



—Miller of Washington

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The Role of the Archivist in the Civil War Centennial

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IT SEEMS to me that the most important thing that the archivist can do in connection with the Civil War Centennial is to help promote a better understanding of the war and its importance in history. Indeed, a better understanding of the war and its impact on the people of the 1860's and subsequent times should be the basic concern, the primary objective, of everyone who has a part in planning and executing the commemorative program, whether on the National, State, or local level. We need a broad and varied program, including pageants, parades, and dedication of monuments. There is also a place for battle reenactments, though it is the hope of the National Centennial Commission that these exercises will not be unduly emphasized; and I am sure that those of us who live in areas where sectional antipathies have not entirely disappeared have some concern about the type of ammunition to be used in the restaging of these ancient fights. But the pageantry and the ceremony will be of little avail unless they contribute to a richer understanding of the war and its influence. There is a danger of frittering away so much time and substance on spectacular, popular, superficial, and ephemeral activities that when the centennial has passed we shall have little of solid and lasting value to show for all our exertion.

In seeking a better understanding of the war it is important for us to take a broad view of the conflict. We should not consider it as a distinct and isolated segment of our past, but rather as an inseparable part of the continuing stream of American history. The roots of this conflict reach far back into the past, to early colonial times, and its influences remain strong and active today. It affected almost every conceivable aspect of American life and its total impact was so

* Adaptation by the author of an address by him to the Society of American Archivists, at Chicago, Ill., on Dec. 29, 1959. Dr. Wiley, professor of history at Emory University, Atlanta, is a member of the Civil War Centennial Commission. His many books about the Civil War include notably *The Life of Johnny Reb: Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943), *The Life of Billy Yank: Common Soldier of the Union* (1952), and *The Road to Appomattox* (1956). He served as a historian with the Army in World War II and has made significant contributions to the Army's historical series.

tremendous and far-reaching as to provide a fertile and challenging field of study for many generations to come. In trying to understand it we must not draw rigid and narrow boundaries of time or discipline. We must explore and reexplore, interpret and reinterpret, such questions as how it came about; what it was like; how it affected individuals, groups, localities, and institutions; how people of the time reacted to the crisis; and how the war has influenced succeeding generations.

The basic requirement for a better understanding of the war is an adequacy of sources. It is in this connection that the archivist can participate most effectively in the Civil War Centennial. It seems to me that the archivist's responsibilities with respect to sources are threefold.

First, he must take a leading role in the collection of materials. I realize, of course, that not all archivists can be collectors and that some of them must devote primary if not exclusive attention to servicing records that come automatically into their custody. But, speaking of archivists as a whole and considering particularly their role in the centennial, I believe that the most important thing they can do during the years 1960-65 is to utilize the upsurge of interest produced by the centennial to gather in from attics, basements, and other secluded places a great harvest of letters, diaries, reports, newspapers, photographs, and other source materials bearing on the conflict. Never again will there be so good an opportunity for collecting Civil War materials. Presumably there will be other centennials, each bringing a renewal of interest in the conflict, but much of the material that now reposes in private possession will be lost or destroyed before another century rolls around. *Now* is the time to make an all-out effort to gather the sources.

It is not necessary to try to get possessors of source materials to part with them permanently. Personally, I prefer to work with the documents themselves, and owners should not be discouraged from donating manuscripts to depositories. But microfilm, in most cases, is a reasonably satisfactory substitute for the original. And the insurance value of microfilming provides a good talking point for persuading owners of manuscripts and other treasures to make them available for the use of historians. During recent months I have obtained the loan to Emory University, for microfilming, of a number of collections of Civil War manuscripts by pointing out to the owners the fact that, should anything ever happen to the originals, facsimiles could be made from the film. Then, microfilm has

the advantage of requiring little space for storage, and for many if not most archivists storage is an important consideration.

It seems appropriate at this point to raise the questions: Is it really important to try to collect additional Civil War records? Do we not have enough of this sort of material already? These questions are more pertinent in view of the statement made recently by a leading Civil War historian that "the future is not likely to see major discoveries of new facts or fresh sources in the Civil War period," and that the mass of historical sources for this period is so formidable that it tends to discourage young historians from choosing this field as a specialty. I have the greatest respect for the historian who made this statement, but I want to register a strong disagreement. I do not think that we have a superabundance of source material on any aspect of the Civil War, and there are certain areas in which material is lamentably inadequate. One example of scarcity is in the correspondence of Confederate congressmen. For the past ten years I have been searching diligently for letters written by members of the legislative branch of the Davis government during their Confederate incumbencies. Rebel congressmen aggregated 267. For only a few have I found as many as 30 letters, and for some I have not been able to discover a single communication.

