

The Archival Profession in Eclipse

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THIS is an essay in de-emphasis, an attempt to show that the archival profession is moving away from fundamental objectives because of the excessive influence of the management specialists who have become increasingly involved in records work, particularly since World War II. An analysis of the development of archival techniques during the course of the last few decades discloses first, an imperfect knowledge of the applicability of modern office methods, and then in recent years a disproportionate emphasis on management activity, to the exclusion of the pursuits that ultimately justify the archivist as a member of a true profession. Perhaps no calling in twentieth century America can grow and flourish in the rare atmosphere of dedicated idealism; but surely, commercialization, automatism, and rigid standardization will turn the professional man out into the market place. That is not to say that practical benefits (they are considerable, to be sure) should be scorned. Rather it is intended simply to recall that the archivist has along with his obligation to save money for his institution, an intellectual mission of at least equal importance.

Since American participation in the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians, held in Brussels in 1910, the dominant tendency had been one of looking across the Atlantic to Europe for guidance in developing the profession in America. A prospectus for a central archives in the United States prepared more than thirty years ago by Waldo Leland pointed out that in planning the actual structure "we should not fail to seek suggestions from European models, notably those already erected or for which plans have been drawn at the Hague, Rotterdam, Brussels, Antwerp, Magdeburg, Breslau, Berlin, Dresden, or Vienna."¹

Among the first eleven staff information circulars of the National Archives, there is evidence showing how much general European precedent in the handling of old records interested the young professional body of American archivists. Archival training in Prussia, a report on an inspection tour of German, Austrian and Swiss Archives, European

¹ W. G. Leland, *The National Archives*, 63rd Congress, 3rd Session, Doc. 717, Government Printing Office, 1915; originally prepared and published, 1912.

archival practices in arranging records, scheduling internal work in the Polish archives, the role of records in German administration were some of the subjects covered in these circulars.

It is true, of course, that the American archivist does not contend with ancient and medieval records. The United States is a relatively youthful nation and some modifications of the standard European practice were indicated from the beginning. As the first Archivist of the United States wrote, "European archives have accumulated over many centuries and have long been the objects of study and care. To a considerable degree, the principles and practices evolved for their preservation and administration have resulted, therefore, from the handling of old records; and, as a consequence are not always applicable to the masses of modern records with which American archivists have to deal."²

Public agencies in the United States not only did not have a well-established archival tradition but also failed to set up registry offices which in Europe functioned as administrative centers for current records. The lack of a coordinated program for the control of current files was a basic factor forcing the American archivist into the field of current records administration. One authority stated, "The existence of registry offices in European countries had made it unnecessary for archives agencies to enter the field of current records management and . . . if the United States had such offices perhaps there would be no need for American archivists to enter the field either."³

Necessary adaptations were made gradually until by 1941 the foundation for a peculiarly American archival profession had been established. American nomenclature, a few specialized courses offered in the universities, the experience of historical societies and state archives, experiments in the handling of corporate records, a constantly growing group of trainees coming into the field, an accumulation of professional literature—all these developments attest to the new profession emerging as a synthesis of the best old and new processes, European and American. "A new learned profession—that of archivist—had come to be recognized and was rapidly developing its methods and techniques."⁴

Meanwhile the full implications of the masses of modern records were becoming apparent particularly in the National Archives. Federal records antedating the First World War had been accumulated under

² R. D. W. Connor, foreword to Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, translated by A. H. Leavitt, H. W. Wilson Co., N.Y., 1940, p. 5.

³ Minutes of Meeting of Open Conference on Administration, National Archives, 23 April 1945; quotation from the remarks of T. R. Schellenberg.

⁴ W. G. Leland, remarks at Records Conference, sponsored by the Committee on War Studies, Social Science Research Council, Hotel Statler, March 24, 1945, p. 4.

one roof by 1946. Thus, the initial program for the concentration of the older records of the Federal Government had been brought "substantially to completion."⁵ But the accumulation of New Deal and Second World War records had not been anticipated. The thought during the planning stage of the early 1930's had been that once the neglected backlog had been put in order it would be reasonably easy to keep abreast of the current records rush. However, the records problem in physical sense did not disappear.

Americans are proverbially ingenious and adaptable. A new departure was indicated. The archivist turned to the office management experts for salvation. The program began rather cautiously under the name of records administration. Implicit in the expression is a broad but intensive project for the management of current records so that the historically valuable documents can be earmarked for permanent preservation and the ephemeral material can be destroyed as soon as its immediate purpose is served. This eliminates the necessity of expensive winnowing and appraisal after transfer to the archival depository.

