

In Memoriam

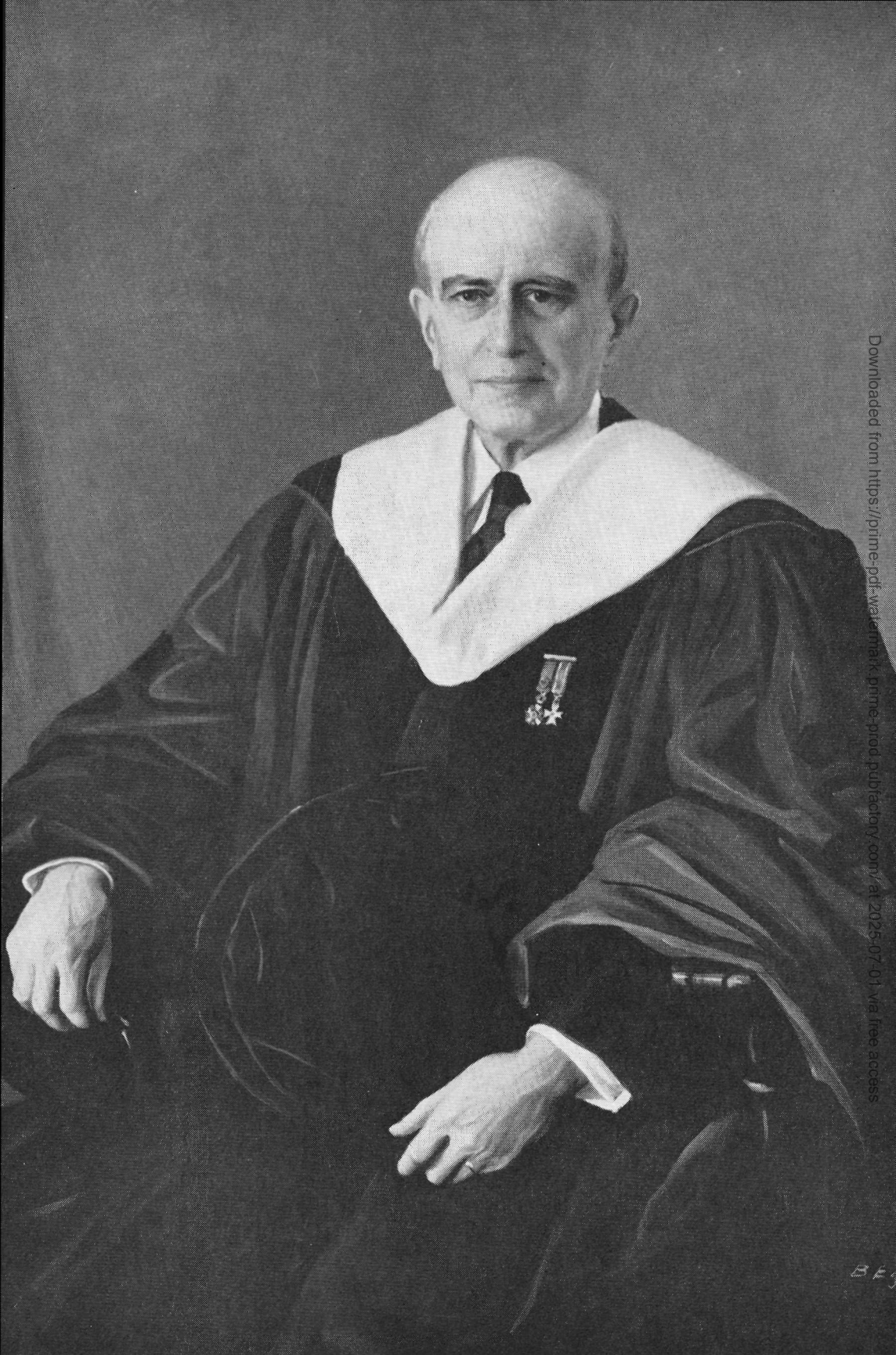
WALDO GIFFORD LELAND, 1879-1966

In January 1903 Waldo G. Leland of Newton, Massachusetts, a graduate student in history at Harvard University, came to the "tranquil village-like city of Washington" on a temporary appointment in the new Carnegie Institution to make a survey of the records of the Federal Government in the National Capital. Thus began a distinguished career, at home and abroad, in the advancement of scholarship, continuing almost to the day of his death, October 19, 1966, in the metropolis of Washington. As his life spanned the period of phenomenal growth during which the political capital became also a great cultural center, so his ideas, his indefatigable activities, and his wide acquaintance with scholars and laymen of first rank contributed in significant ways to this notable development.

Although it is appropriate in these pages to stress the contribution of Dr. Leland to the field of archives, we would view him in false perspective if we failed to identify him first as historian. This is implicit throughout his long career, in the guides to archives he prepared to aid historical research and in the historical essays he wrote, stemming largely from his own experiences and comprising segments of cultural history of the twentieth century.

