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THE SELECTION OF RECORDS FOR PRESERVATION¹

WHAT records shall we preserve? The character of the problems of archivists and historical manuscripts custodians depends upon the answer to that question, as does our judgment in the eyes of posterity. The custodian, be he official or otherwise, can and should participate in answering it. Yet it would be difficult to enumerate any standard set of principles on which the selection of records can be based.

Periods of intense activity in public affairs accentuate the importance of selection rather than defer its operation. Space problems become more acute at such times, and the need for reference to certain materials is increased. The latter point is illustrated by the attention now given to records of our experiences during the last World War. An extreme but very real example of emergency selection is seen in England in the demand for old paper for the manufacture of munitions. The British Records Association has appealed to custodians to give for that purpose only the least valuable records.²

Ideally, selection should go on at all times. Just as the philosophical point of view we seek in historical study should give us perspective in judging current affairs, so should our appreciation of the long-range values of research materials enable us constantly to exercise intelligent appraisal as records accumulate. We may archival effectiveness suffer in periods of intense activity from the lack of a continuing appraisal program.

The selection of records for preservation and the consequent choice of those to be disposed of are the obverse and converse of the same problem and cannot properly be separated. They give concern especially to the official archivist, and this paper is written from

¹ A revision of a paper read at a luncheon of Washington, D.C., members of the Society of American Archivists, April 13, 1940.

² British Records Association, Technical Section, *Bulletin*, No. 7, (October, 1939).

the viewpoint of such a person. The principles of appraisal and the dependence of the keeper of records upon the maker of those materials, however, are equally significant to manuscript custodians outside government service.

The task of selection is profoundly affected by the fact that we must now deal with many more types of records than ever before, and that they are found in much greater quantities. Mechanical recording and reproducing devices and the extension of the functions of government are increasing not only the extent but also the rate of accumulation of records. These facts influence the administrator in dealing with his records, and are equally important to historians and other students because much of their training in methods of research is still based upon archival conditions and types of records as they were fifty or more years ago. Great consideration is now being given to the increasingly difficult problem of the control of research data. I believe in this connection that the archivist can do even more to solve the problem of the mass of data by encouraging intelligent methods of selection of records for preservation than he can by assisting the users of archival material after it has been filed away.

Let us consider the directions from which the maker of archives and the archivist approach our problem. That involves a moot question—the definition of archives. I do not want here to attempt a complete answer to that question, but certain characteristics of archives can be stated without fear of contention. One is that they reflect the policies and activities of organized bodies, be those bodies governmental, business, religious, family, or any other kind. Another characteristic is that they are intended to be kept for record purposes. Documents kept for further current use by the persons creating them do not acquire archival character unless they are subsequently placed in organized files.

On first thought one might say that the point at which documents pass from the current to the archival phase is the point at which the archivist first takes an interest in them. Yet whatever the purpose of the archival custodian, whether he be an agent and part of a government as in the case of a nation or a state, or simply the ultimate custodian of the abiding tradition of a private organization as embodied in its records, it can be shown that he has a valid interest in the documents before they come into his custody. The administrator looks upon records positively as he needs to use them and

negatively as they represent a space problem and a task of serving outsiders who wish to consult them. The archivist looks upon current records as future archives, and it is a legitimate part of his function to make available counsel on how they can best be handled. The archivist in his own custodial and service functions is dependent upon the creator and the filer of the records for the kind of material he must deal with and the character of his problems.

Intelligent appraisal of official papers may be facilitated by considering the several steps in the life history of a given body of documents. I have in mind a diagram illustrating such a biography. At the lower left-hand corner of the diagram is a point representing the physical origin of the material of which the documents are made, which may include a paper mill, an ink factory, or a quarry where graphite is obtained for pencils. From that point a line representing the process of bringing the physical materials through testing laboratories and purchasing offices to the creator of the documents leads upward and toward the right. The importance of this line is shown in the control of the quality of paper and inks used in official business by state inspectors and by the National Bureau of Standards, largely for the purpose of seeing that documents likely to be preserved are made with long-lived materials.