"For five years the National Archives has urged the adoption by Federal agencies of programs embodying these aims and has furnished information and assistance toward this end. At first, there were few who could see the advantages of such action. When early in the war such important agencies as the War and Navy Departments took the time and money to establish large scale records administration offices and demonstrated that twentieth-century, rather than early nineteenth-century methods of records management paid, the way of the National Archives was considerably smoothed. Before that, our evangelism was somewhat suspect; the gospel was all right for us, some seemed to feel, but they themselves did not stand in the need of grace."⁶

The war provided a new impetus to the current records administration trend, as the above citation implies. Literature on the subject poured forth in a veritable torrent. Articles, brochures, pamphlets describing microfilm projects, standardized filing practices, records destruction programs and a host of related subjects have become legion. Slowly and surely the management approach is cutting the records problem down to size.

"Well, then," it may well be asked, "what is the purpose of this discussion? Why disparage the role of the management specialist who has made it possible to cope with what was well nigh an impossible task?" The answer is in the heavy price paid for an immediate tangible advantage. Among American archivists the cost has been the abandon-

⁵ *Twelfth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*, p. 5; referred to below as 12th Annual Report.

⁶ *12th Annual Report*, p. 8.

ment of the tradition of scholarship and research, desertion of historiography, and renunciation of a broad intellectual comprehension of the records, particularly an understanding of how they relate to the world of reality beyond the walls of the repository. The professional archivist is atrophying. At one time, he was coming to be recognized, on a coequal status, as the research partner of the historian, the economist, the administrator and the scientist. It was considered of primary importance that the archivist should be able to render his documents, however complex and specialized, available and usable. Now it appears to be sufficient to house the records safely, to mechanize reference service on the documents, and to keep storage and maintenance costs down to a minimum by means of wholesale records destruction.

The Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad Company's program is a case in point. Before the present supervisor of records was appointed, we are told, "an archivist was temporarily appointed to make a survey of the oldest railroad archives. Those of greatest value were preserved and are now housed at the state museum."⁷ This step seems to be inconsistent with the best archival practice. It would appear to have been much more desirable to have kept all the railroad records intact and for the records supervisor to have made these valuable historical records available.

The U.S. Navy Department has its collection of historically valuable documents separated from larger groups of records. Another curious example of a dichotomy of archival functions was the establishment of the United States Committee on Records of War Administration under the Bureau of the Budget. The Archivist of the United States served on this committee but final responsibility for the work remained with the director of the Bureau of the Budget. President Roosevelt wrote to the director of the Bureau of the Budget on January 25, 1944 that public officials should account for their work.

"Soon after the war each agency should have ready a good final report that will sum up both what was accomplished and how the job was done. If organizational changes make this impossible, the Bureau of the Budget should see that the report is completed. We should also remember that full records must be preserved for deposit with the National Archives."⁸

In other words, the records should be deposited with the National Archives but no role of adequate significance in using the records had been assigned to the Archives.

There are some who consider archives merely a routine filing matter.

⁷ D. K. Taylor, *The Railroad Runs on Railroad Records*, Denver, Rio Grande & Western Railroad, p. 2.

⁸ *The United States at War*, Committee on Records of War Administration, Bureau of the Budget, Preface, p. IX.

They emphasize particularly the cost of keeping records. Due consideration, one article states, must be given to the cost of maintaining records from the time they become inactive until the date of their destruction. "Proper evaluation of this cost may show that the most economical method is to staff the archives. *This department is merely an extension of the central filing department.* Therefore, it appears that some provision for *continuous clerical handling* would be the most efficient method in an organization of any size."⁹

That's the trend today—an extension of the central files staffed by clerks!

Some will say that this discussion is a rear-guard action doomed to fail. They will admit that the professional archivist has been demoted to a secondary place but that it has been an inevitable development determined in particular by the huge record output of recent years. It might further be argued that if, by some remote chance, the archivist should be restored to professional status, the result would be a reversion to nineteenth-century bungling. However, it is not proposed to scrap modern developments introduced largely by management-conscious administrators. It must be admitted that it would be folly to deny categorically the contributions of a records management program.

Many others have noticed and deplored the trend described in this article and while not condemning a counter-trend as visionary or reactionary, have wondered what can be done specifically and constructively. First of all, better training is necessary. The universities should offer many more courses in archival science and related subjects. Standards for a master's degree in archival science should be adopted by the leading universities. Qualifying requirements to enter upon a career in this field should be raised. An exacting education in history, sociology, public administration, business administration, and other relevant subjects in addition to archives laboratory work should be mandatory before the novice is considered eligible to embark on a career.

