

# Decimal Filing: Its General Background and an Account of Its Rise and Fall in the U.S. War Department

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PERHAPS it would be appropriate to state that this paper does not consist of 10,000 pages, broken down to 1,000 paragraphs, each containing 100 sentences with 10 words on each line. The supposition that it might would not be too far removed from early ideas of the use of a decimal system in library classification. A plan presented to Henry III in 1583 provided for a library of 10,000 volumes to be placed in 100 bookcases, each of which was to contain 100 volumes.<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel B. Shurtleff's plan published in Boston in 1856, *A Decimal System for the Arrangement and Administration of Libraries*, provided for the arrangement of the library in alcoves consisting of 10 tiers, each tier having 10 shelves. Thus, although the idea of the decimal system is often attributed to Melvil Dewey, it did not originate with him. The decimal systems suggested before Dewey's time, however, involved the numbering of shelves and bookcases rather than the subjects of the books. It was an almost universal practice for librarians to use "fixed-location" systems—that is, to assign each volume to a specific place in a library, the exact spot determined by such considerations as the size or color of the volumes or an alphabetical arrangement.

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<sup>1</sup>W. C. Berwick Sayers, *A Manual of Classification for Librarians and Bibliographers*, p. 111-112 (2d ed., rev.; London, 1944).

The "fixed-location" systems actually were not classification systems at all but were merely shorthand methods of numbering shelves, tiers, alcoves, and rooms. They did not make adequate provision for the "relative location" of books, that is, putting a book next to others on a similar subject. Librarians were constantly recataloging and reclassifying books in an attempt to obviate the evils of the fixed-location system.

#### THE DEWEY DECIMAL SYSTEM

The fixed-location system continued in general use until 1873, when Melvil Dewey, then not 22 years old, a junior at Amherst College working part time in the library, conceived the idea of applying decimal numbers to the subject content of books and supplementing this by an alphabetical relative index—the idea that was to play an important part in revolutionizing library classification.<sup>2</sup> The moment of Dewey's inspiration was described by him in the following words:

For months I dreamd night and day that there must be somewhere a satisfactory solution. In the future wer thousands of libraries, most of them in charje of those with little skil or training. The first essential of the solution must be the greatest possible simplicity. The proverb said "simple as a, b, c," but stil simpler than that was 1, 2, 3. After months of study, one Sunday during a long sermon by Pres. Stearns, while I lookt stedfastly at him without hearing a word, my mind absorbd in the vital problem, the solution flasht over me so that I jumpt in my seat and came very near shouting "Eureka!" It was to get absolute simplicity by using the simplest known symbols, the arabic numerals as decimals, with the ordinary significance of nought, to number a classification of all human knowledge in print; this supplemented by the next simplest known symbols, a, b, c, indexing all heds of the tables, so that it would be easier to use a classification with 1000 heds so keyd than to use the ordinary 30 or 40 heds which one had to study carefully before using.<sup>3</sup>

On May 8, 1873, Dewey presented a memorandum to the library committee of Amherst explaining his proposed new classification. In brief it provided for the classification of all human knowledge into 10 main classes, each with 10 divisions and every division with 10 subdivisions, and so on. Dewey's scheme of arranging books by subjects was based on the W. T. Harris classification system for the St. Louis Public School Library, which had been derived by inverting Bacon's Chart of Learning. The classes are written in three figures and are as follows: 000, General Works; 100, Philosophy;

<sup>2</sup> See Fremont Rider, *Melvil Dewey*, p. 16-38 (Chicago, 1944).

<sup>3</sup> Melvil Dewey, "Decimal Classification Beginnings," in *Library Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4: 152 (Feb. 15, 1920). The quotation illustrates the simplified spelling that Dewey advocated.

200, Religion; 300, Social Sciences; 400, Philology; 500, Pure Science; 600, Useful Arts; 700, Fine Arts; 800, Literature; and 900, History. Certain mnemonic features are given to some numbers, particularly for form divisions, geographical divisions, and language divisions. Another feature, according to Dewey the most important of his scheme, is the relative index supplementing the classification plan. The relative index not only gives the number under which a subject is classified but also indicates relations between various phases of a subject and the relation of these phases to other subjects.

The library committee at Amherst accepted Dewey's recommendations; and his scheme, which reflected the benefits of the 3-year tryout and experience at Amherst, appeared in print in 1876. From that year on, the Dewey decimal classification was a phenomenal success. Circumstances contributing to the favorable reception and the spread of his system were the founding of the American Library Association in 1876, with Dewey as its secretary and guiding spirit; the founding of the *Library Journal*, edited for many years by Dewey; and the establishment at almost the same time of the Library Bureau, this again by Dewey. Last, but certainly not least important, is the fact that in 1895 the International Bibliographical Institute, now the International Federation for Documentation, adopted Dewey's system to classify its universal subject bibliography. Since this bibliography was to include subject cards for all books and periodicals in all languages, it was necessary to expand on Dewey's classification considerably and to use supplementary symbols to designate subject relationships. This new scheme, commonly called the Brussels or universal decimal classification, has appeared in French, German, Dutch, Swedish, and English.<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of the Library Bureau and the adoption of the Brussels or universal decimal classification in turn contributed to the spread of decimal systems for classifying correspondence. When first established, the Library Bureau was concerned mainly with the standardization and sale of cards and other supplies to libraries. But before long the Bureau began to revolutionize business office equipment and methods. It developed office card files and systems. The invention of the vertical file in 1892 stimulated the Bureau to devise systems of guides and folders, and soon it was devising and recommending filing systems and business methods

