

# Victor Hugo Paltsits, 1867-1952

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**I**N December 1909 Victor Hugo Paltsits read before the first open meeting of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association a paper on the "Tragedies in New York's Public Records." The following paragraph from his paper even now has a contemporaneous ring:

The conscience of public officials is too often blunt in relation to inactive materials under their charge, because they look too generally upon their records from the standpoint of immediate practical use in administration. The reason why so much has been lost and is now being neglected or destroyed is that there is a natural tendency of men to neglect or destroy such things as are not useful to themselves, or which for the moment seem to have passed their usefulness. For this reason every enlightened government owes it to itself and posterity to enact proper laws for controlling the situation, and should intrust the prosecution of the task to some one who has the instinct, sympathy, conscience and ability to grapple with it.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the paper was devoted to detailing losses of State and local records over the years, but the immediate tragedy to which Dr. Paltsits was alluding was not the Albany fire which destroyed so many manuscripts belonging to the New York State Library — that did not occur until 2 years later. He was reporting the recent defeat of the bill to reorganize the office of the State Historian of New York, the post which he had then held for 2 years. Included in his plan was authority for the State Historian to inspect the public records in State and local governmental agencies and the requirement that the State Historian be notified when records were to be destroyed as obsolete. The State commissioner of education proposed a substitute bill which omitted the provisions concerning records and would have changed the status of the State Historian as an independent executive in the administrative department and subordinated him to the Department of Education. Both bills failed of passage. The next year Dr. Paltsits again tried to get legislation which would have made possible the creation of a distinct archival agency. The conflict of jurisdiction between the State Library,

<sup>1</sup> American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1909, p. 369.

which is the legal custodian of State archives, and the State Historian, who later achieved the power to inspect records but as a subordinate to the Department of Education, persists to this date. New York State still does not have a unified archival system. After his 1910 bill was also defeated Dr. Paltsits returned to the New York Public Library in 1911.

Victor Hugo Paltsits had joined the staff of the old Lenox Library in 1888 and had gone to the New York Public Library when the two institutions were merged in 1895. There, except for those brief but controversial 4 years in Albany, he remained until his "retirement" in 1941. At the time he left the New York Public Library — he never really retired — Dr. Paltsits had long been acknowledged as the foremost American bibliographer of his generation. Indeed, *Who's Who in New York* says of him that "for continuous cooperation with works of others, [he] was publicly acclaimed 'unnamed partner in a thousand works that have advanced the learning of this country and the world.'" The long and impressive list of Dr. Paltsits' contributions to American historiography, his many honors, and his widespread professional interests can be found recorded elsewhere.

By archivists Victor Hugo Paltsits may well be regarded as the founder of the archival profession in this country. He was not by any means the first historian to urge the importance of preserving governmental records through establishment of archival agencies. He himself was never an archivist except in the sense that as curator of manuscripts and later as head of the American history section of the New York Public Library he had the custody of many documents that originated in governmental agencies. As a member of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association from 1908 to 1924 and as its chairman from 1911 to 1922, however, he had a profound influence upon the development of archival techniques in this country. It was he who changed the complexion of the Public Archives Commission from a group of historians who were interested in archives chiefly as historical source materials to a group of custodians of records who attended the annual conferences of the commission to discuss the practical problems of administering archives. The Public Archives Commission was, as we well know, the parent of the Society of American Archivists.

The Public Archives Commission had been created by the American Historical Association in 1899. Its first chairman was William

Mac Donald of Bowdoin College; its second was Herman V. Ames of the University of Pennsylvania, under whom Dr. Paltsits first served on the commission. The commission undertook as its initial and chief project that great survey of the archival resources of the States, a work only partially superseded by the inventories published many years later by the Historical Records Survey. Dr. Paltsits pointed out that, important though that task certainly was, it was not sufficient. Archival agencies must and would be created. Alabama and Mississippi had established the first American departments of archives and history in 1902; other States were likewise becoming conscious of their responsibilities towards their archives. There were no trained archivists in those days, no archival training courses. The first report of the commission had noted "the imperative necessity of a more rational and scientific treatment of documentary material in the United States."<sup>2</sup>

At the 1912 conference of the commission Dr. Paltsits outlined the "Plan and Scope of a Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists."<sup>3</sup> For several years thereafter, until the First World War interrupted the meetings temporarily, each conference was devoted to technical problems and an attempt was made to present one or two chapters of the proposed manual each year. Although some half dozen chapters were prepared, the manual was never completed. Space unfortunately does not permit the reproduction here of the outline for this first proposed American work on archival economy.<sup>4</sup> A reexamination of the outline again emphasizes Dr. Paltsits' clear thinking; it might well be the outline for a modern work on the subject. The only topic omitted is records management (including the disposition of records). In those days there was too much "disposition of records" to suggest that archivists should give countenance to such a procedure. Even today there are archivists who maintain that records management is a separate profession, that the archivist is a conservator — not a destroyer — of records, and that once more this function of preservation will be recognized as his true work.

The archives profession honored itself when it made Dr. Paltsits an honorary member of the Society of American Archivists some years ago. Younger archivists may remember him as a witty, genial gentleman of the old school. Those of us who began our archival

<sup>2</sup> Victor Hugo Paltsits, "An Historical Résumé of the Public Archives Commission from 1899 to 1921," American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1922, 1:153.

<sup>3</sup> American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1912, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1912, p. 254.

careers before the days of the National Archives and the archival institutes at Washington mourn the passing of a staunch friend to whom we turned frequently for his always ready practical suggestions, his warm encouragement, and his philosophical advice.