, ordinary women, small farmers, poor immigrant families, and labor’s rank and file.”¹⁷ To help fill these gaps, archivists should consider collecting records from cultural, ethnic, fraternal, and other organizations, and also consider conducting oral histories, which “can be an excellent source of group and community history.”¹⁸

Writing in 1983, archivist James E. Fogerty provided a useful summary of perceptions of oral history in the archives world at that time. Fogerty argued that while oral history had become increasingly accepted by archivists and scholars, it still had its detractors, such as historian Barbara Tuchman, who viewed oral history as a way for “trivia” and “rubbish” to be documented and added to the already over-large documentary record. Furthermore, oral history relied on the potentially faulty human memory for its sources. Disagreeing with Tuchman, Fogerty wrote that although the written record provides a contemporary account of incidents under discussion, it can also be susceptible to weeding, editing, or unreliable narratives (such as a letter writer attempting to present facts in a favorable light). Additionally, given

the large volume of paper records being produced, it can be easy to miss key information. Fogerty, citing oral historian Charles Morrissey, believed that oral history can be used in conjunction with the paper record to focus on the most important information and interrogate relevant individuals about gaps in the paper record, thereby supplementing traditional archival collecting work.¹⁹

In the same article, Fogerty turned his attention to the ways archivists can use oral history to document underdocumented groups: "The inarticulate, the uneducated, and those burdened with work beyond their strength are virtually unrepresented; and their stories are lost. Oral history, of course, has long been touted as a solution to documentation of the inarticulate and, properly used, it can be. The challenge for archivists, however, is to go beyond their collections to individuals not represented, who have no personal papers or records to donate."²⁰ Although he described this sort of outreach as an "unusual activity" for archivists, he believed that it is an "opportunity to balance an archival collection by extending documentation to groups and individuals not normally possessed of papers or who are outside the purview of most collecting agencies." He then summarized several projects documenting regional activist groups from the 1970s.²¹ Thus, by the mid-1980s, the archival literature supported using oral history to document underdocumented groups.

Journals focusing on oral history, such as *Oral History* and *The Oral History Review*, published a wealth of information during this period, describing projects being conducted and outlining the methodologies and technologies practitioners used. In fact, *The Oral History Review* published selected bibliographies from the 1970s to 1990, listing published results of oral history projects organized by subject area. For example, the 1989–1990 bibliography lists 188 projects; while several pertain to elite politicians like U.S. president Lyndon Johnson and U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk, many projects also center on historically underdocumented groups, such as coal miners, gay men, students, and civil rights workers.

Interestingly, despite the huge popularity of oral history projects during this time, and despite discussions of using oral history to document previously underdocumented groups, very few articles in the *archival* literature contain actual case studies on ways to use oral history to document these previously underdocumented populations. While historians have created and used oral histories extensively since the 1960s, and while archivists feel that conducting oral histories is a key part of their work, there seems to be a dearth of case studies in the archival literature containing practical information on method. While some archivists doubtless publish in oral history journals, the word "archivist" appears rarely in the published run of *Oral History* and *The Oral History Review*. In these two journals, it appears in only 233 articles, and when front matter, back

matter, and regional network lists are excluded, it appears in only 36.²² This suggests, then, that while archivists may be conducting oral histories or contributing to the literature, these particular publications do not highlight their role as archivists.

While a long and robust publication record about oral history and archival work in oral history publications is evident, I was interested in seeing how archivists are discussing it with other archivists specifically, so I chose to study articles published only in archival journals. My preliminary research did not uncover many articles in the archival literature outlining methods archivists use to conduct oral history projects of underdocumented groups, so I performed a content analysis of article titles published in *The American Archivist*. This is the oldest archival journal in the United States, having begun publication in 1938; for this reason, it should be well positioned to provide a narrative arc of the discussions surrounding oral history. In particular, it should allow for analysis of the topic before, during, and after the activist archivist period. While this article discusses results from *The American Archivist* in detail, I have also performed preliminary research using other major archival journals to place the results from *The American Archivist* in context.²³ The results of this portion of the study are discussed in a later section of the article.

Methodology

To study scholarly trends in writing about oral history, I chose to create a data set of article titles from *The American Archivist*. I also conducted keyword searches selectively to supplement the analysis of the article titles. Ultimately, my goal was to identify articles that outline oral history projects conducted specifically to document underdocumented groups.

First, I prepared a series of spreadsheets containing bibliographic information for all of the articles published in *The American Archivist* from 1938 (the year of its founding) to 2011 (the latest year to which I had access). For ease of managing the data, I broke the sets into their respective decades, including 1938–1939 with the 1940s set and 2010–2011 in the 2000s set. For the purposes of this project, I included all titles that JSTOR had labeled as either an article or a review; I retained the reviews so as to include in my data set the books and monographs archivists were reading and discussing alongside these articles. As it turned out, reviews made up nearly half of the content I analyzed.²⁴ One of the first things I noticed was the surprising prevalence of foreign language article and review titles, particularly in the earlier years of *The American Archivist*. For the purposes of this study, I removed those titles from my list, due to the prohibitive nature of having to translate them into English. Removing foreign language titles left a total of 4,082 articles, broken down by decade groups as shown in Figure 1.

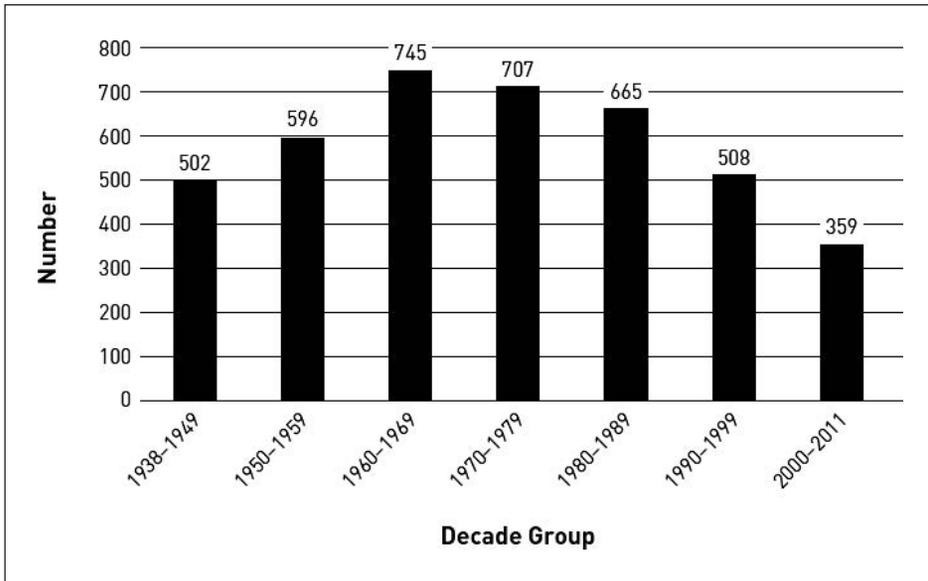


FIGURE 1. This bar graph shows the number of *American Archivist* articles reviewed by decade.

UNDERDOCUMENTED GROUPS

Once I had prepared the spreadsheets and standardized the formatting, I read through the list of article titles to identify phrases, themes, and keywords to study further, focusing on words and phrases that describe underdocumented communities in North America.

