

# An Appeal for Archives in Institutions of Higher Learning<sup>1</sup>

By HENRY J. BROWNE

*Catholic University of America*

MUCH discussion has been devoted under the auspices of these workshops in recent years to the administration of Catholic colleges. Of necessity the keeping of records and the development of new techniques in that field have received attention. It is strange in one sense that noncurrent records have not been a subject of consideration; yet, from another point of view, it is very understandable. It is peculiar because old records are always with us even in an educational institution with only a few years of age to its credit. But why talk about them? Bundle them up and store them in some side room or basement or buy more filing equipment and ask for more office space. If the files are bulging, get one of the office staff to go through and weed them of material that such an individual may decide is of no lasting value, and let it be destroyed or at least stored in some inaccessible nook or corner. This spot has often been a vault, especially where old business records, the deeds to the property, or a precious looking citation received by the president of the institution was involved. But less imposing looking items — old class lists, interoffice communications, or routine letters asking for information, particularly after a change of president or dean or some other official simply become dust-laden bundles in out-of-the-way storerooms.

If this has been too often the story of the treatment of old records in our institutions, even in those of higher learning, it is, however, very easily understood in the light of the general American lack of concern for the problem until recent years. Although the historians, whose very stock in trade depends on documents, had formed a commission on public archives within the American Historical Association by 1899 and an annual conference of archivists

<sup>1</sup> This paper appeared originally as Appendix A of *Discipline and Integration in the Catholic College*, edited by Roy J. Deferrari and published by the Catholic University of America Press in 1952. It is reprinted here, with slight changes, by permission of the editor and the Press. The fact that it was once delivered as a paper at a workshop of college and university administrators explains the archival simplicity of its approach and its Catholicity. It is hoped that the latter will not prevent the application of its main ideas in a more catholic manner. — The Author.

by 1909 — which was to become the autonomous Society of American Archivists only in 1937 — their chief emphasis was on State and Federal Government archival depositories. The symbol of success for the archives movement was the opening in this country of a National Archives in the Nation's capital in 1935, which is now called by a title more descriptive of its full function, the National Archives and Records Service.

American colleges and universities have joined the ranks of governmental agencies, business, and religious groups in the realization that something should be done to utilize the new techniques of an ancient archival profession. It was several generations ago that the materials pertaining to the history of Harvard University were gathered up by Jared Sparks to prevent their loss. Since then ecclesiastical institutions, too, have often owed the better preservation and care of their noncurrent official papers to the historical researchers. The Catholic University of America may be cited as an example in this regard since there is a real connection between the setting up of its department of archives and manuscripts in 1949 and the fact that since 1946 four closely documented monographs on the history of its first 20 years have appeared in print. Librarians, too, have contributed to the movement and in some colleges and universities the official records of the institutions are still housed and serviced in special divisions of their libraries. It has only been in recent years that the archivist as a professional servant of an institution of higher learning has come into his own. This independence of the archives agency was achieved as early as 1921 at Smith College, at Amherst in 1934, at the University of Pennsylvania in 1945, at Fisk in 1948, and at the Catholic University of America in 1949.

If this present paper can give some attention to and appreciation of the terms and techniques of archival economy in the United States today and can point up the need for Catholic college and university administrators to be aware of the advances made, it will have served its purpose. As a preliminary, the very notion of an archives needs a revision in many minds. It has no relation to terms like "archaeology" or "archaic," but still it conveys popularly a notion of *old* manuscripts or documents. Royal charters carrying large wax seals or ancient and indecipherable land grants are conjured up by the very sound of the word. A secret and little-frequented depository for very old and valuable written records is all too frequently the basic elements of an archives in the minds of modern administrators. This is so much a fact that business-minded

people in selling what is basically the archives idea to business men have emphasized expressions like "records management."

