The Responsibility of the State Archivist to the Other Officers of His State Government[1]

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THOSE of us who come from out of town will better maintain our mental balance here at the National Archives if we keep firmly in mind the realization that this is the daughter and not the mother of our state institutions. In a manner of speaking, the National Archives is a colossal upstart, hulking hugely amongst her elders. We should realize and take pride in the fact that she has gone so far during her first ten years partly because of the trained personnel which she has been able to draw from our sturdy though smaller and outwardly less impressive provincial archives.

That debt we need to remember not for our own glory, but chiefly because it serves to center our attention upon the fact that at bottom the problems of governmental archives are constant, being only slightly influenced or changed by the mere size of the unit involved. Thus while it is true that the agencies from which we come have taught this young giant many things, it is equally true that now we in the state archives can learn from this big federal institution. The pattern here holds much that can be applied to our problems in the states once it has been cut down to state size, scaled to fit.

In the rather important matter of mechanical and technical devices, the state archives have long since acquired the habit of referring to the National Archives for advice, but we should draw other inspiration as well. We turn here for the latest information on lamination and microfilming, on fumigation and air-conditioning, on any technical problem connected with records preservation and service, but however necessary and helpful such technical and mechanical aids may be, there are matters even more central than these gadgets. While we archivists cannot all claim to be scholars, we do cling to the coat-tails of scholarly culture, and we should attain to a philosophy of archives above mere mechanical detail. We should be capable of drawing from the proce-

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dures of the National Archives inspiration more vital and of greater permanent significance. Since ours is a profession inherently beset with diversity and detail, one in which we are constantly preoccupied with many things, it becomes especially important that now and again we pause amidst our varied tasks, taking the time necessary to focus upon our proper professional goal.

Here at this convention, while our assistants at home are stacking the mail and lugging tomes to investigators in the searchroom, perhaps for a few moments we can forget the daily worries and consider calmly the relationship and the responsibility which this federal archives bears to the federal government and the relationship and responsibility which our state archives should bear to our respective state governments. Here on this spot we should realize as we may not have realized from the perusal of printed reports, that the National Archives exists as a service agency in touch with every branch of the federal government, that it is actively concerned with promoting the efficiency of federal administration, and that it proudly assumes responsibility for its own specialized field of records administration. In this respect it differs fundamentally from what most of us are doing in the states.

The National Archives is but slightly disturbed by outside influences. It actively cooperates with every legitimate and worthy investigator, but it steadfastly refuses to be dominated by the historical associations and the other learned groups, by the patriotic societies, by any special interest, or by any individual. It is conscious of its creation by the government of the United States, it functions as an integral part of the government of the United States, and it devotes its energies to the promotion of efficient records-keeping in that government. It assumes that so long as files remain in active use the departmental officers in charge can best judge how any given series should be maintained, but with every problem relating to housing and disposal for materials less frequently used it stands ready to furnish expert and courteous assistance.

Such assistance takes a variety of forms. Members of the staff authorize and supervise the considered destruction of accumulated paper trash. They locate and list duplicate files and eliminate duplication when it becomes a needless expense. By analysis they systematize the destruction of bulky files which time has robbed of significance, setting up disposal schedules which promote economy and efficiency throughout the federal agencies. On the more positive side, within this central plant they process and preserve records of enduring value, providing for such records an ordered security for which administra-

tors and scholars of today are grateful and for which investigators in future times will echo praise. The National Archives functions not primarily as a center for research, although it competently meets all reasonable requirements in that direction, and neither does it provide a haven for industrious pursuers of trivialities; it operates as a highly useful member of the family of federal agencies, serves as the one agency directly responsible for the specific task of administering non-current records accumulated by the federal government.

It is genuine cause for regret that so few of our state archival agencies are to be thus clearly identified as practical units making a definite contribution to the continuing efficiency of their parent governments. We must admit that while here in Washington the European concept of the archivist as an officer essential in the operation of the central government has come to set the tone, in our state archives that concept has never been dominant. It is in respect to this matter of serving its brother agencies that the National Archives can teach us its most valuable lesson. All too few of us have succeeded in serving our state governments in the manner in which this federal archives serves the federal agencies. Most of us authorize an occasional disposal, exercising a certain veto power over the destruction of official files, a few of us engage in the microfilming of accumulated files, and we all store and service official papers in greater or lesser volume, but our services to the active officials in the operating departments are all too limited.

