

Richard Saunders

Editor's Note

As editor, I must tell you that this issue of *RBM* might be more notable for what it fails to contain than for what it presents, worthy readers. You will notice that this issue runs a bit short. That is because—well, there is a story here.

The *RBM* editorial board meeting was held this past January. Recall that in January 2019 the county was mired in a federal shutdown. Shutdowns are political conflicts, not fiscal matters. Politicians loudly talk about money, but the cost of a shutdown is difficult to measure since it imposes the hardest toll on those who labor to keep them open and serviceable, and on those who must plan travel weeks and often months or years in advance. The arbitrary closure of cultural institutions (libraries, archives, and public lands like the National Parks) extracts a human cost that cannot be estimated in mere dollars.

The federal government shutdown that began in December 2018 was merely the latest. Government shutdowns in 1980, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1995–96, 2013, and early 2018 all imposed locked doors, shuttering access to federal historical resources including National Archives and presidential libraries. It will not be the last.

By happenstance, the most recent shutdown coincided with the time I generally begin making publication decisions on articles populating the spring *RBM* issue. Just before we launched the editorial board meeting conference call in January, members chatted about the shutdown and its effect on members of the special collections library community as well as the public served by those institutions. Out of that meeting emerged an idea for publishing an ersatz “roundtable discussion” made up of personal comments from those most closely affected by the closure of federal research libraries, the National Archives, and similar institutions.

The publication of a roundtable discussion typically begins with an unscripted discussion in a public forum, such as a professional conference. The proceedings are often recorded, edited into a readable format before appearing in print. In the case of the shutdown, holding a roundtable and then publishing the proceedings a year or two years after the fact risks making the discussion irrelevant. The shutdown is a current topic, and implementing the discussion in the typical way would lose the immediacy of the moment and the discussions that are occurring informally and interpersonally across the profession.

To bring this discussion to the spring 2019 issue required that the editor could compile something publishable within the deadline facing the spring 2019 issue. An invitation was circulated immediately to a select set of federal special-library employees idled by the furloughs. They were invited to set down a couple of pages of individual perspectives about the cost or lost opportunities facing them. The general theme suggested was: *What cost has the shutdown imposed on you personally, on your effectiveness, or on the people served by you? How has the shutdown shaped your perspective of the institution's mission?* As editor, I wanted to reproduce as many entries generated by the individuals affected by the closures as the available space permitted.

Neither I nor the board member who took the initiative received a single submission.

I cannot do more than lament a lost opportunity to comment on the value of special collections libraries from the grassroots. I'd like to think that federal employees locked out by the shutdown were not too afraid to speak out, but I am no longer sure. So this issue will run a bit short. The savings on length will help stabilize the journal's production budget (the last issue ran long), but I can't help but reflect on what we might have lost in terms other than dollars.

Admittedly, we were operating under a very tight schedule, and people may not have had time to commit their frustration, musings, or concerns to written form. May be. However, the experience raises concern about the potential fate of the thematic issue announced for fall 2019. Keep in mind that I am looking for three sound, substantive articles around the theme: *Minority Report: Practice and Issues beyond the Mainstream*. If you can write on the challenges of documenting underserved or overlooked populations, about special collections in HBCUs or tribal colleges, of appropriate curation for cultural material in institutions beyond the culture, your voice, your experience is needed. Oh, we'll have an issue in fall even if there is not a single suitable submission that fits the theme, but like the roundtable discussion you cannot read in this issue, our discipline will be the poorer for the lack.