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THE ARCHIVIST IN AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP[1]

THE plain record of archival activity and development in the United States during the past few years indicates clearly that archival interests have been nationalized and professionalized. The new profession of archives has taken its place beside law, medicine, theology, history, political science, and other older arts in the pattern of American life. Like the lawyer, doctor, and historian, the archivist professes that he has the requisite special knowledge, mastery, and inclination for devoting his time and energy to the service of others by practicing his chosen art for considerations not wholly or primarily commercial. The archivist's conception of his true professional function and rôle has a vital relationship to the service, development, and prestige of his profession. Since it has provoked inadequate discussion and even disagreement, the professional rôle of the archivist in American culture merits careful examination and evaluation.

There is a tendency in some quarters of the United States and Europe to view the archivist as a technician with narrow, restricted, and rather negative functions. The defense of archives in his custody from physical dangers and improper administrative procedures is regarded as the primary duty of the archivist. In the doubtful though possible event that the primary task of preservation does not require all of his time, he may concern himself intermittently with the secondary duty of serving the special needs of researchers. But he should regard this function, in which he is inexpert, as distinctly secondary in importance and as tending to make of him a servant of the public rather than of his archives.

Some of the restrictionists make a rather sharp division of archival responsibility among administrators, archivists, users, and politicians.

[1] Presidential address read at the third annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Annapolis, Maryland, October 13, 1939.

They hold that the administrator has the duty and responsibility of making the archives, preserving them while they are in the office of origin, solving the problem of bulk by destroying documents on the basis of the practical business needs of the office, and determining the time and extent of transfer to the archivist. The administrator alone is represented as the proper agent of destruction; for both the archivist and the historian, from the very nature of their positions and their ignorance of the unpredictable scholarly interests of the future, are incapable of appraising the administrative and historical value of archives, and the historian is further disqualified by his liability to prejudice where his own scholarly interests are involved. The restrictionists consider that the true function of the archivist is to receive the archives from administrators, preserve them, and, if there is time, render minor services to researchers. His chief interest is in the records as archives rather than as documents valuable for history and other fields of knowledge. Such questions as publication, centralization or decentralization, public appropriations, and the date at which modern archives are properly made available to the public are the responsibility of politicians and users.

It is sometimes contended that the archivist, though he needs some knowledge of history and may properly have a personal interest in it and other branches of learning, is not and should not be a historian. A deep interest in a particular field of knowledge creates a prepossession for that field which may make of the archivist an inappropriate, partial, or even dangerous custodian.

In the light of actual conditions in the United States, is this view of restricted archival function and compartmentalized responsibility realistic, wise, and adequate; and does it afford sufficient freedom for the development of the archival profession?

Public archives, created by administrators in the discharge of their official duties, are at first of primary use and importance as administrative or business records essential to the conduct of the public office. Some quickly lose their value as business records; most lose it in a few years; some retain it for a long time or indefinitely. As archives become useless as business records, the busy administrator tends to regard them as valueless. Though created as business records for the use of government and not as historical records for the use of posterity, public archives actually possess historical value from the moment of their creation. Passing time brings a shift in value for most of them. As they decline in value and approach or attain useless-

ness as business records, they increase in value and approach or attain exclusive importance as historical records.

The existing body of current and noncurrent archives constitutes the largest and most valuable mass of significant information on the record of human achievement. It contributes mightily to the various fields of knowledge, particularly the social sciences, and facilitates the writing of thousands of books for the use of scholars, teachers, students, and citizens. Public archives are the repository of information capable of enriching the general education, the specialized knowledge, the historical consciousness, and the culture of the nation and its regions, states, and localities. The archives of the future will possess even greater historical value because they will record an ever expanding segment of human achievement as public activities expand in response to the democratic concept of government as the common agent for solving the ever growing number of common problems which emerge from an ever increasingly complex social organism.

