Photographic records have long presented a challenge to archivists. As photographs first began to enter archival institutions in significant volumes during the second half of the twentieth century the methods used to deal with them could hardly be characterized as satisfactory. Photographs were either largely ignored or valued only for their seemingly obvious image content. Among archivists, this resulted in widespread indifference to knowledge of the context in which photographs had been created. This often led to description of them in image catalogues based primarily on their subject content, and to their actual physical (as well as intellectual) separation by archivists from related textual documents. Archivists as well as historians, traditionally the principal users of archives, have typically valued photographs for their ability to illustrate and support facts found in textual and other records. In other words, photographs were not considered to be archival records in their own right, whose value derived as much, if not more, from the evidence they bore of the actions of their creators as from the photograph's obvious image content.

During the late twentieth century, there has been growing awareness among archivists and others of this evidential value of photographs. The slow emergence of this approach to photographs among archivists is due in part to the fact that archivists have largely been preoccupied with the textual record. As a result, modern archival theory was developed primarily for archival work with written documents. As it developed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, archival theory increasingly stressed the importance of understanding the provenance of records (or the context in which they were created) as the intellectual basis of archival work with them. Context, though, was still largely conceived in limited ways which, in even this limited fashion, did not usually embrace photographs as documents in need of much contextual understanding. Approaches to archival work, though more contextual, were still characterized by heavy reliance on the archivist's knowledge of the subject contents of archival materials.

Concepts of context, however, evolved over the twentieth century due in part to the dramatic rise in the volume and variety of archival records. By the late twentieth century, the contextual approach to archival work emphasized examination of the context of the creation of the records more than their subject content. Archivists then argued that it was only by looking beyond the content of the record to its underlying context that the fullest understanding of the photograph as a record could be revealed. The recent emergence of postmodernism has greatly influenced archival theory and methodology. Archivists have been exploring the potential of a postmodern perspective for new approaches to archiving. A postmodern approach builds upon the earlier contextual approach but expands the notion of relevant context beyond the traditional focus on the context surrounding the record's initial inscription. Postmodern archivists suggest there is more to know about the context of the creation of the record or the history of the record than information pertaining to its initial inscription. Other elements of context such as the record's placement in recordkeeping systems, subsequent uses, custodial history, and even the impact of the archiving process should be examined to appreciate the wider context which has shaped the record.
This thesis explores the development of archival approaches to photographic records since they first began to enter archival institutions in the nineteenth century. It will also explore the potential of the postmodern approach and suggest that this approach may be the most capable and flexible yet in dealing with the complex characteristics of the photographic record.