

Archival Janus: The Records Center

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FOR a generation we archivists have been told that the Greeks had a word for it. The word was *archeion*. It originally meant government house, and from it was derived the word archives, which has since been applied successively and perhaps indiscriminately to the records of a governmental agency, to the accumulated files of all sorts of organizations (governmental and otherwise), to the institution responsible for managing the accumulated files, and to the structure housing them.

But the Greeks did not have a word for another kind of house that also manages accumulated files—the records center. This shortcoming is not surprising, for the records center as we know it is barely a quarter of a century old. If for reasons of prestige we should like to go to antiquity for a name, we might try the Romans. They had a name that fits the concept of a records center, even though it was never so applied. Janus, whose name was derived from a Latin word for “going” or “doors,” was the most important of the native Italian deities. He is characterized as not only the god of gates and doors, or “material openings,” but more truly of “beginnings”—especially of “good beginnings which insure good endings.” He is represented as facing both ways, some say with two heads as well as two faces.

Janus might qualify as the patron of records centers, not because they are two faced or have two heads, but because they face in two directions: toward the offices from which the records come and toward the archives or the wastepaper dealer to which the records eventually go. The records centers, like Janus, serve as a door or a passageway connecting these places of beginning and ending, and if they perform their functions properly the centers can assure that records that begin well will end the same way.

The records centers I have in mind are intermediate records depositories, which receive, store, service, process, and provide security for records that are not sufficiently active to be retained in valuable office or operating space but are too active to be retired directly to the archives or are still too valuable to be sent to the wastepaper dealer. Most people grasp the functions of centers very quickly when we refer to them as purgatories—places where records go to wait out their time, after

Presidential address, given on Thursday, Oct. 19, 1967, at the 31st annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in Sante Fe, N. Mex., Oct. 18–20. Mr. Angel is the Assistant Archivist for Federal Records Centers, National Archives and Records Service. A career employee of the Federal Government since 1932, Mr. Angel was elected Fellow of the Society in 1958.

which the good records go to the heavenly archives and the bad ones go to the flames. Curiously enough, our British colleagues, also going to theology, call their records centers limbo. These uses of the terms purgatory and limbo are both very bad theology, but I believe purgatory is a bit closer than limbo to what we have in mind. As I understand it, storage conditions for records may be better in limbo, but the records never get out. Purgatory seems a better figure for us because we expect records in our centers to turn over like merchandise in a store and in time to move along to their ultimate destination.

Unlike records centers, records storage depots have been with us for a long time. They undoubtedly date back to the first empty attics, cellars, or storerooms, all of which quickly filled with old records that could not tolerate a vacuum. The hall of records, which was often proposed but never built in the years before the movement for a national archives in this country, was basically planned as a collection of vaults or lockers for the storage of older records of Federal agencies, each of which would send its own staff members to rummage for documents as they were needed. Nowadays the records storage depot is a vanishing phenomenon. A few still exist as museum pieces or monuments to inertia, but most have been replaced by that newer and more dynamic institution, the records center.

Not until 1941, however, under severe wartime pressures for space, was the first records center established in this country or, so far as I have been able to determine, anywhere in the world although an organization of this type was suggested by C. J. Cuvelier, the Belgian archivist, in 1923. The founders of the first center were two American archivists, the late Emmett J. Leahy and Robert H. Bahmer, now Archivist of the United States, both alumni of the National Archives and then employed by the Department of the Navy. Considering the joint involvement of an Irishman, a German, and the Navy in the enterprise, it seems particularly fitting that this first center should have been housed near Washington in an abandoned brewery, which has long since been replaced by a slick, modern motel that unfortunately bears no commemorative plaque.

Bahmer soon moved along to the War Department, where he joined another Archives alumnus, Wayne C. Grover, in developing the Army's records management program, including, of course, records centers. By the end of World War II both the Army and the Navy had chains of flourishing records centers that extended across the country and, in the case of the Army, overseas. Independently, but likewise born of war-time pressures, records centers were concurrently being created in and around London by officials of the Public Record Office.

