

# Archival Procedures for Planned Records Retirement

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GENERAL schedules having Government-wide effect in authorizing disposal of records, chiefly those of "housekeeping" activities, are an innovation of the National Archives in the last two years. But they are truly only one step in a long series to aid planned records retirement in Federal agencies. Difficulties in handling isolated disposal authorization requests covering small batches of accumulated records and unrelated sporadic offers of records for transfer were seen by National Archives officials early in that agency's work. Cooperation with agencies to produce planned records programs was sought not only to save the taxpayers' money but also to promote intelligent and orderly archival growth. These aims required study, negotiation, and joint planning as well as new procedural devices. The devices adopted have been surveys with resultant negotiation, single agency disposal schedules of continuing effect, continuing transfer commitments, comprehensive schedules, and general schedules. The joint planning has gone so far as to involve National Archives representatives in the actual devising of Government-wide administrative regulations.

First it was necessary to survey the records holdings of the agencies, to care for a backlog of proposals for disposal, and to set up methods of transfer of legal and physical custody of records to the National Archives. Examiners went into all Government agencies, studied records accumulations, and explained their interests to administrators. The survey, disposal, and transfer procedures first used have been described in early *Annual Reports* of the Archivist, and are by now well known to most American archivists.

Legal steps were necessary to improvement of the program, and the first was the Disposal Act of 1939,<sup>2</sup> which clarified prior legis-

<sup>1</sup> At the time this article was submitted, Dr. Brooks was a member of the staff of the National Archives.

<sup>2</sup> 53 U. S. Stat. 1219-1221, approved August 5, 1939.

lation and provided a definition of records. It was followed by a 1940 act dealing with microphotographed records.<sup>3</sup> That was superseded in turn by the Disposal Act of 1943,<sup>4</sup> which brought a major change in the disposal authorization procedure that had been in existence since 1889. Previous acts provided only for Congressional authorization for disposal of single accumulated bodies of records already in existence, which might vary from year to year or might recur in dismaying tediousness. The 1943 statute adopted a principle already in effect in several other countries. Continuing authorization could now be given for disposal of specific series of records after stated periods of time on *schedules*, as distinguished from the one-time *lists*. Each authorization still applied only within a single agency, and the initiative still came from its administrators. Such schedules now constitute the majority of disposal transactions handled by the National Archives, the older type *lists* being used for bodies of records not created recurrently, or for records of terminated agencies.

*Continuing transfer commitments*, sometimes previously arranged informally, were formalized in 1944, to complement the continuing disposal plans embodied in the schedules. These commitments are based, as transfers have always been, on "agency transfer requests" by which the administrative agency offers records to the Archivist. In the newer type jobs, however, the agency proposes to transfer instalments of stated series at specified periods of time. After the usual appraisal an Archives representative reports on the practicality of the transfer program as well as on the value of the records. The commitment is embodied in a letter from the Archivist to the head of the other agency agreeing to take, for example, the headquarters file of a series of administrative reports at three year intervals, each instalment after the latest report is one year old. Details of the time periods often require careful analysis, and it is occasionally necessary to agree upon transfer after records have reached a certain age, but at intervals to be mutually agreed upon later depending upon space and other considerations. Since the first *continuing* transfer job was set up in the summer of 1944, some 70 such commitments have been agreed upon, and about a third of the accessioning transactions handled by the National Archives are of this type. Other examples of series covered by such jobs are Coast Guard logs (the first so treated), files of discontinued Army posts, records of State Department

<sup>3</sup> 54 U. S. Stat. 958, approved September 24, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> 57 U. S. Stat. 380-383, approved July 7, 1943.

foreign posts, Navy ship plan booklets, and National War Labor Board case files.

At the time a main file of the reports referred to above is agreed upon for continuing transfer, field office copies, to add to the example, may be scheduled for disposal. In fact a *comprehensive schedule* can be prepared, one copy of it being used for a National Archives disposal dossier and one, with reference to the retention items, being used for an accessioning job. Once these are approved the creating agency can file the records according to their ultimate retirement, and can plan its filing space and other facilities knowing exactly what to expect.

