

## **The Crucial Choice: The Appointment of R. D. W. Connor As Archivist of the United States**

DONALD R. McCOY

ARCHIVISTS AND HISTORIANS have often been reminded of the vital importance to Clio's tribe of the lengthy and hard-fought battle to commit the government of the United States to the erection of a National Archives building.<sup>1</sup> The passage of the National Archives Act, in June 1934, is recognized as being equally significant. Yet the determination that year of who should be the first Archivist of the United States was also crucial. That official, under the law, was to have almost complete freedom in appointing his staff and in making rules and regulations for the operation of the new agency. Moreover, at least on paper, he was to have broad powers in dealing with the disposition of federal records.<sup>2</sup> It all meant that the first Archivist would be in an unrivalled position to decide not only what the National Archives would become, but, indeed, also how the archival profession in the United States would develop.

Choosing the Archivist was a prickly affair. There were, of course, numerous people who wanted the post, especially as good jobs were scarce in depression-ravaged America in 1934. There were also some politicians who viewed the National Archives as a rich source of patronage because of the many appointments that the Archivist would control. And there was the fact that few people had suitable qualifications, for there was no archival training program in the country and not many Americans had worthwhile experience as archivists or historical administrators. Finally, it was obvious that the Presi-

Professor of history at the University of Kansas and a former staff member of the National Archives, the author is currently preparing a history of the National Archives and the National Archives and Records Service during the period 1934-68.

<sup>1</sup> The fullest, most scholarly study is Victor Gondos, Jr., "The Movement for a National Archives of the United States, 1906-1926" (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> 48 Stat. L. 1122-1124.

dent and interested legislators knew almost nothing about what an archivist should be.<sup>3</sup>

Candidates for appointment to the Archivist's job quickly appeared after the laying of the cornerstone of the archives building in February 1933. Many people urged J. Franklin Jameson, the chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, to apply for or at least to sponsor a candidate for the position. This patriarch of American archivists and historians replied that because of his wishes, personality, and advanced age (73), he was not in the running. Moreover, he had no candidate for the post; all Jameson wanted was the appointment of a well-qualified person from among the several candidates on hand. William E. Dodd, professor at the University of Chicago and vice president of The American Historical Association, wrote in May of the many applicants for the Archivist's job of whom he knew. He indicated to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that the AHA council was apprehensive lest the wrong person be appointed. Although the organization did not yet have a nominee, he told Hull, "I hope you agree with me that the American Historical Association is entitled to be consulted."<sup>4</sup>

Competition for the top post in the National Archives flagged as it became clear that Congress was not going to authorize the agency's establishment in 1933. Of course, interest in the appointment soared again the following year as the National Archives bill made rapid progress on Capitol Hill. Fear also arose, however, among Jameson, Dodd (by then president of the AHA), and their associates that politicians would dictate the choice of the first Archivist of the United States. There was the rumor that James A. Farley, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, was pressing a nominee for the office. There was also the aggressive campaign, spearheaded by Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi, on behalf of his state's pioneering archivist, Dunbar Rowland, who was not to Jameson's liking if only because of his age (70) and use of partisan politics to get the job for himself. Therefore, Jameson, Dodd, and

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the state of archival affairs at about the time of the establishment of the National Archives, see Christopher Crittenden, "The Archivist as a Public Servant," *American Archivist* 12 (January 1949):4; and Mary Givens Bryan, "Changing Times," *American Archivist* 24 (January 1961):3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Shelley, "The Interest of J. Franklin Jameson in the National Archives," *American Archivist* 12 (April 1949):129; Jameson to Albert Shaw, March 28, 1933, Jameson to Rosa Pendleton Chiles, April 1, 1933, in Jameson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; William E. Dodd to the Secretary of State, May 16, 1933, Official File 221, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

other AHA leaders resolved, in Jameson's words, "to circumvent the spoilsmen."<sup>5</sup>

