

Selective Preservation of General Correspondence

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THE uneven quality and inordinate volume of correspondence often accumulated by public officials have long produced problems in its management, use, and disposition. The problems have evoked varied responses. Napoleon, for instance, deluged with letters, is reported to have used a method that many administrators might envy but few would dare to use. The French Emperor directed his private secretary, Bourrienne, to leave all his letters unopened for 3 weeks and then observed with satisfaction that a large part of the correspondence had thus disposed of itself and no longer required answering.¹ Theodore Roosevelt, the first U.S. President to express great concern about paperwork management, saw the increase of unnecessary and largely perfunctory letter writing as a serious menace to the efficiency of Federal administration and urged that Government officials create and keep only enough correspondence and other papers required "to make a record of what is done."²

During the Roosevelt era C. H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland, compilers of the first comprehensive guide to the archives of the U.S. Government, noted the mounting volume and widely varying value of the Government's correspondence and other records. This material, whose mass even in 1904 was characterized as "well-nigh appalling," was shown to include "thousands of file boxes filled with letters relating to the most unimportant details of routine business" and countless volumes containing far more "worthless letters" than "those having historical importance." They ranged by class from "the papers of the Continental Congress . . . to the correspondence relating to the pay or dismissal of a janitor." From the former class to the latter, Van Tyne and Leland observed in

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¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Napoleon or the Man of the World," in *Representative Men*, p. 242-243 (Philadelphia, 1894).

² See Harold T. Pinkett, "Investigations of Federal Recordkeeping, 1887-1906," in *American Archivist*, 21:178-180, 182-183 (Apr. 1958).

understatement, was a range of "considerable depreciation in value."³

The expansion of Government activities and the use of new record-creating devices since the time of Theodore Roosevelt have made correspondence an element of increasing importance in records management and archival administration. The Federal Government's correspondence, Robert H. Bahmer estimates, has probably increased in recent years more rapidly than other forms of paperwork. This is not surprising, he points out, when it is realized that the Government's business has increased and that letter writing is the principal means by which this business is accomplished.⁴ The magnitude of the problem of dealing with Government correspondence is presented vividly in the following statement from a staff report in 1954 to the Hoover Commission's Task Force on Paperwork Management:

By the best measurements available, it is safe to conclude that the volume of letters and memoranda written by Government now exceeds a billion a year. The volume of correspondence received by the Government from outside sources may total two billion A billion letters ready for mailing and stacked one on the other would reach 390 miles into the stratosphere If opened and laid end to end they would circle the globe 5 times over.⁵

In many Government agencies, much if not most of the correspondence is accumulated in general correspondence files. Such files are usually considered to be groups of related records, consisting mainly of letters, memoranda, messages, cards, and possibly reports and other records. They are created and accumulated at most organizational levels and deal with the general functions that the organizational units perform. Correspondence not created and accumulated in this manner is usually to be found in case files concerning specific transactions or projects, which are maintained in separate file blocks or units.

Appraisal of the great volume of general correspondence produced by Government agencies to insure the preservation of material of enduring value is a very difficult and important undertaking. There are no accumulations of correspondence without some potential usefulness to someone. It is generally agreed that these accumulations often include material of exceptional value for

³ *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington*, p. vi, vii (Washington, 1907).

⁴ Robert H. Bahmer, "Improving Uncle Sam's Letters," speech at the Interagency Records Administration Conference, Jan. 18, 1957.

⁵ Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, staff report, "Correspondence in the Federal Government," p. 3 (Washington, 1954).

both administrative and research purposes. The "letters that flow in and out," Leonard D. White observed, portray the life of government departments and their subdivisions and thereby provide effective means of administrative understanding and control.⁶ General correspondence provides administrators with invaluable information for their review of the background, development, and effectiveness of policies, procedures, and programs of their agencies. It includes, as Carl J. Friedrich states, "an ever-increasing quantity . . . of all sorts of communicable views, opinions, facts, and criticisms" and is becoming "a potent factor in the shaping of public policy, particularly in areas where government is entering new or experimental ground."⁷ This evaluation is supported by an account of the significance of correspondence received by the White House during the early, critical years of the New Deal. According to Rexford G. Tugwell, this correspondence, which "multiplied until it nearly swamped the available facilities," not only dealt with personal problems growing out of relief and employment difficulties but also provided much advice for governmental action in the Nation's crisis and centered importantly on the desirability or undesirability of New Deal policy. The correspondence furnished, Tugwell added, "one important indicator of public opinion" to guide the thinking and action of Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁸

