

Archives and the French Revolution

By CARL LOKKE

POSTERITY has long held mixed opinions regarding the handling of public records during the French Revolution. Critics of the Revolution have denounced the wholesale destruction of records under law. Even Michelet, a supporter of the Revolution, saw in the commission that passed judgment on the records nothing but a Revolutionary Tribunal for records. Others have taken the view that most of the records destroyed had little value. Archivists have found fault with the system of selecting records for retention. Yet, for good or ill, the present unified archival system of France originated in the laws promulgated during the Revolution. The first archivist of the Republic enjoyed an immense prestige, as Charles Braibant has almost wistfully pointed out.¹

At the outset the middle-class revolutionaries of 1789 felt something approaching disdain for records of the Old Regime. There was a reason for this feeling. In the fall of 1788 the Second Assembly of Notables had had the extensive use of original documents made available by Necker.² The purpose was to determine how preceding Estates General had been constituted in order to make recommendations for the one called to meet the following year. When the Notables voted for following the old forms, above all for voting by order rather than by head, the worst fears of the Third Estate were confirmed. The old records boded no good for it. As if he anticipated the verdict of the Notables, one pamphlet writer had already expressed the opinion that it would be fortunate if the archives of France were destroyed by fire, for then the dictates of reason and justice would have to be followed in convoking the Nation.³ Another writer addressed the Notables as follows: "The study of old documents is long, difficult, uncertain, and often misleading. Is it not shorter to consult reason, simpler to follow justice, surer to interrogate one's conscience?"⁴ On the other hand, members of the Third Estate were not above resorting to the archives to gain advantage for themselves. In Auvergne, for example, the rival cities of Riom and Clermont ransacked their old records to determine their respective

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¹ Charles Braibant, *Les archives de France, hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, p. 6 (Paris, 1949).

² Mitchell B. Garrett, *The Estates General of 1789: the Problems of Composition and Organization*, p. 105-106, 108 (New York and London, [1935]).

³ Pierre Louis de Lacrosette, cited *ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 150.

"rights" as to the number of representatives in the Estates General.⁵ Certain it is, however, that in general the care, preservation, and availability of records received no attention at this time. The deputies of the Estates General who met at Versailles in May 1789 had no more intention of unifying the vast number of archival repositories throughout the kingdom than they had of declaring a republic. The problems of the immediate present consumed them. Only the "irresistible march of events," as Bordier puts it, forced them to do something about the records of the Old Regime.⁶

But, if the march of events in the summer of 1789 did not focus attention upon old records, the newly formed National Assembly soon became mindful of the records it was creating from day to day. These must be carefully preserved. In decreeing regulations for itself dated July 29, 1789, the Assembly included a final section on records.⁷ Article one provided for the selection of a safe place in which were to be deposited all the original papers documenting the Assembly's operations. It provided further for making three keys to this repository, one for the president, a second for one of the secretaries, and a third for the archivist, who was to be elected by majority vote from among the members of the Assembly. The final article indicated that the Assembly intended, before the end of the session, to look into the selection and security of "national documents and papers."

The Assembly lost little time in naming an archivist. In less than a week the election took place—on the famous August 4.⁸ Of a total of 375 votes cast, Armand Gaston Camus of Paris received 172, the largest number polled by any one deputy. Dupont de Nemours followed with 127 votes, the next largest number. Several days later Camus was declared elected. The Assembly now had an archives and an archivist, but its members did not know that it had created the nucleus of the national archives of France.

The career of this first archivist merits a few words.⁹ Sagnac ranks Camus with the most capable and talented members of the National Assembly, with Mirabeau, Sieyès, Mounier, Malouet.¹⁰ Born in 1740, Camus had had a long and honorable career in the law before the Rev-

⁵ See François Boyer, *Correspondance de Malouet avec les officiers municipaux de la ville de Riom, 1788-1789*, p. 3 et passim (Riom, n.d.).

⁶ Henri Bordier, *Les archives de la France ou histoire des archives de l'Empire, des archives des ministères, des départements, des communes, des hôpitaux, des greffes, des notaires, etc., contenant l'inventaire d'une partie de ces dépôts*, p. 1 (Paris, 1855).

⁷ J. B. Duvergier, ed., *Collection complète des lois . . . de 1788 à 1830*, 1:30-32 (Paris, 1834-1906).

⁸ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 2.

⁹ Pierre Géraudel, of the Archives Nationales, has written a thesis, "A.-G. Camus, Garde des Archives Nationales (1740-1804)," of which an abstract was published in *École Nationale des Chartes, Positions des thèses soutenues par les élèves de la promotion de 1942 pour obtenir le diplôme d'archiviste paléographe*, p. 61-67 (Nogent-Le-Rotrou, 1942). M. Charles Braibant kindly sent the writer a copy of this abstract of the unpublished thesis.

