

# Early Records of the U. S. Department of Agriculture

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A CENTURY ago—on May 15, 1862—President Lincoln signed the act creating the Department of Agriculture and directing the Commissioner of Agriculture “to acquire and preserve . . . all information concerning agriculture” that he could “obtain by means of books and correspondence, and by practical and scientific experiments . . . and by other appropriate means.” This organic act added significantly that “accurate records” of such experiments should be kept in the Commissioner’s office.<sup>1</sup> The current centennial celebration of the Department arouses interest in the records that it has created and preserved since 1862. Of special interest are the Department’s early records and the circumstances affecting their preservation.

Foremost in any account concerning material now identified as early records of the Department of Agriculture is their scantiness, a scantiness perhaps unparalleled in the archival history of major Federal agencies. The first 15 years of the Department’s work are documented by less than a cubic foot of records, mainly chemical laboratory journals and fiscal ledgers. The next 15 years are represented by a few feet of incomplete correspondence files and miscellaneous ledgers. These items are now in the National Archives in Washington.

The destruction or disappearance of records pertaining to the Department’s earliest years was noted by Commissioner of Agriculture William G. LeDuc, who stated in 1879: “The letters and papers of the Department previous to my induction into office were not filed in regular order nor were they kept any great length of time for purpose of reference.”<sup>2</sup> Although the exact volume of the

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<sup>1</sup> 12 Stat. 387.

<sup>2</sup> LeDuc to Edward Hickey, Nov. 23, 1879, in Record Group 16, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives (cited hereafter as RG 16, NA).

lost records is unknown, they must have included much of the Department's extensive correspondence with a farflung corps of crop reporters and with agricultural colleges, agricultural societies, farmers, American consular officials, and foreign government agriculturists. This correspondence, according to Commissioner LeDuc, kept the Department "well advised of the condition and progress of agricultural industries both at home and abroad."<sup>3</sup> The lost material probably included also a considerable amount of official and semiofficial papers concerning the professional interests and activities of distinguished Department employees, such as Charles M. Wetherill, a former student of the great German chemist Justus Liebig and author of the Department's first published scientific paper; Townend Glover, the first Federal entomologist and recipient of a medal from Napoleon III; Jacob R. Dodge, a pioneer statistician of international renown; and C. C. Parry, a confidant of Asa Gray and the first Department botanist and National Herbarium curator.

The records disposition practice bewailed by Commissioner LeDuc continued during his own administration (1877-81) and during the time of his next three successors (1881-93). T. R. Schellenberg has estimated that well over half the Department's records produced from 1862 to 1889 were destroyed many years before 1935. Attesting to the early losses is the statement of a clerk that when he took charge of the Commissioner's file room in 1885 he found only "confused indexes of letters received and sent."<sup>4</sup> Some idea of the volume of the records handled during the 1880's can be had from the report that by 1889 the Department was receiving and answering semiannually about 39,000 letters.<sup>5</sup>

The destruction or other elimination of most of the Department's earliest files is regrettable, but it was partially offset by two important developments. One of these was the publication of examples and excerpts of records and summaries of their data in monthly and annual reports. The monthly reports of the Department, which were issued from May 1863 to December 1876, were characterized by Commissioner of Agriculture Horace Capron as publications "embodying official data from thousands of correspondents and nearly every county in the Union."<sup>6</sup> These reports usually contained excerpts of letters grouped by agricultural subjects. Names of correspondents and dates of letters were not always shown, but

<sup>3</sup> Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report*, 1877, p. 527.

<sup>4</sup> C. M. Clark to Commissioner Norman J. Colman, Apr. 12, 1887, RG 16, NA.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report*, 1889, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Agriculture, *Monthly Report*, Nov., Dec., 1869, p. 368.

the geographical origin of the letters was usually indicated. In the Department's annual reports, 1862-82, were published many incoming letters and reports, or excerpts from them, dealing with American experiments in crop production and animal husbandry and describing foreign agricultural conditions. Annual reports of the Department's Bureau of Animal Industry during the 1880's contained extracts from letters of correspondents concerning diseases of livestock. Moreover, statistical information on the acreage and condition of growing crops and the yield and prices of farm products, regularly furnished in the Department's circulars mailed to thousands of crop correspondents, was tabulated and summarized in the monthly and annual reports.

