

# The National Archives and the Archival Theorist

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AFTER Dr. Bahmer has given you his informative view of the National Archives from within, it is my pleasant assignment to reflect on the history of our national archival agency from the viewpoint of the archival theorist or generalist. I am attempting to do this on the basis of 15 years of the most gratifying cooperation with the National Archives in the field of archival training. Although I am greatly indebted to three Archivists of the United States and to many members of the National Archives staff for their kindness and friendship, my appraisal of National Archives achievements will be a history in the sense of Auguste Comte, that is, a history without names. I shall discuss the role of the National Archives as an agency of the executive branch of the Government, its functions and organization, its staff, its relations with other archival agencies in the United States, and finally the place it has assumed on the international archival scene.

The birth of what is now one of the major archival agencies of the world must be called obscure. Even if one assumes, as I am inclined to do, that the approval of the National Archives Act on June 19, 1934, marks the beginning of our national archival agency, the precise time at which Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the act cannot be determined. There was no ceremony, and no delegation of prominent persons was present to witness the event, for the act was but one of 40 apparently signed by the President between appointments and other chores. If the establishment of the National Archives went largely unnoticed in this country, archivists in other countries were certainly unaware of its significance and those interested in the history and theory of archives administration missed an excellent opportunity to observe the birth of a great archival agency,

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an experiment in archives administration in the grand style. The infant agency, in its magnificent cradle on Constitution Avenue, was not without resources. There was the European heritage in the field of archives; there were, in addition, the lessons learned in certain State archives, as well as the ideas expounded in the reports of the Public Archives Commission and in the conferences of American archivists. Both the European heritage and the American experience combined to create a concept of a National Archives that must be called a far cry from the type of agency adequate to cope with the reality that the men and women of the National Archives staff were to face. To a certain extent, the past history of the National Archives can be seen as a modification of, if not a breaking away from, the ideas that controlled it during the first years of its existence.

That the National Archives was able to work out its own destiny may be due in part at least to the status as an independent agency that the National Archives Act assigned to it. Studies in the field of archival organization seem to reveal that, other things being equal, a national archival agency will greatly profit from being subordinate to the head of the Government rather than to any particular ministry or department. Such was the status of the National Archives during its formative years, and in my opinion this contributed immensely to the National Archives' stupendous success in concentrating the Nation's record in its custody, a success that must seem a miracle to European archivists, many of whom have struggled for 150 years to achieve what the National Archives had largely achieved by the beginning of World War II. The decisive event, it appears, was the transfer to the National Archives of the historic archives of the Department of State. This meant that in the Federal Government the existence of departmental archival agencies, such as the French Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Archives of the Ministry of War, was not going to be permitted; that on the contrary the National Archives of the United States was to be a national archival agency in the full sense of the word.

How explain this miracle? I think that the interest of Franklin D. Roosevelt had a good deal to do with it. In addition, more general factors may be discovered that helped the Archives to carry out its task. There was in the first place the fact that it was striving for recognition within a young bureaucracy still in the process of "jelling," not so firmly entrenched as that of France or Germany and hence willing to accept an upstart like the National Archives.

Within that bureaucracy records management had been neglected, and no registry offices had developed that as a matter of self-preservation were inclined to "hold on to" and refuse to surrender their treasures. In a way, what complicated the later job of digesting the records of the Federal Government — the lack of administrative care during the periods of their creation and current use — was to help the National Archives in assembling the Nation's record. Furthermore, procedurally speaking, the early organization of the National Archives with its divisions of departmental archives, vestiges of the Hall of Records idea, was bound to prove beneficial in the process of initiating and actually executing the transfer of records.

What about the National Archives in the novel situation that has developed as a result of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949? As an archival theorist I am bound to regret that the National Archives has lost its independent status, hallmark of its dignity. I am bound to find it unusual to see the institution relegated to something like bureau status within an agency of largely heterogeneous purposes. On the other hand, I do not wish to question the material advantages that have accrued and I hope will continue to accrue to the National Archives as part of a very powerful organization, provided it will always be permitted to function without regard to political considerations. According to the late Hubert Hall "archivists are feeble folks," and those of the National Archives may very well benefit from the protection of an understanding Administrator of General Services.

