

The Archival Function in the States

By ROBERT H. BAHMER ¹

National Archives

ONE subject I shall not discuss in this paper is a question that disturbs some of our State archivists: the question where, in a State's government organization, the archival function should reside. I was interested enough in the question, however, to check and see in how many States the function is a legal responsibility of the State library. Statistics compiled by the Society of American Archivists indicate that in 14 States of the Union the State archives are administered in connection with the State libraries. This differs somewhat from statistics presented by the Office of Education in 1956, which indicated that in 18 States the general State libraries were providing archival services.

I don't know the reason for this difference and for my purposes it doesn't matter.

The Office of Education release to which I referred suggested that there was a trend among State libraries toward an assumption of control over archives. I haven't paid too much attention to this development, but from my incomplete knowledge I should not have thought it to be true.

Generally it seems to me that the present status of the archival function in the States is a result of the peculiar institutional and cultural development in each of the States. In many of our older States, where the State historical societies evolved as completely private organizations, the archival function became a part of the service of the State libraries. This was less true in the southern States, where strong historical societies did not develop. The pattern of development there was to place the archives under a commission, sometimes independent, sometimes under the secretary of state, generally covering both archives and history. Much of this development was probably due to the efforts of one of the pioneer State archivists, Tom Owen of Alabama, who seems to have set the pattern for a number of the southern States. In most of the States of the West, where the State historical societies are supported in part by public funds, the archives function has been given to those institutions.

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The regional pattern is by no means without exception, and I know that changes have been and undoubtedly will continue to be made in it. I am pretty sure my guess is correct that most State archivists who are now not a part of the State library organization will resist any movement to annex them to a library. For leaving aside any question of prestige and position, most State archivists sincerely believe that greater financial support can be obtained if the archives is on its own.

Complicating the picture a bit today is the development of the field of record management or record administration, as it is sometimes called. This field, closely related to archival administration, was promoted in the Federal Government by the archivists; and today by law the Archivist of the United States has full responsibility for leadership and staff planning in the administration of Federal records. Record management has also developed in the States during the past decade, often promoted by the State archivist. What effect this may have on the organizational picture I am not prepared to say.

I said at the outset that I should not discuss this question of organizational status, and so I had better change my line before I really get into its pros and cons. Personally I should regret it very much if jurisdictional controversy developed between our professions. I have long thought that there ought to be closer professional relations and greater cooperation between archivists and librarians at all levels. Certainly we archivists in the United States, who on the whole are relatively late comers to our work, owe a debt of gratitude to the librarians, who before our time took care of our government archives. There is today enough work for all of us and we ought to save our energies for doing things that need to be done rather than engage in jurisdictional disputes.

On the subject of archival services of State libraries I am sure there is one point on which we all agree: that is, that the archival function is distinct from the library function; that it requires special training and special competence. I speak, of course, from the point of view of what we believe our job to be as Federal archivists, and if I emphasize the differences between library and archival work, I do so only to ask the State librarians who have archival responsibilities to be patient and understanding with us.

I fully subscribe to the thesis that librarians and archivists have common goals — the collection, evaluation, control, preservation, and dissemination of the materials of knowledge. These, however, are general goals; in specifics the materials handled, the problems

encountered, the work methods, and to a large extent even the clientele served in an archives differ from those in a library.

On the working level the predominant purpose of a library is to acquire printed materials suited to the needs and interests of its patrons, to make its holdings available on open shelves or by quick delivery from the stacks, and to simplify the process of finding particular books and of discovering what books on a given subject are available in print. Its clientele is likely to be very numerous and quite diverse in character. As a rule it is called on to furnish specific items whose existence is already well known or to assist in the development of a bibliography of specific items dealing expressly with some fairly well defined subject of inquiry.

The materials in a library consist mainly of published books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Each unit is an integrated piece, consciously written to tell some story or expound some particular subject. Each unit is identifiable in a standard way by author, title, and date and place of publication. Being published, the unit's existence can be discovered through such generally accessible media as book reviews, publishers' announcements, publishers' lists, consolidated catalogs of books in print, and a myriad of specialized bibliographies. Most of the holdings of a library (except its rare books and similar items) are expendable and replaceable; without too much concern they may be freely exposed to occasional loss and normal wear. If a reader does not find a copy of the book he wants in one library, he can usually find it in another.

Given its broad purpose to collect materials according to the interests of its patrons and to administer its collection primarily with a view to convenience in getting at single items, and given the well defined nature of the items with which it deals, a library normally proceeds by the best suited methods to classify and arrange the items according to subject and to catalog each item so fully that it can be found with almost any clue. And, since a library catalog is expected to lead with precision to known works in various editions, it must be constructed in accordance with strict conventions and must give with scrupulous care all the defining elements by which each particular work can be positively identified.

Archives, it seems to me, have more specialized and limited functions than libraries. Their first responsibility is to the government, in whose operations they take a significant part. They must by judicious selection assist other agencies of the government in reducing to a minimum the volume of records that are to be retained and later transferred to their custody. This selection process in an

archives is fundamentally different from that employed by librarians. The archivist selects aggregates rather than individual items. He judges values on the basis of an analysis of the functions and organization of the creating agency.