It is probable that the publication of representative incoming documents, or excerpts from them, and of statistical crop data from questionnaires was considered by many Department officials to have exhausted the usefulness of original records and hence to have made their preservation no longer necessary. To these officials the published report was the "record." Commissioner Capron, for example, called the annual report of 1869 "a record of agricultural practice" and Commissioner LeDuc lauded the annual reports as "records of our agricultural history."<sup>7</sup> In the monthly reports, according to James M. Swank, Chief Clerk of the Department and its first official historian, there were given "fresh agricultural facts derived from the correspondence of the Department and from other sources" and in the annual reports there appeared "agricultural information of permanent value."<sup>8</sup> From the same point of view printed documents occupying 450 square feet of space in Department buildings in 1896 were characterized by a Secretary of Agriculture as "public records . . . which might be stored in the Hall of Records."<sup>9</sup>

The second important development that has tended to offset the sparse archival documentation of the Department's early years has been the preservation of papers of a few of its early administrators and scientists, principally by State and private organizations. The Minnesota Historical Society has acquired a considerable amount of documentary material accumulated by Commissioner LeDuc. This collection deals extensively with the Department's early experiments in the production of sugar and tea and with its participa-

<sup>7</sup> Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report*, 1869, p. 14, and 1877, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Swank, *The Department of Agriculture, Its History and Objects*, p. 40 (Washington, 1872).

<sup>9</sup> Secretary J. Sterling Morton to the Secretary of the Treasury, Oct. 23, 1896, RG 16, NA.

tion in fairs and expositions.<sup>10</sup> The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has an important collection of papers of Secretary of Agriculture Jeremiah M. Rusk. Among the subjects treated in the papers are the Federal Government's efforts to introduce American meat and livestock to European markets and to eradicate serious animal diseases.<sup>11</sup> Very considerable documentation of the administration of Secretary of Agriculture J. Sterling Morton is provided by the Nebraska State Historical Society's collection of his correspondence. This was the primary source for James C. Olson's biography of Morton,<sup>12</sup> one of the few nineteenth-century heads of the Department of whom biographies have been published.

Papers accumulated by early special investigators, scientists, and other personnel of the Department, which are now in manuscript collections, constitute additional documentary sources for studying the beginnings of the Department. In the archives of the National Grange in Washington, D. C., are papers of Oliver H. Kelley and William Saunders, founders of the Grange. The Kelley papers, 1865-69, include correspondence with the Department's first Commissioner, Isaac Newton, and a diary kept by Kelley during a trip to the South for the Department in 1866 to investigate agricultural conditions. Saunders' papers, 1867-99, treat several aspects of his pioneering horticultural work for the Department.<sup>13</sup> Little-known collections of the papers of other early employees probably contain useful information concerning the Department. Examples are the papers of James M. Swank, a statistician and Chief Clerk (1871-73), in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; papers of Peter Collier, chief chemist (1877-87), in the University of Wisconsin Memorial Library; and papers of Cooper R. Curtice and Fred L. Kilborne, veterinarians during the 1880's, in the Library of Congress and Cornell University respectively.

Interest in the preservation of the Department's important records became evident during the 1890's. In 1893 clerks of the Secretary's file room were instructed to keep a complete and separate file of copies of letters signed by the Secretary. At the same time related incoming letters began to be retained more regularly in the file room or to be recorded there when referred to appropriate

<sup>10</sup> William E. Lemons, Minnesota Historical Society, to Harold T. Pinkett, Dec. 5, 1960.

<sup>11</sup> Josephine L. Harper, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, to Harold T. Pinkett, Dec. 21, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> Donald F. Danker, Archivist, Nebraska State Historical Society, to Harold T. Pinkett, Dec. 9, 1960.

