

The Scholar's Interest in Personnel Records¹

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National Archives

THE twentieth century has witnessed the transformation of the American Republic from a youthful and adventurous people into a mature nation. With thoughts concentrated on comfortable living and personal security Americans have turned more and more to government, national, state, and local, to provide these things. The recording of the enormously expanded functions of government is packing archival institutions throughout the country. Rebuffed by legislative bodies and budgetary bureaus, archivists have come, often times reluctantly, to the conclusion that the time of decision is here, that the less valuable must be abandoned so that the more valuable may be properly kept. Among the categories of records, the value of which is the subject of differences of opinion, are the documents recording the service of an employee of the government.

In the Federal Government, the budget official, and the administrator are inclined to minimize the research values of personnel records. Surrounded as they are with the impersonality of dollars and cents and accustomed to the daily manipulation of zeros and digits, they fail to weigh the human equation and consider the researches necessary to tell the story of the nation in terms of human beings. Small wonder that a representative of the Budget Bureau advocates the destruction of these records for personnel who have left the Federal service prior to April 1947. To him the paramount question is concerned with the thirteen to fifteen million personnel folders which are said to represent the number of employees of the Army and Navy alone up to that date. His interest does not extend very far in the direction of the research interests of those who, more than any other, were responsible for the establishment of the National Archives. His calculations may, indeed, minimize or ignore the fact that personnel records usually constitute no more than one or two percent of the valuable records of an agency.

¹ Adapted from a paper delivered by the author as a member of the staff of the National Archives before the Interagency Records Administration Conference, October 15, 1948.

Few people have any real awareness of the processes of research. Not many have had the experience which is the only teacher of the complexities of this type of investigation. Research, in its true sense, is a critical, careful, systematic, and usually a protracted method of investigation. The critical approach means that the investigator must weigh both the validity and the significance of the material with which he is working. He must exercise painstaking care to extract the real facts and points of view in the documents without distortion. He must be systematic in canvassing as completely as possible all the sources. Research is usually protracted, for the critical, careful, and systematic approach requires time. It is often believed to be the obsession of the historian, and it is true if, by that title we mean an individual interested in tracing the many facets of man's activity. The historian may be the recorder of the miracles of science. He may tell the story of mankind from the viewpoint of psychology. He may relate the changes in the structure, personnel, and administration of government. Or he may be interested only in the history of taxation and tariffs, financial expedients and excesses, and economic advances and reverses.

The problem before the researcher is similar to that of an artist in putting together many pieces of a mosaic. He usually does not, however, have those pieces at hand, nor does he have a preconceived pattern, if he be objective. He must hunt through literally scores of books, hundreds of writings, and thousands of documents to find the little segments of the whole picture. These little segments in many cases are facts about people. Pick up any volume pertaining to history — whether it be political, economic or genealogical — turn to the index, and you will find a large proportion of the entries are names of people. Historical events and trends are developed by individuals. In the volume *Lend-Lease, Weapon for Victory*, by Edward R. Stettinius, thirty to fifty percent of the entries concern the names of the participants of that program — individuals, a good proportion of whose personnel folders are in the Archives. Or go back twenty years to the *History of American Civilization*, by Charles and Mary Beard, and one will observe that throughout its many pages appear the achievements of persons — many prominent, many obscure, in American history. One of the chief merits of *The Age of Andrew Jackson*, by Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Jr., a Pulitzer prize winner, is the multitude of biographical facts accumulated to show how the people of Jackson's age promoted the democracy of that period. This feature is so striking that it attracted the attention of reviewers.

There is not space in this paper to develop at length the interests of research investigators in personnel records. We may make but passing reference to the genealogist, the psychologist, and the economist. The major portion of this essay concerns the interest of the political scientist and the political and social historian in this type of record.

