

The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935

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ARCHIVISTS HAVE TRADITIONALLY looked upon historians as their peers, their colleagues, and their clients. But neither historians nor archivists have carefully examined the long history of this relationship. This paper will study their often troubled relationship from the beginning of the Conference of Archivists in 1909, held under the auspices of the American Historical Association, to 1935, when archivists decided they needed an independent association of their own. Although it is generally recognized that the period was an important era in the process of the differentiation of archivists from historians, it is not so well known that this gradual differentiation of functions was not particularly amicable. Indeed, it illustrates graphically the conflict so often found when an emerging profession attempts to distinguish itself from an older one.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the domination of American historical scholarship by the professional academic historian created a clientele with special informational needs. While earlier historians had respected documentary evidence, the new academic scholars adopted a methodology that emphasized the meticulous examination of a wide range of primary source material. They chose to follow the principles of the scientific school of history as it had been developed in Germany, where many American historians were trained. Returning home, these ambitious scholars discovered that the source materials they so badly needed were not available anywhere in America. They turned for help to their professional organization, the American Historical Association, whose first standing committees were the Historical Manuscripts Commission (1895) and the Public Archives Commission (1899).

Initially there was some confusion about the difference between historical manuscripts and public archives and, consequently, about the jurisdiction of the two committees. By 1902, when Herman V. Ames became chairman of the Public Archives Commission, it was accepted

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that his committee would concern itself with records created by public agencies while the Manuscripts Commission would direct its attention to the preservation of manuscript collections created by private individuals or organizations. Under Ames's chairmanship the Public Archives Commission sponsored numerous inventories of state and municipal archives, which were published in the *Annual Report* of the American Historical Association. The historians who participated in these projects were primarily concerned about the preservation of historical records, not about their administration. Although the Public Archives Commission set out to investigate the "functions of our public repositories" as well as their contents, the members soon concluded that "the way in which official documents of a state, city or county shall be dealt with is, after all, primarily a matter of concern to the people themselves." So they concentrated on describing the actual conditions of the archives, with the hope of encouraging legislation directed toward their preservation. Even in this task they did not turn for help to the few full-time custodians of archives. It appeared desirable not to "enlist the services of public officials or archivists, partly because such officials are commonly much over worked" and partly because these officials might be reluctant "to call attention to defects in the treatment of the papers under their care."¹

By 1909, legislation establishing state archival agencies had provided the Public Archives Commission with a new opportunity to further the cause of archives by sponsoring a conference of archivists. The idea for such a conference was conceived by Waldo G. Leland, a protégé and assistant of J. Franklin Jameson at the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Just as we often associate industrious individuals, such as Herbert Baxter Adams or J. Franklin Jameson, with the development of the historical profession, so Leland is identified with the archival profession even though he was never a practicing archivist.² Like Adams and Jameson, he was one of those historians characteristic of the formative decades of their profession, who was recognized more for his organizational abilities than his scholarly accomplishments.³ Since the Department of Historical Research was engaged in numerous projects involving archival collections in the United States and Europe, Leland had to become familiar with archives administration in this country and abroad. Drawn into the affairs of the American Historical Association, he was elected its secre-

¹ American Historical Association (AHA), *Annual Report, 1900*, pp. 5, 8-9.

² Waldo G. Leland, "The Reminiscences of Waldo Gifford Leland, May 24, 1955, Washington, D.C.," Microfiche Transcript (New York: Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1957), p. 7; Leland, "Some Early Recollections of an Itinerant Historian," *American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings* 61 (October 1951), p. 278.

³ In 1936 Solon J. Buck raised the possibility of nominating Leland as second vice-president of the American Historical Association. However, he concluded there was no "prospect of his selection, for he had no academic connection and his contribution has been that of facilitating the research of others rather than engaging in research himself." Buck to Avery O. Craven, July 27, 1936, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (LC).

tary in 1908, and in 1909 he became secretary of the Conference of Historical Societies. These offices allowed him to follow the work of the Public Archives Commission and keep abreast of the archival situation in the various states.

Three factors convinced Leland that the "time was ripe" for the Public Archives Commission to sponsor a conference that would "enable those who actually have charge of public records to get together and talk over the various problems, most of them technical, connected with the administration of archives."⁴ These were the increase in state archival agencies (which began with the establishment of the Alabama Department of Archives and History in 1901), the presence of a tradition of European archival practice upon which to draw, and the intensification of Jameson's efforts to promote the establishment of a national archives. This represented a considerable departure from the Public Archives Commission's commitment to promoting the preservation of archives, a departure that was not accepted wholeheartedly by Ames.