If subordinating the National Archives to an agency largely concerned with materialistic ends seems to militate against the more lofty ideas of the archivist, the concomitant expansion of its functions, that is, the combination of records management and archival administration, must seem to him equally surprising. No archivist familiar with the status or rather nonstatus of records management in the Federal Government will question the vital interest of the Federal archivist in the current and semicurrent phases of the life cycle of records. Every archivist will admire the boldness of those responsible for initiating the records management program of the National Archives, about 1941, on an admittedly shaky legal basis, and will applaud the courage of the men and women who went into Government agencies to assume tasks largely beyond the scope of the archivist's traditional job. Now that legal responsibility in the field of records management has been assigned to the National Archives and Records Service, the novelty of the situation and the

magnitude of the job are bound to amaze the old-line archivist. True, records management had been neglected with disastrous consequences, had become a no man's land governed by no law and controlled by no responsible authority. But for the archivist to invade this no man's land constituted an endeavor of incredible daring, an enterprise that in a bureaucracy more firmly established and ossified than the Federal bureaucracy could not possibly have succeeded.

In appraising what has happened, one naturally wonders whether ours is a unique development or whether other countries are going to follow our example, combining in one agency responsibility for records management and archival administration. Personally, I am inclined to believe that this combination will remain confined to the United States, simply because the circumstances that caused it do not exist or are not so aggravated as in the United States. The records-manager-archivist must be considered an American phenomenon.

Within the traditional archives field, the 20 years of National Archives existence have seen a number of contributions and peculiar developments that impress the archival generalist. Most obvious among them are technical advances. The National Archives Building has set certain standards that will never be disregarded by the planners and future occupants of archival structures. The methods of documentary preservation and restoration adopted by the National Archives represent enormous and lasting progress beyond the consummate craftsmanship of earlier hand methods. Finally, the large-scale application of photographic methods to various phases of the archival process exceeds anything that Old-World archives administration has seen. Yet, no matter how admirable such progress is, in these technical matters the National Archives may be said to be the skillful exploiter of the country's advanced technology.

To the archival professional, certain National Archives contributions to the fundamental archival functions of records retirement, arrangement, and description would seem equally if not more noteworthy. First and foremost, records retirement has received a degree of attention and systematic thought that is unparalleled in the history of archives administration and has resulted in a thorough rationalization of the retirement process. No country, no archivist, can afford to leave unstudied the scheduling procedure of the National Archives, including the use of general schedules and the concept of the intermediate repository or records center, first adopted by the Navy Department and now an indispensable way station in

the life cycle of records. The contribution that the National Archives has made to the solution of the problem of mass posed by modern records is overwhelmingly clear, and the fact that the institution was forced to throw much of its energy into this largely destructive phase of archives administration does not detract from the value of its accomplishments.

In the field of records arrangement, we owe to the National Archives the concept of the record group, a pragmatic and hence enormously useful refinement of the French concept of the *fond*. It has made this time-honored tool applicable to the bulky records of the giant agencies of modern times. Add to this the records description program of the National Archives — with its record group registrations, an innovation; its preliminary inventories, each dealing with a single record group; and its reference information papers, each dealing with a single subject on which there is material in many record groups — all of them available to the scholar at a distance by means of the near-print process, — and you will admit that the National Archives' contribution to the standard fields of archival administration has been significant. Retrospectively it may be a matter of regret that the preliminary shelf list provided for in the original program tended to become so elaborate and so detailed that it could not be distinguished from the preliminary inventory and had to be abolished. In fact, the preparation of a preliminary inventory is such a time-consuming process that, for the control of great quantities of records, the archivist has to rely on prearchival finding aids, such as indexes and lists made in the agency of origin. Under these circumstances, a descriptive tool of the simplest kind, perhaps of the type of the French numerical repertory, would have been a desirable temporary substitute for the elaborate preliminary inventory.

As regards reference service in the National Archives, there is only one particular development that I should like to touch upon, and that is the program of microfilm publication. I consider this one of the most incisive steps in the philosophy and practice of the archival profession. In preparing film negatives of series of outstanding research value and making copies of them available at nominal cost, the National Archives has abandoned monopoly of some of its most important holdings and has thrown them open to the use of scholars and searchers, regardless of personal merits and qualifications. This is basically a final break with the archivist's proprietary attitude toward his records, a democratization of the archival reference service that constitutes an entirely new departure.

I predict that it will be a long time before archival agencies in other parts of the world will be able and willing to follow this admirable precedent.