There is much evidence of the value of general correspondence to scholars. Historians and other social scientists frequently declare that such correspondence supplies answers to the whys and wherefores of crucial Government actions, gives insight on public reaction to Government operations, and provides intimate and unique data concerning the life, interests, habits, and environment of the Nation's citizens. Samuel P. Hayes, who examined the general correspondence of five record groups in the National Archives during research on his penetrating study, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, called these records "gold mines of information." They provided, said this perceptive historian, "invaluable insight into the attitudes and activities of federal resource agencies" and were especially useful in presenting "a view of policy-in-the-making and of the personal and group struggle over the

⁶ *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration*, p. 97 (New York, 1955).

⁷ "Public Policy and the Nature of Administrative Responsibility," in Friedrich and Edward S. Mason, eds., *Public Policy, Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University*, p. 16 (Cambridge, 1940).

⁸ *The Democratic Roosevelt; a biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 351 (Garden City, N.Y., 1957).

formulation and execution of policy."⁹ Similarly, Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., biographer of Harvey W. Wiley, the controversial crusader for Federal pure food and drug legislation, found general correspondence of various Department of Agriculture offices unusually helpful in revealing points of view and activities of Wiley's allies and enemies and in depicting almost his every move during the long legislative fight.¹⁰

On the other hand, records analysts, archivists, and researchers have regularly found that general correspondence files include a relatively large percentage of material of little use for long-term administrative purposes or significant research undertakings. For example, a comprehensive analysis of the general correspondence files of several major divisions of the Tennessee Valley Authority was reported a few years ago to disclose that material of only temporary administrative value amounted to 40 or 50 percent of the files. Apart from the expense of file equipment and space, the analysis revealed an additional disadvantage in the maintenance and use of such files. The TVA analyst describing this survey reminisced:

Anyone who has had occasion to search general files for information on policies, programs, procedures, or other important matters can testify to the vexations caused by having to handle reams of transmittals and other records possessing only transitory value. These irritations are avoided in files where the trivia are segregated.¹¹

General correspondence files of State government agencies also tend to bulge with ephemera. Margaret C. Norton once reported that such records were among the most bulky offered for transfer to the Illinois State Archives and were accessioned only after they had been well weeded of duplicate copies, form letters, requests for publication, applications for jobs, and other ephemeral matter. In one instance such weeding reduced the bulk of a department's file by two thirds.¹² Christopher Crittenden has estimated that 80 or 90 percent of the records of State agencies in North Carolina con-

⁹ *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency; the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920*, p. 279 (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

¹⁰ *The Health of a Nation; Harvey W. Wiley and the Fight for Pure Food*, p. 280-281 (Chicago, 1958).

¹¹ Sidney R. Hall, "Retention and Disposal of Correspondence Files," in *American Archivist*, 15:12-13 (Jan. 1952).

¹² Norton, "Establishing Priorities for State Records: Illinois Experience," in *American Archivist*, 5:25 (Jan. 1942).

sist of materials lacking value for research. Bulking large among such materials is "routine correspondence."¹³

A plaintive note concerning mixed masses of correspondence and related records is sometimes sounded by scholars. Calling attention to a basic dilemma—how the historian "can sift and read thousands of cubic feet in one limited lifetime" to recreate the past—Boyd C. Shafer expresses the hope that archivists will help to lessen this dilemma by "sorting and discarding more records than they already have done." In doing so, Shafer maintains, archivists help to realize the historian's perennial dream of having the past recaptured, the lost found.¹⁴ Charles M. Wiltse, a distinguished historian with extensive experience in the use of Government records, has spoken of the "cubic dimension" in records as contributing to the problem of finding essential documentation of policy decisions. The real solution to the problem, he contends, "is either to get rid of some of the records or stop making so many records." He would welcome, however, a partial solution in terms of more systematic reduction and organization of the great mass of official papers, which have come to be measured not as other sources familiar to historians—in volumes and library shelves—but in millions of cubic feet.¹⁵ Professor Hayes, whose high valuation of correspondence has been noted, warns that researchers who find the archival "gold mines of information" must have the "fortitude to plow through the interminable number of boxes" of correspondence.¹⁶

