

*Manual of Archives Administration;  
Theory and Practice of Public Archives  
in France: A Review Article*

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France. Ministère des Affaires culturelles. Direction des Archives de France. *Manual d'archivistique; théorie et pratique des archives publiques en France*. Ouvrage élaboré par l'Association des archivistes français. (Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1970. 805 p. 46 Fr.)

BORN in the stormy years of the Revolution, France's archival establishment has been expanded, consolidated, and cemented through a host of decrees and regulations. They have not been presented as a whole body of doctrine and practice, however, since Gabriel Richou published his *Traité théorique et pratique des archives publiques* in 1883. And so France, a much admired leader in our field, was not among the countries that could boast of a modern manual of archives administration. To rectify this anomalous situation, Robert-Henri Bautier's proposal that the Association of French Archivists undertake the preparation of a new manual was acted upon by the Association in 1961 and carried out. The result is this monumental *Manual of Archives Administration*, cooperatively produced by the best archival minds of France and published by the Direction des Archives de France.

Following a foreword by André Chamson, until 1971 Director General of the French Archives, the *Manual* is presented to the reader by F. Dousset, Inspector General of the French Archives, in his capacity as president of the Association of French Archivists. M. Dousset emphasizes the influence of two factors on the genesis of the work: the increasingly important international cross-fertilization of ideas and the accelerated evolution of doctrine and practices in our field, among them the theory of the "three ages" of archives

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and our concern with records management, called *pré-archivage* in France; for, as M. Dousset points out: "Records management is not an autonomous discipline. It is but a branch of archives administration."<sup>1</sup>

The *Manual* thus introduced is the work of 42 collaborators, most of them members of the staffs of the Direction des Archives, of the National Archives and of the archival services of the 95 départements into which France is divided.<sup>2</sup> The texts of the various chapters, which reflect the situation in 1967,<sup>3</sup> are most of them the work of several authors, "harmonized" by a publication committee composed of Pierre Marot, Director of the École nationale des Chartes, Robert-Henri Bautier, professor at the École, and Michel Duchein who has borne the brunt of this demanding task.

Doing justice to this magisterial volume might well be considered an almost equally demanding task. It would not only call for a chapter-by-chapter analysis and evaluation far exceeding the boundaries of a review but would also require an intimate knowledge of recordkeeping in the agencies and of the history and practices of French archives administration that few, if any, outsiders have at their command. A mere mention of the content of this volume of more than 800 pages will support this admission. The *Manual* is divided into an Introduction, consisting of two chapters by Bautier and Guy Duboscq respectively, and into the following main parts: General Archives Administration (241 pages); Special [Problems of] Archives Administration (219 pages); Physical Preservation of Archives (57 pages); and the Scientific, Cultural and Administrative Roles of the Archives (92 pages). Three supplements, an alphabetical index, and a table of contents make up the rest of the volume.

Given the size and inclusiveness of this French treatise, I shall focus on the Introduction and the chapter on general archives administration, barely touch on the other chapters, and, in general, emphasize points of interest to the American reader. In the first part of the Introduction, Bautier deals with general definitions and with the legal problems of archives. His definition strikes an important note in that his concept of *fonds* applies to records in

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, see the pacemaking study by Yves Pérotin, *Le records management et l'administration américaine des archives* (Paris, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> The *département* might be considered the equivalent of the county in Britain and in the United States. In the following, the English term department will be used to indicate this unit of French local government.

<sup>3</sup> In his splendid article "Les Archives de France," in *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique*, 41:397-428 (1970), Michel Duchein has provided a somewhat more up-to-date survey of the development, present situation, and problems of French archives administration.

the custody of their creator as well as to those in the records center and in the archival agency. It is also worth stressing that, in the opinion of the French archivist, the concept of archives covers not only public documents, for to Bautier "the private archives, although sometimes of a character quite different from that of public archives, are nevertheless veritable archives"; they are not historical manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> Bautier also discusses in detail the concept of *public papers*—the French language does not have a term corresponding to our term *records* or the German *Akten*—and the principles of international law that apply, or should apply, to archives.

Chapter II of the Introduction, entitled "The French Archives: Organization, Legislation, Evolution," is the work of Guy Duboscq, now successor to M. Chamson as Director General of the French Archives. Written from the vantage point of his elevated position and based on his intimate knowledge of *la maison*, the chapter provides the reader with a conspectus in the grand style of France's archival establishment and gives him an idea of the dynamism that has animated it during the last 35 years. The beginning of this rather dramatic change from archival passivism to archival aggressiveness can be traced to the decree of July 21, 1936. Long the pious wish of French archivists and now the basis of their professional élan, this decree, countersigned by all ministers, made it obligatory for the central and departmental agencies to transfer to the National Archives and to the departmental archives records no longer needed for the transaction of business. Only a few central agencies, in particular the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and those of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, have remained exempt from the provisions of the decree. Their archives continue their separate existence and hence are dealt with in separate annexes to Duboscq's chapter. The chapter, incidentally, well reflects Duboscq's personality, a happy compound of lifelong experience, professional wisdom, and great good common sense:

We have tried to be clear in our exposé, convinced that all problems must be envisaged in the light of what is practicable, reasonable, and easily applied. The most beautiful, the most seducing, theory is of no value if in the long run those who must put it in practice cannot distinguish the essential from the superfluous, the real from the whimsical. In our profession one must be pragmatic above all; we shall try to be pragmatic—therein following a personal inclination.