At the upper left-hand corner of the diagram is a point that represents the purpose, history, and organization of the governmental agency, company office, or other unit responsible for creating the documents. From this point a line leads downward and to the right, along which flow administrative policies and regulations governing the creator of the documents. From this direction come decisions as to form and content, number of copies, and the like. Many of these decisions are based on the intention that certain of the documents should be retained for the future, and the more that intention is taken into account by the authors of instruction manuals the better off all of us are.

These two lines converge at a point representing the actual creation of the documents. Allowing for infinite variations in the exact methods of producing or receiving documents and making them part of the official business of an office, we can say that the creators are, for example, the persons who write memoranda or letters, gather and record research data, draw maps, conduct conferences or telephone conversations of which notes are taken, pass upon inquiries or applications and decide what shall be done with them, or make

entries in financial ledgers. They are the ones who decide whether tangible evidences of actions shall be made and filed. In governmental bodies they are bound by laws requiring them to keep records of their operations and by instructions from superiors or procedure manuals. Nevertheless, in varying degrees they exercise judgment and are the most important agents in selecting the documents that are "intended to be kept" and that are, therefore, susceptible of becoming archival material. Needless to say, this point of the creation of the documents is the focus of our diagram.

From this key point the life history of a group of documents divides into two branches. One drops downward and out of the picture. It represents informal memoranda that are not filed, extra copies of papers used temporarily for reference purposes that do not serve as the basis for official action, and any other papers that, because of the judgment of their creators, are not records and are therefore not preserved. The second branch goes on toward the right, to the files of the organization, and it is with this branch that we are concerned.

Filing agents and methods are kaleidoscopic in their variety. Usually there is some main unit such as a central files, which keeps most of the material. In any organization we find some essential records outside the central files, either because they are so important as to be specially cared for, because they relate to specialized functions such as personnel and finance operations, because they are not considered important enough to come under regulations governing central files, or because some officials have possessive idiosyncracies and will not turn them over. Thus, the creator of the record may serve as the filing agent also. Whoever performs that function is partly responsible for the manner in which records are preserved and for the decision as to which are to be retained permanently.

Filing schemes are designed essentially for administrative efficiency. How fine it would be if in preparing such schemes the eventual fate of the records were always borne in mind! Then, when due time has elapsed, those that must be filed temporarily but that do not have permanent value could be easily segregated and removed. For example, in some offices correspondence is filed under the name of the person to whom the letter is addressed or from whom it was received, no matter what the subject, with the result that letters concerning policy matters are placed along with routine requests for copies of printed bulletins. To weed out such files after the passing

of time is arduous, almost futile from the standpoint of accuracy, and is a violation of the fundamental archival principle of the integrity of a file. No one can be certain that he has even all the important letters in a file from his particular point of view if he knows that someone else has weeded out what that other person thought worthless.

Suppose that a careful program has been arranged for the periodic transfer of certain files to the archival depository and for the periodic disposal of certain others. This ideal program provides for occasional cut-off dates so that transfers to archival agencies can be made in orderly fashion every few years. It also requires that material be so filed that it can be easily identified and appraised and certain portions can readily be segregated. Furthermore, in this program the copies of papers upon which action is taken, or which give the most complete and legally valid record of action, are so identified that separation of "originals" from "duplicates" is facilitated. "Duplicates" cannot always be identified by their physical form. Carbon copies of outgoing letters, to take an obvious example, are not duplicates so far as the files of the organization are concerned, because the ribbon copies have been mailed out. One other requirement of this ideal program is that material kept only for reference purposes be segregated from that which is filed for record purposes.

Such a program would be particularly valuable in governmental organizations where official sanction is necessary for whatever ultimate disposition is made of record material. If it is followed, there will be no resort to such descriptions as "general correspondence" or "miscellaneous" material. As a result we will have no weeding, no problem of suddenly finding accumulations of records years old about which the present filing staff knows little, and no suffering through an effort to appraise them as isolated items. Appraisal is made when the records are filed, and consultation at that time with representatives of the archival agency will allow the archivists to make their study when full information as to the function represented by the records is available. In such circumstances the periodic reference of disposal lists to the archival agency and the approval of such lists can become almost automatic. I say "almost" because there are always chances of unforeseen elements of interest. Such an end would be for some kinds of records, of course, an incidental result of the use of registry systems such as are employed in Europe. But that subject is outside the scope of this paper.