A word should be said here about the nature of the historical profession in the United States during the early 1930's, something that had been broadly true for a generation. In short, the nation's archivists and historians worked then within a tightly knit hierarchical framework, with J. Franklin Jameson serving as the chief distributor of fishes and loaves. He, his mentors, and his early colleagues had established the profession, and since the turn of the century he had usually been *primus inter pares* among the most influential historians. This was because of the many professional activities and ground-breaking endeavors in which Jameson had successfully engaged.<sup>6</sup> He and his associates and disciples knew what they wanted, and they had been exceptionally able in pursuing their goals. Now that the National Archives—for which Jameson had been the chief agitator—was about to be born, they were not prepared to let others, whether dissenters in the ranks or mere politicians, choose who should head the new agency and thereby decide what course it should follow. It was not difficult for the Jameson circle to rally the faithful in the fight to determine who should be the Archivist of the United States. After all, in the United States in 1934, there were only about 1,200 professionally active Ph.D.'s in history and probably far fewer professionally influential B.A.'s and M.A.'s, most of whom had studied or worked with Jameson and the elite group that led the AHA.<sup>7</sup> These men and women, the country's professional historians and archivists, knew who the bosses were.

They had a good idea, thanks to Jameson's crusades over the

<sup>5</sup> Rosa Pendleton Chiles to Jameson, March 27, 1933, Jameson to Chiles, April 1, 1933, in Jameson Papers, LC; Journal of Robert D. W. Connor, vol. 1, 7, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Jameson to Conyers Read, May 28, 1934, Jameson File, Office of the Archivist, National Archives.

<sup>6</sup> For information on Jameson's remarkable career as an historian, historical administrator, and editor, see Shelley, "The Interest of J. Franklin Jameson in the National Archives"; David D. Van Tassel, "John Franklin Jameson," in Clifford L. Lord, ed., *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Elizabeth Donnan and Leo F. Stock, eds., *An Historian's World: Selections from the Correspondence of J. Franklin Jameson* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956), Memoirs vol. 42; Ruth Anna Fisher and William Lloyd Fox, eds., *J. Franklin Jameson: A Tribute* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> For information on the development of the historical profession in the United States, see John Higham, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965). See also, Marcus W. Jernegan, "Productivity of Doctors of Philosophy in History," *American Historical Review* 33 (October 1927):1-22, and William B. Hesseltine and Louis Kaplan, "Doctors of Philosophy in History," *American Historical Review* 47 (July 1942):765-800.

past three decades, of what would make an acceptable national archivist. As Solon J. Buck of the University of Pittsburgh volunteered to the AHA, that archivist should be a good executive and administrator, one who appreciates both the administrative and historical importance of archives. He should be able to work with both administrators and scholars and be familiar with archival principles. Additionally, Buck implied, the Archivist should not cater to the whims of politicians or fail to act in concert with his colleagues in the profession. As Jameson would undoubtedly have agreed, there are professional and gentlemanly, yet effective, ways to do things. Those are the ways the Archivist would be chosen and the National Archives run if the historical profession had anything to say about it.<sup>8</sup>

And historians were to have much to say about the matter. Of course, Jameson was busy in Washington trying to steer the archives legislation on the right course. However, William E. Dodd, the AHA president and by then the American ambassador to Germany, had decided to lay the question of selecting the Archivist before the association's executive committee at its meeting on May 20, 1934. Indeed, he had arranged to secure President Roosevelt's invitation for the executive committee to nominate someone for the job, although that was no guarantee that the administration would accept the AHA's advice.<sup>9</sup>

On Sunday, May 20, at 11 A.M., an hour when most other Americans would be in church, the AHA executive committee met at Columbia University. The group included AHA Executive Secretary Conyers Read, Sidney B. Fay, Dixon Ryan Fox, William E. Lingelbach, Constantine E. McGuire, and, as chairman, Charles A. Beard. It was a good cross-section of the historical establishment in the United States. Solon Buck's views on the subject of the Archivist of the United States were presented to the committee, and Dodd, in a letter, urged the group to nominate a candidate for the position. Names of a number of leading historians and archivists were discussed, but, not unexpectedly, there was no consensus. The committee asked Lingelbach and Read to confer with Jameson, as the senior member of the AHA council, to recommend nominees.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Buck to Conyers Read, May 10 and 16, 1934, Secretary File (Ex.), American Historical Association Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup> Conyers Read to Jameson, May 11, 1934, Secretary File (Ex.), AHA Papers; *American Historical Review* 40 (April 1935):579.

