

# The Forest Service, Trail Blazer in Recordkeeping Methods

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*National Archives*

THE first two decades of the twentieth century brought important changes in the recordkeeping methods of our Federal Government. During these years the expansion of the Government's functions and organizational structure led to the creation of larger, more complex, and more widely distributed bodies of records. Accompanying this expansion was the growing belief that recordkeeping methods, like other administrative practices, should be guided by the much revered principles of the business world — economy and efficiency. In accordance with this idea these methods were examined critically, and many of them were changed. By the close of the second decade of the century there were several signs of the new direction in which the Government's recordkeeping methods were moving. Here and there this direction had been set by the blazed trails of pioneers. Among these pioneers was the United States Forest Service.

The Forest Service, established in the Department of Agriculture in 1905, consolidated and expanded systematic Federal work in forestry. This work had begun in the Department in 1876 as an investigative and informational activity and had expanded in 1891 with the creation of forest reserves under the administration of the Department of the Interior. After the merger of these phases of work in 1905 Federal forest administration was broadened and diversified by the growth of regulatory functions and the adoption of new policies based on social as well as scientific concepts of forest management. The foundation of this administration, however, had been laid in 1898, when Gifford Pinchot became Forester and Chief of the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture.

Pinchot, an ardent advocate of greater Federal activity in forestry, immediately reorganized the program of the Division of Forestry by offering unprecedented assistance to private forest owners and broadening the Division's informational work. Soon the Division was flooded with requests for assistance; within 3 years its corre-

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spendence and mailing lists were more than doubled. New administrative methods seemed to be required to deal with the rising public demand for service. Accordingly a Section of Office Work was established in 1899, with special responsibility for administrative operations, including the introduction of a new filing system.<sup>1</sup> This system, effective July 1, 1899, provided for the use of carbon copies instead of press copies of outgoing letters and for the filing of incoming letters with copies of related outgoing letters — innovations that were to be recommended to Federal bureaus by Presidential commissions in 1906 and 1912.

The growth of public interest in forestry by 1901 led to the creation of the Bureau of Forestry as the successor to the Division of Forestry and brought a steady increase in paperwork. In this administrative change, recordkeeping methods were reorganized to provide for the filing of correspondence at bureau, divisional, and office levels. The ephemeral value of much of the increasing volume of the Bureau's correspondence was probably recognized; for divisional heads were instructed to prepare subject indexes of correspondence having permanent value, and the chief clerk was directed to maintain a separate file of routine correspondence concerning publications and blank forms.<sup>2</sup> To achieve more uniformity in filing, the head of the Office of Records in 1904 was given "general supervision over the methods of filing in-correspondence throughout the Bureau."<sup>3</sup>

Thus by 1905, when the Bureau of Forestry became the Forest Service, Pinchot had already built an organization in which recordkeeping methods had received some scrutiny, revision, and control. Immediate responsibility in this area had been and for several years continued to be entrusted mainly to George G. Anderson, a former newspaper and railroad employee who had entered the Division of Forestry in 1901 as a stenographer and "type-writer." In a few years he became the agency's principal specialist in office methods and in 1915 its Inspector of Records, a position that foreshadowed the record administrator of today.

The Forest Service, responsible for the administration of a vast land area as well as for the conduct of investigative and informa-

<sup>1</sup> "Report of the Forester," in U. S. Department of Agriculture, *Annual Reports*, 1899, p. 99 (Washington, 1899).

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum of Gifford Pinchot, Forester, on correspondence of the Bureau of Forestry, effective July 1, 1901, in records of the Office of the Chief, Forest Service, National Archives, Record Group 95. Hereafter records in the National Archives are cited by the symbol NA, followed by the record group (RG) number.

<sup>3</sup> Office order no. 64, Apr. 2, 1904, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

tional programs, made several changes in its administrative management and methods during its early years. Many of these pioneering changes caused the Service to be acclaimed as a model organization in efficiency. According to James R. Garfield, the Committee on Department Methods (popularly called the Keep Commission), of which he was a member, was unanimous in the opinion that the Service in 1906 was so much more efficient than other offices that its methods were used as a basis for recommendations to other Federal bureaus.<sup>4</sup> Innovations in recordkeeping practices accounted for some of the acclaim given the Service during the period covered by this article (1898 to 1918). Of these innovations the most important probably were the introduction of vertical files, the development of subject classification of correspondence, and the inauguration of a plan for systematic disposal or retention of records.

