The First Conference of Archivists, December 1909: The Beginnings of a Profession[1]

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IN December 1909, Nicolas II was Czar of all the Russias; Francis-Joseph I was Emperor and King of the Austro-Hungarian agglomeration of nationalities; William II, of the Hohenzollern line, was King of Prussia and German Kaiser; Edward VII was King of Great Britain and Ireland and of the Dominions beyond the Seas, and Emperor of India; William Howard Taft was President of the United States of America, and I was secretary of the American Historical Association. I am now the sole survivor of these historic personages.

In December 1909, the American Historical Association celebrated the 25th anniversary of its founding, with some pomp and considerable circumstance. The annual meeting was held in New York. The members of the Association were lodged in the Waldorf-Astoria, where now the Empire State Building starts to seek the stars and to intercept the air-borne traffic. A Citizens' Committee of One Hundred raised funds for the civic events attendant upon the anniversary and otherwise conditioned the metropolis for the occasion. A monster mass meeting was planned to be held in Carnegie Hall, where the historians were to be addressed by Governor Charles Evans Hughes, whose beard at that time was at the peak of its magnificence, and by President William Howard Taft, who was soothing the nerves of the nation with a movement in *adagio moderato* after the *scherzo agitato* of his predecessor. Mrs. Vanderbilt, of Fifth Avenue, had been persuaded to open her house for a reception which would enable the members of the Historical

[1] Paper read at the luncheon of the American Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists at Boston, Dec. 29, 1949. Dr. Leland, who was presented with an honorary membership in the Society of American Archivists at this meeting, is also former president of the Society of American Archivists, and former secretary of the American Historical Association.

Association to see how the Four Hundred lived, and other plans of similar magnitude and high social import were made. The membership of the Association rose by leaps and bounds, and the Executive Council would have had to sit in continuous session to elect all the new members, after passing upon their qualifications, had it not delegated those functions to the secretary who, in turn, delegated them to his assistant, Miss Patty Washingon, who, happily, still performs them with efficiency and dispatch.

It was unfortunate that a heavy snowstorm prevented President Taft from making a personal appearance. At that time his living voice could not be transmitted from the White House to Carnegie Hall. It was disastrous that illness or a nervous collapse confined Mrs. Vanderbilt to her house so that she could not open it to the members of the Association as advertised. But the members enjoyed themselves, travelling back and forth in the subway between the Waldorf-Astoria, where they slept and congregated, but ate the least possible, and Columbia University, where they read and listened to papers and milled about looking for the right buildings and the right rooms. So the success of the occasion was colossal, to such a point that the Association did not return to New York for another meeting until the survivors of 1909 had died or become obsolete.

In December 1909, the president of the American Historical Association was Albert Bushnell Hart, who had trained for the annual meeting by taking his family for a trip around the world. Its first vice president was Frederick Jackson Turner, who was to succeed Hart as president; its second vice president was William M. Sloane, who would pass up one rung and be succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt. This deal had been arranged by J. Franklin Jameson, who had persuaded T.R. that the second vice presidency was not beneath his dignity, being but the first step toward the presidency. T.R. had had some experience of this sort of progression and so he wrote to Jameson, "All right. I will accept the vice-presidency and later the presidency as you suggest." [2] Three years later T.R. presided over the 1912 meeting of the Association in Boston, and it was his presidential address in Symphony Hall which inspired Allen Johnson to undertake his 50-volume series of *Chronicles of America.*

The master of ceremonies for the celebration was James T. Shotwell, chairman of the Program Committee, now putting the advo-

[2] Quoted from memory.

cates of retirement at 65 to confusion by his performance as president of the Carnegie Endowment. Shotwell felt that his operations on behalf of the program were stymied by the unreasonable demands, as he regarded them, of his Columbia colleague, Professor Seligman. Professor Seligman was chairman, if my memory is correct, of the Joint Committee on Arrangements — a Joint Committee because the American Economic Association was meeting with the historians, the economists not having as yet decided that they would do better to get off by themselves to discuss the mysteries of their science.

Finally, but *facile princeps* in the affairs of the Historical Association, was Charles Homer Haskins, Wisconsin's gift to Harvard, who was secretary of the Executive Council. Of all these, Shotwell and I are the only survivors. I recite their names, not merely as an act of piety, but to bring more vividly to mind the setting of personages as well as of events for the act with which this discourse is concerned.