Some of our senior members may recall that our own Society, at its meeting 25 years ago in Richmond, Va., when records centers were in their infancy, heard four papers on the problem of field office records of

the Federal Government in which the possibilities of regional or combined Federal-State depositories were discussed.

The merits of records centers were too numerous to be concealed. By 1949, when the First Hoover Commission's Task Force on Records Management reported, the Federal Government had over 100 identified records centers, plus more than 200 "substantial accumulations" of records. Today the Federal Government is served by 14 Federal Records Centers holding 9 million cubic feet of records.

The ripples continue to spread. Ernst Posner, in his *American State Archives*, reported records centers serving more than half of the 50 State governments. It is not by coincidence that the first three archives to win our Society's Distinguished Service Award—North Carolina, Maryland, and Wisconsin—all have active records centers. Among our largest cities, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles have municipal records centers. William Benedon, in a 1967 survey of the 500 largest corporations in this country, found that over half had established their own records centers, with capacities ranging from 4,000 to 200,000 cubic feet. He also noted that more industry records centers had been built in the last 5 years than in the previous 25. To these captive centers, if we may call them that, should be added commercial records centers, which provide a variety of individual clients with a wide choice of assistance ranging from dead storage to full-scale records center services. Initiated by Leahy, these commercial records centers are now operated by many companies—frequently by those engaged in commercial storage or underground storage businesses—in numerous locations throughout the country.

Nor is the records center confined to this country. I have already mentioned those operated by our British cousins. To these must be added the equally effective centers to our north in Canada, two in New Zealand, the new "Intermediary Archives" of the Federal Republic of Germany, located just outside Bonn, and a prearchival depot, to be called the Interministerial Archives City, soon to be constructed a short distance from Paris at Fontainebleau. It is significant that all of the centers enumerated, whatever their names, serve all the agencies of their Governments and that all centers are managed by the national archives of the country involved.

It is fair to say that a large proportion of the Federal, State, municipal, corporate, and commercial records centers in this country evolved from the Army and Navy records centers of World War II and that many of those responsible for the present-day records centers either had experience in the early centers or were trained by others who did have such experience. Because of these factors that the centers have in common, they have naturally developed similar physical characteristics, similar professional processes, and even similar patterns of evolution.

Although records centers differ from each other in size, capacity, and

contents, they have a remarkable number of physical similarities, as William Benedon explained in his paper at our Atlanta meeting in 1966 and in his article in the January 1967 issue of the *Records Management Quarterly*.

Records center buildings have come a long way from the brewery in Washington. Gradually they have worked their way upward through a maze of old garages, uneconomical turn-of-the-century multistory warehouses, and outdated industrial plants once used for the manufacture of radios, electronic equipment, torpedoes, and other ordnance. Only good fortune has protected them from firetraps, abandoned mines, and even discarded silos intended for launching missiles—all offered in the hope of a quick profit or on the assumption that any building unsuitable for anything else must surely be ideal for a records center. As new buildings have been erected specifically for records center use, they have generally followed the modern industrial practice of a single windowless level for active storage areas. Occasionally they have been built on two levels because of size or terrain or have employed library-type catwalks, but these are the exceptions.

Early centers stored records in any container available. Among these were battered filing cabinets; steel, wood, and even cardboard transfer cases; and military footlockers. The centers had also a bewildering collection of shelving of all sizes, heights, and materials. Although some filing cabinets and transfer cases are still in use for records frequently searched or filed into, most records are now stored in standard-size cardboard cartons on standard-size steel shelves. The cartons usually measure 12" × 15" × 10", suitable for both letter-size and legal-size records, depending on how they are placed in the container. The standard shelf, geared to the size of the carton, measures 42" × 30", just enough to hold six cartons comfortably. There are variations, of course. The cartons may or may not have separate lids, and they may or may not have handholds. The cartons may be stored 1 high on a shelf so that it holds 6 cartons, or they may be stored 2 high so that it holds 12. The shelving may be erected in a single row so that each carton faces an aisle, or it may be erected in a double row so that there are four boxes between aisles and only the outer two boxes face an aisle. Whatever the variations, the cartons and shelving are basically the same as those developed in the World War II military records centers.