The introduction of vertical filing in the United States accompanied the introduction of scientific forestry. Both were introduced in 1892 and were first given wide publicity at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Indeed Pinchot's acquaintance with vertical files may have begun when perhaps he strolled from his forestry exhibit at the fair to mingle with the skeptical crowd viewing Dr. Nathaniel S. Rosenau's strange device for standing papers on edge. In any event, records show that as early as 1900 Pinchot ordered from the Library Bureau vertical filing equipment for the Division of Forestry. More generally used by his agency before 1905, however, was the Amberg filing cabinet, with its small drawers alphabetically subdivided for the horizontal filing of letters by name of the writer or his organization.

Vertical filing was extended after 1905 when the Forest Service took steps to provide for uniform recordkeeping methods in the offices of forest supervisors, newly acquired from the Department of the Interior. In regulations issued in 1906, which discontinued press copying and required that related incoming and outgoing letters be filed together in the offices of the supervisors, the Service also directed that vertical filing equipment be used for the filing of records relating to particular cases or transactions such as "Grazing," "Timber Sales," and "Trespass." At the same time, however, certain reports and orders and correspondence not relating to specified transactions were ordered to be filed in small drawers of horizontal filing equipment.<sup>5</sup>

The failure in 1906 to prescribe vertical filing for all records

<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Committee on Expenditures in the Department of Agriculture*, p. 18 (H. Rept. 8147, 59 Cong., 2d. sess., 1907).

<sup>5</sup> Forest Service, *Use Book*, p. 134-139 (Washington, 1906).

maintained in the offices of forest supervisors was considered unwise by some Forest Service inspectors. One of these officials, in urging vertical instead of horizontal filing, made horizontal filing seem like an acrobatic performance:

The latter is all right until the drawers begin to fill up and get heavy, then letters slide out over the index guides, and when a drawer is taken out it is a case of rest it on your knee or carry it to a desk while the weight of a mass of correspondence is held up by one hand while the letter is extracted from the bottom of a file with the other.<sup>6</sup>

This inspector also held that vertical files were more naturally expandable to meet new requirements in filing and reported that there was a tendency to adopt vertical filing methods despite some official instructions to the contrary. Moreover, he contended that a vertical system could provide a uniform method of "transferring" (i. e., retiring) noncurrent records once a year whereas the horizontal system tended to make this process occur only at irregular intervals when drawers became full of records.<sup>7</sup>

By the latter part of 1908 Forest Service officials were generally convinced of the superiority of vertical filing and were ready to adopt it as soon as funds were available for replacing the horizontal equipment. Thus, when district offices began to be established in December 1908, these offices were ordered to use vertical files.<sup>8</sup> Within the next 2 years vertical filing was introduced or increased in the Washington and field offices of the Service, including some offices of forest rangers. In October 1910 Forester Henry S. Graves could report that the "standard filing equipment" of his bureau was a two-drawer vertical unit.<sup>9</sup> This innovation came in advance of the practice of most Federal bureaus and was in general use in the Forest Service nearly 2 years before the President's Committee on Economy and Efficiency (popularly known as the Taft Commission) recommended its adoption throughout the Federal Government.

The introduction of vertical files was accompanied by the development of a system of filing correspondence under subject headings. As early as 1905 the newly created Office of Law, of the Forest Service, was permitted to establish an alpha-numeric system that

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Campbell to the Forester, Oct. 31, 1908, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Forest Service, *Manual of Procedure*, p. 24 (Washington, 1908).

