

R. D. W. Connor, First Archivist of the United States ¹

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I FEEL that the privilege of speaking to you of Robert Connor on this occasion is a great honor as well as an opportunity of meeting an obligation of a long and dear friendship. We first met in Raleigh in the spring of 1905; I was on a tour of historical reconnaissance for the new Carnegie Institution of Washington and he was a member and secretary of the new North Carolina State Historical Commission and at the same time secretary of the Educational Campaign Commission of the State's Department of Public Instruction. We were both at the beginnings of our careers, we were of nearly the same age, and our interests ran along related lines in the field of American history. The following year we met again, quite by chance, in Lexington, Kentucky, where he was attending the Conference for Education in the South and I was on my way back to Washington after a second tour of historical reconnaissance. Thereafter, except for the years when I was in Europe, we met more and more frequently, sometimes in the meetings of the American Historical Association, more often in Washington. Our friendship grew closer with the years and is now one of my most cherished memories.

Robert Digges Wimberly Connor was born in Wilson, North Carolina, on August 28, 1878. He was named for his grandfather, Robert Digges Wimberly, who was a planter in Edgecombe County. His father, Henry Groves Connor, then a practising lawyer, was to have a distinguished career as a member of the State legislature, as associate justice of the State supreme court and finally as judge of the United States District Court. His mother was Kate Whitfield of Wilson. His two elder brothers served respectively on the State supreme court and in the legislature. Robert was profoundly influenced by his father, of whom he said, in the dedication of one of his books:

¹ An address read on the occasion of the unveiling in the National Archives of a portrait of Dr. Connor, Oct. 10, 1952.

I dedicate this book to my father, Henry Groves Connor, because it was he who first aroused my interest in the history of North Carolina; because by his own life, character and public service he has added dignity and honor to the annals of the State; and because in himself he personifies that reverence for the laws and institutions of democracy, that love of justice, and that faith in the common man which I believe to be characteristic of the people of this Commonwealth.

Robert graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1899, having distinguished himself in history and in editorial services on student publications. The university was to remain throughout his life an object of devotion and a source of inspiration. His first years after graduation were spent in teaching in the schools of Winston-Salem, Oxford, and Wilmington, an experience which directed his interest to the use of history in the formation of youth. It was in Winston-Salem that he met Sadie Hanes, a fellow teacher, who became his wife in 1902 and whose gracious companionship he was fortunate to have for nearly five decades.

In 1903 he joined with other members of the recently formed State Literary and Historical Association in bringing about the organization of the North Carolina Historical Commission, a step which started him along the long road that led in time to this building and to the post of Archivist of the United States. As secretary of this commission from its creation until 1921, he was a central figure in the advancement of the historical interests and activities of North Carolina, and he achieved a reputation which soon spread far beyond the boundaries of the State. The work that he performed during these years was not merely one of promotion; it was a genuine work of creation — the creation of a great historical agency of the State. As early as 1906 he formulated a plan for a State Department of Archives and History which should house and administer the public records, which should collect and preserve all manner of historical materials, which should issue historical publications, and which should encourage the people of the State to interest themselves in its history. Persistently, patiently he worked to realize this plan, to such good effect that now the Department of Archives and History is an important part of the State establishment, a model historical agency, and a living monument to Robert Connor.

Notwithstanding a heavy load of administrative and official duties, he managed to produce many important contributions to the history of North Carolina. His biography of Cornelius Harnett, published in 1909, received the award of the Patterson memorial

cup and was pronounced by John Spencer Bassett to be "probably the best, most connected, sanest presentation of the state's history in the critical years during which the change [from Colony to State] was absolutely made."² Among later works of this period were *Life and Speeches of Charles Brantley Aycock* (in collaboration with Clarence Poe); *Ante-Bellum Builders of North Carolina*; *The Story of the United States for Young Americans*; and *Race Elements in the White Population of North Carolina*.

Although Connor devoted his attention chiefly to the historical interests of his State, he took an increasing part in national activities, especially those of the American Historical Association. In its annual conferences of State and local historical societies and of archivists, in its general sessions, and in its Public Archives Commission he represented significant experience and achievement, and the range of his influence on behalf of the preservation and administration of public records and of all other forms of historical source materials constantly broadened.

When the United States became involved in the First World War the historians of the country organized in Washington an unofficial National Board for Historical Service, of which Connor was a founding member. Appropriately he directed his attention mainly to the collection and preservation by States and local communities of all kinds of records and materials on which future histories of the war efforts of the American people must be based. In his own State he set up, under the direction of Robert B. House, a special agency for this important service.