The experience of analysts, archivists, and researchers indicates strongly, therefore, that the use of general correspondence for administrative reference and research is impeded by unselective preservation. This indication brings to mind an observation of Benedetto Croce. This famous philosopher, historian, and critic pointed out that basic materials whose preservation serves historiography and the ends of culture—"scattered items of news, documents, and monuments"—are virtually innumerable. Hence to collect them all would not only be impossible "but contrary to the ends themselves of culture, which though aided in its work by the moderate and even copious supply of such things, would be hindered and suffocated by their exuberance, not to say infinity." Croce noted:

¹³ Crittenden, "The State Archivist and the Researcher," in *American Archivist*, 19:217 (July 1956).

¹⁴ Shafer, "Lost and Found," in *American Archivist*, 28:222-223 (July 1955).

¹⁵ Charles M. Wiltse, "Documentation of Policy Decisions," speech at the Interagency Records Administration Conference, Apr. 17, 1953.

¹⁶ Hayes, *Conservation and Efficiency*, p. 279.

. . . the annotator of news transcribes some items and omits the rest; the collector of papers arranges and ties up in a bundle a certain number of them tearing up or burning or sending to the dealer in such things a very large quantity, which forms the majority; the collector of antiques places some objects in glass cases, others in temporary safe custody, others he resolutely destroys or allows to be destroyed; if he does otherwise, he is not an intelligent collector but a maniacal amasser.

Therefore, Croce aptly explained, "not only are papers jealously collected and preserved in public archives and lists made of them, but efforts are also made to discard those that are useless."¹⁷

How can the archivist intelligently deal with this "exuberance" of documents? What criterion should he use for their selective preservation? There is probably no completely logical criterion that can be applied in every situation. Any criterion devised even with great intelligence tends to be conditioned, in Croce's words, "like every economic act, by knowledge of the actual situation, and . . . by the practical and scientific needs of a definite moment or epoch."¹⁸ This is not to say, however, that the archivist has no useful guides for making choices of correspondence files that can reasonably be expected to have value for the future as well as the present. In the first place, there is available to him a significant body of general principles for the selective preservation of all records.¹⁹ These principles provide important guidance for determining the answer to a basic question: Does the general correspondence of a particular office contain a significant amount of material of enduring value? As a rule the answer to this question depends largely on the place of the office in the administrative hierarchy of the organization of which it is a unit. Accordingly, general correspondence files of top-level line and staff offices are most likely to contain documentation of basic policy and procedural decisions and major public reaction to such decisions and their implementation. This documentation is of great interest to administrators and researchers.

In major American government organizations the highest line of authority runs from the chief executive (President, Governor, mayor, city manager, etc.) to departments, independent agencies, commissions, or boards and to bureaus, offices, and/or divisions. Relatively high status and responsibility of line offices are often

¹⁷ Benedetto Croce, *History, Its Theory and Practice*, p. 108-109, tr. by Douglas Ainslie (New York, 1960).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109-110.

¹⁹ The best statement of these principles is provided by T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), especially in ch. 12.

indicated when they are authorized to approve nonroutine correspondence with other government offices, members of legislative bodies, prominent professional and business leaders, and public advisory groups. The officials who compose the main staff offices are principal assistants to the chief executives and key line operators in their job of management symbolized in Luther Gulick's expression POSDCORB, the initial letters of planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting. Such staff men have been referred to as extensions of the personality of the executives. From this point of view, therefore, top-level staff offices are virtually appendages of executive offices. As such they may well accumulate correspondence that supplements importantly the records of executive officials.

