IN A “HOUSE OF MEMORY”:
DISCOVERING THE PROVENANCE
OF PLACE

BY JEANNETTE ALLIS BASTIAN

ABSTRACT: The relationship between archives and collective memory is explored through the archival collections of the MacDowell Colony, an artists’ retreat in New Hampshire. The author examines expanding concepts of provenance in determining how the collective memory unifying this collection guides its organization and access.

Introduction

The image of a house of memory to which the archivist holds the key is a familiar and persistent metaphor in the archival world. We think of these houses as the repositories, spaces, and containers that hold the records, manuscripts, and memorabilia of our collective pasts. Although we often tend to focus on the contents as the loci of memory, memory may also attach to the physical spaces themselves. When this happens, these spaces become powerful self-referencing contexts for collective memory as well as overarching physical environments that bind the contents within them into a coherent narrative. Just such a house of memory sits on a hilltop in the New Hampshire woods: the MacDowell Colony, an artists’ colony in the town of Peterborough. Founded in 1908, the colony has created almost a century’s worth of official memory in the institutional records documenting its founding, growth, and development as one of the premier artists’ retreats in the United States. At the same time, the colony is also gathering a more personal record, a collective memory manifested through the materials—books, manuscripts, paintings, music, sculpture, photographs—created by the artists and fellows in residence. These artistic and literary works travel to the colony by various paths. Some are left there by the artists as potential fund-raising contributions and as inspirations for future fellows. Published works completed as a direct result of the artists’ sojourn at MacDowell arrive with grateful acknowledgments. Many items are sent as part of the lifelong relationship with the colony that former fellows tend to develop. All the materials in this fellows collection, be they tapes, manuscripts, sheet music, sculpture, photographs, or signed first editions, share the one commonality that they are the creative product of an artist who has at one or more times been a fellow in residence at the MacDowell Colony.
Several years ago, I was invited to advise the colony on designing a long-range plan for organizing, preserving, and maintaining their seemingly eclectic and diverse collection. Colony fellows over the years have included such American cultural luminaries as Aaron Copland, Edward Arlington Robinson, Alice Walker, Thornton Wilder, James Baldwin, and Leonard Bernstein. Each of them left their own remembrances, perhaps in the form of an inscribed first edition or an annotated sheet of music, as did many of the over 4,500 colony fellows. This fellows collection, accumulated haphazardly over decades, had reached the point where the colony became concerned about its fragility and increasing value and decided to seek outside advice in determining how best to preserve and manage it.

The fellows collection combined features of a rare books collection, a music library, an art gallery, and a manuscript repository, but its real organizational and philosophical challenge lay in determining the extent to which the collection was defined by both the common experience of the creators and the colony itself. Was the relationship between the creators and the colony—as well as the implied relationship between the creators themselves—the most significant feature of this collection and, if so, how could that be best expressed? One path to understanding and articulating the essential elements of the MacDowell collection lay in reimagining and linking two concepts: the first, archival provenance, and the second, an archival construct of collective memory. Situating both concepts within a practical framework that spoke directly to the many-layered relationships among archives, memory, and provenance might suggest answers to critical questions: How is collective memory identified and expressed through archives and how is that expression captured and conveyed? How far should the bonds of collective memory unifying a collection on many different levels guide its organization and subsequent access? To what extent do both the physical and the metaphorical house of memory and the relationships and influences created within it unite individual creators in favor of a collective creator, in this case, the MacDowell Colony itself? In attempting to grapple with these questions, this article seeks to analyze and understand the place of provenance and the provenance of place in a house of memory. It will attempt to determine to what extent the colony, both as a physical place and a place of collective remembering, is also the contextual space linking creators so that as records are united with memory, their meaning and significance are enhanced.

