

# Applying American Archival Experience Abroad

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**T**WO conditions account for the main differences between the archival principles and practices of the United States and those of other countries. These are (1) the way public records are kept while in current use, and (2) the age and volume of the records.

The archival principles and practices of a country relate directly to the way in which its public records are kept while in current use. Since these conditions vary from one country to another, the principles and practices of the profession also vary; and the literature describing the principles and practices of one country is often unintelligible to archivists of other countries who do not fully understand the conditions under which its public records have been currently maintained.

The ways of the United States Government in keeping public records are basically different from those of other governments. Public records of the United States are kept according to various new filing systems; in practically all other countries they are kept according to a registry system.

An American archivist who does not understand the registry system is not likely to understand the archival principles and practices of a country that employs that system. The differences of principles and practices arising from the use of the registry system make it quite difficult to apply American archival experience abroad. An American archivist going abroad is well advised to proceed cautiously and humbly; for American ways of doing things are not necessarily better than those of other countries; they are merely different. He should be openminded, for he is likely to learn as much as he is able to teach, and he should certainly learn before he ventures to teach.

The essential feature of a registry system, and the one from

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which it derives its name, is the register, which may be in the form of a book or in the form of cards. The system can be applied in various ways. It can be either very simple or very complex.

Under a simple registry system the records of an office are kept in two simple series, one of outward and the other of inward papers. In its register a record is made of all documents in the order in which they accumulate. The documents are assigned numbers consecutively. These numbers are the key by which the documents in both series are controlled. They indicate the order in which the documents are filed in each series. Indexes to persons and subjects are keyed to them. Such a simple system was used in all the Australian colonies before they became states, just as it was in the American colonies before the establishment of the Federal Government.

Under a more complex registry system, the records of an office are kept in one series that consists of file units in which both inward and outward documents have been brought together. The file units are recorded in the register in the order in which they accumulate, and indexes to the names of the writers and the subjects of the documents are made and keyed to the call numbers of the file units.

The file units may be arranged in a simple numerical order, or groups of them may be brought together into subject classes in accordance with a classification scheme. The most complex registry systems are those in which file units are arranged in a classified order.

An archivist dealing with registered files is confronted with materials that have an altogether different physical character from that of materials produced by American governmental agencies. The file units (or registered files) consist of aggregations of papers that contain all documentation on a particular subject or transaction. The papers within a file unit are fastened together in folders or binders and are usually given folio or page numbers. The papers usually exist only in one copy, and may consist of all types of documents, including forms of various kinds. The file units are handled as books are while in current use. They are assigned call numbers as are books. They are charged out to action desks as are books. They are often shelved in the same manner as books.

The way in which such file units may be appraised depends on how well the papers within them have been brought together. If the file units contain both valuable and valueless items, the items within them have to be reviewed singly either by the government officials who first handle them or by the archivist. If the records are prop-

erly classified in the registries, as they are in German registries, the classification scheme may be made the basis for appraisal, as it is by German archivists; for file units may then be appraised in relation to the subjects under which they were classified. If the papers were improperly classified, the appraisal may have to be left to the originating officials, as it is in England. The basic problem of appraising registered files, then, narrows itself down to one of classification — one of grouping the individual documents into file units and grouping file units in relation to activities and subjects. With respect to classification principles American archivists can teach archivists abroad very little; on the contrary, we can learn a great deal from some of them.

The way in which file units may be described in an archival institution depends, again, on how well they were described in the registries. If the call marks on the registered files are accurate and informative, they can be made the basis of repertories or inventories, as they are in Germany. If they are inadequate, the individual file units must be analyzed and described separately.

Contrast this situation with the one in an American archival institution. The units to be analyzed and described here are of various physical types — correspondence, reports, administrative issuances, forms of all kinds — which may have been kept together or organized under separate filing systems. The units of description are thus more varied in physical type and organization, much larger in size, and therefore much more difficult to identify and describe than their modern European counterparts. In the description of aggregates of documents, the experience of American archival institutions is quite different from that of archival institutions abroad and should prove instructive to them.

