

The Archives of the French Foreign Ministry: Opportunities for Research in American History

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THE French have long regarded their Foreign Office Archives as the "brightest jewel" among their archival depositories.² Controlled by the Commission des Archives Diplomatiques since 1880, the Foreign Office Archives contain, as the commission said in its first report, the "papers of a Ministry where *par excellence* history is made." In this very large but simply organized depository materials for the study of American history abound. They are scattered through the tremendous mass of documents that cover every phase of French foreign relations from about 1500 to the present.³

The Foreign Office Archives, which is in the Quai d'Orsay, may be entered through the main public gate or from an entrance on the rue de L'Université. The archives are housed in a large L-shaped building which was damaged by fire and shell in 1944.⁴ Because of the physical damage to the building, access to the records by stu-

¹ This is a revision of a paper read before the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at Stanford University in December 1951. A brief summary of the author's work as a Fulbright Fellow in France and a short list of microfilms he deposited in the Library of Congress and the Bancroft Library of the University of California are part of the report of the Committee on Documentary Reproduction published in the Association's *Annual Report* for 1951, vol. 1, pp. 47-49.

² Carl L. Lokke, "The French Foreign Office Records Under the Third Republic," in *American Archivist*, 5:73 (Apr. 1942).

³ Waldo G. Leland, John J. Meng, and Abel Doysié, eds., *Guide to Materials for American History in the Libraries and Archives of Paris*. (Carnegie Institution of Washington, Washington, D. C., 1943), p. iv.

⁴ Foreign Office documents lost or damaged in consequence of the war are described and plans for obtaining copies of them through microfilming other copies in the files of French embassies and consulates abroad are outlined by M. Outrey in an article published in *Cahiers d'histoire de la guerre* for October 1949. The article was reprinted for the Foreign Office in 1950 as *Note sur les pertes subies du fait de la guerre par les archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et sur les mesures qui ont été prises en vue de la reconstitution des documents détruits*. In general, the documents lost or damaged belonged to the period of the 1930's.

dents was seriously hampered for a few years. Then one could apply for and consult some volumes only through a cumbersome, slow process by which employees took the desired volumes to the Bibliothèque Nationale for research use. By November 1950, however, the records were open to general use in their new quarters. Searchers still worked under handicap of noise and dust from power drills, and reconstruction was still far from complete when I finished my work there in 1951. But, on the whole, the physical conditions were very good. There is much more light there than in other Paris archives and libraries, the desks are good, the chairs are comfortable, and the atmosphere is conducive to work.

The Commission des Archives Diplomatiques has been the instrument for drawing up policy for the use of the archives. It has quite naturally set up rules admitting only qualified persons. Foreigners must ask for permission to use the archives through their embassies, and their research projects are carefully scrutinized. More than half of the searchers are foreigners, and some of this writer's French friends say that it is easier for a foreigner than for a Frenchman to get access to the archives.

The regulations for research are not numerous. The searcher must ask 24 hours in advance for the volumes he wants to consult. The old limit of 5 volumes a day seems not to be in effect now. For each volume requested the searcher must fill out a slip consisting of 3 parts. One part is left in the stacks when the volume is taken; the second is kept and recorded by the archivist in the search room; and the third is held as identification by the reader.

In general, there are no restrictions on the use of documents dating prior to Sept. 14, 1791, but notes from or copies of documents after that year are subject to review by the archival authorities. This rule is not strictly enforced, however. It is true that in 1930-31, this writer's notes were reviewed and a small deletion was recommended, but none of his notes were reviewed in 1950-51. To prevent the use of records for polemical purposes or against the interests of France, the commission has required that all research must be purely personal and done in person. In 1932 it decreed against the reproduction by microfilm of documents dated after 1830, and it is still opposed to mass microfilming.⁵

When the writer worked in the Foreign Office Archives in 1930-31, the records were divided into three principal groups: *Corre-*

⁵ The success of the author in obtaining permission to microfilm large quantities of archival materials indicates, of course, the extent to which this policy may be disregarded when research projects of wide significance are involved.

spondance politique, *Correspondance politique des consuls*, and *Mémoires et documents*. A fourth group, *Correspondance commerciale*, has since been established. These groups are subdivided into *fonds* "identified by the names of the States or areas to which the constituent documents refer. The *fonds* are grouped in alphabetical order, the individual documents within each being arranged chronologically and for the most part bound in consecutively numbered volumes."⁶ The process of binding has by no means been completed, however, and some doubt has been expressed as to the possibility of binding all papers and documents.⁷

Division I is the *Correspondance politique*. This group contains the

correspondence of the diplomatic agents abroad with the ministry in France and the correspondence of the ministry with foreign agents accredited to France. It includes all types of documents: drafts and originals of instructions to and reports from French representatives, as well as drafts of communications to the representatives of other States and originals of the letters of these representatives to the French ministry. In this series are also numerous enclosures that accompanied the principal documents.⁸

In a number of instances enclosures have been taken out and filed elsewhere.

