

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN ARCHIVAL POLICY<sup>1</sup>

THOSE unacquainted with the problems of archival science often think of archivists as people of extraordinarily narrow interests, whose eyes are trained on the most remote past. The insiders realize that the archivist is a man of the future, and not of the past; he is professionally preoccupied with a more distant future than that of any profession save that of astronomy; and he cannot lay down sound policies in the preservation and destruction of documents without taking into account interests broad enough to make up the composite fields of the faculty of a liberal arts college.

I think we understand this among ourselves, but the people at large do not as yet share our vision of the role of archival policy in American culture. We have among ourselves our little technical problems, such as the question of the distinguishing between archives and manuscripts: we cannot expect the public to be very much interested in technical minutia; but we can expect the public to become conscious of an archival problem generally, to assist in laying down a broad archival policy, and to share our vision of the place that the preservation of records has in the whole culture of our country.

In our conception of the place of archives in American culture, we might well keep before our eyes the role of the public library system. There have been public libraries for many centuries. The American public library system made a phenomenal growth a generation ago with the impetus of the Carnegie fortune behind it. The archival system of this country is now entering a similar period with the launching of the National Archives, the work of the Historical Records Survey, and the organization of the Society of American Archivists fostering it. The public libraries had as their primary problem the procurement of books, with cataloguing and organization secondary; the archival materials are already on the ground, and the essential problem is organization and preparation for use. The libraries could count on the public school system to provide a literate population which could take advantage of their resources; in the development of the use of our public archives, we will find that people will not only need to have the materials preserved and organized for them, but must also be taught to use them. True, libraries often offer reading counselling

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services; a fully developed archives may have to go much further than the library in teaching people to use it.

Of course it would be possible to dodge all these problems if we should adopt as a foundation of archival policy the idea that only the professional scholar would be welcomed, or possibly that only the professional scholar would be served. But to take such a view would be to miss our great opportunity. I hold that even the most amateur genealogist ought to be welcomed in our archives, and the people should be allowed to browse through old legal records. The public should learn to expect in the archives of its own community the same kind of reference service that its public library gives. A check of the questions asked at the reference desk of the Cleveland Public Library indicates that a substantial proportion of them is the type of question that can be and should be answered from archival records. If we develop such a policy in the utilization of our public archives, we will not only find the voters willing to provide the buildings and to employ the technicians needed to give these services, but we will also find our people increasingly interested in private as well as public archives. I am told that the late Harvey Firestone was planning to establish just such an institution for the history of his firm and of the rubber industry as McCormick has set up in Chicago and placed in the competent charge of Herbert A. Kellar. The more archive-conscious our people become, the more such establishments there will be.

A public interested in public archives will extend its interest to private archives. Have not many of us been consulted at one time or another on the disposition of the papers of some person deceased? We could imagine it might become a matter of routine, that just as one consults the funeral director on the disposition of a body, so one would consult an archivist on the disposition of the papers. This kind of consultation is now given in innumerable cases by secretaries of historical societies and by librarians.

Parallel to the development of a consciousness of the importance of family papers, we should hope for an increased consciousness of the importance of business archives. Here also technical advice will be needed and should be available. No one should apply in vain to the archivists of this country if he wants to know what to preserve, what to destroy, how to deposit, and how to organize the documentation of family or business firm.

When I link the profession of archivist with that of the librarian, of the business counsellor, and of the funeral director, I see the out-

lines of a profession which must build up not only a high level of technical competence and a high standard of service, but a clear-cut ethic which can deal suitably with problems that arise in the protection of the privacy or secrecy of what ought to be private and secret, and the servicing of information that ought to be publicly available. There are many fine points of practice to be defined. In some cases the archivist with his feeling for values to be realized in the very remote future may advise the sealing of the documents for very long periods; in other cases he may advise their destruction. His responsibility toward American culture on the one hand, toward the families or organizations whose records are involved on the other, should in time come to be defined in a kind of a code, so that a duly certified archivist can claim the confidence of a client just as members of the medical or legal professions claim the confidence of their patients and clients, and just as journalists protect confidences as a part of the code of their profession.

