

# THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

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## THE ARCHIVIST IN TIMES OF EMERGENCY

WHEN the Society of American Archivists honored me by election to its presidency, I was happily pursuing my personal and official education among our good neighbors of South America, and, at the moment of receiving notification of my election, I was in Lima, the City of the Kings, being initiated by new-found friends into the fascinating mysteries of Peruvian archeology. My exaltation of mind at that time and under those circumstances and in that environment was such that I gave insufficient thought to the incongruous position that I, who had never been an archivist, would occupy as president of this professional association. However, on the way home, as the towering Andes and the low, tropical forests grew dim on the horizon, I had ample opportunity for reflection. I found some comfort in the thought that, if I had never been an archivist, there were many members of the Society who had not been archivists very long; and I drew inspiration from my memories of lifelong association with archives and of friendships with archivists in many lands. Furthermore, I assumed that the Society doubtless wished to emphasize the extension of its interest beyond purely technical or narrowly professional matters.

This conception of the Society's character is confirmed by the contents of its journal, *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, by the range of the discussions in its meetings, by the report of Professor Bemis' Committee on the Training of Archivists, and, especially, by the presidential address of my distinguished predecessor a year ago, on "The Archivist in American Scholarship." The concluding paragraph of that notable pronouncement may admirably serve as introduction to my own remarks this evening. President Newsome said:

The American archivist is a scholar, an expert technician skilled in the arts of his profession, and a public administrator. If he is alert

<sup>1</sup> Presidential address read at the fourth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Montgomery, Alabama, November 12, 1940. Acknowledgment for helpful suggestions is gratefully made to Mr. Dorsey W. Hyde and to Mr. Wayne C. Grover of the National Archives.

in every situation for the interests and usefulness of the archives in his custody, and conscious of his opportunity to become a highly significant factor in American scholarship and culture, he will hardly be able to restrict his function to the preservation of archives. He will discover that archival production, collection, preservation, and use are inter-related parts of an integral process which can not and should not be too rigidly compartmentalized. If one part is neglected, the other parts and the whole suffer. He will also learn that he is better qualified than anyone else to concern himself with the entire range of archival interests and must do so in order to save archives from impairment by administrators, politicians, and researchers and to make his own work most effective and fruitful.

It is on the basis of this broad conception of the interests, functions, and duties of the archivist that I should like to discuss with you my own thoughts relating to "The Archivist in Times of Emergency."

We live, in this century, in times of continuing and increasing stress; at present we are in a state of limited emergency, officially proclaimed. Recalling the major emergency of more than twenty years ago we are apprehensive lest the limited emergency, of more than a year's duration, should—perhaps very soon—deepen and spread into the greatest of all emergencies—total war—a situation which would be experienced by the people of the United States for the first time in their history. Fervently we hope that this may not come to pass, but we are forced to realize that developments external to us, which we ourselves cannot control, may force such an emergency upon us. It is therefore only elementary common sense that we should now, while there is still time, take the necessary precautions and prepare the indispensable plans.

It is not necessary to inform the archivist that in such an emergency he has public duties of transcendent importance, but it is desirable to discuss the nature of these duties, which relate to both material and moral interests, and the manner of their performance.

First of such duties is the obligation to take the necessary steps to assure the physical safety of the records in his custody. This is a problem to which we have as yet given little or no attention. Perhaps we are justified in believing, if we do believe, that we are immune from that most terrifying manifestation of total war, aerial attack, and that we need not fear the dangers of high explosives or of incendiary bombs dropped upon us by enemy aircraft. Let us hope that this belief is justified. Nevertheless, the events of the last twelve months should have taught us to expect the unexpected and to prepare ourselves

against the impossible; and the present state of our defense, or lack of it, against attack from the air makes it advisable to consider all appropriate precautionary measures, at least in the exposed cities along our seaboard.

Regretfully we have reached the conclusion that international conventions for the protection of historic and artistic treasures are of no avail under the conditions of total warfare. The United States, with numerous other American countries, has signed the convention sometimes known as the Roerich Pact; and the invitation of the government of the Netherlands, to attend an international conference for the consideration of a world-wide convention of similar purpose, prepared for the League of Nations, was accepted in 1939, but the futility of reliance upon such agreements has become unhappily only too clear.