When Leland suggested that the 1910 Conference of Archivists focus on the problem of the physical restoration of archives, Ames objected that this subject was too technical. He cited the shocking example of the 1909 conference, which few archivists had attended. Most of the participants were either historians or persons with a tangential interest in archives, such as librarians, manuscript curators, state historians, and school teachers.⁵ According to Ames, the programs of the archival conferences must not be too technical. He proposed instead a more general program on archival legislation.⁶ The promotion of legislation had always been the major concern of the Public Archives Commission. As a historian, Ames had more interest in this subject than in the more technical side of archives administration. Not surprisingly, New York State Historian Victor Hugo Paltsits, who was involved in the planning of the 1910 conference, also objected. He was then engaged in a bitter battle to push through archival legislation in New York, and he hoped to enlist the aid of historians. Leland reluctantly agreed. It was decided that the 1910 conference would consider what types of material should go into an archival agency, a question Ames thought would interest archivists and hold the attention of historians as well.⁷

Ames's conviction that the Conference of Archivists should devote itself to the safekeeping of archives was confirmed by what he observed at the 1910 conference. The attendance of archivists was "so far below that of the historical students" that "it would have been more appropriate to change the name from a conference of archivists to an

⁴ Leland to Herman V. Ames, May 29, 1909, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC; Leland to Victor H. Paltsits, June 14 and June 19, 1909, *ibid.*

⁵ Small book numbered "3" containing list of attendants at the 1909 Conference of Archivists, Secretary File, Handbooks, c. 1884-1931, AHA Papers, LC.

⁶ Ames to Leland, April 19, 1910; July 10, 1910, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

⁷ Leland to Ames, March 30, 1910; Ames to Leland, July 10, 1910, *ibid.*

archives conference."⁸ In planning the program for the next conference he favored a general discussion of two disastrous recent fires in Jefferson City, Missouri, and Albany, New York, where extensive damage to public records had occurred. Technical questions would have to wait until the pressing problem of preservation was solved.⁹ This sentiment became the predominant tone of the 1911 conference. In his introductory remarks, Ames noted that "some of us were perhaps too optimistic in our belief that the time was ripe for the consideration in detail" of the problems of the "internal economy of archive administration," an obvious reference to Leland's paper, "American Archival Problems," which was given at the 1909 conference.¹⁰ What value, he asked, was there to describing and classifying archives if all such efforts were subject to the neglect of the fundamental problem of preservation? Reporting on the fire in Jefferson City, Jonas Viles sounded the same note. The time had not yet arrived, he stated, "for training archivists and really scientific work." He recommended that more attention be given to promoting the provision of safe buildings for archives.¹¹

This 1910 conference reflected the historian's interest in the preservation of archives rather than in the organizational aspects of archives administration. But Paltsits was soon to tip the scale in Leland's favor. In 1911 Paltsits lost his position as New York state historian and turned his attention to archival techniques. Leland had originally proposed that the Conference of Archivists should sponsor the compilation of a manual of archives economy. Paltsits had prepared an outline and submitted it to Ames. A subcommittee of Paltsits, Leland, and Ames was formed, and this group decided to devote the 1912 conference to the consideration of such a manual. Whether the Conference of Archivists should concentrate on promoting legislation (Ames's inclination) or devote its attention to archival techniques (Leland's intention) was now resolved. The latter course was reassured with Ames's resignation as chairman of the commission. His administrative duties at the University of Pennsylvania, he said, impinged upon the time he could devote to the commission's activities. Furthermore, since "the work of the Commission is apparently about to be centered upon the archive manual," Paltsits should take the chairmanship.¹² Leland and Paltsits could now direct the full attention of the conference to the proposed manual. It became Paltsits's policy to have as members of the Public Archives Commission only persons engaged in archives work who could assist in this task.¹³ Thus the interests of the

⁸ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 273; 1911, vol. 1, p. 329.

⁹ Ames to Jameson, May 1, 1911, File 74; J. Franklin Jameson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1911, 1, p. 329; Leland, "American Archival Problems," AHA, *Annual Report*, 1909, pp. 341-50.

¹¹ Jonas Viles, "Lessons to be Drawn From the Fire in the State Capital, Jefferson City," AHA, *Annual Report*, 1911, 1, p. 341.