Presumably, the genealogist every day in his life subscribes to the statement of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Every man is an omnibus in which his ancestors ride." The genealogist feels the weight he is carrying, and is one of the few to try to do something about it. In that period when Holmes made this statement, others, too, were impressed by the interest of the individual in his forefathers. It may be startling to report that in 1897 the War Department paid an unconscious tribute to the genealogist when it restricted its records rigidly against access by the public, but provided rules for their use by the genealogist. Virtually all personnel records are useful to him. He is likely to be aggressive in his demands for the safekeeping of his raw materials. He brings to their defense a Chinese reverence for not only his own, but other people's ancestors. To deny his claim is to render one vulnerable to the charges of discrimination and class regulation.

Perhaps the psychologist by means of a sampling process would find in the government employee a good cross section of American life. He might be able to appraise the common feeling that the government clerk is a symbol of mediocrity. Perhaps he could be induced to make studies to ascertain the accuracy of other popular opinions. For illustration: there is a general view that ministers' sons go to the devil. A British scholar undertook to check this preconceived idea some years ago. He studied the lives of some 1030 so-called eminent Britishers, and he found that the parsons produced offspring far superior to the lawyers, doctors, and the army officers. He had the temerity to call his book *A Study of British Genius*. But perhaps the author was the son of a minister.

Similarly the economist and sociologist might use personnel records to study the system of wages for particular classes of employees. Their findings might include material relating those wages to the amount of experience or to the educational background of the individual. During a period of crisis, like that through which we have just passed, government calls upon people from all strata of life for help. Economists, historians, and statisticians from steel companies as well as from universities, from the advertising world as well as from scholarly foundations, arrive in Washington ready

and eager to serve for one dollar — or for ten thousand. Would it not be well for an historian, prodded perhaps by a psychologist colleague, to study from personnel records the efforts of historians during the War? Would they prove to be a sacrificing group or a grasping set of individuals constantly harping on the injustice of the grade in which they found themselves? Would it not be interesting for the economists to study and compare the jobs in which they were placed and the efficiency markings which they received and the political backing which they possessed? Does the journalist make a good bureaucrat? Surely during the past conflict a number of them tried! There is much information in the personnel folders on the efforts of these people in Washington and little in the administrator's files which would be useful for this approach.

The interests of a future biographer are not to be forgotten. From the personnel folder he may obtain a skeleton outline of the subject of his study. That inevitable question which confronts biographers as to what happened to their hero between certain periods of time would be solved partially through the chronicle of positions and occupations held from the earliest job that carried any sort of compensation, whether a mechanic in a garage or a fellow in a graduate school. These facts are usually available from the personnel folder. The biographer would find the personal description, and possibly a photograph of his subject, invaluable. It should be borne in mind that most of the leading figures of tomorrow in our political, scientific, and intellectual world will have spent some of their career in the service of the government. Perhaps the man of the future, credited with applying atomic power to ordinary machines, will have spent a chapter of his life in the Atomic Energy Commission.

It hardly needs to be emphasized that prior to the establishment of the Federal personnel folder, there was great variety in the information retained in those records. The personnel files of one agency, which died by Congressional execution, will some day prove to the historian a great source of information. There he may search with confidence for the attitude of the executive toward the judiciary. Would one expect to find in a personnel folder this crisp, authoritative characterization that "sentencing an active man to life on the Bench is cruel and unusual punishment?" Would one expect to find in such a place, for the use of posterity, an account of the internal conflicts of a small school on the Pacific Coast, which to all appearances has led a blameless life? Would one expect to find the qualifications and limitations and the ambitions of candidates for

high positions in the government in such folders? I can assure you that posterity, one day, will experience pleasure and profit from their perusal.

In the National Archives it frequently has been necessary, in order to identify and describe records adequately, to ascertain the structure of a governmental agency and isolate that unit of government to which the records belonged. The political scientist is equally interested, though for a different purpose, in the ever changing form which the administration of government assumes. Much has been written, particularly in recent years, in this field. It is surprising, however, how often one finds gaps in the records. How illusive some of those organizations seem to have been, particularly those fragments of an office which somehow or other managed to get themselves transported to Africa, to Syria, to India, and back home again! The same problem existed, of course, for the period of the First World War. The personnel files of the War Trade Board are singularly rich in data on governmental organization. One would not find, in the executive files, information to show the formation, the personnel, and the work of the Inter-Allied Trade Committee at Christiana, but the personnel folder of a Nebraska geographer has that information. There is a dearth of information concerning the Central Bureau of Planning and Statistics, which existed in the same period. The answer was found the other day in a processed statement — one of those documents which everyone throws away on the assumption that everyone else has a copy — in a personnel folder. The story of its relations with the War Industries Board, its consolidation with the War Trade Board, the original agreement between the War Industries Board and the War Trade Board, these are related in detail. There is also, curiously enough, the provision for the transfer of those War Industries Board personnel folders to the War Trade Board where personnel was transferred.

