

# Objectives of the Society of American Archivists

By A. R. NEWSOME\*

1937 Presidential Address

THE establishment of the National Archives and the organization of the Society of American Archivists signalize the nationalization of archival interests in the United States. Both agencies are the natural result of an evolutionary process characterized by a gathering momentum of deliberate, constructive effort over a period of many years.

The first third of the twentieth century was an era of archival pioneering in the United States. It was marked by the uncorrelated agitation and activity of individuals and local organizations; by an increasing public recognition of the value of archives; by the establishment of State archival agencies; by collection, publication, surveys, and the enactment of archival legislation; and by the evolving consciousness of a national community of archival problems and interests. Most significant was the sympathetic interest and guidance of the American Historical Association, exerted through its Public Archives Commission. In 1909 this commission convened in New York City, the first national conference of Americans active and interested in archival work. Subsequent annual conferences discussed and defined archival status and problems, demonstrated the value of coordinated effort, and in time revealed the inadequacy of an annual luncheon meeting or conference as the sole agent for the cooperative consideration of the common problems and interests of a growing, nationwide profession.

A new era of remarkable archival fruition opened with the sec-

\*The author, member of the history faculty at the University of North Carolina, 1921-51 (except for occasional duties elsewhere), and chairman of the North Carolina Historical Commission, 1926-35, was chairman also of the American Historical Association's Public Archives Commission, 1932-34. He was one of that relatively small group of State historians and archivists who worked for the establishment of the National Archives. He was also an influential participant in the meeting at Providence, R. I., in December 1936, when the Society of American Archivists was organized; and at that meeting he was elected first President of the Society. His presidential address of June 18, 1937, read at the first annual meeting of the Society, in Washington, D.C., and here reprinted, appears on p. 61-64 of the mimeographed *Proceedings of the Society of American Archivists* (Urbana, Ill., 1937), which was issued before the quarterly journal of the Society, the *American Archivist*, had been launched.

and third of the twentieth century. Several State agencies acquired new buildings and expanded their work. The National Archives was established in 1934. Incidental to the social and economic demands of a national crisis, archival dreams of a future generation became current reality when an impecunious profession received millions of public revenue and thousands of workers for the conduct of nationwide surveys of Federal, State, and local archives and for varied improvements in the quality of archival service. The Society of American Archivists was organized in 1936 in response to the pressing archival needs revealed by the sound, constructive work of the pioneer era. It was the logical culmination of the discernible efforts and trends of a generation and of an active discussion and rapid crystallization of opinion after 1933.

A decent consideration of the interests of archivists, learned societies, and the public suggests the formulation and prosecution of meritorious objectives by the Society of American Archivists. Imperfectly indicative of its objectives are the modest and exploratory activities of the administration set up last December in pursuance of the constitution by the more than two hundred founding members of the Society. Committees have been appointed to study archival problems and the opportunities of the Society in respect to membership, terminology, classification and cataloging, equipment and mechanical techniques, maps and charts, motion pictures and sound recordings, reduction of archival material, publication, training of archivists, cooperation, public relations, and international relations. Moreover an editor and editorial board have been chosen to conduct a quarterly journal devoted to articles on archival materials and economy, abstracts and bibliographical notes, book reviews, and news notes of personnel and of pertinent events and developments in the realm of local, State, Federal, and foreign archives. And the first annual meeting of the Society has been assembled for the promotion of its interests and aims. As befits a new organization on an uncharted course, the Society faces its immediate problems with caution and conservatism; its future with optimism and boldness. The unpredictable conditions and receding horizon of the future warn against the hasty crystallization of objectives and demand the maintenance of a broad, elastic view of the Society's functions. An important task of the future is the sound definition of function, opportunity, and objective.

The constitution of the Society states in broad, general terms that its objects shall be "to promote sound principles of archival

economy and to facilitate cooperation among archivists and archival agencies." As the national coordinating agency of the common American effort to formulate sound archival principles and solve problems essential to the advance of archival economy, the Society, through its personnel, correspondence, committees, meetings, and publications, will appropriate the lessons of successful experience anywhere; accumulate and disseminate useful information; facilitate the discussion of problems and the sharing of experiences and discoveries; stimulate experimentation, discovery, and improvement; seek a wholesome degree of uniformity in archival practice, procedure, and ideology; and encourage productive scholarship in many fields of knowledge.

The broad objectives of the Society may be analyzed in relation to three general categories of archival problems: internal economy, external relations, and professional development.

A primary objective of the Society is to become the practical, self-help agency of archivists for the solution of their complex problems of internal economy. These problems concern the collection, preservation, availability, and use of archives of every type—manuscript and printed books and documents; nearprint and photographic reproductions; maps, charts, motion pictures, and sound recordings.

In respect to the collection of archives, a nationwide concert of effort will discover better criteria and techniques for winning the confidence and cooperation of public officials; classifying archives in respect to priority of importance and acquisition and to eligibility for destruction; defining current and noncurrent archives; obtaining motion pictures and sound recordings; evaluating the policies of centralization or noncentralization of local archives and of mandatory or permissive transfer of noncurrent archives by public officials; and formulating proper rules and procedures for the transfer and accession of archives. Other problems to be clarified are the proper custody of archives produced by the cooperative activity of State-local and State-Federal agencies, the degree to which depositories should seek to collect current archives and become service agents for governmental departments, and the extent to which collections in other archives should be reproduced.