<sup>4</sup> A good discussion, including historical background and information on the expansion of notations, may be found in Sayers, *op. cit.*, p. 122-134.

for commercial firms. In time decimal systems were among those recommended.<sup>5</sup>

#### ADAPTATION OF THE DECIMAL SYSTEM TO CORRESPONDENCE

By the turn of the century the Dewey decimal system of library classification had been extended to cover not only books and pamphlets but literary matter of all kinds. The General Electric Co., for example, published in 1903 a *Relative Index: An Extension of the Dewey System for the Electrical Industry*, which contained the subjects and numbers accumulated for several years covering literature for the electrical industry. About 1899 the department of mechanical engineering of the University of Illinois had prepared a similar extension of the Dewey system pertaining to mechanical engineering. As successive editions were issued by the university, more and more classifications were added to cover various branches of engineering more completely. To the third edition, for example, were added the extensions adopted by the International Railway Congress. By 1912 the university had published six editions.

The extent to which the Brussels classification tended to encourage extensions to and adaptations of the Dewey system for correspondence is conjectural. We do know, however, that the existence of the universal decimal classification and the extension of the classification for railway literature by the International Railway Congress played a part in W. H. Williams' decision to devise a decimal system for the correspondence of railroad companies.

The preparation of the *Railroad Correspondence File*, the decimal system manual of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, actually had its beginning in offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad. L. F. Loree, an engineer for the Pennsylvania lines, had devoted much time and study to the filing problems of engineers' offices. As a result, a uniform system of indexing the correspondence of the superintendents' and engineers' offices of the divisions of the Pennsylvania lines west of Pittsburgh had been established in 1897-98. This index system, however, proved to be inadequate when an attempt was made to extend it to other offices. Loree, who was president of the American Railway Association and chairman of the U.S. delegation to the International Railway Congress at Paris in 1900, undoubtedly was familiar with the decimal classification system adopted for railroad literature. He directed Williams to make

<sup>5</sup> Library Bureau, *The Story of Library Bureau*, p. 2-19 (Boston, 1909); Rider, *op. cit.*, p. 63-65; Helen L. Chatfield, "The Development of Record Systems," in *American Archivist*, 13:263-266 (July 1950); Library Bureau, *Library Bureau Systems: Gas, Electric and Water Companies* (Boston, 1902).



a study of the Dewey decimal system and of filing methods used by railroads and other businesses in the United States and abroad. Meanwhile, in 1901, both Loree and Williams had become associated with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

Failing to find a satisfactory filing system in use by commercial firms, Williams consulted both the personnel at the International Bibliographical Institute and the secretary of the International Railway Congress, Louis Weissenbruch, concerning the feasibility of extending the Dewey decimal system to railroad correspondence. Weissenbruch was primarily responsible for the preparation of an extension of the decimal system for railroad literature. It was concluded that the best plan would be to devise a new decimal scheme using the railroad departments as the subjects of the main classes. Accordingly Williams developed a system containing the following main classes: 000, General; 100, Executive Department; 200, Finance and Accounts; 300, Roadway and Structures; 400, Equipment and Shops; 500, Transportation and Storage; 600, Traffic; and 900, Local Facilities and Affairs.<sup>6</sup> The completed classification scheme devised by Williams was published in 1902, and the new decimal system was installed in the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad offices.

During the next 8 years use of the *Railroad Correspondence File* spread to the Delaware and Hudson; the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy; the Lehigh Valley; the Canadian Pacific; the Harriman; and the Pennsylvania Railroads. The offices of the general manager of the Pennsylvania Railroad began to use the decimal system in 1904. In 1910 the Pennsylvania Railroad appointed " "

early part of 1908, E. A. Wilkie, recorder of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co., asked the Library Bureau to prepare a classification system for the company's files. A group of five Library Bureau "experts," one of whom was William C. Bamburgh, studied the files, decided a decimal system would best meet the needs of telephone companies, and set about preparing the *Decimal Classification for Filing Telephone Correspondence*. Bamburgh was retained by the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. to supervise the installation of the new system in March 1909. Among the telephone companies that later adopted decimal systems were the Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph, Northwestern Bell Telephone, Southwestern Bell Telephone, Michigan State Telephone, and the Ohio Bell Telephone.<sup>8</sup>

Other companies and offices had turned to the decimal system for filing correspondence. When the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency (appointed by President Taft in 1910) made detailed inquiries into recordkeeping practices of commercial firms early in 1911,<sup>9</sup> it found that the Adams Express Co. of New York had been using a modified decimal system for almost 20 years. The Newport News (Va.) Shipbuilding Co. used a decimal system devised and installed by a Mr. Wood in 1902. William B. Bondbright and Co. of New York was also using a decimal system.

