

Notes – Boston KM Forum Breakfast Meeting at The National Archives and Research Administration, Northeast Regional Headquarters, Friday, July 1, 2005

We were hosted by the NARA, NE Region staff, Jill Snyder, Denise Pullen, and Marvin Kabakoff, and given an introduction to the facility, the mission of the National Archives, and the technological challenges they are facing. The biggest challenge is their mandate to preserve federal governmental materials relating to the country's origins, history, essence and actions of government, collaborating with and advising government agencies on archiving their materials. That mandate is facing uncharted territory; with the advent of electronic records becoming the preponderance of content, retention policies that made sense in a paper era may no longer pertain with electronic content. Storage space is no longer an issue for electronic media.

The NARA staff provides guidance to agencies on the interpretation of archival guidelines, appraisal of importance, and retention. Retention receives a lot of attention with only 2% of the material being designated as permanent. However, *temporary* can mean retention for months, decades or even centuries. While NARA gives guidance to agencies about policy formulation on retentions, it is the law that the heads of agencies must follow and enforce the established policies. NARA must go to other authoritative bodies (e.g. Congress) if they feel that an agency's materials are not being preserved in accordance with policies.

Electronic records are stored in three formats, text (ASCII), metadata elements (author, title, purpose, etc.), and electronic structural elements (formatting, fonts, etc.). This enables them to be fully indexed and manipulated as data while the system retains the elements to recreate them in their original format.

Another metadata element that is critical is the concept of a series. This reflects all content that is contextually bound by agency policy. However, the archival work supports an element of complexity, determining how individual members of one series relate to content in other series, even across agencies. For that they have formulated policies and electronic techniques to bring materials from several series together in a research activity.

Waltham is the headquarters for the Northeast region, housing 600K boxes of temporary records. Pittsfield holds microfilm of records and is open to researchers. New York has some permanent paper in its collections. Information about all National Archives facilities is available at: <http://www.archives.gov/index.html>.

After a review by staff members and extensive questioning by the 24 in attendance, we were given a tour of the operation and saw examples of the holdings including documents from Ellis Island immigrations, lobster haul logs from the 1800s, photos of captured Germans at Portsmouth, NH during WWII, and a telegram (the first official notice received in Massachusetts) announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor with the words "this is not a drill."

The intense interest in processing and complexities of dealing with archival materials have prompted us to schedule October's breakfast meeting at Rebecca's with the topic: "Complexities and considerations for archiving electronic records." The staff from NARA will be present again to answer questions and support the discussion. If you missed this meeting and want to know more about the Waltham facility, please visit their Web site at: <http://www.archives.gov/northeast/waltham/waltham.html>. Access to other regional facilities is listed at: http://www.archives.gov/facilities/northeast_region.html.

Boston KM Forum extends its sincere thanks to our hosts and appreciation to Regional Administrator Diane P. LeBlanc for supporting her staff in giving us this view of a wonderful government resource in this locale.

You will also find more information about the National Archives in this article:

"The Fading Memory of the State", by David Talbot, pp 44-49, July 2005
http://www.technologyreview.com/articles/05/07/issue/feature_memory.asp

The citation was provided by Susan Korté, Librarian at GEO-Centers, Inc.