That act, the First Conference of Archivists, was itself a sort of celebration, for it marked the tenth anniversary of the creation of the Public Archives Commission as a major standing committee of the Association. Set up shortly after the creation of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, which was a Jameson proposal and which Jameson directed during its early years, the Public Archives Commission is additional evidence of the importance attached by the historians, as organized in the Association, to the preservation, description, and utilization of the primary sources of American history. The existence side by side of these two standing committees indicates that the distinction between historical manuscripts and archives was roughly understood, although the publications of the Historical Manuscripts Commission included several bodies of material clearly archival in character, as, for example, the despatches of the French ministers to the United States, or the diplomatic correspondence of the Republic of Texas.

Unlike the Historical Manuscripts Commission, the Public Archives Commission did not print collections of documents. Its first efforts were directed to the preservation of the records of public offices, especially those of state, county, and municipality, and the encouragement of legislation to that end. Along with such activities of propaganda and as a part of them, the Commission secured the preparation of descriptive accounts, mostly by historian volunteers, of important bodies of records. During its first decade the Commission had published 41 reports on the archives of 30 states

and of the cities of New York and Philadelphia, as well as important bibliographical tools.

In 1909 Herman V. Ames of the University of Pennsylvania was chairman of the Commission, as he had been from its creation, and the other members were Charles M. Andrews, Clarence S. Brigham, Dunbar Rowland, Carl Russell Fish, and Victor Hugo Paltsits, who later succeeded Ames as chairman, and who, happily, is still among us, as is Clarence Brigham.

Along with the activity of the Public Archives Commission, and stimulated by it, there developed a widespread movement to assure the preservation and better administration of public records. The Department of Archives and History of Alabama was created in 1901, and that of Mississippi in 1902; public records commissions, divisions of records, central archives offices, and offices of state historians or state archivists were variously created in many states. Thus the number of persons responsible for the safe keeping and administration of public records was rapidly increasing throughout the country. For in part, at least, they were drawn from the ranks of the historians and most of them were, or became, members of the American Historical Association. Some of them had been accustomed to meet in the Conference of State and Local Historical Societies, which for several years had been a feature of the annual meetings of the Association, and which was eventually to blossom into the American Association for State and Local History.

Another activity, outside the Association, but of great interest to it, was the exploration of national archives, undertaken by the recently established Carnegie Institution of Washington, where Andrew C. McLaughlin, and since 1905, J. Franklin Jameson, had been successively directors of the Department of Historical Research. The first of these explorations, resulting in the Van Tyne and Leland *Guide to the Federal Archives*, now remarkable chiefly for its brevity, and useful as a historical document, had been directed at the archives in Washington. The operation fanned out into the preparation of a series of guides to materials for American history in the archives of Great Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, Canada, Mexico, and Cuba and the Lesser Antilles.

A significant byproduct of this far-flung operation was the knowledge acquired by a number of American historians of the problems and practices of archival administration in other countries, and along with such knowledge, most of the historians engaged in these investigations also developed an interest in archives *per se*.

A third contributory influence was due to the increased tempo of the long effort to bring into being a national archives establishment for the United States. The guidance of this effort by Jameson, as a function of his directorship of the Department of Historical Research in the Carnegie Institution, has been interestingly and faithfully described by Fred Shelly in a recent issue of *The American Archivist*, and I shall not repeat what has already been so well told.[3] I refer to that effort, or movement as it was called, because it gave a certain point and sense of urgency to many of the discussions which were to be held in successive Conferences of Archivists, of which it was a frequently recurring *leit-motif*.

And so, in 1909, thanks to the circumstances I have described, the time was ripe for the Historical Association, through its Public Archives Commission, to sponsor an annual conference of responsible officials and interested historians devoted to matters of archival administration.

At this point I have to be regrettably personal and I admit that the idea of such a conference was one which I had formulated and held dear. So it fell to me to open the First Conference with a paper in which I tried to set the stage for what was to follow. If you permit me to quote myself, the first paragraph of that paper ran as follows:

> The present assembly is the first formal gathering in America of archivists and of those deeply interested in American archives; we have come together to survey the situation, to take counsel, and to discuss those archival problems upon the proper solution of which many phases of the future development of historical studies in America are in no small measure dependent. It is to be hoped that in this and future conferences, and by means of the work to be done and the investigations to be carried on in connection therewith, there shall be laid the foundation of an archive economy, sound in principle and in practice adapted to American conditions, in conformity to which all our public archives, federal, State, county, municipal and town, and perhaps even our private archives, shall in time come to be administered.[4]

I then pointed out that we had two kinds of problems: the first, to secure adequate legislation creating and governing the administration of the archives; the second, the problems of the internal economy of the archives. As for the latter, I suggested that they dealt with such matters as housing and equipment, cleaning and repair, exhibitions, the transfer of records from their offices of

[3] *American Archivist*, 12:99-130 (Apr., 1949).