The Taft Commission was tremendously impressed by the progress made by business firms and thought that the Government bureaus were far behind commercial firms in recordkeeping methods. The Commission stated that it found no instance in which a business firm had replaced an alphabetic or subject file by a numeric file such as most Government bureaus were using. On the contrary, the Commission reported that the arbitrary numeric file was gradually being supplanted either by an alphabetic file if the business was mainly with individuals or by a subject file if the correspondence dealt with a variety of subjects but that in each type of file a self-indexing system was used.

#### ADOPTION OF THE DECIMAL SYSTEM BY THE WAR DEPARTMENT

##### *Previous Recordkeeping Practice*

In September 1910, when the Taft Commission on Economy and Efficiency began its inquiries into recordkeeping practices, the

<sup>8</sup> Letters, Joseph T. Crowley, assistant secretary, New England Telephone and Telegraph Co., to the author, June 1 and July 6, 1956.

<sup>9</sup> See Bess Glenn, "The Taft Commission and the Government's Record Practices," in *American Archivist*, 21: 277-303 (July 1958).

record-card system established by Gen. Fred C. Ainsworth was firmly entrenched in the Washington and major field offices of the War Department. Detailed instructions for maintaining and filing correspondence under the record-card system had been promulgated in a War Department order of May 15, 1894, and in War Department General Order no. 92, May 5, 1909.

The record-card system was not, the Taft Commission pointed out, a classification system; it was simply a costly numeric finding method. In brief it required the maintenance of three files:

1. A document file of incoming papers and copies of outgoing communications pertaining to each case. The cases were folded, briefed, and assigned consecutive numbers.
2. Record cards numbered consecutively to correspond with the document file. They contained abstracts of incoming communications, either abstracts or copies of outgoing communications, and notations of all actions taken.
3. A card-index file having, for each case, a card bearing the name of the writer of the communication received and usually one or more cross-reference cards to other names or subjects mentioned. The index cards carried the numbers assigned to the document file and record cards, but they were filed alphabetically rather than numerically.

### *Reactions to Taft Commission Proposals*

On September 29, 1910, the Acting Secretary of War appointed a War Department Board on Business Methods that, among other things, was to make a thorough investigation into the current methods of recordkeeping and handling correspondence in the bureaus and offices of the Department and to recommend needed changes. The Board was established in accordance with President Taft's request that the executive departments appoint experts to collaborate with his Commission on Economy and Efficiency. Members of the Board were Maj. Gen. Fred C. Ainsworth, The Adjutant General, president; Capt. Fred W. Sladen, General Staff, recorder; Brig. Gen. E. A. Garlington, Inspector General; Brig. Gen. W. W. Wotherspoon, Army War College; and John C. Scofield, Assistant and Chief Clerk, War Department.<sup>10</sup>

The bureaus were asked to report whether their methods of recordkeeping differed from those prescribed in the War Department order of May 15, 1894, and if so in what respect, and why

<sup>10</sup> On Dec. 27, 1910, Capt. Matthew E. Hanna, General Staff, was detailed as recorder to the Board to replace Captain Sladen. The basic documentation relating to the investigation of recordkeeping systems and steps leading to the adoption by the War Department of the decimal system is consolidated under doc. file 22302, records of the Office of the Secretary of War, NA, RG 107, and doc. file 1705856, records of The Adjutant General's Office, NA, RG 94.

and by what authority the changes had been made. The responses revealed that the record-card system was in effect with only a few deviations from the precise instructions in the order.

On January 3, 1911, General Ainsworth, in compliance with a directive from Chief of Staff Leonard Wood, sent an inquiry to the Washington and field offices concerning recordkeeping by the Army. The objective of this inquiry was the simplification and reduction of paperwork. Most sections of the replies pertained to reports and returns, but generally the sections pertaining to correspondence indicated satisfaction with the record-card system. A few officers suggested elimination of record cards, stating that the document file and the index were sufficient. This suggestion met with no favor in The Adjutant General's Office.<sup>11</sup>

Not many more months were to elapse, however, before the War Department would face criticisms and suggestions that could not be silenced by a simple letter of disapproval. When the President's Inquiry on Economy and Efficiency had received from the bureaus of the War Department and from other executive departments detailed information concerning their recordkeeping practices,<sup>12</sup> it recommended that the folding, briefing, recording, and indexing of communications be discontinued. In lieu of these practices the Taft Commission suggested that insofar as possible correspondence be filed flat under a self-indexing subject classification such as a decimal system. All these recommendations ran counter to the record-card system. But what made the recommendations particularly compelling was the cost analysis that accompanied them and that put the War Department in a very unfavorable light.<sup>13</sup> General Ainsworth, fully aware of the damaging implication against his system, sent to the Secretary of War on February 10, 1912, a letter in which he attempted to show that the figures used by the Taft Commission did not reflect a true picture.