At the base of the hierarchical pyramid of large government organizations are numerous offices (usually branches, sections, and units) engaged in detailed and recurrent activities. They are below the two upper levels of the pyramid—top management and middle management—at a zone of operation aptly called by Leonard D. White "the level of specific performance." Their correspondence deals with specific actions rather than general accomplishments and usually has value only for temporary operating purposes. The detailed information that such correspondence may contain is apt to be summarized or presented in broader perspective in correspondence and reports received at the higher levels. However, selective preservation of the correspondence of typical subordinate offices, including field offices, in a particular line of operation may occasionally be useful to illustrate operating authority and methods at all organizational levels.

The character of the activities conducted by an office also tends to affect the long-term value of its general correspondence. An office engaged in the performance of substantive activities—distinctive assigned responsibilities of an organization—tends to have correspondence and other records of more value than an office concerned only with facilitative work such as internal management and housekeeping. The former office is concerned with providing services for people or regulating their conduct in a particular field. It deals with a basic mission of government. The correspondence of such an office therefore has important value not only for the evidence that it provides of governmental action but also for the information that it presents concerning people and their problems. The facilitative office does not perform service for the general public but is concerned only with carrying on work necessary for the conduct of substantive activities. Its records therefore deal

with activities common to most agencies and tend to have long-term value only if such activities are carried on with unusual means and results.

After it has been determined that a particular office has a significant amount of general correspondence of continuing value, it is then desirable to ascertain whether the correspondence includes blocks of file units possessing only temporary value and whether such blocks can be eliminated without loss of the valuable records. Ideally, of course, correspondence and other records of temporary value should be filed separately from those of permanent value. Some notable efforts are being made in this connection. The U.S. Army's Functional Files System, providing for the marking of file folders with disposition instructions, is an outstanding effort to keep temporary material separate from permanent material. The Tennessee Valley Authority has devised a guide of subject items possessing temporary value, which enables files operators to maintain separate files of temporary and permanent correspondence. The U.S. Forest Service file system prescribes a secondary subject heading titled "Inquiries" for many primary headings, so that much routine correspondence can be filed in separate folders. These are, however, exceptional correspondence filing systems. In most Government organizations there is no system for maintaining separate classes of correspondence of temporary and permanent value. Federal and other government archivists must determine the desirability and feasibility of screening worthless correspondence from valuable correspondence. In general, screening on a paper-by-paper basis or by intensive review of individual folders is uneconomical and is seldom to be recommended.²⁰

The first approach to this problem requires a study of the classification or organization of the file in question by the use of a file manual, outline, or classification scheme and examination of representative portions of the file. In the case of subject files such a study may indicate whether several classes or subject headings relating to substantive activities are readily distinguishable from those concerning facilitative activities. General correspondence even of top level offices engaged in policy formulation and program direction often has a great deal of nonsubstantive material. Frequently appearing are such file headings or equivalents as the following: Accounting, Buildings, Equipment and Supplies, Mail, Personnel, Printing and Duplicating, Procurement, Property, Publications, Space, Travel, and Vehicles. General correspondence filed under

²⁰ For basic considerations in screening see General Services Administration, *Records Management Handbook: Applying Records Schedules*, p. 12-13 (Washington, 1956).

these headings and perhaps numerous subdivisions usually deals with facilitative and internal administrative activities and does not contribute importantly to the documentation of agency program planning, development, and execution—matters of continuing interest. Hence, except for a few file units (usually primary subject folders) possibly explaining basic policy and procedure, the correspondence under these headings is probably disposable.²¹ These file classes are readily observed in a file classification system like that of the General Services Administration, which separates subject headings dealing with internal or facilitative operations from those relating to planning, development, and administration of GSA programs. Use of this method of eliminating facilitative classes of records was exemplified significantly in internal disposal transactions at the National Archives involving general correspondence of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1907–33, and of the Weather Bureau, 1912–35. In these transactions the correspondence files were reduced satisfactorily by about 40 percent of their original volume.

Another class of possibly disposable records frequently found interfiled with general correspondence, especially in middle and lower line offices, are case files arranged under subject headings by name of cooperator, permittee, vendor, grantor, lessor, contractor, claimant, licensee, or other individual or organization. These files deal with specific repetitive transactions that may be explained adequately for long-term reference in general subject correspondence and program reports. Often preservation of a few samples of such files suffices to illustrate operating procedures or to provide information concerning transactions of known historical interest. Folders maintained under subject headings and arranged by geographical area, plan, program, system, study, etc. are sometimes considered as case files, but in reality they may be simple divisions of general correspondence owing to bulk and should be appraised as such.

