

## THE TRAINING OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS<sup>1</sup>

**B**EFORE the training that is essential or desirable for professional work with archives can be intelligently discussed it is necessary to understand what the job of a public archivist is. Essentially it consists of the appraising, selecting, assembling, rehabilitating, preserving, arranging, describing, and facilitating the use of such records of the agencies of the government served as are no longer needed for frequent consultation by those agencies but should nevertheless be preserved because of possible administrative, legal, or historical value to the government or to its citizens. While there are some obvious similarities between that job and the job of the librarian, there are important differences, most of which arise out of the differences in the character of the materials with which the two professions are concerned. The official or legal significance and organic character of archives constitute perhaps the primary difference between them and ordinary library books, but the physical differences are also important. Books are usually provided with title pages, tables of contents, and prefaces, and their component parts are usually bound together or conveniently numbered. Each book, or at least each work, comprises a convenient unit of treatment. Archival materials, and also historical manuscripts, lack these conveniences. A single document in a body of modern archives is as a rule no more a proper unit of treatment than would be a single leaf, or at least a single chapter, of a book. The archivist must determine the interrelations of his documents, identify the appropriate units for treatment, and explain what they are, not merely catalogue them; and all without benefit of title pages, tables of contents, and prefaces. If he attempts to treat each document as a unit for cataloguing and classification according to some subject or alphabetical or chronological scheme, he will not only find himself involved in an interminable task, but he will probably impair the value of his material by destroying the series or groups to which it belongs.

The body of knowledge that the archivist should have at his command in order to do this job effectively may for purposes of con-

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venience be called archival science. It is an applied science rather than a pure science, of course, and, like medical science, it is compounded of parts of many other sciences or fields of knowledge, together with certain principles and techniques derived from practical experience.

That the archivist should be well-grounded in history, and especially the history of the country or district he serves, is fairly obvious; also that he should know the current workings of his government and especially of those agencies of that government from which the records in his custody are derived. Equally important is a more specialized subject which might be considered a part of either history or government but is usually included in neither, that is, administrative history or the history of the government and the agencies through which it has operated and which have created its archives.

That the archivist needs to understand the historical method—a method of research that is used not only by historians but also by the social sciences and the humanities and to some extent by the natural scientists—if he is to function effectively, is obvious. That means that he must have an acquaintance with the so-called auxiliary sciences of history. Granting that the American archivist does not need the intensive training in diplomatics, paleography, sphragistics, linguistics, chronology, and the like that is given to European archivists, nevertheless, he needs to have a speaking acquaintance with them and to know that they have applications to modern as well as to ancient and medieval documents. He ought at least to know that diplomatics is concerned with the forms of documents and not with diplomacy.

Besides this essential background knowledge that all archivists should have, each individual archivist usually finds that it is necessary for him to know something about the special fields of knowledge to which the documents in his custody relate. A custodian of the archives of a labor bureau needs a knowledge of economics; of census records, statistics; of court records, law; of military records, military science; of weather bureau records, meteorology; and so on. It cannot be expected, of course, that the archivist will be well-grounded in advance in all these fields, but it is evident that he needs a broad general education and the ability to orient himself in any field of knowledge when the occasion arises.

The more specialized knowledge needed by the archivist, which

might be designated as archival economy or archives administration, should include not only the theoretical and practical conclusions that have been reached by archivists as a result of their observations and experiences but also the history of the development of systems of administering records and archives and of theories concerning them. This historical approach is necessary in order that the archivist may better understand his function in society through a knowledge of how it has developed. Two other approaches are obviously desirable, however: One, which is a logical culmination of the historical approach, is the study of present practices with reference to archives in the principal countries and institutions of the world; and the other is the subject or topical approach. No generally accepted systematic organization of archival economy by topics has been evolved as yet, but the following has been found to be a workable outline: (1) the nature and value of archives; (2) the making of archives; (3) the status and functions of archival agencies; (4) internal organization; (5) buildings and equipment; (6) the recruitment and training of personnel; (7) the appraisal and selection of archival material; (8) the preservation and rehabilitation of archival material; (9) the arrangement and description of archival material; (10) the reproduction of archival material, including copying by hand or by typewriter, or reproduction by photographic processes; (11) the editing and publishing of archival documents; (12) the service of archives, including exhibitions; (13) problems arising in connection with special types of archival deposits, such as local archives, business archives, and church archives; and (14) problems arising in connection with special physical types of archival material, such as maps, motion and still pictures, and sound recordings.

If such is the knowledge that an archivist needs, the question that arises at once is, How may this knowledge be acquired? In Europe, and especially on the Continent, where archival work has long been recognized as a distinct profession, schools for the training of archivists, such as the famous *École des Chartes* in Paris, have been in operation for many years. These schools give advanced training in history and historical methods, and especially the auxiliary sciences of history, as well as courses on the history of archives and archival economy. Where the schools are associated with archival establishments, as most of them are, the students usually gain some practical experience as they are taking their courses, and as a rule a period of apprenticeship or internship is required after the completion of the

formal training before the students are recognized as professional archivists.

Since few Americans who wish to become archivists can avail themselves of the training to be had in these European schools, even in normal times, it is important to consider to what extent they can obtain the desirable training in this country. It is obvious that most of the general or background knowledge can be obtained in the departments of history and the social sciences of our larger graduate schools, though more courses on administrative history should be offered and more attention should be given to the auxiliary sciences of history and especially their applications to modern materials.