About the same time Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson asked the Taft Commission to make an exhaustive study of the Office of The Adjutant General. He later extended his request to include detailed studies of the Bureau of Insular Affairs and the Offices of

<sup>11</sup> Doc. file 1706005, records of The Adjutant General's Office, NA, RG 94.

<sup>12</sup> See President's Inquiry in Re Economy and Efficiency, *Questions To Be Answered and Memorandum of Instructions To Be Followed in the Preparation and Filing of Correspondence*, Circular no. 5, p. 3-13 (Washington, 1911).

<sup>13</sup> President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency, *Memorandum of Conclusions Reached by the Commission Concerning the Principles That Should Govern in the Matter of Handling and Filing Correspondence . . .*, Circular no. 21, p. 7-20 (Washington, 1912).

the Chief of Engineers, Surgeon General, Chief Signal Officer, and Chief of Ordnance.<sup>14</sup>

Secretary Stimson not only requested the detailed studies but took positive steps to institute as many Taft Commission recommendations as possible. Circular 21, embodying the Commission's general recommendations pertaining to recordkeeping practices, was issued on February 13, 1912. On February 21 Stimson sent a copy of the circular to each of his bureau chiefs, instructing them to consider promptly the findings and recommendations and to advise him which of them could be put into effect and when. He instructed them further to report on any recommendations that could not be adopted and to state why they were not feasible.

Responses from the bureaus varied. Flat filing seemed to evoke the least opposition. It was generally agreed that the discontinuance of briefing would be an obvious step *if* the record-card file were abolished and correspondence were filed under a decimal or other self-indexing subject system.

The Office of the Judge Advocate General believed that the recommendations of the Taft Commission were sound and immediately prepared a classification system, which was made effective on July 1, 1912. In preparing the scheme the then current edition of the *Digest of Opinions of the Judge Advocate General* was used as a guide to obtain the major subjects of the business of the Judge Advocate General's Office. These subjects were arranged alphabetically and numbered 2 to 99; generally only the even numbers were used, so that there would be room for expansion. A decimal classification was then applied under each subject. The file designation assigned to a document consisted of the subject number, a dash, and then the decimal number. The system was applied to general correspondence only. The Judge Advocate General's Office continued to assign consecutive numbers to courts-martial cases and to prepare index cards (but no record cards) as finding aids.<sup>15</sup>

The Office of the Chief of Ordnance was somewhat more pro-

<sup>14</sup> A Special Committee on the Handling and Filing of Correspondence was created in the War Department in June 1911, similar to those in many other departments. W. E. Wilmot and F. H. Tonsmeire of the Taft Commission and John C. Scofield and Gen. Fred C. Ainsworth from the War Department were members of this Committee. The functions of this Committee appear to have been either drastically curtailed or eliminated, however, when the Secretary of War requested the detailed studies by the Taft Commission.

<sup>15</sup> Doc. file 11295, records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), NA, RG 153; Judge Advocate General's Office, *Subject Classification for the Office of the Judge Advocate General, U.S. Army, for Use in Connection with the Decimal System of Classifying Office Records*, p. 1-75 (Washington, 1912).

gressive in its recordkeeping practices than other War Department bureaus. It had begun to use carbon copies in 1903. It also had stopped assigning the next consecutive number to each new communication. Instead, general subjects were given a subject file number, but the numbers apparently had been derived from the old arbitrary number system. There were approximately 1,450 subject numbers ranging from 216 to 39424 (with gaps). Besides the subject file number each communication was given a serial number. Carbon copies of incoming communications, or abstracts of them, and carbon copies of outgoing communications were filed flat in a separate series in lieu of the regulation record-card file.

On March 5, 1912, the Chief of Ordnance reported favorably with respect to flat filing of communications, the use of carbon copies, and the discontinuance of briefing. He also stated that the establishment of a subject classification system for the correspondence files would be taken up at once.

Other bureaus willing to adopt at least some of the Taft Commission's recommendations were the Offices of the Chief Signal Officer, Commissary General, Paymaster General, Quartermaster General, and Inspector General. The Quartermaster General agreed to try filing correspondence without benefit of indexes but doubted that a completely self-indexing system could be achieved. The Inspector General stated that, except for reports of inspections, a subject classification was already in use in his office.

The Office of the Chief of Engineers concurred in the desirability of flat filing under a subject classification system but held it essential to keep a suitable record, preferably on cards, of all important correspondence and to note the receipt and forwarding of correspondence and to make references to papers absent from the bureau. That Office made it clear that although it definitely favored a subject classification system it did not favor a single system for the War Department. It thought that the Engineer Department handled a special class of work and should be permitted to devise a classification that would best meet its own needs. In the light of later developments in the recordkeeping methods of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, it is interesting to note that the Taft Commission stated that the correspondence would readily lend itself to subject classification and flat filing but that the Commission did not "insist on, or recommend, any particular classification."<sup>16</sup> In its

<sup>16</sup> *Message of the President of the United States Transmitting the Reports of the Commission on Economy and Efficiency*, p. 496 (62d Cong., 3d sess., H. Doc. 1252).



detailed reports on the other bureaus of the War Department it recommended a "decimal or analogous system."