It is often assumed that general correspondence files of some continuing value arranged by correspondent (name or number) are impossible to reduce in bulk without serious reduction of research value. Actually, selected parts of such files may in certain instances retain most of the research value of the complete files. For example, an alphabetical name or arbitrary numerical file valued mainly for its explanation of a program to the public and its reflection of public

²¹ Policy and procedure relating to these facilitative activities are usually more conveniently preserved in directive files.

reaction to the program may yield parts as useful as the entire file, as a result of random selections of a few alphabetical or numerical segments of the file. This method of reduction was used in a disposal transaction involving the "general loan correspondence files" of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, 1933-36, from which were preserved name files with the initial letter "C." Analysis of the principal contacts and services of an agency can provide another method for selective preservation of an alphabetical name correspondence series. Such an analysis may reveal types and possibly names of representative clients, cooperators, critics, supporters, and other classes of persons with whom the agency corresponded. With this information one can then select for retention folders of a number of representative correspondents. This technique has been prescribed for several series of general correspondence of the Wage and Hour and Public Contracts Divisions, U.S. Department of Labor.

It is also possible to reduce satisfactorily the bulk of certain general correspondence files on the basis of information obtained about the nature of program operations affecting places, projects, programs, etc. for which file units have been established. For example, a study of the operations of the Public Buildings Administration and predecessor agencies for the period 1934-39 showed that their operations consisted of four major activities—site acquisition, building design and construction, maintenance and repair, and major alteration. It also revealed the names and locations of all buildings constructed and occupied by the Government before 1934 that received no major alterations during the period 1934-39. It could be reasonably concluded that correspondence file units concerning these buildings for the period in question pertained mainly to maintenance and repair activities and hence were of negligible long-term reference value. Accordingly, these file units (arranged by State, thereunder by locality, and thereunder by building) were eliminated from an accession in the National Archives without loss of data concerning the more significant agency activities—site acquisition, building design and construction, and major alteration—contained in the remaining file units. This elimination reduced the total series by about 25 percent.

Besides these methods of reducing the retained volume of general correspondence files without loss of significant material there is the obvious method of eliminating duplicate records. The existence of such records was called by the Hoover Commission's Task Force on Paperwork Management "the most serious problem in office file operations." The Task Force discovered that for the 4

million letters prepared in Federal Government offices each work day, 4 copies on an average were retained by the originating agency and that of the 4 million letters received each day, 17 percent were either copied or briefed.²² This situation has been largely the result of the submittal of many matters for settlement or information to officials at different or coordinate operating levels. It has involved, therefore, the production of an impressive amount of duplicate correspondence, the eventual elimination or reduction of which has become highly desirable. The accomplishment of this may be practicable and profitable when the principal action offices in particular transactions are identifiable and their correspondence is determined to be the official and most complete record of the transactions. Eventual destruction of duplicate correspondence of other offices, particularly nonaction offices, then becomes archivally safe and sensible.

Archival principles and practices, therefore, suggest several methods for the selective preservation of the seemingly evergrowing volume of general correspondence accumulated by Government agencies. The need for selective preservation has been strongly voiced by records analysts, archivists, and researchers. Such action may well contribute to economical and efficient management of voluminous files and provide readier access to the rich and varied experience revealed therein. Thus from selected correspondence there may be brought to pass a fruitful revival of past experience when, in the words of Croce, "many documents now mute, will in their turn be traversed with new flashes of life and will speak again."²³

²² Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, Task Force report, *Paperwork Management*, part 1, p. 27, 29 (Washington, 1955).

²³ Croce, *History*, p. 25.

Neutrality Equated

The book, therefore, will delight principally those of us who cherish a historian with a wrong opinion above one with no opinion at all. Factual accuracy is, of course, indispensable, but the completely neutral writer is not a historian; he is an archivist at best, and more often a mere scrivener.

—GERALD W. JOHNSON, in a review of Bruce Bliven, *The World Changes*, in *New Republic*, Nov. 6, 1965, p. 30.