Our direct service to the governments of our states is thus limited chiefly by the circumstances that we are too busy serving the public, or rather a certain specialized and insistent portion of the public, spending our energies where they contribute somewhat less than they could if invested in larger tasks of more sweeping significance. We have not made our state archives service agencies in the sense in which the National Archives is a service agency, in the sense in which our state departments of buildings and grounds are service agencies. If state archives and state archivists are to become and remain briskly vital, if they are to grow and continue significant in the scheme of state affairs, we must make a more definite contribution to the continuing efficiency of our state governments. Only a very few state archival establishments, and those few in all too limited a degree, operate in intimate relationship with their fellow departments, providing active assistance toward the solution of present-day problems in regard to the housing of non-current but relatively recent records. If we can but develop the stature required to grapple with these problems, we will win for ourselves and our departments the satisfaction which comes of a task well done and the recognition which is always accorded those who

lift when a lift is needed. Increasingly our state offices need help with their non-current records, and therein lies our opportunity.

The National Archives has come to recognize that need and that opportunity, and on that recognition has based its currently successful program. Its very youth has permitted centering attention on its proper and primary function, has enabled it to maintain an Olympian detachment from institutions and organizations other than the United States government. Being of relatively late creation, it has been able to dispense with sideshow features: it issues no popular or academic periodicals, indulges but mildly in the museum business, puts on no programs for the school children, and locates no highway markers. In the states we do some or all of these things, we must do them, and we should and do take pride in doing them well, but inevitably they draw our attention and our energy from the activity which, by the very definition of our task, should be our first duty. We, too, should be service agencies directly effective in promoting governmental efficiency through our work with active officials, exerting a positive influence toward continued improvement in state records-keeping.

The trouble is that being overbusy with many things we have neglected our primary function. Nor is this a condition which has newly stolen upon us; rather is it true that from their inception our state archives have been burdened with encumbrances, encumbrances for which we can scarcely blame the founding fathers. We certainly do not berate our ancestors for failing to foresee jet propulsion, and it is no more just to blame earlier American archivists for ignorance of developments in government and trends in records-keeping which in their day were hidden deep in the veil of the future. Until very recent years, few persons in America held any clear notion of a true archives governmental in its functioning, and we must not speak harshly of those who passed too early to witness the revelation of the true faith. They were forward-looking for their day, but the founders of our state archives were almost to a man antiquarians, slightly eccentric characters with a passion for whatever had attained great age. It was such antiquarians possessing but an embryonic understanding of social significance or ordered documentation who laid our foundations in the states. We praise and revere them for abstracting sections of files from a variety of governmental offices, for rescuing others from cellars and ash heaps, for carting their accumulations to some cubbyhole in the Capitol and starting our collections; we praise and revere them, but we ourselves are to blame if we fail to rise above their naïve conceptions of what a state archives should be.

We must acknowledge, too, that the influence of the patriotic so-

cieties upon our establishments has been at once powerful and distracting. Based partly upon an understandable desire to set apart the older native stock in a country fast filling with foreign born, partly upon the universal desire for social prestige, and largely upon family pride, these peculiarly American organizations came into being in numbers during the 1890's, launching thousands of amateurs, members and would-be members, upon the trails of genealogy, each busily searching the requisites for membership or promotion, documents linking himself with a warrior of the past. Some of our archival agencies were founded, and all were expanded, by that burst of highly personal interest in ancient documents, and even now, fifty years later, the tide runs strong. Most of us will agree that the genealogists have provided support during the years when support has been essential, and undeniably they continue as our most numerous and persistent clients. We must appreciate, however, that they have imparted to our institutions a flavor which is unfortunate. To the great majority of the American public we archivists are merely the people who aid in searching out the line which connects today's mink-clad dowager with her buckskinned forebear of 1776.

The real tragedy is that by constant association, by repetition, iteration and reiteration, some of us have ourselves become converted to the same warped belief, have come to lose sight of our truly great mission. Certainly those of us who serve as state archivists are something more than flunkies to the antiquarians and the patriotic societies. We have an honored function in the framework of our state governments, and that function is the protection of the records which have been produced, are being produced, and will be produced, in the offices of our respective states. Primarily we should devote ourselves to the task of records administration.