<sup>13</sup> Helen T. Finneran, "Records of the National Grange in Its Washington (D. C.) Office" (unpublished manuscript, 1959), p. 7-9.

bureaus for replying and filing. In his report for 1894 Secretary Morton called attention to the valuable character of some of the Department's records then stored in a wooden museum building. Three years later a small fireproof structure was erected for storing these records and important publications. Meanwhile increasing concern for the preservation of records was shown in 1896, when Secretary Morton reported that his space requirements in a proposed Government Hall of Records would probably amount to 6,800 square feet for "files or written folded documents" and 1,600 square feet for "manuscript charts, instrumental record sheets etc."<sup>14</sup>

Space needs of the Weather Bureau were estimated to be three-fourths of the Department's requirements in the proposed Hall of Records. This Bureau, which had originated in the War Department, had retained more of its older records than had other Agriculture Department bureaus. By 1900, however, it had to request disposal authority for more than six million telegrams and telegraphic forms pertaining to Bureau activities from 1888 to 1898. These records were reported to have no value for current business or for historical or accounting purposes. Accordingly, Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson requested congressional authorization for their disposal under an act of February 16, 1889 (25 Stat. 672), providing for the disposition of useless papers in the executive departments.<sup>15</sup> In an agricultural appropriations act of May 25, 1900 (31 Stat. 204), Congress granted the Secretary's request and authorized the destruction thereafter of all Weather Bureau telegrams when they became three years old and when the accounts based on them were settled.

The Department's request of 1900 has special significance. It appears to be the only instance of the Department's seeking records disposal authorization under the act of 1889, which other Federal departments used frequently until it was superseded by the National Archives Act of 1934. Probably because existing law gave no clear definition of records and prescribed no adequate implementation procedure for records disposition, the Agriculture Department's earlier disposal actions had been accomplished without benefit of law. For instance, the Department's chief statistician in 1896 reported: "It is the custom of the Statistical Division to retain a large part of its records, schedules, etc. for a limited period only, gradu-

<sup>14</sup> Secretary Morton to the Secretary of the Treasury, Oct. 23, 1896, RG 16, NA.

<sup>15</sup> Secretary Wilson to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Jan. 11, 1900, RG 16, NA.

ally displacing those of the earlier years, when they become obsolete and useless, to make room for yearly accretions."<sup>16</sup>

Unauthorized destruction of records in the Bureau (formerly Division) of Statistics was noted in 1906 by a special committee of President Roosevelt's Committee on Department Methods, popularly known as the Keep Commission. Recognizing that the destruction of useless records was desirable, the Committee nevertheless stated that it should be accomplished by the legal method.<sup>17</sup> This method apparently was unsatisfactory to the Department, for in 1907 the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry was persuaded to amend the agricultural appropriation bill of 1908 to grant the Department special authority to destroy records without reporting to Congress as provided by the act of 1889. This authority, embodied in an act approved March 4, 1907 (34 Stat. 1281), was stated as follows:

And hereafter the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized to sell as waste paper, or otherwise to dispose of the accumulation of department files which do not constitute permanent records, and all other documents and publications which have become obsolete and worthless.

According to the Chief Clerk, the Department had received this authority for the purpose of destroying "a large accumulation of old and worthless documents such as schedules, for which compilations had been made, miscellaneous correspondence requesting seeds, documents, etc., old efficiency reports, and other reports of the Department."<sup>18</sup> This statement and the wording of the disposal authority suggest that the Department wanted authorization covering the disposal of its "obsolete and worthless" publications and much greater latitude in destroying the "files of useless papers" covered by the act of 1889. In any event the authority granted in 1907 was frequently used to eliminate accumulations of old publications.

Under the act of 1907 a bureau officer, usually its chief clerk or business manager, might file with the Chief Clerk of the Department (Operation Division Chief after 1931) a list or general description of records or publications considered obsolete and useless for bureau purposes. The Chief Clerk might then prepare for the Secretary's signature a special order authorizing disposal of the material. Disposal was usually by its sale as wastepaper unless its

<sup>16</sup> Henry Robinson to Donald McCuaig, Chief Clerk, Sept. 16, 1896, RG 16, NA.