After he takes over the permanently valuable records, the archivist must endeavor through research to maintain or revive the functional utility of the records. For government officials, confronted with new situations, tend to consult their records only so far as their personal recollection of comparable past situations prompts them to do so. When they try to go back further than their own recollections, they are confronted with innumerable obstacles to understanding — obstacles created by changes of organization and transfers of function. When personal recollection fails to suggest a useful parallel, they need the help of archival analysis.

We archivists believe that it is legally, administratively, and historically important that the *essential* records of every agency of government should be preserved as the authentic, firsthand evidence of what the agency was, how it came to be, how it developed in organization and function, how it operated, and what it accomplished. This is one of the main grounds for the well-known archival principle of provenance — the rule that an agency's records should remain physically integrated and identified as a record and should not be treated as a mere collection of separate documents of interest only for what each individually contains. No agency, in surrendering its essential records to any custodian, should accept less than a tacit promise that they will be so treated.

The principle of provenance is strengthened by a further obligation of an archives to preserve in comprehensible form the records of individual actions that are important in themselves without regard to any question of the institutional history of an agency. To be comprehensible, the record of an action must be kept intact and associated with the agency that was responsible for it. And there is also an obligation to respect and preserve the intelligibility of citations made in the past so that documents that have been used and cited in connection with past research can be found and positively identified again.

A secondary function of an archives is to serve the public. The general public, as a rule, visits an archives mainly to see selected documents set out on display in its exhibit rooms. We regard our exhibit program as highly important. As for the researchers who come to the archives to make serious use of its holdings, the archi-

vist should remember that they do not come to it as they would to a library, as the nearest convenient place to consult known works that might be found equally well in some other repository. They come to it as the only place where the material they want is to be found. They cannot know precisely what material there is, but they can know what is likely to exist on the basis of their general knowledge of the archives' holdings.

For government records, especially the older ones, consist largely of unduplicated materials that are available in only one place. Some have a few of the characteristics of books in that they can be identified by author, title or subject, and date of completion; but they are ordinarily not published or even duplicated in many copies. In this class are the studies and reports deliberately written about some administrative problem or as ends in themselves. There are agency histories, annual reports, critiques of organization and procedure, staff studies of particular cases that must be dealt with, handbooks and manuals, legislative committee reports, and many other comparable documents. But a far larger part of every agency's records are of a different kind. They are not characteristically planned and written to give general information about some well defined subject of research. They are byproducts of action — applications for license, receipts for money, vouchers, book entries recording expenditures, reports to superiors on what has been done or observed, and so on *ad infinitum*. The units are not ordinarily fixed but are fluid and amorphous. Some are files of loose papers held together only by a folder, a piece of red tape, or a file box; and administrators seldom hesitate to change their grouping to suit the business in hand or a new system of filing.

An archives, containing material that is not published or largely duplicated and for which there are no efficient general guides comparable to the standard bibliographical guides to books, must first of all find means of bringing to the attention of scholars near and far the general nature of its resources. The most workable means to this end are the broad guide and the more detailed inventory, which can be reproduced in fair-sized editions and distributed as widely as may be desired. In such guides and inventories, it is out of the question to set forth with the precision and detail of a library catalog entry the individual papers and documents of a collection. An archivist must content himself with the identification and description of units that are usually much larger and always less definite in their composition than a published book. And his identifications must be based on a careful study of their relation to the organizational and

functional history of the agency rather than on the simple, often un-descriptive, markings or labels borne by the records themselves. The units most commonly chosen for identification are first the record group — that is, the records accumulated by a single bureau or other establishment of nearly autonomous authority; and second, the series — that is, a body of records kept together on some principle within a record group and kept distinct from other comparable series.

To meet the needs of remote scholars an archives, having unique materials, should do other things that are not ordinarily expected of a library. It should publish as many as possible of its more important series, either by letterpress or on microfilm, so that copies can be placed in more conveniently located libraries. Publication is an important part of the program of every well managed archives.

I have emphasized the means an archives must use to make its holdings known and partly available to persons who live at a distance. I wish now to consider the methods that it must employ in administering the records themselves. First of all the matter of preservation is of paramount importance. The methods used are probably well enough known to all librarians. Next, in view of its obligation to maintain the essential records of each government agency intact, an archives should take great pains not to let any records lose their identity of provenance. As a rule it should keep the arrangement given to the records by the last agency that held them. At least, before undertaking to rearrange them it should consider carefully whether the change will separate related documents or deprive them of any of their organic meaning. In the interest of simple thrift an archives will conserve the value of the tools of control inherited from the originating agency. This means that it should not only save the existing registers and indexes if they are still workable but should also preserve the order of the records in relation to such tools so that they can continue to be used. For no archivist can ever hope to be rich enough to discard existing tools and to substitute a whole new set of his own.

Since all reference to archives, in whatever subject field, is essentially historical — relating to what was or what happened in the past — and since the record units that must be dealt with cannot be intelligibly identified on their face but must be analyzed internally and identified in relation to their origins in political and administrative history, it follows that to be a successful archivist one should have sound academic training in history and historical method. This kind of training is usually easy enough to find. But in addition to

historical training an archivist needs to have studied the peculiar problems and methods of archival work as distinct from the work of both librarians and historians. There is now a sizable literature in English on this subject. So far, however, there are few substantial university courses regularly given in archival management. We hope that in time this situation will be remedied. I trust that it is not too much to hope that in the fullness of time courses in archival principles and techniques may even become a part of the library school curriculum.