

The Archivist as a Public Servant¹

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THE present session of the Society of American Archivists is the fourth since the end of World War II. In 1945 we met in Indianapolis, in 1946 (strikes or no strikes) in Washington, in 1947 in Glenwood Springs, and now here we are in Raleigh. Perhaps it is fitting that our organization should meet in the state which has supplied three of its six presidents to date: the man who was chiefly responsible for the founding of the Society and also its first president, the third president of the organization (who was also the first Archivist of the United States), and finally the present incumbent.

In this connection let me remind you that a few days ago there was unveiled on Capitol Square in Raleigh a statue of the three Presidents that North Carolina gave to the nation — Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk, and Andrew Johnson. All were born in North Carolina or spent some of the early years of their lives here, but all later went to Tennessee and were elected to the presidency from that state. Perhaps you will pardon me if, not entirely seriously, I make a comparison between these three Presidents of the United States and the three Tar Heel presidents of the Society of American Archivists. The latter group differs in some respects from the former. The three presidents of our own organization were all born in North Carolina — there is not the slightest doubt or suspicion that even one of them may possibly have been born over the line in South Carolina. None of them left his native state to migrate to Tennessee. Each of them for a number of years was head of the state archival agency and, after tentative and non-permanent migrations to the District of Columbia, Michigan, or Connecticut, as the case happened to be, all returned to take up their permanent residence in the Tar Heel commonwealth. None of these three Presidents of the United States showed such good sense. So much for the Presi-

¹ Presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, Raleigh, North Carolina, October 27, 1948.

dents of the United States and the presidents of the Society of American Archivists.

Since the establishment of our organization a dozen years ago, the archival profession in the United States has come a long way. Before 1936 the United States was woefully backward in the archival field. In spite of the efforts of various individuals and organizations, no national archives had been established, few states had accomplished much along this line, and large and efficiently administered collections of private and unofficial manuscripts were few and far between.

Likewise, no adequate concept of archives and the problems of their handling had been developed in the United States. When attention had been given to the subject, the idea for the most part was one involving repositories of rare and valuable historical manuscripts, something in the nature of treasure houses for the historian and the antiquarian rather than agencies which would serve a broad public need. There was no full comprehension of the problems involved, especially that of dealing with vast quantities of records, running into millions of cubic feet.

Within the past twelve years we have made great progress in meeting these problems. The National Archives has taken the leadership, and a number of the states have followed. We have come to know far more than we did about how suitably to house records, how to give them physical protection, how to bring them under control, and how to make them available for use. Likewise, we have at last looked the bulk bear squarely in the face, and we have not turned around and run away.

No doubt in the future there will be many changes and developments in our field. In all probability the archivist of the year 2000 or 2050 A.D. will look back and call us immature and perhaps almost primitive in some of our concepts and practices. That is largely as it should be. As a matter of fact, if some of the things we are doing today turn out to be primitive, they may be expected to result later in better perfected methods and procedures. If we had already solved all our problems, there would be nothing further for us to strive for and we might as well move into another profession where there would yet be unanswered riddles and where the field would be more challenging. Certainly ours is not a static profession. I hope that it never will be.

The establishment of archival agencies in the United States resulted largely from the efforts and activities of scholars. The American Historical Association was the leading organization in this venture, and most of our first archivists had the training and

approach of the historian. They went into this new field largely with the thought of preserving materials for historical research. Our first president, in his address to the Society in 1939, expressed the opinion that persons holding leading positions in archival work should have done "graduate work leading to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in American history" and that persons in less important positions should have had at least "two years of graduate work in the social sciences and in archival history and practices." The archivist, it was believed, should be first of all the product of scholarly training. Dr. Newsome titled his address "The Archivist in American Scholarship."² A title almost as appropriate would have been "The Scholar in American Archives."

The history Ph.D. who went into archival work found conditions quite different from those he had known on the college campus. There he had taught classes, he had graded papers (far too many of them, he was convinced), and, as opportunity offered, he had engaged in research in his chosen and usually strictly limited field. But in archival work he found himself facing many entirely new problems. There was little or no time for research. More and more he found himself becoming an administrator, with problems to solve in relations with other government agencies and the general public, the budget, personnel, and other non-scholarly and non-academic functions and tasks. Dear old alma mater and its ivy-covered walls seemed to fade more and more into the background.

It was not that the idea of scholarly research or the scholarly use of archives was abandoned. Rather, the archivist in the making came to realize that there were many different functions of an archival establishment of which the scholarly function was only one. And before long the fledgling archivist found his definition of an archival agency undergoing a metamorphosis — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that one morning he woke up and found that, without his knowing exactly when, his ideas of the subject had already been metamorphosed. If formerly he had thought of such an agency as existing and functioning for the preservation of rare historical documents, more and more he now came to view it as an agency of the government whose primary function was to perform certain official duties.

Of all the problems with which the archivist found that he had to deal, that of bulk was in many ways the most serious. World War II had not yet begun and so the archivist of the federal government did not then have to deal with the estimated 12,000,000 cubic feet of records that were created during that conflict. But

² *The American Archivist*, II (1939), 217-224.

there were vast quantities nevertheless, far more than had been even dreamed of a few decades earlier. Also, records came to bulk larger and larger in the states, especially the more populous ones, so that something had to be done to deal with them. Certainly it was not a matter that could be handled merely by preserving treasured historical documents. Some new and radical departure was called for.

