Archival Activity in American Universities and Colleges[1]

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THE impulses leading to archival activity in American universities and colleges differ only superficially from those perceived in other fields of American records preservation. For just as in the spheres of federal and state action, historians and librarians have taken the initial lead in bringing together and preserving the noncurrent official records of their particular institutions. Probably the earliest step in this direction was taken around the middle of the nineteenth century when the great Nestor of American historians, Jared Sparks, gathered up all of the Harvard College records he could lay his hands on and placed them in the Harvard College Library. At Dartmouth, a former librarian, Professor Sanborn, decided in 1870 that it was "high time something should be done to rescue the history" of his college from oblivion, and thus invigorated the archival unit now operating in the Baker Library. The great assemblage of university archives in the Low Library of Columbia University stems from the inspired days of Librarian Melvil Dewey. And during the same latter part of the nineteenth century Professor Edward Hitchcock at Amherst, President Lyon G. Tyler at William and Mary, and Librarian Nina E. Browne at Smith engaged themselves in similar activities on behalf of their respective institutions.

These and comparable actions were prompted almost certainly by historical rather than administrative motives. In general, as the university or college passed the heyday of its youth and the inevi-

[1] This paper, originally submitted to Dr. Ernst Posner of the American University, Washington, D. C., in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a graduate course in archival administration, was read before a joint meeting of the Society of American Archivists and the Association for State and Local History at Duke University on October 28, 1948. Mr. Jennings, onetime Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the College of William and Mary, is now Librarian of the Virginia Historical Society at Richmond, Virginia. He gratefully acknowledges the kind assistance rendered by some several score university and college officials who supplied the information needed for his analysis.

table centennial or bicentennial volume became a pressing desideratum, the unfortunate scholar charged with its preparation turned quite naturally to his institution's official records. And usually his shock and dismay over their physical condition, dispersal and lacunae quickly converted him into an ardent advocate of a centralized records repository. At his behest the older existing segments of the materials were often transferred to the university or college library. But the translation was not always effected under such authoritative direction as the venerable Sparks provided at Harvard. Indeed, many administrative offices refused to be swayed by the appeal, and the records remained in diverse locations, constantly subject to the dangers that had threatened their existence since the day of their retirement to inactive status. It would be highly gratifying to report that such conditions no longer prevail. But the fact of the matter is, a large percentage of the institutions that have gone all out in recent times to collect historical manuscripts have unexplainably neglected their own archival resources. Unhappily, moreover, many of the collections that did come into being during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to display the attributes of their whole-hearted dedication to historical services.

University and college librarians, in whose custody the material was generally placed, attempted to apply their own particular skills and techniques to archival management, occasionally with tragic results. Strictly archival matter was planted in the midst of purely historical manuscripts and vice versa. Little or no attention was paid the more recent noncurrent records, which, lacking immediate historical use, continued to languish in whatever quarters the creating offices cared or were able to provide. Curators, in offering their pious tributes to scholarship, resorted to unusual arrangements and classifications, often hopelessly — and, in the eyes of some subsequent laborers in the vineyard, irrevocably — disorganizing the organic relationship of record bodies. A collection of heterogenous manuscripts and printed material concerning the history of the university or college, rather than an archival assemblage, came into being.

As Dr. Clifford K. Shipton has pointed out,[2] the very term archive for a long period of time stood in grave danger of becoming synonymous with the word collection. The light has yet to penetrate certain academic recesses, for as recently as 1946 a large

[2] "The Harvard University Archives: Goal and Functions," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 1:101, Winter, 1947.