The commission has published summary inventories (*inventaires sommaires*) covering a part of the *Correspondance politique*. The original plan was to publish summary inventories alphabetically by nation, but it became necessary to suspend publication before the volume describing the *Correspondance politique, États Unis*, could be issued.⁹ As an aid to students, however, the commission issued in 1936 an *État numérique des fonds de la correspondance politique de l'origine à 1871*. Divided into 3 parts — political correspondence to 1848, political correspondence to 1871, and political correspondence of consuls, 1830-71 — it simply lists the volumes of correspondence by country, giving the volume numbers and date span for each and the names of the principal diplomatic or consular representatives of France. It was compiled for public use chiefly because by decree of March 24, 1927, access to the archives was

⁶ Leland, *Guide*, p. iv.

⁷ For a statement on the commission's policy with respect to binding and the numbering and stamping of pages and folios, see Lokke, "French Foreign Office Records," in *American Archivist*, 5:74 (Jan. 1942).

⁸ Leland, *Guide*, p. v.

⁹ Drastic cuts in personnel and funds, particularly since the war years, have seriously interfered with the commission's original plans and policies. Leland states that the volume for the United States has long been in proof and can be consulted at the Archives.

permitted to records dated May 10, 1871, whereas previously February 1848 had been the cut-off date.

The *État numérique* lists 103 volumes for the United States to the year 1848, and 45 volumes for the period 1848-71. The Leland *Guide* has carefully analyzed the contents of each volume of correspondence through volume 121 (April 1859). Items relating to California and the West through 1857 are described in the writer's *French Activities in California; an Archival Calendar-Guide*, published at the Stanford University Press in 1945.

As Leland points out, "it is important to note that supplementary to this large group of papers is a significant collection known as *Correspondance politique, Supplément*," arranged in the same manner as the principal series. In general the supplements, which are found for many but by no means all countries, contain materials which are properly a part of the *Correspondance politique* but which came to the Foreign Office Archives after the papers with which they belong chronologically had been collected and bound into volumes. They include papers given or sold to the government by families of deceased diplomatic agents, documents purchased on the open market, old files transferred from French embassies and legations, and, frequently, duplicate copies of important papers.¹⁰

The *États Unis Supplément* is divided into two series. The volumes in each are easily distinguished, although they could be regarded as a continuous series if one desired to do so. The first, which consists of 11 volumes covering the period 1777-1835, contains a variety of materials, including some consular despatches to the Ministry of Marine and the Foreign Office dealing with commerce, Louisiana and Florida, and the retrocession of Louisiana. It also includes correspondence of the Ministry of Marine with Vergennes and with French agents in the United States. The second, which contains 27 volumes ranging in date from 1778 to 1832, includes materials relating to military operations during the Revolutionary War and correspondence between the French Legation and French and American officers; papers on exchange of prisoners, finances, liquidation of the French debt, and Swan and Schweizer; *mémoires* on English colonies, data on the organization of the United States, and records on Santo Domingo, the Canadian and Louisiana missions of Mézière, and the cession of Louisiana; and correspondence of the Ministry of Marine and the French Legation with American colonial authorities. These volumes are analyzed in the Leland *Guide*.

¹⁰ Leland, *Guide*, p. v.

The political correspondence for Mexico, of which there are open to the public 69 volumes dating from 1811 to 1867, is also important for students of American history. Leland describes only the first 35 volumes (through 1847). The writer's *French Activities* covers volumes through 1857, and the *Leland Guide* analyzes 9 related volumes of political correspondence for Texas.