For instance, there is the case of a scholar working in the field of literary history. Among the private papers of an American author, he discovered coded letters. He cracked the code and found that these letters contained a record of a personal scandal which incidentally completely explained the origin of one of the most important literary works of this author. The scholar had been allowed to consult these papers through the courtesy of the author's family. When he made this discovery he was, of course, under an ethical obligation to suppress the truth that he had discovered so far as present publication was concerned; was he also under an obligation to inform the family of the compromising character of the documents he had discovered, knowing that these documents would then be destroyed by the family and a certain significant fact lost forever to American cultural history; or should he have returned the documents without explaining his discovery to the family, confident that the papers would then be preserved because of the ignorance of their contents; or should he have explained the documents to the family and endeavored to persuade them to preserve them under long-term seal?

In developing archival policy in the field of business records, the archivist meets a professional enemy in the office manager. With office management he must reach a working agreement. According to a president of the Office Managers Association, one of the first things that an expert does when he comes into an old-fashioned office and begins to modernize it is to segregate and destroy records not cur-

rently in use. In one case a roomful of files was found in a business firm. "What are these dead files doing here? Why don't you throw them out?" asked the expert. "Our legal department advises us that we must keep them," was the reply. "Well, get another opinion from your legal department and throw them out," said the office manager.

It may be that microphotography will facilitate the archivist's work in that it will make possible the preservation of more records in less space, but certainly that will not be the whole answer. The archivist must interpret to a business client the value of business history in the formation of business policy, and compromise with the needs of office management by careful distinction between the destroyable and the preservable records.

The archivist ought to be qualified and ought to be trusted to handle matters of this kind, and to function as a public relations counsel for the relations of the people of today with the historians of future centuries.

The archival interest as the public comes to understand it must be broad enough to include family and business papers no less than public archives, but leadership lies in the public archives field. At this particular moment we have come to a turning point in policy. Hitherto we have been principally worried because we knew so little about the state of our public records; now they are all being inventoried. The inventories, made with unprecedented thoroughness and accuracy by the thousands of workers in the Historical Records Survey, are describing a body of documentation equal in amount to the contents of our public libraries, and just as widely distributed through the country. With our knowledge of what we have, we can begin to study the question of how it is to be used. It would be a mistake to think that the use of our archives is merely to provide documentation which scholars can work into books. We must think of it also as a place in which teachers in our schools will read for interesting information to be used in their classes; we must think of it as a reference room in which whole classes of questions—such as the date of this, the cost of that—will normally come for answer. The Social Security Act has given rise to many very practical reference questions in connection with the claims of people who do not possess birth certificates.

The public archives of a community can become a kind of local encyclopaedia, and the public can be taught to use it. The people generally will then come to be shocked by the destruction of records

that ought to be preserved just as they are shocked by cruelty to animals and as they are coming to be shocked by cruelty to automobiles. Have we not seen a generation growing up so sensitive to machinery that bearings burned out for lack of oil, or gears stripped through senseless handling, offend their sensibilities even though the car is not their own, just as their sensibilities were once offended by the teamster flogging his horse? Certainly there are many of us who already feel deeply concerning the destruction of unique and irreplaceable records, but that feeling is not yet sufficiently widespread to guarantee the adequate support of public archival activities, let alone the adequate preservation of business and family records.

We must hasten that time, and to hasten it we must expand the public use of archives; and to expand the public use of archives we must do more than make inventories. We must classify, develop, and define archives for purposes of general use. What is the next step? I have already suggested it in setting the parallel between the archival system and the library system. The libraries are already collaborating with the schools; let them now enter into a three-cornered combination with the local public archives. Let us take the inventory of the public archives of some community which already enjoys good library facilities; get a group of librarians who know the kind of question that the public brings to the library to help us in defining and analyzing the kind of questions that the public might bring to the archives if the archives is ready to answer them. We will find that certain of our archival series are not adequately indexed for reference purposes; we may be able to get them indexed. We find that others to which the public might wish to refer are housed in inaccessible cellars and attics; we may get them properly housed. When we have found by conferring with librarians what kinds of questions people would be interested in answering from archives, let us secure the co-operation of the libraries and the schools in informing the public of what they can find in their local public records.

