

The Relation Between Archivists and Record Managers

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DURING these times of cold and not-so-cold wars and guided missiles we hear much talk of coexistence. This morning I should like to explore the possibility of a closer relation between the archivist and the record manager — coexistence, if you wish. When Mr. deValinger asked me to appear, he spoke of an uneasy alliance existing between archivists and record managers. I represent the point of view of the record manager. I venture to say that you expect my address to be in the nature of a castigation. I hope you won't be too disappointed when I tell you it will not be. No fur is going to fly. I cannot agree that there is any basic difference in purpose between record managers and archivists; at least I cannot agree that there should be. We all are — or we should be — trying to do our best job. Record managers are subject to somewhat different pressures than archivists, but I submit that the differences between us — and Heaven knows there are some — are almost all due to lack of communication between us.

The history of every company starts on the day of its inception. The recording of this history starts with the first document written, whether it be a certificate of incorporation or a simple agreement of partnership. The history of the Du Pont Company starts with a cash book, in which our founder posted his cash on hand and expenses. In this little book, Eleuthère Irénée du Pont kept track of his daily operations. After this, letter books were created. These give an insight into the rewards and defeats Mr. du Pont encountered in operating his mills. Later there were ledgers of capital account, of accounts receivable, and of accounts payable. Reading these early records, one can visualize the masons laying the first stones of a small gunpowder mill on Brandywine Creek, near Wilmington, Delaware. This venture in the New World was started in the summer of 1802 by Mr. du Pont, who had landed in America

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on New Year's Day in 1800, just 3 weeks after the death of George Washington.

Here I should like to tell of the experience that prompted Irénée du Pont to start making gunpowder. He had no thought of gunpowder when he came to America. With his father and older brother Victor, he hoped to set up a colony in which Frenchmen like himself could start life anew. While he was hunting one day, his gun misfired when he tried to shoot a bird. At this point his thoughts turned back to his youthful experience of powdermaking, when he had been apprenticed to the famed French chemist, Antoine Lavoisier. He made his decision that day. He was sure he could produce better gunpowder, and he began to assemble capital for the first powder mills.

As you know our company prospered and, as more and more gunpowder was produced, it naturally produced more and more records. The lack of modern typewriters and office equipment must have kept business on a simpler scale, for the owners apparently had no real record problem — at least we find little mention of it — for the first hundred years. Then we become aware of a breakdown of records into several classes, such as vouchers, contracts, agreements, patents, and last — and by far the most voluminous — correspondence. This correspondence began to be broken down into a multitude of subjects and became a potpourri of great complexity. It seems to me, however, that from the correspondence we have gained the most facts of historical importance.

To cope with the accumulation, a file room came into being. Later on, company offices became decentralized and, with the variables in operation, many file rooms were required. Further, through the autonomous operation of the various departments, a number of filing systems were set up, which in no way simplified the problem of retrieval.

In 1904 the vast accumulation of files necessitated the relocation of inactive records. Thus the Hall of Records was established — at first in an unoccupied building on company property near the site of the first mills on the Brandywine. By modern standards it was not good; but, though we don't use it for record storage now, we have considered remodeling the interior to permit the installation of shelves.

This building must have filled an important need; for, in spite of concerted efforts of management, we had to construct two additional buildings — one in 1917 and the other in 1919. The record management program during this era seemed to be confined to the

oft repeated plea: "Don't send your record material to the Hall of Records until all activity has gone from them." Another slogan of the program was: "I think that our position is stronger if we can say that we do not destroy any of our records. If we cannot find them we shall at least not be accused of purposely doing away with them."

For 25 years we operated happily on this then-common principle, but then we were forced to construct still another building. It is a 1-story fireproof building containing about an acre of space. We thought it would serve forever, but in 1950 we had reached the point of saturation with inactive files; all buildings were filled. Something had to be done — we needed either a new record center or a new method of housing the records. We selected the second alternative. By using corrugated cartons and steel shelving we were able to compress the records, a total of 140,000 cubic feet, in the newest building and still have storage space for an additional 25,000 cubic feet, all housed compactly in the same building. Along with the rehousing of inactive records, record management came into the picture — that is, administrative control of written material.