<sup>9</sup> Graves to George P. McCabe, Chairman, Departmental Committee on Economy and Efficiency, Oct. 10, 1910, in correspondence of the Office of the Chief, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

contained an element of subject classification. In 1906 offices of forest supervisors were authorized to use subject headings for the filing of correspondence and other records concerning classes of transactions such as "Timber Sales" and "Grazing" and correspondence with the Office of the Forester dealing with general administrative matters. By 1908 the belief was strong that the Forest Service should file most of its correspondence by subject. One inspector pointed out that there was much "correspondence in which the idea of the Subject strongly prevails over the name of the writer as a key for the future reference to the correspondence in question."<sup>10</sup> Another inspector observed that there was "a natural and almost involuntary tendency" to use vertical subject files and asserted that most forest supervisors who had given the matter any attention preferred a subject file to other systems.<sup>11</sup> Supporting these views were recommendations of the firm of Gunn, Richards and Co. of New York City in its appraisal of the business methods and organization of the Forest Service. Examiners of this firm recommended that "practically all of the internal correspondence of the Service should be filed by subject."<sup>12</sup>

These comments by official and nonofficial observers brought a decision to adopt subject classification for correspondence. Accordingly George G. Anderson was instructed to draft a classification scheme, and this was officially approved in November 1908 for use in the Washington and district offices of the Service. A few months later the scheme was approved for offices of forest supervisors and other field officials. With modifications it was used as the official filing method of the Forest Service until July 1, 1959, when it was replaced by a "manual-coordinated file system" using a numeric code and subject headings. Under the 1908 method a key letter or key letters designated the major office or division charged with the function involved in the correspondence and under the key letter or letters the correspondence and related papers were filed. Added to the key letter were primary headings such as "Cooperation," "Inspection," and "Studies." Secondary and tertiary headings were devised as needed. An exception to this system, maintained for several years, was the "general correspondence" series in which miscellaneous and relatively less important correspondence not easily related to the prescribed headings was filed. The files of central

<sup>10</sup> Inspector W. R. Matton to the Forester, Jan. 23, 1908, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Campbell to the Forester, Oct. 31, 1908, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>12</sup> Preliminary Report of Gunn, Richards and Co. to Pinchot, June 30, 1908, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

and field offices were correlated so as to supplement each other and make possible the replacement of any records that might be lost or destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

In December 1908 Anderson began a tour of the district offices to help establish the new filing system. On his return to Washington he helped reorganize the files of the central office. And by the end of 1909 the new system prevailed throughout the Forest Service. Its introduction, like that of vertical files, was in advance of the practice of most Federal agencies. It came more than 3 years before the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency recommended such files for all agencies.

In less than a decade after the introduction of subject files the Forest Service took another pioneering step with the development of a schedule for the systematic retention and disposal of records. Various proposals were made after 1912 for a more systematic disposition of the Service's growing volume of noncurrent records. As early as 1913 a forest supervisor in Utah, for example, proposed that the Service obtain authority to make "appropriate disposition" of "certain 'closed cases' and correspondence, beginning with the year 1906 and continuing annually taking out useless correspondence ten years old." For the next 4 years, however, the policy of the Service was to obtain authority from the Secretary of Agriculture for the destruction of particular bodies of accumulated records.<sup>14</sup>

Impetus for the adoption of a broader disposition policy was given in 1915 by a survey of the noncurrent files of the Washington office of the Forest Service. These files, the survey revealed, were piled high in three rooms and a vault, were considerably disarranged and difficult to examine, and undoubtedly included much material that could very well be destroyed without danger of embarrassment to the Service.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile officials in the field began to call the Forester's attention to a need for destroying useless records in their offices. In 1916 the Forester referred this matter to Anderson, who now had the title of Inspector of Records, and the latter began a study of the situation. Anderson inquired into the saving of storage space that might be effected by destroying certain classes of records more than 3 years old, the nature of these classes, the kind and amount of work that would be involved in segregating them, and "the cost of such segregation as an offset to the saving, immediate or

<sup>13</sup> Graves to McCabe, Oct. 10, 1910, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>14</sup> The Secretary could grant such authority in his Department under an act of Congress of 1907 (34 Stat. 1281).