His mentor while he was a student at Brown University and during his quarter-century on the staff of the Carnegie Institution was J. Franklin Jameson, to whom the young man paid tribute on several occasions. As fellow historians they collaborated in many projects of their profession. For two decades they carried the major load of responsibilities in the American Historical Association, Leland as secretary, Jameson as editor of the *American Historical Review*. Leland was also secretary during World War I of the association's National Board for Historical Service, concerned with the efforts of historians toward an intelligent understanding by the reading public of America's participation in the conflict.

For 7 years before the outbreak of World War I Leland directed the Carnegie Institution's historical mission in Paris. He received this assignment before he was 30 years of age—"a fine young fellow, with many engaging traits," so Jameson described him to Henry Adams not long afterward. This was the period of spade work on the *Guide to Materials for American History in the Libraries and Archives of Paris*. The war interrupted these activities, but he returned to Paris in the 1920's, and the first volume of the *Guide* appeared in 1932. By this time he had long since achieved an international reputation. France decorated him Chevalier, Legion of Honor, in 1929, Officer in 1949; and Polonia Restituta conferred the title Chevalier in 1933. Meanwhile in the United States he had helped organize the American Council of Learned Societies, in the new spirit of interdisciplinary research and publication, drafted its constitution, and served as director for 20 years, until his retirement in 1946. It is significant that during his administration the *Dictionary of American Biography* was published under the Council's auspices.



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When Dr. Leland prepared his "Recollections of an Itinerant Historian" for the American Antiquarian Society (published in its *Proceedings* of 1951), he confessed embarrassment "to find myself described as an archivist, a title to which I have no claim. I have never had charge of records, public or private." Nevertheless, he was customarily referred to as "dean of American archivists," and properly so. His early reputation rested on the *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington* (1904; 2d ed. rev., 1907), a milestone in the "primitive" period of American archival development compiled in collaboration with Claude H. Van Tyne. It put young Leland on the program of the first American conference of archivists (1909), which he referred to 40 years later as "the beginnings of a profession"; and he spoke from firsthand knowledge on "American Archival Problems."

During this period Jameson was soliciting congressional support for a national archives establishment. Leland provided the ammunition in an essay on "The National Archives: a Programme" (*American Historical Review*, October 1912), which opened with an indictment of Congress for neglect and indifference toward the official records of the National Government and then set forth what needed to be done, forcefully demonstrated by his recent survey and *Guide*. In this same year he addressed the American Historical Association's Public Archives Commission on "Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives." When, at long last, the National Archives was authorized by Act of Congress in 1934, he might have taken with propriety some credit for the outcome, but the victory was Jameson's, and Leland would claim no part of it.

The founding of the Society of American Archivists in 1936, toward which Dr. Leland had pointed the way, gave the profession a cohesion it could not achieve by an occasional conference or the program of the Public Archives Commission. He was a charter member of the Society and was elected Honorary Member in 1949, Fellow in 1958. As second president of the Society in 1940 he spoke on "The Archivist in Times of Emergency," from his experience during World War I, providing guidelines for the profession's constructive program during the conflict that was about to engulf America.

By successive archivists of the United States Dr. Leland was regarded as unofficial advisor, always available and keenly interested in current problems whether they involved Presidential libraries or international cooperation or archival training. By archivists throughout the Nation he was held in high esteem as elder statesman, a keen scholar who enlightened the present with his knowledge of the past. He had a kindly manner and a delightful sense of humor that often came into play through understatement. He spoke softly but distinctly and to the point, with economy and grace of language, and he wrote with a felicitous style that stirs regret at the limited amount of his writing.

On the occasion of the unveiling of his portrait in the National Archives Dr. Leland, with characteristic modesty and humor, reflected that "my lack of success in managing my personal records convinces me that I would have

been a very poor archivist, but I have enjoyed telling others how records should be managed. As Rousseau is reported to have said: 'The man who rings the bell cannot march in the procession,' and I admit to having rung the bell." The foregoing sketch, a refutation of this reflection of his, has reiterated the point that he led the procession.

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Communication With Archives

Until two decades ago few economic, social, intellectual, and political historians, as well as economists and political scientists, communicated with any archives. Even these pioneers usually failed to make adequate use of the resources. Those who visited archives without prior notice expected immediate presentation of documents dealing exclusively with their topics; others inquired by letters that explained their subjects in such ambiguous terms that it was virtually impossible to prepare a useful reply. Some successful searchers, unwilling to accept the archivist's advice, prepared footnotes that made recovery of the documents difficult. One well known scholar, for example, cited an "unsigned, undated memorandum" among the New Deal National Recovery Administration Records in the National Archives. When another author asked for the memorandum, it simply could not be located among the agency's voluminous papers.

—MEYER H. FISHBEIN, "Archival Training for Historians," in *AHA Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 5 (Dec. 1966).

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