**Archives and Collective Memory**

When then ICA President Jean-Pierre Wallot coined the term “houses of memory” in a 1991 address, he referred to the treasures of our past contained within archival institutions where, he maintained, archivists are the holders of the “keys to collective memory.” Wallot suggested that archives could be both physical spaces and memory spaces. As physical spaces, they store and hold their contents; as memory spaces, they are the containers of the collective memory of their use and their users, and of their own creation and institutional past. As both physical and memory spaces, they may stand as symbolic representations of particular values or ideas. This connection between archives and collective memory is forcefully made by another Canadian archivist, Hugh Taylor, who traces the heritage route that archives have taken in Canada from the per-
ception of documents as mere dusty records of events, secondary aspects of history, to an awareness of the document itself as the heritage. Taylor notes that “visually unremarkable, voluminous in quantity, and hidden away in boxes, archives have generally been taken for granted as the information environment of traditional heritage, a collective memory to be ransacked by experts when some element of the past is to be fixed in time and space.”

Foreshadowing the revival of interest in the collective memory theories of Maurice Halbwachs, Taylor asks at which point these records become part of a national or local heritage and concludes that this happens when communities themselves personalize their heritage. In the early 1990s, Richard Cox connected these underlying assumptions that archivists hold about records as sources for memory with developing historical trends in memory studies, suggesting that while archivists needed to hew to basic principles and be wary of fads, they also needed to become advocates for the place of archives and public memory within historical movements.

More recently, as memory studies have increasingly become a focus for historians and social scientists, archivists have taken up the challenge of examining memory in archival terms. Likewise, the interpretation of archives by outside disciplines has encouraged archivists to reconsider their own safe harbors so that, while memory has always been an implicit (though largely undefined) part of the archival vocabulary due to its natural association with the very contents of records, defining the relationships between archives and memory has sharpened into a more focused and interrogative discourse.

North American archivists are no longer assuming a relationship with memory but endeavoring to understand and reconcile their role in memory construction, interpretation, and mediation. Brien Brothman, for example, suggests that memory is a process rather than a place, a process that involves diminishing “the pastness of the past,” in favor of shaping information for present use. He also echoes Halbwachs in suggesting that “in the framework of memory, ‘the past’ is simply a term of convenience, one that encompasses certain categories of information available for use by contemporary individuals, organizations and society.” In a similar vein, Elisabeth Kaplan argues in her study of the American Jewish Historical Society that memory is a social construct and that archival collections are deliberately mediated creations.

At the same time, the archives as a physical and conceptual place of memory has also become a focus of interest to scholars outside the archival discipline, particularly following the 1995 publication of Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever. For these scholars, as for archivists, the physical image of a memory house also seems to be an apt metaphor for an archives, one that arises naturally from Derrida’s tracing of the word “archive” to the Greek word ἀρχεῖον, meaning “the house or domicile of a superior magistrate where legal documents were housed.” One social historian refers to an archives as “the counting house of dreams,” and “memory’s potential place.” Another sees the archives as a “home” in which “adopting an occupational identity, one claims the archival space as one’s own.” These researchers note a shift in their conception of an archives from a “defined data-holding facility, somewhat like a penitentiary” to a physical space in which memory resides, an institution that bridges the gap between private and public spaces.

But the association of collective memory with a physical space is not a new one. Edward MacDowell himself referred to his tranquil retreat in Peterborough as “a house
of dreams untold,” anticipating the house of memory that the MacDowell Colony would one day become.

The MacDowell Colony

The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, was established as an artists’ colony in 1908 by Marian MacDowell as a permanent memorial to her husband, American composer Edward MacDowell. Since that time, the colony, nestled within 450 acres of wooded rolling hillside, has hosted over 4,500 creative artists, including many of the most prominent names of twentieth-century American culture. Although little remembered today, Edward MacDowell was a highly regarded composer and pianist during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, part of a group of composers known as “the Boston Boys” centered primarily in New England. At the time of his death in 1907, he was considered one of the greatest musicians that America had yet produced. In the latter part of the twentieth century, performers, as well as scholars, began to rediscover these American romantics and record their pieces for a new generation of musicians. In April 2000, MacDowell was included among the American Classical Music Hall of Fame inductees for that year, joining a number of MacDowell colleagues who had been inducted in previous years, among them, Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Amy Beach, and Leonard Bernstein. The archives of Edward MacDowell were the first to be received by the Library of Congress Music Division.