With increased diversity in the types and sizes of records sent to records centers has come corresponding diversity in storage equipment to accommodate small punch cards and large engineering drawings, bound volumes and computer printouts, and microfilm and magnetic tapes. Filtered forced-air ventilation has replaced the dust and soot from grimy and leaky windows. Air conditioning is provided for archives, microfilm, and magnetic tape; and air-conditioned vaults accommodate security-classified records. Fluorescent lighting has superseded dingy

warehouse lighting—one bare bulb to a bay supplemented by battery-powered miner's lamps. Centers are protected from fire by sprinklers or smoke detectors or both and from intrusion by guards and sophisticated alarm systems. In short, most records transferred to records centers "never had it so good." Yet, according to current Federal Government figures, all this luxury for records in a modest functional building costs only 29¢ a cubic foot each year as compared to \$4.43 per cubic foot for storing records in office space and equipment.

Records centers, as distinguished from records storage depots, provide most of the usual services of an archival repository—accessioning, preservation, arrangement and description, reference service, and disposal. Not only are these services generally absent from records storage depots, but they are also performed only indifferently in many offices from which the records come. Archives properly limit themselves to permanent records, leaving it to records centers to accept any records not needed in expensive office space but not yet disposable. Centers likewise accept records that have no fixed disposal date or the extent of whose reference activity is unknown. Disposition periods can be worked out in time, but this time is less expensive when the records occupy low cost records center space. As for reference activity, most office files personnel honestly do not know how often their records are used, but they invariably give one of two answers, depending on what they conceive their interests to be: They report either that the records are never used or that they are used all the time. Both answers are wrong, of course. Some statistical guidelines have been adopted for accessioning records. Federal records center officials, for example, accept records referred to no more often than once per file drawer per month. They also strive to have 50 percent of all Federal records in center-type space. Both standards have proved practical in application.

Like archives, all records centers strive to provide responsible custody, which includes security from fire, theft, insects, and vermin; clean and orderly storage; and temperature and humidity controls when needed. In addition the centers serve as a staging area, where records can wait until they become sufficiently inactive for the next step in their life cycle to be taken. Centers identify records coming to them—no mean task considering the poor condition in which many are transferred. They arrange or rearrange records received in disorder and supply additional detail when documentation received with the records is not adequate for prompt and effective reference service. They prepare and often publish guides, inventories, indexes, and other finding aids for their holdings but of course not in the detail required by archives for permanent records.

Many outside the profession find it difficult to realize that records centers are not simply warehouses where records remain in dead storage. Records centers—because they hold large quantities of recent records that are frequently used—are "where the action is." Reference services

are provided by the thousands every year—by the millions in a few larger centers—chiefly to those from whom the records were received. Some searching is done for scholars, of course, but not nearly to the same extent as in archives. The reference service process has been incorrectly renamed by some status seekers as information retrieval, though none has yet had the courage to call a hard-working staff searcher a retriever. Under whatever name, documents are found, copied, or returned, and information is furnished by telephone or letter, all in a matter of minutes or hours. Records center staffs are accustomed to being praised for providing better service than inquirers receive from their own file rooms.

For the archivist the real merit of the records center is measured by its accomplishments in records appraisal and disposal. With knowledge gained through identifying, arranging, and furnishing reference service on his records, the center archivist can help in determining their value. He can develop disposal schedules and apply existing ones. When permanent records are in proper order, he supervises their transfer to the archives or to an archives area within the center itself. When temporary records are eligible for disposal, he carefully reviews the boxes and their contents as they move on to the wastepaper dealer or to incineration or pulping often performed under his supervision.