The problem of defense against acts of war is a physical problem, and is shared by archivists with their colleagues of our museums and libraries, and with all who have the custody of our historic and artistic treasures. The Science Committee of the National Resources Planning Board has recommended that the problem receive immediate attention from such organizations or agencies as the American Library Association, the American Association of Museums, the National Park Service and, of course, our own Society. A joint committee representing these interests should, in co-operation with architects, engineers, chemists, military experts, and others, undertake the appropriate technical studies and should recommend the necessary measures of protection.

The problem of protection against air raids has already received much attention from our European colleagues. In 1939 the International Museums Office of the Intellectual Co-operation Committee of the League of Nations published a volume, based largely on the experience of the Spanish Civil War, entitled *Protection internationale des monuments historiques et des oeuvres d'art en temps de guerre* (International protection of historic monuments and works of art in time of war), while from London have come several publications, such as *Air Raid Precautions in Museums and Picture Galleries*, issued by the British Museum. Dealing especially with the protection of archives are two articles published by the General Archives of the Netherlands, on "The Protection of Archives Against the Hazards of War," and on "Archives and Protection Against Air Raids," both of which have been summarized in recent issues of THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST.

It is not my purpose to dwell on the nature of the protective measures, but only to urge that the problem be immediately and carefully studied. I may, however, repeat certain suggestions that have been made by members of the staff of the National Archives and others with whom I have talked, such as that archives of great sentimental value should be removed to places of undoubted security, that archives of which it is indispensable to keep an exact record should be microphotographed, and that the balance of the archives be left to take their chances, after such practical precautions as may be possible have been effected. The experience of the last few months is not conclusive as to the value of basement shelters; and removal of great masses of materials not needed for constant reference to widely scattered refuges must be contemplated. It has even been suggested that the vast caves of the Shenandoah Valley, far underground, with natural air-conditioning and within a hundred miles of Washington, might be utilized for safeguarding the archives of the region of the national capital.

Whatever plans of precaution may be made, they must be capable of immediate execution. In the summer of 1938 I visited the cellars of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and found them full of evacuation boxes.

It is necessary, however, to remember that the functions of the archivist, and the continuous use of the materials in his custody, are indispensable in time of emergency, and that in this respect his responsibility differs from that of the custodian of a museum and, in degree at least, from that of the librarian.

This observation leads us to the consideration of problems that present themselves in varying degrees in peacetime emergencies as well as in those of war. Among such problems, none is more urgent than the demands made upon the archivist to find space in which to store records whose room is needed for other uses. The rapid expansion of existing departments and bureaus, and the creation of a bewildering array of new services, are the usual phenomena of national emergencies. We have recently been reminded that in less than a decade the number of employees of the federal government has increased from half a million to more than a million, or over a hundred per cent. Now every bureau that undergoes expansion seeks additional space; following normal procedure it resorts, at once, to getting rid of as large a mass as possible of its records, and so, promptly, with or without notice, it calls upon the central archives establishment to take them off its hands. I have heard members of the staff of the National Archives

speak of this course of action with feeling and even with deep emotion. Furthermore, the expanded bureaus and the newly created services seem possessed of a *furor scribendi*, or perhaps we might call it a *furor ex machina*, which impels them to the production of new records. They leave us in no doubt as to the capacity of America to produce—words on paper—without limit.

In the early 1920's, with the aid of Dr. Newton D. Mereness and others, I made a survey of certain sections of the archives of the federal government, and reached the conclusion that their accretion during the two war years had about equalled in bulk the total accumulation from 1789 to 1917. I now believe this estimate to have been far too low. I learn from Mr. Grover, of the Division of War Department Archives, that the accumulation of records of the War Department and of the armies, prior to 1917, was 81,391 cubic feet, while for the war period alone it was 316,736 cubic feet. In other words, of the total accumulation from the beginnings of the federal government in 1789 to the close of the World War, nearly eighty-one per cent was of the last two years of that period. I am confident that a comprehensive survey of the federal records covering the last ten years would reveal even more startling comparisons.

Confronted by such a situation, the archivist's lot is not a happy one. He must resort to all sorts of expedients to cope with it, and at once, for emergencies call for high speed and are inexorable in their demands.