Division 2 is the very large body of *Mémoires et documents*. As described by Leland, it "contains a wide variety of memorials and accompanying papers prepared by or submitted to the ministry and referring directly or indirectly to the foreign relations of the state."¹¹ They are arranged in the same manner as the *Correspondance politique*, with one exception: there is a very large series of volumes found under the designation *France*, which does not appear in the latter. The *Mémoires et documents* is always "held open" and may be added to. It includes some documents without specific dates, which supplement the *Correspondance politique* but which could not logically be incorporated there. The documents are of varying importance. Two series deal with the Americas. The first, series *Amérique* (about 48 volumes) relates to colonial rivalries, independence movements, and the like in both Americas between 1592 and 1847. The second series, *États Unis*, dates from 1767 to 1840 and consists of 22 volumes. In this series are many important *mémoires* of Collot, Guillemin, Crèveœur, and others. Volumes in *Mémoires et documents* are analyzed in the *Leland Guide*.

Division 3 is *Correspondance politique des consuls*. It includes reports from and instructions to French consular officers throughout the world and contains a large amount of material originally enclosed with such documents.

By article 29 of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, signed in 1778, the United States and France agreed to accredit consuls, vice consuls, and agents in their respective ports. A consular convention was signed in 1788 and ratified in 1790. Conrad Alexandre Gérard, the first French consular agent to the United States, arrived in July 1778 and later became the first French minister and consul general from France.

Consular correspondence relating to the United States for the period 1778-91 is on deposit in the Archives Nationales, but authorization to examine it must be obtained from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²

¹¹ Leland, *Guide*, p. v.

¹² The *Bureau des Consulats* was transferred from the Ministry of Marine to the

From 1793 to 1825 the Foreign Office did not separate commercial from political dispatches. In 1825 the office was reorganized and it was decided to separate the materials in two series, political and commercial. At first the consular correspondence was filed with records of the diplomatic post to which the consulate belonged, actually mixed in with the general correspondence or classified in volumes *intercalaires*. After 1830, however, the consular correspondence formed a distinct series, arranged by post and thereunder chronologically. The series of consular political correspondence relating to the United States, 1837-70, is in 38 volumes. For Mexico there are 5 volumes for the period 1858-67. It is believed that this series has never been used by American students. The writer, however, has made an analysis of each of the 38 United States volumes and has calendared every document relating to California.¹⁸ These last have been microfilmed and are available in the Bancroft Library of the University of California.

It is not possible to list here the many important topics covered by the consular political correspondence. A few can be indicated, however: the Dillon affair in San Francisco, the Black Warrior affair in Cuba, the negotiation of a new consular convention with France, filibustering activities in Lower California, and the French attitude and policy during the Maximilian episode in Mexico.

The last group, *Correspondance commerciale des consuls*, is probably the greatest single unexploited body of documents in the archives of the Foreign Office. The correspondence, 1778-91, now in the Archives Nationales, belongs to this series and is analyzed in part in the Leland *Guide*. Correspondence dating from 1792, however, has been returned by the Archives Nationales to the Foreign Office and has been rearranged since Leland's *Guide* was prepared.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs by decree of February 14 (15), 1793. The papers were divided; those of the Marine were transferred to the Archives Nationales in 1898; the others were transferred to the Foreign Office. The former now constitutes series Affaires Étrangères B7 in the Archives Nationales.

In 1931 and 1933 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs transferred to the Archives Nationales consular correspondence before February 14, 1793. These papers constitute series Affaires Étrangères B1 in the Archives Nationales. Those relating to America have been microfilmed for the Library of Congress.

In 1929 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs transmitted to the Archives Nationales a collection of *registres* and cartons numbered 1 to 470 (485) called Ancienne série commerciale et consulaire. This is now Affaires Étrangères: Sous-Série B3 in the Archives Nationales. Although ranging in dates from the 17th to the 19th centuries the principal documentation relates to the period 1750-1850. Of chief interest for American history are cartons 439 to 458. Cartons 439-449, 451, and 457 are on microfilm in the Library of Congress. This is a complete file of consular correspondence relating to the United States before 1792.

¹⁸ The author is currently engaged in preparing this calendar for publication.

In general, the commercial correspondence consists of the regular consular reports drawn up for transmittal to the Foreign Office. For example, here are the annual and other reports on commerce and navigation, business, mining, education, religion, and population. Consul Moérenhout, for example, for many years drew up annual reports on California. Often the records furnish a convenient summary of State and local publications; sometimes these are accompanied by original American newspaper accounts. More important for California history are the documents showing the progress of the American Civil War and the French activities during the war years, the military intelligence and other secret and nonsecret reports, and the papers reporting on persons and developments affecting French interests. Many enclosures were taken out and sent to interested ministries. The writer has found some in the Archives Nationales among the papers of the Ministry of Commerce.

