

Some Suggestions for National Archives Cooperation with the State Archives¹

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IF there are State archivists who feel that the National Archives of the United States has not been sufficiently cooperative with them or has not rendered them all the services they anticipated, they should carefully reconsider their demands and the ability of the National Archives to comply with them. Less than fifteen years ago, the first consignment of Federal records reached the National Archives. Less than fifteen years ago, the members of the staff of the National Archives began to handle government records and to become familiar with the complex problems of archival administration. The State archivist who expected the establishment of the National Archives to bring about immediate and miraculous changes in his field of work has certainly been disappointed. The State archivist who believed that the National Archives would be continually at his call for the solution of all of his problems has not been completely satisfied. The State archivist who looked to the National Archives for guidance and leadership in its sphere, similar to that provided by the Library of Congress in the field of library science has also been doomed to disappointment. These disappointments are more the fault of the State archivist who expected miracles than of the staff of the National Archives.

The State archives were first on the scene, and largely as a result of their interest, influence, and support the National Archives came into being. The Library of Congress was established under the provisions of a law of April 24, 1800, and has been building up experience and influence for more than one hundred and fifty years. Then there is the matter of the dissimilarity of the problems and philosophies of the State archives and the National Archives. Recently an experienced archivist in a State rich in material wealth and in public records wrote:

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, October 9, 1950.

When I first came to . . . [this State] I thought that leadership in every field of archival science ought naturally to come from the National Archives just as leadership in library science and methods comes from the Library of Congress. As the years have gone by I have come to realize that the two situations are not at all alike. The Library of Congress deals with the same materials as smaller libraries except in larger quantities. The National Archives, on the other hand, handles materials which are in no way like those which state archives have to deal with.

Another State archivist, who formerly was a member of the staff of the National Archives, was of the opinion that a discussion of the subject of cooperation between the State archives and the National Archives was a waste of effort on the part of the speakers and of the time of the Society of American Archivists. He stated frankly and forcibly:

I think that the National Archives has been most co-operative with this State Archives. To me the problem is not one of Federal-State co-operation, but one of interstate co-operation. . . . We need general circulation of material such as Miss Norton's manual on the "Disposition of Illinois Records," currently appearing in *Illinois Libraries*. We need comments and appraisals of such documents, so that we can modify the ideas expressed to fit our own need. . . . We need information on records disposition policies of other States. . . . We need to know more about the mutual problems in records description, indexing, fumigation, microfilming, and records administration. . . . On such problems of inter-state co-operation I believe that the National Archives can be of service, but it would be only as the wide and over-all experience of that agency can guide those of us in the States whose problems are infinitesimal in comparison with the Federal job.

The State archivists seem to agree in general that the National Archives should be a clearing house to which they could go for technical advice and information. There they should find collected the latest information on sorting, arranging, classifying, listing, calendaring, and indexing of archives. The National Archives should consider itself a testing ground for all types of equipment of interest to the archivist, such as filing, photographic, lamination, fumigation, and storage devices. They feel that the National Archives should set up and maintain a permanent exhibit of such items and information.

The State archivists believe that the National Archives should make available in printed form the results of its experiments and experiences. They are more than eager for printed material such as National Archives *Bulletins* Nos. 5 and 6, entitled the "Repair and Preservation of Records" and "Buildings and Equipment for Archives." Arthur E. Kimberly's two articles, "Repair and Preser-

vation in the National Archives" and "New Developments in Records Containers," which appeared in the July 1938 and July 1950 issues of the *American Archivist*, illustrate the exact type of information zealously sought. They are keenly disappointed with general discussions by members of the staff of the National Archives who are capable of giving them specific detailed information. The State archivists believe that the National Archives, with its now experienced staff, should consider compiling and publishing a technical manual which would gather into one volume the best experiences and methods of American and foreign archivists. They would appreciate an American version of Hilary Jenkinson's *A Manual of Archive Administration*, and are of the opinion that material could be gathered together for its compilation and publication by the National Archives.

Considerable expense would be involved if the National Archives undertook to meet these demands or suggestions, but the service rendered would greatly enhance its prestige and strengthen its position of leadership. If the National Archives fails to provide the necessary leadership, then State archivists must turn to other sources. The story of the development of the processes of lamination in the United States well illustrates this point. The National Archives early perfected methods and equipment to meet its needs, but offered nothing which a State archive could afford. The State archivists turned to William J. Barrow, of Richmond, Virginia, a pioneer in the field, who had developed something practical for their use. The result has been that his methods and equipment are in use or are about to be installed in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina, Belgium, Brazil, and France, and in the Library of Congress and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington.

Other subjects suggested for cooperative action were the training of archivists, the exchange of personnel, the fixing of professional standards for archivists, the microfilming of Federal and State records, the making of the National Archives a depository for microfilms of State records, and the publication of important groups of documents. As you know, the President of the United States recommended something similar to the latter suggestion in a speech delivered on May 17, 1950, and Dr. Philip M. Hamer informs us that the National Historical Publications Commission is exploring the possibilities of his recommendation. The National Archives certainly should expand into the business of publishing archives, and Clarence E. Carter's work in that field has set an excellent precedent.

