Archivists and Their Colleagues: Common Denominators[1]

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DEAR Fellow Members: Such a salutation is hardly a unique or an exciting manner of greeting you, but is appropriate as one that calls attention to our reason for being here — to consider our objectives, as individuals, but especially as an organized body constituting the Society of American Archivists. I had thought momentarily of addressing you as "Dear Friends and Gentle People," for despite the intensity of the Quebec business meeting I am sure you are both. That greeting would be appropriate to the pleasant times that always mark our annual meetings, but perhaps it would hardly be suited to the tone of such a discourse as this is supposed to be.

Just what is the proper tone for a presidential address, I must confess, is something that puzzles me. There have been many persons in allied fields more than in our own, fortunately, who have on such occasions read scholarly contributions to learning that formed capstones to their accumulated knowledge of their subject fields. These discourses have often been so highly specialized that few listeners have understood them. It has always seemed to me that presidential addresses should be of wider interest, even if for that reason they are less profound.

Others have treated philosophically, from high pedestals of learning and prestige, broad interpretations of the course of history or other subjects equally cosmic. This I surely am in no position to do. Still another type of address is the kind in which elder statesmen of their professions, practically at the ends of their distinguished careers, have given sage advice to their younger colleagues. Since I am still one of the latter group, this type of speech is out for me. Yet another, and an enjoyable, kind of address that is not open to me requires the maturity of a long career well-spent and well-

[1] Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivist, at Madison, Wisconsin, October 9, 1950. In his preliminary remarks Dr. Brooks paid tribute to the late Dr. R. D. W. Connor, saying that it had been hoped to confer an honorary membership on Dr. Connor in person at that meeting.

rounded. That is the genial reminiscence of earlier days (usually so remote that the audience cannot judge its accuracy) with bits of counsel deftly interwoven.

In any event, there is precedent for considering a presidential address as a sort of cadenza in which the speaker is bound by no rules of composition, can be highly personal, and can be entirely irresponsible to any party line in expressing his own views. I intend to take full advantage of the opportunity.

One special type of address that I should mention among the precedents is the crisis call. We had two such calls, quite seriously and opportunely, when Dr. Leland spoke in 1940 and 1941 on wartime activities of archivists and historians. We may be in fully as critical times now, although it is difficult to foresee what may happen. In the October issue of *The American Archivist* I have spoken of the need for preparation on the part of archivists, and the Council is taking steps to see to it that we have a focal point for considering what we should do if war comes again.

Yet I believe we would do better here to concentrate on a matter of fundamental definition on which some reasonably clear understanding is essential to effective operation either in times of stress or calm.

There is one greeting that I hardly felt sure enough about to use at the beginning of these remarks, despite the name of our Society. That is "fellow archivists." We do have quite a variety of professional activity represented in this group, and I have argued strongly for years that that variety is both stimulating and essential to our being an alert, useful organization. We are bound together by the clause of our constitution that opens membership to "those who are or have been engaged in the custody or administration of archives and historical manuscripts or who, because of special experience or other qualifications, are recognized as competent in archival economy." That gives us a good working foundation, and most of us have had little difficulty in applying it with quite a broad interpretation.

When this organization was being planned at the Chattanooga meeting of the American Historical Association, it was spoken of as an "institute," and thought was given to membership qualifications based on some sort of certified recognition, such as exists among the "corps" of archivists in some other countries, and among other groups, such as architects, in this country. Such a ruling would have severely restricted our membership; would, in my view, have limited our usefulness drastically; and would have imposed what

seems to me an insuperable obstacle in the defining of qualifications.

We still do have problems of definition, however. I do not propose to yield to the academic temptation to debate at length the meaning of words. That is an enticing pursuit, and useful to the extent that it enables us better to understand each other; but it is nefarious and disconcerting when we strive for unrealistic and unhuman precision, and when it diverts the attention of otherwise sane persons from the substance to which the words are supposed to apply. Nevertheless, there are words in our own field that are used loosely and with confusing variation. For example, the word "archives" proved to be an esoteric stumbling block in the early negotiations of the National Archives with other agencies of the Government; so much so that we sometimes wished the name of that institution could be changed to "Public Records Office." Now, in view of the strengthening of our concept of records administration, I am more inclined to feel that the term "archives" is correct for the immediate organization — the National Archives proper. And more people in Washington understand it now than in 1935. The newly created National Archives and Records Service might better fit the concept of "public records office," on the basis of a broad understanding of that title.

In view of the wistfulness with which some of us once looked at a different title, I am tempted to note as an aside that in the transition of India the central archival organization changed its name from "Imperial Record Department" to "National Archives." It did this with full knowledge of American experience, for we at Washington have had close relations with that institution and enjoyed having its present Acting Director among us as an intern some years ago.

