

"Archivists may not willfully alter, manipulate, or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence." ([SAA Code of Ethics, 2012](#))

Due to the often unique nature of our collections, archivists have a responsibility to our records. Our responsibility exceeds that of a public or school librarian who can order a replacement for a lost or worn-out book on Amazon. For many archival records, once a record is gone, it is gone forever. In the past, archivists were willing to stake their careers for the good of the collection, especially in the case of controversial accessions.

In the 1960s, Ken Duckett of the Ohio Historical Society was professionally reprimanded for his role in obtaining a collection of letters written by President Harding to his mistress in the 1910s. The OHS was negotiating with Harding's estate for his personal papers when the letters were donated by the mistress' probate lawyer. Duckett chose to keep the letters a secret so that the larger collection's negotiations were not jeopardized. After learning of the letters, OHS Board of Trustees forced Duckett to return the original correspondence, unaware that he had privately microfilmed the collection. A long court battle ensued, where Duckett was sued by Harding's family for \$1 million (\$7.9 million in 2017 dollars) for obtaining the letters and publishing an article about them. The suit was settled when the mistress' previously lost heir gave the letters to the Harding family (who later donated them to the Library of Congress with a 50 year restriction) and Duckett surrendered copies of the microfilm to the Hardings (Pyatt 2015).

Duckett was legitimately concerned about the destruction of the original letters. He took steps (perhaps not the best ones for his career) to preserve the records above all other concerns.

Pyatt, Timothy P. 2015. "The Harding Affair Letters: How One Archivist Took Every Measure Possible to Ensure Their Preservation." *Case Studies in Archival Ethics*, no. 5 (April). Accessed October 22, 2017. https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/HardingAffairLetters_CEPC-CaseStudy5.pdf.