I drew up a list of keywords and terms that describe groups for which, according to my research, there had been a push to document more thoroughly in the last 50 years or so. These included words describing social and economic classes (for example, “labor,” “students,” “workers”); people of different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (“Catholic,” “African American,” “immigrants”); people of different sexual orientations (“lesbian,” “homosexual”); women; people of different abilities (“blind,” “hearing impaired”); and participants in social causes (“civil rights,” “activism”). I included variations of spelling (“labor” and “labour”), word endings (“diverse” and “diversity”), and synonymous or antiquated terms (“Black,” “African American,” “Negro,” etc.) to be as complete as possible.²⁵

I ran this list against all article titles and came up with 143 titles containing one or more of the keywords. For this portion of my study, I focused on the titles of the articles, my rationale being that many of these words may turn up in the body of an article as descriptors or demographic indicators, but the documentation of groups associated with these words may not be the subject of those articles. Furthermore, running this list against the full text of all of the journal’s articles would yield an unmanageably large body of data that might not, in the end, turn up anything useful. By concentrating on finding these

words in the titles of the articles and book reviews, I tried to ensure that the articles would be largely about the cultures and communities in question.

Oral History in *American Archivist* Articles

Attempting to analyze article content and scholarly trends based strictly on article titles begs the question: are article titles accurate reflections of the content of the articles? For this sort of analysis to hold, one must assume that if a phrase appears in the title of the article, it highlights an important part of the article's central point or thesis. After working with the data, it seems clear that most article titles do reflect the central point of the articles. I did not see many articles that contain significant content about, for example, conducting oral histories with an African American community, that do not have both "oral history" and "African American" (or a synonym) in the title.

To check this, I compiled a set of 43 articles that contain "oral history" in the title. I searched the content of these articles, not just the titles, for words and phrases on my underdocumented group keyword list. The majority of results were brief mentions of the underdocumented group used as part of an example. These examples might be very brief, such as finding the keyword "grassroots" in this passage: "Other oral history projects, however, devote all energies to grassroots documentation, the history in the lives of plain men and women."²⁶ Some are more in-depth, such as an interview with historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who discussed the value of oral histories as sources on "the women's liberation movement, . . . racial justice efforts," and other related topics.²⁷ In my sample set, on only one occasion was the content of the article more in-depth than the title would suggest: a brief piece called "Augmenting Manuscript Collections through Oral History" by Irene Cortinovic.²⁸ In it, the author provided some significant information about several oral history projects documenting groups on my list. For example, she outlined a project at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection–St. Louis documenting the League of Women Voters and the Missouri Equal Suffrage Association. After accessioning their papers, staffers conducted oral histories with veterans of these organizations and discovered a partisan political scandal, not documented in the papers, which influenced how these organizations conducted their work thereafter.²⁹ This article, however, was the only one I found that includes significant case studies of oral history projects on underdocumented groups that does not refer to both "oral history" and the underdocumented group in the title.

Performing these initial assessments led me to conclude that the appearance of both the phrase "oral history" and an underdocumented group name in an article's title fairly reliably indicates that it is a case study of an oral history project documenting that particular group. Articles that have an underdocumented group name in the title might contain a reference to oral history in the body; and articles

that have "oral history" alone in the title might mention underdocumented groups in the body; but articles with one phrase and not the other tended not to be the true case studies for which I was searching. I decided to use the results of these assessments to develop search parameters for finding the case studies in question.

After compiling a list of citations for all the articles and reviews published in *The American Archivist*, I wanted to consider how frequently the phrase "oral history" appears in the journal. First, I searched for instances where "oral history" appears in an article title, with the understanding that this could indicate that oral history is a primary subject of the article or review. Only 37 articles include the phrase in the title, and they break down as follows: 3 articles were from the 1950s (8.11%), 7 were from the 1960s (18.92%), 10 were from the 1970s (27.03%), 11 were from the 1980s (29.73%), 5 were from the 1990s (13.51%), and 1 (2.7%) was from 2000–2011. Sample articles include "Oral History Can Be Worthwhile" (Vaughn Davis Bornet, 1955); "Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask" (Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists, 1973); "Oral History in American Business Archives" (Gary D. Saretzky, 1981); and "Access to Oral History: A National Agenda" (Bruce H. Bruemmer, 1991).³⁰

It is important to note here that while my initial hypothesis was that case studies using oral history to document underdocumented groups would have both "oral history" and the group name in the article title, the study results proved this to be false. Only three article titles using "oral history" also include an underdocumented group name³¹

Since the number of results was so small, and so few of the articles also mention an underdocumented group, I decided to see how often "oral history" appears in *either* the title of an article or its body. While searching so broadly

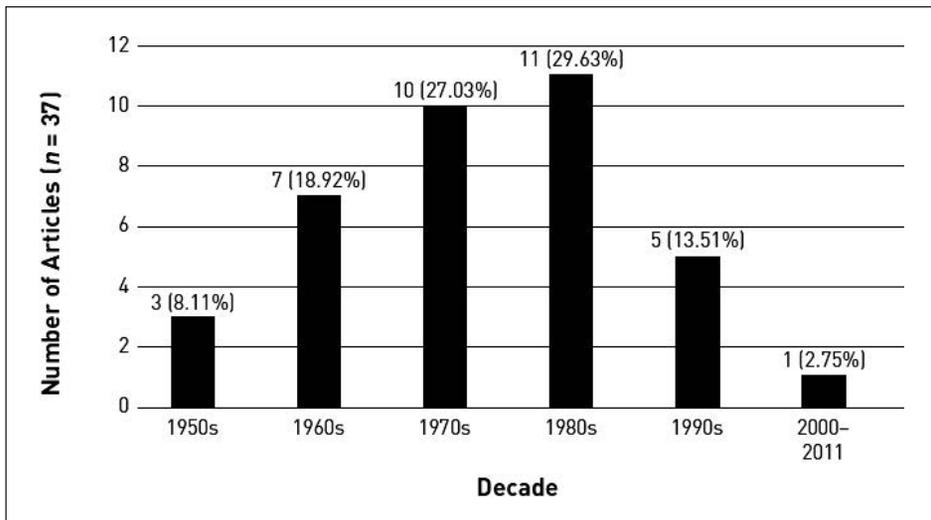


FIGURE 2. This bar graph illustrates by decade the number of *American Archivist* article titles that include "oral history" alone without the name of an underdocumented group.

could identify instances where “oral history” is mentioned in passing or with limited relevance to the main focus of an article, this method also shows how frequently “oral history” came to authors’ minds as an example or relevant idea, which in itself could speak to the popularity of the term in a more general way.

To accomplish this, I performed a full-text search using a database of all *American Archivist* articles to find mentions of “oral history” in their titles or bodies. Since the start of publication of *The American Archivist*, 383 pieces contain the phrase “oral history”; 19 of these pieces were written in the 1950s (4.96%), 32 of these pieces were written in the 1960s (8.36%), 114 of these pieces were written in the 1970s (29.77%), 101 of these pieces were written in the 1980s (26.37%), 68 of these pieces were written in the 1990s (17.75%), and 45 (11.75%) of these pieces were written in the 2000s (see Figure 3). As indicated in Figure 2, of the 383 pieces, 37 (9.66%) contain the phrase “oral history” in the title as well.