[4] Proceedings of First Annual Conference of Archivists. *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1909, pp. 337-378.

origin to the general depository, the collection of other than public records, the classification of archives (and I put in a strong word for the principle of *respect des fonds*, to show that my two years in the French archives had not been wasted, and a bad note for artificial schemes of classification), the nomenclature of various series, cataloguing, and regulations for the use of archives by investigators. In conclusion I expressed the hope that in time we might be able to prepare a manual of archival practice similar to that by the Dutch archivists. As we shall see, this hope had a beginning, but only a beginning, of realization.

The next five papers of the Conference were by scholars who had taken part in the Carnegie Institution's explorations of foreign archives. Under the general title of "The Lessons of the Archives," Professor Marion Dexter Learned of the University of Pennsylvania spoke on the archives of Germany, Professor Carl Russell Fish of the University of Wisconsin on those of Italy, Professor William I. Hull of Swarthmore on those of the Netherlands, Professor William R. Shepherd of Columbia on those of Spain, and Professor Amandus Johnson of the University of Pennsylvania on those of Sweden.

Of the various "lessons" drawn from the experiences of the countries dealt with, as being of special interest to Americans, I will cite only a few.

Professor Learned spoke of the training of the German archivists. He said:

> The great distinguishing feature of the State archives as contrasted with American archives is that only scientifically trained men are put in responsible positions, men who are able to carry on independent research. In all the State archives it is possible to find men who not only read the documents but know the history which they contain in a most efficient way.[5]

Of Sweden, Professor Johnson said:

> The lessons to be learned from the Swedish archives and the points worthy of consideration may be summed up as follows: The convenience of the investigator is one of the first considerations in Sweden, for records are to be used, not only preserved; only trained archivists and specialists in their various departments are employed, giving efficiency in service; the access to the archives is easy, almost too much so, saving time and trouble; records are sent from one place to another, a system highly commendable; book rather than card catalogues of the manuscripts are used, in the opinion of the writer the more convenient form; official copyists are employed, who make copies at a certain standard price; the research room is well supplied with "aids," simpli-

[5] *Id.* p. 353.

fying the work of the student; a simple system of classification is employed, with the historical and logical systems combined, and cross references to the documents in the various groups making it easy to find any desired subject.[6]

Professor Hull, speaking of the archives of the Netherlands, emphasized the "hearty cooperation between the nation, on the one hand, and the provinces, towns and other local bodies on the other in the collection and supervision of the archives," a cooperation which was strengthened, he said, by an annual conference of archivists held at the Hague since 1894, which gave consideration to archival questions and published its proceedings in a periodical. Professor Hull also called attention to the fact "that buildings especially constructed and equipped for the purpose have been devoted in all the large towns to the exclusive preservation of their archives." [7]

The conference was concluded with a rather sombre account by Victor Paltsits, then State Historian of New York, entitled "Tragedies in New York's Public Records," in which he piled up horrible examples of how not to preserve and treat archives.

I think a conservative claim may be made for this First Conference of Archivists that it marked the formal and conscious recognition of the administration of archives as a distinct profession similar to other custodial professions, but differing from them in demands and qualifications.

This professional character was emphasized, and American recognition of it was reinforced by American participation, in the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians at Brussels in August 1910. The representatives of the United States in the archives section of the Congress were Gaillard Hunt, chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, who was the delegate of the Government; Dunbar Rowland, director of the Department of Archives and History of Mississippi; Arnold J. F. van Laer, archivist of the New York State Library; and the present speaker, who had by then returned to his explorations of the French archives in Paris. Of these representatives only two had had previous European experience and spoke and understood French, which was the language of the Congress. Nevertheless, a good time was had by all. The benefit of the Congress as a stimulus to the new profession, new, that is, in the United States, was brought back by Mr. van Laer in the form of an admirable report with which the Second Conference of Archivists was opened in Indianapolis in

[6] *Id.* p. 368.
[7] *Id.* pp. 357, 359.