Records centers are increasingly called upon to add new but related services. As part of close relations between archives and records centers, overcrowded archives have used the centers as annexes. Conversely, where centers exist and archives do not, centers have concentrated the cream of their records into archives areas awaiting the day when archives will be established. Some centers have areas set aside as depositories for vital records. Some offer microfilming services in conjunction with their documentary reproduction facilities. Still others assist their parent organizations by identifying and recommending improvements in poor recordkeeping practices. Center staffs are especially well situated to detect problems such as those caused by inadequate filing systems, piecemeal transfer of file series, careless packing and shipping of records, disposal schedules that cannot be matched with the records, and files retained long after their value and activity have ceased.

Just as records centers have archival characteristics and processes, so they likewise perform functions of the offices from which the records come, and often they perform those functions better. They store records economically and securely, releasing costly space and filing equipment as byproducts. They act as a sure memory, furnishing quick and accurate reference service from a huge data bank. They provide professional advice to management on recordkeeping practices. At the same time, through the application of such modern management techniques as program planning, performance budgeting, work measurement, and manpower utilization, they not only pay their own way but also make a modest profit for their sponsors. In the language of the investment market,

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records centers are not a glamour stock, promising rocketlike advances and subject to similar crashes. Rather, they are a blue chip, whose solid professional assests assure a steady income of security and service and a value that increases unfailingly through the years.

This brief review of the physical characteristics and professional processes of records centers demonstrates more than their great similarity one to another. It also shows that these characteristics and processes, although varying from those in offices and archives, have much in common with each. When we consider these similarities and overlappings, the appellation of Janus for records centers seems neither farfetched nor pedantic.

A concluding word must be said about similarities of the developmental patterns of records centers. It is axiomatic that records management has three parts, dealing with the creation, maintenance, and disposition of records. But it is also true that every good records program begins by concentrating on the disposition phase: the inventorying, appraising, and scheduling of records and the full use of records centers and archives. Only after these processes and facilities are fully operational can sound progress be made in the areas of records maintenance and records creation.

A corresponding three-part cycle in the establishment and development of records centers might be described as reluctance, acceptance, and overreliance. In the early days of any center—and the same can be said for any archives as well—its clients are suspicious of, if not hostile to, the new institution. Hardheaded officials seek the hidden motives of archivists who are willing, without charge, to take old records, preserve them well, and make them available for use. Cautiously the officials transfer to the center records that are old and worthless or records so neglected that their nature and value are unknown. When nothing catastrophic happens, younger and better records are transferred. Eventually it becomes evident that there is no sinister plot to harm either the records or those transferring them and that, though the archivist may not be “quite bright” in his willingness to perform this free service, he is really harmless.

With the passage of time officials learn the advantages of centers—the economies in storage, superiority in care, and excellence of service—and reluctance gives way to acceptance when it appears that all concerned will live happily ever after. The cycle has not truly run, however, until some official, convinced that the archivist is gullible, attempts to foist off on that unsuspecting individual active records that are in daily use, perhaps even the official's central files. When the archivist meets and rejects this temptation, when he insists that Caesar accept the responsibilities that are Caesar's, then the archivist has found his place in the bureaucracy and has really arrived.

Granted that Janus did well in Rome and is thriving in his present situation, what of the future? We sometimes hear that the records center is obsolescent if not obsolete, doomed to replacement by microfilm, computer, or some other form of miniaturization. We may come eventually to this end. But 40 years ago we were told that microfilm would replace paper records. Instead, microfilm has achieved an important and honorable place in documentation; it has supplemented paper records, but it has not replaced them. Today we hear the same claims for computers and other new inventions. These have yet to find their ultimate place in the scheme of things. Meanwhile the records centers keep rolling along, storing microfilm and magnetic tape with complete impartiality alongside paper records, looking both forward and backward, and providing a documentation door at which the past and the future can meet.



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