Figures 2 and 3 show a high point in the 1970s and 1980s for both articles focusing on oral history in particular (as shown when the phrase is in the title, in Figure 2) and for articles that mention it in some way (as shown when the phrase is found anywhere in the article, in Figure 3).

For context, Figure 4 compares the total number of articles in each decade with the number of articles that mention “oral history” in the title or body of the article.

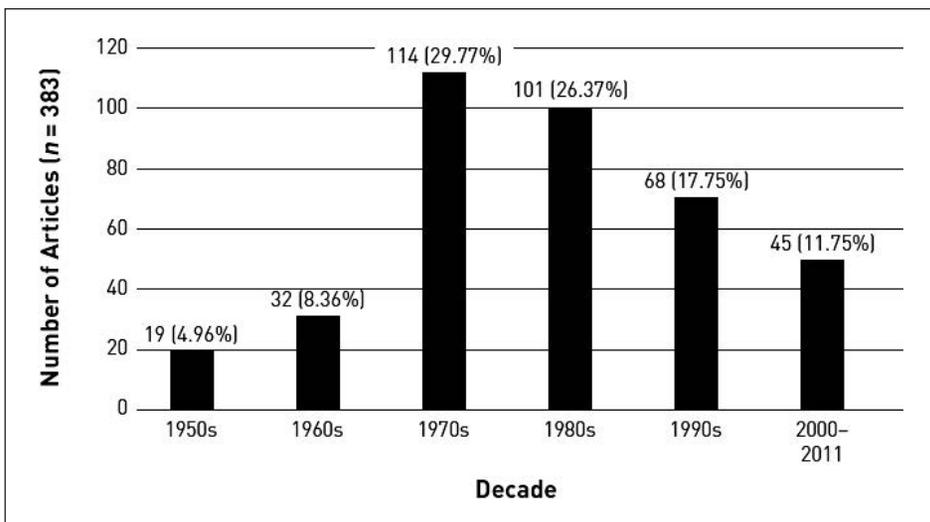


FIGURE 3. This bar graph represents by decade the number of mentions of “oral history” in both *American Archivist* articles and their titles.

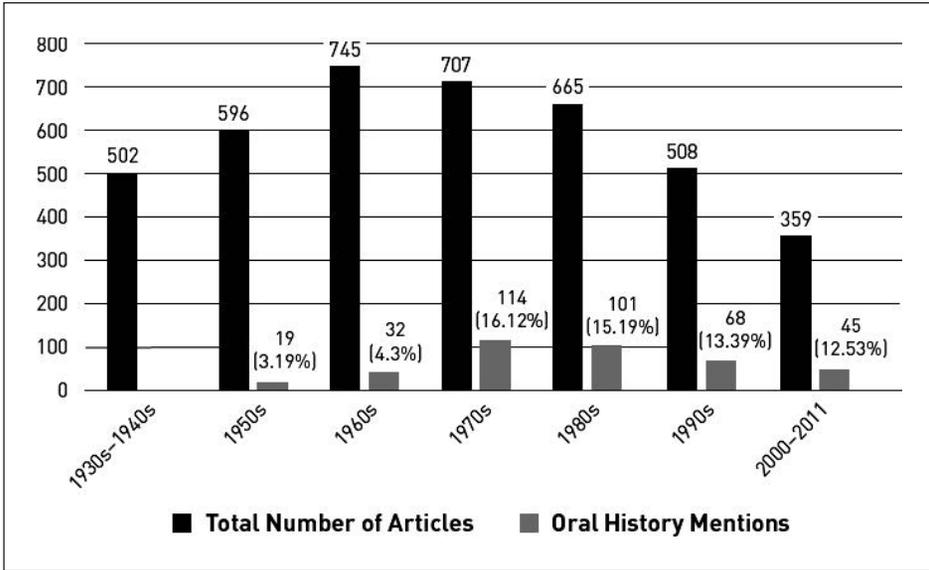


FIGURE 4. This bar graph compares the number of articles mentioning “oral history” in *The American Archivist* with the total number of articles examined.

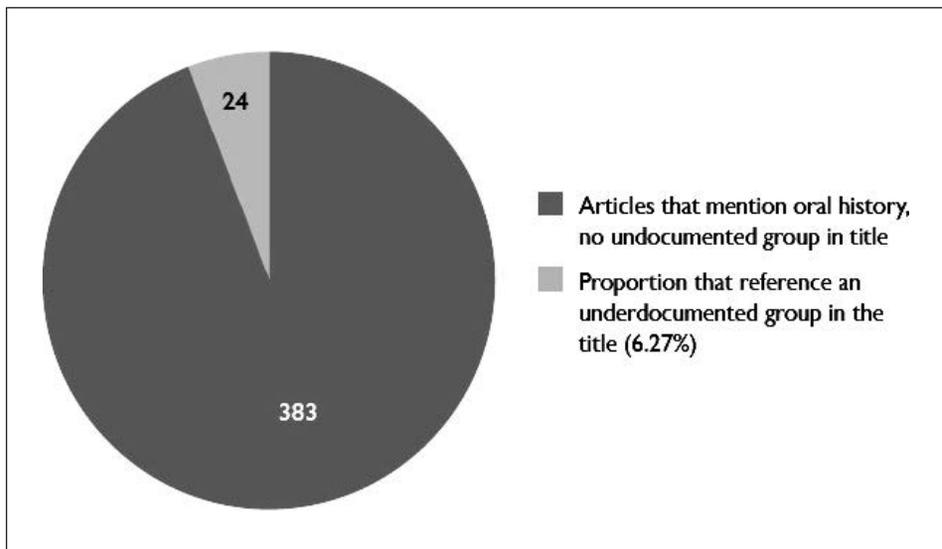


FIGURE 5. This pie chart illustrates the number of articles in *The American Archivist* that mention oral history and the proportion of those that refer to an underdocumented group in their titles.

Figure 4 demonstrates that, starting in the 1970s, at least 12.5% of articles published in each decade mention oral history. The high point was in the 1970s, when 16.12% of articles have at least one mention of the phrase, followed closely by the 1980s, when 15.19% mention the term.