From the above it would seem that in the 20 short years of its existence the National Archives has established an impressive record of achievement. What may be even more remarkable is that this record was established in a period of turmoil, external and internal. Depression, emergency, war, and postwar adjustment combined to prevent the National Archives from carrying out some of its functions or had a retarding effect at least. It proved to be equally troublesome that it took the National Archives more than 15 years to achieve an effective working organization. In fact, much of its history is characterized by heroic and energy-consuming efforts to "shake down" organizationally. It was what I should like to term the curse of bigness that the National Archives had to cope with from its very beginning, the problem of large-scale archival organization.

There was indeed little in the way of foreign experience that the National Archives was able to draw on in putting its house in order. There were, however, a few precedents that, *mutatis mutandis*, might have been of assistance. The final organization of the National Archives into branches charged with the administration of records from functionally related provenances has much in common with that of the former German National Archives and — I am improvident enough to mention it — with that of the Soviet Archives as it emerged in 1918. As it was, some costly detours had to be made before the National Archives achieved a simple and workable organization, one that made possible central direction as regards policy and essentials and the necessary latitude and initiative at the grassroots. At the beginning, the influence of library practice and concessions to the old Hall of Records idea combined to create an impossible situation. Later on, the doctrines of administrative organization as developed by theorists in the field carried too much weight in a special situation to which they had paid scant if any attention. It was only when the peculiarity and uniqueness of the archival situation was taken into account, when the trend toward establishing substantial administrative units and charging them with responsibility for records of related provenance was started and brought to completion, that the National Archives proper achieved its present internal equilibrium. It goes without saying that the period of experimentation, though well-nigh unavoidable, was at the time a matter of concern to friends of the



National Archives and a disappointment to some of its staff members. Its beneficiary has been the archival theorist, to whose advantage much light has been shed on the problem of large-scale archival organization.

The trend toward integration has been accompanied by a trend toward establishing uniform procedures that has produced the National Archives *Handbook of Procedures* and those most useful staff information papers dealing with arrangement, description, and other fundamentals. To the best of my knowledge, nothing quite comparable exists in any other country. In fact, the European archivist will marvel at the extent to which administrative minutiae have been made the subject of uniform regulation, willing though he may be to admit that in an organization the size of the National Archives uniform procedures are more necessary than in the smaller national archival agencies of Europe. In this connection, I am reminded of the difference between an American cookbook and a French one. To quote from Raoul de Roussy de Sales' essay on "Love in America":

A French recipe seldom tells you how many ounces of butter to use to make crêpes Suzette, or how many spoonfuls of oil should go into a salad dressing. French cook books are full of esoteric measurements such as a *pinch* of pepper, a *suspicion* of garlic, or a *generous sprinkling* of brandy. There are references to seasoning *to taste*, as if the recipe were merely intended to give a general direction, relying on the experience and innate art of the cook to make the dish turn out right.

American recipes look like doctors' prescriptions. Perfect cooking seems to depend on perfect dosage.

To all intents and purposes, the National Archives *Handbook of Procedures* is the most minute archival cookbook that the profession has seen. To be just, however, there is a difference between cooking for the customers of a Paris *boite* and cooking for a mess hall.

Granted that an archival organization of the size of the National Archives cannot move toward and attain established objectives unless there is a great deal more of regimentation than the archival profession has experienced hitherto, what then is the effect of this novel situation on the men and women who compose the National Archives staff? First and foremost, I should like to state emphatically that I have never encountered a more devoted lot, dedicated with a strong sense of duty and with an incredible enthusiasm to the frequently tedious tasks of a profession that is just beginning to receive recognition. At the beginning led astray rather than assisted by European experience, working out at the grassroots

the techniques and methods applicable to Federal archives and thus enabling their leaders to develop the body of principles and procedures that now governs the National Archives, enduring an unusual number of organizational changes, they may claim a great share in its accomplishments.

But, in spite of that, I am not quite sure that they have been able to derive from their chosen profession the happiness and satisfaction that their European colleagues seem to find in it. This I am at a loss to explain. The general lack of stability of our administrative machinery certainly is a contributing factor. Beyond that and more specifically, could it be that the procedural perfection toward which the National Archives is striving has had an adverse effect on the well-being of the archivist as a member of a profession that calls for scholarly as well as administrative aptitudes? In the midst of timesheets, quarterly reports, forms, and procedures, is the archivist losing his personality? And is he possibly deprived of the spiritual rewards that in other countries go with a frequently tedious job?