There is no published guide to these records. There is, however, a typewritten list of them in the Foreign Office. Bound chiefly in 1934-35, the consular correspondence is now open to students. A list of the volumes relating to American history is appended to this article.

There are other series in the Foreign Office, however, that contain material for American history. These may be described briefly as follows:

Reclamations: Consists of cases relating to French claims and *actes officiels et renseignements*. There are 19 volumes for the United States dating between 1794 and 1839, arranged according to cases and claims.

Affaires diverses: Consists of miscellaneous materials for the nineteenth century. While the writer has not personally seen these materials, he has been told that they are of minor importance although they relate to all countries from about 1815 to 1895. They are arranged according to country. Omissions from regular series are indicated in the proper places, referring students to these more specialized and less accessible series.

Affaires contentieux: Consists of materials relating to trials, particularly in the field of private international law. Although the writer has not seen this series, he understands that it contains very few documents dated before 1900. There is reason to believe that the papers are not bound and that they were in part destroyed by fire during the German occupation.

Personnel dossiers: Kept unbound and in alphabetical order by name of official, these dossiers constitute the service record of the officials in the French foreign service. Sometimes letters missing from other series are to be found here. For example, the only numbered letter missing from the consular correspondence of Consul Guys is to be found in his personnel dossier. Obviously

the dossiers are a splendid source of biographical materials on French agents abroad — their personalities, quarrels, and private opinions on various matters. The writer has made many notes from and handwritten copies of some letters in this important series. Many letters marked *Chancellerie*, found in the dossiers, relate to consular accounts, which normally are to be found in another consular series marked *Comptabilité*.

Comptabilité: Consists of budgetary and fiscal records of the ministry. Special series also have been established for *Protocol*, *Circulars*, and *Finances du Ministère*.

These, then, constitute the principal groups in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry containing materials relating to American history. It is true, of course, that several studies on a limited number of topics have been published which are based in part on these archives or transcripts from them now on file in the Library of Congress. There have been, too, a few projects which resulted in the publication of selected Foreign Ministry documents or collections of papers, chiefly dealing with the American Revolution. But innumerable opportunities for research in these archives are still open to American historians.

List of Volumes of *Correspondance Commerciale des Consuls* Relating to American History

This list was compiled from typed and other lists in the reading room of the Foreign Office Archives in Paris. All the volumes listed are in the Foreign Office Archives unless otherwise noted. The key to the symbols used follows:

A. N. In the Archives Nationales

Leland Described in the *Leland Guide* (see footnote 3)

Nasatir Calendared in Abraham P. Nasatir, *French Activities in California: an Archival Calendar-Guide* (Stanford University Press, 1945)

Alexandria, Va.

1 vol. 1796-97 [Leland]

Austin

1 vol. 1838-46

Baltimore

Vol. 1 1781-1817 [Leland]
2 1818-24
3 1825-55
4 1856-59
5 1860-70

Birmingham

Vol. 1 1861-63
2 1864-66
3 1867-72

Boston

Vols. 1 and 2 1779-92 [A. N. B¹
209-210; Leland]
Vol. 3 1793-95 [Leland]
4 1796-1824 [Leland]
5 1825-50

Boston (cont.)

- Vol. 6 1851-60
- 7 1861-69
- 8 1870-77

Charleston

- Vol. 1 1784-92 [A. N. B¹372;
Leland]
- 2 1793-99 [Leland]
- 3 1800-1815 [Leland]
- 4 1816-24
- 5 1825-39
- 6 1840-53
- 7 1854-65
- 8 1866-70
- 9 1871-77

Chicago

- Vol. 1 1860-77

Galveston

- Vol. 1 1847-70

Mobile

- 1 vol. 1842-48

Monterey (and Los Angeles)

- Vol. 1 1842-52 [Nasatir; published in California
Historical Society
Quarterly]
- 2 July 1852-1863
- 3 1867-79

Natchez and Newport

- 1 vol. 1795-1816 [Leland]

New Orleans

- Vol. 1 1804-17 [Leland]
- 2 1817-21
- 3 1822-25
- 4 July 1825-1832
- 5 1833-36
- 6 1837-Sept. 1838
- 7 Oct. 1838-1840
- 8 1841-44
- 9 1845-47
- 10 1848-49
- 11 1850-52
- 12 1853-55

New Orleans (cont.)