No subject has invoked the interest of the political scientist and of other scholars more than the history of the Merit System. Its inauguration in the 1880's was universally hailed as a step toward a more efficient and a more democratic government. Its progress through the decades has been closely surveyed and its proponents have been proud to announce that every president had increased the number of government positions placed under its restraining and purifying principles, that is, every president up until a certain date! Even the emergency of the First World War appears to have been taken in stride. It is said that 315,000 new people were added

to the payroll in that period under Civil Service requirements, and all were recruited amidst the distresses of war. To some, this was the climax of fidelity to the merit principle. After 1930, what happened? At some future date this is a rich field for the political scientist to explore. He should investigate the assertion that the number of positions under the Merit System dropped from eighty-one to fifty-seven percent. A worthwhile study could be made concerning the alleged measurement of every job as worth forty votes. These questions would be difficult to answer, in any case, but impossible by merely exploring the office files of personnel branches. One could not arrive at the whole truth without employing a sampling method in studying personnel records of individuals.

Perhaps these folders will have information concerning the abolition of certain organizational units of larger bureaus and departments. The thorough-going researcher would probably not stop with the official explanations for intra-agency changes. Details of those changes have a way of showing up in personnel records.

Students of the Merit System are also interested in the relationship between the position held by an individual and his background of education and experience. Here again, by a sampling of personnel folders, he might be able to determine whether higher learning, advanced degrees, and long years of study pay dividends in the government, or whether there is any relationship between the lack of a formal education on the part of the boss and extensive training on the part of his employee.

Still another aspect of the Merit System which deserves attention from the political scientists, is the examination system. This involves, of course, a study of the tests themselves, their suitability for purposes they purport to serve. Perhaps the psychologist would again help out by appraising those examination sheets filled with their blanks, squares, circles, rectangles, etc., into which the applicant, mistakenly steeped, perhaps, with the knowledge of twentieth century American history, must put his checks and crosses. The study should also relate to the marks of the individual, the relationship between those marks and his previous training. Then there is the unassembled examination, that instrument of kindness from which many of us have benefited. Has it been fairly employed or abused? Could such questions be answered in the general files of personnel units? Presumably not, but the personnel records, themselves, might reveal much with respect to these questions.

Let us turn to some of the specific documents to be found in a personnel folder, whether of the standard type or of that employed

prior to its adoption. We may appraise them and attempt to find whatever research value there may be. Applications and recommendations are frequently relegated to the worthless class. This may or may not be true. It is certainly more true in recent times than in years gone by. In the records of the Department of State there is an Application and Recommendation File. It extends over a period largely of the last century, and it embraces usually just those two types of documents. It has been used repeatedly by historians and biographers and its value is enhanced by the fact that the government in those days was comparatively simple and the applicant for the least important position might in some way attract the attention of the President, himself. In more recent times, however, applications for positions are not wholly without value. In times of emergency, individuals may offer to the government their services and along with them some invention or contrivance designed to assist the operations of a branch of the government. A great majority of these are, of course, useless, but, on the other hand, the small number that do prove of value are worth keeping. With respect to recommendations, it is the custom now to send an individual a form asking him to check certain characteristics attributed to the human animal. If the replies are colorless and stereotyped, it is, in part, the government's fault. In 1917, the War Trade Board addressed personal letters to the references. These communications carried a tone of genuineness and sincerity and inspired the recipient with the thought that he had a personal responsibility and obligation to prevent the wrong person from entering the government service. The replies were singularly interesting. They had a tone of honesty and conviction. On the other hand, is it necessary to eliminate all traces of humor which may creep into such documents? Can we not afford the future historian or biographer a little smile now and then as when he reads the last sentence of a letter addressed to "Gentlemen: I am confident that she will make you a valuable woman," or when another somewhat whimsically observed in summing up his laudation: "She is a fine woman in the worst sense of the word"?