It was Edward MacDowell himself who originally conceived of the Peterborough property and his house Hilltops as his own creative retreat, describing it in his poem, “From a Log Cabin,” as a “House of Dreams Untold, / it looks out o’er the whispering treetops / and faces the setting sun.” Born in New York City in 1861, MacDowell gained early recognition in the United States as a pianist and composer. Following marriage to his student Marian Nevins in 1885, they moved to Boston, but his teaching and performing schedule left him little time for composing. Searching for a summer retreat that would give MacDowell the solitude he needed, they discovered Peterborough. It was there at Hillcrest that the MacDowells spent their summers and where Edward found the peace and tranquility that best stimulated his creativity. In the late 1890s, MacDowell accepted an endowed professorship at Columbia University’s first music department. He was an outspoken advocate for art education, lobbying to expand Columbia’s music department into a department of fine arts and founding the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Anticipating the MacDowell Colony philosophy, he believed that “artists and their work could be enhanced and enriched if those working in different areas of the creative arts had the opportunity to work and study together.” But Columbia was not interested in MacDowell’s vision of an inclusive arts program and he resigned in 1904, returning to Peterborough, which now became his full-time residence. Deeply depressed, he was diagnosed with a degenerative disease and died in 1908. When it became clear that he would not recover, Edward asked Marian to promise that she would provide a haven at Hillcrest for a few artists to come and enjoy the solitude and creative inspiration that he had found there.

Retreats for artists, musicians, and writers had become popular in the late nineteenth century, primarily as fashionable summer gathering places. Marian had something slightly
different in mind. The MacDowell Colony was established to offer not only the conducive environment that these other colonies offered, but to offer it to everyone regardless of social status. Although initially a nominal fee was charged, no creative person was denied if unable to pay.

After Edward’s death, Marian devoted herself to raising funds for the colony, which quickly expanded as she began acquiring more land and building more studios to accommodate the artists. The routine of working and living at the colony established by Edward remains the same today as a cherished part of colony tradition. Fellows live centrally in Colony Hall, but spend their days apart in assigned studios where lunch is individually delivered in picnic baskets. They come together again for supper and often gather in the library for a presentation by one of the residents. The studios, some 40 scattered around the colony, are outfitted to accommodate the specific needs of various types of artistic endeavor; some may have a piano, photographic equipment, or an artist’s easel. All studios have porches, rocking chairs, and desks, and no one may visit the studios during the day without permission from the current inhabitant. The length of a fellowship is typically six to eight weeks, but artists are not limited to only one stay and many fellows make repeat visits.

While several thousand persons apply annually for admission, the colony accepts only about two hundred fellows per year. Although in 1911 each artist paid $1.00 a day, today the colony supports the entire visit: the artists’ only obligation is to fulfill their own creative promise. A visitor to the MacDowell Colony is struck by the complete dedication of the colony staff to their primary mission of nurturing and fostering the environment that Edward MacDowell cherished. A colonist arriving in 1924 describes his arrival: “I went as a fledgling poet … At Peterborough I got off the train and whispered the name of Heaven to the local taxi driver … hurrying through the former barn … I slowed up in awe at the two swing doors with short passage between them that led to the dining room. Softly I edged through and entered the banquet hall of the gods. They were all colonists of a month’s standing, so a newcomer drew glances from twenty-odd pairs of imperious eyes … Here I was! Arrived!”15 The celestial motif persists today as a colony fellow in 2000, staying in a newly constructed writers’ studio observes, “when I moved in, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. It’s so spacious, you can unpack your whole book.”16