I then compared the list of 143 article titles containing keywords about underdocumented groups against the list of 383 articles that mention “oral

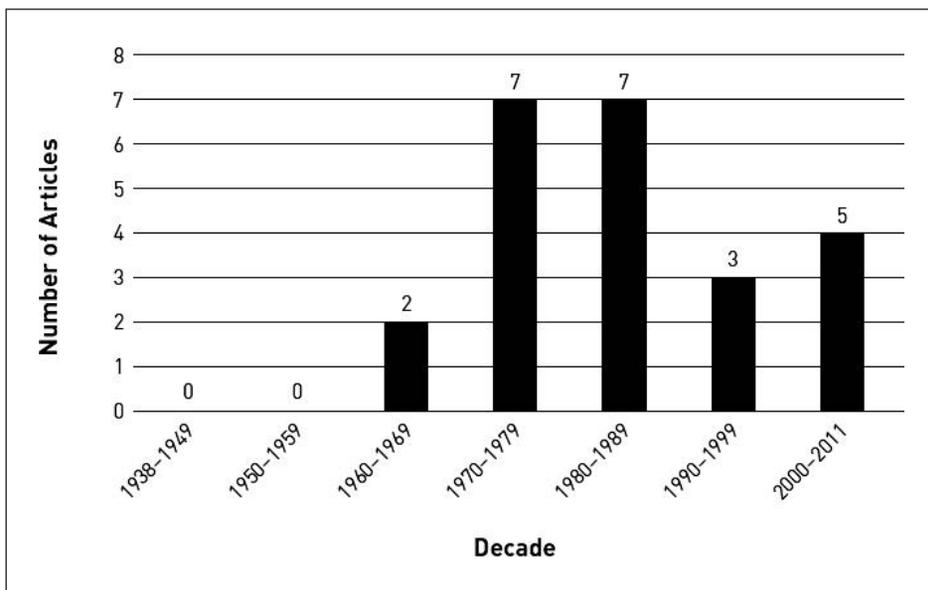


FIGURE 6. This bar graph charts the number of articles in *The American Archivist* by decade that both mention underdocumented groups in their titles and mention oral history in their bodies.

history” in the title or the body of the article. Only 24 articles appear on both lists. This indicates that 16.78% of articles with keywords about underdocumented groups in the titles also mention oral history. Of the total number of articles mentioning oral history, only 6.27% have underdocumented groups in the titles.

As shown in Figure 6, out of the 24 overlapping articles, 7 (29.17%) were printed in the 1970s and 7 (29.17%) in the 1980s, which does support the case that these articles coincide with a movement to use oral history as a subaltern documentation practice. Interestingly, the third highest percentage is in the 2000–2011 decade, perhaps indicating a resurgence.

The very small number of overlapping articles suggests that very few case studies of oral history projects documenting underdocumented groups (within the parameters I have established) were published in *The American Archivist*. Again, more case studies could have been published that do not fit the search criteria I established, but, as described above, preliminary keyword search tests did not yield many results to support that theory. The balance of articles with oral history mentions (but not an underdocumented group) in the title tend to reflect on oral history in general, discuss its merits, or explain how to conduct an oral history project. For those articles that contain the phrase “oral history” solely in the body, the titles are about a wide variety of subjects, but, again, few of them focus specifically on conducting oral histories on particular groups.

Next, I analyzed the 24 overlapping articles by title.

Table 1. Themes by Decade of Articles Mentioning Oral History

Decade	Number of articles	Theme of each article
1960s:	2	labor, labor
1970s:	7	Native American communities, South Asia, immigration/ethnicity, immigration/ethnicity, Native American communities, Native American communities, social history
1980s:	7	women, Jewish immigrants to the U.S., field workers/folklore, social history, Mexican Americans, social history, other
1990s:	3	South Asia, women, field workers/folklore
2000s:	5	Caribbean, other, women, Pacific Rim, immigration/ethnicity

Figure 7 groups the themes based on frequency of occurrence, and Table 1 organizes the themes by decade. Interestingly, I located no articles fitting my search parameters that feature African American groups in the United States in the title.³² While a small proportion of articles seemed to be actual studies about documenting particular groups, such as “Documenting a Mexican American Community: The Houston Example” (Thomas H. Kreneck, 1985), the most frequent themes are general ones pertaining to documenting immigrants and ethnic groups and about using oral history as a tool to develop social history resources. Of the 24 overlapping articles, only 8 (30%) describe oral history

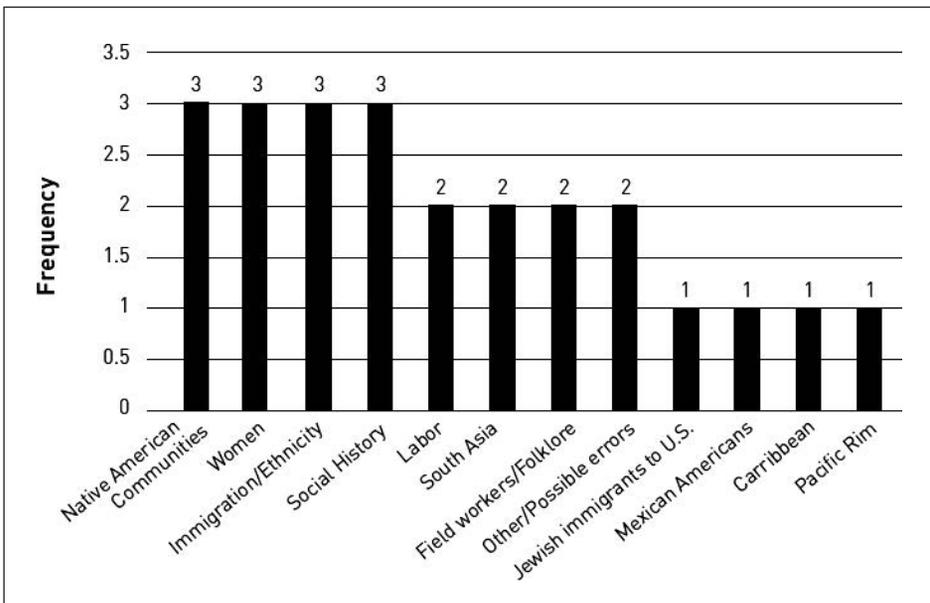


FIGURE 7. This bar graph charts themes in titles of *American Archivist* articles that both mention oral history in their bodies and underdocumented groups in their titles.

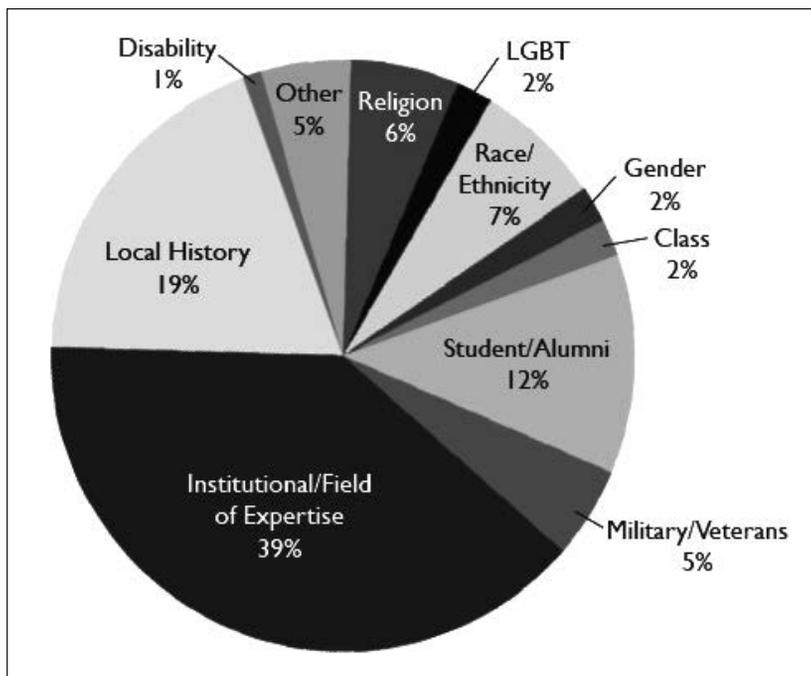


FIGURE 8. This pie chart compares the percentages of oral history project themes reported by current archival practitioners.

projects in some depth. A full list of the overlapping articles is included in Appendix B. These results suggest that, even with the search parameters modified to include articles with any mention of oral history at all, *The American Archivist* contains very few case studies about using oral history to document underdocumented communities.