According to a news item in the *London Sunday Times* of Nov. 16, 1947, a Diploma Course for Archivists has been recently inaugurated at the University of London. The correspondent wrote, "this, indeed, and a similar course at Liverpool, may well mark an epoch; for they introduce a new profession." Apparently, the need for such training in England had become so pressing, that something positive and constructive had to be done. Also, it is a curiously interesting sidelight that the reporter should speak of a "new (archival) profession" in England whose documented history goes back to the days of Julius Caesar. The point

⁹ Ernest A. Davis, "The Destruction of Old Records as a War-time Measure," *Bulletin of the National Association of Cost Accountants*, Vol. XXIII, No. 18, May 15, 1942, p. 1230. Italics supplied.

is that a comparable pressure for better training is being felt today in the United States, and that something along the lines of the new courses at Liverpool and London could be successfully instituted; there is no reason to wait for the records to be covered by the dust of centuries before attempting a scholarly approach.

Secondly, opportunity for advancement and for intellectually challenging work, commensurate with the training and talent demanded, must be presented. Such opportunities are rarely offered today, but they can be. There are innumerable arduous and useful projects dormant and untried in all records collections of any size. These are tasks that require training, intelligence, and imagination rarely found among the clerks who have come to service, on a mechanical basis, the records in most repositories. For example, the Archivist of the United States has admitted that there is a serious problem of organizing and explaining the documentation of the war period in such a way that it can be effectively used. "This is a task that could be accomplished with the normal resources of the National Archives only over a span of decades and far too slowly to permit the fullest use of the records in serving the practical needs of the Government or the people."¹⁰

The above quotation intimates certain budgetary and appropriation problems not germane to this discussion, but the essential task of the professional archivist is well described there. The point is apt. Who is being equipped today to evoke and bring to life the complex facts hidden in a mass of documentation so that each respective enterprise and the public in general may profit from the mistakes and successes of former days? Young people with a talent for records work are not being attracted. They naturally prefer to follow a course that promises greater reward and more prestige.

On June 8, 1945 the National Archives Conference on Administration conducted a panel discussion on the question "Can We Make Greater Use of Non-Professional Personnel in Archives Work?"¹¹ A most revelatory debate ensued. One participant advanced the opinion that as any institution develops, "division of labor becomes feasible and larger numbers of non-professional people must be employed if economy of manpower and money is to be achieved." This thought was countered with the assertion that "the professional approach is definitely worthwhile in archival work." The two points of view were argued at length without reaching complete accord. It was agreed that archival work required "a high degree of expertness of a professional character, particularly where early records of the Government were concerned." Disagreement remained as to how much archival work,

¹⁰ *12th Annual Report*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Minutes of Meeting of Open Conference on Administration, National Archives, June 8, 1945, passim.*

presumably of a routine nature, might be suitably done by non-professional persons.

In this panel discussion the danger of mechanizing archival functions was well expressed by Dr. Paul Lewinson. "Business and industrial efficiency practices" have arbitrarily been applied. Sub-division of labor and assembly line production have deprofessionalized the staff. "There are, of course, gradations in archival work, but all archival workers must have something of an integrated and inclusive outlook over and experience in the materials with which they work; otherwise archival work is not a profession at all." This position was by no means unanimously accepted at the particular meeting in which it was presented and in the two and a half years ensuing, top archives officials have retreated even further from the maintenance of high personnel standards.

The directors of archival repositories who face the problem of organizing and exploiting the documentary resources in their custody should reconsider their system of priorities. Difficult arrangement, description, and research assignments are time-consuming and expensive and they compete with urgent physical and mechanical tasks. But if the professional work is not given a higher priority because of immediate pressures, then the records repository becomes a warehouse for used paper. Indeed, it may well be asked what is the point of seeking and preserving policy records, documents that not only have an obvious legal or administrative use but that have a potential of historical significance.

Posterity is entitled to a full written record of the past. The archivist bears a major responsibility to organize such a record. It is his function to make available the patrimony inherited by the succeeding generations. This generation in turn keeps a record for the future and meanwhile, must make a more concerted effort to explore and profit from its own documentary inheritance. To achieve such a goal more must be done than simply to house our records neatly and answer routine inquiries. The buried truth must be exhumed.

Professor Toynbee has written recently that history is not synonymous with inexorable fate, that it does not necessarily repeat itself. Much depends on how this age is guided by the lessons of the past. History is likened to a navigator's chart "which affords the seafarer who has the intelligence to use it a much greater hope of avoiding shipwreck than when he was sailing blind, because it gives him the means, if he has the skill and courage to use them, of steering a course between charted rocks and reefs."¹² Surely the role of the archivist in Professor Toynbee's picturesque analogy is apparent. Perhaps, after all, the professional archivist can contribute toward the solution of some of the fundamental problems that baffle a bewildered post-war world.

¹² Arnold J. Toynbee, "Does History Repeat Itself," *N.Y. Times Magazine*, Sept. 21, 1947, p. 15.