The true definition is quite different from any "sound-meaning" and closer to the etymological one. It comes from the Greek *archeion*, meaning a government house and, hence, the papers kept therein. So it was applied at first only to bodies of official governmental documents. By analogy it was used to designate the accumulated files of an institution or even of a family. In its present American sense the plural was carried over from the French *les archives*, to mean not only the body of such records but also the place where such documents were kept. Hence, the essential element in archival material is that it be official records of a noncurrent nature, that is, documents produced in carrying on the work of a given office or agency, which are no longer required for the conduct of the day-to-day work of that office or agency but still are of enduring value. One can realize, therefore, that the minutes of the board of trustees, the official correspondence of officers of a college or university, the individual student folders — all such — become in time archival material, although the interval will usually differ in length. They need not constitute very important material nor very old material. The word document, furthermore, does not mean only manuscripts or typescripts. There are obviously such things as an official faculty picture, blueprints, or maps not in frequent use, a bound jubilee volume, one copy of which should be preserved as a record copy, or any printed material that is issued by various offices (e.g., the catalog of the registrar) and that ought to be preserved in one or two archival copies.

The systematic preservation and servicing of such types of official records as have been mentioned above are the real work of a college or university archives. It is true that certain other procedures have gone by the name — and all praise to those who carried them out for what has thus been accomplished in saving at least the fragmentary sources for the history of our institutions as well as of prominent Catholic figures. The vault in the library that has received the annual commencement programs or souvenirs of public receptions and, if the librarian was a "string-saver" by inclination, the menus and seating lists at various functions, this at times has been called an archives. Again the collecting propensities of some faculty member or the generosity of a benefactor may have resulted in the acquisition by the college or university library of literary manuscripts of some poet or novelist or, perhaps, the correspondence and writings of an important historical personage. These alone may

have been referred to as archives or, if housed with old cold-stored records of the institution so blessed, even said to have been deposited in its archives. In the light of the modern American professional usage which restricts archives to mean the official noncurrent records of an agency, such variant usages are definitely inaccurate. Administrators are no more justified in using the term "archives" so loosely than they would be in ignoring the fact that American educators now have meanings in common when they use such terms as college, or school, or faculty in connection with higher education.

But where will the manuscript gift of a benefactor be housed, and how will the historical menus be saved for posterity? The former belongs to the manuscripts division of a college or university library as much as does an illuminated medieval manuscript. The menus, like printed class-day proceedings and similar material originate in some particular office of the institution and, hence, become a part of its records, and when they become unnecessary for the working of that office, if still considered of enduring value, they should be transferred as part of those records to the archives. This is just as true of the theater programs of the dramatic productions and the concert notes of the music department. These individual items are parts of larger bodies of records and the archivist, as the records officer of an institution, is not supposed to be a paper collector in the sense of being concerned with the impossible task of gathering such elusive publications as they are turned out.

The archives, then, is not intended to serve first and foremost the social scientist or critic who is interested in the examination of historical or literary manuscript materials. In this the library should and traditionally has served through its manuscript division or room. In fact, in its concern with official records the archives is fundamentally and primarily a tool of administration, and has been aptly described as the official memory of an institution. For example, Colgate and Indiana Universities have emphasized this point by the somewhat unusual step of making the archives a division of the president's office. Set up in any case as a service unit within a college or university, the archives can be made to serve as the source for the accumulated experience of that educational community. No one who has ever destroyed a letter or at times employed the telephone instead of writing is so foolish as to think that documents tell all or that men in official positions always leave behind them complete and unbiased records. It is something like the case of using examinations as the test of student ability. Everyone knows

they have deficiencies but, one asks immediately, what else do we have? In the case of archives, what will take the place of such records? Surely not the fallible human memory!

Some services rendered by an archives are so obvious and at the same time so varied that it is not always simple to illustrate them. In an archives there is found not only a safe place for an institution's noncurrent legal documents but as well a place where they will be readily accessible when the school's interest calls for them. It is difficult to conceive of an administrator who at some time or other would not desire to examine at least certain records created by his predecessors to help guide his own policies. Of course, experience learned in subordinate positions in an institution may later be sufficient for wise administration at a higher level. One may hazard a guess in this regard that if complete outsiders were more commonly put in positions of leadership in Catholic colleges and universities the problem of the efficient handling of noncurrent but permanently valuable records might have been faced and openly discussed long before this. Apart from personal advisers, how else could traditions and precedents become known to one who was a complete stranger to the administrative family of an institution?

