

Lost and Found

By BOYD C. SHAFER¹

American Historical Association

FOURTEEN years ago Professor Roy Nichols of the University of Pennsylvania called his essay on the National Archives "Alice in Wonderland."² I do not know where Alice is now but the Archives is still wonderful. I title my paper "Lost and Found," because through the Archives a considerable part of our American past, once lost, has been found. Because of the monumental collections of the Archives we can almost dream of having the "past recaptured," the lost found.

My purpose is not to describe the problems of the individual scholar as he uses the Archives for the preparation of a monograph on a political, diplomatic or military subject. If it were I should have but two things to say: "The Archives has much more material than I thought. How can I plow through it?" I shall, rather, devote my attention to some relationships of the historian to the Archives. You may expect nothing profound. I shall have nothing to say on provenance or record group or *fonds*, or on the philosophy of archival management.

Historians and archivists are close kin. Without the documents which the archivists collect, care for, classify, and make usable, the historian loses essential working materials. Without the documents, history becomes fiction, myth, fantasy, perhaps the poetry which Aristotle believed higher than history — but not history. Without the historian the archivists lose much of their reason for being. Collections of historical documents without historians to use them are no more than museum curiosities. Of course our National Archives exists primarily not for professional historians but for the safeguarding of governmental records as a service to the agencies of the Federal Government. But even here the collections are of

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Williamsburg, Virginia, September 14, 1954. The author was professor of history at Stout Institute and the University of Arkansas and has served as officer and historian with the Air Force and War Department. Since 1953 he has been executive secretary of the American Historical Association and managing editor of the *American Historical Review*. A specialist in modern European history, he is author of a recent study, *Nationalism; Myth and Reality*.

² *American Archivist*, 3: 149-158 (July 1940).

value only when officials and clerks of these agencies become historians and use the documents for pragmatic reasons. Archivists and historians both are interested almost exclusively, then, in the past in so far as their professional lives are concerned. Without the archivist the historian is lost; without the historian the archivist probably would never be found.

Possibly we archivists and historians are related, too, because the public tends to lump us together, to look upon us as a pale and anemic, dry and boring people who have retired to our tiered stacks, decks, and floors, to our dreary studies, to our hard-chaired search rooms and boxes of yellowed papers — people who somehow are not able to do more active and romantic things or to make money. As I was reading recently a late novel about a dashing, handsome diplomat, I came across a section about two female employees of the Archives who gave a party for the “Junior Archivists, Division of Useless Executive Papers.” They wanted the young diplomat to come to their apartment after the party because they thought “all men in the Archives . . . unburied cadavers.” What struck me is that this is probably also the opinion of a good many college students about history professors — those people who are unable to do anything else, are too shy to face the present world, and so escape into the past.

We historians and archivists have the past as our common field. Knowing that past, we must jointly disagree with the observations of both the female archivists of the novel and with the college students. We know that the past still lives, that the present is largely the past on the way to the future. We know that the present, without knowledge of its roots, is thin and meaningless. We know, as Carl Becker told us so well, that when men begin to think they can think only with the facts of the past, that while study of the past does not make a man intelligent, a man cannot be intelligent unless he knows the past. Many of the papers in the National Archives, as in every archival establishment and manuscript depository, are useless or may never be used. Much of the history that we write is never read. Some of us may be dead, though unburied. But we are, by and large, a virile and long-lived people. We have existed a long time. Other men could get along without us only at their peril. If we did not exist they would, in order to live well, have to recreate us. Almost from his beginning *homo sapiens* has had his archives and his history, if only in cave paintings, inscribed rocks, and folk tales. The profession of historian is older than Herodotus

and, as Ernst Posner some years ago told us, the ancient Egyptians had their archives.³

The National Archives began its operations but 20 years ago. Before it could be established there had to be a fundamental change in the American mind about the significance of the American past. American Congressmen, elected by the American people and impertuned by historians like J. Franklin Jameson, had themselves to begin to feel the importance of this past for the present and future.

