

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OF ARCHIVAL DEPOSITORIES¹

DURING the last two meetings of the Society of American Archivists, I have listened carefully to a great number of serious papers on such subjects as the training of archivists, classification and cataloguing of archives, objectives of the Society of American Archivists, the cleaning and repairing of archives, the development of microphotography, and many others of vital interest. All of these papers contained useful information for the archivist, even if some of it was a bit impractical for many state archival institutions struggling with inadequate funds to meet everyday problems. I have been particularly impressed with the lack of attention given to the subject of the relationship between archival institutions and the public. I have listened to enough private discussions and complaints during the past three years to convince me that archival officials have devoted insufficient attention to the cultivation of friendly relations with the general public.

Many of you probably read an article a few years ago in one of the Washington papers in which a reporter described his unsuccessful efforts to get an ordinary book in the reading room of the Library of Congress. I believe that he gave up in disgust after waiting thirty-seven minutes. I recently listened to the complaints of two Mississippians, a genealogist and a college professor, who had attempted to do research in several state archival depositories. Their chief complaint was that the persons who came into contact with the public were old ladies who seemed to know nothing about the collections and appeared to care less. A few weeks ago I was discussing a new state archival building with a citizen of the state's capital. His comment was that the building would have been constructed twenty years ago if the staff of the institution had not been a "bunch of old fools." A universal complaint in the past about the Mississippi Department of Archives and History has been that it either refused to answer letters or answered them from six weeks to six months after they were written.

Most archival depositories realize the value of newspaper publicity and make special efforts to cultivate friendly relations with

¹ A paper read at the third annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Annapolis, Maryland, October 13, 1939.

the press. Mississippi newspaper men have been very friendly and have been exceedingly helpful in acquainting the public with the work of the department. They are beginning to learn that the collections of the department will always provide them with a feature story when current news is scarce. For instance, a writer for the Jackson *Daily Clarion-Ledger* has filled his last three Sunday columns with material supplied by the department. When he dropped into the department about a month ago and explained that he had no ideas for his column, I stated:

A new governor, Judge Paul B. Johnson, has been elected; you are rumored as his private secretary; and a great number of people are seeking jobs in the new administration. The department has just acquired four of L. Q. C. Lamar's private letter books, covering his period of service as Secretary of the Department of the Interior, and one of the letters contains an idea for a good column.

The letter which I showed him and from which he got a good story contained the following passage:

I have to be in my office generally at nine o'clock, and if not here [there], am kept by the visitors who call on me before I rise in the morning, and stick to me until I start. It is rarely the case that I get to bed before twelve o'clock, so constant are the demands upon my time and attention. . . . Since I have been here I have found out the cause of the failure of the Southern Confederacy. It did not have a Department of the Interior, and this government did. I believe the Department of the Interior could this moment overcome Russia and England combined, if allowed to put the office seekers into the army.

Mr. A. S. Salley, secretary of the Historical Commission of South Carolina, was a newspaper man before assuming his present position. His relations with the press have been cordial and have been of considerable assistance to his institution. He states:

On various occasions when there has been any threat against this department editors have come to my assistance with strong editorials and *The News and Courier* of Charleston, which is the oldest paper in the State, has an editor who occasionally throws in a complimentary editorial when there is not a cloud in the sky. Both *The News and Courier* and *The State* of this city have published a great many historical articles by me in the past thirty-five years which have conduced to the popularity of this department. . . . Many of the newspapers of the State today call upon me for contributions when they are going to have some special edition of historical nature. . . .

The publicity policies of Mr. Floyd C. Shoemaker, secretary of

the State Historical Society of Missouri, seem to be about the best in the country, and the remainder of us would profit by attempting to follow them. Mr. Shoemaker explains:

Our relations with the press of the State are very close owing to the fact that our Society was founded by the Missouri Press Association prior to its becoming a State Institution, also because we receive approximately 400 current Missouri newspapers and approximately 20,000 bound volumes of Missouri newspapers are filed in our Society, and because I keep in personal touch with the editors through visits in their offices and through attendance at State and regional Press Association meetings, and finally, because we send to the editors of the State a weekly historical press release called "This Week in Missouri History" which is published in 99 of our 114 counties and in the city of St. Louis. I should also add that the editors who send papers here for preservation thereby become members of our Society and receive as well the *Missouri Historical Review*, our quarterly magazine.