Another example is the correspondence of Negro soldiers, some 200,000 of whom wore the Union blue. I have long had a deep interest in these colored soldiers and during my research for *The Life of Billy Yank* I made a special effort to find letters that they wrote during their service. I found no more than about 30 all told, written by less than a half-dozen individuals. It seems reasonable to believe that a widespread and systematic effort during the centennial years to unearth materials in private possession would bring to light additional documents in these and other scarce categories.

If time permitted I could point out a number of areas and aspects which have not been adequately treated by historians — and the reason in many cases is scantiness of source material. These include biographies of lesser generals, and by lesser generals I mean to include corps commanders. We do not yet have a good biography of Winfield Hancock, one of the best corps commanders on either side. I understand that a biography of Hancock has been written by Glenn Tucker and is to be published in the spring of 1961. We lack biographies of some of the State governors and other secondary political figures. Army supply has never received sufficient attention. Only recently did we get a good biography of Montgomery

Meigs, the Union Quartermaster General, and we still do not have a good biography of his opposite on the Confederate side, A. R. Lawton. There is also a dearth of up-to-date, thoroughly researched studies of State participation — for example, there is no book-length study of Tennessee in the Confederacy. Other subjects which need fuller treatment are the role of women and the Trans-Mississippi theater.

Even in the areas of greatest abundance there is need for further collection. I do not suppose that there is any type of source material for the whole of American history to be found in such great profusion, in public depositories, as the letters and diaries of Civil War soldiers. Even so, the person who sets out to write the history of a regiment sometimes has great difficulty in locating letters and diaries written by the rank and file of the organization in which he is interested. Recently a student called to my attention a group of 63 letters written by a private of the 52d Georgia Regiment. The letters were poorly composed and hard to decipher. My advice was asked as to the advisability of microfilming the collection. Even before reading them I said, "By all means, microfilm them, for they may be the only known extant letters of a soldier belonging to the 52d Georgia Regiment." I knew from prior experience that this could easily be the case. When I read the letters I was even more convinced of the wisdom of microfilming them, for they gave delightful and revealing glimpses of the character, thought patterns, and language of representative members of the great masses of the American common folk of a hundred years ago. On July 10, 1863, shortly after hearing of the fall of Vicksburg this soldier wrote his wife: "I can tell you we air whipt now if we [only] nod hit. We have not got anuff Men here in the West to hold old Grant a bit. he can whip us here ever fit and he has don hit eve fit we hav had with him."

Included in this collection were a number of letters written by the soldier's wife. She was having a hard time at home trying to make ends meet and take care of a new baby. Her lot, like that of most soldiers' wives, was harder than that of her husband. But when he wrote that he could not send her any money because he had not received his pay, she replied: "Don't disfurnish yourself on our account and don't be onese about us." What more vivid commentaries could be found on the character and morale of the common people during the crisis of the war!

Another collection of Georgia soldier letters loaned to Emory recently for microfilming contained the most vivid and expressive

description of the causes and consequences of diarrhea that I have ever seen. This soldier wrote his wife: "I have bin a little sick with diorah two or three days . . . I eat too much eggs and poark it sowered my stomack and turn loose on me."

I see no danger in the foreseeable future of acquiring *too much* source material of any sort, in any category. And there is still a deplorable shortage of certain types of material. I have already indicated some of the gaps that need to be filled. As a general rule the need for additional material is greatest in areas pertaining to nonmilitary aspects of the war. Letters and diaries of civilians, and especially women of the lower and middle classes, are relatively scarce. In the military realm, manuscripts treating of noncombatant activities are not often found in great abundance. One may say that the farther the researcher gets from the smoke of battle, the thinner becomes his source material.

In his role of collector, the archivist must be willing to *seem* profligate and indiscriminating. For he must think not only in terms of known and present needs of the historians, the genealogists, the chroniclers, and the curious, but also of the unknown requirements of investigators in all time to come. Then, he must be willing to receive a lot of chaff on the chance that with the chaff will come a few kernels of usable grain. And if he is not interested in acquiring Civil War material, he will do well to seek it in the hope that along with it will come sources treating of other aspects of history. A smart archivist will use interest in the Civil War as an instrument for meeting his larger needs, not only in the realm of collection but in other phases of his work as well.