The measures to which resort must be had are of three kinds: distribution of mass by transfer, reduction of mass by destruction, and reduction of bulk by compression—as, for example, by processes of microphotography. The first of these measures is the most easily and quickly resorted to, if space for storage can be found or speedily provided. It is far better, however, to have foreseen the need and to have provided, in advance, suitable storage space to which, whether in times of emergency or under normal conditions, materials infrequently needed can be transferred and where they can be properly preserved. Every major archives establishment should have an auxiliary building, located in an outlying section of the city, or even outside, where it can store materials of minor importance. The Bibliothèque Nationale, for example, has long stored its files of newspapers in a specially constructed building at Versailles, and numerous other examples of outside storage could be cited. Buildings constructed for this purpose alone do not require monumental treatment, nor is it necessary to

make provision in them for expensive office, library, and reference space. They can, therefore, be of great capacity and can be constructed economically; furthermore they should be located on grounds large enough to admit of indefinite expansion. I am not sufficiently optimistic, however, to believe that such buildings will actually be provided in advance of need. Their construction will not be undertaken until the need of them has become overwhelmingly acute, with resultant inconvenience, appalling waste of effort, and detriment to the public interest. Those of us who went through the last quarter century of the campaign for the National Archives building have no illusions on this score.

So much, therefore, for distribution of mass by transfer. As for reduction of mass by destruction, I cannot do better than to refer to Mr. Emmett J. Leahy's admirable report on "Reduction of Public Records," which appeared in the January, 1940, issue of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, as well as to the work of the Society's Committee on the Reduction of Archival Material. The program of policy and of action proposed by Mr. Leahy seems to me sound and practicable, but if the archivist is to profit by it in time of emergency it must be applied and perfected under normal conditions. The pressure of emergency demands may easily lead to hasty and regrettable destructions. The archivist, who represents the interests of future generations, must be enabled to intervene effectively on their behalf. The archivist and the administrator, as Mr. Leahy points out, must work together in the weeding out of useless papers, but the process should be under the supervision of the archivist.

Reduction of bulk by compression, through processes of microphotography, is still in the experimental stage. In several bureaus of the federal government, microphotography is extensively resorted to, both for the purpose of providing duplicate records and to make possible the destruction of the original documents. I share the feeling of many archivists with whom I have discussed the matter that microphotography is destined to become one of the most important means at their disposal in the search for space.

It has long seemed to me, however, that preventive measures have received far too little attention in considering the problem of space for the storage of archives, and I am glad to note that Mr. Leahy emphasizes the importance of "efforts to prevent excessive record making and to insure segregation and prompt elimination of types of documents known, through experience, to have no permanent value."



Although this is a pre-emergency measure, it should have a prominent place in any plans dealing with emergency situations.

In the early part of the century, when, with my friend Dr. Van Tyne, I was engaged in the first attempt at a general survey of the archives of the federal government, I was much fascinated by the detailed descriptions of office procedure and record making as they were practiced in 1887, presented in the so-called "Cockrell Report" (Sen. Rept. 507, 50 Cong., 1 sess.). I wish that a similar description might be prepared of the corresponding practices as they are found today. I imagine that if such a description were compiled we would find it easy to suppose that office practice, so far as record making is concerned, had been prescribed by manufacturers of filing equipment, office supplies, and typewriters. For my own part I should like to see the trained archivist, the archivist for whom President Newsome has furnished the specifications as distinguished from the secretarial school filing clerk, have an important part in determining this procedure. This may seem to be a novel function for the archivist and to encroach upon the functions of the administrator, but that does not worry me. At any rate I am in good company in putting forward the suggestion, as is demonstrated by Miss Helen L. Chatfield's article in the April, 1940, issue of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* on "The Problem of Records from the Standpoint of Management." It seems to me that Miss Chatfield has made out a clear case for the active participation of the archivist in determining the procedure of record making. Unquestionably such participation would greatly simplify the problem of the archivist who is to be charged with the care of the records after they have been transferred to his custody. I believe that the archivist, in collaboration with the administrator, would be able to simplify and abbreviate the practices of record making, to make the completed records more useful to the administration, to render their manipulation far easier, to bring about frequent reductions of their bulk, and, finally, to make possible their transfer to the archives establishment in condition to be readily absorbed and administered.

You may ask what this has to do with the functions of the archivist in times of emergency, and my reply is that such pre-emergency measures would greatly facilitate the performance of emergency functions.

The problems that we have considered thus far have dealt with the protection of archives against acts of war, and with the difficulties of providing storage space for them in times of emergency, when vast

accumulations of materials are suddenly transferred to the custody of the archives establishment. These problems are physical in character, and the archivist deals with them in his capacity as custodian of material things. Let us turn now to problems which the archivist must deal with as a scholar and as an interpreter of records.

