

# The French Departmental Archives and the Fulbright Microfilm Project<sup>1</sup>

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**E**XACTLY 4 years ago I returned from France just in time to attend the annual meeting of the American Historical Association at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. When Richard W. Hale, Jr., chairman of the French section of the American Historical Association Committee on Documentary Reproduction, then asked me for ideas on the Fulbright microfilm project, I said that if the unpublished inventories which I had just been using in the French National Archives had been available to me in America before I left for my year abroad I could have saved at least 3 months of thumbing through archival guides in Paris, months that could more profitably have been devoted to reading the manuscripts themselves. Mr. Hale adopted my suggestion that the handwritten inventories be microfilmed and later invited me to become a member of his subcommittee. It is, therefore, especially gratifying to be asked to speak on the progress of the microfilm program in France during 1951-52, with special emphasis upon another project of mine — namely, the expansion of the program to include the departmental archives.<sup>2</sup>

In Paris last year I continued the program that had been carried on in preceding years by Howard C. Rice of Princeton University,

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the session on the Progress of the Microfilm Program at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D. C., on December 29, 1952. I would like to express my appreciation to the Fund for the Advancement of Education for the Ford Fellowship, which enabled me to spend the past academic year in Paris, and to the American Philosophical Society and the University of Florida, which made possible my visits to the French departmental archives. I also want to acknowledge my gratitude and appreciation to the scores of French archivists without whose unfailing courtesy and helpfulness my personal research and the extension of the microfilm program would have been impossible. — The Author.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent published statement of "Operation Fulbright," Lester K. Born's annual report on "Microreproduction," in Library of Congress, *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, 10:27-28 (November 1952), contains no reference to the 1951-52 program in France.

A. P. Nasatir of San Diego State College, and Lester K. Born of the Library of Congress. So far as the Archives Nationales was concerned the task was primarily to see that the microfilming of the manuscript inventories was completed, to make sure that no important ones had been overlooked, and to investigate possibilities of expanding our project. The thoroughness with which my predecessors had done their jobs at the Archives Nationales made that part of my task relatively easy. There are several inventories, however, that will have to be microfilmed at a later date as they are still in progress. For example, the minutely detailed, multivolumed inventory of series o<sup>1</sup> (Maison du Roi), which was begun in 1918, containing important materials on the Old Regime and the French Revolution already amounts to more than 10 folio volumes and is still far from finished.<sup>3</sup> As these are completed they should be included in the program.

Another activity which I continued during the past year at the Archives Nationales was keeping in touch with the progress of several important archival publications. The first of these, the supplement to the List of Archival Inventories of 1937,<sup>4</sup> will give us more recent information on the unpublished repertories which we may want to microfilm in the future. The second, Pierre Caron's inventory of the papers of the Committee of General Security<sup>5</sup> is one of those which we have already microfilmed. We sincerely hope that gradually the publication of such guides will replace the need for their consultation on microfilm by American scholars, as printed catalogs are of course much more convenient to use than rolls of film.

Here a word of caution is in order. Both these inventories appear to be still in the press. In France, as elsewhere, editing and printing is a long and expensive process. I fear that very few of the inventories which we have microfilmed during the last few years will be made available in handy published form in our generation. The microfilms made available by the Library of Congress through the

<sup>3</sup> "Inventaire analytique des cartons de la serie o<sup>1</sup>," begun by Henri de Curzon and continued by his successors goes as far as o<sup>1</sup> 1830. It is numbered 225 in the Archives Nationales set and is supplemented by nos. 226 and 239. For a convenient guide and finding list see H. Curzon. *Répertoire numérique des archives de la Maison du Roi (serie o<sup>1</sup>)* (Paris, 1903) and also A. Cans, "Les registres d'expédition du Secrétariat d'État de la Maison du Roi," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 4:257-261 (1902-3).

<sup>4</sup> *État des inventaires des Archives nationales, départementales, communales et hospitalières au 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1937* (Paris, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> "sûreté Le fonds du Comité de générale" (Paris, 1931). Caron published the preface in abbreviated form in *La Révolution française*, 86:5-28 (1933).