¹² Ames to Leland, December 13, 1912; December 9, 1912, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

¹³ Paltsits to Charles H. Haskins, December 2, 1913, Executive Council, Secretary File,

historian were being subordinated to the needs of the archivist. After the publication of the reports on the archives of California and Vermont in the 1915 *Annual Report*, the commission suspended the inventory of state archives which the historians had made its primary objective. The archives manual now became its chief undertaking.¹⁴

Year after year tentative chapters of the manual were presented at the conferences.¹⁵ But the prospects of publishing these papers as a separate archives manual depended ultimately on the goodwill of the association. Paltsits had submitted the idea to the Council of the American Historical Association in 1912, but that council concluded that the proposed manual was too expensive to publish. The most obvious factor behind this decision was the declining support of the historians. The Conference of Archivists was an extension of the activities of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association. As such, the scope of its activities depended upon the diminishing beneficence of the parent organization. Upon their recommendation, a less ambitious plan for a "Primer of Archive Economy" was proposed by Paltsits, but funds were not forthcoming.¹⁶ The association began to cut its appropriations to the Public Archives Commission and to other committees as well.

Disheartened by the council's lack of support, Paltsits threatened to resign in 1912. Leland encouraged him to remain as chairman of the commission, however, "just now when the critical stage of preparing the Primer has been reached."¹⁷ Leland assured Paltsits of the council's goodwill, but it gave only \$50 to the commission, thereby putting an end to any major activities by it. In 1917 the Conference of Archivists turned its attention to the problems of archives in wartime, the United States having just entered World War I.

The war was a blow to the Conference of Archivists. The income from membership fees of the American Historical Association declined appreciably, bringing further cuts in expenditures and the suspension of the Public Archives Commission. Leland, who was always willing to serve as arbitrator between the council and Paltsits, believed the former did not suspend the Public Archives Commission, but had "merely

Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC; Paltsits to Leland, December 20, 1915, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

¹⁴ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1916, 1, pp. 75, 135; Leland to Paltsits, June 1, 1916, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

¹⁵ These can be found in the AHA, *Annual Report*, 1913-1916. See also Paltsits's review of this period in his "An Historical Resume of the Public Archives Commission from 1899 to 1921," AHA, *Annual Report*, 1922, 1, pp. 152-60; and "Pioneering for a Science of Archives in the United States," in *Public Documents with Archives and Libraries*, ed. Jerome K. Wilcox and A. F. Kuhlman (Chicago: American Library Association, 1937), pp. 233-39; also in Society of American Archivists, *Proceedings*, Providence, R.I., December 29-30, 1936, and *Washington, D.C., June 18-19, 1937* (Urbana, Illinois: Society of American Archivists), pp. 41-46.

¹⁶ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1913, 1, p. 262; a draft outline of the primer is in the Paltsits Papers, New York Historical Society (NYHS).

¹⁷ Leland to Paltsits, December 11, 1916; December 18, 1916, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

asked the commission to get along without any money." Paltsits found little comfort in this facile explanation. No matter how one interpreted the action of the council the result was the same: the commission was doomed to a cessation of its activities.¹⁸ No further Conference of Archivists was convened until 1921.

The early disparity between Ames's conception of the role of the Conference of Archivists and that of Leland foreshadowed an inevitable conflict between the aims of historians and archivists. As we have seen, this divergence became more evident when Paltsits tried to persuade the association to publish a primer of archival economy. The Conference of Archivists was in itself an indication of the process of differentiation between archivists and historians. As it became apparent that historians had changed their attitude toward archival matters during the postwar era, this process of differentiation was accelerated.

By 1920 the general membership of the historical profession had little interest in archival affairs. A generation of historians had emerged from American graduate schools apparently lacking the commitment to research and professionalism so characteristic of the pioneers of their profession. As early as 1912, Leland observed that in the ten years he had been in Washington, he could recall no more than "two score" historical investigations in Washington archives. He was "strongly tempted to conclude that those who should be the best friends of the archives have but slight appreciation of their worth."¹⁹

New fields of historical research were opening up which drew the attention of historians even farther away from public archives. American history was no longer the predominant field of professional historians. By World War I a steadily increasing number of historians were working in non-American fields of history.²⁰ This phenomenon and its consequences for archives did not go unnoticed by Paltsits. In response to Leland's assurance that the council approved of the idea of a primer, Paltsits observed that "what you write . . . may well have been the opinion and wishes of those who work in American history, but I got the impression, not a new one by the way, that the American public records are not viewed with much respect by those who are interested in other departments of history."²¹

Even those historians working in American history often had interests that differed from those of the scientific historians. Inspired by the social sciences, many historians broke away from the previous emphasis on political and institutional history and focused instead on the intellectual, economic, and social aspects of American society. Typically, an interest in the daily life of the "common man" called for

¹⁸ Leland to Paltsits, November 2, 1918; Paltsits to Leland, November 11, 1918, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Leland, "The National Archives: A Programme," *American Historical Review* 18 (October 1912): 2.

