

ARCHIVAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY¹

THE men who fought the War for Southern Independence lived for the next three decades in the aura of a valiant though defeated cause. Many of their sons, rising to manhood during the harrowing days of a nation's defeat and a region's rehabilitation, lived only to explain (without benefit of critical analysis of actual historical records) the day of Gettysburg and Appomattox. The next generation cut its literary teeth on Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon, Jr., and John Esten Cooke, and still saw the South in terms of the romantically conceived plantation régime. The present generation has found itself torn with doubts, since—from both within and without—the South has been christened the problem child of the nation. Regardless of the validity of the data on which the charges against the South are based, the present writer comes before you as one Southerner (unregenerate in some respects) who admits candidly that in at least one important element of cultural progress—the preservation of archival, manuscript, and other historical materials—many of the states of the South have generally lagged behind those of the North.

Although archival problems have doubtless been similar throughout the country, public apathy and the lack of constructive leadership have been the rule in most of the Southern commonwealths. Notable historical legacies have been housed in attics, closets, vaults, basements, and even frame out-buildings, where dampness, dust, and insects have held sway. State and local officials, too often careless or neglectful of their duties in the preservation of their records, have permitted the destruction of countless thousands of irreplaceable documents. But a study of the history of archival work in the lower Mississippi Valley reveals that the blackness of the situation has not always been unrelieved by a few glimmerings of light. About the turn of the century, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana began to follow the leadership of other states in taking some interest in what is hopefully referred to as objective history and, before the first decade had passed, the first two states established agencies dedicated to the preservation of state records. Archival science was still in its infancy and

¹ A paper read before the second annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Springfield, Illinois, October 25, 1938.

too often the documents were boxed, unlabeled, and relegated to the dark closet, never to see the light of day except when some itinerant and unusually persistent research student dragged them forth.

Before a discussion of the historical development of archival economy in each of the three states is attempted, a note of explanation is appropriate. The writer's purpose is not to offend, but to analyze. The following statements are made only after careful consideration, and a three-year period of active field work in the states concerned. It is hoped that criticism will be accepted as being constructive in that it may help lead to archival activity along aggressive and modern paths.

Although attempts were made to begin archives work in Arkansas during the last half of the nineteenth century, no tangible progress was made until 1903. The father of the movement was Professor John Hugh Reynolds of the history faculty at the University of Arkansas, who gave a series of lectures on Arkansas history to university literary societies. Intense local interest was aroused and in June, 1903, the Arkansas Historical Society was organized by the students of the university. During the following winter the society was reorganized on a state-wide basis, with Professor Reynolds as the first secretary. During the year 1904 many old newspapers, pamphlets, books, and some manuscript material pertaining to the history of the state were collected by the society. In 1905 a bill was introduced in the legislature organizing a nonpermanent Arkansas Historical Commission. Two years later the life of the commission was extended for a second biennium.

The historical missionary work of Professor Reynolds, coupled with the publication of two volumes of historical material by the commission, awakened much interest and a belief in many quarters that the organization should be made a permanent part of the state government. The legislature of 1909 thereupon passed an act creating the Arkansas History Commission along the same general lines as the departments of archives and history of the states of Alabama and Mississippi. The act provided for the location of the commission in the new state capitol, and for the appointment of the commission and a permanent secretary. No provision for the salary of the secretary was made and for two years this office remained vacant. In 1911 a bill appropriating the necessary funds was passed by the legislature but vetoed by the governor, notwithstanding which the commission

adopted a resolution electing "Dallas T. Herndon, of Georgia, a man well qualified for the Secretaryship," who "has agreed to accept the office, trusting to the good faith of the next Legislature to reimburse him,"² on the condition, however, that the commission, while assuming no financial liability, agreed to recommend to the next legislature an appropriation sufficient to cover his salary. On this unstable foundation was begun the building of the structure of archival activity in the state of Arkansas.³

In the years since 1911 Dr. Herndon has collected many hundreds of volumes of newspaper files, has made subject bibliographies, organized information concerning Arkansas history, and secured several private collections of manuscripts. He has written on the history of the state, has compiled rosters of Arkansas soldiers in the War with Mexico and the War for Southern Independence, and has installed and operated an historical museum.

The commission's holdings are housed in the state capitol. In addition to state archives, state publications, and exchanges, there is a total of twenty-eight linear feet of manuscript material arranged and filed in labeled envelopes or other containers. Slightly more than half of this material has been arranged, generally by donors' names and by chronology, though less frequently under subject heading. For the period preceding 1871 the commission has in its possession a considerable collection of fugitive American publications of more or less public nature. This material is for the most part fairly well organized.