The MacDowell Collection

The institutional archives of the MacDowell Colony from 1869 to 1973, as well as the personal papers of Marian and Edward MacDowell, are at the Library of Congress; current institutional records after 1973 remain at the colony.17 In addition to its institutional records, the colony maintains a library filled with the donated work of colony fellows as well as a small miscellaneous collection of other donated books and musical scores. Every available space, including the attic of Colony Hall, is likewise filled with artwork, sculpture, photographs, and other artifacts donated by fellows. A substantial sheet music collection willed to the colony by music critic, arranger, and conductor William Henry Humiston, a pupil and close friend of MacDowell, became the catalyst for the building of the Eugene Coleman Savidge Memorial Library in 1927. The Humiston
Collection, however, forms only a very small part of a growing collection of first editions, tapes, CDs, musical scores, plays, and poetry, some published and some in manuscript form. Since the primary purpose of the library is to inspire the colony fellows, the library also contains listening equipment and Humiston’s baby grand piano. The interior of the library, where the piano and a fireplace are the focal points, is one large but cozy space with picture windows on one side of a building looking out onto a small garden and the forest. In addition to housing the fellows collection, the library is also used for social gatherings and evening presentations by current residents. Outside the library in Colony Hall itself is the artwork: painting, sculpture, drawings, photography, even some delicate handmade books. The collection includes over 5,000 works of unpublished and published fiction and nonfiction; approximately 600 cassette tapes, over 80 percent of which are unpublished musical compositions; over 1,100 published and unpublished musical scores in addition to MacDowell’s annotated published scores and Humiston’s unpublished arrangements of MacDowell’s music; 12 linear feet of miscellaneous published and unpublished materials, including original play scripts; and approximately 500 visual works, including collages, drawings, paintings, handmade books, and sculpture. In addition, there are several thousand photographs. Approximately 400 items are added to the collection annually, all donated by creators. 18

Although outside researchers may visit the library upon request, its primary users are the fellows themselves. Current fellows gain insight and ideas from the works of their predecessors and they are encouraged to visit the collection, listen to the tapes, play the sheet music, and borrow items on an honor system. Here, inspiration is no gratuitous gesture but central to the library’s mission. In a questionnaire about library use sent to former fellows, 74 percent of the responses indicated that looking for or listening to fellows’ work were the most important reasons they visited the library. 19 Browsing and reading presentations also ranked high as important library activities. Over 75 percent of the respondents had contributed their own works to the collection and a majority of the remainder indicated that they would like to. The library collection is recognized by both the fellows and the staff as a vital center of colony life, a physical and intellectual space that contains the colony’s collective memory and, in a larger sense, a formidable portion of the collective memory of the artistic life of the United States in the twentieth century.

Collective Memory and Provenance

Collective memory has intrigued sociologists and historians since the 1930s when Maurice Halbwachs published his seminal work, The Social Frameworks of Memory, legitimizing memory as an academic area for study (previously memory had been considered primarily within the purview of psychology). In analyzing collective memory, Halbwachs first defined his concept of remembering as a process of locating images of the past in specific places. He characterized remembering as an “imaginative reconstruction in which we integrate specific images formulated in the present into particular contexts identified with the past.” 20 He concluded that “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.” 21 For Halbwachs, it followed logically that collective memories are individual
memories that are part of "a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days." Even older memories must be placed within a totality of memories common to other groups. While collective memory is a social construct, Halbwachs acknowledges that, "while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember." Although it is the individuals, not the group or the institutions who remember, "these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past." Halbwachs concludes that "every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time." Archivists, beginning with Hugh Taylor, are extending Halbwachs' personalization of context as they examine the connections among records, heritage, and identity.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars have embraced the study of memory and collective memory. Some of these studies refer to an archival involvement. Historian Alon Confino, for example, suggests archives when he links memory to context and place, observing that, "I would like to view memory as an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture." To sociologist Alan Radley, "people do not remember a series of personal events which touched their own lives but enjoy a 'sense of the past' through the understanding of a history which other people appear to have created." Geographer Kenneth Foote also supports the connection between archives and collective memory, pointing out that writings within a number of the social sciences conclude that "material objects, artifacts and documents—including those contained in archival collections—play a special role in human communication ... archives can be seen as a valuable means of extending the temporal and special range of human communication." In his discussion of remembering and forgetting, Foote, using examples of the Salem witch trials and radioactive deposits, connects documents with specific sites, placing them within the contexts of how society has determined to commemorate or efface a particular memory. In similar fashion, the placement of fellows' materials and manuscripts throughout the colony suggests the conscious effort towards collective remembering within a particular space.