The next step in our diagram has already been suggested. The main line goes on to the right, representing the records that are to be kept permanently. Another line here drops downward out of the picture. With it go the records that have served their purpose, have been kept for a time, and are to be discarded as being without sufficient value to warrant the cost of the space they occupy. This is the step with which we are most familiar, and in it the archivist usually takes a direct part. In the federal government, in most states that have archival establishments, and in most foreign countries the agencies of origin are required to submit to the archivist for his review lists of records that it is proposed shall be discarded.³ They are said to have no "legal or administrative value or historical interest," to use the phrase employed in the model state law prepared by a committee of the Society of American Archivists, or no "permanent value or historical interest," to use the language of the federal statute. Neither term is completely accurate and both are tautological.

The pressure resulting from the cost of storage space has given this part of the process a separate legal existence and an unwarranted special significance. For the agencies also propose to the archivist the transfer to his custody of other records that do have permanent value, and he accepts them or not after an appraisal similar to that made of the papers designated as being without value. The whole appraisal function is one undertaking, and it can best be performed with a complete understanding of the records of an agency in their relationships to each other as they are created rather than after they have lain forgotten and deteriorating for twenty years.

From that realization derives the most constructive idea, to my mind, that has come out of our study in this field. It has been developed independently by several persons, all working in the same direction. That idea is that the earlier in the life history of the documents the selection process begins, the better for all concerned. And the earlier in that life history that co-operation between the agency of origin and the archivist can be established, the easier will be the work of all. This would by no means preclude the practical plan of temporary storage in good order of records that may have occasional administrative use for a few years.

³ Discussions of and suggestions concerning legislative provisions for the reduction of public records are contained in Albert Ray Newsome, "Uniform State Archival Legislation," *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, II (January, 1939), 14; Emmett J. Leahy, "Reduction of Public Records," *ibid.*, III (January, 1940), 13-38; and "The Proposed Uniform State Public Records Act," *ibid.*, III (April, 1940), 114-115.

Before leaving our diagram of the life history of a group of documents, we should consider the various means of reducing volume. The main line here splits into several branches, each representing a method of dealing with the problem. One method is for the person or organization producing records to transfer them to interested historical societies or libraries. This should, of course, be encouraged, but it will not wholly solve the problem of volume for those agencies often have limited storage facilities. Two other methods besides this and complete discard offer real hope. One is the reproduction of records on microfilm and the subsequent destruction of the originals. Studies are being made of photographic equipment, ratios of reduction, reading devices, and other technical factors, and some large-scale experiments are being carried on.⁴ The other method is representative sampling. Statisticians have taught us that in the case of some large bodies of material sizable specimens chosen at random and representing all the elements contained in the whole are sufficient for the study of average conditions, of characteristics of various regions, of time periods, and the like. This principle of sampling was ably explained in a paper read by Morris A. Copeland at the first annual meeting of this Society.⁵ It can be illustrated by the example of the straw vote for sounding public opinion. Several experiments of this sort have already been put in operation in connection with federal records.

The development of these methods is extremely important, but they are no panaceas eliminating the necessity of selection. If we are to use the labor of skilled workers and expensive photographic equipment for the reproduction of records, we want to be sure that the records chosen for such treatment are worth the effort. And in order to determine what bodies of records susceptible of statistical sampling should be so treated, we must appraise their permanent value just as carefully as we should if it were a question of preserving or discarding the entire group.

Much has been said here and elsewhere about the appraisal process, and it is high time that we undertook to define some of the points of view that must be kept in mind by anyone responsible for the selection of records, whether he be administrator, record creator, filing agent, official archivist, or manuscript custodian. Let me suggest

⁴ Developments in this field are reported and appraised in the quarterly *Journal of Documentary Reproduction*, edited by Dr. Vernon D. Tate, of Washington, D.C.