<sup>10</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, May 20, 1934, Secretary File (Ex.), AHA Papers; Read to Jameson, May 24, 1934, Jameson File, NA.

Jameson's first choice was his chief disciple, Waldo Gifford Leland, the executive secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies. Yet there were, Jameson thought, several problems with Leland. First, he did not want the job, although he was willing to discuss it; second, Jameson wondered what would happen to the ACLS—or more probably the influence of historians within it—if Leland left; third, Leland was a regular Republican, which could make difficulties with President Roosevelt and Congress. Still, Jameson had an ace in the hole personified by Robert Digges Wimberly Connor, the head of the Department of History and Government at the University of North Carolina. In fact, Jameson had not only told Conyers Read about both Leland and Connor toward the end of May, but he had also asked Connor if he would be interested in the AHA's nomination for Archivist if Leland declined to be considered. Connor replied that he expected to be in Washington in two weeks and would prefer to discuss it with Jameson then.<sup>11</sup>

Connor was, as Jameson knew, a splendid possibility. He was a member of a prominent North Carolina family and, of course, a Democrat. That would ease the problem of securing political support, especially in view of the Southern and Democratic congressional backing that Dunbar Rowland, Mississippi state archivist, could secure against a Northerner and a Republican. Professionally, Connor occupied a position in North Carolina much like that which Jameson held nationally, and Connor had friends all over the country as well, including Leland, Dodd, and Jameson. Connor would be 56 years old that summer. He had been a school teacher and administrator as a young man, but in 1903 he had become Secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission. In that role he developed the state's outstanding Department of Archives and History, and he became as well a prolific writer of scholarly materials on North Carolina history. In 1921, Connor assumed the Kenan Professorship of History at the University of North Carolina, a position in which he exercised considerable influence on scholars of Southern history.<sup>12</sup>

Jameson thought of Connor with good reason, given his di-

<sup>11</sup> Jameson to Read, May 28, 1934, Jameson File, NA; Jameson to Connor, May 28, 1934, Connor to Jameson, May 31, 1934, in Robert D. W. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

<sup>12</sup> Robert R. Simpson, "Leland to Connor: An Early Survey of American State Archives," *American Archivist* 36 (October 1973):513-22; Waldo Gifford Leland, "R. D. W. Connor, First Archivist of the United States," *American Archivist* 16 (January 1953):45-54; Hugh T. Lefler, "Robert Digges Wimberly Connor," in Lord, ed., *Keepers of the Past*, pp. 109-23; *Who's Who in America, 1934-1935*, s.v. "Robert Digges Wimberly Connor."

verse historical and academic activities, as "a man of affairs, who knows how to deal with politicians. He is, and makes the impression of being a man of power. He did a fine job in the organizing of the North Carolina Historical Commission and pushed its affairs forward with energy, skill and tact. . . . I think he has the necessary backbone to resist the pressure of office seekers and their senators and representatives, but would not do it unpleasantly."<sup>13</sup> Jameson was not wrong in any respect. Waldo G. Leland could not be talked into being the AHA's nominee for Archivist, and it is possible that as Jameson considered the difficulties involved he did not try too hard to change Leland's mind. Therefore, increasingly, it seemed that Robert D. W. Connor should be the nominee. And why not, for he was all that Jameson thought him to be and more besides. He looked like an amiable buffalo and was in fact a courtly, honest, modest, and likeable person, one who was thoughtful and could get things done with a minimum of fuss. Obviously, Connor could get along with a variety of people and persuade them to do things. A man of integrity and professional dedication, he would not allow himself to be pushed around.