western university issued a six-page brochure entitled *Archives University of . . .* that never mentions the actual university records, or for that matter any material touching the history of the institution, but does gallantly discuss the problem of collecting historical manuscripts relating to the region in which the university is located. Equally disorganized terminology can be noted in the titles applied by universities and colleges to the custodians of their manuscript resources. The title of university or college "archivist" is generously bestowed upon any officer who administers manuscript material, even though the material fails to reflect in any manner the institution's official activities. A keen perception of the fallacy led Dr. Lester J. Cappon to rephrase the title of his valuable report on historical manuscripts activity at the University of Virginia. The first ten numbers (1930/31-1939/40) in the series appeared under the title *Annual Report of the Archivist, University of Virginia Library*; in 1940, however, Dr. Cappon, candidly reviewing the scope and true nature of his activities on behalf of the manuscript division of the Alderman Library, accurately revised the title to read *Annual Report on Historical Collections, University of Virginia Library.*

It would be foolhardy, as well as ungrateful, to condemn historians, librarians and antiquarians for these situations. Their unflagging energy, interest and zeal led to the preservation of university and college historical material, both archival and nonarchival, that might otherwise have been irretrievably lost. Indeed, our present understanding of the principles of archival administration was nourished in the trials and errors that characterized the first awkward attempts to control the historical segments of our records heritage. Yet the application of sound archival principles, terminology and techniques in the management of the official records of an institution as large as the American university and college of today is a problem of growing magnitude.

The fact that many American universities and colleges have attained extraordinary institutional size and vigor cannot be disregarded. Information offered in the 1948 edition of *American Universities and Colleges* (published by the American Council on Education) shows that their enrollments may number five, twenty or even forty thousand students; that their grounds may embrace thousands of acres; that their financial resources may exceed five, fifty or in several highly enviable cases a hundred million dollars; that their faculties may consist of eight or nine hundred professors

and instructors or more, and that their payrolls may list several thousand employees. Their administrative activities, in other words, exceed those of many eighteenth and nineteenth century European principalities. And reasonably enough, their record output reflects and parallels their phenomenal growth. It is unnecessary to explore the problems that face administrators when their organizational records escape control. To be sure, as an institution grows larger and older, as its organization becomes more complex and as its records increase and multiply, the adoption of a records and archival program becomes an indispensable adjunct to efficient management. In the course of time administration is finally obliged to accept this as a natural feature of its continued existence.

Aside, however, from scholarly and administrative springboards, there is evidence that other factors have energized archival activity within the citadels of learning. These influences, generated by archival progress in related record fields, have stimulated administrators, educators, historians and librarians alike to a realization of the inadequacies of existing arrangements. The establishment of the National Archives in 1934, for example, gave incalculable prestige to the movement, and similar successes on a more or less spectacular scale in the various states offered progressive encouragement. The Society of American Archivists, organized for purposes of professional support in 1936, has, mainly through the medium of its official journal, *The American Archivist*, which first appeared in 1938, invigorated activity in all spheres of archival interest. A training program for archivists, begun by Dr. Solon J. Buck at Columbia University in 1938 and subsequently conducted by Dr. Ernst Posner at the American University in Washington, D. C., has annually animated a sizable number of disciples from all sections of the country. It is fairly obvious that these and comparable developments have promoted an atmosphere that enables universities and colleges to examine their needs more effectively than would otherwise have been possible.

The merits of any specific solution to the archival problem facing American universities and colleges can of course be argued only on the basis of individual cases. What might meet the practical requirements of one institution need not necessarily be applicable to another. Even so, the desirability of implementing legislation enacted by the university or college governing board, or else an executive directive emanating from the institutional president, should be emphasized. True, the surest means of obtaining

the noncooperation of the faculty at some academic establishments is to launch a program sponsored by the institution's governing board. In these cases — and they are not common — the fate of the archives will remain vested in an uncertain providence, which may or may not provide an ingenious handmaiden to work the necessary miracles. For the program's success or failure unquestionably bears a direct relationship to the measure of authority exercised by the archivist in fulfilling his mission. The knowledge that his actions are backed up by an official statute or directive supplies wholesome comfort in times of stress. His problems, on a reduced scale to be sure, are nevertheless comparable to those of his colleague operating on federal and state levels. His charm and affability, no matter how great, do not guarantee that the dean of the graduate school or the chairman of the committee on admissions will transfer their noncurrent records to the archival depot. Nor will his ingratiating manner necessarily unlock the door to consultations on problems of current records management. A failure to meet these issues and to fortify the archivist's position will almost certainly impede the program's successful operation.