<sup>17</sup> Report of a special committee to the Subcommittee on Correspondence, Apr. 12, 1906, RG 51, Records of the Bureau of the Budget, NA.

<sup>18</sup> C. C. Clark, Chief Clerk, to R. M. Pindell, Jr., Chief Clerk, Department of Commerce and Labor, Dec. 20, 1911, RG 16, NA.

I, William Saunders Supt Propagating Sander  
do solemnly Swear that I have never voluntarily borne arms against the United States since I have been a citizen thereof; that I have voluntarily given no aid, countenance, counsel, or encouragement to persons engaged in armed hostility thereto; that I have neither sought nor accepted nor attempted to exercise the functions of any office whatever, under any authority, or pretended authority, in hostility to the United States; that I have not yielded a voluntary support to any pretended government, authority, power, or constitution, within the United States, hostile or inimical thereto. And I do further Swear that, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

*William Saunders*

Sworn and subscribed to }  
before me, this 1st day }  
of November A. D. 1862. }

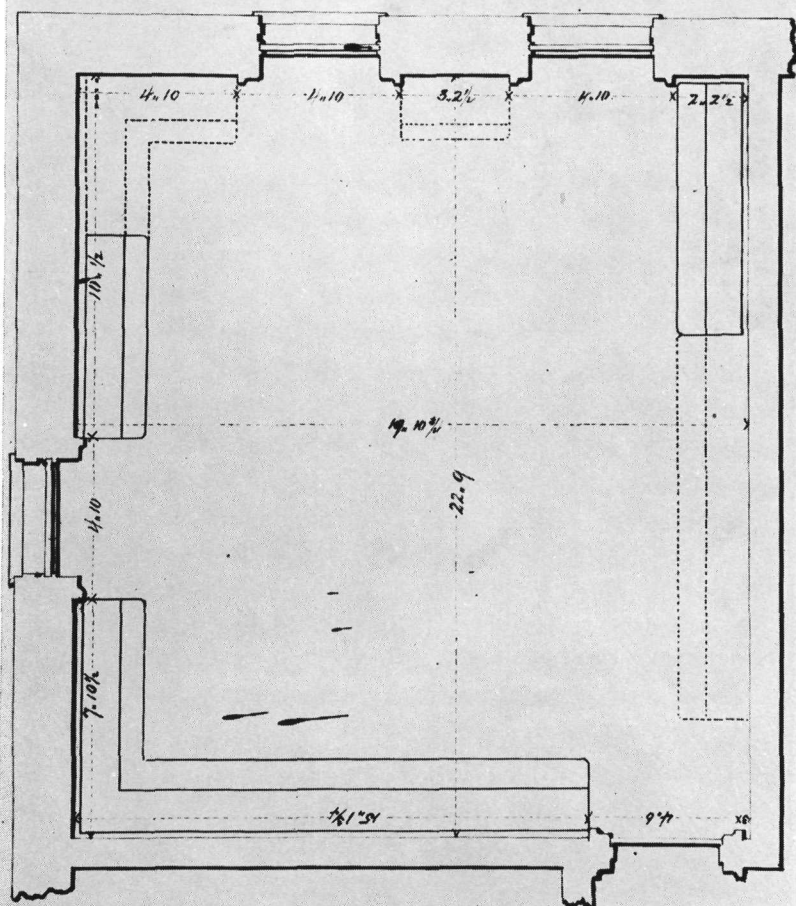
*Kypton Betts, J.C.*

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE OF WILLIAM SAUNDERS, 1862

—Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; National Archives



# Department of Agriculture.



## Chemical Museum & Library

FLOOR PLAN, 1871, FOR "CHEMICAL MUSEUM & LIBRARY"  
(showing corner of Agriculture Building, erected 1868)

—Records of the Bureau of Agricultural and Industrial Chemistry;  
National Archives



confidential character required its destruction. Department records seem to show no instances of disapproval by the Chief Clerk of disposal requests or of any attempt by him to obtain more information concerning material proposed for disposal. Moreover, he was advised that he was not required to submit Department disposal lists to the Librarian of Congress for review as provided for executive departments under an Executive order of March 16, 1912.<sup>19</sup>