Oral History and Archives Today

To place these results in context, I conducted a brief survey of current archival practitioners to learn their perceptions of oral history projects. I designed the survey using Qualtrix software and disseminated it to the Society of American Archivists listserv via an email link. The survey was active from May 26, 2015, through June 26, 2015. During this time, 150 survey responses were submitted.³³

Of those who responded, 42% reported working in a college or university setting. Fifteen percent responded that they work in a government agency. The remaining respondents were split among archivists from museums, public libraries, nonprofit agencies, historical societies, businesses, and other institutions.

The first part of the survey addressed the types of oral history projects respondents and their colleagues had undertaken during their careers.

Eighty-three percent of respondents ($n = 124$) agreed that they or their colleagues had conducted an oral history project at their current places of employment. These respondents were then asked to describe the projects being conducted, paying specific attention to the "people, groups, or institutions you tried to document using oral history techniques."³⁴ Ninety-three people answered this question, which allowed for multiple projects to be listed in each answer; this yielded 135 project responses. I then coded the oral history subjects listed using keyword categories I compiled previously, including those keywords related to underdocumented groups listed in Appendix A.

The largest response category, at 53, included projects documenting institutional memory or a specific area of professional expertise (such as university faculty, dancers, or physicians). The next largest response category, at 26, included projects documenting the local history of a town or community. Student and alumni oral history projects were next largest, at 16. Interestingly, many fewer respondents described projects highlighting the underrepresented groups discussed above: 8 projects involved religious groups; 9 projects involved members of racial or ethnic groups; 3 projects involved labor or workers; 3 projects involved women; 7 projects involved the military or veterans; 2 projects involved LGBT individuals; and 1 involved issues around disability.

Clearly, then, the majority of oral history projects conducted by the respondents focused on institutional memory or local history. While these projects may naturally result in the documentation of one of these underdocumented populations—a project documenting a working-class African American community, for example—most responses did not specify that these industries or communities were being documented because they contained these underdocumented groups.³⁵

Because my research showed that *The American Archivist* published few case studies of oral histories, I asked survey respondents whether, to the best of their knowledge, any of their institutions' oral history projects were shared in a journal article, conference presentation, or other venue. Only 44% of respondents answered yes. In a free-text follow-up question, I asked where the project was described. As before, many respondents included multiple answers, so I coded each separately, for a total of 45 data points.

Figure 9 depicts the methods for disseminating information about oral history projects. Only 11% of responses mentioned an archives publication such as a journal or newsletter. Interestingly, 18% of the data points (8 responses) mentioned presenting at conferences outside of the library and archives world, and the majority of those (63%, or 5 responses) were at oral-history-oriented conferences, such as the conference of the OHA.

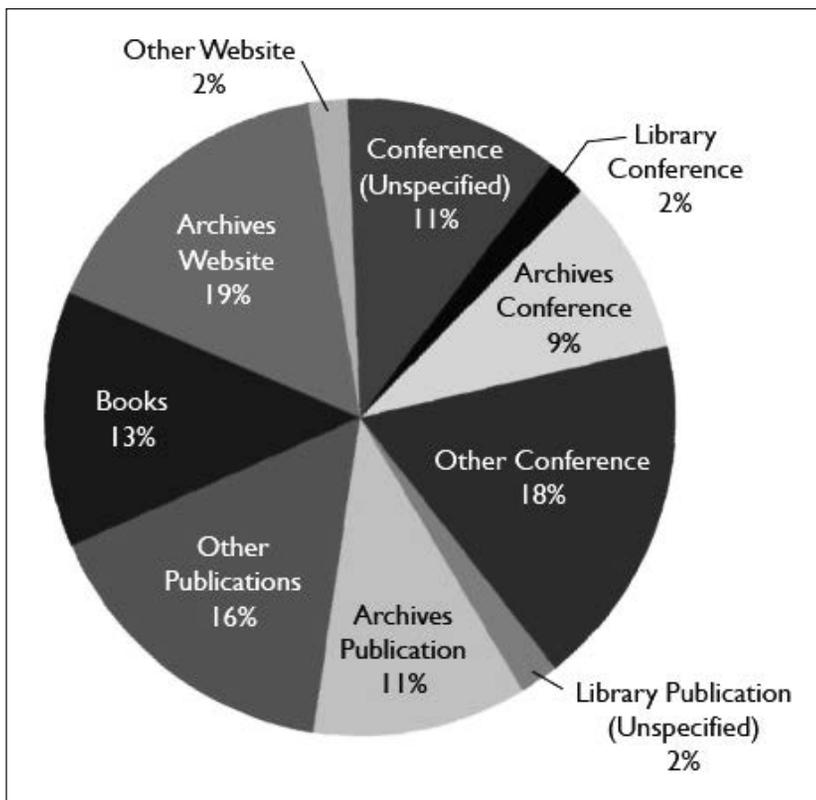


FIGURE 9. This pie chart illustrates how information regarding oral history projects was shared.

When asked whether they felt oral histories are a valuable addition to archival collections, most respondents (98%) felt that they are. In a free-text follow-up question, respondents explained why they felt that way, stating that conducting oral histories with target populations is a key way of supplementing the historical record, particularly with the voices of those whose materials may not have made it into the paper documentary record. They also felt that oral histories add color, context, and a sense of humanity to the record.

When asked whether they plan to conduct oral history projects in the near future, 71% said that they do. Respondents were asked to explain further, and to indicate any factors that might prevent them from conducting oral histories. Since this was a free-text question, several respondents who answered in the affirmative did include some factors limiting their progress on oral histories. Ninety-nine responses to this question were collected, and, of these, 38 mentioned at least one limiting factor. As before, when respondents listed multiple

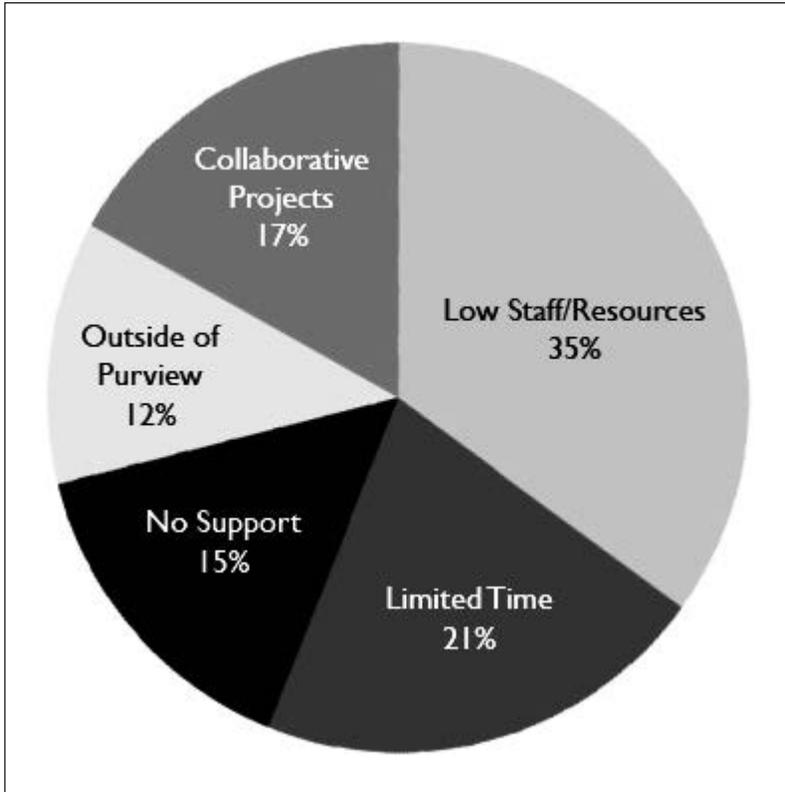


FIGURE 10. This pie chart illustrates factors limiting oral history projects.