- Vol. 13 1856-May 1862
- 14 June 1862-1864
- 15 1865-67
- 16 1868-74
- 17 1875-77

New York

- Vols. 1 and 2 1783-92 [A. N. B¹
909-910 Leland]
- Vol. 3 1793-1805 [Leland]
- 4 1806-17 [Leland]
- 5 1818-24
- 6 1825-30
- 7 1830-33
- 8 1834-July 1836
- 9 Aug. 1836-1837
- 10 1838-39
- 11 1840-41
- 12 1842-43
- 13 1844-46
- 14 1847-Mar. 1849
- 15 Apr. 1849-1852
- 16 1853-Aug. 1855
- 17 Sept. 1855-Sept. 1857
- 18 Oct. 1857-Mar. 1859
- 19 Apr. 1859-1860
- 20 1861
- 21 1862-63
- 22 Jan.-Oct. 1864
- 23 Nov. 1864-June 1865
- 24 July 1865-Mar. 1866
- 25 Apr.-Oct. 1866
- 26 Nov. 1866-Mar. 1867
- 27 Apr.-Oct. 1867
- 28 Nov. 1867-Apr. 1868
- 29 May-Dec. 1868
- 30 1869
- 31 Jan. 1870-Sept. 1871
- 32 Oct. 1871-1872
- 33 1873-June 1874
- 34 July 1874-Aug. 1876
- 35 Sept. 1876-Mar. 1877
- 36 Apr.-Dec. 1877

Norfolk

- Vol. 1 1783-91 [A. N. B¹927]
- 2 1793-June 1814

Norfolk (cont.)

- Vol. 3 July 1814-1824
4 1825-31

Philadelphia

- Vols. 1 and 2 1778-92 [A. N. B¹
945-946; Leland]

- Vol. 3 1793-Apr. 1796
4 Apr. 1796-Sept. 1798
5 Oct. 1798-1801
6 1802-Sept. 1803
7 Nov. 1803-Dec. 1810
8 Feb. 1811-Dec. 1814
9 1815-16
10 1817-Apr. 1818
11 May 1818-1820
12 1821-Sept. 1824
13 1825-30
14 1831-36
15 1837-Sept. 1838
16 Oct. 1838-1840
17 1841-49
18 1850-62
19 1863-70

Portsmouth

- 1 vol. 1783-1822

Richmond

- Vol. 1 1831-38
2 1839-50
3 1851-57
4 1858-Sept. 1861
5 Nov. 1861-June 1864
6 July 1864-1870

Savannah

- Vol. 1 1802-24
2 1825-39

San Francisco

- Vol. 1 1849-51
2 1852-53
3 1854-59
4 1860-66
5 1867-71
6 1872-74

Washington

- Vol. 1 1805-19
2 1820
3 1821
4 1822
5 1823
6 1824
7 1825-June 1827
8 July 1827-1830
9 1831-42
10 1843-47
11 1847-50
12 1851-52
13 1853-54
14 1855-57
15 1858-63
16 1864-Mar. 1867
17 Apr. 1867-June 1869
18 July 1869-Oct. 1870
19 1871-73
20-1874-77

Williamsburg

- 1 vol. 1784-87 [A. N. B¹ 1183]

Wilmington

- 1 vol. 1783-1810

The following records of posts outside the United States contain important materials for United States history:

Guatemala

- Vol. 1 1823-43
2 1844-45
3 1846-49
4 1850-57
5 1858-60
6 Apr. 1860-Apr. 1862
7 May 1862-1868
8 1869-74

Honolulu

- Vol. 1 1837-52
2 1853-62
3 1858-65
4 1866-70
5 1872-77

Mazatlán

- Vol. 1 1841-67

Mexico

- Vol. 1 1817-28
- 2 1829-July 1830
- 3 Aug. 1830-1831
- 4 1832-36
- 5 1832-43
- 6 1844-50
- 7 1851-61
- 8 1862-73

Panama

- Vol. 1 1843-51
- 2 1852-62
- 3 1863-64

Panama (cont.)

- Vol. 4 1866-67
- 5 1868-74

Tampico

- Vol. 1 1832-57
- 2 1858-Apr. 1865

Tahiti

- 1 vol. 1836-41

Vera Cruz

- Vol. 1 1828-37
- 2 1838-50
- 3 1851-July 1863
- 4 Aug. 1863-1876