The way in which file units produced in registries may be arranged is relatively simple as compared with the ways that must be followed in dealing with the public records of the Federal Government of the United States. In the National Archives groups of records that originated in various offices of an organizational subdivision of a Government department have to be placed into proper relation to one another. These groups have to be fitted together, somewhat as a jigsaw puzzle, after painstaking research into their organizational and functional origins. This sort of work is not required for most modern archival groups in Europe, though it must, of course, be done when the arrangement of registered files has been disturbed and must be reconstructed.

The second condition that accounts for the difference between the principles and practices of American archivists and those of our colleagues abroad relates to the age and the volume of the records with which they deal. European archivists devote a considerable part of their attention to very old medieval documents. They have published important collections of documentary source materials, the most important of which is the *Monuments of German History*. They devote much of their time to the analysis of individual documents, applying their knowledge of linguistics, history, and the auxiliary sciences of history in editing and describing them. Their training in archival seminars consists, in part, of training in the analysis of such individual documents. It is in this regard that their work is to be most sharply distinguished from work in dealing with modern records.

American archivists are concerned with an overwhelming mass of documentation. They must reduce this mass to make it usable. They realize that not all records can be preserved, that some of them have to be destroyed, and that a discriminating destruction of a portion of them is in fact a service to scholarship. They know that a careful selection of the documentation produced by a modern government is necessary if they are not to glut their stacks with insignificant materials that will literally submerge those that are valuable. American archivists believe that this selection should be made by those most cognizant of the interests of scholarship, namely the archivists who are familiar with research interests and research needs. Even in their definition of archives, therefore, they make the element of value an important attribute of archives; and in their procedures for the review of records proposed for destruction they reserve to themselves the function of appraising records from the point of view of their utility in research. This approach is in rather striking contrast to that of the English archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, formerly Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in the Public Record Office. Jenkinson does not admit of the idea that an archivist should select records for preservation. American archivists, in their concern with the selection of documents, have given more thought to appraisal standards than have their European colleagues; and in this respect I believe they have something worthwhile to contribute to archival thinking.

As I intimated before, the volume of modern records has led American archivists to devise new methods of description — methods that are suited to the description of documents in the

aggregate rather than as individual items. Ordinarily they are not concerned with the treatment of individual items. Their descriptive methods relate to larger units than those of most European and foreign archivists. Their practices therefore depart even more than those of European archivists from those of librarians, which are by and large concerned with the treatment of individual items. Their materials do not have the appearance or the character of books, as registered files have.

The volume of certain series of records produced by modern governments has led archivists dealing with them to question whether the time-honored principle of provenance should be followed strictly in arranging them. Obviously, all series should be so kept that their administrative origins will be apparent. But certain of the large series that relate to individual persons or corporate bodies are kept solely for the information in them that is useful for sociological, economic, demographic, or other studies. Within such series, therefore, the individual items may be arranged or rearranged in whatever way scholars will find most useful.

Archivists dealing with modern records are confronted with another problem that is of little concern to archivists dealing with older records. This is the problem of access. The experience of the National Archives in opening up public records for research and other purposes should be of some interest to foreign archivists. Our Government has always been very liberal in making available the public records it produces; and the National Archives, as the agency that administers such public records for purposes of research, has attempted to make them available to the fullest extent that is consistent with the public interest. By considering the conditions under which records should be restricted in the public interest it has often been able to obtain a relaxation of restrictions on use. Its experience, based on handling many requests for the relaxation of restrictions on military, diplomatic, economic, and personal records, is reflected in the restriction policies that are formulated for the various record groups and subgroups in its custody. These policies follow a fairly consistent pattern and would be generally applicable to similar types of records that other governments of the world have been creating in recent years.

In general, American archivists, in dealing with modern records, have, to a greater degree than their European colleagues, attempted to develop principles and techniques for dealing with records *en masse*. They are little concerned with linguistics or the auxiliary

sciences of history, which are the substance of European archival science; nor are they much concerned with the methods of treating individual items, which are the substance of librarianship. They are concerned with new principles and practices that are peculiarly applicable to modern archives. They are concerned with the development of a distinct archival profession.