A sharp realization of these facts led the Harvard Corporation in the late nineteen-thirties to adopt a series of measures specifically designed to place its archival program on a sound basis. The measures are fully described and explained by Dr. Shipton, the Harvard archivist, in a series of articles lately published in the *Harvard Library Bulletin*.[3] Montana State University, influenced perhaps by the Harvard action, issued an executive directive in 1945 designed to achieve the same ends. And in the spring of 1948 the Board of Trustees of Fisk University adopted an "archives charter" that offers one of the most comprehensive statements of archival aims and procedure yet formulated by an American institution of higher learning. Brown University, I am advised, is also contemplating legislation along similar lines.

It should be stressed that the formulation of a comprehensive archival statute or directive, or even the working plans for an informal program, is best preceded by a complete survey of the institution's records and records-keeping practices. Such a survey, and on a monumental scale, was conducted at the University of California in 1948. This academic colossus, faced with record creators and record accumulations on eight different campuses, wisely preferred to assess the constituents of its problem before proceed-

[3] 1:101-108; 176-184, Winter and Spring, 1947.

ing to formal archival organization. Indeed, the scope and nature of the problem at any institution cannot be ascertained until this precaution is observed.

An archival statute enacted by the university or college trustees, regents, governors, visitors or what have you, would in most cases launch the program with more *éclat* than would an executive directive stemming from the president's office. But in either case it is vital that the following points be covered: a formal definition of the archives; the place of the archival agency within the administrative framework; the appointment and responsibilities of the archivist; the establishment of an archives council or committee; the regular transfer of noncurrent records to the central repository; the disposition of useless papers; the availability of records to users, and the archivist's role in current records administration. Most of these points, I might add, do not require amplification in THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST since they are features common to archival planning in all record fields.

The placement of the archival agency within the institutional framework, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. Several solutions to the problem present themselves, but all should be subjected to the practical dictates of specific situations. At those institutions, for example, where historical association has firmly identified archival activity with the university or college library, it might prove expedient, though theoretically undesirable, to endeavor to expand the existing arrangements into an efficient archival program. Harvard has successfully proceeded on this assumption, and so has Columbia, though its program lacks the formal organic justification enjoyed by the former. Other institutions apparently developing their programs along this line — that is, organizing the archives as a division of the library — include, to mention only a few, the Universities of Chicago, Minnesota, Texas, Illinois, Brown, Oklahoma and Iowa. The Chicago program, which originated in the mind of the former university librarian, Mr. Beals, is under the supervision of an archivist who was first appointed in 1946 and who serves on the library staff. In 1946 also, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees appointed an archivist and activated his agency as a unit of the library organization. Brown, referred to in connection with its plans for archival legislation, is working on the assumption that the library is the proper repository for its archival collections. And in 1947 the Oklahoma University Board of Regents established an archival agency within the university library framework.

There are dangers in assigning the archivist a place on the librarian's staff: the archivist is then only indirectly responsible to the president of the institution, and the librarian becomes in fact the chief custodian of the archival collections. Certain earlier consequences of the connection have already been discussed. But even so, librarians are becoming fairly well aware of the fact that there is such a thing as archival economy, and if the local program is based on a sound statement of aims and the actual archivist is trained in his calling, the danger can be minimized.

Due to financial problems, the smaller university or college may find itself unable to support an agency devoted only to archival functions no matter where it is placed within the administrative framework. And in some cases the extent of the problem may not warrant the activation of an agency having this as its sole *raison d'être*. In such an event, archival responsibilities should logically be entrusted to the library's manuscript division. The College of William and Mary, where the former librarian, Dr. E. G. Swem, has capably concentrated the college archives in the manuscript division of the library, is an example of this type. The danger in such a proceeding is eliminated if a clear understanding of the nature of archival material exists in the custodian's mind.

