

# The Wheeler Survey Records: A Study in Archival Anomaly

By C. E. DEWING\*

*National Archives and Records Service*

**W**ESTERN AMERICANA holdings of Yale University were enriched in 1962 by the accession of what appears to be an important part of the surviving records of the Wheeler Survey (The United States Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian). These records are described in the catalog of the manuscript dealer who handled them as

The original manuscript papers of the Wheeler Survey of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, extending over a period of nine years, involving fourteen topographical and geological expeditions throughout forbidding terrain which was up to this time largely unexplored. Comprising some 6,500 pages of correspondence from the field and copies of letters sent, the whole bound in thirteen thick contemporary morocco volumes; plus thirty-one volumes of original manuscript journals, topographical and meteorological records, and field books, many with maps and sketches, mostly very extensive running from fifty to one-hundred pages and more; and including . . . [one volume of printed maps and three volumes of photographs]. In all 48 volumes containing some 10,000 pages of manuscripts, various sizes. . . 1871-79.<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of these records is an event of some importance to historians of American science and exploration. The Wheeler Survey records, though dismembered, are now largely accessible to research. Major segments are in the National Archives, at Yale University, and at the University of Colorado; some fragments are dispersed in other repositories;<sup>2</sup> the remainder, presumably, has been acquired by private collectors or has been destroyed. Future

\*The writer has been an archivist on the staff of the National Archives since 1948, serving during 1962-63 in the Office of Records Appraisal of the National Archives and Records Service. He acknowledges data and other assistance received from Francis P. Farquhar; from the Office of the Chief of Engineers; from Edward Eberstadt & Sons; from library officials of the Geological Survey, of the U. S. Army Engineer School, and of the Universities of Stanford, Yale, Colorado, California, Utah, and New Mexico; and from H. V. Baute, H. R. Friis, and other colleagues in the National Archives and Records Service.

<sup>1</sup>Edward Eberstadt & Sons, Catalog 159, *California Manuscripts*, item 186 (New York, 1962). Quoted by permission.

<sup>2</sup>The University of New Mexico Library has 53 Wheeler Survey notebooks, and the Bancroft Library of the University of California has a Wheeler Survey scrapbook of newspaper clippings. Other nonarchival Wheeler Survey record holdings may exist;

finds of Wheeler Survey records are possible, though a repetition of the Yale windfall appears rather unlikely. It seems opportune, under these circumstances, to make a preliminary, and admittedly incomplete, archival accounting of these records.

Lt. George M. Wheeler of the United States Army Corps of Engineers was the officer in charge of the organization commonly known as the Wheeler Survey.<sup>3</sup> This organization made topographic surveys and conducted incidental scientific field work in the West from 1871 to 1879. Three other organizations with similar missions—the Hayden, King, and Powell Surveys—operated concurrently. In 1879 these four early surveys were liquidated, and the Geological Survey was established in the Interior Department to carry on their work.

A few records pertaining to the Hayden, King, and Powell Surveys are now in nonarchival repositories,<sup>4</sup> but the principal surviving records of these three surveys were inherited by the Geological Survey and were transferred to the National Archives in 1937. The records of the Hayden, King, and Powell Surveys have had a relatively uneventful history; the Wheeler Survey records, in contrast, have been subjected to a succession of archival anomalies; repeatedly opportunities to maintain the integrity of the Wheeler Survey records have been lost.

From 1879, when its field work ended, to 1883, when its office operations ceased, the Wheeler Survey apparently retained its corporate identity as a subordinate unit in the Office of the Chief of Engineers. Until his retirement in 1888 Lieutenant (later Captain) Wheeler supervised publication of the official report of his Survey,<sup>5</sup> the final volume of which was not published until 1889. With the possible exception of data used in compiling the report, the Wheeler Survey records apparently became “noncurrent” in 1883. For the

no comprehensive census of such holdings has been attempted for present purposes. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections should eventually provide comprehensive coverage.