Considerable opposition to the Taft Commission's recommendations was registered by the Office of the Surgeon General, the Office of The Adjutant General, and the Bureau of Insular Affairs. All three were convinced that in their offices the elimination of the record-card file and the filing of correspondence under a self-indexing subject classification would be little short of a calamity. The Offices of the Surgeon General and The Adjutant General also were opposed to flat filing, but the Bureau of Insular Affairs agreed to change over at some time in the future—if and when it had sufficient space.

The Office of The Adjutant General, which put up the most stubborn resistance, was perhaps under the greatest pressure to comply. The preliminary report on that Office, completed by a committee of the Taft Commission on March 20, 1912, was, by direction of the Secretary of War, referred to The Adjutant General for comment. General Ainsworth had by this time retired, but he had left staunch adherents to the system with which his name is associated. The preliminary report did not mention the decimal system. It was restricted to such matters as flat filing and discontinuing the briefing of communications and the use of record cards, but The Adjutant General nonetheless objected to every recommendation. He knew, of course, that a decimal or other self-indexing classification system was a part of the Taft Commission's general recommendations, and he probably had this in mind when on June 5, 1912, he commented on the report. At any rate, there is no doubt that many in the Office of The Adjutant General were fearful of losing the safeguards of the record card and the index. The resistance to change spelled out in The Adjutant General's 21-page memorandum of reply is reminiscent of resistance against the use of this very record-card system when it was adopted in 1890.

The conflict of views between The Adjutant General and the Taft Commission grew spirited. On July 22, 1912, the committee of the Taft Commission, in replying to the objections raised to its recommendations, clearly revealed a loss of patience. On the same day F. A. Cleveland, Chairman of the Taft Commission, wrote to the Secretary of War and suggested that the controversy be resolved in a meeting with the Secretary at which representatives of The Adjutant General and the Commission would present their views. To this the Office of The Adjutant General would not agree.



A few weeks later Cleveland complained that staff members in the Office of The Adjutant General were uncooperative.

*Gradual Acceptance of Decimal Classification*

Through the entire controversy Secretary Stimson supported the Taft Commission's recommendations.<sup>17</sup> By the beginning of November, however, neither The Adjutant General nor the Surgeon General had yielded in their opposition to a self-indexing subject classification system. At this time the Secretary of War sent two persons from his Office and one each from the Offices of The Adjutant General and the Chief of Engineers with a member of the Taft Commission to investigate recordkeeping methods of some commercial firms in the vicinity of New York City.<sup>18</sup> The tide then began to turn. After their investigations the group was convinced that correspondence of the War Department could be filed flat under a subject classification with a minimum of indexing.

On November 14, 1912, the Acting Secretary of War appointed a Board, under the chairmanship of Robert E. Parker, on the staff of the Assistant Secretary of War, to prepare a subject classification system. The other members of the Board were from the Offices of the Judge Advocate General, the Chief of Engineers, the Chief of Ordnance, the Chief Signal Officer, the Surgeon General, the Quartermaster General, and The Adjutant General.

Meanwhile the Taft Commission had submitted to the Secretary of War reports on the six Offices that it had been asked to study in detail. The Secretary by an order of January 6, 1913, directed the chiefs of these Offices to report their progress in carrying out the recommendations on which they had concurred. He also appointed a Board to give further study to the recommendations on which these Offices had reported adversely. Reports from the chiefs of the Offices and the Board were to be submitted by February 1, 1913.

On January 23, 1913, the Secretary of War, aware of the continued skepticism of The Adjutant General and some other bureau chiefs and mindful of the changed impressions of the group that

<sup>17</sup> Within his own Office he appointed a Board on Mar. 23, 1912, to consider the reports made by the division chiefs on the recommendations outlined in Circular 21. The various divisions of the Secretary's Office began using carbon copies and discontinued briefing on May 1, 1912. These two recommendations were put into effect throughout the War Department on Sept. 1, 1912. (The Mail and Record Division, however, received permission to reestablish press-copy books on Sept. 4, 1912.)

<sup>18</sup> The concerns visited were the New York Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad Co., Jersey City, N.J.; the Butterick Publishing Co., the Manhattan Electric Supply Co., and William B. Bondbright and Co., in New York City; the Edison Electric Illuminating Co. in Brooklyn; and the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. in Boston.

had visited commercial firms, suggested that The Adjutant General and representatives of other bureaus visit Boston and New York to observe the recordkeeping methods used by the Pennsylvania Railroad and the New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. Accordingly, on January 27 and 28, The Adjutant General and five officials, chosen from his Office and the Offices of the Surgeon General, the Assistant Secretary of War, and the Quartermaster General, visited the two firms. Like the earlier group, the representatives were favorably impressed. The report of the Board appointed by the Secretary of War, dated January 30, 1913, shows that after these visits opposition to the decimal system dwindled. This did not mean, however, that the Offices of The Adjutant General and the Surgeon General were yet ready to accept the decimal system.