In 1920 Robert Connor prepared to leave the North Carolina Historical Commission for a new phase of his career, that of university professor. Graduate study in Columbia University and association with such scholars as James Harvey Robinson, William A. Dunning, Evarts B. Greene, and James T. Shotwell had prepared him for the change in occupation and status. His resignation as secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission took effect in August 1921, and he then became Kenan Professor of History and Government in the University of North Carolina. But he retained a lively interest in the commission, and in the following summer he undertook a mission in its behalf to England for the purpose of reporting on North Carolina materials in the Public Record Office. Later he served as a commission member and chairman; and, when the commission was transformed into the executive board of the State Department of Archives and History, he continued to be

² *American Historical Review*, 15:623 (Apr. 1910).

its head. Thus he took part in the realization, in name as well as in fact, of the plan which he himself had drawn up in 1906.

The transition from State office in Raleigh to the university faculty at Chapel Hill was not difficult, for he had never lost close contact with his Alma Mater, having served as a member and secretary of its board of trustees and as president of its alumni association. So he slipped easily and happily into the life of the academic community, with its duties of teaching and administration and its opportunities for research and writing, not to mention its friendly and stimulating associations. He quickly won the respect and affection of faculty and students. Succeeding to the headship of the department of history and government, he was considerate of his colleagues and encouraged their research and their plans of instruction. He was an inspiring teacher, for to him teaching was an art and not a pedagogical device. We know that twice he came perilously near being elected to the presidency of the university; but, recalling in this place what that elevation would have cost the National Archives, we can only be gratified by his escape.

During his 13 years at Chapel Hill he was able to make important contributions to North Carolina history, of which the most notable was the two-volume work which bore the title of *North Carolina; Rebuilding an Ancient Commonwealth* (1929). He also contributed numerous articles to the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

When the American Historical Association held sessions of its annual meeting in Chapel Hill, in 1929, Professor Connor read a paper entitled "The Rehabilitation of a Rural Commonwealth," which is a moving account of the upward progress of North Carolina from the depths of reconstruction to the brighter uplands of the present century. The opening passages of this paper are so perfect an example of his quiet humor and literary expression that I venture to quote them:

We North Carolinians are a modest people. Indeed, our modesty is our favorite boast. We love to think of North Carolina as a "valley of humility between two mountains of conceit" — but we love still more to brag about it. That is what we call our "honest pride." . . . As for myself, I confess to no little embarrassment at the part assigned to me in this conspiracy. Really, it seems to smack too much of that form of egotism which inspires a man to invite you to his house in order to talk about himself. That offends the feeling of humility which I inherited in so marked a degree from the O'Connors of County Cork.³

If I have dwelt at some length on Robert Connor's careers as

³ *American Historical Review*, 36:44 (Oct. 1930).

State historian and archivist and as university professor, it has been to make clear how completely they prepared him to undertake the culminating task of his life — the formation of the institution which bears the name of the National Archives.

For many years the historians of the Nation, including Connor himself, had labored to bring about the construction of a building suitable for the housing of the public records and the creation of an establishment for their preservation and administration. By 1934 the building was nearing completion, and the National Archives Act of that year provided for the Presidential appointment of an Archivist of the United States and the formation of a "National Archives Establishment." This creation of a new independent agency was at once noted, not only in the world of scholarship but in that of practical politics.

Scholars who had striven to achieve the objective which was now assured were determined to secure the appointment as first Archivist of the United States of a man as ideally qualified as possible for the post. They sought a scholar of high reputation, of proved administrative energy and resourcefulness, who had had experience in the administration of public records and whose firmness of character would make it impossible for persons of ulterior political motives to impose upon him. The American Historical Association, chartered by an act of Congress of 1889 "for the promotion of historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical manuscripts, and for kindred purposes in the interest of American history and of history in America," rightly conceived itself to have a major public responsibility in the matter. Accordingly its executive committee was charged to canvass possible candidates and to make appropriate recommendations to the President of the United States. John Franklin Jameson, although not a member of the executive committee, was senior member of the council of the association, a former president, and chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress. He was requested to serve with and for the executive committee; and, in fact, he performed most of its labors. It was he who had led the long campaign for the National Archives, and no one was more determined that the first appointment should be of the highest quality.