In the American system of decentralized administration, is it prudent or practicable to entrust the fate of valuable public archives to thousands of public officials who are, in many instances, political in character, unversed in scholarship, unappreciative of the historical value of archives, uncertain but brief in their tenure of office, and comparatively inexperienced in the art of making and preserving records? Can these administrators be trusted to select durable paper and ink and writing devices? To introduce and administer any system for the effective selection and destruction of records? To preserve noncurrent as well as current records? To determine the proper time and extent of transfer to the archivist? The realist cannot answer these questions affirmatively.

What manner of person is the archivist who rules over the princely domain of noncurrent public archives and whose professional function is under examination? Some careful students of the factors of competence in archival administration consider that the archivist in responsible direction of any major American municipal, state, or federal archival agency should have a broad general collegiate education with specialization in the social sciences, particularly American history and government, and a good equipment in modern foreign languages. This training should be supplemented by graduate work leading to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in American history with extensive research use of public archives, by some study of archival history and practices and the elements of library science, and

by an apprenticeship in an archival establishment. Even archivists in charge of minor agencies should have two years of graduate work in the social sciences and in archival history and practices. Though all American archivists do not now possess these qualifications, the professional standards have been set, are winning recognition, and will be applied increasingly in replacements. No respectable archival establishment can long disregard these professional standards. They will insure an archival personnel whose training and ability compare favorably with that of the best in American professional life.

Far from impairing the archivist's fitness, thorough graduate training in history, as broadly conceived by modern historians, is a distinct asset in that it enhances his professional esprit de corps, his respect for archives, his appreciation of their importance, his determination to serve them properly and effectively, and his ability to minister to the present and future scholarly interests of social scientists who are and will be the chief users of the archives. Though the precise scholarly interests and emphases of the future may be unpredictable, it is not likely that great fields of knowledge and scholarly interest will be developed that are not now more or less within the purview of the modern social scientist. Perhaps an archivist ought not to be a historian, but a historian may well be an archivist. The historian, who becomes an archivist and thus an ex-historian, will not subordinate archival to historical interests. There is no real antagonism between sound historical scholarship and archival competency.

The well-trained archivist will be appreciative of the administrative and historical values of archives, sensible of their neglect by public officials, expert in his knowledge of the best techniques for their preservation, conversant with the needs of scholarship, and alert to all the conditions which affect archives and his success as an archivist. Will he be able to restrict his function to the preservation of archives?

Though the administrator is responsible for the making or production of archives, the American archivist cannot be unconcerned about the quality of materials and the forms used. They vitally affect his primary task of preservation. Unless administrators comply with accepted standards of durability for paper, ink, and writing devices and use compact and convenient forms, the archivist's task of preservation will be rendered more difficult. Until administrators are sufficiently interested and informed to comply with such standards, archivists must concern themselves with the enactment of

public records laws embodying those standards and with the enforcement of the laws by education, supervision, and penalties. By their activity in stimulating archival legislation, state and federal archivists and the Society of American Archivists have definitely recognized the improvement of production as a proper archival function.

The American archivist will be under pressure to become an aggressive collector rather than a passive receiver of archives. If he is content with such as survive administrative neglect and come to him by administrative whim or initiative, he is likely to discover that the archives are greatly impaired in quantity as well as in physical and moral quality. Until public officials generally of their own volition or by legal requirement regularly transfer their noncurrent records to the archivist, he must be alert to secure their transfer by persuasion and by legislation.

The major attention of the archivist will be devoted to the primary function of employing the best techniques and instrumentalities for the preservation of the archives in his custody. On no account should he neglect this basic task. But he is also concerned with the preservation of the records before they are transferred to his custody. Mere transfer works no magic transformation in the value of archives. The negligence of administrators in preserving records in their offices seriously impairs their value and complicates the work of the archivist. Therefore, in defense of the interests of self, archives, and scholarship, American archivists quite properly seek by education, legislation, and supervision to require administrators to preserve such public records as are in the offices of origin.