Thus a new step was taken. In European countries, where central registries for records were maintained and where archivists had dealt almost exclusively with *old* records, they had considered that current or semicurrent records were outside their line of duty. In the United States, however, the practice developed of having the archival agency work with other government agencies in meeting current records problems. With the National Archives taking the initiative, conferences on records administration on which various federal agencies were represented came to be held and a formal organization was set up. This development received a powerful stimulus from World War II, during and after which a great deal of progress was made in such matters as control, disposal, transfer to the National Archives, and the like.

Such a development was a far cry from the scholarly approach of a few years earlier. I remember the comment of a visitor from a small institution in one of the states who happened to be in Washington. All that the archivists in the Nation's Capital seemed to be thinking of, he said, was the transfer or disposal or control of hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of records. This comment points up sharply the change in point of view and procedure that had developed. Along the same line, the criticism was later voiced that the archives profession was being diverted from its major function, and the charge was even made that the archivist was being demoted and downgraded professionally.

Perhaps we can better understand this situation and possibly we can find a solution if we ask ourselves a few questions, engage in a little introspection — which at times is good for the soul. In any type of work it is easy to lose perspective, to lose sight of the forest because there are so many trees. Especially is this true in times of crisis and of rapid change such as the present period. At such times, in so far as records are concerned, it is necessary to act promptly and to devise new methods and procedures lest we lose control of the situation.

Let's ask ourselves what should be the primary objectives and major functions of the archivist. If he can answer that question, perhaps we can see the situation more clearly. Can we not say that

in general it is the archivist's primary duty to render the greatest possible service to the government of which his agency is a part and to the public at large? More specifically, is it not his duty to preserve and protect those records of his government which are worth preserving, to bring those records under control, to let would-be users know what materials are in his custody, and to make those materials available for use? If these be his major duties and functions, then they are indeed broad and challenging.

In preserving records, there is of course the question of evolving suitable methods and procedures. As the situation has developed in the national government and in many of the states, it is difficult to see how this could be done without a program for current records administration, worked out in cooperation with the various official agencies involved. Certainly the establishment of a controlled and smoothly functioning relationship with those agencies is essential. A careful study of the various aspects of disposal is necessary. For proper physical preservation, the archivist needs to keep up to date regarding developments in buildings and equipment.

Control is likewise essential, for we might almost as well not have records in our custody if we do not know what and where they are and if we cannot produce them with reasonable promptness when they are called for. In seeking to meet this problem, it has been necessary in most cases to abandon old methods of cataloging individual documents or small units of documents, and instead to follow the practice of preparing finding media for large records groups.

In discussing these various duties of the archivist, are we not in reality saying that his functions are on a broader scale than originally conceived? As we have dug into these problems, have we not found that they are bigger and in many cases more baffling than at first we realized? And can we not say that such a development, if it has indeed occurred, is in many ways good, for it means that the archival profession is bigger and broader, and offers more challenging problems, than could be seen at the beginning?

Looked at in this light, is there any major difference in the viewpoint of those who stress the scholarly approach on the one hand and of those who emphasize administrative problems, and particularly the problem of handling current records, on the other hand? For are not all these merely parts of a larger whole? It would seem that broad training and a wide perspective are necessary, but that at the same time the practical facing of immediate problems of administration is also needed.

I for one am not in the least perturbed because of recent develop-

ments. That there has been a shift of emphasis, cannot be doubted. But has not this shift occurred because we have come to recognize the pressing need of filling in a gap in our program? Naturally this development in its earliest stages has received a great deal of attention, and, in order to be properly worked out, it has necessarily been emphasized. This, it seems to me, is a healthy development. It does not mean at all that other phases of our program should be neglected — and I do not believe that they will be.

First of all, the archivist should always look upon himself as a public servant. He should offer the most effective service possible to other agencies of the government, to unofficial organizations, to private researchers, and to the general public. If he performs this function and does it well, he need not concern himself about questions of prestige or of professional standing, for such matters will take care of themselves.

In the United States the archival profession has made tremendous strides. Our colleagues come from all over the world to study our methods, our buildings, our equipment, and our plans for the future. We have achieved through hard work, through threshing out differences of opinion, and through working out solutions that are based upon our composite opinions. It is the American way, the democratic way. By continuing to develop such a program in the future, always thinking of ourselves first as public servants, may we not expect to go on enlarging and broadening our services to the government of the United States, to the states of the Union, to scholars and researchers, and to the general public? And, as a corollary, may we not also expect to raise our professional standards and to win for ourselves recognition as members of a leading profession, looked up to and respected by all?

Finally, I wish to make a practical proposal — that our Society set up, in order to study some of the questions raised in this address, a committee on long-range planning. Such a committee, if established, should have representation from the archives of the national government, from the states, from private and unofficial manuscript depositories, from users of archives and manuscripts, and probably from other sources. It should make a thorough and careful study of what has been done in the field of archives and of what ought to be done in the future. It should bring in from time to time recommendations as to general policy over the longer period. Such a committee, I believe, can be of great service in helping us keep our perspective and maintain and plan a well balanced program. I recommend to the Society that it be established.