⁵ Morris A. Copeland, "The Significance of Archives to the Economist and Sociologist," *The Society of American Archivists, Proceedings* (Urbana, 1937), 47-51.

some ways in which "permanent value" can be determined, and illustrate them by examples.

Before any criteria of values are applied, we usually can see upon looking at the records representing a function or a unit of organization that they are marked by extensive duplication. The number of actual duplicates of a single document is sometimes amazing. They are usually made for the information of various offices or for so-called "personal" reference files kept informally by the creators of the records. By eliminating actual and full duplication, we can reduce appreciably the volume of records. Furthermore, since regulations usually stipulate the number of copies to be made of formal documents, they might also provide which of them are to be considered the file copies and are to be preserved. The use of substantial paper should be prescribed for those copies. Sometimes copies go to different offices and there become operating records, that is, further entries are made upon them and each copy becomes a formal record of an operation. In such cases, of course, they cease to be true duplicates, even though they may bear the same form numbers or titles.

There is duplication other than actual physical similarity in the carrying of information from one type of record to another. This suggests the necessity of making an analysis of the relationship of documents as a part of the selective process. All the documents created, for example, in the process of receiving an application from a seeker for a government job, employing him, keeping track of his working time, paying him, analyzing his efficiency, changing his status, retiring him, paying him a pension, then possibly transferring the record of his earnings to punch cards for a research study of salary schedules, tabulating the data from the punch cards, and eventually publishing a report on the study—all of those documents and many incidental ones have relationships to each other in which there are duplications of information.

When we line up these documents in such a pattern, certain ones stand out clearly as essential and others as incidental. Consider the attendance records, for example. Daily records of attendance may have legal value as the initial evidence of the presence of certain employees, but they have such slight value proportionately that usually it is not thought practicable to keep them permanently. The same is true of routine applications for leave, passes to leave buildings during working hours, and other obvious examples. The essential data on those documents are customarily written on annual leave cards and

on service record cards. Some personnel experts have used annual leave cards for administrative analyses of attendance in general, but circumstances change so rapidly that, I have been told, such studies cannot practicably be made from cards more than five years old. Therefore, the leave cards appear to be of real value for only a limited period. The service record cards, however, are basic to personnel operations right up to the payment of retirement compensation and are customarily retained. It is likely that the information for the punch card study is taken from them. The information on the punch cards is in turn tabulated on other records, and unless the cards are on good paper stock and are carefully stored, they cannot be used with accurate results after a few years.

Furthermore, the chances of using the punch cards for studies other than the one for which they were originally made are usually remote. Therefore, the tendency is to discard them after a reasonable time and to depend upon the tabulations made from them. We find that there are intermediate work sheets unintelligible to anyone except the persons doing the tabulating, and that some formal report is a more dependable source of information. Essentials of the formal report are likely to be published, but often specialists want to see more detailed information than is published in a bulletin for public circulation. Therefore, it is desirable to retain the original formal reports.

This is not a complete analysis, but it illustrates the importance of studying records in their relationships with each other rather than as isolated items. Similar comparative reviews can be made, if the effort is undertaken early enough, on the written evidences of almost any function or administrative unit. In making such reviews, lists of forms and outlines of administrative regulations and procedures are extremely useful.

Comparative studies of the functions and records of agencies can also be made with profit. Especially in an organization as large as a state government or the federal government, there are many functions that are common to all agencies and are represented in each by similar types of records. Some of us refer colloquially to these as "housekeeping" records, to distinguish them from those representing the technical and professional aspects of an agency's work. The "housekeeping" functions are chiefly concerned with personnel, supplies, budget estimates and accounting, the collection and disbursement of funds, and printing and processing. No appraisal of leave

cards, purchase contracts, budget estimates, statements of collections, vouchers, and printing requisitions, for example, could properly be made in the federal government without an understanding of the relationships of the agencies with the Civil Service Commission, the Department of the Treasury, the Bureau of the Budget, the General Accounting Office, and the Government Printing Office. In all those fields some forms are standardized and more are similar. The actual duplication is tremendous. Thorough studies leading to standard practices in the selection of papers representing these functions might take care of half the records of the government. An archival institution serving all agencies of a state government or the federal government is in a strategic position to make such comparative analyses.