Another word that I feel is confused in use is "historical." In legislation and writings on archives it is sometimes used to cover all the reasons for "permanent" or "enduring" value of records. To be sure, any use of evidence of the past is in a properly broad sense historical. But many persons make the mistake of thinking of archives as "historical" in the sense of political or institutional history and sentimental interest exclusively, without taking into account all the manifold other kinds of research analysis that archives serve — uses for administrative precedent, government research, economics, sociology, scientific development, and other lines of investigation so numerous as to evade logical classification. The reason why this limited view disturbs me is that I think it tends to hide some of the basic meaning of archival work.

It is not only the qualifications for membership in the society that leads me to give some thought to the question of what an archivist is. Among other causes, perhaps the basic one is the evident growth of specialization within our field. The number of persons and institutions concerned with the preservation and use of records has grown notably in recent years, as have the staffs of many older establishments. In a larger State archives, for example, there now are enough different kinds of work to do so that people classed as "archivists" may have quite different duties; in the Federal Government this is even more conspicuously true. One result is the need in several States and at Washington for defining archival work so clearly to civil service agencies that they will give what we consider adequate credit to the character of archival work done when they establish job classifications for archivists.

My own thoughts were further directed toward this problem during my attendance at a recent inter-American conference of archivists, where the delegates from other countries were not so severely stratified in their fields as our legal framework and civil service regulations require us to be. I would not disparage the objectives of civil service legislation, but it seems to me that its requirements tend to make us concentrate on the fine points of definition to the extent that this mental exercise leads us "to lose sight of the woods for the trees." If there is a problem of definition, it is our challenge to define our mission in terms of objectives and qualifications and then to obtain recognition of it in laws and regulations, rather than vice versa.

There must be a difference between the broad concept of an archivist as we use it in defining the membership of this Society and the more precise view that must apply in civil service categories. One is a matter of interest, the other of occupation. We all have a concern for the preservation and effective use of valuable evidence of human activity in the form of records. We should focus on that common denominator. At the same time, each of us is probably considered competent to do only a few of the many kinds of work necessary to carry out that objective, and is responsible for the performance of some one specified duty. As the term "archivist" is used in the name of this Society I believe it should be based on the concept of interest and concern; as it is used in civil service rules it must be based on more specific definitions of qualification and work assignment. These two concepts are not in conflict — but we had better be sure that the narrower one is actually recognized to be part of the broader.

What I would like most to do here is to get at some of the common denominators that bind us together, and beyond that some of the things we have in common with allied disciplines. In attempting to do so, we must remember several cautions. Among them is the fact, which I am tempted to illustrate by a digression, that there are pitfalls in applying the broad concept too sweepingly. It happens that my personal relations with the field of statistics have not been wholly happy (and this is said entirely without disparagement to that field). I am one of those who can not add a column of figures twice and get the same answer. Furthermore, I become most unhappy when required to measure for statistical reporting things like thinking, consulting, studying, and composition, which obviously are not measurable in numerical terms. Yet because of the position I occupied a year ago I, of all people, was listed on page four of a big directory of statisticians in the Federal Government! Of course this illustration has its obverse. The reason for the listing was that I had charge of an office whose job was to get all kinds of records — including statistical — for the use of an important research agency. In such activities we have a definite relationship to the statisticians as well as to the many other types of analysts, and must know something of their subject needs.

Now in studying relationships, let us start at the beginning by asking where we fit into the whole process of recording, or documenting, human activities. In the mind of the layman there is a general idea that an archivist, whether he is the custodian of official records or of private manuscripts, is concerned with musty old papers. There is implied here a basic principle that is sound — even though we do not deal exclusively with old papers or let our holdings become musty. We do not receive records until they have become noncurrent for the purposes that caused their creation. I doubt that any one would class as archivists, in the stricter of the two senses I have referred to, the administrators who create records in the course of business, or the filing staff that cares for them while they are in a current state. Yet in the broader sense all these people, especially the filing staff, may have a valid concern or interest in archival economy. And the archivist certainly has a concern in the creation and current handling of the records from which his holdings will eventually come.

There are really, it seems to me, two phases of the relationship of archivists to the organizations from which their accessions will be derived. One is the guidance that archivists, because of their special interests and qualifications, can give to administrators with

respect to methods of creation and current handling of records. This needs to be done, of course, in cooperation with management and filing authorities whose primary concern is with current administration. This activity has reached its highest development in the new records management program of the National Archives and Records Service, which has been planned and worked out by archivists, even though a good many persons working on it are not performing tasks that would meet the more strict definition of archival work. This program materially affects the life history of the records it touches, and is an integral part of our broader field. There must always be close coordination between it and the National Archives proper.