At those institutions where manuscript repositories exist independently of the university or college library another development can be noted. For instance, the Michigan Historical Collections at the University of Michigan have become the resting place — as a result of transfers from the general library and from the administrative offices — of large segments of the university archives. The same process is underway at the University of Notre Dame, where portions of the university archives have been transferred to the custody of the curator of Roman Catholic historical records. But just as in the case of archival units operating as divisions of libraries, proper precautions must be observed when they are organized as divisions of manuscript repositories in order to maintain the integrity of the archives and to supply the custodian with sufficient authority to prosecute properly his archival functions.

There have also been cases where the alumni office or the office of the institutional secretary have partially assumed archival responsibilities. But these are rare, and only under the most unusual conditions could be viewed as desirable bases for expansion.

Many of the potential pitfalls inherent in the organizational approaches just discussed can be avoided by the establishment of

an independent agency devoted solely to archival and related functions, and operating under an archivist directly responsible to the institutional executive. At least two institutions, Colgate and Indiana, have organized their archival agencies as divisions of the president's office. Indiana, it is interesting to note, houses its collection within the main administration building in a five-story stack area that can be entered directly through the executive suite. While this is highly flattering to the administrative significance of the collection, a more common practice involves the activation of an archival agency as a service unit on a level with other service agencies of the university or college. As early as 1921 the Smith College Board of Trustees appointed an archivist to administer its collection of official and historical records, and endowed the agency with independent status. The archival resources of Amherst, after being identified with the college library for a long period of time, were transferred in 1934 to an independent agency operating under an archivist accountable only to the institutional executive. An independent archival agency was established by the University of Pennsylvania Board of Trustees in 1945, and in 1948 Fisk University took a similar step. While many librarians will heartily disagree, it is probable that the larger universities and colleges that have so far neglected organizing their archival agencies will find this the optimum solution to the problem.

The nonarchival collections touching the history of the institution must be taken into account since they are bound to be factors in archival planning. Whether or not these materials (for example, the correspondence of a distinguished faculty member; the records of a student organization; printed histories of the institution; biographical material concerning alumni; early student notebooks and textbooks; prints of the buildings and grounds, etc.) should be administered by the library, a special curator or the archivist himself is a matter of great concern to the latter. Many of the services he performs are closely geared to those of the historical collections. In fact, several of the university and college archival agencies that have not been granted this control have been obliged to establish duplicate working historical collections in their own quarters. It is no doubt true that extraneous materials through physical proximity constitute potential threats to the integrity of the archives. And such is certainly the case if the archivist is not trained in his calling. But if the archival matter is properly segregated, both physically and by inventory, from the other manuscript resources under

his supervision, the threat is less than negligible. The advantages in coordinating the activities of these two service agencies are financial as well as functional.

While I am convinced, moreover, that the archival agency from an organizational standpoint should in most cases be established as a unit independent of the library, I am nevertheless forced to recognize the fact that appropriate quarters for the agency in or attached to the library building is a highly desirable provision. The practicing archivist, if he renders the services expected of his agency, is daily obliged to rely on the printed materials in the library for the supplementary evidence needed to interpret his own manuscript collections. The sheer convenience of having these materials close at hand is an advantage that both the staff and the user of the archives will keenly appreciate.

This paper obviously fails to stress many important features of university and college archival activity. I have not emphasized the internal organization of the agencies, nor have I discussed the arrangement of their resources. I have been even more derelict in openly treating the most essential feature of the whole problem — that is, the functions of a university and college archival agency. To reserve the last paragraph for this confession is admittedly a weak conclusion. Yet the underlying motif of my remarks has been a recognition of the fact that university and college officials have begun to realize that certain functions — more specifically, the retirement, preservation and servicing of records — fall within the purlieus of professional activity. Had my paper been addressed to a different audience — say, for example, a group of university and college presidents or trustees — it would have taken a different form. Then its theme would have been the manifold services that can be expected of a university or college archival agency.