We have seen in this discussion that everyone connected with the life history of documents may have recourse to various categories of value, and it may be profitable to suggest what are some of these categories. Two qualifications must be made. One is that they overlap greatly. The second is that this discussion can only be an opening wedge in a field which deserves more extensive study.

The first category of value to consider is, naturally, the value that the documents may have for the agency of origin. For judging the utility of documents for efficient administration and for protection against claims of all sorts, a record producing organization itself must serve as the determining agent. The criteria of selection are usually clear enough. The archivist cannot undertake any of this responsibility, but he does observe the ways in which it is exercised, and he cannot help feeling that the safest plan is one in which some central office conducts the appraisal, with the co-operation of each unit that may conceivably be interested in a given group of records.

In another category of value, closely related to administrative use, the archivist has a definite interest. That is the usefulness of records for the study of administrative history of the record creating bodies. Such value is of concern to later administrators seeking precedents, to political scientists or others who want to study the organizations' operations, and to the archivist, who must preserve the agencies' records strictly in accordance with the functions they reflect. Such materials as memoranda and circulars of instruction on organization and procedures, administrative reports of all kinds, special reports on operations and conditions, records of investigations, personnel folders and service record cards, minutes of important conferences,

interoffice correspondence, and even letterheads are valuable for administrative history.

This examination of the categories of value has already brought us into the broad and indefinable field of "historical value." Most people have a rather conventional idea of history, which centers largely in political and national developments. It is natural for one to think of historical records as those few that have intrinsic value as documents in addition to the importance of the information they contain. Letters of presidents, significant treaties, and the Declaration of Independence merit all the care that is given them, but they by no means tell complete stories. In fact, most records having historical value possess it not as individual documents but as groups which, considered together, reflect the activities of some organization or person or portray everyday, rather than unique, events and conditions.

There is also a general impression that anything must be old to be historical, but no one can answer the question "How old?" Many times decisions have been made to preserve those portions of certain series of records that are dated before 1870, for example, and to destroy all those dated later because they are too recent to be historical! No one can justify the selection of that date any more than the selection of yesterday or tomorrow. Age is no criterion, but it can be significant on account of changes in methods of record keeping. For example, requisitions for supplies are now so routine and so completely summarized in other records that they seldom merit preservation. Yet a group of requisitions of the Marine Corps in the 1840's, in the form of letters containing poignant descriptions of the barefoot condition of the troops in the Seminole War in Florida, proved to be of definite interest to a military historian. Some kinds of routine forms from the 1840's, on the other hand, are of no more real interest than if they were dated in the 1940's.

Suppose we say that all records derived from an organization that portray the basic facts of its establishment, form, policies, and operations are of historical value. The preservation of those records is far from a simple goal to reach, for often the relevant facts are found only in intraoffice or interoffice memoranda, in transcripts of telephone conversations, in the calendar pads of important officials, and the like. Consider the establishment by some agency of a project involving large personnel and broad national interests. In general correspondence files there are likely to be letters from various persons

containing suggestions that form the true origin of the project and explain its purposes. After the program is begun, project files are set up reflecting its complete history, except for those vital basic letters that were put into general correspondence files because there was no specific project file for them at the time they were written or received. The same situation exists in connection with memoranda between officials commenting on plans before the actual establishment is set up. Those memoranda, if they are kept, may be sandwiched between others of no interest at all. And if records of telephone conversations are kept, it is conceivable that those discussing policies may be located right along with those regarding luncheon engagements! Efficient planning for the recording of such data and for their initial filing will improve the situation greatly, but the appraiser must always have a keen eye for significant information that may crop up in supposedly insignificant records.