Even with these devices for expediting retirement within any one agency, National Archives officials felt that more could be done. Many kinds of items appeared to be similar on schedules and transfer requests submitted by different agencies. Most of them pertained to "housekeeping" activities. And in a government that keeps employment records of millions of public servants, purchases supplies and equipment by the billions of dollars, deals with an inquisitive citizenry of 150 million persons, and creates records by thousands of cubic feet, "housekeeping" records assume vast bulk. Citation of figures showing mass is not enough, however. For with two or three hundred agencies having the same kinds of administrative work, the duplication is great and the opportunities for streamlining are promising. These thoughts led to the invention in 1945 of the *general schedules* applicable to types of records common to all or several agencies of the Government. Their use required additional legislation, which came in an amendment to the Disposal Act approved in 1945.<sup>5</sup> This law provided that the Archivist could initiate and submit such schedules to Congress for approval, without waiting for other agencies to report items for disposal. Allowance for special factors requiring some agencies to keep records longer than the general rule was made, in that the general schedules are permissive, not mandatory. Yet for maximum effectiveness all agencies are urged to utilize the shortest retention periods that have been approved.

Personnel records were the first kind to be put on a general schedule. Common practices were already evident that were put into retention periods on the schedule, for examples, of one year for unsuccessful applications for positions and leave applications, three years for annual leave record cards, and five years for effi-

<sup>5</sup> 59 U. S. Stat. 434, approved July 6, 1945.

ciency rating reports except the final one on each separated employee.

Meanwhile a committee of the Council of Personnel Administration (now the Federal Personnel Council) had been working since 1943 on an Official Personnel Folder and a National Archives representative served with the committee throughout its work. This plan, embodied in Civil Service Commission regulations early in 1947,<sup>6</sup> provided that specified kinds of records of an employee's service should at the time of initial filing be clamped on the right side of the folder for indefinite retention, including his application, notices of personnel actions, oaths of office, veterans' preference forms, reports of loyalty investigations and other documents affecting his status. These go with the employee if he transfers to another agency. Others listed were to be clamped on the left side of the folder for temporary retention only, including requests for personnel actions, letters of release, letters of reference (after some debate over their lasting value), personal debt correspondence, and many others. The general schedule was then revised to provide for disposal of temporary papers when the employee transfers to another agency of the Government or is separated from the Federal service. One aim is to make the filing and retirement of personnel records standardized so that clerical employees can carry it on without further high-level planning or further clearance with the National Archives and the Congress for disposal authorization.

The personnel general schedule was based on the practice of filing the basic folder for each employee in the operating agency where he works, rather than in the Civil Service Commission. Not so the schedule covering fiscal records. The General Accounting Office is required by law to audit the accounts of all agencies, and therefore receives the "original" monthly accounts current of all disbursing officers, with many supporting papers. But the agencies retain copies, which are susceptible to brief retention. In such a large field as that of fiscal records (in the fiscal year 1947 the General Accounting Office received twenty million accounts of disbursing officers for audit) there are bound to be current revisions of procedure. Here again the Archives representatives were involved in analyzing present and future operations, rather than in studying the "musty old papers" with which laymen identify archivists.

With fiscal records the chief need was to provide retention of accounts, schedules, vouchers, and supporting papers in the other

<sup>6</sup> *Federal Register*, 12: 1335-1336; February 25, 1947. The regulations have been revised occasionally.

agencies only long enough to allow the answering of questions raised by the General Accounting Office during audit. Once it was agreed that five years was a safe period, papers needed for answering audit questions could be scheduled for disposal after that period, and many other series scheduled for only one or two year preservation. A covering letter issued by the Archivist with the schedule stated that only a few basic series general ledgers, appropriation and allotment ledgers, and records and registers of original entry need be retained by the agencies to record the financial phases of their organization and administrative history, as distinguished from the records of individual accounts preserved at the General Accounting Office. Volume savings and convenience of disposal operations should be even greater than in the personnel records field. Of course there remains a gigantic problem in the evaluation and segregation of accumulated accounting papers in the General Accounting Office, but that will not be appropriate for a general Government-wide schedule.

A smaller but yet universal problem is encountered in records that deal with answers to routine inquiries, distribution of publications, "fan mail," complaint correspondence, and the like. These types were put into another general schedule, for disposal after three months. The assumption was that future administrative and research needs would be served by retention of replies to inquiries only where special research was required for the answers, master files of publications and statistics of their distribution, and letters of favorable or unfavorable comment only where administrative action resulted.

Other general schedules of government-wide applicability cover records of mail operations and of the committees that handled Selective Service deferment of government employees in the war, the latter being under standard procedures imposed by a general review committee.

Possibilities of covering several instead of all agencies have been exploited only once so far, in a general schedule applying to bankruptcy records of District, Territorial, and certain other Federal courts. Full utilization of this schedule in the approximately 90 courts affected could provide immediate disposal of 60,000 cubic feet of records and a regular plan for the future that could be followed in initial filing. Liberal disposal has been provided for papers in no-asset cases, supporting documents such as proofs-of-claims and various petitions and orders in asset cases, and duplicates of all valuable papers. In order to simplify matters for Court clerks and

in deference to the conservatism of legally-minded records keepers, two rather long standard retention periods have been provided for the various classes of disposable papers, ten and thirty years.