<sup>3</sup> In 1872 the Wheeler Survey acquired a formal corporate name, The United States Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian. Lieutenant Wheeler was carrying on field surveys as early as 1868, but the first organized field season for the Wheeler Survey was 1871. For historical background see Richard A. Bartlett, *Great Surveys of the American West*, part 4 (Norman, Okla., 1962); and A. Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government*, ch. 10 (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

<sup>4</sup> See U.S. Library of Congress, *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, 1959-61* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962), and Philip M. Hamer, ed., *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> *Report Upon United States Geographic Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian, in Charge of First Lieutenant George M. Wheeler . . .* (7 vols., supp., and atlases; Washington, 1875-89).

next four and a half decades, until 1929, the records remained relatively undisturbed with the exception of maps and photographs separated from the textual records and assimilated into files of the Office of the Chief of Engineers. Because of their early and complete separation from the rest of the records and their relatively uneventful subsequent history, the Wheeler Survey maps and photographs will not be further discussed in this article.<sup>6</sup>

From 1883 to 1929 the Wheeler Survey records presumably suffered some diminution. Some of them were separated from the main group and became intermixed with extraneous records,<sup>7</sup> and some may have been given away. At the end of 1929, however, they probably were at least as well preserved as the records of the Hayden, King, and Powell Surveys.<sup>8</sup>

On December 16, 1929, the Acting Director of the Geological Survey requested that the original records of the Wheeler Survey be transferred from the Office of the Chief of Engineers to the Geological Survey.<sup>9</sup> This was done, and within 2 months the Geological Survey had decided that the bulk of the records was disposable, as is shown by the inclusion of "one ton" of "old notebooks of the Wheeler Survey" on a list of "useless papers" submitted, along with similar lists from other Interior Department bureaus, to the Librarian of Congress for review before submission to Congress for final approval.<sup>10</sup> On March 5, 1930, J. Franklin Jameson, on behalf of the Librarian of Congress, took note of the proposed destruction of the Wheeler Survey records and suggested that one of the western universities might be able and willing to preserve them, in part or as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The Geological Survey promptly acted on this sugges-

<sup>6</sup> The separation of the maps and photographs from the main body of the records apparently took place at some time between 1879 and 1929. The maps and photographs are now well represented in the National Archives.

<sup>7</sup> In one such case, the National Archives received from the Library of Congress in 1962 four Wheeler Survey items that had been intermixed with pre-Civil War Engineer records and transferred from the Office of the Chief of Engineers to the Library in 1932.

<sup>8</sup> This statement is based on a comparison of the state of preservation of the records of the four early surveys as of 1929; none of the four groups was intact when the records came to the National Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Letter, Julian D. Sears, Acting Director, to the Chief of Engineers, file 103.12, part 2, Records of the Geological Survey, National Archives, Record Group 57. Hereafter records in the National Archives are indicated by the symbol NA, followed by the record group (RG) number.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, Director of the Geological Survey, to the First Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Feb. 12, 1930, enclosing a list of "useless papers," file 1-42, part 16, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, NA, RG 48.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to G. O. Smith, Director of the Geological Survey, file 103.12, part 2, NA, RG 57.

tion by offering the records to the University of Utah. While negotiations with the university were proceeding, however, the Chief Clerk of the Interior Department became aware of the pending donation and informed the Geological Survey on June 27, 1930, that he could find no record of approval by the Department of the Interior of the original transfer of the Wheeler Survey records from the War Department, that the proposed gift to the University of Utah could be made only by congressional authorization, and that the records should be returned to the War Department "since they are stored in one of the basement corridors and constitute a fire menace."<sup>12</sup>

On July 21, 1930, the Acting Director of the Geological Survey requested that the Office of the Chief of Engineers resume custody of the Wheeler Survey records. The Engineers agreed, and a few days later the records were returned.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for some seven months in 1930 the Geological Survey had, and lost, the opportunity to assure the preservation of the Wheeler Survey records. In offering the records to the University of Utah, Director George Otis Smith explained his action as follows: "The published report of the Wheeler Survey probably presents all of the material in a form more convenient for reference than in the original notebook form."<sup>14</sup> This appraisal may have been absolutely valid with respect to the current business of the Geological Survey, but it ignored larger considerations. The willingness of the Geological Survey to dispense with the original records of the Wheeler Survey contrasts strangely with its solicitude for the records of its other three forerunners, the Hayden, King, and Powell Surveys. The Geological Survey's low appraisal of the Wheeler Survey records in 1930 might have been an echo of the opinions expressed in 1879 by John Wesley Powell and others in the course of the bitter controversy that led up to the liquidation of the four early surveys. Partly on the merits and partly for polemic purposes, there developed at that time what amounted to a consensus among civilian scientists concerning the poor quality of the work done by the Wheeler Survey.<sup>15</sup>