If collective memory is informed by both the social fabric and by the context of individual memory, then collective memory is an important consideration for archivists for whom context is a primary concern. If, according to Foote, "archives are sometimes said to be society's collective memory," then at what point in the archival process is that sense of collective memory expressed? I argue here that the contextual concerns of both collective memory and archival arrangement meet within the archival principle of provenance, a principle of organization built around context. If the aggregate of individual memories built up and accumulated through the past forms a collective memory by virtue of its shared contexts, then provenance speaks directly to the concept of collective memory.

While the principle of provenance has engaged archivists in a variety of arenas, they would generally agree that provenance refers, firstly, to the maintenance of records by their creator or source and that, secondly, records from different creators must not be intermingled. In the nineteenth century, archivists began to move away from the subject
arrangement of archival materials to a contextual one, an arrangement based on the idea that archival documents were not discrete items but could be best understood in their context and in relationship to other documents from the same source. Today, the principle of provenance has retained its essential core and remains the key organizational base of archival arrangement. If it has undergone any modification, it has been towards broadening the definition of "context." Provenance, as generally practiced in North America, is expressed through individual creators, such as in a collection of personal papers, or through collective creators, as in the papers of a family. The creator may also be an entity such as an institution or a government body, which includes many creators working within one overarching context. But, as the complexity of modern records creation has put an ever-increasing burden on the principle of provenance, provenance itself has expanded to embrace both the specific processes of records production and the wider society within which the record was created. Hugh Taylor noted in 1970 that "archivists ought to focus more on why and how people have created documentation rather than on their subject content. Archivists should extend their understanding of the provenance of documentation deeply into the societal origins of human communication throughout history." Terry Cook expands on this as he identifies a societal provenance, pointing out that "texts cannot be separated from their ongoing and past interpretations, nor author from subject or ever-changing audiences, nor author from the act of authoring, nor authoring from broader societal contexts in which it takes place."

Another way of expanding provenance is to link it with specific contexts of collective memory. Actualizing a house of memory into a physical space such as the MacDowell Colony allows us to give concrete direction and definition to the idea of provenance as place. It also suggests that repositories themselves may be key to the context of creation even though they may house collections produced by multiple discrete creators. As previously noted, at the colony the act of creation is not only tied to a physical space but is also tied to the collective memory of that physical space—a collective memory that is the common denominator amongst all the creators, regardless of their own physical locale. A repository that is part of the context of creation can claim this status, not only if its creators share a collective memory in the Halbwachian sense of a common community, but also because this collective memory is dynamic and incremental: memory piles upon memory as each creator absorbs the influence of previous creators. Provenance as place implies both a physical community and an imagined community where the act of creation is tied to the actual space as well as to all the other creators who have engaged within that space. The provenance of place suggests multiple levels of provenance.

For archivists, the concept of collective memory has gone beyond metaphor and must now take its place among the other categories of delineating and describing collections. Perhaps to a certain extent this is nothing new. The challenge may lie in the reexamining and broadening of provenance to embrace a wider social context for records while also expressing a place in which a circle of interrelationships creates a collective memory and context of its own. What the MacDowell Colony collection suggests is that there may be a sense in which the placement of materials in a specific and connected location, combined with the relationships between the materials that naturally occur because of their relationship to a particular place, not only adds a collective value to these materi-
als, but also suggests ways of organizing and describing them that expresses these relationships.

The editors of the recent edition of the "Dutch Manual" suggest that, previous to a more localized and specific principle of provenance, "Dutch archivists in the nineteenth century initially considered the community (the city, province or state) to be the creator of an archive." From a very different perspective, this is echoed in Terry Cook's societal provenance as well as in Hugh Taylor's vision of archives as "grounded in locality as one aspect of the memory of a community, a powerful element of heritage with a rich contextual web of connections spun within public and private records alike." Seen through an inverse lens, the provenance of place also applies from the opposite end as demonstrated by Kaplan's study where she shows that a repository and its collections work in tandem to forge a particular identity. Her analysis raises the question of the extent to which collections also take on additional meaning by virtue of being placed within a particular repository. In my own work on colonial records, it became clear that the creation of the records cannot be divorced from the colonized society in which they were created, regardless of the location of the official records-creating office.