For the study of archival economy, the fact that there exists a considerable body of literature on the subject is of outstanding importance. This literature is hard to find, however; most of it is not available in English, and some of it is to be found in this country only in a few large libraries, if at all. There is need for more bibliographical work in this field, such as the *Selected References on Phases of Archival Economy*, produced by the National Archives as No. 6 of its *Staff Information Circulars*; of more translations, such as Dr. Leavitt's translation of the Dutch *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York. H. W. Wilson Company, 1940); of the building up of more adequate collections in libraries; and finally of the preparation and publication of a manual designed especially for American archivists.

The desirability of providing somewhere in this country specialized training for archivists was pointed out by Dr. Waldo G. Leland as long ago as 1909, but, despite the growing interest in archival matters, none of our institutions rose to the occasion and the staff of the National Archives had to be recruited without benefit of specialized training. Some attention had long been given, of course, in seminars and in courses devoted to historical methodology, to archives as materials for historical research; and a special course dealing with archives primarily from this point of view was inaugurated at Harvard University in 1937. The first course designed primarily for the training of archivists to be offered in this country appears to have been the course given by the present writer at Columbia University during 1938-1939. This course, which was entitled "Archives and Historical Manuscripts," dealt with the history and administration of archives in the principal countries of the world and with special topics in archival economy approximately as outlined above. For

financial reasons Columbia University was unable to continue this course, but a course on archival economy was given last summer in the Library School of Columbia University by Miss Margaret C. Norton, of the Archives Division of the Illinois State Library.

The arrival in Washington in the summer of 1939 of Dr. Ernst Posner, who had had extensive experience as a professional archivist in the Prussian Privy State Archives and as a teacher in the school for archivists connected with that institution, made possible the initiation of a program for the training of archivists in the national capital. Dr. Posner was appointed professor of archives administration in the Graduate School of the American University, and arrangements were made for the offering jointly by that institution and the National Archives of a course entitled "The History and Administration of Archives" to be given by Dr. Posner and the writer, which covers essentially the same ground as the course given at Columbia University the previous year. In the academic year 1939-1940 four students took this course for credit at the American University, and, in addition, fifteen others, mostly members of the staff of the National Archives, took it as auditors. In addition Dr. Posner gave a course in methods and materials in modern history at the American University which provided excellent background material for prospective archivists.

The apparent success of this experiment led the Carnegie Corporation, through the American Council of Learned Societies, to provide financial assistance for a period of three years that has made possible the offering of a more comprehensive program for the training of archivists in Washington. The courses given last year are being repeated this year, and in addition courses are offered by the American University in co-operation with the National Archives on comparative administrative history (by Dr. Posner), on the administrative history of the federal government (by Dr. Louis Hunter), and on the administration of current records in government offices (by Miss Helen L. Chatfield, Treasury Department archivist). The total registration in the four courses given during the present semester is thirty-five. Numerous courses in history and the social sciences offered at the American University and at other institutions in Washington are appropriate to provide background training for prospective archivists, and students who have prepared themselves to profit thereby will be given opportunities for advanced study of archival problems and archival administration as interns at the National

Archives. It is the hope of the writer and Dr. Posner that they will be able, during the three-year period for which this program is financed, to prepare an American manual of archival economy.

There is no reason why the development of this program should discourage graduate schools outside of Washington from arranging programs, of background courses at least, for the training of archivists, and the offering by some of them of specialized courses in co-operation with state archival agencies should be encouraged. It may be pointed out, moreover, that a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy in history or one of the social sciences in any of our larger graduate schools, who has had appropriate background courses and desires to qualify for a career as an archivist, could profitably spend one of his years of graduate study in Washington, taking some of the specialized work now available there and making use of the resources of Washington in research for his thesis.

Since most practicing archivists in this country have not had adequate professional training of the sort here proposed and numerous others without such training will probably be appointed to archival positions in the future, it should be pointed out that, while experience alone cannot make one a professional archivist any more than could experience in the practice of medicine without theoretical training qualify one to be a physician, nevertheless experience coupled with extensive and intensive individual study might give one the equivalent of such training. Practicing archivists whose background or theoretical training is incomplete should be encouraged, therefore, to engage in such study, and, whenever the staffs are large enough to justify, in-service training programs should be conducted. The National Archives has been experimenting for about two years with in-service training courses, and the consensus of opinion seems to be that they have been valuable both to the institution and to the individual students. Some of these have been divisional seminars designed, as a rule, to promote study of the special problems of the divisions as well as of archival science in general, and others, open to any qualified members of the staff, have been devoted to the study of such phases of archival science as federal administrative history, records in the National Archives as materials for research, and the arrangement and description of archival material.

A question that inevitably arises whenever the training of archivists is under consideration is, What are the prospects that those who prepare themselves for careers as archivists will be able to find

employment in their chosen profession? It must be admitted that no considerable number of appointments are likely to be made in the National Archives in the near future and that most of the vacancies in higher positions there will probably be filled by promotion from within. All new appointments are made from Civil Service registers, and the commission has already given an examination for junior archivist (initial salary \$2,000), which has provided a register of eligibles. Other examinations will doubtless be given from time to time, and it is reasonable to suppose that competent people who have had training for archival work will be more likely than others to attain high rank on the resultant registers and to be selected for appointments. More promising, perhaps, than these prospects is the evident trend, resulting in part, at least, from the example of the National Archives and the activities of the Historical Records Survey, in the direction of the establishment of state, municipal, county, institutional, and business archival agencies, and the expansion and reorganization on a more professional basis of those that already exist. Moreover, the training proposed for archivists is sufficiently broad to fit those who take it for professional work in manuscript and other specialized divisions of libraries, in the Historic Sites Branch of the National Park Service, in historical societies, and in research institutes in the fields of history and the social sciences. Finally it should be noted that such training would add to rather than detract from the qualifications of those who take it for teaching positions in colleges and universities. It is always desirable to have at least two strings for one's bow.

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