A sound record management program will accomplish — among other things — the following:

1. Simplified identification of documents to aid filing.
2. Efficient filing of active records to permit easy accessibility.
3. The transfer of less active records to low cost storage.
4. A uniform retention schedule and the destruction of obsolete records.

It is in the fourth accomplishment that I believe the archivist and the record manager can benefit by a closer alliance. Much literature has been produced since World War II proclaiming the merits of record control, recordkeeping, file systems, paper control, form control, retention schedules, and so on ad infinitum. Much of the drum-beating in this connection, particularly that which is directed toward disposal, is done with an eye to profit. Prompt record disposal can save money, and anyone who can show a businessman how to make a saving will be rewarded. Less literature — at best a very little — has been directed toward making the businessman see the need for retaining records that may be of historic interest. I am not familiar with any literature that, while recognizing that saving records costs money, presents a case for spending today's dollars to protect business records that may be of value 50 or 100 years from now.

How is the record manager to know what the historian of the future will consider important? I don't say that you archivists can

know, either, but I do say that you should be in a better position to guess. Your education and experience with the past fits you better to predict the future in this respect. I have yet to see a document that tells the record manager how to identify historical records in the retention schedule he develops. We also seem to fall short in our liaison contacts with the archivists and historians, in that information regarding our records is not disseminated to them. In the Du Pont Company we have not established record management as such — primarily because of our departmental setup and the autonomy of the departments. There are industrial, auxiliary, and administrative departments — each operating as an almost separate entity and each using file systems and record controls tailored to fit its individual operations. The various departments send their inactive records to the Hall of Records promptly and thus free valuable office space. Once the records are in the hall, they are indexed by title, year, and contents to permit ready reference. For our index we use the actual storage list, which is prepared by the originating department. In our particular case, we find it desirable to use the indexing system currently used by the department transmitting the records. We don't try to make the records and record titles conform to a special index for the record center.

For many years we have used a retention schedule in connection with all records. We are now preparing a new schedule, and in determining retention periods we give consideration to the length of time the records are required as work papers and the period during which they must be retained to meet legal requirements. In a few instances we have considered history. As an example, records dealing with our effort during World War II are retained as historical.

We record managers are primarily businessmen, who pursue efficiency and economy. In so doing, we undoubtedly destroy records now obsolete that in 50 or 100 years could well be the missing pieces in the puzzle from which our history must be reconstructed. Such records as our chemists' notebooks, formulae, employee history record cards, and a few others are retained permanently — in total they amount to about 5 percent of the records we produce. Are we destroying records of historical value? There are probably records of importance among those we throw away, but we have no way of knowing. Perhaps this is where the experience of archivists could help us.

Many record disposal systems are based on automatic destruction of a record when it has attained a certain age. We do not believe

that we can in 1958 establish a retention period, of, say, 30 years, for a record and be certain in 1988 that the record should be automatically destroyed without review simply because of a decision made 30 years earlier. No Du Pont Company records are, or ever have been, destroyed automatically because they have reached a certain age. When they attain the agreed age a complete review is undertaken. In our company this review is made by the originating department, the Treasurer's Department, and the Legal Department, final authorization for destruction being given by the Secretary's Department. All must concur before a record can be destroyed. This system cannot guarantee that nothing of historical importance will be destroyed, but it does afford a series of checks by responsible officials and it guards against the thoughtless destruction of valuable material.

The magnitude of the problem can be illustrated by our experience — and we are just one company of many thousands. During the first 7 months of 1958 we have reviewed 37,000 cubic feet of records to select those that could be destroyed and segregate those we wished to retain either for their value to the going business or for their future value. At least, we are trying.

It would be presumptuous for me to evaluate the importance of the record manager to the archivist, but I do think there is much to be gained by our relations, particularly if we trust and confide in each other. We must recognize each other's problems, respect each other's ability and judgment, and refrain from either condemning or patronizing. If we can do this I assure you that there will be a strong alliance between us. Remember that the archivists who follow you will be working with records that we are accumulating. You tell us what they will need, and I promise that we'll try our best to protect it for them.