²⁰ John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 37 and 42.

²¹ Paltsits to Leland, December 12, 1916, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

an examination of material falling more in the category of historical manuscripts than public archives. As the informational needs of these historians expanded, they turned to academic libraries, to historical societies, and to special libraries, all of which aggressively acquired manuscripts during the 1920s and 1930s.

Perhaps equally significant, the "rapid expansion of the historical profession that occurred at the turn of the century did not resume until after World War II." The membership of the American Historical Association, 2,700 in 1908, did not pass 3,000 until 1926.²² Just as archivists benefited from the prewar vitality of the historical profession, they suffered in the 1920s and 1930s from its comparative decline. There was a feeling among historians that the Public Archives Commission had fulfilled its original function—the survey of state archives. The historian's primary interest was in the preservation of archival materials; and when there were no longer funds or individuals willing to carry on the surveys, historians abdicated their responsibility for the Public Archives Commission.

In 1919 the council of the American Historical Association asked Paltsits to draw up a plan for the future course of the commission. Paltsits responded with a proposal to establish adjunct archives commissions in every state in order to promote an interest in archives. When Evarts B. Greene, secretary to the executive council, received Paltsits's proposal, he turned to Leland for advice. Following a suggestion made a year earlier by Leland,²³ Greene suggested that the commission be suspended and that a special committee chaired by Paltsits be appointed to prepare the primer of archives economy. On Leland's advice the council voted to suspend the commission another year and formed the Committee on Primer of Archives, consisting of Paltsits and Leland.²⁴ To Paltsits this suspension appeared to end the Public Archives Commission. In 1920 the commission was revived, but the move had little meaning since funds to carry out substantial projects were not appropriated.

For the time being Paltsits remained chairman, but a new problem arose: lack of leadership. Leland and Paltsits, who had been so prominent in the prewar years, now moved on to other things. Although he accepted an appointment to the Public Archives Commission in 1921, Leland's participation was minimal. He spent a good deal of time abroad and became increasingly interested in interdisciplinary studies. In an effort to extricate himself from some of his obligations, he decided to resign in 1919 as secretary of the American Historical Association and "get out of everything." His relationship with the association "became informal and rather infrequent," he did not attend

²² Higham, *History*, p. 27.

²³ Leland to Paltsits, December 9, 1918, Secretary File, Correspondence, Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, Manuscript Division, LC.

²⁴ Greene to Leland, December 16, 1919; Leland to Greene, December 20, 1919, Executive Council, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

the meetings, and he lost touch with the archives situation in the United States.²⁵

Paltsits also gave less time to the commission. He urged the executive council of the American Historical Association to rescue the Public Archives Commission from the "inactivity of a paper organization." John Spencer Bassett, secretary of the association, replied that if he could suggest to the council any "practical work" the commission might do, the council would vote it funds, quite forgetting that Paltsits had offered such a plan in 1919.²⁶ At the 1921 Conference of Archivists, Paltsits suggested that archival propaganda be transferred to others if the association continued to neglect the obligation it had assumed in creating the Public Archives Commission. He was convinced "that too many of the controlling forces in the Association are concerned with other things, and our archival problems awaken no response in them."²⁷ In 1922 he resigned as chairman of the commission.