On June 13 the Parker Board submitted the first draft of the War Department decimal system. When this Board had reported 6 months earlier, the members had been sharply divided on whether the system should be applied individually by each bureau or be uniform for the entire military establishment. By the time the first draft was completed 9 of its 11 members voted to accept a uniform classification and to adopt the classification system just drafted. The Board was convinced that the decimal system would be much more economical than the record-card system. It believed that even greater economy would result if a central "office of record and archives" were established for the War Department instead of a record office for each bureau.

The War Department bureaus thus were faced with acceptance or rejection of two proposals—the decimal classification and a central "office of record and archives." On May 26, 1913, Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison, Stimson's successor, had called for reports embodying the views of the bureau chiefs and officials of the General Staff.<sup>19</sup> Of the 13 officials who submitted reports, 11 were in favor of the decimal system and 2 were opposed. The Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs had joined those in favor of the decimal system but still wanted to retain record cards. The Adjutant General and the Surgeon General had not yet been won over.

The Surgeon General expressed adamant opposition to the decimal system, but The Adjutant General's opposition was rather mild.

<sup>19</sup> Garrison had appointed an Economy and Efficiency Committee 2 months earlier and assigned to it the job of collecting the information. See doc. file 44880, records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NA, RG 92, and file 313.215, records of the Office of the Secretary of War, NA, RG 107.

He stated that he thought the decimal system would be less efficient than the record-card system and that it would not be so economical as the Taft Commission estimated. He went on, however, to discuss how the new system would have to be administered, thus implying a somewhat passive acceptance of it.

With respect to a central office of record, six officers favored the plan and seven opposed it. Many of the replies, however, contained qualifying endorsements or were rather indefinite, so that the tally was not clear cut.

The results of the Garrison survey were discussed on July 14, 1913, at a meeting of the bureau chiefs and the Secretary of War. On the following day the Secretary directed a Committee on Classification to revise the first draft of the classification system, to prepare a relative index, to prepare necessary instructions for operating the system, and to determine the cost of its installation. To serve on the Committee, Parker appointed representatives of the Offices of The Adjutant General, the Quartermaster General, and the Chief of Ordnance, all of whom had assisted in preparing the first draft of the classification.

By January 1914 the Committee on Classification had completed its assignment, and *War Department Correspondence File: A Subjective Decimal Classification With Relative Index for Arranging and Filing War Department Correspondence* was then published. On March 24 the Acting Secretary of War issued Circular no. 1 containing explanations of the system and instructions for adopting it. About 2 weeks later several copies of *War Department Correspondence File* were sent to each bureau with a request for comments on whether or not the proposed system appeared to be an improvement over the record-card system and whether or not the bureau wished to adopt the new system.

The Quartermaster General and the Chief of Ordnance, each of whom had a representative on the Committee on Classification, were the first to respond favorably. The Quartermaster General requested permission to install the system gradually, and with the approval of the Assistant Secretary of War the new system was installed experimentally in one branch of his Office between June 4 and October 7, 1914.<sup>20</sup> The Chief of Ordnance expressed doubts that subjects of special interest to the Ordnance Department were fully provided for, but he recommended that the new system be

<sup>20</sup> Letters dated Apr. 2, May 5 and 19, and Nov. 7, 1914, in file 313.215, records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NA, RG 92.

tested in his office. His recommendation was approved on July 18, 1914.<sup>21</sup>

In the decimal plan prepared by the Committee on Classification an attempt was made to adapt Dewey's concept to War Department correspondence. An initial requirement, therefore, was an overall view of War Department subject matter so that the subjects could be logically divided into not more than 10 major classes. To obtain a comprehensive picture of subjects, the Committee carefully analyzed and screened about 50,000 subject cards submitted by the bureaus. The Committee decided that the subjects then currently in use could be grouped into nine classes, thus leaving one for later use. The nine classes selected were 000, General; 100, Finance and Accounting; 200, Personnel; 300, Administration; 400, Supplies, Services, and Equipment; 500, Transportation; 600, Buildings and Grounds; 700, Medicine, Hygiene, and Sanitation; and 800, Rivers, Harbors, and Waterways.

Meanwhile two other decimal classification systems had appeared. The Appointment Division (redesignated the Civilian Personnel Division in 1919) in the Office of the Secretary of War had prepared a decimal system that it used from 1913 to 1940.<sup>22</sup> The Bureau of Insular Affairs published its *Subjective Classification of Correspondence* (a decimal system) in February 1914.

The story from January 1915 to mid-1917 is one of gradual adoption of the decimal system by the Military Establishment. The Secretary and Assistant Secretary of War played a fatherly role during this period. They encouraged use of the system, checked and rechecked with the offices that adopted it to be sure it was giving satisfaction, and even answered some specific questions concerning the assignment of file numbers to particular subjects.

Headquarters Eastern Department was given authority to install the system on May 15, 1915. The Office of the Chief of Ordnance, which had been using the system on a partial basis for almost a year, put it into full operation on July 1.<sup>23</sup> On July 26 and August 10, 1915, by order of the Acting Secretary of War, several copies of *War Department Correspondence File* were sent to the military departments and posts informing them that the system was in successful operation in some offices and suggesting that they also adopt it. Six months later the Western, Central, and

<sup>21</sup> Doc. file 35937/2082 and 2088, records of the Office of the Chief of Ordnance, NA, RG 156.