Conclusion

In the practical terms of the MacDowell Colony, how does the incorporation of collective memory within considerations of provenance affect its collection of materials? The MacDowell collection operates on many different levels. While, on the one hand, this collection might be seen from a library "special collections" point of view that privileges the authors as individual creators, the materials as discrete items that could be organized by type or media, and the MacDowell connection as a related subject heading, the collection might also be seen from an archival point of view that sets the individual creators within the context of the colony and its purpose, and the items as the creative string of products of generations of artists in residence. Seen from this view, the colony itself, both as a physical place and a place of collective remembering, is the contextual space linking these creators. The materials are the products of the colony as much as they are the products of individual artists. From a larger perspective, the artistic life of twentieth-century America may be glimpsed through a longitudinal snapshot of the creative activity of the MacDowell colonists. It could be argued that here, a provenance of place, which by its very nature embraces both the physical locale and the collective memory of that locale, establishes a context of creation that links the creators as well as the act of creation to a location, to the past and present meaning of that location as well as to one another as inhabitants of the location. In this artists' colony, the "house of memory" goes beyond things stored, as in an archives, to include the very act of creation itself. It raises the question of how residents influenced one another, both those whose stay was concurrent and those who were inspired by the items left or donated by past residents. The library is filled with the creations and creative spirits of past colonists all linked and influenced by a place.

At the same time, the provenance of place is not restricted to an obvious physical space such as the MacDowell Colony, but applies to many locations and collections. Student theses produced in a university setting, research fellowships in a historical so-
ciety or institute, collections deliberately selected to foster a point of view—the provenance of place pervades many houses of memory! At the same time, by examining the relationship between archives and collective memory as expressed in a “house of memory” such as the MacDowell Colony, it may be possible to gain a clearer understanding not only of the way that memory is expressed in an archives, but the way that archivists can express memory. Discussions of memory have up to now been generally initiated by public historians and social scientists, but archivists are emerging as uniquely positioned to make meaningful contributions to this debate. Not only do archivists hold the keys to the houses of memory, but their profession has provided them with the tools with which to organize these memories and sustain them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeannette A. Bastian is Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College where she directs the Archives program. Her research interests are focused on archives in colonial and post-colonial contexts, relationships among archives and collective memory and archives education. She is the recent author of Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its History and Found Its Archives (Libraries Unlimited, 2003). The author wishes to thank the Archival Issues Editorial Board for their helpful and insightful comments, in particular Amy Cooper Cary whose conscientious and thoughtful “shepherding” significantly enhanced the final product.

NOTES


5. Brothman, 79.


12. Steven Ledbetter, “Edward MacDowell, American Romantic,” Historical New Hampshire 51 (1996): 23–32. In addition to being a virtuoso performer, MacDowell was best known for his compositions “To a Wild Rose,” “Woodland Sketches,” and “Hamlet and Ophelia,” which established him in his lifetime as a major American composer.
17. This is a deliberate decision by the colony board and management who are concerned about privacy issues. In addition, many of these older records are still consulted by the colony.
18. This estimate of the collection was made in 2000.
19. The survey was conducted by the colony staff in 2001 through the colony newsletter.
22. Halbwachs, 52.
23. Halbwachs, 22.
27. Foote, 379.
29. Nesmith, Canadian Archival Studies, 17.
31. Benedict Anderson’s classic, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1995), coined the term “imagined communities” to describe shared experiences and ideals among persons who never met but were nonetheless joined by common spaces.
32. In the actual describing of the MacDowell collection, databases were used to capture the complex relationships between the creators and the colony so that, for example, fields delineated the period of the creator’s stay at the colony as well as the number of times in residence.
35. Elisabeth Kaplan, “We are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity.”