Once we have made this truth central in our thinking we will be on the way to better things, but we must do more than bear lip service. Enmeshed as we are in tradition and ingrown procedures, the way will not be easy. Like any convert who bears witness to the light, casts aside his load of sin, and plants his feet upon the pathway to salvation, in our upward course we will encounter difficulties and discouragement. For one thing, our brother officials in other departments will not at once comprehend our desire to play a role which to them will seem so novel. Furthermore, since starting anew is obviously impossible, we must begin where we are and struggle against reactionary thought patterns, popular prejudices, and the throng of daily details which forbid prolonged concentration and thrust us powerfully back toward the accustomed rut. Of necessity we will ourselves change and grow, and

changing and growing are painful processes, painful but glorious.

In our struggle a tide which runs strongly in the channels of present-day government can be turned to our service: in every governmental office the problem of providing housing for the less active records now looms large and menacing. In a society which is increasingly socialistic, older agencies pyramid their files in startling fashion and agencies more newly created have started other series which already have reached alarming proportions. When we stop thinking of ourselves as scholarly recluses and venture into the practical and active world of records administration, this situation will cause a new vitality to pulse through our agencies, for once persuaded that we are sincerely interested in their problems and competent to help with them, departmental executives will welcome our proffered aid and actively assist us in working out our programs. The housing and servicing of less active files are to them troublesome matters, and they will gladly cooperate with a project which they come to believe offers a sound and practical solution. With these executives from other state departments lending their support in the many direct and indirect fashions in which such support can be manifest, the state archivist will find opening before him new and exciting opportunities. By mutual effort it will become possible to secure the housing, the equipment, and the staff essential for establishing and operating a central service agency capable of relieving the pressure of records now causing worry in every state office. Furthermore, officials in other departments will come to accept the state archivist as a practical fellow and a useful officer of the state, an administrator making to order and efficiency in government a most important contribution.

Today the state archivist is faced with the golden opportunity and the harsh necessity of molding his institution into a central service agency with a clearly defined, distinctly articulate, and soundly practical program for establishing and maintaining control over those departmental records which in scores of offices are now imperilled by their own mounting volume. Certain among us might prefer to dwell farther from the heat and tumult of the market place, but despite such preferences and despite the sinking of our hearts which is inevitable as we consider the magnitude of the problems involved, we must remake ourselves and our institutions or stagnate each in his narrow confines. Too many state archives follow a formula established in the day of the family surrey and button shoes; too many state archivists feel but vague discontent with conditions of records storage would should stir them to action in defense of the interests of posterity. Both state archives and state archivists must develop, expand, and resume new

responsibilities or they will lose their present respected status and retire to obscure positions as ineffectives serving but small purposes in the affairs of their respective commonwealths.

A pattern has been set here at the National Archives, set with the fear and the fumbling inevitable to a pioneer venture, and that pattern we in the states cannot afford to ignore. It is true that we cannot lug home the bow of Ulysses and use it to shoot our local varmints, but we can profit from the model. We can learn from the accomplishments and also from the errors of this federal archives; we can adjust its procedures and its principles of operation until they fit our local needs and dimensions, and by so doing we can create within our present framework state archives which are agencies actively serving our state governments. We must assume and bear with competence and honor a very real responsibility to the other administrative officials of our states, helping them to meet the pressing problem of providing housing and adequate search service for their recently non-current records.

Since the change must be made as we run, it will not be made with ease. Our new program must be shaped and our new responsibilities must be assumed even while we continue to bear the familiar burdens. Certainly the genealogists and the amateur historians can rightfully demand continuation of the usual services. We must continue providing those services with the accustomed promptness and courtesy, but we must do far more: we must formulate and present an integrated, logical, and convincing program for the control of yesterday's records which even now are flowing into cellars and attics and ash cans; we must establish such relations with other state officials that we can enlist their aid in securing the expansion of plant and staff essential to a new and broadened program; and we, ourselves, must grow to a better understanding of departmental problems and procedures with records, to greater administrative power and ability, if we are to gain and retain positive mastery over the machinery which we design and establish.

Though admittedly difficult, the task is far from impossible. The National Archives stands ready to help with advice, technical guidance, and friendly encouragement. The basic similarity of the records crisis as it exists in state after state enables us to profit greatly from these conventions, from our professional quarterly, from the exchange of letters, and from personal conferences with neighboring archivists. Even more potent than any one of these sources of strength is our intimate knowledge each of his own local situation. We have been trained at length and in a peculiarly effective school to gauge the unique qualities of our own capitals. With a model before us, with professional encouragement on every side, with our own close-range un-

derstanding of local factors involved, we need not be supermen to accomplish the task which cries to be done. A rich opportunity lies ready to our grasp, and if in the course of the next few years we fail to develop a series of archival units for which posterity will call us blessed, the fault will not lie in our stars.

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