

The Presidential Papers Program of the Library of Congress

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Library of Congress

THERE is a singular appropriateness in our gathering today in this educational institution dedicated to the study of the Presidency to consider what the Library of Congress is doing with the papers of 23 Presidents in its collections. One might say, in an effort to dress current activity in the garb of a newspaper headline: *L. C. Achieves Long-Sought Breakthrough With Presidents' Papers*. For 60 years the Library has received and preserved records of presidential administrations from George Washington to Calvin Coolidge, with a few exceptions. Nearly two million manuscript pieces are included. "Presidential Row" has long been a principal ornament in the collections housed in the Manuscript Division, as almost every visitor will recall.

Until recently, however, the Library lacked the means to assure the definitive organization of all these significant source materials, to provide complete and adequate indexes, and to make the papers more widely available through modern photographic techniques. Many of the presidential papers had been organized and cased in handsome leather bindings, and a few had been fully indexed. In some cases the legal status of a deposit had delayed necessary work for several years. The continuing and increasing flow of new manuscripts and the heavy demands of more and more scholars gave little enough time for the tasks the Library knew were necessary.

It was at this juncture, in 1957, that Congress considered a bill, introduced by Representative Paul C. Jones of Missouri, to give the Librarian of Congress the authority and the means to accomplish these tasks. At a hearing held on June 21, 1957, the proposal was carefully considered and expert testimony was given. Interested persons can read the printed proceedings, which include a copy of a letter supporting the bill, written by an honorary member of this

*Paper read before the Society of American Archivists on Oct. 7, 1961, at the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo., as a part of a session of the Society's 25th annual meeting. The author, on the staff of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, is supervising the Library's presidential papers program. He is a Fellow of the Society.

Society to the Speaker of the House.¹ The proposed legislation became law when President Eisenhower signed the act on August 16, 1957.² Actual operations in the Library began a year later, on August 25, 1958, soon after funds were made available. The work has gone forward steadily for more than three years and will continue, we trust, for several more years until completed.

Before telling you something of our methods and the principles underlying our work, let me describe the results to be achieved in our program. There will be a complete microfilm reproduction of each of the 23 Presidents' papers on conventional 35 mm. reels. A scholar or interested citizen may use a microfilm on interlibrary loan anywhere in the country—virtually anywhere in the world. He will have before him full and exact reproductions of every page of every manuscript in the collection. The value of this service to scholarship cannot be overestimated. The professor whose duties require him to be on campus throughout the winter may continue his research in his university library at times convenient to him, with minimum expense and travel. Many libraries have purchased at cost the positive microfilm reproductions already released. Three libraries intend to buy all films that will be made available by our program: the Truman Library, the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library, and the University of California Library at Los Angeles. There is one other consideration that should be mentioned, although we do not like to discuss or dwell on it—the physical security of these precious original manuscripts. Should the worst come to pass and should these documents be destroyed in some holocaust, so much of the American heritage as is comprised in the documents will be preserved in microfilms of them distributed widely through the country and the world. (The Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission recently presented a print of the Lincoln film to each member country of the United Nations.)

We consider that each of the 23 presidential collections offers a different kind of challenge. The same general principles apply, to be sure, in organizing each of the collections; but we face one problem when we have only 631 items, as in the Zachary Taylor papers, and quite another problem when we have more than half a million documents, as in the William H. Taft papers. If a collection is found to be well organized and if its organization has passed the

¹ 85th Cong., 1st sess., Committee on House Administration, Subcommittee on the Library, *Hearing . . . on H. R. 7813, To Organize and Microfilm the Papers of the Presidents . . . June 21, 1957*. President Truman's letter appears on p. 25, and his testimony in favor of the bill on p. 2-5.

² 71 Stat. 368.

test of time and use, we probably shall accept and perfect this organization whether or not we think it ideal. We do not necessarily quarrel with those who in the past may have arranged a set of documents in chronological order. When we are so fortunate as to find that a collection is in its original filing order, as in the case of the Taft and Coolidge papers, we devote ourselves to perfecting that original order.

We feel a special responsibility to describe accurately the organization of documents to be microfilmed. The user of a microfilm is more restricted than the user of original manuscripts. For this and other reasons, we do not hesitate to second the thoughtful remark of Mr. Butterfield that the user of a microfilm is entitled to consideration.³ Each of our microfilms includes a title page, a general statement by the Librarian of Congress, a detailed description of the particular President's papers, and a list of the sources from which the manuscripts were acquired. This information is reproduced on each reel of the microfilm. The repetition, we believe, is needed, for if a scholar decides to use only some reels in the middle of the microfilm reproduction he may find it most inconvenient not to have the information. The technical excellence of the film is guaranteed by the staff of the Library's Photoduplication Service. The Manuscript Division supplies what might be called "editorial quality control" for the content. We inspect every frame to be certain that not one page, indeed not one word, however trifling in value it may appear to the most junior staff member, is omitted. Our criterion is completeness, and we go to extreme measures and efforts to insure this. The number of reels varies greatly, according to the size of the group of manuscripts. The papers of Taylor are on 2 reels, Cleveland on 164, Pierce on 7, Lincoln on 97, Tyler on 3, Benjamin Harrison on 151. The Taft papers will require 750 or more reels.