Indicative of Paltsits's and Leland's declining interest was their willingness to turn over the planning of the 1921 Conference of Archivists to Solon J. Buck, the superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. Reviewing the programs of previous conferences, Buck decided that the subject of archives was not and could not "be made one of general interest and popularity." They should give up trying to attract a general audience and arrange instead a small, informal meeting for the few people who were genuinely interested in archival work.²⁸ Indeed, the conference became an informal luncheon meeting of about twenty-five persons actively engaged in archives work.²⁹

Perhaps it was time for a reconsideration of the relationship between archivists and historians. This was forthcoming at the 1929 Conference of Archivists in a paper entitled "The Archives Department as an Administrative Unit in Government"³⁰ by Margaret C. Norton, superintendent of the Archives Division of the Illinois State Library. Norton pointed out that considerable archives legislation had been passed by 1929, but there were "in reality only about a dozen states in the whole country providing sustained and systematic care to their official records." She attributed this slow progress to the popular misconception of archives as historical documents, a fallacy arising out of the efforts of scientific historians to encourage their preservation. In Norton's view "the greatest handicap . . . to getting adequate

²⁵ Leland to Greene, November 1, 1919, Executive Council, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC; Leland, "Reminiscences," p. 42; Leland to Graham Botha, November 15, 1922, Series III, General Correspondence, Leland Papers, LC.

²⁶ Paltsits to Bassett, November 8, 1921; Bassett to Paltsits, December 5, 1921, Paltsits Papers, NYHS.

²⁷ Paltsits, "An Historical Resume of the Public Archives Commission From 1899 to 1921"; Paltsits to John W. Oliver, October 25, 1923, Paltsits Papers, NYHS.

²⁸ Buck to Paltsits, August 13, 1921, Paltsits Papers, NYHS.

²⁹ Margaret C. Norton, personal interview with the author, June 19, 1973, Springfield, Ill.; Norton to the author, May 31, 1973.

³⁰ Margaret C. Norton, "The Archives Department as an Administrative Unit in Government," *ALA Bulletin* 24 (September 1930): 536-68.

support for archives work is the belief that archives work is just another function of the state historical society." The Public Archives Commission must be encouraged to promote the preservation of archives "as an administrative problem of state government instead of as a mere adjunct to the historical field." If they hoped to attract public officials as new clientele, archivists must formulate a new conception of themselves by suppressing their personal enthusiasm for history. Indeed, the archivist's first interest "is in business efficiency, and only secondarily" in history.

Norton's conception of the archivist's role diverged so sharply from the traditions of the American archival movement that her speech was received "in stony silence" by the 1929 Conference of Archivists. Only the historian Milo Quaife perceived the importance of the speech. After Norton's presentation he told her, "Margaret, you done noble. You are way ahead of them and they don't know what you are talking about."³¹ It would be some time yet before Norton's approach became "a generally accepted tenet of archivists,"³² but she was a perceptive witness to the differentiation developing between historians and archivists. Norton delineated the situation facing archivists and offered them an alternative ideology and clientele. But those attending the 1929 conference were not prepared to disengage themselves from the familiar historical milieu.

In 1930 the Public Archives Commission was reorganized and returned to the hands of historians. The only archivist on the commission was Norton. The new chairman, Charles W. Ramsdell of the University of Texas, a member of the commission since 1927, acknowledged that he knew "little of the activities of the commission during the last few years and was unable to learn anything about them," which is some indication of the state to which the commission had fallen.³³

The council of the American Historical Association directed the commission to compile a pamphlet, which was published under the title of *The Preservation of Local Archives*.³⁴ This pamphlet was not intended for archivists; no attention was given to the technical matters relating to archives. It stemmed instead from the social historians' growing interest in local research material. Ironically, the only publication of the Public Archives Commission was not a manual on archives administration, as Leland and Paltsits had once hoped, but a pamphlet representing the primary concern among historians, namely, the *preservation* of archives. It was neither an important contribution to the professional literature nor a piece of propaganda that would promote the archival movement. As the pamphlet noted candidly, "local offi-

³¹ Norton to the author, May 24, 1973; personal interview with the author, June 18, 1973.

³² Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 30.

³³ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1930, p. 60.

³⁴ American Historical Association, Public Archives Commission, *The Preservation of Local Archives* (Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1932).

cials care for the archives";³⁵ the archivists did not. It did have one good effect on the Public Archives Commission. Ramsdell did not think the pamphlet was worth doing and resigned as chairman.³⁶ This was fortunate for archivists because he was succeeded in 1932 by Albert R. Newsome, secretary of the progressive North Carolina Historical Commission.