If ignorance of history often leads people not only into error but even into a repetition of old errors, *a fortiori* without the sources of history — the records of an agency — an administrator may well become afflicted with a kind of myopia. Oftentimes much wisdom is based on memory. How else would one know accurately the experience of a college or university with a given individual or organization? How, for example, can an intelligent answer be given even to a problem like the deemphasizing of college football, not to mention more basic educational ones such as a deemphasis of prescribed as against elective courses, without a look at the past record? The question of how to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of a Catholic college might find its answer in part by a look at the record of its silver jubilee. Naturally, such consultation will not give the complete answer, for some things like the dullness of a particular jubilee orator might be recorded only in the archives of a brain crevice of the patriarch of the faculty.

Less fanciful services, too, can be performed by a functioning archives. Such would be found in the caring for old maps and blueprints which are not constantly consulted but which are indispensable when campus alterations or expansion programs get under way. In the National Archives the availability of records of various projects such as merchant marine shipbuilding dating from World War

I saved valuable time and money after the outbreak of war in 1941. In a similar way the rejected plans drawn up by an educational institution years ago may prove valuable later; or even the printed diagrams of the wiring of a building, when an archivist can readily produce them, may mean a great saving of expense and, perhaps, also of patience and time.

The economic argument in favor of the full-fledged archivist may best be brought home in the office of the registrar. Since it is there that records accumulate most noticeably, valuable office space as well as the work of the staff is restored for other purposes by the retirement of outdated files. These, however, do not become dead storage but remain within easy reach for consultation and copying. The transferred student records which are within a date bracket that will see them called for only infrequently during the academic year are preserved more cheaply than in expensive filing equipment, yet are still readily available in an archives that is set up as a going concern. If their bulk requires, they may even be with much wisdom reduced to microfilm. This systematic release of the records pressure on this particular office is a great blessing for the registrar and an aid to the institution in fulfilling its obligation to inquiring alumni.

The purposes of a Catholic educational institution are served by an archives in less obvious ways. We may not have professors like Henry Adams, whose class lists are often consulted by inquirers at the Harvard archives, but some do win sufficient fame that in later years sends researchers looking for students with some recollections of these professors. The college or university tradition on such matters as the admission of colored students will only be known faithfully from well kept archives material, although in this case, perhaps, records that are good in a moral sense will not carry the evidence. In the whole area of public relations as a matter of fact the archives can be made to serve. It may, indeed, prove indispensable for even so slight a matter as a popular anniversary bulletin, and it can be invaluable for material that is useful for exhibits or to regale old grads in alumni publications. Aims such as these have made some university archives broaden their holdings to embrace material of a less official nature relating to the history of the university; particularly appealing along these lines is a photographic archives of views of buildings and grounds and of old personnel of the institution.

There is a further and broader function for Catholic educational archives. Our Catholic educators in the past, at least by the evi-



dence of many recent contributions to American Catholic historiography, were notoriously active in questions going far beyond the confines of their own campuses. Not only the history of Catholic education in the United States but conflicts and movements of all kinds within the Church can only be studied by research in the archives of many of our Catholic colleges and universities. Light will be found here on historical subjects, from the personality of Archbishop John Hughes of New York as a young priest in the 1830's to the Church and municipal politics in San Francisco in the early twentieth century. But this brings us to a service rendered voluntarily by many of our institutional archives in the interest of truth both to the members of their own schools and to serious students from outside. It is crossing over into what is really a secondary function, as even historians today are quite ready to admit.

