

**THE HUMANITY OF THE ARCHIVE: REFLECTIONS
OF A YOUNG ARMENIAN-AMERICAN**

Բանալի բառեր՝ հայ-ամերիկյան ինքնություն, պարբերական մասուլ, արխիվներ, առօրեական և բացառիկ պատմության փոխհարաբերություն, գեղագիտություն, սերնդային շարունակականություն:

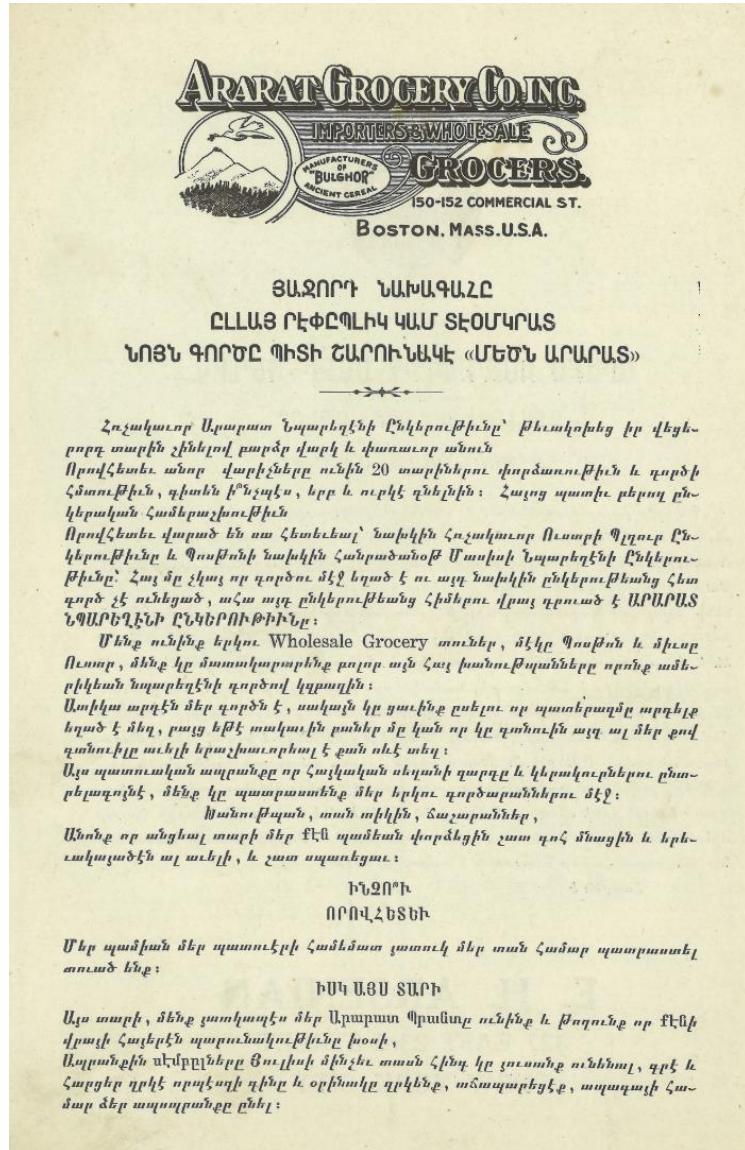
Keywords: Armenian-American identity, periodicals, archives, ordinary vs. exceptional history, aesthetics, generational continuity.

Archives are not silent. I learned this not in a classroom but in NAASR's periodicals section, sorting through newspapers and magazines whose pages have been touched by the hands of a community over the past 150 years. Most of my Armenian ancestors immigrated to the United States before 1900. Thus, I am, in most ways, a very American Armenian-American. Fortunately, I have been lucky enough to grow up on the East Coast, which offers many routes toward an Armenian identity: church, AGBU, youth groups. NAASR provides another. It connects through scholarly discussion at lectures, recipes from cookbooks in the bookstore, and, most affecting to me, the intergenerational care and knowledge housed in NAASR's Mardigian Library.

When I first began volunteering at NAASR as a middle school student, I was told to start with a mountain of boxes of newspapers and periodicals in the basement. They were labeled as duplicate periodicals, though no one knew for sure, since there wasn't a complete and accurate catalog of the library's periodical holdings. I spent the next few summers finding out. The work was slow and unremarkable—opening, sorting, labeling, and shelving. But the more time I spent among those boxes, the more I realized that I was learning more than just how to create order from chaos. I was learning history.