Historians should take a similar view. Civil War specialists ought to utilize the current interest in the war to promote the cause of history in general. And historians who specialize in other fields, instead of decrying the emphasis on the war as some of them are now doing, should consider the advantages that this emphasis may bring to them. Undoubtedly many converts are being won to history in the revivals that Civil War folk are now conducting all over the land. The preaching is often poor, the doctrine tainted with heresy, and the ministers more notable for glibness than for substance. But they are bringing in the converts and it is better to get them into the promised land by a back door than not to get them in at all. The important thing is to get them in.

The most important thing that the archivist can do, then, in connection with the Civil War Centennial is to collect — to collect now and to collect generously. He can evaluate, arrange, discard, and

do other necessary work later. But for *collecting*, now is the time of opportunity; and the archivist should make the most of it.

What can and should the archivist do to promote collection?

First, he should solicit the assistance and cooperation of lay and professional historians.

Second, he should enlist the aid of local historical societies, Civil War round tables, patriotic organizations, and other interested groups. Mary Givens Bryan, State Archivist of Georgia, has made effective use of the Georgia United Daughters of the Confederacy to build up her collection of Confederate manuscripts.

Third, he should utilize newspapers, radio, and television to publicize his desire for additional material. Newspaper stories about new acquisitions will nearly always bring letters or telephone calls offering other collections for microfilming. A few months ago, Mrs. Carolyn Wyatt of Decatur, Georgia, asked me to read the Civil War letters of her father, who served in an Indiana regiment and participated in the Atlanta campaign. She hoped to get the letters published in book form, and I was able to put her in touch with some prospective publishers. It soon became apparent that these letters, though unusually good, would not be accepted for publication. I persuaded Mrs. Wyatt to lend the letters to Emory for microfilming and to permit the film to be placed in the Emory library for use by historians. She generously consented. After the letters were filmed, the Emory Public Relations Department interviewed Mrs. Wyatt and published a long story about the letters and their usefulness in the study of the history of the war. Within a week Emory had a number of telephone calls offering similar collections of letters for microfilming.

I should like also to give an instance from my personal experience of the value of the radio in acquiring new materials. During my research for *The Life of Billy Yank* I was interviewed by Olivia Brown of a Memphis radio station. In the course of the interview I let it be known that I was interested in finding Union soldier letters in private possession. Before I left the studio I received a telephone call from Mrs. Hall E. Mosher of Memphis telling me that she had the Civil War letters of a kinsman who had served in the 36th Illinois Regiment. These proved to be an exceptionally good collection of 60 letters written by Day Elmore, who originally enlisted at 16 as a drummer boy, but who laid aside his drum for a musket and fought in most of the big battles in the West. He was an exemplary soldier in every respect and his full and vivid letters to

his parents throw valuable light on the experiences and reactions of the Union rank and file.

Elmore was seriously wounded in the battle of Franklin on November 30, 1864, and was carried to a field hospital. Shortly afterward, a resident of Franklin, Mrs. Joseph Baugh, who had come to the battleground to see what aid she could render, found Elmore lying on the floor of a field hospital, had him placed in her carriage, and drove him to her home, holding his head in her lap en route so as to reduce the pain of the ride. She nursed him tenderly until he died on December 9, 1864. Then she wrote his father, a minister, a long letter telling of the last hours of his son and the courage and faith with which he faced death. This woman had a son in the Confederate Army, but she expressed the greatest sympathy for the "enemy" who had lost his boy on Southern soil.

The archivist can also make good use of the television in publicizing his desire for sources. Television programs can be organized about a good collection of letters that have been loaned for microfilming. The program may consist of closeup shots of some of the manuscripts, choice quotations from the documents, and comments on their importance by local specialists in Civil War history.

The archivist on occasion should take to the speaker's circuit to make known his needs. Talks to historical societies, civic organizations, and women's clubs often will turn up valuable collections of manuscripts. In 1953 I made a talk to the Cartersville Rotary Club. At the luncheon I sat by Paul Akin, son of Confederate Congressman Warren Akin. During the course of the conversation I asked Mr. Akin if he had any of the letters written by his father while in the Southern Congress. I was told that all of the letters had been destroyed when Sherman came through Cassville, Georgia, in May 1864 and burned the Congressman's home and law office. About a year later I went back to Cartersville to talk to this same group. On this occasion I sat between Paul Akin and his son, Warren Akin, II. To make conversation, I remarked to Paul Akin that I was still grieving over the destruction of his father's letters. Warren Akin, II, spoke up and said: "Dad, all of the letters were not destroyed. About fifteen years ago you gave me a big batch of them and they are now in the safe over in our office." I think that I must have shortened my speech in order to get to the law office quickly. The letters filed in the safe aggregated 50 and most of them had been written by Akin during the latter part of his service in the Confederate Congress. The letters were written after Sherman's Atlanta campaign and are the more valuable because materials bearing on

the work of Congress during this period are relatively scarce. These well-written communications throw much light on life in Richmond and the doings of Congress in the final months of the war. The Akin family generously permitted me to take the letters to Emory for typing and microfilming. Recently they were published by the University of Georgia Press.