The establishment of the National Archives in 1934, and the creation of a National Historical Publications Commission, prompted a discussion within the council of the American Historical Association regarding the closer coordination of the activities of the Public Archives Commission, the Historical Manuscripts Commission, and the Publications Committee. As a result of this discussion, archivists were given another opportunity to evaluate their relationship with historians. On December 2, 1934, the council established a special committee consisting of Newsome, chairman, and Francis S. Philbrick, chairman of the Committee on Legal History, to examine "the relationship of the A.H.A. to the whole problem of documentary publications and of national, state, local, and private archives," and to consider, formulate, and present "plans for a nation-wide survey of archival material which might be made the basis for an appeal to the foundations."³⁷

Newsome wrote to a number of archivists and historians asking whether the "A.H.A. or the archivists should be responsible for archival interests and activities in the future." "The archival interests in the country," he observed, "have been represented only by the Public Archives Commission, a committee whose personnel, activities, conferences, etc., have been determined entirely by the Council of the A.H.A., and so far as conferences go, by the chairman of each year's A.H.A. program." In the past year or two Newsome had encountered an increasing desire among archivists for an independent, self-governing organization of their own. He had discouraged such a movement in the past, waiting until the National Archives was established and "until it was clear that the leaders of the A.H.A. would not regard the movement in other than a favorable light." Now, if there was substantial support among archivists and if it could be done with the cooperation of the historians, there would be advantages in an independent association. The time would soon come, he predicted, if it had not already arrived, when archivists would "need and merit a better medium of self-expression than a mere A.H.A. committee." To determine if this time had arrived, Newsome asked that the report of the special committee serve as the medium for presenting the idea to the American Historical Association.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁶ Posner, *American State Archives*, p. 27.

³⁷ AHA, *Annual Report*, 1934, p. 77.

³⁸ Newsome to Robert D. W. Connor, March 13, 1935, Correspondence, R. D. W. Connor papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina. Contrary to Newsome's assertion, the Public Archives Commission was not the only committee concerned with archives. The National Association of State Libraries had a Public

The responses to Newsome's query revealed that many leaders in the archival movement were reluctant to break with the American Historical Association. Solon J. Buck was "in considerable doubt" whether archivists were ready for it because the number of "strictly professional archivists" in the country was very small. He recommended retention of the Public Archives Commission for the time being, although he was "open to conviction." The highly respected Jameson had no strong opinion, although he tended to think "the time has not yet come for this."³⁹ Some responses were more positive. Theodore C. Pease, editor of the *Illinois Historical Collections*, acknowledged that the American Historical Association had provided a great service in the past in arousing an interest in archives, but it should now welcome the creation of an archivists' association. Paltsits expressed an attitude that was becoming increasingly prevalent among archivists: "using archives or manuscripts is one thing, administering them is quite another matter. The latter is an unknown quantity to the general run of academic scholars." Archivists need their own organization, he asserted, "unhindered by the veto of teachers and writers."⁴⁰

Norton provided the most cogent rationale for an independent organization, but she was hesitant about its formation. Archivists needed a separate organization, she argued, "because there is somewhat of a conflict of interest between what historians want and archivists need." Archivists needed a body of professional literature dealing with the cataloging, preserving, indexing, and inventorying of archives, matters of little interest to historians. In the past, she reminded Newsome, historians were the only friends archivists could rely on, but recently public officials had become their "most loyal supporters." Norton was anxious to form an archivists' association, but she worried about "the practicability of an archives organization—that is something else again." She doubted if the few practicing archivists could keep it solvent. Thus her answer was, like most of the others, somewhat equivocal.⁴¹

It might have been expected that the most positive response to Newsome's question would come from Robert D. W. Connor, the Archivist of the United States; but this answer was as equivocal as Norton's. Connor agreed that the formation of a separate archival organization was desirable, yet he qualified his agreement with the proviso: "if a sufficient number of members can be obtained to keep it going."⁴² It was this fear that most troubled the respondents to Newsome's survey. Many librarians and manuscript curators already belonged to the Conference of Historical Societies, leaving few persons

Archives Committee which served chiefly as a clearing house of information about archival legislation. It also sponsored programs at NASL Conferences.

³⁹ Buck to Newsome, April 10, 1935; Jameson to Newsome, April 10, 1935, Public Archives Commission, 1933-40, AHA Papers, LC.