In 1938 the commission sponsored a WPA project which has rebound, mended, and catalogued books, pamphlets, and newspaper files, which until this time had been chiefly stored without order and without regard to preservation in the damp fastnesses of the capitol's subterranean regions. This project has done notable work in rescuing from almost certain destruction many important records of Arkansas' past. In view of the fact that Dr. Herndon has been considerably hampered by the lack of financial co-operation from the state, it is appalling to think of the possible archival future of Arkansas had it not been for the labors of these project workers.

² Dallas T. Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas* (Chicago, 1922), I, 601.

³ For the early history of the Arkansas History Commission, in addition to the acts of 1905, 1907, and 1909, see the following works: Herndon, *Centennial History of Arkansas*, I, 599-602; *ibid.*, *Highlights of Arkansas History* (The Arkansas History Commission, 1922), 149-150, 153-155; *ibid.*, "The Arkansas History Commission—a Review of Its Work," *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association* (Conway, 1917), IV, 272-283.

Much is yet to be done before Arkansas' records, public and private, will be safely preserved and made available for the student of history. An archives building or at least commodious quarters should be provided. The secretary should be given enough financial assistance to enable the proper functioning of his commission. A trained cataloguer is gravely needed. Funds should be appropriated for the purchase of private manuscript collections, newspaper files, and the transcription or microfilming of Arkansas archives material outside the state. The state and local authorities as well as the secretary of the historical commission should take full advantage of the unprecedented opportunities offered by various federal agencies, particularly the Historical Records Survey. A closer co-operation is needed between the commission and the governing officials of the state, with institutions of higher learning, and with many interested private citizens.

The work of Professor John Hugh Reynolds in Arkansas found its counterpart in Mississippi in the labors of Dr. Franklin L. Riley, a professor of history at the university, and General Stephen D. Lee, president of the Mississippi Historical Society. In March, 1900, an historical commission was created by legislative enactment and two years later, through the immediate initiative of Governor A. H. Longino, a bill was passed "to establish a State Department of Archives and History under the auspices of the Mississippi Historical Society" to be located in the capitol and to have for its principal purposes and objectives "the care and custody of official archives, the collecting of materials bearing upon the history of the State and of the Territory included therein, from the earliest times, the editing of official records and other historical materials, the diffusion of knowledge in reference to the history and resources of the State, the encouragement of historical work and research, and the performance of such other acts and requirements as may be enjoined by law."⁴ In compliance with this statute, the board of trustees met on March 14, 1902, and elected Dunbar Rowland of Coffeeville, Yalabusha County, director of the department and secretary of the commission.

During the first year archives materials were collected from various places about the old capitol, a tentative classification was made, and the collections were boxed preparatory to removal to the new state

⁴ Mississippi, *Laws*, 1902 (Jackson, 1902), ch. 52, pp. 43-45; Dunbar Rowland, *Mississippi* (Atlanta, 1907), I, 126; see also *First Annual Report of the Director of the Department of Archives and History of the State of Mississippi* (Jackson, 1902), 3-15.

house. The Mississippi Confederate archives were located and the first annual reports popularized the work of the department. Official and statistical registers appeared, and the director found time to edit a three-volume cyclopaedic history of the state, in addition to other publications. The first decade saw intense activity in collecting archival and manuscript materials, but after 1912—though the department's budget for certain bienniums ran as high as forty thousand dollars—there was a gradual lessening of emphasis on manuscript acquisition. During the years from 1912 to 1937 Dr. Rowland compiled, edited, and wrote many volumes pertaining to the history of the state. He died in November, 1937, having served as director of the department for over thirty-five years.

On January 1, 1938, Dr. William D. McCain, a native of Mississippi, resigned his post in the National Archives at Washington to assume the position made vacant by the death of Dr. Rowland. A Gargantuan task awaited Dr. McCain. He inherited an extensive, miscellaneous, uncatalogued library; a large collection of newspapers, uncatalogued and unsystematically bound; a few small collections of private manuscripts, unaccessioned and scattered throughout the building; and numerous rooms and closets filled from floor to ceiling with the state archives. In the brief period since assuming office, Dr. McCain has made a remarkable record. Among other accomplishments during his administration might be listed the sponsorship of a WPA project which has bound some three thousand volumes of newspapers; the preparation of a check list of Mississippi imprints; the reorganization of the state historical society and the founding of a quarterly publication; the opening of negotiations for the exchange of manuscripts and newspapers with other state departments of archives and particularly with the Department of Archives and Manuscripts of Louisiana State University; and the cleaning, sorting, and inventorying of Mississippi's archives.

The archival outlook at the present moment in Mississippi is promising. The director is a trained and thoroughly capable archivist, intensely interested not only in the editing and writing of the state's history but in the collection and preservation of countless manuscript collections as well as the official archives of the state.