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Service Committee, Apr. 1, 1915, in records of the Office of the Chief, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.



potential, both in money and in greater efficiency of the retained files." <sup>16</sup>

By September 1917 Anderson had carefully studied the disposition problem in the main central and field offices of the Service and had obtained useful advice from several officials. His findings and recommendations formed the basis of a significant request made by Acting Forester A. F. Potter on September 14, 1917. After describing the increasing accumulation of records due to the expansion of national forest activities and the attendant problems of storage and access to valuable papers, Potter asked for authority to destroy, after retention periods of 2 and 3 years, certain classes of records having "no permanent or historical value." The destruction of these records, he contended, would permit a complete examination of the noncurrent files, rearrangement of those worthy of preservation, and reduction of the cost of storage. It was therefore regarded as essential in the interest of "business economy and efficiency." <sup>17</sup>

The departmental Chief Clerk, acting for the Secretary of Agriculture, recognized the unusual nature of the disposal authority requested, recommended that it be granted by the Secretary, and suggested that it might be a matter worthy of consideration by the departmental Advisory Committee on Finance and Business Methods, presumably for use in other bureaus. <sup>18</sup> The Secretary granted the authority requested by the Forest Service but did not think it necessary to extend it to other bureaus. <sup>19</sup> In accordance with the authorization, the Forest Service within a year destroyed at least 5 tons of the old files in its Washington office. <sup>20</sup> Meanwhile in March 1918 Acting Forester Potter issued a schedule for the destruction of useless files in field offices. Under the schedule, correspondence that related to unimportant topics and transactions, or whose essence was preserved in retained records, might be destroyed after 3 years. <sup>21</sup>

District foresters were given authority to provide for the preser-

<sup>16</sup> Report of Anderson on the inspection of records in the district office at Denver, Colo., Oct. 18, 1916, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>17</sup> Acting Forester A. F. Potter to R. M. Reese, Chief Clerk of the Department of Agriculture, Sept. 14, 1917, in correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NA, RG 16.

<sup>18</sup> Chief Clerk Reese to the Secretary of Agriculture, Sept. 15, 1917, in correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NA, RG 16.

<sup>19</sup> F. R. Harrison, Assistant to the Secretary, to Reese, Sept. 27, 1917, in correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NA, RG 16.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of the Service Committee, Aug. 15, 1918, in records of the Office of the Chief, Forest Service; NA, RG 95.

<sup>21</sup> A retention period of only 2 years for requisitions for supplies authorized by the Secretary of Agriculture was apparently increased by this schedule.

vation of any material not specified for preservation if they judged such action to be necessary in the public interest. The disposal authority was made optional, perhaps because of the view expressed to Inspector Anderson that the files of an official of the Service "are the record of his administration and that he is entitled, for his protection, to preserve such files as he deems essential to the vindication of his official actions."<sup>22</sup>

The schedule contained a list of the primary subjects in the current filing scheme of the Service and the following instructions for the disposition of material filed under each subject: "Segregate," "Preserve," "Destroy," or "Concentrate."<sup>23</sup> The schedule therefore provided for the retention or disposal of all field records. Showing an unusual understanding of the value of records, Acting Forester Potter expressed the view that the schedule would maintain "the historical integrity of the records" and at the same time would "provide for ready reference to such of them as are of permanent value from the standpoint of administration or research."<sup>24</sup>

This schedule of 1918 preceded by two decades the systematic development of record disposal and retention plans for other Federal bureaus. Its provisions were made applicable to the Washington office of the Service in 1924, and its basic standards and instructions were restated in circulars to field offices in 1925 and 1930.<sup>25</sup> The circular of 1930 provided disposal authority until it was superseded in 1936 by action taken under the National Archives Act of 1934. In 1938, however, archivists under the supervision of T. R. Schellenberg used the circular as a guide in developing a disposal and retention schedule for the Service that set a useful pattern for other Government bureaus.

Innovations of the Forest Service, therefore, were forerunners of significant changes in the recordkeeping practices of the Federal Government. In an era of increasing demand for greater efficiency in public administration these innovations showed unusual recognition of the contribution that new recordkeeping methods might make to such efficiency. Moreover, they provided effective means for preserving the historical record of the rise and expansion of an important Government activity.

<sup>22</sup> Report of Anderson on the inspection of records in the district office at Albuquerque, N. M., Nov. 28, 1916, in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>23</sup> To "concentrate" meant to consolidate the records of two or more field offices dealing with a particular subject.

<sup>24</sup> Miscellaneous [Circular] 0-61 (Mar. 15, 1918), in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.

<sup>25</sup> Miscellaneous [Circulars] 0-135 (Mar. 11, 1924), 0-142 (Feb. 28, 1925), and 0-187 (Dec. 1, 1930), in records of the Division of Operation, Forest Service, NA, RG 95.