The archivist's second responsibility with respect to sources is to provide for their proper preservation. I do not propose to dwell on this point because archivists are fully aware of its importance and most of them, within the limitations of available staff and storage facilities, are doing a remarkably good job of preserving the sources committed to their care. Occasionally, though very rarely, the historian encounters an archivist who seems more concerned about preserving his treasures than having them used.

Some archivists are unable to do the job of preservation that they earnestly want to do because of a grossly inadequate physical plant. It seems reasonable to hope that archivists can use interest in history stimulated by the centennial to get better facilities for the preservation of their records.

The third responsibility of the archivist with respect to sources is for servicing them — facilitating their use by scholars and other interested people. There is no point in collecting and preserving sources unless they are *used*. To be used, records must be arranged according to some sensible and practical plan. They must be cataloged — and a minimum of cataloging is the preparation of a statement giving inclusive dates and describing briefly the character

they were able to get together for me a number of substantial collections of soldiers' letters and diaries.

Some of the State depositories have no catalogs of their holdings. This works a great hardship on both the archival staff and the researchers. Much valuable time is consumed in searching for pertinent collections and the fumbling-in-the-dark procedure often causes the researcher to miss rich and sometimes vital materials bearing on his subject.

The archivist cannot fully meet his service obligations until he has prepared and issued a published guide to his holdings. But only a small proportion, even of major depositories, have been able to provide this type of finding aid. Guides serve the researcher in many valuable ways. I can only point out a few. First, they alert him to possible research projects. Second, they help him to determine whether or not an article or a book which he has in mind is practicable by throwing light on the all-important question: Is there enough source material available to justify the study? Third, they help him to plan his research. If travel is necessary, guides enable him to plan his itinerary at home where living is relatively economical, research assistance available (which in the case of the college professor means that he can exchange his dishwashing and baby-tending talents for the typing proficiency of his spouse), and where family associations provide spiritual comfort and sustenance. Guides also reduce the amount of travel required, either by revealing that material in certain depositories is insufficient to justify visiting them or by providing information for ordering essential sources on microfilm. The increasing expense of itinerant research makes very important the careful planning of travel and the substitution of micro-filming for travel whenever possible.

I want earnestly to urge archivists to do all that they possibly can to utilize the interest engendered by the centennial to issue published guides to their Civil War manuscripts — or better still, to their holdings as a whole, including their Civil War manuscripts. I should hope that publication of a guide to their Civil War manuscripts might help point up the need of a general guide, so that interest in the Civil War might be used as a foot in the door. I should like to suggest as a practical and economical measure publication of a guide to Civil War manuscripts — and it does not have to be complete — as an article or series of articles in a State or local historical journal, and then having reprints or extra copies run off for issuance as separates. Your State Civil War centennial commission might be persuaded to finance the reprints.

Another important function of the archivist in the centennial is the provision of information about the war.

First, he should provide information about units. Archivists from the North have the enormous advantage of published rosters and Dyer's remarkable *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (recently reprinted by Thomas Yoseloff of New York) with its chronologies and thumbnail histories of regiments, battalions, and batteries. I only wish that we had the equivalent of a Dyer's *Compendium* for the Confederacy.

Second, he should provide information about the role of States, counties, and communities in the Civil War. One of the great needs in Civil War historiography is more *good* local histories.

Third, he should provide information about individuals and families. The Hodnett family of Georgia, according to family tradition, had twelve sons in the Confederate Army. Enoch Cooper Cook of Alabama served as a soldier in the Confederate Army along with ten sons and two grandsons. The contributions of families such as these ought to be commemorated during the centennial and the archivist should cooperate with the descendants in digging up the necessary information.