By June 1, AHA President Dodd had instructed the executive committee to pick a nominee. Dodd clearly wanted the association to be ready to go into action as soon as the National Archives legislation was enacted. Moreover, since he was in Berlin attending to his duties as ambassador to Germany, he did not want any more time spent on the matter than necessary. On June 5 the executive committee laid the groundwork for its campaign. It wrote to President Roosevelt urging him to appoint as "National Archivist" a person with administrative ability and tact in dealing with government departments, yet one "who will maintain an intelligent and informed sympathy" with research scholars, one who is "deeply interested in facilitating and promoting the study of American history." Simultaneously, Executive Secretary Conyers Read pressed Connor for a decision on whether he would accept the Archivist job were it offered to him.<sup>14</sup>

Matters were not to proceed expeditiously. It would have been unrealistic to expect the White House to rush into an appointment, especially when there were a number of contenders

<sup>13</sup> Jameson to Read, May 28, 1934, Jameson File, NA.

<sup>14</sup> Read to Jameson, June 1, 1934, Jameson File, NA; Executive Committee AHA to the President, June 5, 1934, OF 221A Misc., Roosevelt Papers; Read to Connor, June 5, 1934, Connor Papers.



for the post of Archivist. Moreover, Connor was not to be speeded into a decision to be the AHA's nominee, regardless of what Dodd, Jameson, and Read wanted. Connor replied to Read that he would discuss the matter during his visit to Washington late in the second week of June. When he did see Jameson and Read, he told them that he could not make a decision until he had read the National Archives Act and been in touch with the president of his university, Frank P. Graham.<sup>15</sup>

The National Archives legislation was passed and approved by June 19. Jameson was not entirely satisfied with the law, largely because the staff of the new agency would not be under civil service. That made him all the more sensitive to the need to appoint a dedicated and able historical administrator as Archivist of the United States. For him, Connor was the man, and Jameson was prepared to do whatever was needed to see him in the job. The AHA's executive committee was of the same mind and apparently tried to force Connor's hand. Its members were polled by mail, and on June 21 Read reported that the committee had unanimously decided upon Connor as the association's nominee for Archivist. Jameson mailed a copy of the National Archives Act to Connor for his study; Read advised the North Carolinian of his nomination and urged him to decide to accept so that Ambassador Dodd could get the State Department behind Connor's appointment, a move that could carry considerable weight in view of the department's long-standing interest and responsibilities in archival matters.<sup>16</sup>

Others were, of course, ready to move, Congressman Sol Bloom of New York, who considered himself the father of the National Archives Act, urged the President to take plenty of time before making the appointment, since the goal had to be to name "the best man available." Bloom averred that he did not know who that was, but he nevertheless asked for a meeting with Roosevelt to discuss the matter. Clerk John G. Bradley of the House Library Committee undertook to evaluate for Committee Chairman Kent E. Keller of Illinois a dozen probable candidates for Archivist. On June 22 he advised Keller that only three men were available, capable, and not too old: Connor, John C. Fitzpatrick (editor of the Commission for the George Washing-

<sup>15</sup> Connor to Read, June 7, 1934, Connor to Graham, June 18, 1934, in Connor Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson to Samuel Flagg Bemis, June 19, 1934, Jameson to Read, June 18, 1934, in Jameson Papers, LC; Read to Jameson, June 21, 1934, Jameson File, NA; Read to Connor, June 21, 1934, Connor Papers. Dodd had apparently already moved by June 22 to enlist the support of Secretary of State Cordell Hull; see, Hull to the President, June 25, 1934, OF 221, Roosevelt Papers.

ton Bicentennial), and Thomas P. Martin, assistant chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. A week later, Bradley, indicating Jameson's influence on him, told Keller that Connor deserved their support. Of course, Jameson's commitment to Connor eliminated Martin, his assistant in the Manuscripts Division, from consideration; and the old gentleman ranked Connor over Fitzpatrick, even though Sol Bloom apparently favored the distinguished editor. Bradley was a rather remarkable person for a congressional aide in that he shared Jameson's vision of what the National Archives should be. This was seen in his comment to Representative Keller, his distant relative, about Connor: "I am told that Connor is a regular fellow in addition to being a scholar, that he has administrative ability, and that he knows his way about politically—meaning that he has sufficient guts to keep this thing out of politics and keep it on a high level of professional standards." In short, what it meant, as Jameson wrote to Connor on June 22, was that Keller and Bradley would go along with Connor. The word was also that this was true of Bloom, even though he preferred Fitzpatrick.<sup>17</sup>