factors, I coded them separately, so I came up with a total of 48 data points (see Figure 10).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 35% of the data points touched on limited staffing and resources as a factor, followed by limited time at 21%. Seventeen percent of the data points mentioned participation in collaborative projects with other institutions or offices, to help make up for limited resources in-house. Fifteen percent mentioned a lack of support or buy-in from stakeholders, such as research subjects, supervisors, or archival staff themselves. And finally, 12% mentioned that conducting oral histories falls outside of the scope of their current positions.

Other Conferences and Publications

The survey results point out that even though archivists may continue to conduct the kinds of oral history projects under discussion here, they may not be published in archival literature; this may have been true throughout

the history of the archival profession as well. This begs the question: does the content of *The American Archivist* reflect actual contemporary archival trends and beliefs?

To address this, I consulted the records of the Society of American Archivists, assessing in particular the programs of SAA annual meetings going back to 1938. Interestingly, I did find that, even during periods when there did not seem to be extensive discussion of oral history in *The American Archivist*, panels were being convened to discuss oral history projects, and the Oral History Section of SAA conducted full programs during its meetings at the annual conference. In fact, by the mid-1970s, the majority of SAA annual meetings contained at least one panel or workshop on oral history or a related topic, in addition to the Oral History Section meeting. (The high point was in 1981, when there were six oral history panels on the program, one more on preservation of audio recordings, and one on ways to document the African American citizens of a town in Mississippi.)³⁶ This may indicate a shift in the ways archivists viewed oral history: once they stopped seeing it as a cutting edge tool to be debated, championed, and criticized in print, practitioners convened to discuss strategies for implementing these projects. In addition, discussion of oral history projects has given way to other theoretical and practical questions to be debated in the professional literature, particularly with respect to the advent of personal computing, electronic records, and the Internet.³⁷

The 2015 Society of American Archivists annual meeting (held in Cleveland) featured a particularly large number of panels and activities focusing on community engagement, documenting underdocumented populations, postcustodial theory, and oral history. One key example is the establishment of “A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland.” During the meeting, archivists and community organizers conducted oral histories on the subject of police violence as part of an event they titled “Righting the Record.” Those oral histories helped establish the People’s Archive, which “aims to provide a sustainable, autonomous means for Cleveland citizens to share their experiences with or commentary on police violence.”³⁸ Furthermore, the People’s Archive strives to highlight the fact that “more than 700 people died at the hands or in the custody of American police officers” from January through mid-August 2015 and that a “disproportionate number of those killed were black, poor, transgender, mentally ill, or a combination of all four.”³⁹ The movement to document police violence using oral history is a key example of attempting to fill gaps in the documentary record. Therefore, perhaps contemporary political and social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, will coincide with a reinvigorated debate on the role of archivists in documenting a broader swath of society.

There are other indications that interest in this topic is resurging. Overlapping articles in *The American Archivist* ticked up slightly after the year 2000. In addition, as mentioned, I performed preliminary research on several other key archival journals to determine whether the results from *The American Archivist* are consistent with other publications. I ran a search of the full publication run of each of these journals, searching for the phrase "oral history." I identified how many of the articles retrieved had that phrase in the title. Then I analyzed the titles to determine whether keywords from the underdocumented group list were present (see Table 2).

Results from *The American Archivist* have been included here for context; when ordered by percentage of overlap (articles mentioning oral history along with articles with an underdocumented group in the title), *The American Archivist* places quite low on the list. When I controlled for the dates of publication, only including results from 1972 to the present (this corresponds to the earliest publication date of another journal, *Georgia Archive*), the results change only slightly: rather than an overlap percentage of 6.3%, the overlap percentage becomes 6.7%.

Additional research is necessary to identify why results from *The American Archivist* are lower than those of many other archival journals. Some journals may have editorial boards particularly interested in this topic, or mission statements that encourage publication of materials on this topic, which could have increased publication rates for articles with an "activist archivist"/oral history focus. Indeed, the journal *Provenance* released a special issue on "The Activist Archivist" in 1987, featuring articles on creating a more representative documentary record by including materials on social action groups and the gay rights movement, among others.⁴⁰ And, more recently, as Table 2 indicates, the journal *Archival Science* has featured quite a bit of content about documenting underdocumented groups and using oral histories to fill in those gaps.

Table 2. Survey of Other Publications

Journal Title	Dates of Publication	Oral History Mentions	Phrase "Oral History" in Title	Underdocumented Group in Title
<i>Archival Science</i>	2001–present	65 total	1	21 (32.3%)
<i>Archivaria</i>	1975–present	96 total	14	18 (18.8%)
<i>Midwestern Archivist/Archival Issues</i>	1976–present	55 total	4	11 (20%)
<i>Journal of Archival Organization</i>	2002–present	38 total	3	7 (18.4%)
<i>Provenance</i>	1983–present	68 total	6	6 (8.8%)
<i>The American Archivist</i>	1938–present	383 total	37	24 (6.3%)
<i>Georgia Archive</i>	1972–1982	59 total	1	3 (5.1%)

Conclusions and Further Study

Archivists have long touted the value of oral history as a way to supplement the documentary record. It was a controversial but often-discussed tool, initially being used to fill out collections about elites and elite institutions. During the activist archivist era, oral history came to be seen as a key way to capture the experiences of “everyday people,” particularly those marginalized or historically underdocumented. One of its selling points was that it could supplement the archival record with the perspectives of people of color, women, workers, and other harder-to-document groups.

This project set out to answer several key questions: first, did archivists in fact conduct oral histories of underdocumented populations to fill out the historical record, as was advocated during the activist archivist period? Second, if they did, did they publish or share the results among their fellow archivists? Third, how do current archivists feel about using oral history in this way?

The results of my study of *The American Archivist* suggest that, while articles discussed and debated the usefulness of oral histories for this purpose, very few case studies appeared in its pages. The evidence suggests that very few people published case studies in *The American Archivist* of how this was actually done and how well it worked. According to the metrics I used, only 24 articles reported the ways oral histories were used in conjunction with underdocumented groups. Furthermore, only a small percentage of these articles are true case studies; otherwise, when the subject is mentioned, it tends to be only a brief example in the context of a wider discussion.

The recent survey I conducted of practicing archivists suggests that while archivists do value oral histories, and many do conduct them, the emphasis has mainly been on recording the experiences of employees to document an institution’s history, or on documenting the experiences of members of a certain profession or industry. A much smaller percentage of respondents indicated that documenting people of color, women, labor unionists, or other groups highlighted during the activist archivist era was their goal. In addition, the survey indicates that very few of these projects have been shared in archival publications or conferences.