¹⁰ P. Sagnac, *La Révolution, 1789-1792*, p. 23 (Paris, [1920]).

olution; his speciality was canon law. His publications included a successful book on the legal profession, an essay on the history of printing, and a translation of Aristotle's treatise on animals. A Gallican and a Jansenist, he had criticized the privileged position of the nobility and the laxity in the Church. His views naturally won him favor among the reformers; yet everyone, reformers and traditionalists alike, recognized in the austere Camus a man of unquestioned probity, who with his wife and six children lived an exemplary private life.

In the National Assembly Camus experienced reverses as well as successes. He pleaded in vain for a declaration of duties along with the declaration of rights. He defended the Church's ownership of its property. "The Church is in the State, the State is not in the Church," ran his dictum.¹¹ But when the Church lands were taken, Camus worked zealously to regulate their sale.¹² Moreover, in line with his Gallicanism, he helped push through and ardently supported the civil constitution of the clergy.¹³ In line with his fight against privilege, he caused the publication of the "red book," thus revealing the pensions paid by the King.¹⁴ But he kept free of party entanglements; in the factions, he declared, one had to lead or be led, and neither role suited him.¹⁵

In September 1792 the Legislative Assembly called upon the archivist to convoke the Convention of which he had been elected a member.¹⁶ His active service in that body was destined to be short. Unlike Sieyès, he did not slip prudently into the shadows; he was put into the shadows. Late in March 1793 the Convention sent Camus and three other deputies on a mission to bring General Dumouriez to Paris for questioning.¹⁷ The Minister of War accompanied them. The general, however, proved obdurate. When Camus lost patience and undertook to arrest him, Dumouriez promptly turned the tables by first placing his visitors under detention and then turning them over to the Austrians. Foucaud, their secretary and a member of the archives staff, chose to share their cap-

¹¹ Quoted in Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution française*, p. 179 (Paris, 1951).

¹² See Raymond Delaby, *Le rôle du Comité d'aliénation dans la vente des biens nationaux, d'après la correspondance inédite du constituant Camus avec le département de la Côte d'Or* (Dijon, 1928), cited by Albert Mathiez, "French Revolution," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 6:475 (New York, [1931]). In an earlier review of this study, written by one of his former students at Dijon, Mathiez not only highly praised Delaby but castigated historians for failing to see how Camus and other members of the alienation committee, despite the Constitution, regulated the actions of departmental authorities in the minutest detail. *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 6:96-98 (Jan.-Feb. 1929).

¹³ [Armand Gaston] Camus, *Développement de l'opinion . . . dans la séance du samedi 27 novembre 1790, sur l'exécution des lois concernant la constitution du clergé* (Paris, 1790); *Observations sur deux brefs du Pape en date du 10 mars & du 13 avril 1791, par M. Camus, ancien homme de loi, membre de l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris, 1791).

¹⁴ École des Chartes, *Positions des thèses, 1942*, p. 64.

¹⁵ *Opinions de M. Camus, citoyen actif de la section des Tuileries, dans l'assemblée de cette section, sur les événements du 20 juin 1792* (n.p., n.d.).

¹⁶ Decree of Sept. 20, 1792. John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, p. 371 (New York, [1951]).

¹⁷ École des Chartes, *Positions des thèses, 1942*, p. 64.

tivity.¹⁸ This lasted until December 1795 (more than 2½ years); then Camus, his fellow deputies, and the minister were exchanged for Madame Royale, daughter of Louis XVI.¹⁹ The modern archivist, writes Ernst Posner, should “be pleased to see one of the great figures of his profession in so conspicuous a role, appraised as equal to one fifth the value of a princess of the royal house of France.”²⁰ (Lafayette, it may be remarked parenthetically, was not appraised at all; he had to endure an Austrian imprisonment of 5 years—from 1792 to 1797.)