I note that my friend, Dr. Edwin A. Davis, of the Department of Archives of Louisiana State University, has very pleasant relations with the press. He recently outbid me, having a dollar every time I had fifty cents, on a Negro collection in Natchez, and it was one of the first of its kind in the United States. The Baton Rouge papers made quite a story of this excellent acquisition.

Scholars often have a tendency to regard the activities of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the American Legion, and similar organizations with amused tolerance, to say the least. Such an attitude on the part of officials of archival institutions is certainly unwise. The members of these organizations are responsible citizens and taxpayers, and they usually have considerable influence with legislative bodies. These organizations have been of considerable assistance to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and every reasonable effort is made to maintain friendly relations with them. The American Legion is mainly responsible for the new quarters which are now being built for the department. The Mississippi division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy has recently raised \$350 to purchase supplies to be used by the department in indexing its Confederate records. The American Legion has recently presented the department with an alphabetical list, bound in three volumes, of all Mississippians who served in the United States Army during the World War. The department and the American Legion are now co-operating with the Work Projects Administration in regis-

tering the graves in Mississippi of all veterans of all wars. The Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy have recently started a movement in Mississippi to place "Beauvoir," the home of Jefferson Davis, under the jurisdiction of the department.

Mr. William J. Van Schreeven, the principal archivist of Virginia, reports that various patriotic organizations have contributed greatly to the preservation of local archives in Virginia. Mr. C. C. Crittenden, secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission, presents a very convincing statement in regard to these organizations as follows:

These groups can harm or help a historical agency a great deal. We have succeeded in preserving amicable relations with them, and they have assisted in our work in many ways, including aid in securing larger appropriations from the legislature, assistance in our highway historical marker program, co-operation in preserving old houses and other historical places, and support in other ways. Especially significant was the work last year of the National Society of Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America, which spent more than \$1,100 in restoring the records of the General Court of North Carolina for the late 17th century and the early 18th century. At the present time there is about to be formed a new North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities—a movement in which various "patriotic" groups are co-operating enthusiastically. Frequently the Secretary of the Historical Commission is invited to make speeches to "patriotic" groups throughout the State, which gives him an excellent opportunity to publicize the history of the State and the work of the Historical Commission.

Every archival depository has the inevitable problem of the genealogical researcher. Letters come to my desk every day asking for information on family history that would require from one to twelve months of the time of a trained researcher. Each week brings one or many very nice old ladies who make the most impossible requests imaginable in regard to information on their ancestors. I can appreciate a recent statement by an archival official that "all genealogists should be hanged," but I think his attitude very unwise for a public servant. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History seems to follow the general policy of other similar institutions. We attempt to answer all reasonable requests, and we refer persons making involved requests to the sources and to professional genealogists. Even though we are unable to supply the required information, the genealogists seem to appreciate prompt and courteous attention and treatment.

I believe that Miss Margaret C. Norton, archivist of Illinois, is making an index of names in all Illinois records before 1850 and now has several hundred thousand cards filed. The North Carolina Historical Commission states in its *Seventeenth Biennial Report* that it has recently abstracted and is alphabetizing 250,000 marriage bonds, and that it has indexed 72,000 names of North Carolinians who served in the military forces of the Confederacy. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History has recently typed and filed approximately 100,000 index cards on Mississippians who served in the Confederate forces and expects to add another 50,000 in the near future. It is also indexing the Confederate pension records and is trying to work out a system of indexing its holdings of real and personal tax rolls. The Department of Archives of Louisiana State University, according to Assistant Archivist William R. Hogan, has begun to make an index of all names appearing in its collections of personal papers, and ten of these collections have yielded 50,000 cards. These examples are indicative of the interest of archival institutions in the problems of genealogists, and their value to such investigators is obvious.

It is possible that I am devoting too much attention to the attitudes of custodians of archival materials toward genealogical researchers, but I would like to point out that genealogists make up one of the most vociferous groups that engages in research. My observation has been that those who receive efficient and courteous service do not hesitate to tell their friends about it. On the other hand, those who are displeased with the service rendered do not fail to shout about it from the housetops. Last year we received a letter from a lady in Texas requesting some family history, and we were fortunately able to answer her fully and promptly. A few months later that lady visited Natchez, Mississippi, during one of the pilgrimages, and I believe that she told every prominent person she could find there what a wonderful institution the Mississippi Department of Archives and History was.