We might perhaps assume that our scholars who are engaged in research in the social studies and other fields are already familiar with the wealth of archival material in this country, but I doubt that this is true at present, for the archival establishment, national and local, is a little too new to have had its effect on professional research. It is possible that the study of our archival resources in each of our research fields would lead to a diversion of much research energy from working with books to working with unpublished public records. At

least this inquiry should be made and we should recognize the fact that American scholars generally have been far more extensively trained in the use of libraries than in the use of archives. It is quite possible that a whole new set of problems will come to the fore as research problems when the availability of archival resources is better understood. We might think that this matter could be left to the sociologists, the economists, or the historians, and that theirs might be the initiative; but I think it would be wise to take the lead and to present the problem of the use of archives to the scholars of this country in the form of the very practical question: Which of these classes of archival materials, which of these specific series which our inventories exhibit, ought to be preserved for you and your purposes; and which would you be willing to see destroyed? It may be that only the experts in the different fields of research can answer these questions; on the other hand, only the archivists can ask them.

I noted a case in Cleveland in which a graduate student was about to undertake a little research work on a problem of relief policy. The task was organized just as the inventory of county records was completed. Of the fifteen hundred series of county records exhibited in the inventory, fifty series that he had not previously known about or planned to consult were found to have a bearing on his problem.

I believe that a study of our problem from this standpoint may show that the traditions of the archival craft were defined in connection with the control of bodies of record so much slighter than those that now confront us that a new approach to the science may be necessary. The bulk of the records of the Hundred Years' War between France and England was probably equalled every day in the conduct of the World War.

The new archival rules ought quite properly to evolve after clearing the questions of value, destruction, preservation, and control, with all interests. These interests include the public, whose needs can best be interpreted by the public library; the research scholars, who can interpret their own needs; and of course, the administrative users of the records, with whom there is already adequate consultation.

Just as the public archives are the immediate center of attention, so of the public archives those that are found throughout the country are the most important, for it is only through them that the whole public can be reached and taught.

This means that above all else, the strategic objective of archival policy at this time must be to work with the relief labor program to



develop and improve local archives. The Historical Records Survey has amazed the scholars of America by the competence and thoroughness of its work. The kind of thing it is doing can be carried further.

I do not regard the use of relief labor as an emergency, as an occasion of the moment, but as a probable permanent feature of American cultural economy, intermittent, of course, but recurrent in times of depression. And the natural and normal occupation of the white collar worker on work relief is with the archives, with the public records.

For who is the white collar worker? He is essentially the clerk. I mean by this the clerk in the historic sense, the descendant of those clerics whom Alcuin trained for Charlemagne in the free schools of Aix. He is the worker who works not with tools but with people and records. The old economy of medieval Europe used him for this purpose, and modern business economy uses him in the same way. Instead of copying manuscripts he copies invoices; instead of preaching sermons and hearing confession he sells refrigerators. But he is and will continue to be an essential part of our population, and there is no advantage in trying to retrain him for nonclerical labor during a depression, for when employment rises, clerks are needed by private industry just as much as hand laborers are needed.

The archivists are in a position now to plan for the recurrent use of quantities of labor that will help to make the archives useful to a wide public. This is one of the most important duties that faces archival science at the moment. It is a problem never posed before.

Just as librarians promote the use of books, and as teachers defend before the public the value of education, so archivists have as a part of their duty to give stimulus and guidance to the use of archives, and to their use not by the few but by the many.

The objective of archival policy in a democratic country cannot be the mere saving of paper; it must be nothing less than the enriching of the complete historical consciousness of the people as a whole. If we, as archivists, accept this as our problem and our duty, our profession will grow to be comparable in cultural significance with librarianship, teaching, and the professional research of scholarship. That time is a long way in the future, but, as I have suggested, the archivist is and ought to be concerned with the most distant futures, and less than any other professional man in the country can he afford to be hesitant in defining long-term objectives.

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