While all this was going on, President Graham of the University of North Carolina was pressing Connor to stay there. This had great influence with the historian, for he loved both Chapel Hill and the university. Indeed, Connor informed Jameson and Read on June 22 that he could not accept the position of Archivist because of his obligations to the university. He indicated to Graham that the provisions of the National Archives Act also contributed to his decision, though he did not specify what bothered him about the legislation. Jameson and Read immediately urged him to change his mind, the latter telegraphing that "All our hopes were pinned on you and we hardly know which way to turn if you cannot be induced to reconsider."<sup>18</sup>

Communications were something of a problem at this time, for Connor was in Morgantown, teaching in the summer school of the University of West Virginia. Yet, the letters, telegrams, and probably telephone calls between the interested persons in Washington, Morgantown, Chapel Hill, and even Berlin were numerous. Jameson volunteered to drive to West Virginia to

<sup>17</sup> Rudolph Forster to Marvin McIntyre, June 22, 1934, OF 221A Misc., Roosevelt Papers; Bradley to Keller, June 22 and 29, 1934, Connor Papers; Jameson to Connor, June 22, 1934, Jameson File, NA.

<sup>18</sup> Graham to Connor, June 22, 1934, Connor to Jameson, June 22, 1934, Connor to Read, June 22, 1934, Connor to Graham, June 23, 1934, Read to Connor, June 23, 1934, in Connor Papers.



talk with Connor, but, out of deference to his age, Connor agreed to meet with him in Cumberland, Maryland. On June 24 Jameson arrived with Henry E. Bourne, the managing editor of the *American Historical Review*, to confer with Connor. The result of the meeting was that the North Carolinian agreed to reconsider his position and to consult further with President Graham, although Connor emphasized that both he and the AHA retained freedom of decision. Immediately, Jameson wrote Graham urging upon him the importance to scholarship of Connor being the AHA's nominee for Archivist of the United States. Connor, in his turn, wrote to a friend, C. T. Murchison, who was a high official in the Department of Commerce, asking for information on living conditions in Washington. Although he expressed to Murchison his keen reluctance to accept the nomination for Archivist for fear that he could be appointed only on a political basis, Connor was clearly reconsidering his earlier stand against being a candidate for the job.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Jameson indicated that he was prepared to adopt a new candidate in the event that Connor did not change his mind. John C. Fitzpatrick was acceptable to him, he wrote Read, if Connor did not accept the AHA's nomination. Ambassador Dodd acted to place the Secretary of State in a holding pattern. He cabled from Berlin to Cordell Hull, saying that "Connor cannot accept at once" and asking for a month's delay in the appointment process. The Secretary, who had written to the President on June 22 of Dodd's interest in Connor, immediately conveyed the ambassador's cable to Roosevelt.<sup>20</sup>

Connor's colleagues at the University of North Carolina and his fellow historians placed great pressure on him, the former pleading with him to remain at the university, the latter exhorting him to head the National Archives. Their reasons were plain in both cases. On the one hand, Connor was a power within the university—indeed he had been seriously considered for president there—and he was highly successful in appealing to the state's people and legislators for support of Chapel Hill's educational programs. On the other hand, historians and archivists from all over the country liked and respected him, and he was highly appreciated as one whose backing for historical projects always seemed to enhance their possibilities for success.

<sup>19</sup> Connor to Read, June 25, 1934, Jameson to Graham, June 25, 1934, Connor to C. T. Murchison, June 25, 1934, in Connor Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Jameson to Read, June 27, 1934, Jameson File, NA; Dodd to the Secretary of State, June 25, 1934, Hull to the President, June 25, 1934, in OF 221, Roosevelt Papers.