Having resumed custody of the Wheeler Survey records, the

<sup>12</sup> Memorandum, June 27, 1930, file 1-42, part 16, NA, RG 48. The Departmental Chief Clerk, W. Bertrand Acker, intervened quite properly in this matter. The interdepartmental transfer of the Wheeler Survey records could have been legitimized easily, if the Geological Survey had wanted to keep them.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to the Chief of Engineers, file 103.12, part 2, NA, RG 57.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Prof. George E. Fellows of the University of Utah, Mar. 24, 1930, file 103.12, part 2, NA, RG 57.

<sup>15</sup> A. Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government*, ch. 10 (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

Office of the Chief of Engineers on August 11, 1930, renewed the Geological Survey's offer to the University of Utah. On December 23, 1930, the university librarian accepted the offer and asked whether the university might destroy any or all records that proved to be of no value. By allowing 4 months to elapse between offer and acceptance, the University of Utah lost its chance to acquire the records, for on December 15, 1930, Senator Samuel M. Shortridge of California requested that they be turned over to the Stanford University Libraries. The Senator's request was honored, and on January 7, 1931, the Wheeler Survey records were delivered to the Senate Folding Room for shipment to California under senatorial frank.<sup>16</sup>

Senator Shortridge's successful bid for the records was prompted by a request sent to him by the Director of the Stanford University Libraries on December 9, 1930:

I am informed that a very interesting collection of material relating to the Wheeler Survey is available at the Archive Section, Office of the Chief of Engineers, Room 1841, Munitions Building, Washington, D. C. This relates to the history of the west and will be presented to the Stanford University Libraries provided we arrange for the transportation.

Under the circumstances would it be possible for you to provide the War Department with a frank or franks to cover this?<sup>17</sup>

This formal request was obviously preceded by effective spadework. The prime mover in Stanford's acquisition of the records appears to have been Francis P. Farquhar, a Californian. In 1930 Farquhar visited the archives of the Office of the Chief of Engineers and was shown the records. His own account of this visit, as he remembers it some three decades later, is in part as follows:

On October 8, 1930, I went all alone to the Engineer Corps Bldg. and wandered down to the basement, following my hunch. And just as I suspected, there was a door with a sign over it: "Archives." I entered, and there was an elderly civilian clerk punching a typewriter. I finally engaged his attention and pretty soon he realized that I knew what I was talking about. . . . I asked . . . if he knew anything about the Wheeler Survey papers. He looked at me in amazement. Why, they were in the very next room stacked up on tables waiting to be carted away to the dump. "You wouldn't have found them here next week." There they were; and the first things I looked at proved to be a stack of field sketch-books of the 1870s, and, lo and behold, there were sketches

<sup>16</sup> File 314.7, part 6, records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers in the Federal Records Center, Alexandria, Va. Access to these records was granted by the Office of the Chief of Engineers.

<sup>17</sup> Enclosure with Senator Shortridge's letter of December 15, 1930, to the Chief of Engineers, file 314.7, part 6.

from the Yosemite peaks and from Mount Whitney, also some from the Tahoe region. I said, "If these are going to be destroyed, couldn't I have them?" "I'm sure you could, but I'll have to ask someone upstairs first." So we went up to the Chief's Office, and there . . . [a colonel] said, "Certainly, I could have anything I wanted from these papers," and gave a memo to that effect. So, the sketch-books were mine . . .