Archivists may look to the meetings and publications of the Society as stimuli and direct sources of aid in the care, preservation, and restoration of archives. These problems relate to the temperature, humidity, lighting, ventilation, air conditioning, and arrangement of buildings; the types and materials of shelving,

filing cases, binders, folders, and physical equipment; the techniques and materials of cleaning and repairing; the treatment of faded print or writing; the production, durability, and care of motion pictures, sound recordings, and the various forms of photographic reproduction; and the reduction of the quantity of archival materials by destruction of useless records, microphotography, and the simplification of administrative forms. Many of these problems of preservation are susceptible of scientific determination.

Some of the most puzzling and important problems of archival administration relate to availability. The archivist has vital obligations to investigators, whether they use the archives as business or as historical records, and whether they come to the archives or the archives go to them. What are the best rules, principles, and systems of classification and filing? What about the forms and relative advantages of the catalog, calendar, inventory, list, and index? What research room rules, practices, and implements best serve the interests of archives and investigators? What are the needs for additional guides, inventories, and surveys of archives in the United States and in foreign countries? Should archivists be content with the maximum availability of their records to the small number of visiting and inquiring investigators or should they extend availability by resort to publication, viewed broadly as the entire process of taking reproductions and guides to the public? What types and materials of archival publication are proper and what is their relative importance? What are the best editorial practices and how may they be standardized? What are the relative advantages and costs of the various forms of publication—print, nearprint, and photographic reproduction? These questions relating to an increased availability of archives will receive discussion and consideration by the Society.

By stimulating a higher quality of archival service and by cultivating among scholars a better understanding of the research value and possibilities of public archives, the Society will help all competent archivists approach their goal of a more extensive use of archives by scholarly investigators.

Clearly, then, one major object of the Society is to stimulate, gather, and disseminate useful information on problems of internal administration incident to the collection, preservation, availability, and use of public archives and to shorten the lag between the discovery of solutions and their general adoption. The Society will strive to nationalize archival information and technique.

A second major objective of the Society is the solution of archi-

val problems involving external relations with all archival agencies, with learned societies, and with the public.

The Society will seek to enlist the cooperation of all archival organizations, to plan the interchange of information, to prevent overlapping effort, and to discover ways of mutual aid. With respect to international affairs, it will seek to cultivate friendly relationships with foreign archival agencies, to effect the interchange of information and publications, and to participate in international undertakings.

The Society has an opportunity to foster a wider and more intensive interest in archives among the national organizations of historians, economists, sociologists, political scientists, statisticians, lawyers, and other learned professions, some of which have never set up archival committees or manifested adequate official interest in archival work. Public archives are of the greatest value not only to historians but to scholars in every branch of the social sciences. Perhaps by joint sponsorship of programs or concurrent meetings with other scholarly organizations, the Society may achieve the triple advantage of self-help, missionary accomplishment, and promotion of scholarship.

Absolutely vital to the existence and advance of archival work is public support, intellectual and financial. The Society should ever seek to broaden and strengthen the base of public support for archival work. It will ascertain the existing situation as to archival legislation and administration in the United States, determine the better types of laws and administrative systems, and make this information available to governmental officials, archival agencies, and the public. It may give consideration to the importance and methods of the public exhibition of interesting documents, encourage well-directed publicity of an informational nature designed to show the value of archives as business records vital to the official and business life of the community and as historical records essential to scholarly research, and lend with discrimination the weight of its influence to the enactment of sound and effective public records laws. Law determines in large degree the existence and form of archival establishments and the location, care, and availability of Federal, State, and local archives. It imperiously directs the investigator to the places where his source materials may be found and determines in large measure the conditions attending them and his use of them. Law is the expression of public opinion. Archivists must never cease to merit and cultivate public good will, upon which they are dependent for the establishment, regulation, and

support of archival agencies and for the enactment of public records laws governing the making, collection, preservation, availability, and use of archives.

Archival science cannot live unto itself. The character of its external relations may be basic to the solution of its problems of internal economy. A second objective of the Society, then, is the cultivation of wholesome relations with archival agencies, the learned professions, and the public.

The Society's third major objective is the development of a genuine archival profession in the United States. It will endeavor to unite archival experts, whose aims, problems, and ideals are common yet distinctive from those of all other groups. It will seek to draw together in one organization all agencies "that have the custody of archives or historical manuscripts" and all individuals "who are or have been engaged in the custody or administration of archives or historical manuscripts or who, because of special experience or other qualifications, are recognized as competent in archival economy." Through the Society, American archivists will cooperate with each other, with the learned professions, and with foreign archival agencies and movements. The Society will seek to nationalize archival terminology by formulating definitions for technical terms. It will consider the standards and nature of education and training needed by those who desire to enter the profession and will promote projects for making such study and training available. Perhaps it will hasten the preparation and publication of a bibliography of archival science and a manual of archives embodying information of the best archival principles and practices. Its meetings and publications will reveal significant archival history and developments and the actual status of archives in the United States and in foreign countries; stimulate discussion, experimentation, achievement, and scholarly production; and quicken professional dignity, consciousness, and *esprit de corps*.

These readily discernible objectives of the Society of American Archivists in relation to internal economy, external relations, and the archival profession are startling, humbling, and challenging. Resting upon the solid foundation laid by a generation of pioneers and focusing American archival interest and intelligence upon the problems of the profession, the Society may exert a profound and directing influence upon the development of archival economy in the United States.

A hospitable Providence was the place of the Society's birth. May a kindly Providence bless and immortalize its career.