During Camus’ absence the Convention went out of existence. But friends took care of things for him. The Constitution of the Year III declared: “The status of member of the Legislative Body is incompatible with the holding of any other public office, except that of Archivist of the Republic.”²¹ In due course Camus was elected to the Council of 500 and reelected archivist.²² On his return he turned a deaf ear to the Directory’s offer to him of the Finance Ministry,²³ preferring to keep the post of archivist. Bonaparte continued him in it, although Camus voted against the life consulate.²⁴ Late in September 1804 Camus suffered an accident. One Sunday he fell in his garden and broke a leg, and several weeks later, on November 2, 1804, his death was reported.²⁵

Such was the man chosen archivist of the National Assembly. His work with its records won him a vote of thanks from his fellow deputies; posterity has praised it. But Camus’ vision from the very beginning extended beyond the current records in his charge. A man of his age and interests could hardly dismiss the long years of the Old Regime. He probably wrote that part of the regulations of July 1789 relating to records, which announced the intention of the Assembly to look into the selection and security of “national documents and papers.” In any case Camus early drew up a plan to establish a great repository for the records of the Old Regime. On May 19, 1790, the Assembly named a commission to make a report on the proposal. Several weeks later (June 29) the commission presented a report, together with a draft decree for the establishment of a national archives.²⁶ A modified version of this draft became law on September 4 and 7, 1790.²⁷

This law created a national archives but limited its holdings to records of the National Assembly. It seemed to declare that only records of

¹⁸ [Camus], *Etat des Archives Nationales au 1^{er} prairial de l’an V*, p. 14 ([Paris], prairial, an V [May–June, 1797]).

¹⁹ *Réimpression de l’ancien Moniteur*, 27:177 (Paris, 1840–45).

²⁰ *American Archivist*, 14:161 (Apr. 1951).

²¹ Stewart, *Documentary Survey*, p. 581.

²² *Réimpression*, 26:367.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27:318–319.

²⁴ Decree of July 23, 1800 (4 thermidor, an VIII). Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 13.

²⁵ *Journal des débats*, Sept. 29 and Nov. 3, 1804 (7 vendémiaire and 12 brumaire, an XIII).

²⁶ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 3–4; *Réimpression*, 4:751; 5:567, 568, 592.

²⁷ Duvergier, *Collection*, 1:362–363.

the new order were worthy of careful preservation. The archivist, who was to have a 6-year term and be eligible for reelection, might be either member or nonmember of the legislature; if not a member he was to receive a salary of 6,000 livres. He was not to be left to his own devices, however; the Assembly was to elect two of its members to serve as commissioners to keep a close eye on the archives and report on its activities. In the absence of the archivist because of illness or any other reason these two commissioners were required to take over his work. The archivist was himself required each year to prepare and publish a report on his work for distribution to members of the legislature. Camus had originally proposed that the archives be open to the public every day. The law was less expansive. The archives was to be open 3 days a week from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and again from 5 to 9 p.m.

But if the Assembly did not see fit to sully its records by bringing them into contact with those of the Old Regime, it had already undertaken to make some provision for the latter. By a law of August 7, 1790, it proposed to concentrate in one place and under one keeper, subject to the municipality of Paris, the holdings of several records repositories in the capital.²⁸ These papers included the records of several royal councils, of the *Maison du Roi*, of the old courts of justice, and of the late King of Poland. Some of them were kept in the Louvre. Nothing was done, to be sure, for several years to carry out this law. In fact no serious steps were taken to concentrate public records until after the Revolution was well along in its most radical phase. In the meantime the records suffered severe losses.

Vast amounts of records were legally destroyed in 1792 and 1793; these consisted primarily of genealogies relating to noble families and of feudal titles—that is, evidence of servitude. The destruction got underway not long after France declared war on Austria. By a decree of May 12, 1792, the Legislative Assembly ordered the burning of the records in the Augustine Convent relating to orders of knighthood. Public and private land titles, however, and documents of interest to the arts and sciences were spared. Camus served on a commission that selected such items for retention.²⁹ On June 19, the anniversary of the decree of 1790 abolishing titles of nobility, 600 volumes of noble genealogies were burned in the Place Vendôme at the foot of the statue of Louis XIV. Condorcet, himself an ex-noble, made a speech applauding this final touch to the “edifice of political equality.”³⁰ On the following day the mob invaded the Tuileries and, menacing the royal

²⁸ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 5.

²⁹ [Camus], “Mémoire sur les dépôts de chartes, titres, registres, documents et autres papiers qui existaient dans le département de la Seine, et sur leur état à l’époque du 1^{er} janvier 1789, sur les révolutions qu’ils ont éprouvées et sur leur état au 1^{er} nivôse de l’an VI [Dec. 21, 1797],” in Félix Ravaisson, *Rapport adressé à S. Exc. le ministre d’État au nom de la commission instituée le 22 avril 1861*, p. 322–323 (Paris, 1862).