Well, I couldn't carry away the whole ton or more of books and files, but it seemed to me that they might be worth sending to California for further inspection. . . . [The clerk], wise in the ways of our Government, said, "Why don't you get your Congressman or Senator to frank them to some institution in your state?" I knew Senator Shortridge, so I phoned him at the Senate Office Bldg. "Why, sure, he would be glad to do anything in the interest of the history of the glorious State of California, and as a friend of Stanford, he would have them shipped to the Stanford Library under his frank." So that was done; it seemed like half a carload.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the main body of textual records of the Wheeler Survey was transferred to the Stanford University Libraries, apparently with a minimum of formality.<sup>19</sup> It would appear, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that Stanford University was free to keep, give away, destroy, or otherwise dispose of the records at its sole

<sup>18</sup> Farquhar's interest in the Wheeler Survey records stems from his interest in the history and geography of the Sierra region. The information presented in this article concerning the role played by him in the history of the records was made available in recent private communications, here quoted by permission. For most of the events Farquhar describes, his recollections are the unique source; what independent evidence is available tends to corroborate them; no independent evidence has been found that casts doubt upon them. Farquhar asserts that he was told by the clerk on duty in the Engineer archives that the Wheeler Survey records were "waiting to be carted away to the dump. 'You wouldn't have found them here next week.'" No corroboration or refutation of this assertion has been found in the records of the Chief of Engineer's Office. In his successful effort to arrange the removal of the Wheeler Survey records from the custody of the Army Engineers, Farquhar was definitely motivated by the belief that the records were threatened with imminent destruction. It is, of course, possible that Farquhar was misinformed, and that the Wheeler Survey records were not, in fact, doomed. Even if the Office of the Chief of Engineers was actually about to destroy the Wheeler Survey records, congressional authorization was apparently lacking; none of the reports of the Joint Select Committee of Congress on Disposition of Useless Executive Papers include any mention of the Wheeler Survey records. Apparently, either Farquhar was misinformed or the Wheeler Survey records were about to be destroyed informally. In any event, through Farquhar's intervention the Wheeler Survey records were actually transferred to California; whether he thus saved them from destruction is an issue that has not been resolved by the present writer.

In 1963 Farquhar carried out a long-standing intention to present all his Wheeler Survey record holdings to the National Archives. They consist of 40 field notebooks and a small quantity of other records of field parties.

<sup>19</sup> No congressional authorization has been found for the removal of the Wheeler Survey records from the custody of the Office of the Chief of Engineers. There is no evidence to show that the Engineer officials who acquiesced in dispersals of the Wheeler Survey records were conscious of any impropriety.



discretion. From Stanford parts of the records were dispersed to other institutions, and in 1960 Stanford offered the residue to the National Archives. The offer was gratefully accepted, and these records now form a subgroup of Record Group 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers. Until 1960 the National Archives' holdings of Wheeler Survey records had been limited to a few stray volumes and papers.<sup>20</sup> With the accession from Stanford University, the National Archives became, for the first time, a major holder of Wheeler Survey records. Substantial parts were still missing; large-scale diminution had obviously occurred; but the appearance in 1962 of the records now at Yale and the acquisition by the National Archives in 1962-64 of four additional (though smaller) lots<sup>21</sup> have reduced the kinds and quantities of records that cannot be accounted for. A partial "want list" of these is as follows:

*Letters received.* These are missing with the exception of a few items in the National Archives. That the Wheeler Survey actually accumulated a file of incoming correspondence is proved by the survival of the appropriate indexes and registers.

*Letters sent.* Copies of letters sent (longhand), 1871-74, 1 or more volumes; press copies of letters sent, various dates between 1871 and 1882, 14 or more volumes.

*Notebooks.* Perhaps the most important and certainly the largest category of Wheeler Survey records, the notebooks contain not only data collected in the field but also office computations, compilations, and other records kept in notebook form, ca. 1868-ca. 1880. According to a list compiled by the Office of the Chief of Engineers in 1930 there were at that time 916 notebooks. Of these, approximately 906 are now known to exist. Present holdings of Wheeler Survey notebooks known to the author are as follows: National Archives, ca. 540 volumes; University of Colorado, 282 volumes; University of New Mexico, 53 volumes; Yale University, 31 volumes. Because it is not certain that particular items should be considered notebooks, the National Archives holdings are approximate.