What can be done about achieving or improving these valuable services in a college or university archives? If one were to follow the example of the University of California at Berkeley, there would be a preliminary survey made over a period of 2 years of the records of the entire institution. Even prior to that step of analysis there must be, of course, the appointment of an archivist. It is understandable that in a smaller institution such a person may not be carried on the staff solely for that purpose. Hence, he may be connected with an administrative office, the history department, or the library, as long as he appreciates that the function he is called upon to perform as archivist is a professionally distinct one from his work in other capacities. At the very outset the archivist or records officer of any institution greatly needs a clearly defined status. He must be authorized and supported by the administration through action of the board of trustees or at least by a directive from the office of rector or president. The archivist's position is further strengthened in some places through an archives committee made up of the principal university representatives whose interests are involved or whose advice is needed, for example, the registrar, a member of the department of history, and the librarian. These members are in addition to the archivist, who should, in the ideal order, have had training, some experience, or at least the benefit of observation — if not all three — in archives administration against a background of American history and particularly, in our case, in its Catholic and local aspects.

The issuance of a charter of regulations to the record producing offices of the institution has proved helpful in notifying the whole educational community of what the archival program aims to ac-

complish. In this or a similar communication, the archivist's position and full authority has to be made clear. People are at times loath to give up "old" records of a school or a department to an "outsider," no matter how ingratiating he may personally be. Often this is based on a misconception that there is no distinction between the private papers which are a product of the personal activities of an official and the records which result from his work for the institution. These latter he has no right to destroy wilfully or to keep, since they are institutional records and not his personal property. Hence the need may not be merely for an educational program but for one with some administrative teeth. The velvet glove is highly recommended as an approach in arranging for the collection of records but at times the strong hand of authority beneath it may have to be employed to get some reluctant official or professor to part with papers that he never uses, yet which he jealously guards against removal.

But despite all the glory of administrative strength, the archivist is useless without a place to work. His survey of existing records of permanent value and their rate of growth may be highly useful if plans are being drawn for completely new quarters for the new institutional service. Most of the time the necessity of adapting a vault or room will obviate concern about the exact bulk of materials to be transferred, except for the purpose of estimating the need of shelving. The important thing in such a renovation is to make the quarters safe against prying men and harmful elements such as dampness, fire, and termites. The failings of those who would maliciously destroy or remove documents as well as the type of person who would have taken the story of Judas or Peter out of the Gospels are worthy of precautions. The location of the archives should also be considered from the point of view of accessibility to the offices that will be consulting its noncurrent material most frequently. Another consideration is the fact that much of the searching in any archives has to be filled out with information gathered from reference books such as biographical dictionaries, almanacs, and directories. A Catholic archives would find volumes of the *Catholic Directory* almost indispensable; but the library, if nearby and perhaps even preferably in the same building, would take care of that problem.

The subject of the care and arrangement of the archival material of a college or university might constitute a paper in itself. As yet there is no American handbook for the guidance of workers in this field. A few remarks of an introductory nature may, how-



ever, serve to give some guidance and at least point out possible pitfalls in the process of forming a working archives.

The survey of the archivist should in effect add to the bulk of material that the institution's officers have already decided on their own is archival. These paper-wrapped bundles contained in vaults, the old metal file cases transferred *in toto* to some closet, or the jammed transfer file cases indiscriminately piled in some other type of storage area — all such items will form the nucleus of the archives. The preliminary survey should first include such material and by consultation with the various officials in charge of them a decision may be arrived at as to whether to dispose of, select from, or transfer them in their entirety to the archives room. Furthermore, the archivist will personally have to consult with administrators about the noncurrent records that still encumber their offices although they are only very seldom used. These contacts should be instructive in purpose but also cooperative in spirit since his ignorance of the work of a given office may be as abysmal as the ignorance he will find there concerning archives. In the matter of inoperative items still held in office files, he might well come to a decision with the individual officials based mostly on the administrator's awareness of how often a given group of records, for example, the correspondence of his predecessors, is used and his estimation of their possible future usefulness to his own or some other office of the institution. The decision as to whether a given group of records has any permanent value over and above these considerations as, for example, for an educational or historical study, is where the records officer's experience, knowledge of the history of his institution, and historical training will be heavily drawn upon.

