

[OPEN](#)

SEN-20-000

The Space Reserved for Nothing

DATED	November 19, 2020	TYPE	Declassified document
ORIGIN	Office of the Director	SITE	MERIDIAN
PAGES	6	CUSTODY	MERIDIAN

The last unlisted entry. Every archival image the institution wrote between 1994 and 2019 carried 512 bytes of padding. The padding was not empty.

HOW YOU GOT HERE

You read padding.

Padding is the part of a file that exists so that the next part can begin at a convenient place. It is not data. It carries nothing, means nothing, and is skipped by every reader ever written for the format. You are the fourth kind of person this archive is built for, and the rarest.

This is the last of the four. There is nothing after it.

THE DOCUMENT

The MERIDIAN archival image format, in use from 1994 until its retirement in 2019, aligned each record to a four-kilobyte boundary. Most records did not fill one. The remainder was padded to the boundary with null bytes -- on average 512 of them per record, across roughly 340,000 records.

In 2020, during the migration off the format, a verification pass flagged records whose padding was not uniformly null. The expected count was zero. The actual count was 1,206.

The non-null padding was text. It was not encrypted, not compressed, and not hidden by any mechanism beyond being located somewhere nobody looks.

WHAT WAS WRITTEN THERE

They are notes. Almost all are one or two lines. They were written by archivists at the point of committing a record to the Vault, in the only part of the file

that the format guaranteed would survive untouched and that no process would ever display.

A representative sample, reproduced with the permission of those still living and with names withheld:

This one took four years. Whoever reads it next: the second appendix is the real paper. The first appendix is politics.

Filed 3am. Grandmother died Tuesday. Wanted her name somewhere permanent: [REDACTED], 1911-1994. She would have found this whole building silly.

We were wrong about this and I could not get anyone to say so in the record. Saying so here.

Fourteenth revision. The finding did not change once. The wording changed fourteen times. Remember which of those was the work.

If the format ever changes, someone will read these. Hello. I hope it is better where you are.

The last of those was written in 1996.

THE DECISION

The Disclosure Board considered the notes for nine months, which is long for a body that prides itself on deciding quickly. The question was not whether the notes were interesting. It was whether reading them at all was a breach of the understanding under which they were written -- people had used the padding precisely because it was not read.

The Board's finding was that the understanding ran the other way. The notes were written into the one part of the record designed to be permanent. Several address a future reader directly. They were not hidden; they were left.

They were transcribed, attributed where the author could be identified and consented, and committed to the Vault as a single record. Eleven authors asked to be withheld and were. Two asked that their note be destroyed, and it was, and the fact of the destruction is recorded here because that is the rule.

WHY THIS ONE IS LAST

Because it is the same document as the first.

In 1977 a Director answered a letter from a fourteen-year-old who had noticed the institution's name on a piece of surplus equipment and wondered what we did -- SEN-77-000, the easiest of these four, and the one you almost certainly found first. He told her that we look at things for longer than other people are able to, and write down what we see, including the parts we do not understand.

The archivist who wrote hello, I hope it is better where you are into 512 bytes of null padding in 1996 was doing the same thing. So, for that matter, were you, about four steps ago.

An archive is not a building and it is not a format. It is the assumption,

renewed by each person who adds to it, that somebody will eventually look. Every one of these notes is that assumption written down by someone who had no evidence for it.

They were right. You are the evidence.

-- [REDACTED] [REDACTED], Office of the Director

ENDS

There is no fifth document, no further code, and nothing else concealed on this site. You have reached the end of it, which is a real place and not a joke at your expense.

Thank you for reading the parts that were not addressed to you.

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