To the foreign observer France's archival establishment may ap-

<sup>4</sup> An essay on the history of the concept, as a counterpart to Oliver W. Holmes' "Public Records—Who Knows What They Are?" in *American Archivist*, 23:3-26 (Jan. 1960), is indeed a desideratum.

pear like a monolithic structure, created in one fell swoop, in the same manner as the country's administrative system was created by Napoleon's law of the year VIII. This is not the case. The National Archives and, on the other hand, the archives of the departments, municipalities, and hospitals were controlled by different ministries and led separate existences until 1897, when they were combined into one service. Because of many decades of coexistence rather than unity, the lower level establishments are in many respects still governed by regulations that do not apply to the National Archives, and vice versa; and, consequently, in Duboscq's essay and in the later chapters, the various categories of public archives had to be treated separately. In recent decades there has developed a noticeable trend toward reducing existing differences, accelerated by action from the top and a vast expansion of the central administrative service at Paris. More than 40 archives buildings newly constructed, expanded, or modernized bear outward testimony to the great renaissance of French archives administration.

Duboscq's chapter unavoidably overlaps various chapters of the body of the book to which we now turn, singling out those that should be of particular interest to archivists in this country. They will learn of the acceptance in France of the main tenets of records management—that is, cooperation with the agencies in current records creation, the concept of the three stages in the life cycle of records, and the need for a records center as a halfway house between agency and archives. In developing the field of records management, it is only natural that France, burdened by the traditions of the past, lags behind the United States and Britain. Archivists *en mission* have been appointed to serve as liaison officers in a number of ministries to facilitate the transfer of records to archival custody. Their mission could not be too successful, because they had no responsible person to talk to, inasmuch as there are no records officers in the agencies. Also, with a few exceptions, the device of the schedule has not been adopted, although it is being encouraged by the organization and management officers in the ministries. To carry the gospel into the agencies, the usefulness of an interagency records administration conference, on the Washington model, and short courses for agency records personnel might well be explored. As an important first measure, a large records center has been created in the *cité interministérielle* near Paris. M. Pérotin, who deals with this complex of problems in the *Manual*, takes a dim view of recordmaking in the agencies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> An up-to-date and well-informed study of records management and records centers in France is available in Eckhart G. Franz, "Aktenverwaltung und Zwischenarchive in Frankreich," in *Der Archivar*, 24:275-288 (July 1971).

Where a records center is in operation, as it is on the national level, the appraisal and disposal of records takes place in the center, which of course will be controlled and staffed by the archives administration; and from the center accessions will reach the archives in a relatively even flow, which facilitates arrangement and assigning call numbers to them. In carrying out this most important function, the National Archives is the heir and victim of a pattern of classification that goes back to an order imposed upon it by Daunou as head of the National Archives from 1804 to 1815. He followed the "abominable" principle of dividing the holdings in four "sections on the basis of their administrative, historical, domanian, or judicial" interest. Arranged in classes (*séries*) and subclasses within the basic scheme and expanded by the creation of new classes and subclasses as the need arose, the overall organization of the National Archives holdings has become quite "anarchical." All accessions from the administrative branch (*Administration centrals*), except those from the Ministry of Justice, have to go into class F, now divided into 33 subclasses and a number of sub-subclasses. Most of the subclasses correspond to the main functions of Government, and so it may be said that the arrangement of records in the National Archives is and will be by function. Arrangement by office origin in a system of record groups based on agency organization is considered impractical, although the possibility was investigated at the turn of the century. It is felt that the present system is so firmly rooted in the past that it must be retained and that it can only be a matter of simplifying it and smoothing out anomalies. In the *Manual* the American concept of the record group is definitely rejected, and that rejection, in the case of France, can be understood, although the difficulties of the record group system seem to be overrated. We shall not enter here into the arrangement of records in the departmental, municipal, and hospital archives.

The preparation of finding aids, more appropriately called *instruments de recherche* in France, has been the subject of considerable experimentation and has resulted in a vast number of guides of one kind or another, of inventories, and numerical repertories. It is this last type of finding aid, in the form of the "detailed numerical repertory," that now enjoys increasing acceptance. Beyond the identification of the various items, it provides the searcher with detailed information about the content of each. Normally an item is a register, volume, bundle, or dossier and not an extended series because extended chronological series of the kind we have in the United States are the exception rather than the rule.