In the survey, current practitioners reported limited resources, staff time, and institutional support for all their oral history projects. The evidence does suggest, then, that archivists have not used oral histories to document underdocumented populations as much as early advocates suggested they might; or, at least, archivists have not published major case studies in archival journals indicating that they did so.

Certainly, then, it is important to consider the reasons for these results. First, while archivists may not be publishing results in *The American Archivist* or

other archival literature, evidence suggests that some are sharing results elsewhere, such as in oral history journals, at archives or oral history conferences, or on the Web. Further research could indicate whether other venues are better marketed to archivists for disseminating their results. It is also unclear whether user groups (including archivists and historians) find published articles a useful way to discover, learn about, and discuss oral history work, or whether conferences and websites are more effective; this might encourage practitioners to present in these venues rather than through archival publications.

It is important, also, to consider whether the absence of oral history projects from the traditional publication record is attributable to newer avenues of publication on the Internet. Preliminary Web searches about oral history collections turn up materials housed in university collections and on university websites, but these results very rarely yield the kinds of discussions about methodology or context expected in a peer-reviewed publication. Some collections, like A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, are shared exclusively online and do contain explanatory notes from the oral history practitioners (who, in this case, are archival professionals).

Another factor to consider, of course, is whether the archivists conducting oral histories receive institutional support or encouragement to publish. Further study is needed to reveal the implications of this issue on scholarly work generally and around oral history in particular. Do employment figures suggest lessening institutional support for archivists to publish, and is this a factor in limiting written treatments of oral history projects?

In addition, a long tradition exists of oral histories being conducted not by academic historians, archivists, or trained oral history specialists, but rather by family historians, genealogists, public historians, activists, and community members. Writer, public historian, and performer Studs Terkel had a great impact on the field with his many bestselling books, such as 1974's *Working*, for which he conducted oral histories with individuals from all walks of life in and around Chicago on the subject of their working lives. In a 2006 roundtable, Charles Morrissey, Albert Broussard, and other oral history practitioners, discussed the ways oral history began in an archival and academic framework, but was increasingly being conducted by a wide variety of practitioners. According to Broussard, "Some of these projects got started and continued—and some, indeed, have been quite successful—because institutions weren't interested in telling their story. Others simply wanted to tell their story and perhaps did not know that there was an institution or an archivist engaged in oral history."⁴¹ It seems clear that the agendas of these practitioners may not have been to publish in academic literature at all; instead, they might have been conducting their oral history projects for community building or community engagement reasons; they may have been writing books, writing newspaper articles,

or preparing genealogical histories for their families. Perhaps this helps explain why oral histories do not turn up in archival literature even as they are being created.

Other indications suggest that the idea of archivists conducting oral histories to document underdocumented groups has not been jettisoned completely. Some archivists in my recent survey did report performing this kind of work; *Archival Science* has published a number of articles on this topic in recent years; and a vibrant discussion of community outreach and documenting social movements ensued at the most recent SAA conference. Furthermore, just as activism in the 1960s and 1970s spurred the initial wave of scholarly interest in “history from the bottom up,” current popular discussions of African American, feminist, and LGBT issues in the news may encourage archivists to look again at collecting around groups that have been underrepresented in the historical record. Perhaps, then, conditions are suitable for archivists to use oral histories to “fill in the gaps” once again.

Appendix A: List of Underdocumented Group Keyword Search Terms

Note: For each of these terms, I searched as many spelling and hyphenation variations as possible.

Activist	Factory	Native American
African	Feminism	Negro
African American	Gay	Oriental
Afro American	Genealogy	Pacific
Appalachian	Hispanic	Protest
Asian	Homeless	Refugee
Bisexual	Homosexual	Same sex
Black	Immigrant/Migrant	Sexuality
Blind	Indian	Slave
Caribbean	Islam	Social history
Catholic	Jew	Socialist
Chicano	Judaism	Social movement
Civil rights	Labor/Labour	Student
Colonial	Latino	Transgender
Colored/Coloured	Lesbian	Union
Community	LGBT	Veteran
Deaf	Mexican	Woman/Women
Disabled	Migration	Workers
Divers	Mormon	
Ethnic	Muslim	

Appendix B: *American Archivist* Articles with an Underdocumented Group in the Title and “Oral History” in the Title or Body

- Cooper Cary, Amy. “Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History by Jeannette Allis Bastian.” 68 (Spring/Summer 2005): 172–75.
- Daniel, Dominique. “Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives.” 73 (Spring/Summer 2010.): 82–104.
- Gilliland, Anne, Sue McKemish, Kelvin White, Yang Lu, and Andrew Lau. “Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm: Can Archival Education in Pacific Rim Communities Address the Challenge?” 71 (Spring/Summer 2008): 87–117.
- Hagan, William T. “Archival Captive—The American Indian.” 41 (April 1978): 135–42.
- Juliani, Richard N. “The Use of Archives in the Study of Immigration and Ethnicity.” 39 (October 1976): 469–77.
- Kreneck, Thomas H. “Documenting a Mexican American Community: The Houston Example.” 48 (Summer 1985): 272–76, 278–85.
- Lewis, Paul and Morris Rieger. “Labor Union Records in the United States.” 25 (January 1962): 39–57.
- Marcus, Richard W. “Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the U.S.A. Archival Resources by Herbert A. Strauss.” 43 (Spring 1980): 219–20.
- Miller, Fredric. “Social History and Archival Practice.” 44 (Spring 1981): 113–24.
- . “Use, Appraisal, and Research: A Case Study of Social History.” 49 (Fall 1986): 371–92.
- Morrissey, Charles T. “*The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History* by Edward D. Ives.” 43 (Fall 1980): 491–92.
- Moseley, Eva S. “Sources for the ‘New Women’s History.’” 43 (Spring 1980): 180–90.
- . “*The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History* by Edward D. Ives; *Oral History Cataloging Manual* by Marion Matters.” 59 (Spring 1996): 242–44.
- Prieto, Laura. “*Women in Utah History: Paradigm or Paradox?* Edited by Patricia Lyn Scott and Linda Thatcher.” 70 (Fall/Winter 2007): 434–36.
- Slavin, Timothy A. “The National Archives of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.” 54 (Spring 1991): 220–26.
- Stewart, William J. “The Sources of Labor History: Problem and Promise.” 27 (January 1964): 95–102.
- Stout, Leon J. “*Cambridge South Asian Archive: Records of the British Period in South Asia Relating to India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, Nepal, and Afghanistan Held in the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge* by Mary Thatcher.” 39 (April 1976): 205–6.