Additionally, Connor, more than any other prominent historian, appeared to have the qualities that would ensure his acceptance as Archivist by historical administrators, researchers, and politicians.<sup>21</sup>

The tug-of-war for his favor was ferocious and he felt it profoundly. President Graham wrote him on June 30 that he would abide by Connor's decision, though he made it clear that he wanted the historian to stay at Chapel Hill. Jameson apparently acted prematurely on July 7, when he told William E. Lingelbach that Connor was free to accept. Actually the North Carolinian had not yet made his decision, although his correspondence suggests that he was then inclining toward accepting the AHA's nomination for Archivist. Graham took heroic actions to retain Connor's services, not only telegraphing on July 8 begging him to stay, but also visiting with Jameson in the hope that the old gentleman in the Library of Congress would release his hold on Connor. It was to no avail, however. By July 9 Connor decided to allow the AHA to submit his name to President Roosevelt for Archivist of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, many factors contributed to Connor's reluctance to accept the nomination: his love of North Carolina, his dislike of leaving the university on such short notice, his anxiety that perhaps he was too old for a new, uncharted venture, and his fear that despite all he would not get the appointment and thus would be thought of "as an unsuccessful job-seeker!" Then, too, he "liked Fitzpatrick and thought that he would be a good man for the job." (And it was obvious that Fitzpatrick wanted the position, for he was asking his friends, including Connor, for support.)<sup>23</sup> However, Connor and the AHA were now committed to each other in the struggle for the Archivist's post and thereby control of the National Archives.

When word got out that Connor was the American Historical Association's official nominee, many of the candidates for Archivist withdrew. In fact, some of them, like Solon J. Buck,

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, W. W. Pierson to Connor, July 7, 1934, Dixon Ryan Fox to Connor, July 5, 1934, in Connor Papers. Lefler, "Connor," 109-14; Leland, "Connor," 45-51.

<sup>22</sup> Graham to Connor, June 30, July 8, 1934, Jameson to Connor, July 9, 1934, Connor to Leland, July 9, 1934, in Connor Papers; Jameson to William E. Lingelbach, July 7, 1934, Jameson File, NA. Jameson was either premature or immediate in arranging for Cordell Hull to propose Connor to Roosevelt, for Under Secretary of State William Phillips informed Jameson on July 9 that Hull had sent Connor's name to the President for consideration. Of course, it made no difference by July 9, for Connor was then the AHA's nominee for Archivist. See, Phillips to Jameson, July 9, 1934, Connor Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Connor Journal, 1, 34-36, 47, 76, 84; John C. Fitzpatrick to Connor, June 25, 1934, Connor Papers.

threw their support to Jameson's annointed. The result was that there was only one other strong contender for the position, Dunbar Rowland of Mississippi. Rowland had been questing for the job since early 1933 and had already gained much support among Southern Democratic politicians and even considerable backing from educators. The battle between the supporters of the two pioneers of the state archives movement would rage for ten weeks during the summer of 1934. The differences between Connor and Rowland, however, were considerable. The former was a man of many experiences in the scholarly world, while the latter's life since 1900 had been largely devoted to historical administration; Connor was more of the type of leader universally successful in academia, while Rowland was at home with a broader spectrum of people; the North Carolinian's support was more national in nature, the Mississippian's more sectional; Connor was moderate in personality, Rowland was assertive.<sup>24</sup> The question was whose forces would make the greatest impression on the President? The answer, Connor's, since his supporters were better organized to court Roosevelt than were Rowland's.

J. Franklin Jameson and the AHA carried the main burden of the fight to appoint Connor as Archivist, but the nominee himself became increasingly involved. Connor's modesty was never dented by his experience. He was amazed by what was claimed on his behalf, including the myth that he had been seriously thought of for governor of North Carolina in 1932. As he put it, regarding his supporters, "none realized better than I that they exaggerated my qualifications." Yet, plunging into politics was not as bad as he had earlier believed, partly because he found that he had a number of valuable political contacts and partly because, as he inscribed in his journal, "Politicians are not so bad when they are on our side!" Of the members of the North Carolina congressional delegation, Connor knew only Senator Josiah W. Bailey and Representative William B. Umstead. Although he believed that the state's senators and representatives backed him only because they had no other candidate for the "fat job," Connor's brothers were prominent in legal circles and well acquainted with a number of members of Congress. Of course, their father had been one of the best-known and most-beloved political figures of his time in North Carolina, so the Connor name was well established among the

<sup>24</sup> Connor Journal, 1, *passim*; Jameson File, NA, *passim*; Connor and Rowland folders, OF 221A, Roosevelt Papers; *Who's Who in America, 1934-1935*, s.v. "Dunbar Rowland."