After much correspondence the unanimous choice of the executive committee rested upon Robert Connor. The next step was to induce him to allow his name to be presented with assurance that he would accept the appointment if it should be tendered. To the great disappointment of the committee, Connor at first declined to

be nominated to the President, giving as his reason his sense of obligation to the University of North Carolina. He was persuaded, however, to discuss the matter with President Graham and to defer his final decision until he had done so. Jameson, not wishing to leave any stone unturned, suggested that he and Connor might talk the matter over before Connor's interview with the president of the university. Accordingly, on June 24, Jameson and Henry Bourne journeyed to Cumberland, Maryland, to meet Connor, who journeyed there from Morgantown, where he was teaching in the summer school of the University of West Virginia. The interview at Cumberland was historic and fortunate, for after Connor had his discussion with President Graham on July 6 he informed Jameson that the executive committee of the association might present his name to the President. After communicating this happy news to the executive committee and to William E. Dodd, president of the association, who was then in Berlin as United States Ambassador to Germany, Jameson presented the association's recommendation to President Roosevelt. A few passages from Jameson's letter of July 14 are here quoted because they reveal the qualities which in the opinion of the executive committee the position demanded of its incumbent and which the committee was convinced that Robert Connor possessed in a high degree. Jameson wrote:

Professor Connor is a man of fifty-five years, of strong and impressive physique, of a family highly regarded in the State, his brother being a justice of the Supreme Court, as his father was before him. He was secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission (which means archivist of the State — the first archivist the state ever had) . . . to 1921, and made a distinguished success of that work, so that the archives of North Carolina hold a high place in the estimation of historians throughout the country. . . . But while the Executive Committee of the American Historical Association lays proper emphasis on successful experience in archive work, it is well aware that the business of being the first Archivist of the United States is primarily an administrative employment, and one requiring a combination of organizing power and personal tact. In recommending Professor Connor they have had chiefly in mind the fact that he is a man of great administrative capacity, a man of force and character, who would wish and would be able to place the new institution on a high level and maintain it there, a man of affairs and action, yet one of quiet and agreeable ways, who has shown by his success in dealing with the North Carolina Legislature the tact and considerate spirit which a novel institution like the National Archives will require in its dealing with the various governmental organizations which will contribute to the Archives and which the Archives will serve.

Besides its aid to government departments, it is possible for the National

Archives to perform a great service to the country and its intellectual progress, by facilitating and encouraging those studies — historical, economic, sociological, statistical — which the best European archives promote and in some cases carry out. The recommendation of Professor Connor is based on the conviction that, taking an enlightened view of all these possibilities and capable of understanding and devising means for their realization, he would make the new institution, from the beginning, a powerful agency in the development of American scholarship, comparable in its way, to what Dr. Putnam has made of the Library of Congress.

It was not difficult to secure the support of the Senators and Representatives of North Carolina in Congress for this recommendation nor the support of others near to the President, such as the Ambassador to Mexico, Josephus Daniels; the Secretary of Commerce, Daniel C. Roper; officers of the Department of State; and, of course, Ambassador Dodd. Perhaps unnecessary concern was felt because of rumors of other candidacies, some of which were politically inspired, and because the President made no sign of his intention. At last, however, Connor was invited to an interview with the President on October 3. The story of this he has told in lively fashion in the *American Archivist*.⁴

In this account he relates that after the President had expressed his gratitude for a service rendered to him years before by Connor as secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission, he came to the point of the interview in the following words:

"I am required," the President said, "by an Act of Congress to appoint an Archivist of the United States. The man I am going to appoint must have two qualifications — he must be a good Democrat and he must have the endorsement of the historians of the country."

To this Robert replied, "I can meet the first requirement, Mr. President, but I don't know about the second."

Whereupon the President said, "Well, I do, and I'm going to appoint you."

And so, on this day, 18 years ago, the first Archivist of the United States was appointed.

Connor was able to enter at once upon the duties of the new office; but, since the new Archives Building was not ready for occupancy, the first Archivist, with a small and slowly increasing staff, took up quarters in the adjoining building of the Department of Justice. Many matters called for his immediate attention and action. First of all the plans of the Archives Building required

⁴ "FDR visits the National Archives," *American Archivist*, 12: 323-332 (Oct. 1949).

numerous tenant changes; and these had to be discussed with Louis Simon, Supervising Architect of the United States, whose interest in the new construction had been as keen as it was helpful. At the same time plans had to be made for the organization of the staff that was soon to be recruited, and simultaneously relations must be established with other branches of the Government whose records would soon be flowing into the new depository, while representations must be made to Congress to assure adequate fiscal provision for an agency which had not yet been set up. Finally, a continuous and endless stream of applications for positions in the new establishment had to be considered and sifted.