This leads to another question: does the professional staff of the National Archives play the role it would seem predestined to play in American scholarship? In 1910, the Public Records Commission of England came to the conclusion that the staff of the Public Records Office "do not hold that position as historical students of proved competence which might be expected." I am afraid that, with certain exceptions, the same would have to be said about the staff of the National Archives, and this in spite of the fact that, when it was recruited, some most distinguished or promising scholars were brought in.

I do not think it is too difficult to explain what seems to me a regrettable situation. There exists in the National Archives a strict barrier between official duties and research work, unknown in other countries where scholarly productivity is valued as professional archival achievement and where possibly part of the working day may be used for this purpose. I hope the time will come when the National Archives will be able to encourage and support a greater number of studies, such as the recent one on the records of the Continental Congress. Even if that is done, we should not overlook the conditions that, in our American civilization, seem to militate against the archivist's participation in scholarly activities. He does not have the leisure time that his European colleague enjoys. The European archivist, underpaid though he is according to our standards, is still able to pay for domestic help; he does not have to care for an automobile, which he cannot afford anyway;



he does not have a house and hence does not have to mow his lawn and weed his garden, to say nothing about washing the dishes, feeding the baby, and doing the laundry; in general, he does not have the domestic chores that cut so deeply into the American archivist's leisure time. Blessings of our civilization!

So far I have been taking what might be termed an isolating view of the National Archives. In reality, it is not just the archival agency of the Federal Government, it is the largest of the many archival agencies of a far-flung country, our professional leader, a laboratory in which archival principles and techniques are being worked out on a large scale. What then is the relationship between the National Archives and other archival agencies in the United States as it has evolved over the last 20 years? There is to be found in most European countries a certain discrepancy in views and working methods between the national archival agency and the lesser agencies in the field, but nothing quite like the one we are confronted with in the United States. The difference, let us say, between the General Archives of the Kingdom in Italy and the State Archives in Venice, between the National Archives of Germany and those of the City of Cologne, is small compared to the enormous gap that separates the National Archives from our State and institutional archives. Once again it is the curse of bigness that characterizes the position of the National Archives; and, though I realize that this situation cannot be changed, I do not know whether enough has been done to remedy its effects.

Is there no way to initiate a healthier and more continuous give-and-take between our National Archives and our State archival agencies? Is there no possibility of encouraging and instituting a more frequent exchange of personnel between them? Shall we abandon all hope of creating paid internships in the National Archives that would enable State personnel and American citizens in general to enjoy the advantages now available at the National Archives to trainees — from Thailand, Pakistan, New Zealand — by virtue of Point Four or other grants in aid? Raising these questions is a far cry from answering them, and I am quite aware that the job of narrowing the gap between the National Archives and the other archival agencies is complex. It should receive our best thought, however, if we are serious about arriving at a common body of principles and practices in archival work, the development of which has been so much retarded. We should not rely exclusively on the Society of American Archivists to achieve that meeting of

minds that is of the essence if we want the archival profession securely established in the United States.

It may seem strange that the National Archives has been willing and able to play a more important role on the international archival scene than the one it has assumed within the United States. And yet, in doing so, it has only acted in harmony with one of the basic elements of our national character.

The readiness on the part of the National Archives to assume international responsibilities clearly reflects this characteristic of our Nation. It was first demonstrated when during World War II the National Archives participated energetically in the work of the Roberts Commission and its predecessor organizations, assembling and furnishing information on archival treasures in enemy and enemy-occupied countries that should receive protection, selecting archives officers to be attached to major military commands, and encouraging and supporting their activities. Hardly had the war come to an end when much thought was given to the creation of a United Nations Archives and to ways and means of providing for the safekeeping of the records of other international bodies. And it was the National Archives again, youngest of the great national archival agencies, that took the initiative in making plans for the formation of the International Council on Archives and bringing these plans to completion, though in some respects our idealistic concepts were watered down as a result of deeply ingrained prejudices. Last but not least, has not the National Archives become the training ground for archivists and would-be archivists of countries that are in the process of building up their archives systems; has it not given generously of the time of its staff to those who now look to the National Archives rather than to the Public Records Office for advice and leadership?

The picture of the evolution of the National Archives during its first 20 years, which I have tried to draw, had to be selective, but it is one that isolates and appraises what to the extramural archivist seem to be significant trends, achievements, and shortcomings. I have tried to formulate my judgments *sine ira et studio*; I have tried to be frank though sympathetic. It is with this same frankness that I would like to draw my final conclusion: in the past 20 years the National Archives has achieved an amazing rise to prominence, one without parallel in the history of archives administration.