At any rate, the records that are eventually preserved should be kept as they were originally filed. Every basic unit or records series should be integrally preserved. For example, it might be the minute books of a particular faculty or the file of correspondence of a dean's office. These should be preserved intact and no attempt should be made to integrate them with a file of someone else's correspondence, annual announcements, or any other item in a chronological or subject arrangement. The original order which an organic body of records assumed as it was being formed is sacrosanct to archivists. Any attempt to group letters by subject matter or to run together disparate materials such as alumni bulletins, promotional material, and correspondence into one file because they were produced in the same year, or to unify the records of different offices results only in archival bedlam. This statement is made with a faith

that conforms to American archival practice, which in turn has drawn on the best of a long European tradition and adapted it to the records magnitude of our national way of life.

In this matter of accessioning material into such safekeeping, certain irregular practices follow from misconceptions alluded to above concerning the nature of an archives. A person who thinks it a place where only certain items with an immediately obvious historical or apologetic importance are filed for future use is apt to be sending to the archivist promptly on issuance all such important announcements. Again a similarly limited idea in the mind of an administrator may result in certain choice, if not more aptly, albeit colloquially, referred to as "hot," items on some episode in the institution's past being handed over to the records agency. Such individual documents or small batches of records should rather be considered as part of a definite series of records with its own organic unity, which is spoiled by such a process of selection and, perhaps, by their isolation the precious items removed are even rendered less understandable.

This preservation of records according to the office of their origin and, whenever possible, according to the order or system in which they were formed gives to the college or university archives a certain diagrammatic unity. The whole will be made up of parts which may be called record groups, the records of the board of trustees, of the president, of the various schools and subordinate departments according to date of establishment, and so on down the line of jurisdiction. Even down to the archives of the archivist the very arrangement of the records according to the best archival practice will reflect the organizational history of the college or university. Just as offices continue despite changes in personnel, so the documentary tools of their work, which are in time the chief evidence of their accomplishment, should continue in unbroken and distinct lines.

These lines of records — the so-called record groups — are not commonly retained in expensive office filing equipment in American archives. Here again the economic argument comes to the fore. Over and above the saving produced by the elimination of much useless paper from old files, under any archives program a great saving is effected even in the handling of what are considered permanently valuable records. American experience has just about established that in most cases the best containers are cardboard cartons or document cases of about five inches in width and ten in height and made to hold legal or correspondence size papers as desired. In such

easily handled units the materials are shelved systematically and, if the use demands it, in time finding aids can be elaborated in the form of indexes. Many times, of course, such already exist within the records transferred and remain still usable.

Moreover, individual documents may be scientifically treated if they are in need of repair in order to be safeguarded against further deterioration. The old Vatican library process of silking manuscripts to preserve them against the ravages of time in the form of moisture or chemical reactions due to the ink or contact with another substance has generally given way to what is called lamination, a distinctly American contribution to archival science. In the lamination process a document is pressed between sheets of cellulose acetate foil while heat and pressure are applied until the substances become in effect blended into one. This device is merely mentioned here, not because the ordinary college or even university archives would be expected to plan for a small laminating machine, but in some cases of fragile or often exhibited documents that are highly prized by an institution, it might be well to have the manuscripts strengthened in this manner in an outside agency. Ordinarily a careful unfolding — since today's creases are tomorrow's breaks, especially in modern paper — a dusting and, perhaps, first of all a fumigating, before boxing and shelving is sufficient physical processing of our ordinary types of institutional records. Within each box, of course, the division into folders as in the original filing system in the office of origin is maintained.

From what has been said it is not difficult to see that there is a very real connection between the filing of current records and the administration of an institutional archives. It can happen that some departments of a college or university may not be represented at all in the archivist's domain simply because they produced no records or at least kept none in their early days particularly. The contribution of some scientists and engineers who worked on low budgets and without secretarial staffs, one might suspect, will be lost since they are prominent in this group. Again an office with the reprehensible habit of destroying periodically enough of its old correspondence to make the file drawer a little less stuffed will certainly produce no archival material. Another bad office filing practice which militates against good current records and archives administration is simply to continue filing material without any regard to the retirement of certain amounts of material as quasi-current and eventually noncurrent after a determined number of years. In such cases the cabinets multiply beyond all control and when some-

thing just has to be done the situation can be handled only by a time-absorbing job of weeding. As records officer of the institution, the archivist should work out with the various agencies on the campus a program for the retirement of certain types of records to the archives and the disposal of others without transfer after stated periods of time. This is necessarily a cooperative work. Only a registrar, for instance, would know how old a student record generally is before it becomes subject to merely an occasional call. It is evident that the full meaning of modern archives administration implies this awareness of the need for the management of records from the point of origin through day-to-day use and on to the fires of destruction or the Elysian fields of the archives, whence, however, they may be called back at any time to serve their former masters.