No one is more concerned than the archivist with the problem of bulk. The desirable goal is an adequate reduction of quantity by the destruction of archives without business or significant historical value and the preservation of a sufficient quantity of impartial records to show the important proceedings of the governmental offices and meet the needs of scholarship. The complex system of central registry is excellent and feasible for well-administered offices. It makes the administrator the sole agent for the selection of archives for permanent preservation and also for the destruction on the basis of the administrative needs of his office of a considerable portion of the records before they reach the archival stage. But the utter impossibility of the general adoption of the system in the United States makes it at present an impractical solution of the problem of bulk. Until some such system is generally and effectively applied, Ameri-

can archival conditions indicate that the administrator, instead of being the sole agent of destruction, should be forbidden by law to destroy any archives. The safest and most practical method of achieving reduction is to make destruction the joint responsibility of those most capable of appraising the business and historical value of the records—the administrator and the archivist. Selection and destruction should be based on the needs of the scholar as well as of the administrator. The well-trained archivist possesses more adequate knowledge and judgment than anyone else for evaluating noncurrent archives, and the archival function properly includes the important and baffling problem of reduction.

Archivists have not adequately developed the function of facilitating the extensive use of archives. To researchers they sometimes appear as antiquarians hoarding their precious records, protecting them from exploitation, or even resenting their extensive use. Most noncurrent records in archival custody are valuable only as historical records. But are they actually valuable unless and until they are used by researchers? Can the archivist's work in production, collection, and preservation attain fruition until the archives are used? On what stronger ground than the utility of archives can the archivist justify his professional existence and his claim for public support? If there is an important relation between value and use, the archivist will give to his archives the maximum of availability to historians, economists, sociologists, political scientists, statisticians, and other investigators, consistent with the requirements of preservation.

Realizing that most researchers have little time or aptitude for hunting hidden collections, the archivist will apprise them of the location, extent, and nature of the archives in his custody. When researchers come to the agency, they will receive courteous and intelligent service and descriptive lists and other convenient aids for the effective use of the records. Not content with serving visiting researchers, the archivist will seek to take his archives to the world of scholarship by various methods of publication—printing, near-printing, and microphotography. The vast quantity of valuable archives, the high cost of printing, and the small number of copies of archival publications needed by libraries and scholars open great possibilities to microphotography as a means of publication. The archivist can enrich American library resources and scholarship by establishing a regular service of supplying to libraries and individuals at cost microfilm copies of important collections or categories of

archives made from master films prepared and retained by the agency. The cost of the master films would be inconsequential in comparison with any other form of publication; the cost of the copies would be within the reach of libraries or even individuals; the service would be adequate to the needs of scholarship; and vastly more archives would be made widely available than could conceivably be the case by any other form of publication.

As public officials in a democratic country, American archivists might well devote some attention to the stimulation of wider use of archives by teachers, students, and citizens and to the establishment of reference and informational service for the public as well as for governmental offices. Greater use and appreciation of archives by the public would contribute to general education and insure more liberal public support for the entire range of archival work. There is no real antagonism between the archivist's service to his archives and to the public.

By increasing the availability and use of archives, the archivist extends and enriches his services to archives and the public, makes himself more culturally dynamic and significant, and contributes to the development of the archival profession as an indispensable publicly supported agent of American scholarship and culture.

The function of the American archivist is affected by the fact that he is in his own right a public administrative official. As such, he should provide smooth and efficient administration for his archival establishment and cultivate wholesome relations with external agencies and the public. He should keep the superior governing authority fully conversant with his archival achievements and needs. To all who make use of the archives, he should provide an efficient and expanding service. He should maintain helpful relations with other archival agencies and contribute to the development of his profession. He should stimulate a greater public use and appreciation of archives and interpret archival work to the public as a necessary factor in an enlightened society.

The American archivist is a scholar, an expert technician skilled in the arts of his profession, and a public administrator. If he is alert in every situation for the interests and usefulness of the archives in his custody and conscious of his opportunity to become a highly significant factor in American scholarship and culture, he will hardly be able to restrict his function to the preservation of archives. He will discover that archival production, collection, preservation, and use

are interrelated parts of an integral process which can not and should not be too rigidly compartmentalized. If one part is neglected, the other parts and the whole suffer. He will also learn that he is better qualified than anyone else to concern himself with the entire range of archival interests and must do so in order to save archives from impairment by administrators, politicians, and researchers and to make his own work most effective and fruitful.

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