³⁰ Eugène Despois, *Le vandalisme révolutionnaire; fondations littéraires, scientifiques et artistiques de la Convention*, p. 275 (Paris, 1868).

family, showed its disrespect for those living representatives of the highest caste. On June 24 the Assembly, spurred on by Condorcet, returned to the attack by ordering the burning of genealogical papers in every public repository.³¹ In due course other laws were passed to the end of destroying the last vestiges of privilege. Those of July 17, 1793, and June 25, 1794, prescribed the burning of feudal titles. In this way the revolutionaries hoped to make more difficult any return to the past.

They also had immediate practical uses for old records. The continuation of the war led to the need of paper in the making of munitions. A decree of August 19, 1792, required the burning as useless papers of settled accounts and accounts more than 30 years old;³² but several months later, on January 15, 1793, another decree called for sending such useless papers to cartridge manufacturers.³³

"The haste with which the destruction was carried out," wrote Camus, "caused the loss of many important papers." A few volumes and bundles were snatched from this records holocaust.³⁴ Yet there remains the question of the extent to which these laws were obeyed throughout the country. Bordier doubts that the destruction of papers was as great as sometimes supposed. In search of evidence he had some 15,000 addresses to the Convention examined.³⁵ Only 64, all falling between August 10, 1793, and March 1794, referred to the matter. Of these, only 16 specified records destroyed. In some instances records reported destroyed were later found intact.

But the course of events now began to point up the need for some general provision for archives. The public domain had been greatly increased by lands formerly belonging to the Church and the émigrés. As every purchaser of such property became a potential supporter of the Revolution, the careful preservation of land titles increased in importance. This consideration lay behind the enactment of two important laws affecting public records.³⁶ The new measures, stemming from the acts of August 7 and September 4 and 7, 1790, were largely the work of Pierre Baudin.

As already noted, the law establishing the archives of the National Assembly as the national archives provided that in the absence of the archivist the two commissioners named by the legislature to watch over the archives should carry on his work. While Camus languished in successive Austrian prisons, Baudin served as one of these commissioners. He took this assignment so seriously and accomplished so much for the

³¹ Edgard Boutaric, "Le vandalisme révolutionnaire: les archives pendant la Révolution française," in *Revue des questions historiques*, 12:350 (Oct. 1872); Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 327.

³² [Camus], "Mémoire," in Ravaisson, *Rapport*, p. 324.

³³ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 327.

³⁴ [Camus], "Mémoire," in Ravaisson, *Rapport*, p. 329.

³⁵ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 332-333.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

archives that one is tempted to believe that the absence of the archivist was a blessing in disguise. This disinterested deputy from the Ardennes had no personal ax to grind. Moreover, granting the ripeness of the time for action, Baudin seems to have possessed in abundance the requisite charm for winning the support of his colleagues. Camus on returning applauded his work.³⁷ When Baudin died suddenly in October 1799—he died of joy, it was said, upon hearing that Bonaparte had landed at Fréjus—three eulogies were pronounced over him.³⁸

What did Baudin accomplish? In the first place he did something about the dormant law of August 7, 1790, which required the concentration in one repository of various records in Paris. These records, he proposed to the Convention, should be divided into two groups and placed under the control of the archivist.³⁹ This proposal having been favorably received, the Convention passed the law of November 2, 1793.⁴⁰ It provided for dividing the records between two repositories or sections of the national archives “under the immediate supervision of the archivist,” the first section to receive land and administrative records, the second to receive judicial records.

This law marked only a step, however; the main problem remained unsettled. Several weeks later (January 27, 1794) the Convention gave the subject of archives the broadest consideration by naming to study it a commission drawn from the committees of public safety, domain, legislation, public instruction, and finance.⁴¹ Its report, which Camus credited to Baudin, formed the basis of the law of June 25, 1794. The Great Terror was then at its height. If we bear this in mind we may marvel perhaps that Baudin and his colleagues made so few concessions to the revolutionary passion with respect to old records. This act of 7 messidor, an II, drafted while the blade of the guillotine rose and fell ever more frequently, became and is today the charter of the Archives Nationales.

The first of the act's 48 articles established the archives of the “national representation” as the central repository for the entire republic.⁴² Authority to act in records matters was vested in the Convention's committee on archives. The archivist received only incidental mention. He kept his authority over the new domain and judicial sections of the archives, but the committee was to nominate the heads of these sections and the Convention to elect them. Article 7 stated, to be sure, that earlier laws affecting the organization and administration of the archives remained intact in every respect.

³⁷ Camus, *État des Archives Nationales*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Réimpression*, 29:852, 853, 858; *Journal des débats*, nos. 155 and 156 of Oct. 1799; article on Baudin by Aulard in *La Grande Encyclopédie*, 5:856 (Paris, n.d.).

³⁹ Camus, “Mémoire,” in Ravaisson, *Rapport*, p. 333.