The second phase of our relationship to the sources of records is in the task of selection. This is basic to any archival or manuscript work. I need not emphasize here the importance of selection. Determination of criteria as to what records should be preserved, at whatever stage in the life history of records the criteria are applied, is an essential responsibility of an archivist. He should be the most competent to perform it for the reason that he bridges the gap between creator and consumer. Here is one of the basic common denominators of our profession, the common interest of many related groups in the selection of what is to form the enduring core of valuable records.

These interests are increasingly recognized by archivists throughout the world. From the South African law providing for advice by archivists to government agencies, to the laws in Santo Domingo and Chile requiring transfer of records after five and ten years, respectively; from the Mexican concept of current records as "archives en tramite," to the British concern for masses of intermediate and semicurrent records in the last war; from the increasing activities of French, Belgian, and other continentals in selection, to the many developments in our own States, there is plentiful evidence that official archivists are becoming better acquainted with the handling of recent records and more selective in relation to what they receive. This summer I had occasion to look into the records problems of a major State government. It was interesting to find that the need for constructive interest in records adminisration, for sound selection, and for close coordination of records administration and archival work was precisely the same as in Washington.

A similar development in import, though necessarily different in form, may be noted in nongovernmental fields. The close relationship of business manuscript custodians, business records admin-

istrators, business historians, and business firms themselves is a case in point. And there is reason to believe that manuscripts custodians in historical societies and other institutions are also becoming more selective.

To some it apparently seems that this recent emphasis on the early life history of records means we have lost sight of the basic archival objectives. Here again I believe there is danger of becoming confused in our definitions. We must remember that archivists have entered the records administration field because economical administration of records at all stages is closely akin to the specialized activities of archivists, and because the results of good or bad records administration affect the kind of job that archivists can later do with the records. Furthermore, I consider that selection is one of the basic archival functions. This can be said with full recognition of the archivist's responsibility for preservation, description, and reference servicing of the records worth retaining.

Passing to another phase of our problem of relationships, I think what sometimes appears to be a divergence between archivists and manuscripts custodians actually is a distinction between official and nonofficial archivists. This distinction is based on the character of their establishments, and on the legal position of official archivists in governments. Official archivists must be closely concerned with the official agencies from which their records come. On the other hand, most of their specialized activities are similar to the technical processes of manuscripts custodians. As a matter of fact, the examples of nongovernmental archives — those of churches, business firms, or other institutions and families — in the custody of "historical manuscripts" agencies are so numerous as to constitute the rule rather than the exception. The custodians of these nongovernmental archives are archivists by any definition. This is a truism. I include it simply to put these random thoughts in some order. Indeed, all official archivists are necessarily historical manuscript custodians.

One thing we may lose sight of, that contributes to confusion on this matter, is that our National Archives is by its basic law as strictly limited in its scope as any other archival agency in the world, for it has been able to take only official records directly from the Government agencies. The recently enacted Public Records Act of 1950 changes that slightly, but the predominant concern of the National Archives will still be with the record of official actions of the Government, whereas most archival agencies in our States and in foreign countries are charged with the preservation of any his-

torical records of significance to the State or Nation. This fact may sometimes prevent archivists in Washington from fully appreciating the views of their colleagues elsewhere, but I hope that by now, knowing of this danger, we have successfully avoided it.

I would go further, however, than just to say that all custodians of organized bodies of records which we think of as archives have a common interest in the realm of this Society. Surely selection, preservation, description, and reference servicing or some other way of making documents available to "consumers" are basic functions of the custodians of collections of discrete historical manuscripts. Whether the tasks be physical handling of collections, repair of manuscripts, or interpreting documents to potential users, the activities we have in common are so extensive as to fortify the constant efforts of some of us to make the Society truly representative of all who share these responsibilities.

Let us move on to think of some of the relationships outside what I consider our immediate field. There was an implication in my introductory remarks that I would not reminisce. But I want to make a confession. When this Society was formed no one was more determined than your first Secretary to protect the interests of a new profession. This was a natural manifestation on the part of a newly formed organization, but in some ways I think we carried it too far. We should, of course, have our independence and our own meetings, but we grew unduly far apart from some allied disciplines.