Possibilities of general schedules in all fields of "housekeeping" activities, and in many special classes including court records other than those of bankruptcy, have not yet been fully exploited. Even if eventually the majority of the larger fields are covered there will always be revisions necessitated by changing government procedures. Favorable comments from many agencies, however, and the relief of archivists at not having to appraise repeatedly the same classes of purely housekeeping records in one agency after another have already shown this new enterprise to be most worthwhile.

All evaluation for future use is somewhat speculative. One may well ask who is competent to judge whether a given body of records has "sufficient administrative, legal, research, or other value to warrant their continued preservation by the United States Government," to quote the Disposal Act of 1943. The broad field of evaluation cannot be covered in a brief article, but certain principles can be stated that are relevant to this account of planned records retirement procedures.

In no case does the Government depend upon the judgment, which may be humanly subjective, of any one person to decide what is to be kept and what destroyed. In fact, the problem of procedure development has been to offset the tendency toward an unconscionable number of clearances. The initial judgment as to administrative and legal value comes from the administrators producing the records, who best know the reasons for creation of records and their current use.<sup>7</sup> Even before initiating general schedules, the Archivist naturally consults the appropriate central service and control agencies. The agencies producing records know by experience how long they must be referred to in order to wind up the business for which they were created, and generally how much longer they must be referred to for administrative precedents. Those agencies also know the laws governing their activities. They know which records involve legal rights and responsibilities of the Government or of the individual citizens concerned.

The National Archives judges records from all points of view. In the first instance it must be satisfied that due care has been given in the agencies to administrative and legal value. Then it deter-

<sup>7</sup> Guidance in evaluation from all points of view is given to the agencies in the manual *How to Dispose of Records*, Washington: National Archives, Rev. ed. 1946, p. 8-12.



mines, after consultation of other agencies and from its own experience in reference service, whether or not records may be needed by agencies other than those which created them. For examples, it knows that the General Accounting Office refers to agency fiscal files, that the Civil Service Commission and Federal Bureau of Investigation call upon personnel folders, and that the Bureau of Labor Statistics consults files of all other agencies in its studies. The need for clearance with other agencies was the basis for the initial requirement that disposal jobs be approved by the National Archives Council, consisting of the heads of the major executive departments and certain other key officials. That was true of all disposal jobs until 1943, and is still true of general schedules.

The most important contribution of the National Archives, in appraising records either for disposal or for transfer, is that of judgment from the research point of view.<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to suppose that administrative officials, busy with current duties, can know to what extent their records may be called upon in later years by historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, statisticians, genealogists, and a wide variety of other users whose work constitutes research. The National Archives, on the other hand, with its stated objective of making records available both to the Government and to the people, is accumulating a body of experience from which it knows the kinds of records and of information that are sought. Its professional staff consists largely of trained historians, and they are expected to study the utilization of records as part of their daily work. Furthermore, its organization is intentionally such that the staff members who appraise records also have experience in reference service on the specific record groups to which they are assigned. Thus the bridge between selection of records for preservation and reference service to the Government and to the people is embodied in their own personal knowledge. Challenging problems still arise, such as those of great masses to which sampling techniques must be applied. But the majority of evaluations involve no substantial differences of opinion among agency officials, the appraisers, and the supervisors in the National Archives who approve the appraisals. This is in considerable measure due to records administration consultation with agency officials in advance of submission of disposal jobs.

Congress plays a part in authorizing disposal. Its Joint Commit-

<sup>8</sup> A discussion of evaluation for research needs is contained in Philip C. Brooks, "Selection of Records for Preservation," *The American Archivist*, 4: 221-234 (October 1940).

tee on the Disposition of Executive Papers must approve all disposal lists and schedules, and after the Committee's report is filed with the Clerk of the House of Representatives the lack of negative action by the Congress itself constitutes authorization. This role of Congress has existed for nearly sixty years. Its existence gives a formality to the authorizations that enhances the feeling of responsibility for records of all Federal officials. To be sure the Congressional Committee depends upon the judgment of the National Archives, though in some cases, notably when records of the military services covering the period of the Pearl Harbor attack were reported for disposal, the reports are carefully scanned by some Congressmen.

The records retirement procedures that have been described necessarily involve "red tape." The new devices adopted in recent years are part of a constant effort to reduce it. But Government in a democracy involves accountability to the governed for records of its actions. Thus the National Archives must be sure that due consideration is given to administrative, legal, and research values of the papers the Government creates, files, and eventually either disposes of or retains.