The Personal Question Sheet has a wealth of biographical data. With what joy an alumni secretary of some college or university would grasp such documents! No doubt, he would either lock them up in his vault or reproduce them in the most expensive form. These sheets vary considerably from one agency to another and from one period of time to another. For illustration: a researcher might be

able to study housing conditions of government employees from the data in some of these Question Sheets.

A Personnel Interview Sheet would probably be as valuable in appraising the qualifications and capacities of the interviewer as the one interviewed. One would get some idea of both in a report which characterized the lady applying for the job as "having bright, brown, expressive eyes, only one missing."

Perhaps the oath of office has little research value but no one will deny that it has significance in this day of loyalty investigations. There is some variety in the form of oath, and there are different types of agreements, or commitments, that are thrust before the eyes of the startled applicant when he assumes his duties. Some officials, of course, are requested to sign an affidavit to the effect that no one had supported his candidacy in an unlawful way. In World War I most of the War Trade Board employees subscribed to an oath by which they were enjoined from divulging any information about the activities of that Board either to the public generally or to another government employee. It was also true in World War I that many employees agreed in writing, not to engage in any other occupation within or outside government hours which would bring them remuneration. To stabilize the personnel situation and to prevent personnel raids on the older departments and bureaus it was provided in an Executive Order that the new war agencies of World War I were not to employ persons from the older establishments; hence, one finds statements by the newcomers to the effect that they had not transferred from another government agency.

Presumably you will hear a good deal from the other speakers on this program about the employees Record Card or Service Record. It would serve the future researcher as it now serves the administrator as a short-cut method of locating certain types of data about an employee. Some of the older cards provide more than that. Those of the War Trade Board afforded space for only five changes, that is, only five transfers and promotions. How antiquated that would be now! In some of the same group there appears after the printed words "reason for resigning," what one would rarely see now; namely, "work completed." Administration goals as well as procedures change.

Although we have not completed mention of all the types of records in the personnel folder, we may mention lastly the personnel action sheets. To the political scientist or historian of the future these may seem largely innocuous and routine, but the alert

scholar may appraise and evaluate. Is this promotion genuine or is it internal politics? Is this change in organization real or fiction? And the same would hold true for demotions. To what extent did fear and favoritism enter the writing of these sheets? He would probably attempt to correlate his research in such records with that of the administrator's files. Some fifty years ago, according to a brief examination of the personnel records of one agency, downgrading was general among the upper brackets after the election.

To the writer, the considerations set forth above, constitute in considerable part speculation. It is necessarily so. Systematic personnel records, as we think of them today, have existed for no more than forty years. There has been no real testing period for research among them. The most obvious reason is, of course, that they are confidential records. Many of the nineteenth century papers relating to personnel have not been tried in any thoroughgoing way. Research work by outsiders has not been a very welcome intrusion to agencies unprepared for it. Although the National Archives opened its doors nearly thirteen years ago, it has not been sufficiently tested for research in personnel records. In its early years it lacked the means and resources, and during the war period, the researcher lacked the means and resources. The future may come to his assistance. In this time of scientific wonders, who can foretell when more cheap and rapid photographic reproduction will be perfected? The scholars, on the other hand, may develop more teamwork, greater coordination of effort, and new substitutes for the laborious note-taking of the past.

At the present time there should be, first, greater trust and reliance on the dependability of the scholar. He should be placed more frequently on his honor. Trust begets trust, and honesty begets honesty, while suspicion provokes evasion. Secondly, those in charge of research materials should do their utmost to facilitate research. They might well study the possibilities of providing photostats of confidential materials with the names blanked out. They might well consider maintaining punch cards for personnel information and provide machines for their use for sampling and other statistical work.

The Federal Government spends yearly large sums for the benefit of small groups of citizens. The scholar is probably at the bottom of the list of beneficiaries. He should be given a better opportunity.