Special orders issued under the act of 1907 resulted in the disposal of more series of the Department's older records. Some of these, if appraised for historical interest or research value, would doubtless have been preserved. Among these, for example, were indexes to correspondence of the Secretary's Office, 1879-95; correspondence of the Bureau of Animal Industry beginning in 1885; records concerning the work of county and township crop correspondents before 1895; and records concerning farm management and farmers' institutes at the turn of the century. Unfortunately the description of records in several special orders was so vague that it is impossible to determine what files were authorized for disposal. Such descriptions were sometimes worded as follows: "A large amount of old correspondence and files of various sorts," "cases of old letter files," and "correspondence which has outlived its usefulness." It is likely that some important older records were destroyed under these vague descriptions.

Probably the most novel and significant disposition procedure instituted under the act of 1907 was the use of a schedule for the systematic retention and disposal of records. Developed by the Forest Service in 1917 to control the growing volume of noncurrent records, the schedule provided for the destruction, after specified retention periods, of certain classes of records having "no permanent or historical value."<sup>20</sup> During the first year under this procedure the Forest Service destroyed approximately five tons of its old files. By 1924 the schedule was being used to control the retention or disposal of all central and field office records of the Service. The Department's Chief Clerk seems to have considered that such scheduling might well be used by other bureaus, but Secretary Wilson did not think it necessary to extend it throughout the Department.

<sup>19</sup> R. W. Williams, Acting Solicitor of the Department of Agriculture, to R. M. Reese, Chief Clerk, Aug. 11, 1919, RG 16, NA. Department officials maintained that this order covered only disposition action under the act of 1889, which was not applicable to the Department in view of the special disposal legislation of 1907.

<sup>20</sup> See Harold T. Pinkett, "The Forest Service, Trail Blazer in Recordkeeping Methods," in *American Archivist*, 22:419-426 (Oct. 1959).

The procedure was used effectively by the Service to eliminate large quantities of noncurrent records, yet it does not appear to have caused any great loss of permanently valuable records.

A unique disposition transaction involving early records of the Department took place in 1908, when letter files of an important scientist were transferred to another Government agency. These files, accumulated by George Vasey, dealt with his activities as the second botanist of the Department and curator of the National Herbarium (1872-93). They were recommended for transfer to the National Museum by Vasey's noted successor, Frederick V. Colville, who appreciated both their value as a documentary source for the history of systematic botany in the United States and their potential usefulness in the herbarium work supervised by the Museum. Secretary Wilson approved Colville's recommendation and offered the files to the Museum. They were gratefully accepted by Charles D. Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, were transferred in November 1908,<sup>21</sup> and are still preserved by the National Museum.

The preservation of records of the Department was probably influenced by dissimilar interpretations of the nature of "permanent records." Noting that the act of 1907 did not permit the destruction of such records, an administrative officer of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics once asked the Bureau's business manager to explain what constituted "permanent records." The reply was: "What constitutes a permanent record is a matter for individual judgment. As the law does not define a permanent record, we can decide for ourselves what is a permanent record in each case."<sup>22</sup> In general the volume of permanently valuable records created by the Department was not considered to be large. This was evident in the lack of interest shown for several years in the proposed building to house Government archives, advocated by J. Franklin Jameson and others. While agreeing that the erection of such a building would be "wise and proper," Secretary Wilson as late as 1912 thought that "not many papers of real historical value" had been accumulated in the Department of Agriculture.<sup>23</sup>

Another impediment to the preservation of old and inactive

<sup>21</sup> Colville to B. T. Galloway, Oct. 8, 1908; Galloway to Colville, Oct. 10, 1908; Secretary Wilson to Charles D. Walcott, Oct. 14, 1908; Walcott to Wilson, Oct. 27, 1908. RG 54, Records of the Bureau of Plant Industry, NA.

<sup>22</sup> Undated note of C. W. Kitchen to C. L. Snow, written shortly after a memorandum of Snow to Kitchen, Oct. 28, 1924, RG 83, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, NA.