Fourth, he should provide information about institutions, business establishments, schools, colleges, and hospitals. The Civil War caused a tremendous industrial expansion. Many business establishments operating today came into being during the war years. Some of them are planning to hold commemorative ceremonies during the centennial. Naturally they will turn to the archivist for help in obtaining information about their origin and early history. There is a great need for good histories recounting the war experiences of these and various other types of institutions which played conspicuous roles in the great crisis of the 1860's. I hope that archivists as they receive calls for information concerning this and other subjects will alert historians, especially those who direct theses, to the opportunities for investigation existing in these and other areas. Archivists should also call on historians and graduate students to assist in the preparation of bibliographies, the editing of exceptionally good collections of personal papers, and similar undertakings. If ever there was a time when archivists and historians needed to work together for their mutual welfare and the common good, it is during the centennial now approaching. Each can be of enormous help to the other.

The archivist should use his influence to see that the centennial is observed in an appropriate manner. Fortunately archivists are

represented on the centennial commissions of most of the States — and if they are not represented they ought to be. Since most of the commemorative activities are to be planned and executed on the State and local level, and since archivists will be called on for information and advice, they are in a position to influence the character of the commemorative program. It seems appropriate, therefore, for me in concluding these remarks to try to tell you what the thinking of the National Commission is — as far as I have been able to ascertain it from our meetings and discussions — as to what kind of commemorative program we should have during the centennial years.

First, the program should be dignified. The Civil War was, in many respects, the greatest experience in our history. Commemorative activities should be in keeping with this fact; restraint and good taste should be always observed; commercialism should be held within reasonable bounds; and ceremonies should not have a "picnic" quality.

Second, the programs should recognize and pay tribute to the greatness demonstrated by both North and South during the crisis of the Civil War. This was a time of supreme greatness for the masses of both sections. Never were the people of this nation called on to make such enormous sacrifices as they did during the years 1861-65. More than 600,000 soldiers, North and South, paid the supreme price in the war, and twice as many of them died of disease as perished from hostile bullets. In this war more American servicemen lost their lives than in all other American wars combined, beginning with the Revolution and coming on down through the Korean campaign, the figures being 618,000 for the Civil War and 606,000 for all other wars. The lowly folk at home suffered even more than did the soldiers in the armies. The exemplary manner in which the masses of the people acquitted themselves during this ordeal reflected great credit upon them and justified the faith of Thomas Jefferson in their basic soundness.

Third, the program should be broad in its scope. It should have a grass-roots quality. It should not be confined to tributes to generals and commemoration of battles, but should recognize all phases of the conflict and all elements of the population. It should not neglect the economic, social, and political aspects. It should take cognizance of the heroic performance of small units like the 1st Texas Regiment, the 1st Minnesota, and the 26th North Carolina, each of which lost more than 80 percent in killed and wounded in a single battle. Company "F" of the 26th North Carolina on the

first day at Gettysburg went into the battle with 91 officers and men and at the end of the day not one of them was alive and uninjured. It should pay tribute to the women, and especially to the lowly wives of soldiers, who endured hardship, suffering, and anxiety of a sort that is difficult for present-day Americans to imagine. The courage of these patriotic women is exemplified by an incident that occurred in Virginia during the war. As Governor John Letcher was returning to Richmond from a visit to his home in Staunton, he stopped at the home of an old friend. The good woman of the house was alone, and she told the governor that her husband and ten sons were all in the army and in the same company. "You must be very lonely," the governor said, "as you are accustomed to so large a family." "Yes," the noble matron replied, "it is hard to be alone, but if I had ten more sons they should all be in the army."

Fourth, the commemorative program should be one that will inform and provide a basis for continuing information.

Finally, the program should be one that will unify. It should emphasize the fact that people of both sides were sincere in their motives and that in supporting their respective causes they conducted themselves in a way that merits the praise of succeeding generations. Commemorative activities should point up the fact that the war helped to weld the country into the great unified nation that we know today. Both Northerners and Southerners ought to be able to recall the greatness demonstrated by their forebears of the 1860's without getting angry at each other. There ought to be no vaunting on the part of the victorious North and no flareup of antagonism on the part of the defeated South. It is especially important that the South, which — because it was the vanquished party and because most of the battles were fought on its soil — tends to remember more vividly the conflict, should not revive the passions of war. As the South views the Confederate flag, of which it has every reason to be proud, it ought to regard that flag as a symbol of the suffering, the sacrifice, and the greatness of our forefathers, and not as an emblem of hatred and continuing defiance. Both Southerners and Northerners ought to commemorate the war as *Americans*, as members of a united country, inspired with new hope and looking to the uncertain future with increased confidence because of the strength that was revealed by our forefathers in this the greatest crisis of our history. Because they endured, we know that we can endure.