On my part this tendency was accentuated by a joint session we held at a library association meeting in the late '30s, at which there was great controversy as to whether the librarians or the historians should train the archivists. We were not then in a position, in this country, to insist that the archivists should train the archivists. But one library leader stated somewhat acidly that archival work was just a subordinate phase of library work, and that the librarians could take it in stride. Such an expression did not strike me kindly. I still find some librarians who fail to realize that archives, for the reason that they are generally unique and unpublished series growing out of and representing organic bodies, cannot usually be cataloged in the same manner as library books, and present a special challenge. Fortunately I think we have now gone past the stage of misunderstanding with most leaders of the library profession, and that we mutually appreciate our interests in many common problems.

Aside from the obvious fact that many bodies of archives do happen to be in the custody of librarians, there are several other meeting grounds. One is the rising tide of "near-print," "pro-

cessed," and other types of materials produced in numerous copies but not actually published. This is a tide which flows between the more traditional types of archives and true publications, and it threatens to engulf us all. It is an uncontrolled growth that all the skill of librarians and archivists together will be required to conquer.

In recent years a fine example of cooperation has been set in the common efforts of the National Archives and the Library of Congress to define their fields in areas of possible competition. In Washington even personnel have been known to shift from one agency to another without too serious contamination. I can think of a dozen or so who have moved one way or the other and enriched their experience by knowing both institutions. I am sure that other examples exist throughout the country of archives-library cooperation.

To get down to principles again, the real basis of common interest among archivists, librarians, and many other allied disciplines is our concern for the control of information. After all, our total objective is to preserve valuable information and to see that it is used to the best interests of society. In this we are part of the field of documentation, as it is most broadly defined. The word "documentation" is another term that is used to cover many things, as the "documentalists" themselves admit. Most of the writings I see on it appear to deal with technical processes of handling periodical articles and abstracts. Yet the new journal, *American Documentation*, referring to a definition by the International Federation, says that documentation covers "the creation, transmission, collection, classification, and use" of documents. Certainly under that tent all of us can find shelter if we need it. I do not want to anticipate the discussion planned for another session at this meeting, but I would say that an awareness among us archivists of our place in this broad field is vital to our occupying a useful place in society (and perhaps we can let the "documentalists" know something of our special interests, too).

In speculating on the definition of an archivist I may have looked out on a field that seems alarmingly broad. We might be able to clarify our idea by asking a question — what do we teach people who are to become archivists? In fact, I once thought of devoting this whole talk to that question. But I found that a thorough analysis of training courses would be far too extensive a task, and that a hasty one would not do justice to those who teach. Dr. Posner covered this subject with his usual keenness in an article in the *American Archivist* of January 1941. What is needed now is an article to

bring that one up to date; and much of the supplementary data would consist of Dr. Posner's own important contributions in actual development of courses.

His article of 1941 discussed the type of archival training given in schools designed broadly for graduate instruction in history but including archival work (exemplified by the Ecole des Chartes), and in those designed primarily to train archivists (like the Institute at Berlin-Dahlem). In the last decade courses have opened up in many parts of the world, following generally one or the other of these two patterns. But in both types I believe there is an increasing degree of consensus in emphasis on the history of archival administration, on arrangement and description or analagous subjects, on those bases of governmental administration that are so important to the handling of modern archives, and on practical exercises in archival establishments. Perhaps this has been partly inspired by the exchange of information in our own quarterly journal, particularly through articles like Dr. Posner's.

Naturally all the curricula stress a number of subjects that have always been considered basic. One of those universally taught outside this country is paleography. Most of our records are too recent to require this highly important technique, but I am sure that a study of paleography would help us to read some of our own colleagues' handwriting! Other basic subjects are those in technical methods of preservation, and in languages.

Then there are related subjects, which interest me because some of them bear on one of my major premises. Among these, the most important are historical method and history itself. Courses in national, local, and other aspects of history are either taught in the archival curricula or are considered prerequisites for entry to it. This strikes me as significant, for it emphasizes the relationship of the archivist to the broad field of research. Something of the same concept in modern vein is embodied in a statement by the present Archivist of the United States that curricula available in Washington of interest to his staff "include basic courses in history, economics, political science, public law, special phases of public administration and administrative management, effective writing and editing, and foreign languages, all of which contribute to the broad background that an archivist should possess."

The emphasis on history is something we take for granted, but it is worth mentioning here as bearing on the essential character of archival economy. For the very fact that archives are organic bodies, produced in the evolution of organizations of human beings,

stresses their vital relationship to the history of those organisms and the milieu in which they have grown. Archives at once are derived from history and serve the study of history.

A pertinent question in regard to archival training is "do we practice in our work all these facets of knowledge which have been taught?" Surely we are practicing selection more and more, we naturally put into practice all the conservation we can, and we give reference service at least to the minimum necessary to meet demands. But sometimes, it seems to me, it is only with what time and energy we have left over that we do any analysis and description. I wonder if sometimes, usually because of pressure of mass or paucity of resources, we do not fail to complete our task of bringing records into their most effective utilization. This is primarily a matter of our relation to our consumers.