The difficulty of using large collections of manuscripts or series of archives without some form of index is well known to us all. The law wisely calls for an index to each microfilmed presidential collection, and one is being prepared except for the Van Buren papers; the Library published a calendar of these in 1910. The 22 indexes are to be published in book form. Each is designed to be as helpful to the reader of the original manuscripts as to the reader of the microfilm reproduction. Each is essentially a name index—listing

³ L. H. Butterfield, " 'Vita sine literis, mors est': The Microfilm Edition of the Adams Papers," in Library of Congress, *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, 18: 53-58 (Feb. 1961).

the writers, the recipients, and the dates of letters; indicating their location; and providing other information to help the user identify manuscripts. The indexes provide an experiment in the use of mechanized equipment as applied to historical work. A handwritten slip is first prepared for each document. The information on the slips is punched on conventional keypunched cards, which are proofread for typographical errors. The cards are then tabulated in the same order as the manuscripts appear—the shelf-list order, often chronological. The tabulation sheets give an opportunity for a further check on the accuracy of the arrangement of the manuscripts.

The next step is a final check for accuracy of the punched cards against tabulation sheets, handwritten slips, and the original manuscripts. This is the moment of truth in the indexing work. An editor and one or more assistants spend several weeks, depending on the size of the index, on this complete check. When it is finished an arrangement of the cards in alphabetical order is accomplished by a noisy but efficient sorting machine. New tabulations are thus obtained, and the last editorial process includes reconciling variations in spelling, expanding names, and smoothing rough entries. When this step is completed, a final tabulation on paper of good quality is prepared. The paper is trimmed and affixed to large pages. When page numbers and alphabetical headings are added the index copy itself is ready for the printer. It is photographed (reduced to 49 percent of the original size) and is printed by the photo-offset process. Copy for a brief history of the papers and for other introductory matter has been prepared meantime. Reproduced as appendixes are the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections card, the description of the papers, and the Librarian's general statement.

It is well to point out not only what the index is but what it is not. It is not a calendar. It is not in any sense a subject index, although a few subjects appear. It does not consist of coded entries that must be translated by historians, who have a strong and determined resistance to such procedures. It does not tell a user that one item is very important and another is unimportant. It does not relieve the historian of the necessity to examine the original manuscript or its photoreproduction and to exercise his own sound judgment. Our processes, however, do not prevent the use of the punched cards for other purposes at some future date.

Many persons have asked us how we decided on the order in which the Presidents' papers should be filmed. There was no requirement to proceed chronologically from Washington to Coolidge,

or alphabetically from Arthur to Wilson, or indeed to proceed in any other order. We selected first the smaller collections so that we could train our staff and test our methods. The smaller collections include the Taylor, W. H. Harrison, Tyler, Pierce, and Arthur papers. With these collections substantially completed, we turned next to the larger collections that seemed to be in good order and to those collections for which there was a current demand. The Abraham Lincoln papers were filmed and indexed to coincide with the Lincoln Sesquicentennial. The Andrew Johnson papers were given priority because scholars are now at work on a letterpress edition of many of them. The staff is now arranging and indexing the Washington and Taft papers.

Archivists and curators as well as historians will wish to know the current status of the program. Ten microfilm reproductions have been completed and released. Four others are in advanced stages of preparation and will be released when the appropriate indexes are available. Four indexes have been published, and copy for four others has been or very shortly will be completed. Actual publication will be delayed only until the necessary introductions have been prepared.

Within a few more years the Library, in making these rich materials more widely available, providing greater security for their contents, and inspiring informed patriotism, will have fulfilled the directive of Congress.

To Push It to a Solid Basis

Spiegel Grove
Fremont, 30th Sep. 1884

Enclosed please find three dollars for Annual dues to Am. Hist. Asso.

I am glad you started this thing. I hope you will be able to give time enough to it, to push it to a solid basis. In all such cases some one person must make it a specialty, or it moves [?] languidly. You will find it enjoyable occupation.

— EX-PRESIDENT RUTHERFORD B. HAYES, charter member of the American Historical Association, to Clarence Winthrop Bowen, first treasurer of the association (Papers of the association, in the Library of Congress).