The multitude of printed finding aids has been of great service to the searchers. Most of them are listed in the lists of inventories

published in 1938 and 1955 and available for all of France in the *Salle des inventaires* of the National Archives. An excellent device has also been created for letting a searcher know who has been working on a given topic and what records he has consulted for the purpose. This is the Center for Information on Historical Research in France. Administered by Bernard Mahieu, it keeps a running record of ongoing research in French history: the names of the researchers, the nature of their work, and the classes of archives they are using; and this record not only includes research in the National Archives but also investigations in the archives of the departments, the autonomous archives services of the exempt ministries, the universities, and the learned societies. It is, therefore, far more comprehensive than our *List of Doctoral Dissertations in History*. The data assembled are published in the *Bulletin du Centre d'information de la recherche historique en France* to which our Library of Congress contributes information concerning the use of the microfilms of French archival material in its Manuscript Division.<sup>6</sup> Although it would be utopian to develop a similar nationwide service here, something of the kind would seem possible and very useful if produced on the national level to include research in the National Archives, the Presidential Libraries, and the Manuscript Division. It might help to avoid conflicts of interest in at least one broad spectrum of historical research.

Although agency restrictions and the wish to protect the interests of private persons and political figures still stand in the way of the researcher, an interministerial decree now makes records to July 11, 1940, available for research.<sup>7</sup> The same progressive spirit is also evident in the fourth part of the *Manual*, which deals with the scholarly, cultural, and administrative roles of the archives. It includes good advice on such matters as the part the archivist can and should play in advising and guiding the searcher and also on his participating in historical activities. Such participation is strongly urged because "the reputation of the archivist—his prestige, in one word his success—depends almost uniquely on his personal [scholarly] work." It is the area of documentary publication in which French archivists have made and should make a particularly significant contribution. The problems of how to organize archival exhibits and how to make them serve the education of the young, are sensibly dealt with in another chapter of the book.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the Center and its *Bulletin*, see Chantal Daniel, "The Center for Historical Research in France," in *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 28:248-252 (Oct. 1971), where a sample page of the *Bulletin* is reproduced on p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Mahieu, "American Scholars at the Archives Nationales," in *ibid.*, p. 246-247.

Little need be said about Part III of the *Manual*, devoted to a discussion of the physical protection of documents. Its two chapters on buildings and equipment and on the restoration of damaged documents are the exclusive work of Michel Duchein whose superb knowledge of these technical subjects is well known and highly regarded.

Part III of the *Manual* may be said to have universal applicability. Part II of the book, on the other hand, has a more national flair and character in that it discusses some problems peculiar to the archives of France, foremost among them the care and administration of municipal and hospital archives. They are subject to the supervision of the head of the departmental archives. It is difficult, however, to make his supervision of the municipal archives effective, for there are some 36,000 municipalities in France, only a few of them staffed with professional personnel. It is estimated that each municipality can be inspected only every 15 years, and in the intervals between inspections important records can deteriorate or disappear. Large scale microfilming of municipal records does not seem to be considered.

In recent years the maintenance of hospital records has been receiving increasing attention. Originally concern was limited to administrative records, which quite frequently reach back to the Middle Ages. Now the keeping of medical records as sources for research is being emphasized. So far, arrangements for their keeping and servicing have been inadequate, and the specialty of medical records librarian—what a misnomer—and facilities for training have not been developed. In this field the United States and Canada seem to be well ahead.

Happier than the fate of the municipal and hospital archives has been that of the notarial archives, a category of semi-public archives of the greatest value for research in economic, social, and cultural history; it has been said that a Frenchman would rather die without the sacraments of the church than make a contract without using the services of a notary. Under a 1929 law sparkplugged by Ernest Coyeque, notarial records more than 125 years old may be deposited in the National Archives and the departmental repositories. As a result, great numbers of notarial archives that in some parts of the country go back to the 14th century, have found their way into responsible custody. To become totally effective, transfer should be made obligatory, which it is not. Certain notaries are reluctant to release their old records because they are sentimentally attached to them or shun the labor of dusting them off and otherwise preparing them for the archives.

The second chapter, which I have bypassed, is concerned with the



problems posed by handling certain types of documents, such as seals, pictorial documents including maps, and government documents, called printed archives in France. The archival nature of the last is taken very seriously because, it is said, they "represent the visible face of the administrative world that otherwise remains in the dark." More than 20 pages are devoted to microfilming and the use of microfilm. It might be noted that the National Archives leaves microfilming records for public use to the French Microfilm Society, which has its studios on the premises. In the departments, photographic workshops, where they exist, produce microfilm for internal use and the public. At the end of 1967, only about half the departmental archives were equipped for this service, and only five or six of them had xerographic facilities. This chapter also includes sections on audiovisual and automated records.

In concluding my lengthy and necessarily inadequate summary, I should like to make some general observations concerning this truly *magnum opus*. The vast subject matter is well organized into chapters and within chapters appropriately broken down into sections. Although the history of French archives has not been included in the *Manual*, chapters and sections often discuss the genesis of present ideas and practices and begin with a theoretical discussion of the problems involved. Matters of less importance and of a very specialized character are treated in short paragraphs in small print, and ample footnotes refer the reader to pertinent literature and relevant administrative issuances. Appendixes show the various classification schemes and examples of finding aids. Although throughout the text there is evident an understandable pride in the achievements of French archivists, the deficiencies and defects of the present setup are acknowledged and frankly discussed. In solving their problems, French archivists are in some instances hampered by the weight of a long tradition. The glory of that tradition, however, is strikingly mirrored in this magnificent work.