We often think and speak of the public institutions in which some of us are employed as service agencies. This is a correct view, but I hope we do not accept it in too restricted a manner. We perform a minimum of service if we select and preserve valuable records and provide information from them when it is requested. But suppose nobody asks or knows what we have to ask for? Are we to sit and wait? Or, to be more realistic, suppose people do not use records in our custody which we know would be of value to them? Is it entirely their fault? There is no assurance that even the most assiduous investigator will ferret out all the valuable evidence on his subject if we simply open the door for him. He can not do it unless we let him know what we have and guide him in his use of it.

Most of us believe, whether our work is supported by taxes or by private means, that our custody of valuable documents is a public trust, and that our responsibility goes beyond custody to the point of making our holdings known. This means making them known to the public in general by active exhibition programs, and to the research users by means of description and finding aids.

Hundreds of "man-years" have gone into the production of descriptions of records designed to aid the searchers, and properly so. I doubt that anyone thinks that the best methods have yet been found. This was a major subject of interest, incidentally, at the recent archives conference in Havana, emphasis being put on general guides to holdings of institutions and on guides to materials on subject areas; there most attention was naturally given to the old favorites of materials relating to the history of certain other countries or regions. We are experimenting with subject guides of a different sort at the National Archives, and I believe the effort

may produce something especially useful, conceived in terms to bridge the gap between custodian and consumer.

There is another way in which I think we can bridge that gap. It is one which we should employ more than we have, both as individuals and as a Society. That is the development of closer relations through individual conferences, committees, associations, and all other means for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. This is a need I feel strongly, because it seems to me that we have gradually grown apart from the close relation with the historians that we had when this Society was established as an offshoot from the American Historical Association. I am pleased that in the past year, through the initiative of an archivist-historian, that Association has formed a Committee on Historians and the Government, which at least on the Federal scale will provide a ground for working out some common problems. Two among the major interests of the Committee are the accessibility of public records for research, and the publication of historical sources, most of which are in the care of manuscripts custodians and archivists.

That kind of close association of custodians and users probably exists already to a greater degree in regional and local fields than at Washington, simply because the problems of mass make for us greater degrees of specialization and compartmentalization (to use two good bureaucratic terms). But the basic principle of association is worth stressing anywhere and at anytime. And it needs to be developed with research groups other than historians — with economists, sociologists, geographers, political scientists, and many more. That will be one way to let us understand their needs better, and to let them understand the possibilities in our holdings.

Needless to say, individual scholarly accomplishment by archivists in any of those fields will greatly aid us in reaching our goal. In fact, the description and the interpretation of archival materials in reference service requires a considerable degree of subject knowledge. This could be an important element in distinguishing between the various degrees of archival competence.

Now all this is said on the assumption that we have faith in our calling — and I feel sure that for this group that is a safe assumption. Every day I see about me people who are doing far more than putting in time at the public expense. Their earnestness, their pleasure at completing a difficult search or acquiring valuable records, are evidence that they believe their jobs are worth doing. One of the responsibilities of higher officials of archival institutions is to let their staff members know what this profession is in which they

are becoming increasingly proficient — to pass along our faith and the reasons for it.

In attempting to bring out some of the common denominators among those who gather here, and some of our ties with allied groups, I have hoped to call attention to our common responsibility for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Nation in the broadest sense. I believe it is worth preserving, not only for pride of possession, but also for the lessons of experience that it represents. I, for one, want the leaders of government at all "levels" to be guided by the best possible information of past experience. I feel this keenly, for I have seen at close range persons responsible for decisions important to a Nation, who failed to use the resources of information available to them. Archivists and their associates have a vital, constructive role to play in the field of "intelligence," as that word is now used in public affairs.

In another sense, but in somewhat the same vein, I hope the officials who put into practice our democratic ideals of government, and our teachers and textbook writers who mold the ideals of the future, will be guided by the best possible information on the sources of those ideals and how they have been applied in the past.

I do not share the view of some that there is no such thing as progress, or that human beings will not apply lessons of experience, and that history is therefore worthless except as an exercise of the mind. Nor do I agree with those who hold that the teaching of history simply binds us to traditional patterns and prevents creative or constructive thought. I believe that the study and teaching of history, interpreting history broadly as the knowledge of all phases of human experience, is among the highest realms of cultural activity; and that it cannot proceed without evidence. I believe that in preserving the evidence and promoting its effective use archivists and their colleagues have a role to play of which we can be justly proud.