As one further example of the attitudes of State archivists, another experienced archivist stated that he believed that the "more prominent areas of cooperation" between the National Archives and the State archives might be summarized as follows: (1) "Technical advice and assistance in the development of standards relating to descriptive indexing, records preservation and storage"; (2) "Mutual cooperation in the establishment of standard criteria relative to the retention of major classes of public records"; and (3) "Exchange of information regarding sampling techniques and evaluation methods and procedures."

The fact should be pointed out that the National Archives has not taken full advantage of its opportunities to cultivate good public relations with State archivists and others of influence in the field of archivology. For instance, the story of the restoration by the National Archives of certain captured Confederate records to the State of Virginia could have been exploited more effectively had the impetus for their return not come from Richmond. The speaker has long felt that the National Archives was neglectful of public opinion outside Washington, but would have hesitated to mention it but for the fact that other experienced State archivists suggested that he do so. A State archivist, of course, understands that people in Washington are busy during his infrequent trips there, but he would appreciate a little more time and attention from people in places of responsibility. However valueless his advice may be on matters pertaining to the welfare of the National Archives, his good will can be acquired and kept better if his counsel is sought more often. There are State archivists who may not have national reputations as scholars or records administrators, but they are well enough acquainted with two United States Senators and several members of the House of Representatives to advise them competently on matters affecting the National Archives.

Finally, there is an extremely important, but controversial, field in which State archival agencies and the National Archives might seriously consider cooperative action. There are vast quantities of Federal records scattered in innumerable offices in the forty-eight States. Very few State governments have made adequate provision for the custody, care, and servicing of their own archives. If we could take these two great problems and solve them by cooperative effort, the future of the archival profession and of research in government records might be infinitely richer and more satisfactory. On October 26, 1942, Mr. Oliver W. Holmes, of the National Archives, and the speaker discussed this matter at the sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Richmond, Vir-

ginia. We considered the centralization of Federal records in Washington, the establishment of regional archival depositories, and a system of Federal-State depositories in each of the forty-eight States. The speaker has considered the idea of Federal-State depositories many times since then and apparently other archivists have given some thought to this possible solution. Recently Mr. Christopher C. Crittenden, of North Carolina, suggested that "Some arrangement might be made for the erection of buildings in the States to house both Federal and State records. One section might be assigned to State archives and another to Federal archives. The whole building might be administered by a State agency or it might be jointly administered."

The speaker stated in 1942 that the centralization of Federal records in Washington naturally had its advantages, but that he was "constitutionally, fundamentally, and otherwise opposed to the general proposition of centralization." Certainly a general policy of placing Federal records in the custody of State libraries, State archives, or State historical societies is not practical, for the simple reason that hardly any State could or would supply adequate buildings or financial support. The speaker then believed that a "system of Federal-State depositories in each of the forty-eight States probably would be impractical," but liked the idea and wanted to see its possibilities explored. The fact that Federal and State governments have cooperated in matters pertaining to public health, military training, agricultural extension work, social security, social welfare, highway building, and many other fields would seem to insure success in cooperative records preservation and administration.

While a great deal of study and time would be required for planning and placing in operation such a Federal-State system, it undoubtedly could be accomplished successfully. Such a system would tend to encourage States to become more interested in the problem of buildings for their records. It would contribute toward raising the standards of archival work and the stimulation of serious and productive research. It would also greatly contribute toward the preservation of State and local records, as well as Federal archives in field offices.

Of course, there are those who might complain that researchers and historians would be hampered by decentralization. Those who follow the general trend in this country toward centralization and eventual dictatorship would raise the cry that decentralization is inefficient and uneconomical. Decentralization for the safety of archives increases in importance, however, as more destructive meth-

ods of warfare are developed, and the preservation of our records should be considered before the probable convenience of a few researchers in one section of the country. Some people would be inconvenienced by decentralization, but many scholars distant from Washington and those interested in State and local history would be helped. We might all be better citizens if we gave more attention to State and local history in preparation for an understanding of national history. The suggestion of a Federal-State system of depositories might also be challenged as a further invasion of States' rights, but only a few misguided Southern Democrats and the Republicans seem to worry nowadays about States' rights.

The general attitude of the State archivists toward the National Archives is excellent, and those who offer constructive criticism and suggestions do so in an effort to increase its influence and prestige. They were especially chagrined when, under the guise of economy and efficiency, it was merged into the General Services Administration. Some of the general views expressed by State archivists and members of their staffs should be of interest. One stated that the National Archives had been of great help to him and that on his visits there he had always been received courteously and had been given valuable assistance. Another wrote that his department had had "close co-operation with the National Archives" and had found its "personnel co-operative and the research materials available." A third said: "We have found the personnel more than cooperative and most generous. . . . They have appeared interested and anxious to be of service to this Department." Another wrote that his staff had had "fine cooperation" and that there was "no reason to believe that we will not have continued service from that source." Still another stated that he had "had the opportunity to work on a cooperative basis with the National Archives . . . [and had] found the advice, assistance and technical knowledge of the National Archives staff most helpful."

When we attempt to compare the National Archives with the Library of Congress, we might remember that, while the latter institution was established in 1800, the American Library Association was not founded until 1876. The first Archivist of the United States was appointed in 1934, and within three years the Society of American Archivists was founded under the guidance and protection of the National Archives. No one doubts the great service rendered State archivists by that one act alone, and all of us look forward to many benefits from the progressive leadership of the National Archives in the future.