



Preserving the Controversial and the Mundane

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In January 2020, *The New York Times* reported that the National Archives blurred a photograph from the 2017 Women’s March, which stunned the archival and historian communities. In an image promoting the exhibit *Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote*, NARA blurred the text of several signs the women held, including one that said “God Hates Trump” and one that said “Trump & GOP—Hands Off Women.” The words “vagina” and “pussy” on other signs were also blurred. NARA later apologized, stating that it was trying to keep the focus on the march and not the signs and felt that some of the words were not appropriate to share in promotional materials.

This type of erasure—however unintentional—reminds us how important the photographic record is in preserving historical events. Photos give a second, more tangible interpretation of events than a written record. It’s essential that archivists do not alter photographs and documents to fit certain narratives or cater to specific interest groups. In trying to be neutral by not telling the full story or by altering records so as not to offend, we are removing facts from the historical record in much the same way that people in underrepresented communities have often been omitted from written records in the past.

One way to prevent such erasure is to remember how contextual clues in photographs help create a complete record of the events, places, or people featured in them.

Above and left: Downtown Mobile, Alabama, a few days before and after the Gulf Coast Hurricane in July 1916. Courtesy of the University of South Alabama.





In the case of the NARA incident, staff obscured words deemed to be controversial. But who decides what is controversial and what isn't? Is it based on a written organizational code or the personal beliefs of the person creating the exhibit? How we perceive the world—and the historical record—is shaped by our life experiences. What is controversial to one person at one time in history may not be an issue to another.

Preserving the Ordinary

Images show the good, the bad, the ugly, and sometimes the mundane. But every image is a unique snapshot of the story of humanity and thus is important for recording the lives of ordinary people.

Take, for example, the opening photo on page 6 featuring the American flag during a parade. The photo shows trends of this place and this time—from clothing to the design of objects such as a baby pram. Both African American and white residents have turned out for the parade, lining the streets, although it is only white men who carry the flag. Whereas today's parades often include fences and barricades for safety, this photo shows some viewers climbing lampposts and buildings to catch a glimpse. For architectural historians, the buildings are most important. Many of the buildings in

this town have been torn down, renovated, or damaged by flooding and fire. This image can be useful when restoring historic buildings to their original facades.

Some facts no one would know without a historical framework. The photograph was taken by Erik Overbey on July 4, 1916, on Government Street in Mobile, Alabama. It showcases the largest flag in American history up to that point. Despite the sunny weather in this photo, the next day the 1916 Gulf Coast Hurricane surged through these streets, flooding a large portion of downtown Mobile and destroying the wharf not far from where these people stand, enjoying the parade. The storm caused millions of dollars in damage and severely affected the lives of residents.

The second photo on page 6 shows the aftermath of the storm in Mobile's downtown. A child pushes a rowboat through the shallower parts of the street and another stands ankle deep in the water. In the background, a crowd of people work to clean up the damage. The photo tells the story of a community trying to pick up the pieces and move on after hardship.

Ensuring Authenticity

Whether photographs show unidentified or fully documented historical figures, the stories that they tell are all important. They can show us how buildings looked at a given time, how people worked and played and dressed. They can reveal class differences and social attitudes that may have been taken for granted and therefore not written about in other documents.

Images provide a peek into portions of history that may not be recorded elsewhere, or at least not in as much detail. This is why we must preserve images as they are—not how we want them to be. By altering images, we alter the very nature of history. It's our duty as archivists to preserve the items we are stewards of and let them tell their own stories. ■



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