state's elite. Furthermore, Connor was an old friend of Governor John C. B. Ehringhaus and of Franklin D. Roosevelt's long-time boss in the Department of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, who was currently Ambassador to Mexico. Both were very supportive of Connor's candidacy for Archivist. Secretary of Commerce Daniel C. Roper was another friend. He had already endorsed Fitzpatrick, but he promised to do what he could to help Connor. Roper did talk to the President and reported that he was impressed with Connor.<sup>25</sup>

Of the AHA leadership, Jameson made the greatest efforts on Connor's behalf. He worked unstintingly to halt or to undermine the campaigns of other contenders for the job; to rally the support of historians, archivists, and bureaucrats; and to persuade politicians that, for the good of all, a thoroughly professional man had to be appointed as Archivist. He particularly worked to reach the White House. In his first attempt, in July, he tried to see Louis Howe, the President's personal secretary, but Howe was too ill to arrange a meeting. Jameson bombarded Roosevelt and his staff with messages. On September 20, knowing that the time for decision was growing ripe, he urged upon White House Secretary Marvin McIntyre the proposition that the prompt appointment of the Archivist would be very helpful in determining the final phases of the construction of the National Archives building. Jameson wrote to Roosevelt at the same time, asserting that the objectives of the National Archives Act called for the appointment of a man of "scholarship and breadth of view." He added that Connor was superior, by far, to the other candidates of whom he had heard.<sup>26</sup>

There were many things that could have led Roosevelt to make his decision. It may have been the incessant campaigning of Jameson and his associates; the kindly words on Connor's behalf by Daniels, Roper, and probably Hull; the pressure exerted by the North Carolina congressional delegation; Roosevelt's own long-standing interest in historical matters; or even the President's knowledge that he would forever get the blame or the credit for whatever the National Archives became and that he probably would prefer it be credit. Indeed, it may have been all of these things and others besides. That is not known now, and probably never will be. What is important is

<sup>25</sup> Connor Journal, 1, 35, 65, 104-5, 107-8, 112, 115, 117-18, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Jameson File, NA, *passim*; Connor Journal, 1, 89, 127-29; Connor folder, Dodd to the Secretary of State, August 9, 1934, enclosed in Cordell Hull to the President, August 10, 1934, Jameson to McIntyre, September 20, 1934, Jameson to Roosevelt, September 20, 1934, OF 221A, Roosevelt Papers.

that after Jameson's letters of September 20 reached Roosevelt, he decided to act quickly. He penciled on Jameson's letter to McIntyre, "*Mac* Thank him and send for Professor Connor when I get back to *Wash.*" In view of the President's traveling schedule, that meant that the summons had to wait until September 27. It was then that McIntyre wrote to Connor, inviting him to meet with the President on Wednesday, October 3, at 11:15 A.M. There was no mention of what they were to chat about, but it was obvious.<sup>27</sup>

Robert D. W. Connor was, of course, available to meet with Roosevelt. Connor arrived in Washington October 2; that night he "slept some but not too much." The next morning, he first saw Jameson, and then he went to the White House where he was soon ushered in to see the President. In their unhurried conversation of October 3, Roosevelt and Connor began by talking a bit about North Carolina. Then the President recalled an event that Connor had forgotten: when Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the Woodrow Wilson Administration, Connor had made available for use in a project that Roosevelt was supervising some 5,000 documents pertaining to North Carolina's Revolutionary War naval record. Next to come was the real subject of the meeting. The President said, "as you know, I am required by an act of Congress to appoint an Archivist of the United States . . . and the man I am going to appoint must have two qualifications—he must be a good Democrat and he must have the endorsement of the historians of the country." Connor replied, "I can meet the first requirement, Mr. President, but I don't know about the second." "Well, I do," Roosevelt declared, "and I am going to appoint you."<sup>28</sup>