Certainly this last task was in many respects the most difficult. The Archivist sought advice and help from competent and disinterested sources and resolutely resisted considerations of political patronage. I think that those who have most at stake in the efficient operation of the National Archives, including the scholars who use the Federal records for research and the advancement of knowledge, would agree that a staff of great competence was built up, inspired by professional zeal and high ideals of public service and scholarship.

A year later, when at last the new building was occupied, the Archivist addressed an assembly of his staff in words of confidence and encouragement. Recalling the long effort to bring the establishment into being and to provide for the public records of the United States the magnificent building that was now ready for use, he expressed his conviction that the staff would "fully justify the high hopes and expectations of all those who made possible the National Archives of the United States." He continued:

From more than one source, from private persons, from experienced newspaper men, from government officials in other agencies — many commendations upon the personnel of the National Archives have been received. For myself, I am deeply grateful for the way in which you have all taken hold of your tasks, for the magnificent *esprit de corps* which you have displayed and for the spirit of loyalty which you have brought to the National Archives.

Having, myself, been in a position to observe the formation of the staff, to watch its development into an effective team, to participate in its professional enthusiasm, to estimate its contribution to effective administration and to scholarship, and to find that under new leadership its quality has not diminished, I feel qualified to say that the staff of the National Archives is itself the greatest tribute to the character of him who brought it into being.

Another major part of the task of the first Archivist of the United States was to "get along," if I may use that term, with officials of the Government and with Members and committees of Congress. In this his success was complete. His attractive and impressive appearance, his courteous and considerate manner, his friendly attitude and his sense of humor, together with his good sense in all matters, insured that success.

President Roosevelt, whose interest in the National Archives was exceedingly keen, as it was in all matters historical, accorded Robert Connor his friendship from their first meeting and soon addressed him as "Bob." It was my good fortune to witness this friendly relationship on numerous occasions, some of them fairly intimate, when plans for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park were being made, discussed, and carried out. With officers of the Government friendly working relations and agreements as to the transfer of records to the new Archives Building were not too difficult to reach. Indeed, with the coming of the prewar emergency, the reluctance which some officials had shown to part with their records gave way to an eagerness to transfer as many of them as possible as fast as possible.

With Members of Congress and in committee hearings Robert Connor was at his best. He was no novice in securing funds from legislative bodies, and he knew how to approach them. With committees he discussed in intelligible and convincing language the problems and needs of the National Archives. He told them about the destruction of "useless papers" and the possibility of reducing the bulk of the records by the process of microphotography, and he recounted striking instances of important economies which had been realized through the rediscovery of long-lost documents. He interested his congressional listeners, he never bored them, and he convinced them that the National Archives Establishment was an essential part of the Government.

To the general public the Archivist told the story of the National Archives on many occasions and to many different audiences. He explained its purpose and functions and the importance of the Federal records for all aspects of American life. In his own world of scholarship he described the many ways in which the National Archives could contribute to the advancement of knowledge, and he invited its fullest use by his professional colleagues.

In these and in all other ways Robert Connor accomplished his great national task with success and honor. Considering the man

he was, this does not surprise us, but our gratification is none the less complete.

And so, when in 1941 he was invited to return to his beloved university to occupy the newly founded Craige Professorship of Jurisprudence and History, he could accept the call with the feeling that he had done that for which he came to Washington 7 years earlier and that his colleagues and successors would carry on in the tradition that had been established.

After submitting his resignation to President Roosevelt he received a characteristic reply. The President wrote from Hyde Park on July 20, 1941:

Dear Dr. Connor, I hate the thought of losing your splendid services as Archivist of the United States, but I can well appreciate the pull that the Chair of the University of North Carolina makes on your heart-strings.

As the first Archivist of the United States you have not only laid the foundation but have built the actual structure of an extremely important and permanent repository of American historical source material. Your record is one which will always be acclaimed with well-deserved appreciation.

Please let me know when you want me to set the date of your official resignation. I am doing this not only with official regret, but with my own deep regret that I shall lose a personal friend from my official family.

In September Robert and Sadie Connor returned to Chapel Hill, leaving vacancies in Washington which would not be filled. On their departure the staff of the National Archives presented to them a token of their affection in the form of a beautiful silver service.

Robert Connor's interest in archives did not cease, however, with his reentry into academic life. He was elected president of the Society of American Archivists, which he had helped to form, and he resumed official relations with the North Carolina Historical Commission.

On February 25, 1950, while he was engaged in the congenial task of preparing a documentary history of the University of North Carolina, the inexorable messenger came for him, and so he passed from among us.

His memory and his works endure.