It should be clear that the ultimate purpose of all archival activity is utility or service to the college or university itself. The aim is not merely to have a fine array of records but through them to supply a need which American administrators in all kinds of endeavors are becoming increasingly aware of as necessary for good administration. The secondary function of service to historical truth through aid to research is by its very statement of genuine importance. It is certainly at least not to be overlooked. The contributions of such noted educators as Father John A. Zahm of the University of Notre Dame or Monsignor John A. Ryan of the Catholic University of America will be better known than those of some of their predecessors because their records have been preserved. The joint experiences of Catholic educators in the National Catholic Educational Association can be studied and reflected upon with profit in our day only because Catholic institutions, and these include some three educational ones, did something to preserve their records. These are but samples of what needs little proof but they may strengthen by illustration the argument for better records and archival administration in our Catholic colleges and universities.

Archival administration is not, however, by any means a Catholic problem. Enough institutions of higher learning have already shown sufficient interest as to cause a special committee on college and university archives to be set up by the Society of American Archivists. As a matter of fact, Catholic participants in this growing professional group have not been too noticeable except for the fact that the intensive summer training program conducted by the American University at the National Archives has seen for 8 years now about one fifth of the enrollment representing Catholic institutions of

various types. Why then speak specifically of Catholic institutional archives? It is justified if only because of the strong traditions in favor of good archival practice which are part of our sometimes forgotten inheritance. The code of canon law which is the distillation of centuries of tradition legislates quite definitely on the matter for dioceses and parishes, but, of course, our colleges and institutions escape that obligation and have for the most part only the practical and even economic consideration of more effective administration to sway them to renewed interest or reform.

Yet the middle years of the twentieth century may be a good time to advert to "impractical" considerations. "No documents, no history," is one principle we have already alluded to. If we think we have made and are making a contribution to American education, some record more than the repeated statement of the fact will be useful to the future historian. Sometimes the inquiry about the untold Catholic chapters in our American history books might be answered by the question: who has studied them or where are the sources from which one will be able to study them? When the cultural history of a nation is written sources almost without parallel, to the minds of some, are found in its college and university archives. At least no one can deny that such works as Samuel E. Morison's classic volumes on the development of Harvard University or the recent history of the University of Wisconsin or the already four-volume series on the Catholic University of America have saved unique educational traditions from oblivion. This was made possible by the availability of the records of those institutions, but in how many of our Catholic colleges and universities will this be able to be done in such a scientific way in the next generation? Moreover, let us not lament any national shallowness that we might attribute to a lack of a sense of tradition if we do not know something of the early days and the giants of our own institutions. The pioneers and shapers of our traditions will remain unknown as will our own days, which are to be the early days to our successors of tomorrow, if our records are destroyed or simply kept stored in inaccessible places. Our roots in the past, on a very local scale to be sure, must run deep into the rich soil of our institutional archives. "What is past is prologue," wrote Shakespeare in the *Tempest*, and the Government of the United States engraved it on its Archives Building. If some have not hesitated to cite as a measure of a nation's level of civilization its care for the written and other monuments of its past, may it not with some justice be proposed as a measure of the maturity of a Catholic college or university?

Whether from the awareness of these truths or from the very unphilosophical suggestion of a great American Catholic layman who used to call regularly for "a look at the record," it should become increasingly evident to the administrators of American Catholic colleges and universities that a well-ordered and functioning archives is not a luxury but an obligation they owe to the past, the present, and the future.

W. J. BARROW

*Document Restorer*

STATE LIBRARY BUILDING

RICHMOND 19, VA.