In normal times the archivist is constantly called upon to furnish, from the records under his control, information which is required by the various branches of the government in their transaction of the public business. In times of emergency these demands increase greatly in number and in urgency and broaden in scope. The archivist becomes an expert on many questions of organization and procedure, for he is the custodian of the records of earlier experiences. In the National Archives are to be found, for example, the records of the numerous emergency services of the World War period—such as the War Industries Board, the Shipping Board, the Food Administration, the Fuel Administration, the War Labor Board, and the Committee on Public Information. In the present emergency of national defense it is highly important to learn as much as possible, and as soon as possible, of the organization and activities of some of these earlier bodies, and the archivist is called upon to furnish this information. The difficulty of answering these calls under emergency conditions suggests at once the importance of preparing such information in advance. In general we might urge that at the expiration of an emergency the records of the special services established to deal with it should be carefully organized, and that a series of studies should be made of their organization and operations. Thus the archivist would perform duties analogous to those of the historical section of a general staff, making available for future planning the experience of the past.

This aspect of the archivist's functions seems to me so important and so worthy of our careful consideration that I venture to reinforce what I have just said by quoting a statement by Mr. Grover, contained in a memorandum which he has been good enough to furnish me. Mr. Grover writes:

As an expert, the archivist has a place in the governmental framework which is particularly significant for a democracy in war periods. Potentially, at least, he is the custodian not only of the records but of some part of the knowledge and skills of past institutions. An emergency produces war-time agencies which flourish for a time, disappear, and then in the next emergency come to life again. The archivist in a sense is a part of each re-emerging agency, aiding the members of the new organization to discover their institutional past. In periods of emergency democratic



government relies largely on the volunteer service of civilian experts. Whatever nuclei of past experience they rely upon must be found either in the records or in the memories of those who participated, and it is the records which are more likely to yield precise, technical, and detailed information. The archivist is potentially capable of supplying an element of continuity more reliable than memory; but to do it he must offer himself as more than a guide. He must be a consultant, thoroughly grounded in a knowledge of the governmental institutions, past and present, with which he deals.

I think you will agree with me that this conception of the role of the archivist as both guide and consultant in times of emergency establishes his position as one of capital importance and of high responsibility.

Finally, I should like to discuss an emergency function of the archivist which he would perform in his scholarly rather than in his official capacity, but which is closely related to his official functions. He should exercise leadership in a movement to gather and preserve the materials of all sorts upon which the history of the emergency in all its aspects must ultimately be based.

Some of you will remember, for you took part in it, the work of the National Board for Historical Service, a volunteer organization of historians which served a variety of purposes during the period of the World War. As it turned out, the activities of that body which had the most far-reaching and the most lasting effects were concerned with the collection and preservation of historical records. In May, 1917, a special committee of the board, composed of the late Gailard Hunt, of the present archivist of the United States, and of the current incumbent of the presidency of the Society of American Archivists, addressed a letter to all state historical commissions, to the most active local historical societies, and to a great number of librarians, in which they said:

It seems clear to us that if the interests of the student of history are to be secured, the various historical agencies of the country, and especially the historical societies and libraries, must bestir themselves to provide for the systematic and inclusive collection and the effective preservation of all kinds of materials serving to record and illustrate present events.

Many replies to this appeal were received and, under the guidance of the committee, much collecting activity was inaugurated. A few months later, moreover, the committee addressed the state councils of defense, suggesting that they should appoint state committees on history. In this appeal the committee said:

The National Board for Historical Service is endeavoring to do two things: to make our past experience useful for the present, and to see to it that our present experience is preserved for the future. We believe that experience is the greatest human asset, and that its use and preservation are matters of the greatest public importance.

In part as a result of this suggestion a number of state war history commissions, as most of them were designated, were organized by the various councils of defense, and became exceedingly active. In 1919, a National Association of State War History Organizations was formed, and although it was not long-lived, it served to stimulate and guide the organization of materials for the history of the war period after the National Board for Historical Service had demobilized itself. To those who are curious to learn more of this episode, I commend the perusal of a section of the *Annual Report* of the American Historical Association for the year 1919 (Volume 1), entitled "American Historical Activities During the World War," where, in nearly two hundred pages, Dr. Newton D. Mereness has compiled a record of which American historians have no reason to be ashamed.