To summarize, the history of the Wheeler Survey records might be divided into three periods: official neglect, 1883-1930; nonofficial neglect, 1931-60; and belated solicitude, 1960-64. Farquhar's assumption that the main body of the records would find a safe haven in California proved false; no one at Stanford University—neither the custodians of the records nor the potential users of them—ex-

<sup>20</sup> Special orders, 2 vols.; circulars, 1 vol.; instrument record, 1 vol.; copies of letters sent (longhand), 1 vol.; and a few letters received.

<sup>21</sup> From the Library of Congress, 4 items; from Stanford University, 11 notebooks and other items; from Francis P. Farquhar, 40 notebooks and other items; and from the University of Utah, 149 notebooks and other items.

hibited much interest in the records, and consequently a major dispersal occurred between 1931 and 1960. Apparently Farquhar himself participated actively in the dispersal in 1948. In that year, or possibly in 1947, he visited the basement of the Stanford University Libraries in the company of a faculty member. Presumably with the knowledge of the library authorities, Farquhar and his companion proceeded to divide up the Wheeler Survey records as follows:

. . . we spent the better part of a day sorting out the huge pile. We made three stacks: one [stack] of the things we considered to be important and worth keeping in some library in California . . . ; another stack that seemed of no interest to California, such as dozens of field computations for points in Utah . . . or Colorado, etc.; and a large stack that seemed utterly useless to anyone, including a lot of blank forms or merely barometer readings or mathematical computations. I took a few things that related to the Sierra Nevada home with me; and . . . [the Stanford University faculty member] removed quite a lot to the Geology Department.<sup>22</sup>

The California items considered "worth keeping" must have been one of the largest "stacks"; it may have suffered some loss by destruction, gift, or otherwise, but presumably most of this "stack" was retained by Stanford University and was presented to the National Archives in 1960. The non-California items are partially accounted for; 282 Wheeler Survey field notebooks were presented by Stanford University to the University of Colorado Library in 1949,<sup>23</sup> and possibly other institutions (*e.g.*, the University of Utah) benefited from Stanford University's generosity. The Sierra items taken home by Farquhar are accounted for; he presented them to the National Archives in 1963. The records removed to the Stanford Geology Department are partially accounted for; 14 items retrieved from a member of the department were presented by the Stanford University Libraries to the National Archives in 1963.<sup>24</sup>

Was the Yale University collection of Wheeler Survey records among the "stacks" that Farquhar and his companion sorted out in 1947 or 1948? Were the records now at Yale separated from the main body of the records during the period of official neglect, 1883-1930, or was the separation made during the period of nonofficial neglect, 1931-60? We have insufficient information to answer these

<sup>22</sup> Quoted from Farquhar's recollections (see note 18).

<sup>23</sup> Letter, Librarian of Western Historical Collections, University of Colorado Library, to the author, June 5, 1963.

<sup>24</sup> Letter, E. M. Grieder, Acting Director, Stanford University Libraries, to the author, May 24, 1963.



questions; the Wheeler Survey records now at Yale could have gone astray at any time between 1883 and 1960.

Through the dispersal of major parts of the Wheeler Survey records the sovereign people of the United States have lost part of their patrimony, part of the record of their corporate experience. This loss is a general one, but historians are peculiarly the losers. Yet, the role of professional historians in the preservation of the Wheeler Survey records has been curiously negative.<sup>25</sup> If the historical profession had demonstrated sufficient appreciation of the research potential of the records during the decades when they gathered dust in Palo Alto, it is possible that the dispersal of the records might have been prevented or minimized. What happened to the Wheeler Survey records exemplifies the damage that can result from poor communication between the custodians and the potential users of records.

The Army Engineers donated the Wheeler Survey records to Stanford University some 4 years before the National Archives opened for business in 1935. Since then legislation and executive action have made the anomalous dispersal of Federal records increasingly unlikely. The National Archives inherited from the old dispensation, however, a variety of problematic situations in which, as in the case of the Wheeler Survey, Federal records of permanent value are suspected or known to be lost. Such cases are unfinished archival business.

<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, Francis P. Farquhar is a historian, but his pursuit of history has been avocational rather than professional.

*PLAN NOW TO ATTEND—*

28th Annual Meeting  
Society of American Archivists

*Austin, Texas*

*October 6-10, 1964*