We must also include as records with historical value those that describe interesting conditions or events other than the operations of the organization, or that tell us about certain individuals, periods, or methods of doing business. These criteria of value other than that connected with the record creating organization itself cannot be classified. In urging that they be kept in mind one can scarcely do more than to mention a few of the many fields of research which must be remembered. Obviously, training in the scope and methods of research is invaluable to an appraiser, and he must be alert to broadening scopes and to new methods. Witness the project recently undertaken for putting the ante-bellum South on punch cards. Professor Frank L. Owsley of Vanderbilt University, by tabulating machine analyses of the censuses of 1850 and 1860 for Alabama, has proved the existence of a significant number of plantation owners who were not of the slave-owning class, and has thus considerably upset the traditional "moonlight and magnolia" school of Southern history.⁶

Important among the fields of research to be considered are biography and genealogy. I have frequently heard people try to justify the preservation of some routine forms like leave cards by such an appeal as "Now, think how valuable we should consider a leave card if we had one for George Washington." That is one of the most specious of many arguments in which Washington's name is

⁶ Frank L. and Harriett C. Owsley, "The Economic Basis of Society in the Late Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, VI (February, 1940), 24-45.

taken in vain, for obviously few of the millions for whom we now have those records will achieve any unique importance, and for those who do there are so many more sources of information than those we have for George Washington that minor ones such as leave cards become insignificant. On the other hand, real value does sometimes appear in unexpected places. Besides records of vital statistics, journals, and diaries, which are among the most obvious sources of biographical and genealogical data, any body of correspondence, personnel files, and even routine financial papers which include names of payees, investors, or the clerks preparing forms might contain information valuable in these fields.

Much of the study of economics proceeds on historical patterns, and that field is one to be kept most actively in mind in appraising records. Interesting examples are some of the voluminous collections of recent records representing new fields of governmental activity. While these groups often occur in bewildering quantities, they can be most instructive if proper statistical sampling techniques are applied. Surely the thousands who filed applications for housing and farm loans and the other thousands who sent letters to the president wrote into those documents vivid first-hand analyses of economic conditions which could not elsewhere be duplicated.

Sociology, applied science, medicine, and many other fields could be profitably discussed here if only one had the space and the specialized knowledge necessary to cite examples of records that would contribute to their study. It should be noted, however, that some special types of records, particularly maps, photographs and motion pictures, demand attention. The accomplishment of the purposes for which such materials were created does not necessarily end their value, any more than it does that of ordinary papers. They may constitute research data gathered for a special purpose but useful otherwise for general reference, or they may be significant in the development of the processes of making records.

The proper use of various categories of value requires knowledge and perception of four general kinds. First, we must know the agency of origin, its history, its objectives, and its methods. Second, we must know the relationships of records to each other, as shown in comparative studies within agencies and among all of them. Third, we must know and be alert to changes in the scope and methods of research—a staggering assignment in itself. And fourth, we must be acquainted with the use actually made of the records we have

preserved. I have not tried here to analyze the use of records as a guide to their value. But the experience gained in making them available to students should be enlightening. For that reason it is important that the persons who appraise the records participate in providing service on them. The problem of the selection of materials for preservation is so large and complicated that the co-operation of all persons connected with their life history is needed for its solution. Not only co-operation but also intelligent planning and keen observation from the very first step to the last are essential.⁷

PHILIP COOLIDGE BROOKS

The National Archives

⁷ Continuous attention to the problem of selection from beginning to end of the life history of given bodies has not to my knowledge previously been expounded at length. It has, however, been suggested in a few of the various writings dealing with the reduction of records, most of which have been in the field of business. Among them are Oliver W. Holmes, "The Evaluation and Preservation of Business Archives," *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, 1 (October, 1938), 171-185 (which cites further references); Ralph M. Hower, "The Preservation of Business Records," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*, XI (October, 1937), 37-38; Harold C. Pennicke, "Retention of Records," American Management Association, *Office Management Series*, No. 69 (1935), 6-12; P. J. Ventner, "The Destruction of Records in South Africa," in *Archives Yearbook for South African History* (Capetown, 1938), Part I, 233-239; and the article by Emmett J. Leahy cited in footnote 3. Addendum: Since writing this paper I have learned of a valuable Polish pamphlet in which the problem is treated in much the same fashion. Gustaw Kaleński, *Brakowanie Akt* (Warsaw, 1934), 44 pp. (The Selection of Records).