The relations of archival institutions with legislative and administrative departments are of vital importance, because they must have appropriations from the legislature and records from the state departments. These problems have to be worked out in each state in accordance with conditions of the moment and with ordinary common sense. I believe that several institutions have used such publications as the *Official and Statistical Register of the State of*

Mississippi to gain the good-will and interest of members of their legislatures. I might suggest that some conditions found in Mississippi be avoided. At one time relations between the department and the legislature became so strained that one of its members, a former Populist candidate for governor, struck the director over the head with a heavy hickory cane. Thereafter, the director carried a loaded pistol in anticipation of further altercations. I would not recommend that an institution depend only on a few leaders in each house of the legislature, but would suggest friendly relations be cultivated with all members. Neither would I recommend that other state officials be kept as uninformed of the activities of an archival depository as one I found in Mississippi. A few weeks after I arrived in Jackson, this splendid and intelligent official stated to me: "You know, McCain, I think this state should have a department charged with the custody and care of noncurrent state records."

One of the most neglected phases of the public relations of archival institutions is their lack of contact with business men and business men's organizations. Before I left the National Archives, Mr. Dorsey W. Hyde kindly took me aside and pointed out the possibilities and the advantages of cultivating the interest and friendship of business men. In following his advice, I have found that many business men are almost totally uninformed of the functions of archival depositories and that they have a tendency to view the work of such institutions as impractical and unnecessary. A few years ago, a prominent business man in the Mississippi legislature stated that he would be glad to pay the expenses of hauling and dumping the Department of Archives and History and its director both into the Pearl River. On the other hand, scholars have a tendency to look down their noses at business men and their organizations. It would be to the mutual advantage of both if they had a better understanding of each other. Service clubs, such as the Rotary, Lions, Exchange, and Kiwanis, are continually looking for speakers, and in Mississippi they furnish very attentive and enthusiastic audiences for short talks on the work of the department.

Naturally speeches to business men must be interesting, and they must contain a few jokes. The collections of archival depositories always contain interesting and humorous incidents which can be used for purposes of illustration. I have found two items that always receive a good reception from business men. One of them is an excerpt from the famous "Fish Hatchery" speech of that renowned

Mississippi humorist and congressman, Private John M. Allen. The other pertains to the early territorial history of Mississippi.

Congressman Allen was attempting to point out the advantages of his home town, Tupelo, Mississippi, in order to get the House of Representatives to pass a bill establishing a fish hatchery there. After bringing the history of Tupelo up to 1860, he stated:

Lincoln refused to let the wayward sisters depart in peace. "No," he said, "this secession takes from the Union Tupelo." The armies of the Union were first directed against the capital at Richmond, Virginia, but some obstructions were thrown in their way at Bull Run, and they were persuaded to return to Washington. Another great army was marshalled under the command of General Grant, who landed at Pittsburg Landing, on the Tennessee River, and began his operations against Tupelo. General Albert Sidney Johnston and myself met General Grant's army at Shiloh, and for most of the first day we had a really good time with them, and but for General Johnson's being killed and me being scattered on the evening of that day, there is no knowing what might have happened or how the history of this country might have been changed. President Davis ordered General Beauregard to fall back on Tupelo. Tupelo fell. The very fact that Tupelo had fallen seems to have broken the spirit of the Confederacy, and we never did much good after that.

This, Mr. Chairman, is a proposition to establish a fish hatchery at Tupelo. We have the ideal place for a fish hatchery at Tupelo. Why, sir, fish will travel over land for miles to get into the water we have at Tupelo. Thousands and millions of unborn fish are clamoring to this Congress to-day for an opportunity to be hatched at Tupelo.

The story concerning territorial history pertains to a little case of insubordination shortly after the first United States troops came down the Mississippi in 1798 and went into quarters at Fort Adams.

General Wilkinson, Colonel Hamtramck, Major Butler, and other officers were making merry over their punch one night, and the general by some accident got his queue singed off. Next day he issued an order forbidding any officer to appear with a queue. Major Butler refused to obey and was put under arrest. Soon after, he was very sick and when he knew he could not live he made his will, and gave instructions for his burial, which he knew would be attended by the whole command.

"Bore a hole," said he "through the bottom of my coffin, right under my head, and let my queue come through it, that the damned old rascal may see that even when dead I refuse to obey his order."