activities of our committee will remain our basic tools for a long time to come. Moreover, I had more than one experience in comparing handwritten inventories with their printed versions that convinced me that the published guides do not always satisfactorily replace the manuscript originals. The latter are almost invariably more complete, more accurate, and more detailed, perhaps because French archivists are possessed of an inhuman patience and an almost fanatical fidelity as contrasted with French printers. High costs and limited budgets conspire to prevent the archivist's work from being presented in its entirety. For example, at one of the more important departmental archives that I visited last summer I was referred by the chief archivist to a particular published inventory as a guide to my research. As a key to the arrangement and general contents of the *fonds* it was excellent, but in the index only family names were given. A single entry would run together references to a number of distinct individuals, whose identities and activities had to be disentangled by reference to the documents themselves. The reason was, of course, that economy ruled out such little "luxuries" as Christian names or initials. After the departure of his chief a few days before I myself had to leave for Paris, the assistant archivist brought out a huge handwritten volume from which the printed index had been made. It included not only given names but also addresses and sometimes professions so that in an hour I had all the references that I needed more exactly and more completely than those in the published version, and I saved days of uselessly calling for and examining bundles of manuscripts that contained nothing on my subject.

This experience is by no means exceptional. Those of you who have worked in the Archives Nationales in Paris will recall that when you had exhausted the inventories on the open shelves of the *salle de travail*, the president would send you to the archivists behind the scenes, who would usually solve your problem by simply consulting a card catalog or a more detailed manuscript inventory available only to the staff. After you had been around for a couple of years you discovered that they would sometimes let you consult these precious guides yourself. One particularly obliging archivist — a true gentlewoman of the old school — saved weeks of my time by letting me use the great series of file slips and *inventaires sommaires* in her care. (The French, being a logical people, call the most detailed type of guide a "summary inventory.") It has been generally felt that the microfilming of what we would call card catalogs presents great technical difficulties. The task, however, may

not be entirely impossible. During the past year I carried on an experiment in connection with microfilming exactly this type of index in the departmental archives at Lille and I am anxiously awaiting the reactions of the Library of Congress as to this attempted solution of the problem. If their judgment is favorable I think that we might very well reopen the whole question of microfilming card catalogs and perhaps continue our project at the Archives Nationales to include the 125 odd inventories on file slips, as suggested by Dr. Born some time ago.

Moreover, this new approach to the problem would enable us to break ground in other important areas within the Archives de France. The Archives de France, you know, occupies a vast complex of buildings in the Marais quarter of Paris, including, besides the huge nineteenth century depots, those elegant town houses which bear the noble and sonorous names of Soubise, Rohan, and Boisgelin. The Administration of the Archives de France, though it has no control over the archives of four "old" ministries (Foreign Affairs, War, Navy, and Colonies), directs a far flung network of departmental, communal and hospital archives, as well as the Archives Nationales. Among the important subdivisions of the latter is the Minutier Central des Notaires de Paris, or notarial archives, which comprise over 70 million original minutes of the notaries of the Paris region from the middle ages to about 1830.<sup>6</sup> This recently created depository and similar ones in the departments (among the more important are those at Aix, Avignon, Bordeaux, Nîmes, Strasbourg and Toulouse) are of the highest value for social, economic, artistic, literary, and sometimes political history. Since some of you are already familiar with the Paris minutier and since Mr. Krueger will undoubtedly touch on the peculiar significance of notarial archives in countries of Roman legal traditions I shall merely call your attention to the fact that the only adequate guide to the Paris depository besides the contemporary registers in which notaries recorded each day's legal acts, is a constantly growing card catalog of over a million names located in the attic of the former stables of the Hôtel de Rohan, where the archives notariales are housed.

In the adjoining Hôtel de Boisgelin, recently rebuilt within its ancient shell, are the archives économiques and the archives privées,

<sup>6</sup> See Howard C. Rice, "The Paris Depository for Notarial Archives," *American Archivist*, 14:99-104 (April 1951), and Jacques Monicat, "Cinquante kilomètres de vieux papiers; préservation et utilisation historique des minutes notariales," *Cahiers français d'information*, no. 202, p. 10-12 (April 15, 1952), with photographs.

which comprise the papers of certain industrial, transportation, banking, and commercial firms and of various families and individuals who have played a leading role in politics, business, and diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> These recent additions to M. Braibant's growing family are of the highest possible interest for economic and social historians as well as their more conventional brethren. Their availability to scholars, however, is limited by the fact that their inventories, too, are almost exclusively on slips. I believe that M. Monicat, M. François, M. Gille, and other directors of these specialized services will be eager to cooperate with us in studying methods of reproducing their card catalog guides. I suggest that the next representative of the French subcommittee in Paris look further into the technical possibilities of microfilming these guides and continue the consultations which have already been started with the officials at the Archives.

But all this is for the future. Let us return to the program for 1951-52 but this time in its newest aspect, namely, activities in the departmental archives. The headquarters of the archives départementales, like those of the Archives Nationales, are in the Hôtel de Soubise. They were established during the French Revolution in order to constitute the administrative archives of the newly created territorial departments, and then to preserve certain historical records inherited from the Old Regime. As a result these 90-odd repositories<sup>8</sup> are the guardians of the papers of numerous corporate bodies of prerevolutionary France, including the enormous mass of manuscripts collected and edited by the erudition of generations of monastic scholars, the papers of the various parlements and provincial estates, of the royal intendants, and so on. These repositories are also the caretakers of the official documents created by departmental administrations and prefects from the Revolution to the present. Moreover, recent years have seen some concentration of local records (communal, hospital, and notarial) into the various departmental archives.

The importance of these archives to historians needs no elaboration. The work of Professors Crane Brinton, R. M. Brace, Donald Greer, Louis Gottschalk, John B. Sirich, Beatrice F. Hyslop, and others in one field alone is evidence enough. Their vast riches, nevertheless, have been only partially exploited. For example, until

<sup>7</sup> See Bertrand Gille, "Les archives d'entreprises," *Révue historique*, 208:185-204 (October 1952).

<sup>8</sup> In 89 "home" departments, the territory of Belfort, and the 3 Algerian and 4 overseas departments.

the confidential reports of national agents still preserved in many departmental archives have been thoroughly studied, no valid conclusion regarding public opinion during the French Revolution can be made. Today we should like to make available to scholars in this country the essential guides to serious work in this area. Some of you are already familiar with the printed inventories of certain record groups that have been published by some departmental archives. Others of you have personally consulted numbers of such inventories that are still unprinted.

During the past year my research took me to representative departmental archives in widely separated parts of France, from Lille in the North to Montpellier in the South by way of Clermont-Ferrand and Périgueux and from Tarbes in the Upper Pyrenees to Nice in the Maritime Alps by way of Lyon and Grenoble. This research project put me in personal contact with and enabled me to gain the interest and cooperation of the archivists in question for our microfilm program. I investigated possibilities of reproducing unpublished inventories and other materials and gained practical experience in dealing with various local microphotographers. Since I made it clear that we were not a commercial agency and were not trying to microfilm large blocks of manuscript materials in order to avoid future visits to their archives but merely to reproduce inventories that would in the long run bring more scholars to their doors, the archivists were most helpful and cordial. Not only did I select inventories to be microfilmed, but some of the local archivists suggested that we consider reproduction of other types of material of value to historians. For example, at Lille it was proposed that we microfilm one of those vast collections of medieval documents carefully gathered by the erudite monks of the early modern period but never published.

In the few minutes remaining I should like to speak more specifically of the new direction in the program, initiated this past year by a pilot project at the Archives Départementales du Nord at Lille. Lille seemed to me to be a particularly good place to begin because it has one of the largest and best organized of the departmental archives, which includes records for one of the most strategic areas both in time and in space so far as French history is concerned. After considering various possibilities and consulting with Pietreson de Saint-Aubin, the chief archivist, I decided to ask for authorization for the microfilming of certain selected inventories. One of these was on small slips of paper bound together in booklets. In other words a card catalog in a particularly awkward form for



microfilming. A local microfilm firm estimated that it would be able to handle the project and the price appeared to be reasonable. The project was approved by the committee and by the Library of Congress, and I ordered the work done. All of this took time, of course, and the microfilming was not completed before I had to return to the United States. At the suggestion of John W. Cronin of the Library of Congress, however, I got in touch with Manuel Sanchez, publications procurement officer at the American Embassy in Paris, who very kindly forwarded the film to Washington by diplomatic pouch when the work was subsequently completed. The 10 rolls of film resulting from this project are now available at the Library of Congress. They contain complete microreproductions of inventories 72, 73, 88, and 158 of the Archives Départementales du Nord at Lille.

In keeping with the purpose of the project these microfilms reproduce finding aids that supplement but do not duplicate existing printed inventories and that are indispensable guides to particularly significant historical materials. Rich in manuscripts pertaining to many periods of French history, the Archives du Nord enjoy a unique position as the most important provincial collection of Revolutionary documents. Series L alone includes more than 10,000 bundles and volumes of manuscripts! Since funds were quite limited it was decided to microfilm only guides to record groups of the Revolution, notably series L, for which there is an excellent printed *inventaire numérique*.<sup>9</sup> The latter is the abbreviated, analytical type of finding aid, which gives a clear picture of the general scope, organization, and arrangement of a record group. Of its very nature it must be supplemented by detailed *inventaires sommaires* and subject and person indexes. The microreproductions of inventories 72 and 158 now provide American scholars with exhaustive guides to the deliberations of the departmental and district administrators who from 1790 to 1799 wrestled with the complex political, economic, social, and religious problems of a revolutionary government in an active war zone.<sup>10</sup> Inventory 73, an alphabetical index to the dossiers of suspects and émigrés in series L, Q, M, and V, makes possible detailed study of the war, the emigration, and the Terror

<sup>9</sup> Max Bruchet, ed., *Archives départementales du Nord; répertoire numérique, série L (période révolutionnaire)* (Lille, 1911).

<sup>10</sup> Inventory 72 is entitled "Inventaire de la série L (Conseil, Directoire et Administration central du Département du Nord)." Compiled by M. Bruchet, it is undated and comprises 60 folios. Inventory 158 is entitled "Inventaire de la série L (Directoire des districts); table manuscrite des délibérations." This two-volume work, dated 1932, was compiled by F. Beaujot.

in this strategic area.<sup>11</sup> This guide is completed by inventory 88, which is an alphabetical repertory of persons who faced revolutionary justice before the criminal tribunal of the department.<sup>12</sup> The first three of these inventories presented no reproduction problems; but, as has been indicated, the last (no. 88), which consisted of hundreds of small slips bound together in fascicles, had to be taken apart, arranged, photographed, and finally reassembled. The apparent success of this complex experimental operation indicates, I believe, that the proposal to broaden our program to include other card-catalog finding aids at the Archives Nationales as well as in various archives départementales is not entirely impractical.

Before I close I should like to call attention to a possible further extension of the program for the somewhat more distant future. I propose that we consider eventual inclusion of unpublished inventories of certain important private archives whose historical interest and huge size qualify them for comparison with the official archives. I refer, of course, to the archives of the former royal and imperial families of France.

The archives de la maison d'Orléans at the Château of Dreux contain the social and economic records of the cadet branch of the French royal family. They include large numbers of feudal and manorial documents, financial accounts, legal papers, and other records connected with the inheritances, marriages, business affairs, and management of the family estates in almost unbroken continuity until our own day. Although the papers of Philippe Egalité, the Duc d'Orléans of revolutionary fame, and of his son King Louis Philippe are of particular interest to historians, this hitherto untouched mass of source materials is of the highest value for social, economic, and even cultural history for a period extending from the twelfth century to the present day. Thanks to Beatrice F. Hyslop

<sup>11</sup> Inventory 73 is entitled "Inventaire des séries L, Q, M, et V (dossiers de suspects et d'émigrés); table manuscrite époque révolutionnaire, Consulat et Premier Empire." This undated work, of 484 folios, was compiled by M. Bruchet. Cf. P. Denis du Péage, "Inventaire des dossiers concernant les émigrés du Nord aux Archives nationales," *Annales du Comité flamand de France*, 32:109-170 (1921), and "Liste générale des émigrés . . . du Nord" and other lists in AD Nord, L 1079, 1080, 1093-1102. See also A. J. Paris, *La Terreur dans le Pas-de-Calais et dans le Nord; histoire de Joseph Le Bon et les tribunaux révolutionnaires d'Arras et de Cambrai* (2d ed., Paris, 1864); Louis Jacob, *Joseph Le Bon; la Terreur à la frontière* (Paris, 1933); and Donald Greer, *Incidence of the Reign of Terror During the French Revolution; a Statistical Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1935), and his *Incidence of the Emigration During the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1951).

<sup>12</sup> Inventory 88 is entitled "Inventaire du tribunal criminel du Nord; répertoire manuscrite des registres de transcripts des jugements criminels (19L, 74-92, 94, 95)." Compiled by A. Quenson de La Hennerie, this undated work comprises 7 vols.



and the Comte de Paris I was able to consult these unique private archives for my own research, and I believe that the Pretender to the French throne may be willing to give other American historians the privilege of using his family records. When Dr. Hyslop's work on Philippe Egalité, based in large part upon these papers, is published we shall have an even better idea of the singular value of the Orleanist archives. In the meantime I hope that she will be willing to tell us more about this important depository as she is the first historian ever to be permitted to use it extensively and up to this moment she is the one person most thoroughly familiar with its extent, contents, and organization.

Prince Napoleon, like his Orleanist competitor, has also returned to France and he has moved his archives to Paris. It is hardly necessary to underline here the great value and interest which these "family papers" will have for American historians of the First and Second Empires and of the Bonapartist pretenders. Professor Georges Bourgin of the Sorbonne, former head of the Archives de France, who appears to know literally everything about French archives, seems to think that Prince Napoleon may not want to be outdone by the royalists in the matter of opening private archives to qualified scholars. Although this is not certain, our next representative in France ought to look into this fascinating possibility.