- Viola, Herman J. "American Indian Cultural Resources Training Program at the Smithsonian Institution." 41 (April 1978): 143–46.
- . "Some Recent Writings on the American Indian." 37 (January 1974): 51–54.
- Vogt, Diane L. "Manuscripts in the Baker Library: A Guide to Sources for Business, Economic, and Social History by Robert W. Lovett and Eleanor C. Bishop." 42 (October 1979): 476–78.
- Voss-Hubbard, Anke. "'No Document—No History': Mary Ritter Beard and the Early History of Women's Archives." 58 (Winter 1995): 16–30.
- Warner, Robert M. and Francis X. Blouin. "Documenting the Great Migrations and a Century of Ethnicity in America." 39 (July 1976): 319–28.
- Wurl, Joel. "Community as Classroom: A Teacher's Practical Guide to Oral History by Krysztof M. Gebhard; *Caring for Our Past: Documenting Saskatchewan's Multicultural Heritage* by Ruth Dyck Wilson and Kathlyn Szalasznyj." 50 (Spring 1987): 273–75.
- Yakel, Elizabeth and Deborah A. Torres. "Genealogists as a 'Community of Records.'" 70 (Spring/Summer 2007): 93–113.

Appendix C: Survey of Current Oral History Practices

1. We are researching oral history projects conducted by archives staff. Have you or one of your colleagues ever conducted an oral history project at your current institution?
2. If yes, please describe the people, groups, or institutions you tried to document using oral history techniques.
3. To your knowledge, were any oral history projects conducted by your predecessors at your institution?
4. If yes, please describe the people, groups, or institutions your predecessors tried to document using oral history techniques.
5. Have you ever conducted an oral history project at a previous institution?
6. If yes, please describe the people, groups, or institutions you tried to document using oral history techniques.
7. To the best of your knowledge, were any of these oral history projects described in a journal article, conference presentation, or other venue?
8. If yes, please explain where the project was described (if you know).
9. Do you feel oral histories are valuable additions to archival/special collections?
10. Please explain your answer.
11. Do you have any plans to conduct any oral history projects in the near future?
12. Please explain your answer. If you are not planning to conduct any projects, please identify any barriers preventing you from doing so.
13. For which type of institution do you currently work?
 - a. College or University
 - b. Historical Society
 - c. Government Agency
 - d. Charity or Nonprofit Group
 - e. Religious Organization
 - f. For-profit Business
 - g. Other

NOTES

- ¹ I use the word "underdocumented" throughout this article to highlight the fact that the people and groups being discussed have frequently, both deliberately and unconsciously, been excluded from the historical record. While the power imbalances against people of color, women, LGBT individuals, immigrants, workers, and others are hugely relevant to this topic, they have been discussed extensively elsewhere and are beyond the scope of this article. I have therefore narrowed my focus to the way these power imbalances manifest themselves in the historical record.
- ² F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 13.
- ³ Of course, in the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth centuries, many archivists were trained first as historians, and little separate formal archival training was available.
- ⁴ Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charleton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, Md.: Rowman Altamira, 2006), 20–21.
- ⁵ Ellen D. Swain, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," *The American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 140.
- ⁶ Swain, "Oral History in the Archives," 141.
- ⁷ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," 27–29.
- ⁸ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," 23.
- ⁹ For an in-depth treatment of the activist archivist period, see Jessica L. Wagner, "The Student as Subaltern: Reconsidering the Role of Student Life Material Collections at North American Universities," *Archival Issues* 35 (2013): 37–51.
- ¹⁰ Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* 2 (1977): 22.
- ¹¹ Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," 23.
- ¹² Ham, "The Archival Edge," 8.
- ¹³ Ham, "The Archival Edge," 9.
- ¹⁴ Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *The American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 431. Cappon did not discuss the extent to which these records capture the point of view of the enslaved persons, however, which is certainly part of the reason oral histories held appeal as a way to document underdocumented groups.
- ¹⁵ Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," 431.
- ¹⁶ Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," 433.
- ¹⁷ Dale C. Mayer, "The New Social History: Implications for Archivists," *The American Archivist* 48 (Fall 1985): 393.
- ¹⁸ Mayer, "The New Social History," 393.
- ¹⁹ James E. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," *The American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983): 149–50.
- ²⁰ Fogerty, "Filling the Gap," 155.
- ²¹ Fogerty, "Filling the Gap," 155.
- ²² This search was obtained in March 2016, using the JSTOR database. JSTOR holds issues of *Oral History* dated 1972–2014 and of *The Oral History Review* dated 1973–2010.
- ²³ These journals are *Archivaria*, *Archival Issues*, *Archival Science*, *Journal of Archival Organization*, *Georgia Archive*, and *Provenance*.
- ²⁴ For ease of language, I will use the word "article" to represent both articles and reviews throughout the rest of this article.
- ²⁵ A full list of search terms is included in Appendix A.
- ²⁶ Ann M. Campbell, review, *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*, by Elizabeth B. Maso; *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*, by Louis M. Starr; and *Oral History 25th Anniversary Report*, by Louis M. Starr, *The American Archivist* 37 (January 2014): 91–93.
- ²⁷ Lynn A. Bonfield and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Conversation with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: The Use of Oral History," *The American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980): 471–72.

- ²⁸ Irene Cortinovis, "Augmenting Manuscript Collections through Oral History," *The American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 367–69.
- ²⁹ Cortinovis, "Augmenting Manuscript Collections," 368.
- ³⁰ These titles are fairly representative; the majority of articles with "oral history" in the titles seem to discuss oral history broadly rather than particular oral history projects.
- ³¹ The three articles that fit these parameters are Joel Wurl, review, *Community as Classroom: A Teacher's Practical Guide to Oral History and Caring for Our Past: Documenting Saskatchewan's Multicultural Heritage*, in *The American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 273–75; Charles T. Morrissey, review, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History*, in *The American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980): 491–92; and Eva S. Moseley, review, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History; Oral History Cataloging Manual*, in *The American Archivist* 59 (Spring 1996): 242–44.
- ³² The "Caribbean" theme listed in Table 1 in this case refers to a piece about communities in the U.S. Virgin Islands, not in the United States proper.
- ³³ Full survey questions are available in Appendix C of this article.
- ³⁴ Question 2 of survey.
- ³⁵ However, when these dimensions were explicitly mentioned, such as in responses like "women in the arts" or "urban Hispanic community," both dimensions were coded. In these examples, the first response was coded both with gender and professional expertise, and the latter was coded both with a racial/ethnic focus and a local history focus.
- ³⁶ Research conducted on my behalf by staff at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in the Papers of the Society of American Archivists, Conference Programs, in May 2015.
- ³⁷ Ellen Swain presented a persuasive case that articles about technology have replaced oral history and other older topics in the archival literature. See Ellen D. Swain, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," *The American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 156–57.
- ³⁸ "Contribution Terms of Service," A People's Archive of Police Violence, Archivingpoliceviolence.org/terms.
- ³⁹ "Purpose," A People's Archive of Police Violence, Archivingpoliceviolence.org/purpose.
- ⁴⁰ *Provenance* 5 (Spring 1987). While this issue does focus on underdocumented groups, it does not, perhaps surprisingly, include much discussion on using oral history as a tool.
- ⁴¹ Kenneth H. Williams, "Issues that Have Shaped the Field of Oral History—a Roundtable," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 104 (Summer/Autumn 2006): 621–22.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Wagner Webster is the digital initiatives librarian and an assistant professor at Baruch College, City University of New York. She holds an MLS in archives and an MA in American history from the University of Maryland. Her responsibilities include digitizing print materials for access, designing long-term archival preservation and access systems, and developing workflows for processing born-digital materials. Her research focuses on material culture, trends in archival practice, documentation of underdocumented populations, and collection of student life materials.