This leads to four generalizations which again reveal the relationship between the archivists and the historians. In origin and development we arise out of the same conditions and states of mind. (1) Before there can be organized archives as well as written history, men must acquire a belief that what they are doing is important, so important that they should leave a record for succeeding generations. This belief occurs in early and primitive societies before the techniques of writing and of preservation of documents permit either organized archives or history that goes much beyond folk lore. (2) Men must somehow come to believe that they can learn from the past, that it is good to possess more than myth and fable about their ancestors, that it is helpful to them in their present to know history as actuality. (3) In the case, more specifically, of archives housing governmental records, governmental officials of any one time must come to think that what they are doing is significant and their successors must feel likewise and desire continuity. In Western civilization this occurred especially at the time of the French Revolution of 1789, when perhaps the first national archives in the modern sense was begun. It occurred in the United States in the decade of the 1930's and, as a result, the historians of the future will have an unequalled opportunity to recover the past of the period of the depression of 1929 and World War II. (4) Before the records can be made fully usable, systems of preserving them and making them accessible must be developed. European archivists learned a good deal about effective methods in the nineteenth century; we are building upon the foundations they created and in some respects we are going beyond them. For the purposes of the historians the documents are becoming more and more available and usable.

There is, however, another obstacle to overcome. Here the archivist and the historian must continue to work in closest cooperation. How, in this "paperacious" age of ours can the archivist

³ "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution," in *American Archivist*, 3:159-172 (July 1940).

and historian, the custodians and interpreters of the past, handle, read, and interpret all the millions of cubic feet of records — the over 25 million cubic feet, or 4,770 miles of records in the National Archives and the Federal Records Centers?

In the four areas of historical relationships I have just outlined the answers are fairly clear and solutions to arising problems are under way. It is to the question I have just asked — how can the historian encompass the vast mass of paper documents — that the rest of this paper is directed. And may I say “directed” without promising or giving an answer? We have documents, almost too many documents. Documents are, in fact, multiplying in almost geometrical progression. They are becoming available at least at an arithmetical rate. How can the historian make use, effective use, of them? How can he avoid being drowned in a sea of paper?

Here at once it must be stated that we historians as yet have not known how to make the fullest possible use of what is available. We have not always been aware of the vast treasures in the National Archives, nor have we known fully how to tap them. The fault may be largely a fault of the historians, but historians are notoriously conservative and we need to have explained again and again just what gold is available and how best we may mine it. May I give several illustrations?

The National Archives contains a wealth of material on European history, especially its diplomatic aspects. Our American historians of Europe could become more fully aware than they are of this rich store of source material. Some of the best reporting on sixteenth-century Europe was done by the Venetian ambassadors. If our American diplomatic representatives were not as astute or observant as the Venetian, they left, nevertheless, an invaluable record. Recently, by way of illustration, one German-American scholar has uncovered in our National Archives an amazing story of Stinnes and von Seeckt in the Germany of 1923 and the Ruhr crisis. Material for more articles like his still awaits the historian.

If I may cite two further instances among many in European history, there are untapped documentary materials in the despatches to the Department of State by Elihu B. Washburne, our minister to France, 1869-77, and in the foreign service post records from the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1870-1927. The first constitute a source of importance on the Franco-Prussian War and on political events in the days of the Second Empire and Third Republic. The

second reveal the nature of extraterritoriality in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.⁴

May I turn homeward to the States for another and final example. Several years ago I was the second reader of a master's thesis about what was variously called the "Crazy Snake," "Smoked Meat," or better still, the "Bacon" Rebellion, an Indian difficulty in Oklahoma in 1908-9. I read the thesis and, thinking it based upon too little and too thin source material, I wrote to one authority in the field to ask skeptically whether he thought a satisfactory thesis could be written on the subject. A few weeks ago, still skeptical, I went to the Archives to determine whether the governmental records of the Office of Indian Affairs contained anything. Though my questions addressed to the Archives people were imprecise and uninformed, I obtained within an hour the documents that would have permitted the student to write the full story of that disturbance, the full story, which he did not and could not write from the newspapers and interviews from which he drew his evidence. He did not consult the vital documents because he did not know they existed, and because, though he thought on questioning that they might exist, he did not know that they were in the Archives. We might observe that this shows woeful ignorance and lack of historical ability. We might say that he was not the persistent searcher the good historian should be. But even the competent authority to whom I wrote did not know of the existence of the documents, believing that the disturbance was not a Federal problem but only an affair of Oklahoma.

We historians should be as persistent as the Indian chief who was falsely accused of fomenting the trouble, Eufaula Harjo or Crazy Snake. He wrote the acting Commissioner of the Office of Indian Affairs:

I always say that the Government of the United States has been done wrong to the Indians by creating the State of Oklahoma out of our country without our consent. If you are got tired to see the affairs of the Indians or to take care of the poor Indians. In accordance with the above mentioned treaty [1832], I am perfectly willing that you can take all of the people of your race out of our country and put them in your steamboat and sail, way out in the big water, then, I can not come to you, and beg you for my rights because I have no steamboat to sail in the big water, but if you are still live on this continent, I'll come, and beg you, If its going to be one hundred years from now.⁵

⁴ Memorandum, Carl Lokke and Alexander P. Mavro, National Archives, to Boyd C. Shafer. Sept. 9, 1954.