With that settled, the President launched off onto several related subjects. He was not reluctant to take credit for the establishment of the National Archives, asserting, "It is my baby, you know." He then alarmed Connor by saying that he favored Sol Bloom's idea for creating a separate Hall of Records for routine documentary materials, since he thought the National Archives should be the repository only for the great state papers, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, treaties, and presidential proclamations. The North Carolinian forthrightly argued against a Hall of Records. He contended

<sup>27</sup> Connor folder, Jameson to McIntyre, September 20, 1934, OF 221A, Roosevelt Papers; McIntyre to Connor, September 27, 1934, Connor Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Connor Journal, 1, 134–37; Connor to Sadie Connor, October 3, 1934, Connor Papers; Robert D. W. Connor, "FDR Visits the National Archives," *American Archivist* 12 (October 1949), 323–25.

that "ordinary office files" were historically very valuable and were often related to the great documents. More to Connor's liking, Roosevelt went on to say that presidential papers, including those in the Library of Congress as well as his own, should be in the National Archives. The President then ended the interview by suggesting that Connor should immediately see Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes about the government's survey of historical records.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Connor would be significantly involved in all of these vital archival subjects during his years in office.

On October 10 the President signed Connor's commission as Archivist of the United States, and the White House issued a press release on his appointment. Roosevelt also took care to write to Senator Harrison about Dunbar Rowland. He said that Rowland stood "very high in everybody's estimation," but that he appointed Connor largely because he was the "unanimous choice of the American Historical Association." Connor received his commission as a recess appointee on October 19 (and he was confirmed by the Senate without trouble on March 20, 1935).<sup>30</sup>

The leadership of the AHA was overjoyed. On October 14, Conyers Read told the executive committee of Connor's appointment. He reported that "They all with one accord burst into paeans of thanksgiving. Nothing, they felt, could be better,—nothing which the American Historical Association has helped to do in the interest of American historical scholarship, of greater moment." William E. Dodd cabled to Connor from Berlin, "You have one of the most important historical opportunities [sic] of our time," that is, providing easy access to government records for qualified researchers. The ambassador reasoned that Connor would have a free hand with appointments as long as the people employed were "competent and fairly trained."<sup>31</sup>

President Roosevelt had chosen well. When he took the crucial decision, thanks to the guidance of Jameson and the AHA, scholarly rather than political criteria prevailed. Furthermore, Robert D. W. Connor proved that he was not only professional and fair, but energetic, experimental, and innovative as well. Of course there were troubles and false starts.

<sup>29</sup> Connor Journal, 1, 134-37; Connor to Sadie Connor, October 3, 1934, Connor Papers; Connor, "FDR Visits the National Archives," 323-25; Lefler, "Connor," 116-17.

<sup>30</sup> Cordell Hull to Connor, October 15, 1934, Connor Papers; Memo for the Press, October 10, 1934, Roosevelt to Harrison, October 12, 1934, OF 221, Roosevelt Papers; Connor Journal, 1, 146 and unpagged section on confirmation.

<sup>31</sup> Read to Connor, October 22, 1934, Dodd to Connor, October 31, 1934, Connor Papers.



Connor, however, was to provide the new National Archives with a competent staff, and he began the arduous work of rescuing and making available for research a great variety of federal records. Under his direction, the National Archives would pioneer in, among other things, methods of the repair and preservation of archives. It would also play the leading role in establishing a recognized archival profession in the United States, complete with training and publication programs and a professional organization. Before the first Archivist returned to North Carolina in 1941, the first presidential library, Roosevelt's, would be built and the seeds of modern federal records management sown. Connor had begun, as he had wanted, something that could "truly be called a national institution."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Connor Journal, 1, 3.

# CLAMSHELL MANUSCRIPT BOXES

SEND FOR PRICE QUOTATION  
ON YOUR SIZE AND  
QUANTITY REQUIREMENTS.

CLAMSHELL



DROP FRONT



DROP SIDE



THESE BOXES ARE CLOTH COVERED, CLOTH HINGED AND LINED WITH PERMALIFE. THE 300 YEARS LIFE EXPECTANCY PAPER. UNSURPASSED FOR STORING VALUABLE DOCUMENTS.

**POHLIG BROS. INC.**  
25TH & FRANKLIN STREETS  
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23223

1866-1966  
A CENTURY  
OF PACKAGING