⁴⁰ Pease to Newsome, April 19, 1935; Paltsits to Newsome, April 16, 1935, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Norton to Newsome, April 15, 1935, *ibid.*

⁴² Connor to Newsome, March 22, 1935, *ibid.*

concerned strictly with public archives for an independent organization of archivists.⁴³

The response to Newsome's inquiry was decidedly ambivalent, an ambivalence transmitted in the report of the special committee, a document composed by Newsome.⁴⁴ In it he distinguished carefully between archivists and historians, thus formulating what could be recognized as the archivists' declaration of independence. He identified the historian as the man in front of the desk, and the archivist as the man behind. In contrast to that of the archivists, the historians' primary consideration was the location and accessibility of archives. Although both groups were concerned with the preservation and administration of archives, "the primary interests and problems of the two are different. Each may logically be regarded as more capable than the other of promoting his own primary interests and solving his own primary problems." The contribution the American Historical Association had made to the archival movement was duly noted, but there was still "no standard manual of archival theory and practice, no adequate inventory of public archives and historical manuscripts, no well-developed archival science or profession." Having made this critical observation, Newsome tamely noted that while there was a growing sentiment that problems of interest to archivists "would be better served by a more independent, self-governing organization," there was still doubt as to the ability of such an organization to be self-sustaining at that time. If such an organization should materialize, the report urged the association to "manifest a sympathetic and cooperative interest" in its development.

This seminal report provided the rationale for a separate organization of archivists although it hesitated to recommend such a course of action. But even as it was submitted to the council of the American Historical Association on October 15, 1935, others were pursuing the possibility. On that very day, Solon J. Buck, by that time director of publications at the National Archives, sent a telegram to Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, asking him to give a paper at the 1935 Conference of Archivists that would lay the "foundation for discussion of the need for an American Institute of Archivists."⁴⁵

It is unclear precisely when or why it was decided at the National Archives that a discussion of the creation of a separate organization of archivists was appropriate for the 1935 Conference of Archivists. It seems unlikely that this was the conscious decision of any one person. We know that the top administrators at the National Archives, particu-

⁴³ Newsome to Paltsits, April 23, 1934; to Pease, April 25, 1935; to Buck, April 20, 1935, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Report of the Special Committee to the Executive Council," AHA, *Annual Report*, 1935, 1, 175-80.

⁴⁵ Buck to Blegen, copy of telegram, October 15, 1935, Correspondence, 1935-48, Folder Conference of Archivists, 1935-36, Solon J. Buck Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

larly Connor, Buck, and Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr., director of archival service, were considering the matter.⁴⁶ Discussion of the idea was probably encouraged when Newsome, who had long believed that Connor should "step into the lead of the archival movement," asked him to plan the next conference of archivists.⁴⁷ Connor delegated the major responsibility for this assignment to Buck.

Hoping to reinforce their belief that the time was appropriate for a separate organization, Buck sent Connor a memorandum on November 1, 1935, which included his correspondence with the Public Archives Commission. He pointed out that the difficulties encountered by the commission as a subsidiary to the American Historical Association suggested "the need for an independent organization of archivists."⁴⁸ The lackadaisical attitude on the part of the Program Committee of the American Historical Association toward the Conference of Archivists could only confirm Buck's observation.⁴⁹ The Program Committee favored a luncheon meeting for the archivists, but Buck protested that this would not give them sufficient time for their discussion following Blegen's paper. The committee refused to move the conference to another place on the program. It did appropriate some additional time for discussion. However, to Buck's chagrin, the printed program of the annual meeting did not mention that the primary purpose of the conference was to discuss the formation of an organization of archivists.

Nevertheless, on a cold December 28, 1935, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, the luncheon Conference of Archivists was held at Read House, Chattanooga, Tennessee, with over fifty persons attending.⁵⁰ Blegen presented the keynote paper entitled "Problems of American Archivists."⁵¹ Taking as his model Leland's "American Archival Problems," presented twenty-six years earlier at the first Conference of Archivists, Blegen discussed the "present status

⁴⁶ Buck to Blegen, October 17, 1935, Theodore C. Blegen Papers, University Archives, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁷ Newsome to Buck, July 16, 1935, Presidents Correspondence, 1935-41, SAA Records. The records of the Society of American Archivists are temporarily deposited at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison (SHSW).

⁴⁸ Memorandum, Buck to Connor, November 1, 1935, Secretary File, Correspondence, AHA Papers, LC.

⁴⁹ The archivists had problems with the Program Committee in 1934, when Chairman Samuel Flagg Bemis wanted the Conference of Archivists and the Conference of Historical Societies to hold a joint meeting, to the chagrin of the archivists. Because it was the fiftieth anniversary of the American Historical Association, with many special events, Bemis wanted to telescope certain sessions to reduce their number. It is an ironic comment on the status of the archivists in the association when we recall that the extensive program of the first Conference of Archivists in 1909 was optimistically held on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the association. Samuel F. Bemis to M. C. S. Noble, May 31, 1934, Public Archives Commission, 1933-40, AHA Papers, LC.