The point of this digression is that in 1917 there was no national archives establishment and there were only a few state establishments of the now familiar pattern; consequently leadership in the movement to collect and preserve the materials for the history of the emergency had to be assumed by a voluntary and improvised organization. The situation today is entirely different, in that we have a national archives establishment, a large number of strong state establishments, and, uniting all these in co-operative activities, the Society of American Archivists. In present and future emergencies it will not be necessary to have recourse to improvised bodies, but the recorded experience of such organizations may usefully serve us in planning activities appropriate to the times.

As I have intimated, the exercise of leadership of the sort described imposes itself upon the archivist because of his dual role of scholar and expert on historical source materials. It may be pointed out that in times of emergency the archivist will be so overwhelmed with official duties that he will have scant time for organizing and directing general activities, but for numerous state or local archives establishments the collection and preservation of regional materials may well constitute one of their most important and necessary functions. In any event it is, it seems to me, incumbent upon the Society of American Archivists, through one of its committees or through some other appropriate agency, to assume responsibility for encouraging and co-

ordinating such activities throughout the nation.

By way of summing up, may I review briefly the suggestions that I have ventured to lay before you, and to propose, on the basis of those suggestions, a program of special activities for our Society?

1. To assure the physical safety of the records in the custody of our archivists, studies should at once be made of the most effective measures of protection against the dangers of war; and general and specific recommendations should be formulated for the guidance of the directors of our archival establishments.

2. To assure the additional storage space called for by emergency transfers of records to central depositories, special studies should be made of the methods by which such space may be secured, rapidly and on the shortest of notice. These studies would be closely related to the long-term study already undertaken by the Society on the reduction of archival material. Each establishment, moreover, should make a survey of additional storage space within range of its operations, to which records might be quickly transferred, and should assure itself of the means of making such transfers without loss of time, should occasion for them arise.

3. A series of brief studies should be undertaken on the organization, functions, and history of the special administrative agencies created to deal with previous emergencies, selecting for such study those agencies whose experience seems likely to be most useful at the present time or in the near future.

4. A long-term study should be undertaken on the practices and methods of work of governmental offices, with special reference to the processes of record production and for the purpose of providing means of simplifying and abbreviating those processes and, above all, of reducing the output. This is a major undertaking requiring governmental authorization and co-operation, and its bearing upon the functions of the archivist in times of emergency is that reforms in practice, based upon the results of such a study, would undoubtedly facilitate the performance of emergency functions, as they would also facilitate the performance of functions under normal conditions.

5. There should be undertaken the preparation of a manual of information and suggestions respecting the collection and preservation, under emergency conditions, of materials illustrative of all phases of the emergency. A manual of this sort could be prepared under the direction of a standing or special committee which would also endeavor to promote and co-ordinate such activities on a national scale.

The carrying out of the program which I have suggested would make heavy demands upon the Society's resources and upon the goodwill, time, and effort of its members and of the archival establishments of the United States. If financial assistance should be needed for certain parts of it, I should hope that it might be possible to secure it. At any rate I believe that the matters which have been discussed are worthy of our careful consideration.

And now, in closing, I find myself impelled to offer a suggestion which I do not insist that you should take seriously. We are all agreed, I trust, that emergencies are the bane of what should be a relatively peaceful, although laborious, existence. Should we not try to understand better the nature of the emergencies that arise to plague us, as the meteorologist endeavors to understand the weather that besets us? Why should we not join, therefore, with the scholars in other appropriate fields of learning in a study of the natural history of these recurring phenomena?

I can see, in my imagination, filling a long shelf in my office, such a work—a monumental work, in many splendid volumes, which has been produced with the munificent aid of convinced and admiring foundations and with the co-operation of advisory boards of illustrious names. And as I run over the contents of this great contribution to knowledge, I note that they deal with the origins, the rise, the florescence, and subsidence, and the re-emergence of emergencies, and that separate volumes are devoted to their bibliography, their folklore, their economics, their statistics, their sociology, their dynamics, their psychology, and their politics.

But as my mental vision of this great work fades, my physical vision lights on a small volume, on the fly-leaf of which I find an inscription:

“J. Franklin Jameson from Henry Adams,  
April 4, 1910.”

The title of the little book is *A Letter to American Teachers of History*, and at the bottom of page 15, my attention is arrested by these words:

Man had always flattered himself that he knew—or was about to know—something that would make his own energy intelligible to itself, but he invariably found, on further inquiry, that the more he knew, the less he understood.

WALDO G. LELAND

American Council of Learned Societies