⁵ Eufaula Harjo to Acting Commissioner Hon. F. H. Abbott, August 25, 1909, in Indian Office files, 28628-1909, Creek file 1921, "Crazy Snake"; National Archives.

I imagine that archivists at times would like to tell persistent historians to get a big boat and sail out in the big water. On the other hand, I think the National Archives could, as the years go by and appropriations permit, further help us historians in our endless task of sifting and reading thousands of cubic feet of records in order to recreate the past. The Archives, I believe, could help us by continuing and developing what it already has begun in the way of guides and research tools.

The Archives is not a library. No card index classified by author, title, and subject is possible. But I should like to suggest the preparation of two aids, a historical guide to the agencies of the United States Government and a historians' guide to the National Archives.

The first suggestion — preparation of a historical guide to the agencies of the United States Government — ought not to present an insurmountable task. Already the *Guide* and the preliminary inventories carry remarkably accurate and succinct summary-descriptions of agencies. I suggest only that these summaries be amplified, that others be prepared (and that the summaries include suggestions concerning the usefulness of the various record groups for historians and other social scientists). An encyclopedic guide of this kind would, incidentally, be invaluable not only to historians but also to the staffs of legislative and executive agencies of the Government. I have worked both on the "Hill" and in an executive agency. Many times, as I have prepared papers on legal and financial questions, I have needed the kind of information that such a historical guide would contain.

The second guide, a historians' guide, might be more difficult to prepare were it not for the fact that a good number of the officials of the National Archives are trained historians, who came to the Archives in the depression of the 1930's and have remained to help guide its course. What I suggest here is something like what Jesse Shera has done for librarians in his fine *Historians, Books, and Libraries*. What I am suggesting might well be called "Historians, Public Documents, and the National Archives." It would tell historians in simple language, and without much reference to technical terms like *fonds*, how to proceed when they wish to do research in the Archives. It might suggest, for instance, that they use the *Guide* and the special lists before they come to Washington, and that they write ahead to indicate to the Archives the nature of their project, thereby permitting archivists time for a preliminary search. It might, further, outline for the historian in general terms the nature of document classification and indicate to him the desirability of precise questions, of knowing the exact agency or agencies which

created or *could have created* the records he wishes to consult, and of determining as closely as he can the dates of the letters or memoranda he wishes to see. Most historians when they come to Washington have but a limited time and the bulk of public papers amazes them. They need, then, all the shortcuts they can find. Perhaps too the historians need to know that there is no real substitute for personal relationships between themselves and the custodian of the relevant and particular records, that no written pamphlet of instructions can take the place of a few good questions addressed to the man who handles the documents day in and day out.

Of course, what I have suggested is no answer to the historian's basic dilemma, how he can sift and read thousands of cubic feet in one limited lifetime. Perhaps the archivists could help further by sorting and discarding more than they already have done. Perhaps, too, other indexes and calendars of general and specific nature could be prepared, though these need not be so comprehensive as that prepared for the records of World War II. Perhaps, finally, there is no completely satisfactory answer for the historian who wishes the full record in these days of the telephone and of memoranda expressing not the actual but the "desired" record.

In proportion as the documents are collected, preserved, and made accessible, the historian will be able to sift, read, and interpret. But with the Archives accomplishing its functions, the historian will probably still need some kind of jet propulsion — even Contouras and Leicas, photostating, microfilming, and microcarding do not give us the time and speed we need. We possibly could, like the professor of a *New Yorker* story, invent some kind of mechanical brain that would sift and read and summarize; but the historian would still have to determine what he wanted to have the machine read and would have to interpret the summaries without the context — a very dangerous procedure.

I see, then, no Utopia ahead for either the archivist or the historian. We shall have to suffer and enjoy together in the foreseeable time. I do know that now we historians and archivists are finding a part of the lost past, and this in itself is no small achievement. We can, after 20 years, to paraphrase Ernst Posner once more, assume that the archivists have become the Nation's experts who are consulted in all questions of public record making and record keeping, and likewise have become the trustees safeguarding the written monuments of the past and present.⁶ As the archivists are the trustees, we historians are the interpreters of the past. We look forward to cooperation so that the lost will be increasingly found.

⁶ *American Archivist*, 3:172 (July 1940).