Business men accumulate valuable economic and social records, or they did until the advent of efficiency experts. Many of their records might find their way into archival depositories if the men

who accumulate them were better acquainted with the functions of such institutions. Naturally the archivist must approach them on their own ground. They can understand the value of archives when a parallel is drawn between archives and the records they accumulate in the course of their business dealings. They also understand when archival and historical work is reduced to terms of dollars and cents. I never fail to tell business men's clubs that the business men of Natchez, Mississippi, estimate that the history of that little city brings them between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 annually in tourist expenditures. I give them examples of students who come to do research in the Department of Archives and History and who leave money in Mississippi. For example, a student from Duke University recently worked for a month in the department. He left money in Jackson for a month's lodging, food, and recreation; spent \$36 with a Jackson firm for photostats; and had \$200 worth of copying done by Jackson stenographers. Two University of Texas students spent six weeks in the department this year. In addition to the usual expenditures, one of them became ill, with a resulting hospital and doctor's bill. For further emphasis I often read the following excerpt from a letter written to the department by a prominent Mississippi engineer:

In doing research for historical information relative to that part of Mississippi lying south of the 31st Meridian, which information is very necessary to us in preparing a report on which hinges a \$400,000.00 law suit, it became necessary that I go to Jackson and spend some time in your department gathering data which I found there.

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I wish to take this opportunity to thank you and your department for the wonderful help and kindness shown me there. I also wish to say that the information contained in your department is something not only interesting from the historical point of view, but absolutely necessary in transacting business where ways and means of the past have any bearing on the determining of principles for the present. We have found your data most helpful and certainly expect to make full use of your department in the future.

I might point out to you how we are now trying to turn a bit of adverse publicity to our advantage with business men. A person who is doing commercial research in Jackson recently wrote to a number of prominent bankers in Mississippi, stating that neither the Department of Archives and History nor the secretary of the Mississippi Bankers Association knew anything about the charter or history of

the first bank established in Mississippi, the Bank of the Mississippi, which was chartered by the territorial legislature on December 23, 1809. He further stated that the original charter was in the British Museum and offered to secure copies of it for the bankers at a price.

Several of the bankers transmitted their letters to the secretary of the Bankers Association. He came to the department, somewhat irritated, and asked for a copy of the charter. I was able to tell him that a pamphlet entitled *An Act Passed to Establish a Bank in the Mississippi Territory, Passed the 23rd December, 1809*, had been printed in Natchez, Mississippi Territory, in 1811, but that the only known copy was in the British Museum. I further told him that the charter of the bank and of its successor had been printed in Natchez in 1818 under the title of the *Charter of the Bank of the State of Mississippi, by an Act Passed on the 23rd of December, 1809, and an Act Supplemental thereto, Passed on the 4th Day of February, 1818*, but that the only known copy was in the Massachusetts State Library. I also informed him that the charter had been published in the *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Sixth General Assembly of the Mississippi Territory, Begun and Held in the Town of Washington, on Monday the 6th Day of November, Anno Domini [sic], 1809*, but that the department's copy had been sent to London to be bound. I then suggested that we look in the *Statutes of the Mississippi Territory; the Constitution of the United States, with the Several Amendments Thereto; the Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-west of the River Ohio; the Articles of Agreement and Cession, between the United States and the State of Georgia; and Such Acts of Congress as Relate to the Mississippi Territory*, published in Natchez in 1816, and usually known as Turner's Code, and in *The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi, in which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly, of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823; with a General Index*, published in Natchez in 1824, and generally known as Poindexter's Code. The charter was found in both volumes, and we later found that the department had the original manuscript charter.

A photographic reproduction of the charter, with an appropriate explanation, was placed in the next issue of the *Mississippi Banker*, which is the journal of the Mississippi Bankers Association. A few days later I unexpectedly discovered two copies of the 1818 pamphlet and acquired them. This pamphlet is now being reprinted, with an

introduction, and a copy will be sent to every banking official in the state.

The archivist should not neglect the opportunities for making friends in the schools and colleges of his state. During this year, I hope to spend one day in each senior and junior college in Mississippi, lecturing to history classes on the department. If I can find time next fall, I hope to start a class in Mississippi history at Millsaps College. These contacts should win friends for the cause of Mississippi history. After all, the success or failure of an archivist depends largely upon the number of friends he makes for himself and his work. The attentive listener usually gains more friends than the boresome talker, which reminds me that I have talked too long.

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