In the beginning, I didn't think of what I was doing as historical work. It felt more like inventory. Under the guidance of NAASR's library director, Ani Babaian, I began to make sense of what we had. Each fragile newspaper taught me how to handle the next. Each inconsistency reminded me that precision is an act of respect. Every week, the person typesetting *Նոր Օր (Nor Or)* had to remember to increase the issue number by one. Noticing misnumbered issues was one of the first times that I considered the humanity of the people who created these objects. The basement began to transform from a mountain of paper into a mountain of memory.

As the years went by, I started to notice the range of the materials passing through my hands. Some periodicals were printed on heavy, expensive paper; others were nearly pulp, crumbling after a single touch. There were elegant art magazines and typewritten church bulletins, revolutionary newspapers and glossy cultural journals. Together they formed a portrait of a community that contained multitudes—earnest and commercial, serious and comic, artistic and pragmatic. Sorting through them became an education in humility. The more I saw, the less I believed in hierarchies of value. A cheaply printed newsletter could tell me as much about Armenian life as an elaborately produced volume.



Advertisement for Ararat Grocery Ազգ (Azg) from 1915/16, touting its top-quality bulghur
Azg (Boston). Batzarik T'iw (1915/1916), p. 138
Ազգ (Պուրքն). Բացարիկ Թիւ (1915/1916), 138

One afternoon, I came across something that stopped me: an advertisement for Ararat Grocery in Boston, of which my great-grandfather was a co-founder, in an issue of *Uqq* (Azg) from 1915/16. I had grown up with ephemera bearing the Ararat Grocery logo sprinkled around my house, but encountering it out in the “wild” was an entirely different experience. It made me proud and feel viscerally connected to the past. Humor often did the same. Advertisements for shoes, terrifying looking dental equipment, and photos of men with spectacular mustaches often had me chuckling or snapping photos with my phone to send to my friends. Humor, I realized, was a bridge. It collapsed the distance between my ancestors and me more effectively than reverence ever could.



An advertisement for dental supplies in Կոհակ (Kohak) from 1912

Kohak (Constantinople). Vol. 3 no. 1 (January 11/24), p. 12

Կոհակ (Պոլիս). Գ. Տարի թիւ 6 (Յունուար 11/24), 12

My sense of aesthetics also served as an empathetic bridge. I sometimes cringe at the glossy West Coast Armenian magazines of the 1990s and 2000s, preferring the ornate etchings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But I have begun to wonder how those in the past viewed the graphic design of periodicals from the decades before their own time. Just as I rolled my eyes at 1990s design, someone in the 1950s might have found the 1900s unbearably decorative. The archive preserves those shifts in taste without judgment. It refuses to declare which style is correct. But my own human reactions and biases remind me of the humanity and imperfection of the people who created and consumed this material over time.

If I had encountered these materials only through a curated exhibit—limited to the most beautiful or significant items—I would have come away with a narrower view of history. Handling every issue, from the mundane to the magnificent, taught me something different. Exhibits isolate the exceptional; daily contact with the archive reveals what was typical. For every monumental event, there are hundreds of ordinary Tuesdays recorded only in advertisements, community

announcements, or forgotten bulletins. While there is no way to truly step into the shoes of the people these items were created for, interacting with, even on a shallow level, so many objects is the closest I have come.

By the time I was in college, I understood the archive not as a static collection but as a living system. NAASR's periodicals are still growing, and their vitality depends on the people who handle them. Each box opened, each label applied, each record corrected keeps the conversation alive. The archive endures not because of ceremony but because of routine. And that routine, practiced with care, becomes its own kind of reverence.

This work has also taught me something about institutions. Young people form connections through responsibility, not token inclusion. I have continued to work at NAASR for so long because I was trusted with meaningful work. Institutions that want younger generations to care about preservation must give them real work with real stakes. The archive is a classroom only when you are allowed to participate in its upkeep. This does not mean handing over the care of the most rare or fragile items to a middle schooler! The dignity of the everyday is what gives archives their power. By treating the ordinary with care, we preserve the world as it was actually lived.

ԱՍՓՈՓՈՒՄ

Աշխատանքը ներկայացնում է, թե ինչպես է Համազգային հայագիտական միության (NAASR) պարբերականների հետ գործնական աշխատանքի արդյունքում ձևավորվում հեղինակի՝ պատմության և ինքնության ընկալումը: Արխիվային առօրյա գործունեության ընթացքում նույնիսկ ամենասովորական նյութերը բացահայտում են իրենց ստեղծողների մարդկային եռթյունը, թերություններն ու գեղագիտական ընկալումները: Աշխատանքը փաստում է, որ հաստատությունների ներսում իրական և գիտակցված պատասխանատվությունն է, նպաստում սերունդների միջև կենդանի և խորքային կապերի ձևավորմանը՝ ապահովելով պատմության պահպանումը ամենօրյա աշխատանքի միջոցով: