

The National Archives After 20 Years

By ROBERT H. BAHMER¹

National Archives and Records Service

ONE natural approach to the subject of the National Archives after 20 years, it seems to me, is to take a look at where we started and where we are with reference to certain fundamental questions of policy.

I propose to consider only two of these: the question of a proper relationship between the National Archives and the working records of the Federal Government and the question of a proper organizational position and structure for the National Archives.

On the first question there had been considerable discussion and more than a little controversy before the appointment of Robert D. W. Connor, the first Archivist, in the fall of 1934. Over the years a number of opinions had developed as to what kind of central records installation the Government should have. There was, first, the popular notion that the National Archives should be a repository for only the rare documents of outstanding historical interest. No one immediately concerned with the problem, however, gave this restricted point of view any serious attention, least of all the new Archivist.

A second opinion of greater respectability and influence was that held by a number of important Government officials: that the pressing need was for a records building in which space could be assigned to each agency for the housing of its accumulations of active and inactive files, along with their attendant clerks. This point of view gave strength to the Hall of Records movement that developed after the Civil War. As many of the records considered proper for storage in a Hall of Records were old and many were valuable, much was said by the Hall of Records advocates about protecting the so-called "historical records."

A third point of view was held by the historians, archivists, and

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, on September 14, 1954. The author joined the staff of the National Archives in 1936; from 1943 to 1948 he was attached to the Departmental Records Branch of the Adjutant General's Office; and since 1948 he has been Assistant Archivist of the United States.

scholars — the group that after 1900 labored so long and so effectively for the National Archives. The position of this group was the traditional position of archivists: that all records created by Government agencies, when they became inactive, were appropriate for storage in an archival establishment.

The scholars and historians in the period before 1934 knew that the records and files of the Government were encumbered with trivia and useless papers, but this problem was to them of minor concern. Their interest lay in obtaining an institution for the preservation and administration of the important files. And in respect to the records to be given attention, their position differed less from the proponents of a records and files building than is usually assumed. The older civilian clerks — often the chief clerks — were conservative regarding the destruction of Government records. Many of them, however, were also conservative on the question as to what records should be moved to an archives building and particularly as to when those records should be transferred.

Over a long period of years the reluctance of the Government agencies to transfer their records to an archival agency had been manifest. The advocates of a National Archives took this fact into account, and their thinking resulted in proposals for the progressive transfer of inactive records, beginning with material dated before the Civil War.

The essential difference between those who favored a records and files building and those who favored a National Archives establishment lay as much in their differing judgments as to the age and activity of the material to be transferred as it did in their differing opinions as to the nature and value of the material to be accommodated. Underlying the position of the historians and scholars was also the fear that if a records and files building were obtained the prospects of a real archival establishment, functioning in the interests of scholarship, would be postponed indefinitely.

All of these points of view were known to the Advisory Committee on the National Archives Building, appointed in 1930 after the appropriation for construction had been passed by Congress. James Franklin Jameson, the representative of the Library of Congress, understood the situation very well indeed. Early in the Committee's deliberations the question of the use of the proposed archives building was considered. James L. Baity, Executive Assistant in the General Accounting Office, raised the point when he said "that he was first told that the Archives building would take care of the Government files and records and that later he was informed that it

was to be for historical records." And later on in the discussion that followed he asked whether there was any possibility that there would be constructed "in addition to the Archives building a storage building for the orphan files, etc."

Dr. Jameson set the Committee right on this point with considerable emphasis when he stated "that the Committee was called together to advise for one Archives building and that it would be preposterous to begin by having two."

The Committee did not, however, escape the question so easily. It soon discovered that it faced a real problem concerning space in the proposed building. After a survey of the Government's files and after eliminating those which, in the judgment of the creating agencies, could be destroyed, the Committee estimated that there were approximately 3 million cubic feet of records in existence that ultimately would be transferred to the Archives Building. This, it was estimated, was just about the maximum capacity of the building that could be constructed on the site selected at 7th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

On the other hand the Committee found that two-thirds of the 3 million cubic feet were records dated after World War I. When the Committee applied the idea of a progressive transfer program starting with the pre-Civil War records or even pre-World War I records, it concluded that most of the space would remain unused for 30 years or longer. This was the problem: to recommend plans for a building the ultimate capacity of which would be limited to records already in existence but which would nevertheless remain vacant for many, many years. Some of the members of the Committee felt that the site chosen should be abandoned in favor of one capable of greater building expansion. An obvious solution to the problem of excess space was to use it for active or semiactive files. The Committee was reluctant to propose this solution partly because it knew that the agencies would be opposed and partly because it felt that large numbers of clerks would have to accompany the records. The Committee finally asked the Secretary of the Treasury for guidance on the problem, saying that a depository for inactive files was one thing; a building for active files quite another.

Acting Secretary of the Treasury Ferry K. Heath, who answered the Committee's letter, didn't want a change of site; neither did he approve the transfer of active files. He thought the solution was to construct initially a building of less than its ultimate capacity.

In the end the Committee recommended plans that envisaged

immediate construction of a building of about half its ultimate capacity, capable of expansion by the construction of stacks in an inner court. On these plans construction of the building proceeded after the cornerstone was laid by President Herbert Hoover on February 20, 1933. In 1934 the National Archives Act was passed, and in the fall of that year Dr. Connor was appointed Archivist.

But even before he was appointed — and this is the reason for so much pre-Archives history — the question of the proper use of the Archives Building became an issue again. The years 1933 and 1934 were the early days of the New Deal, when older Government agencies were expanding and new ones were being set up at a rate that created incessant demand for more office space. In the winter of 1933 a survey of space requirements disclosed what numerous surveys before had shown: that thousands of square feet of good office space in Government buildings was occupied by files and records. The result was a recommendation made to the Bureau of the Budget in January 1934 that money be obtained for a records and files building.

At this time the management of Government buildings was under the National Park Service, and the justification for such a building was presented to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. The proposal must have been something of a shock to E. K. Burlew, Administrative Assistant to Ickes; for Burlew had served with Jameson, Simon, and others on the Advisory Committee in 1930. The Committee, he could recall, had worried about an Archives Building with too much initial capacity and had presented vigorous representations against a "records and files" building even for the future.

It can be assumed that Burlew influenced Ickes to oppose the new records building and to propose as an alternative the quick completion of the inner court of the Archives Building. Ickes acted in characteristic fashion. In June 1934 he obtained President Roosevelt's informal approval of the inner court project to be constructed with PWA funds and in September a more formal approval when the President wrote:

I approve proceeding with the allotment for stacks in the court of the National Archives Building. Before final allotment, however, will you please be sure that we are violating no law? Someone told me that by some Act of Appropriation the Archives Building is limited to historic archives and cannot be used for ordinary Government records and files. Will you check?

The point of law was quickly resolved, but the project was "off again, on again." The President apparently at one point withdrew

his approval; later in the year, after Ickes' insistence, he approved it again, but not until after the Archivist had been appointed and had supported the project.

Even then the idea of a records and files building refused to stay dead. It was revived a second time in 1935 by the Treasury Department, and it picked up a sponsor in Congress, Representative John J. Cochran, who in 1935, 1937, and 1939 introduced legislation to provide for "a building in which to store Government records."

Secretary Ickes appealed to the President to oppose the revived project in 1935 and again obtained the Archivist's support. Connor's letter to Ickes of November 23, 1935, indicates something of the spot he was on. The issue, it must be emphasized, was space for the storage of what "F. D. R." called the ordinary records and files of the Government. Ickes argued that the space to be obtained in the Archives inner court could be used for this purpose and that as a result an additional building was unnecessary. Dr. Connor agreed. Both Ickes and Connor felt that these ordinary files and records were potential archives.

Connor knew, of course, that under the law the classes of material to be transferred to the National Archives building were to be defined by the National Archives Council. One wonders whether the resolutions which he presented to the Council in February 1936 were not influenced by the events of the preceding year and a half. Perhaps the "records building" issue accounts for the broad and somewhat indefinite character of the main class of records which the Council decided were subject to requisition by the Archivist: "I. Any archives or records that the head of the agency that has custody of them may offer for transfer to the National Archives."

From the issue of the "records building" and its defeat by the construction of the inner court of the Archives Building came a number of consequences important to the future of the new institution. Gone completely, for one thing, was any basis for planning rationally the accessioning of records in progressive stages. Whether the decisions made led to a more liberal policy of accessioning than would otherwise have obtained is more difficult to say. From the inside I would judge that they did. But, more important, the danger (and a very real danger it was) of a records storage installation competing with the National Archives was averted.

With no competition from a records building and with continually increasing pressure on building space from the expanding Government, first during the depression and then during World War

II, the matter of obtaining the transfer of the older records of the Federal agencies proved to be less of a problem than many had anticipated. There was some reluctance to transfer records during a few years in the late 1930's; and a few diehards, such as the War Department, held out until presidential pressures were applied; but in the main the problem that had so greatly troubled the promoters of the National Archives proved in the end to be the least problem of all.

After experience had proved that records transferred to the Archives were not lost or unobtainable — that the long-haired archivists were competent to manage them — the older fears of the agencies disappeared and their reluctance to transfer records was replaced by desire. The problem of late years has been one of putting on the brakes, of slowing up accessioning, of preventing overzealous records personnel in the agencies from using the National Archives as a dumping ground. It is a problem of applying stricter principles in the selection of materials for transfer to the National Archives.

The reasons for this departure from the position taken in 1934 and 1935 are obvious. First, there is the continued growth in volume of Government records. Waldo G. Leland in 1912 estimated the annual accumulation of Federal archives at 60,000 cubic feet. The Committee in 1930 estimated it at 200,000 cubic feet. In 1953 we estimated that 4 million cubic feet of records had been created within the year. We can no longer adhere to the objective originally announced, of concentrating in the National Archives Building all inactive archives of permanent or longtime administrative value or historical interest.

Records of longtime administrative value only are not transferred to the National Archives today. Records centers — a few under the jurisdiction of the agencies and a nationwide regional system under the National Archives and Records Service — now serve as repositories for this class of material. Over 90,000 cubic feet of such records have in fact been removed from the Archives Building to records centers in the past 5 years.

It may well be asked concerning these records centers: Are they not precisely what the proponents of the "records and files" building wanted and against which the historians and archivists labored? The answer is that they are not. The records centers had their origin in the defense agencies during World War II, when the volume of material created was so overwhelming that, even with

the inner court completed, the bulk was well beyond the capacity of the National Archives.

The records centers naturally have made their biggest contribution in providing responsible and economical administration for the vast quantity of records of less than permanent value. They serve also, however, as intermediate depositories for material that has sufficient value to go eventually to the National Archives. They make it possible to foresee a return to that excellent idea of our founders that accessions should be planned, with all of the attendant advantages of more considered evaluation, better arrangement, and better control. And, beyond this, they make it possible to envisage a regional decentralization of archives of permanent value but primarily of local or regional interest. The National Archives Building in Washington, it appears to many of us inside, must in the long run limit its holdings to material of genuine national interest that has met increasingly higher standards of selectivity. In this view we have changed a lot in 20 years.

Higher standards of selectivity imply a more liberal policy for the disposal of records. This second aspect of the relationship of the National Archives to the records of the Federal Government deserves greater consideration than I can give it now, but this much must be said: from our experience we have developed in the staff of the National Archives a competence in the evaluation of records that did not exist anywhere 20 years ago. Our standards for judging record values have been clarified and, in the face of the frightening statistics of record volume, have been modified in the direction of more liberal disposal.

The most noteworthy development in our handling of the disposal of records has been the introduction of the disposal schedule. The scheduling idea originated in an endeavor to introduce system into a situation where chaos prevailed. One curious fact should be mentioned — the idea of scheduling records evolved out of necessity in the National Archives without reference at first either to the practice of those American firms that already used schedules or to the example of the British Public Record Office, where scheduling was the rule for a generation before our National Archives was established.

Twelve years ago I read a paper on scheduling at a session of the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists. I predicted that every kind of reform in recordkeeping would result from comprehensive scheduling. I now withdraw at least the more sweeping of those predictions. Scheduling has not and cannot alone bring

about the archivist's ideal world of better but fewer records. But until someone comes along with a more practical method of permitting the professional archivists to review the disposal recommendations of the Federal agencies we shall continue to use the technique of scheduling.

Regulations issued by the National Archives and Records Service in 1951 required all executive agencies to complete their initial record scheduling programs by June 30, 1954. In the main the job has been accomplished. Perhaps I should really say it has just begun, for the schedules show that of the records covered, over one-fourth, by bulk, are listed for indefinite or permanent retention. Now one-fourth of an annual accumulation of 4 million cubic feet is 1 million, a volume equal to the capacity of the National Archives Building. Obviously we cannot afford to construct a new National Archives Building every year.

The solution we are seeking seems to be in two parts: first, to approve the disposal, reluctantly perhaps, and after sampling, of many of the borderline series of records; and second, to develop improved procedures in the agencies for creating records of less bulk but higher quality of content.

This second approach is the job of records management. It illustrates clearly a point that many have failed to appreciate: that records management in the Federal Government has developed far beyond its original focus on systematic disposal in the early 1940's, when the National Archives first began promoting records administration in Government agencies. The farther records management has moved into the field of current records maintenance and handling and into the more uncertain field of record creation, the less the professional archivist, as an archivist, can contribute.