Louisiana, unlike Mississippi or Arkansas, possesses neither an historical commission nor a state department of archives and history. Under the present laws there are two depositories containing por-

tions of the archives of the state: the Louisiana State Museum at New Orleans, and the Department of Archives and Manuscripts at Louisiana State University.

Historical interest began in Louisiana over a hundred years ago with the organization of the Louisiana Historical Society. The society prospered until 1860, but the scope of its activities was reduced to terms of bare existence during war and Reconstruction years. In 1888, Charles Gayarré resigned the presidency, an office which he had held for twenty-eight consecutive years. With his resignation, lethargy again set in but 1893 brought another revival of the organization.

In 1906 an act was passed establishing a permanent state museum at New Orleans.⁵ Five years later the museum was permanently housed at the Cabildo and the Presbytère. Despite meager appropriations from the state, Curator Robert Glenk made progress in the collection of colonial and state archives and the archives of New Orleans. Much of this material was catalogued and some has been published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*. In 1915 the Commission Council of New Orleans turned over the city colonial records then housed in the city archives. In addition to archival material, the museum secured the gift or loan of many personal manuscript collections. Mr. Glenk served as curator until December 10, 1934, when James J. A. Fortier, the son of Professor Alcée Fortier, a Louisiana historian, was appointed president and assumed active direction of the museum. With the aid of various agencies of the federal government and increased state appropriations, Mr. Fortier has renovated, restored, and rebuilt the museum buildings. The records have been cleaned, repaired, and catalogued. Few collections of private manuscript material have been received during the past several years.

About the time of the reorganization of the Louisiana Historical Society a number of prominent Louisianians became interested in collecting historical materials. They introduced public opinion to the necessity of preserving private manuscripts dealing with the history of the state, and proved the generating force in the establishment of the Department of Archives and Manuscripts at Louisiana State University. During the ten-year period prior to 1932, a few scattered collections found their way to the library of the university. In that year the writer became a member of the Department of History and

⁵ For the history of the establishment of the Louisiana State Museum see Robert Glenk, *First Biennial Report of the Board of Curators of the Louisiana State Museum* (New Orleans, 1908), 7-17.

began traveling throughout the state in search of manuscript materials. In 1935 the library agreed to pay his traveling expenses; a year later he was relieved of half his teaching duties and the Department of Archives and Manuscripts was officially organized as a division of the university libraries. The same year the legislature passed an act empowering the Louisiana State University through this department "to perform certain services in the way of preserving state and parish records and distributing and exchanging state documents; and to authorize the state, parish and other officials to turn over certain records to said Institution." Under the authority of the act the department was authorized "to receive and collect public records or documents and materials bearing upon the history of the state."⁶

The personnel of the department has been increased to meet the needs of a constantly expanding program. In 1936 a half-time cataloguer was appointed. The same year a half-time assistant took over the task of sorting incoming collections. Twelve months later a part-time secretary was secured and on September 1, 1938, William R. Hogan, regional historian of the National Park Service, became assistant archivist, devoting full time to the work of the department.

On January 1, 1937, the department's manuscripts totaled slightly more than fifty-six thousand pieces, the majority of which were of a private nature. By January 1, 1938, the manuscript material had more than doubled and some fifteen million items of an archive nature had been received from state and parish officials. These archives have been sorted, inventoried, and the task of cataloguing and indexing begun. Through the co-operation of the Historical Records Survey, typescripting, calendaring, and biographical indexing are already under way. The records have been cleaned, boxed, and arranged in order in the stacks. Much is yet to be accomplished, but the co-operation of state and local officials and an interested university administration is perhaps the best augury of the future of the department.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that the archival future of Arkansas is not encouraging. The historical commission is passive, not active, in view of what could and should be accomplished. Too much energy has been wasted in the writing of patriotic state history, in the building and maintenance of political fences, and not enough in collecting, preserving, and making available for the student the archives and manuscript records of the state. Until 1938 the same general

⁶ Louisiana, *Acts*, 1936 (Baton Rouge, 1936), Act No. 258, pp. 669-670.

criticism could have been made of Mississippi, but with the inauguration of the present régime, the Department of Archives and History has been given a new lease on life, and much can be expected in the immediate future. The chief criticisms of the present situation in Louisiana are two: Many of the important archives are now in the possession of the Louisiana State Museum, where they are subordinated to the major interest of that institution; and, although the Louisiana State University Department of Archives and Manuscripts is authorized by basic law to act as the needed central archives agency, its budget is still too small and its domicile, though modern and adequate at the present writing, will be outgrown within the biennium.

Although the entire South, including the lower Mississippi Valley, has always been extremely historically minded, the majority of its states have not been vitally concerned with the preservation of the documentary and manuscript records of its past. There are many encouraging signs, however, that in the future these records will be collected, properly housed, and made available to that small but growing group of Southern historians who have chosen to become realists rather than romanticists.

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