⁴⁰ Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 5–6, partial text, p. 5, n. 3.

⁴¹ Despois, *Le vandalisme*, p. 286.

⁴² Text in Duvergiér, *Collection*, 7:202–205; Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 384–389.

Land titles drew the particular attention of this law. Such records were to be retained and divided between the two sections. Article 6 required the transfer of land titles to the domain section whenever the archives committee requested it. Other land papers to be retained were those considered to have historical and educational interest. In Paris these were to be sent to the Bibliothèque Nationale, in the departments to the library of each district. With respect to feudal titles the law was inexorable—they must be destroyed.

This law had teeth. It set up a temporary records agency (*Agence temporaire des titres*) to screen the Nation's papers in Paris. This was the body that Michelet dubbed a Revolutionary Tribunal for records. Its members, consisting of not more than 9 citizens versed in charters, laws, and other documents, were required to do their work in 6 months. Nor did the provinces need to feel neglected. In each department the screening of records was to be done by 3 citizens with like qualifications; they had to finish it in 4 months. On the basis of reports from all these disposition agencies the archives committee was required each month to submit a general report to the Convention.

These arrangements for separating the wheat from the chaff did not work out with respect to timing.⁴³ The Paris agency needed more time and it was indeed given more time: the bureau (*Bureau du triage des titres*) that succeeded it was not abolished until 1801. For years Camus tried in vain to have it abolished. The screening in the departments ended sooner: a law of October 26, 1796, closed the local agencies and ordered the transfer of the records to the chief repository of each department.

The Paris agency labored mightily in some 400 repositories. By March 1796 more than a hundred tons of paper and parchment had been turned in for disposal.⁴⁴ Altogether the agency marked for destruction, Ravaisson tells us, upwards of 500,000 kilograms (550 tons) of records, including those considered entirely useless.⁴⁵ Practically all the records marked for retention were divided between the domain and the judicial sections of the Archives Nationales. The agency designated 489 volumes and 1,171 boxes of records as useful for historical and other purposes.⁴⁶

Pierre Géraudel in his study of Camus has said that the first archivist should not be censured for having been only a man of his own time.⁴⁷ The same charitable judgment may well be extended to include the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ A figure of 222,916 pounds was given by the members of the Bureau du triage in a letter to the Directory written after the creation of the Bureau by the law of April 24, 1796. Bordier, *Les archives*, p. 591.

⁴⁵ Ravaisson, *Rapport*, p. 156.

⁴⁶ For a criticism of the methods used in screening the records see M. de Boislisle, *Correspondance des controlleurs généraux des finances avec les intendants des provinces* (Paris, 1874), 1:xxxviii.

⁴⁷ École des Chartes, *Positions des thèses*, 1942, p. 65.

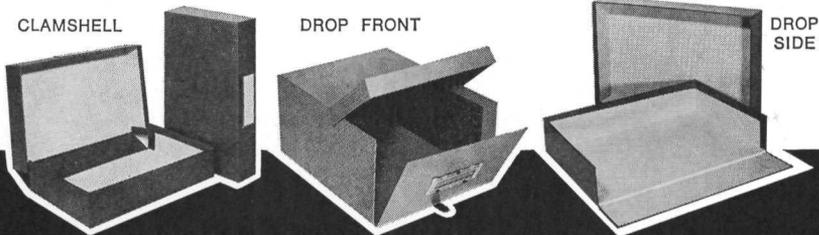
men who destroyed such quantities of records under the law of June 25, 1794. They were fighting desperately to prevent a return to the past, and they seem to have had in mind also reducing the costs of administration by reducing the bulk of the public records that no longer served a useful purpose. A little skepticism regarding destruction statistics, however, is in order. To read David Dowd's paper on the Fulbright microfilm project is to get the impression that much has survived.⁴⁸ I have yet to hear Beatrice Hyslop⁴⁹ complain because the extant records of the House of Orleans are too meager. The losses of public records would almost certainly have been greater had the revolutionaries not created a national archives for France.

⁴⁸ David L. Dowd, "The French Departmental Archives and the Fulbright Microfilm Project," in *American Archivist*, 16:241-249 (July 1953).

⁴⁹ [Professor of history at Hunter College, New York City; specialist in French nationalism and the French Revolution. Her published works, with which Lokke was undoubtedly familiar, include *Répertoire critiques des cahiers de doléances pour les États généraux de 1789* (Paris, 1933), *French Nationalism in 1789 According to the General Cahiers* (New York, 1934), and *A Guide to the General Cahiers of 1789 . . .* (New York, 1936).—Ed.]

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