1910. Mr. van Laer had long been acquainted with European archivists and archival practices and the proceedings and language of the Congress were not, to him, unfamiliar. He summarized the results of the Congress in the concluding passage of his report, which I quote in full because of its significance for future professional developments in this country:

> Summing up the points in the proceedings that seem of special interest to American archivists, we may note:
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> First. A growing realization among the archivists of different countries of the need of cooperation in order to bring about improved and uniform methods of archive administration, which cannot fail to benefit countries which like the United States are backward with regard to archival organization.
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> Second. A tendency to be no longer satisfied with the exclusive care of the older records, but to make systematic efforts to preserve the modern administrative records, especially of large cities, which must necessarily bear a close resemblance to the modern records in this country and present similar problems of arrangement and indexing.
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> Third. A keen appreciation of the value of economic material and the springing up of an entirely new class of archives, devoted exclusively to the collection and preservation of such material.
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> Fourth. Practical unanimity among the archivists of continental Europe as to the importance of the adoption of the "principe de la provenance" for the arrangement of archives.
>
> Fifth. The failure in this country to distinguish clearly between public archives and miscellaneous collections of historical manuscripts and to provide for the systematic preservation of public archives in central depositories, under the care of trained officials.
>
> Sixth. The high degree of scholarship required in Europe for the position of archivist, and the decision of a majority of the members of the Congress in favor of an historical-literary rather than of a legal training as the best means of preparation for the archival profession.[8]

The balance of the program of the Second Conference was devoted to discussion of the concentration of state and national archives and of the problem of selecting the records which should be transferred to the central archives depository. This discussion was led by Dunbar Rowland and Gaillard Hunt, the latter having visited the principal archives of western Europe after the Brussels Congress. Mr. Hunt summarized his observations of European practices in many countries and pointed out that the Government of the United States could not be said to have developed any practices at all. Among the participants in the discussion was Mr. Rob-

[8] Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of Archivists. *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1910, pp. 291-292.

ert D. W. Connor, of North Carolina, who stated quite simply — "I have had no experience in archival work. . . ." [9] During the following twenty-five years, however, he must have picked up some of the rudiments, or else, in spite of being "a good Democrat," he would hardly have been appointed to be the first Archivist of the United States. For this interesting episode, of the appointment, I refer you to the lively account which you have all read in a recent issue of *The American Archivist*.[10]

The Third Annual Conference of Archivists was held as part of the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Buffalo, in December 1911.[11] The Conference was opened with a carefully prepared paper by Mr. van Laer on "The Lessons of the Catastrophe (the fire) in the New York State Capitol at Albany on March 28, 1911," in which he pointed out the dangers of using administrative buildings for archives depositories, the varying degrees of protection afforded by different systems of filing and storage, and the methods of dealing with problems of salvage and restoration. This account was followed by a paper of similar import by Professor Jonas Viles of the University of Missouri on "Lessons to be drawn from the Fire in the State Capitol at Jefferson City." Two other papers described the Dominion Archives of Canada at Ottawa, and the Provincial Archives of Ontario at Toronto.

The Fourth Conference of Archivists was held in Boston, where the Historical Association met in December 1912.[12] It was notable for the presentation by Victor Paltsits of a report on the "Plan and Scope of a 'Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists'." This plan had been drawn up by Mr. Paltsits in his capacity as chairman of a special committee appointed by the Public Archives Commission, after the Third Conference. The plan called for comprehensive treatment of problems encountered in the administration of archives under 17 principal headings as follows:

Archives in relation to government
Adaptation of archives to public uses
Legislation for archives
Sites and plans for the construction of archival buildings
Fixtures, furniture, and fittings; shelving and accessories

[9] *Id.* p. 309.
[10] *American Archivist*, 12:323 et seq. (Oct., 1949).
[11] Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of Archivists. *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1911, pp. 327-363.
[12] Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference of Archivists. *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1912, pp. 247-273.

Heating, ventilation, lighting and cleaning
Fires: protection, insurance
Administration: rules and regulations
Organization of staff and other employees
Accessions: methods
Cataloguing: indexes, inventories, calendars, guides
Classification: systematization and notation
Binding, repairing and restoration
Stationery, record paper, record inks and type-writer record ribbons: standards.
Inter-loan methods with officials and departments
Publication: copying, editing, printing, reproduction by photography and processes; preparation and contents of administration reports
Archival museums and exhibits.