<sup>22</sup> For a copy of this system, see file 132, records of the Civilian Personnel Division, Office of the Secretary of War, NA, RG 107.

<sup>23</sup> Doc. file 35937/2159, records of the Office of the Chief of Ordnance, NA, RG 156.

Southern Departments had installed the system at their headquarters and the Eastern Department had extended its use to certain coast-defense installations and posts. Several other posts also adopted it. In November 1915 the system was instituted in the Office of the Secretary of War.<sup>24</sup>

During the next year and a half this pattern continued. Among the establishments that adopted the new system were the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, the Headquarters of the Philippine and Hawaiian Departments, and many supply depots and arsenals.

By mid-1917 the United States was at war. The National Defense Act, passed in June 1916, authorized increases in the Standing Army and the National Guard. In May 1917 the Selective Service Act was passed. Also in May, Gen. John J. Pershing was ordered to France as head of the American Expeditionary Forces and in the following month the first American detachments arrived in France.

A mushrooming Army posed three recordkeeping problems or circumstances that caused the Army to act quickly. First, for correspondence filing, part of the military establishment was using the new decimal system; part of it retained the old record-card system that the Taft Commission had stated could never cope with another wartime situation. Second, the Office of The Adjutant General, which had heretofore held back, adopted the decimal system in July 1917. So did the Office of the Inspector General. Finally, many Army field clerks who had had experience with the decimal system at cantonment and division headquarters in the United States were sent to France, and many of those remaining were inexperienced in any form of recordkeeping. Because of these varying circumstances the Army had to establish immediately a uniform system of recordkeeping for administrative headquarters of divisions, brigades, and cantonments and to provide the necessary filing equipment and simple filing instructions before the arrival of troops. Therefore, on August 6, 1917, the Secretary of War appointed a Board on Correspondence and Filing Systems to make recommendations for standardized filing equipment, to prepare an abridgment of *War Department Correspondence File*, and to handle related matters.<sup>25</sup>

Before preparing the abridgment, the Board quickly consulted Washington and field offices that were using the decimal file for

<sup>24</sup> The Office of the Secretary of War continued to number documents consecutively for the period of July 1913 to Nov. 1915 although they were filed flat. The records for this period were later reclassified under the decimal system.

<sup>25</sup> File 313.215, records of the Office of The Adjutant General, NA, RG 94.

suggestions on the elimination and addition of subjects. In the abridged edition, submitted for approval on August 31, 1917, fine subdivisions of subjects, normally represented by numbers to the right of a decimal point, were greatly reduced. Insofar as possible the Board attempted to restrict the number code to whole numbers. The detailed breakdowns were supplied by the record offices as needed by the addition of descriptive words or phrases. This plan provided much greater flexibility in that subdivisions were no longer restricted to 10. Furthermore, a logical place could be found for new subjects because a clerk could always go to the class or division breakdown to which a new subject was most closely related and then add a necessary word or phrase.

The abridged edition was published in September 1917. At this time the Board, with the support of The Adjutant General, recommended that the decimal system be mandatory except for the Insular Bureau, which was not considered an integral part of the Military Establishment. This recommendation was approved by the Secretary of War and implemented through the issuance of War Department General Order no. 121, September 16, 1917. The order specified that *War Department Correspondence File* or the abridgment be used "in all offices and bureaus of the War Department excepting the Insular Bureau, and at headquarters of departments, districts, coast defenses, posts, cantonments, and of regiments and higher units."

In Washington General Order no. 121 affected the Offices of the Surgeon General and the Chief of Engineers. The decimal system (abridged edition) was installed in the Office of the Surgeon General on October 11, 1917.<sup>26</sup> The Office of the Chief of Engineers, however, was less amenable. It had prepared its own subject classification based on the decimal system and had submitted this for approval to the Secretary of War on May 29, 1915. This Office believed that its river, harbor, and flood control functions (that is, its "civil" functions), which at that time constituted most of its work, were so specialized that its records needed a separate classification. Permission for the modification was not granted, and, failing in this, the Office of the Chief of Engineers pointed to the exception of the Insular Bureau from the provisions of General Order no. 121 and maintained that correspondence relating to civil functions should be exempt on the same basis. In this it suc-

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Sept. 27, 1917, with endorsements, file 313.215, records of The Adjutant General's Office, NA, RG 94; letter, Nov. 16, 1917, file 313.2-2, records of the Office of the Surgeon General (Army), NA, RG 112.

ceeded, and effective February 16, 1918, only the correspondence of the Military Branch was to be filed under the decimal system.<sup>27</sup>

In compliance with the general order, the Office of the Judge Advocate General discontinued using the classification system it had prepared in 1912. Most of the divisions of the War Department General Staff, however, did not comply with the order.