⁵⁰ "List of persons present at the luncheon for archivists at Chattanooga, Tennessee, Saturday, December 28, 1935, at which it was decided to form an Institute of Archivists," Organizational Files, SAA Papers, SHSW.

⁵¹ Theodore C. Blegen, "Problems of American Archivists," U.S., National Archives, *Bulletin*, No. 2 (November, 1936), pp. 17-24.

of archival economy." He paid homage to the contributions of the early pioneers, to the efforts of the American Historical Association and the Carnegie Institution, and to the activities and contributions of the Conference of Archivists. However, "it would be a mistake," he said, "to create the impression that American archival economy has gone much beyond its initial stages." There was no manual available, no body of techniques, and archival legislation was still inadequate in most states.

In the discussion following Blegen's paper, participants outlined problems to which an organization of archivists could direct itself. These included the establishment of a school or department of archival training at some university, the development and standardization of archival techniques, the formulation of a definition of archives, and the pressures which could be brought to bear on public officials who failed to take measures for the preservation of public records.⁵² The best hope for attaining these objectives was the formation of a professional association.

Accordingly, Roscoe R. Hill of the National Archives moved the formation of a committee of ten to plan a meeting for the projected organization. The earlier doubts about breaking with the American Historical Association were now gone. "The sentiment in favor of establishing a professional organization of archivists appeared to be unanimous."⁵³ Hill's motion was carried. At last the archivists had committed themselves to forming an organization apart from the American Historical Association. The 1936 Conference of Archivists would be devoted to the formation of the Society of American Archivists.

With the formation of the Society of American Archivists, a degree of equilibrium was established in the relationship between archivists and historians. The historical training of most archivists, the intimate relationship of the two fields, and the recognition that historians were still an important body of clients, made a complete break unlikely. The luncheon Conference of Archivists continued to convene at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association. In its early years the new society turned to historians—Newsome (1936–39) and Leland (1940–41)—for its presidents. (Granted, Newsome was a former archivist who had recently returned to teaching and Leland was long considered an expert in archival matters, but their ambivalent status as archivists or historians symbolizes the transition well underway by that time.) Theodore C. Pease, University of Illinois historian, was the first editor of the *American Archivist*. The noted Yale historian Samuel F. Bemis was chairman of the important Committee on the Training of Archivists, which issued its landmark report in 1938.

The organizational relationship between archivists and historians

⁵² Emmett J. Leahy, manuscript "Report on a luncheon conference of archivists, Read House, Chattanooga, December 28, 1935," Organizational Files, SAA Records, SHSW.

⁵³ "The Conference of Archivists at Chattanooga, December 28, 1935," U.S., National Archives, *Bulletin*, No. 2 (November, 1936), p. 15.

became less intimate as the latter willingly forfeited the care of archives to the archivists. On the recommendations of the special committee of Newsome and Philbrick, the Public Archives Commission and the Historical Manuscripts Commission were discontinued and a Committee on Historical Sources Material was established. This new committee was composed of a subcommittee on public archives and another for historical manuscripts. Gradually, the Society of American Archivists, the National Archives, and the WPA Historical Records Survey assumed most of the archival responsibilities formerly pursued by the American Historical Association. The coming of World War II, combined with the growing indifference of the historians, prohibited any ambitious undertakings by the AHA Subcommittee on Public Archives. In 1947 it was abolished, and by 1950 all AHA committees dealing with archival material had been discontinued.

In their classic survey of English professions, Carr-Saunders and Wilson noted that "when a new profession evolves within an existing profession . . . the practitioners of the new craft usually remain for a time in the shelter of their ancient home, and in consequence the segregation of the new profession is delayed."⁵⁴ Beginning with the 1909 Conference of Archivists, American archivists remained within the shelter of the historical profession for almost three decades. Their commitment to historical scholarship, instilled by their own interests, their training, the prevailing concept of archives as historical evidence, and their lack of numbers, made the formal break with the historians a slow and painful process. That break was encouraged by the opening of the National Archives and by archivists' growing awareness that their dependence on the historical profession could no longer prove beneficial to their professional development.

⁵⁴ Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, *The Professions* (London: Frank Cass, 1964), p. 298.