If anything was left out of this plan I am sure that it can now be found in the files of *The American Archivist.*

The discussion of Mr. Paltsits' plan was opened by the present speaker, who was also a member of the special committee of which Paltsits was chairman, and which had produced this comprehensive preview. I will spare you an analysis of my paper which bore the simple title of "Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives." If there is any demand for it, which is not likely, it can be reprinted in *The American Archivist*, for it is not copyrighted.

Unfortunately, the plan for a manual was never realized under the auspices of the Conference of Archivists. A few drafts of chapters were presented and discussed in succeeding conferences, and the plan undoubtedly served to stimulate and systematize professional thinking. The paper read by Dunbar Rowland in the Fourth Conference bore one of the chapter headings of the proposed manual — "The Adaptation of Archives to Public Use" and, in the discussion which followed, the appearance of the future second Archivist of the United States, Dr. Solon J. Buck, is to be noted. He, however, admitted to some experience with archives.

Mr. Rowland's concluding paragraph on "The qualifications of an archivist" is commended to your appreciative attention, and I will approach the conclusion of this discourse by quoting the passage in full. This is what he said:

The idea that an archivist must be some old fossil who croons over ancient manuscripts like a miser over his gold is about as far from the true conception of what an archivist should be as an Italian garden on Como is from a stunted collection of pines on a barren hillside.[13] The archivist should be an accom-

[13] There seems to be an inversion of metaphor here, but the cultural influence of European travel is to be noted.

plished man of letters who has specialized in history, political science, law, and archival science. He should be a man of affairs, with something of the politician in his make-up, for appropriations are necessary to his work, and he must deal with congresses and legislatures in order to make it a success. It goes without saying that he must love his work, and have the capacity to make others realize its importance. The archivist should be a combination of the scholar, the college professor, the lawyer, the politician, and the business man, for no other profession calls for more varied talents.[14]

While the introverts among you ponder on this in a mood of self-examination, I have no doubt that the personnel officers and the Civil Service Commission will make the most of it.

I shall not carry this account of the Conferences of Archivists further than to remark that the Eighth Conference,[15] in 1917, was devoted to War Records and to the problems created by them, problems which have increased in geometrical ratio during the last two decades, and on which I would not presume to discourse to this audience. I recall, however, that I was the co-author of a work entitled *Introduction to American Official Sources of the Economic and Social History of the World War*, which was published by the Carnegie Endowment in 1926, but after this vision of future nightmares, I had the discretion to retire to the side lines of the archival arena.

It remains for me now, in conclusion, to offer a few observations on the significance of the Conference of Archivists, the 40th anniversary of which we mark on this occasion.

I think that you will agree with my suggestion earlier in this paper that the Conference was the birthplace and cradle in America of the *profession* of archivist. Certainly, professional archivists had existed among us long before and had rendered inestimable services, but recognition of them as belonging to a profession, closely related to, but distinct from other learned and custodial professions, was an achievement of the Conference.

I think that you will also agree that American representation in the Brussels Congress of 1910 and the report on this Congress to the Second Conference greatly reinforced the professional attitude towards archives in this country, and brought to us the benefit of the longer professional experience of European archivists.

The Conference was also a means of strengthening the interest in the preservation and decent care of the public records, and it

[14] *Id.* p. 272.

[15] Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Conference of Archivists, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1917, p. 103-135.

helped along the numerous movements to that end in the various states and also in the nation.

I like also to think that the Conference has, by a sort of transmigration of spirit, become the Society of American Archivists, and that the journal of the Society, *The American Archivist*, continues the modest *Proceedings* of the Conference.

But the point of greatest significance is, it seems to me, that the profession of archivist is so clearly shown by the history of the Conference, to be the offspring of the ancient profession of historian. This relationship is proudly acknowledged on both sides and it is of great importance that it be maintained and strengthened. The archivist must, it is true, deal with a vast number of technical problems, but he must not, because of that necessity, become a mere technician.

The ultimate purpose of the preservation and efficient administration of the public records goes far beyond the improvement of administrative processes and the facilitation of the public business. The ultimate purpose is to make it possible for our present generation to have enduring and dependable knowledge of its past, and for future generations to have such knowledge of their past, of which our present is a part. To achieve this ultimate purpose the necessary technical and administrative processes must be controlled by the scholar, and it is in the high ideals and purposes of scholarship and in its concern for the public good that the archivist must find his motives and seek his inspiration.