When the Board on Correspondence and Filing Systems submitted its report of August 31, 1917, enclosing the draft of the abridged edition, it recommended revision of the initial edition. The recommendation was approved. When the Board first began its revisions, in December, its members differed on whether the abridged or the unabridged edition should be used as a point of departure. They soon concluded, however, that the abridgment, designed originally for field purposes only, was not entirely satisfactory for use by the bureaus because long explanatory phrases had to be affixed to the numeric symbols. The Board strove, therefore, to devise a classification system that would be simpler than the original scheme but that would provide more numeric symbols than the abridgment. The revised edition prepared by the Board was approved by the Assistant Secretary of War on April 24, 1918, and was published almost at once. It superseded all previous editions and, upon receipt by Washington and field offices, was put in operation.

The Board, in its final report dated June 9, 1918, recommended relaxation of the absolute prohibition of the addition of new numbers and decimal subdivisions. It recommended that the prohibition be restricted to basic numbers and that expansion be permitted in decimal extensions.

With World War I over, there set in a period of stagnation, which lasted until the Nation was again at war. The recommendation that decimal extensions be permitted to take care of needed expansion was not put into effect. Alphabetical filing, as introduced in the 1917 abridgment, was permitted. Occasional requests were addressed to The Adjutant General for additions of or changes in classification numbers. Most of the requests originated with offices dealing with subjects pertaining to the Air Corps, which was in its infancy when the 1918 revision was made. Until 1942, however, nothing was done toward bringing the classification system up to date.

<sup>27</sup> Doc. file 87121/74, 80, 82, and 96, records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, NA, RG 77.



*New Problems*

On April 10, 1942, records administrators and officers from various agencies of the War Department were called together to discuss the need for an up-to-date classification manual. The consensus of this meeting was that the manual should be revised by a board appointed for this purpose. Accordingly, the War Department Correspondence File Manual Board was appointed. The president of the Board was from the Office of The Adjutant General; other members were a recorder from the same Office and representatives of the Army Air Forces, the Office of the Quartermaster General, and the Office of the Chief of Engineers.

This Board proceeded similarly to the one appointed in 1917. It too invited suggestions and recommendations for additions and deletions of subjects. The 800 class was revised and expanded to provide coverage for Engineer civil activities. The Board also attempted to make adequate provision for the needs of the Army Air Forces by greatly expanding subdivisions in the 360, 373, and 452 subclasses.

The new manual was published early in 1943 and, in accordance with the Board's recommendation, was made mandatory. The Office of the Chief of Engineers had begun to use the decimal system on November 4, 1942, and the Engineer field offices adopted it a few months later.

There apparently was some concern that the entire Engineer Department would not adopt the decimal system. To remove any doubt that the system was mandatory, a statement of this requirement was placed on the flyleaf of the new manual. Actually, the precaution seems not to have been necessary insofar as the Office of the Chief of Engineers was concerned. A few of its field offices, however, had expressed opposition to changing to a new system during an emergency.

Paradoxically the Army Air Forces, from which a Board member had purposely been chosen, did not continue to use the decimal system for long. On April 28, 1944, Headquarters Army Air Forces was granted exemption from mandatory use of the system for its non-security-classified files kept in Washington. Its security-classified correspondence, however, and the correspondence in field offices were not exempt. Beginning on June 1, 1944, a subject-numeric system<sup>28</sup> was installed in the Washington office for the

<sup>28</sup> Prepared by William Muller, who had assisted in preparing the subject-numeric system in the Department of Agriculture before his appointment as records administrator for the Army Air Forces early in 1944.

non-security-classified files. Filing non-security-classified correspondence under one system and security-classified correspondence under another was not, however, a very satisfactory arrangement, particularly since security-classified correspondence was downgraded from time to time. Eventually, in 1947, the newly created Department of the Air Force agreed to have the files recoded under the decimal system, but a year after the Air Force became an autonomous department of the Defense Establishment the subject-numeric system was being used in Washington for both security-classified and non-security-classified files. In 1950 it was made mandatory throughout the Department of the Air Force.

In 1947 the Department of the Army (formerly the War Department) gave some thought to another revision of the decimal file manual, but the plan was abandoned. By then effective records management programs were underway. Records officers had discovered that the controlled, centralized filing required by the decimal system was frequently more theory than fact. Surveys showed that in many bureaus the operating divisions had established files that not only included duplicates but frequently contained original enclosures and decisions missing from the central files. These division files had been established primarily because the huge central filing organizations were too remote from the action desks and from centers of policy decision. In some instances this duplication was encouraged by the need for case files that were not provided for by files classified under the decimal system.

#### DISCONTINUANCE OF THE DECIMAL SYSTEM BY THE ARMY

Recognizing the problems, the Department of the Army encouraged its bureaus and offices to decentralize files to operating levels and, as an interim step, made the use of the decimal system optional rather than mandatory. It was apparent to the Department, however, that further simplified filing was needed, and eventually The Army Functional Files System (TAFFS)—a system combining the Army records disposition program with the file system—was evolved. This system was put gradually into operation in the field and was made effective for all Army Field Commands on January 1, 1959, and for all Headquarters Department of the Army offices and bureaus on January 1, 1963.

After 50 years the era of the decimal file had ended for the Army. It is easy now to point to its complexity, rigidity, and other imperfections, but the fact remains that it was used—and successfully used—for nearly half a century.