I do not imply that the archivists in the National Archives should have no interest in records management, that their points of view can be neglected in records management matters, or that the National Archives was in error when it so ably promoted the new field of records administration. I am speaking only of what should be expected of the professional archivist who is administering the non-current files of the Government.

Records management and the National Archives are separate operating activities within the National Archives and Records Service. Records management is not a function of the National Archives.

This brings me to my second main point: the organizational position and structure of the National Archives. There is a lot of

history as yet unwritten about the background of the act that established the National Archives as an independent executive agency directly responsible to the President. Someone should surely find it interesting to give us a better understanding of our origins. Proposals were made to place the National Archives in the Library of Congress, under a council or a commission, in the National Park Service, and probably elsewhere. It seems clear that the institution was made an independent agency because it was to serve all three branches of the Government. The idea of a governing council had considerable strength, partly because of European example and partly because this type of organization was recommended for the British Public Record Office by a Royal Commission in 1910. But greater weight should probably be given to the feeling that the agencies at best would be reluctant to transfer their files to the Archivist. The choice was to write into the law something of a mandatory nature about transfers, to give the Archivist authority to requisition records in his discretion, or to allow the agencies some measure of control. The National Archives Act adopted the last-mentioned compromise by establishing a National Archives Council, made up of representatives of the agencies and authorized to establish the classes of records subject to requisition by the Archivist. In other respects the Archivist was given full authority.

What has happened since? You are all as familiar as I am with the work and results of the Leahy task force of the Hoover Commission and with the Federal Records Act of 1950.

The Leahy report recommended the creation of a Federal records administration in which the National Archives would be continued as a separate entity but to which would be added the operation of Federal records centers and the development of improved records practices. The Hoover Commission recommended inclusion of the proposed agency in a central service agency. This central agency was the General Services Administration, and the functions of the Archivist were transferred to the Administrator of General Services by the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949. The Federal Records Act of 1950 is simply Title V of that act. The individuals who framed these acts either believed in or were subject to the principle of public administration that lodged statutory authority only in the head of the agency. Today, as a result, the authority of GSA relating to Federal records is vested in the Administrator — with one important exception. The Archivist is still by law the judge of what records shall be deposited with the National Archives of the United States.

Basically what happened in all this organizational development is that the Archivist of the United States accepted the responsibility of adding to his older functions relating to the National Archives, the Federal Register, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library the large new function of records management. Taking on this new function imposed upon him the specific task of developing such effective staff and procedural arrangements between the National Archives and the Records Management Division that both would profit and neither would suffer.

The development of the internal organization of the National Archives had been such by 1950 that it might have appeared logical to assign the new records management functions to the records branches (formerly called divisions), each of which administers the records of a number of departments and agencies. The original attempt to organize the National Archives on a functional basis with accessions, reference, classification, cataloging, and other divisions was short lived. By 1938 reference service responsibilities relating to Government agencies as well as accessioning and disposal functions were assigned to the custodial records divisions. In 1941, as a result of the recommendation of a special staff committee, arrangement and finding-aid responsibilities were given to the records divisions, and the change from functional organization to one based on record groups was almost complete.

It took a few years before the "coordinators" of functions at the top-management level disappeared. But they did gradually, so that by 1950 the chiefs of the records branches in the National Archives were in fact responsible for all functions relating to records in their custody. They were not, to be sure, independent professionally in the sense that a college professor or a scholar is independent, for after all the National Archives does exist within the framework of Government bureaucracy.

As I have said it might have appeared logical in 1950 to assign to the records branches, which had acquired such important status, the new responsibilities for records management. But that would have been logical only if records management was still confined to records disposal — and records management had grown beyond this original interest. Furthermore, much of the records management work, it was clear, had to be accomplished on a "task force" basis, with technicians possessing skills and competence not required of the archivists. It would have been fatal to the records management program to divide it up among the several archives branches.

And such an assignment could only have detracted from the true professional development of the National Archives staff.

My paper must end abruptly at this point because there are at least half a dozen other fundamental questions that should be discussed before conclusions are drawn. To mention only a few: Where did we start and where have we gone with reference to our internal work programs, on preservation, finding aids, and publications? What have been the changes in our reference service policy? What is the judgment at this point as to our success in developing a truly professional staff that over the years will avoid the evils of inbreeding? I can only hope that someone with time and interest will consider these questions for us before 20 more years have passed.