<sup>23</sup> Secretary Wilson to Charles D. Hilles, Presidential Assistant, Feb. 17, 1912, RG 16, NA.

records of the Department was the practice of storing them in unsuitable places. The small building erected in 1897 for the storage of the Department's important records and publications soon became inadequate. By 1911 the "transferred files"—such as old letter-press books, correspondence, and photographs—were stored in attics, greenhouses, and even in an alley stable. The following complaint in 1911 of the principal file clerk of the Bureau of Plant Industry was typical:

Perhaps the greatest objection to the use of the attic for the purposes of storing our files is the fact that it is overrun with rats. These rats have gnawed large holes through the cement flooring in many places, and their presence, of course, places in jeopardy the valuable papers and correspondence of the Bureau.<sup>24</sup>

Unsatisfactory storage of important records prevailed for many more years. As late as 1932 it was reported that the Department had been "greatly embarrassed because of the lack of facilities for the housing of records of a permanent or semi-permanent nature."<sup>25</sup>

A survey of storage conditions in the Department by a departmental Committee on Efficiency and Economy in 1911 produced significant action on records disposition but probably came too late to save many early records. In accordance with a recommendation of this Committee, subcommittees were appointed in several bureaus to examine all stored records and to make recommendations for the destruction of records found worthless or of little value. Standards proposed for evaluating such records occasionally showed concern for the retention of records for more than administrative purposes. The subcommittee for the Bureau of Plant Industry, for example, in its examination was instructed to ascertain

whether the records in question are used infrequently or not at all, whether the information they contain is of any value, whether the information can be found elsewhere in the Bureau or Department, or in publications, and whether the records contain any information of historical value that might be useful or interesting at some future time.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, standing committees on the disposition of useless papers were established by several Department bureaus in accordance with recommendations of the Interdepartmental Board on Simplified Office Procedure in 1925 and the Federal Coordinating Service in

<sup>24</sup> F. S. Moise to James E. Jones, Chief Clerk, Bureau of Plant Industry, Feb. 16, 1911, RG 54, NA.

<sup>25</sup> W. W. Stockberger, Director of Personnel and Business Administration, to Lt. Col. U. S. Grant, Director of the Public Buildings Commission, Aug. 22, 1932, RG 16, NA.

<sup>26</sup> B. T. Galloway, Chief of the Bureau of Plant Industry, to F. S. Moise, July 11, 1911, RG 54, NA.

1933. Although the committees were usually composed of experienced employees, they were seldom given specific standards for guidance in determining the classes of records that should be recommended for disposal.

Thus the Department's centennial year finds an unusual paucity of records but not necessarily a dearth of documentation concerning its early years. Publications provide much evidence of the young agency's activities in carrying out its original mandate of 1862—to acquire and widely diffuse information concerning agriculture. Largely because of irregular records disposition practices, however, the documentation is in many places and forms and is of uneven quantity and quality. Its deficiency is perhaps most regrettable with respect to the inadequate information provided about the ideas, interests, and activities of the early scientific employees, whose professional attainments and services put them in a class above the nineteenth-century rank-and-file Federal personnel and earned for many of them places in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. This deficiency must be assessed as a real loss to the documentation of the Department's beginnings under the scientific leadership of men whom an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture with pardonable pride described as “eminent in their special lines and recognized for their work and their ability the world over.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Assistant Secretary Edwin Willits, in Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report*, 1890, p. 49.

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### *Veil of Oblivion*

. . . A historian who now does his work conscientiously has to take about the same time to narrate events as the events themselves occupied in happening. Innumerable sources of knowledge have been opened, and he will be regarded as superficial if he does not more or less avail himself of every conceivable means of information. . . . A merciful veil of oblivion has no doubt covered a great deal. Yet we may feel inclined to imagine that no fact which has happened within the last few centuries has been so thoroughly hidden that we can be quite sure that it is irrecoverable. . . .

—LESLIE STEPHEN, *Studies of a Biographer*, 1:8 (New York and London, 1898).