ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY IN FEDERAL ARCHIVES

IN 1904, John A. Fairlie remarked, in the preface to his *The National Administration of the United States of America*, that it was "surprising that there had not been published long ago a comprehensive and systematic work on American national administration."[1] For years political scientists had dealt only with the constitution and its judicial interpretation. After Lord Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* appeared, attention was given to legislative methods, parties and party machinery, but administrative organization and activities were hardly mentioned.

The organization of the Institute for Government Research in 1912, followed by the publication of its series of *Studies in Administration*, *Principles of Administration*, and *Service Monographs of the United States Government*, did much to fill this void in American scholarship. These studies, however, were primarily concerned with existing organization, with special interest in such reorganization proposals as might be suggested by the logic of the studies. Of particular importance among these publications was Dr. Lloyd M. Short's *The Development of National Administrative Organization in the United States*, which called attention to the history of the development of national administration as "one of the most important chapters in the evolution of our political system."[2]

Professor Fairlie's book was based upon printed sources. He recognized his study was not a complete picture when he noted the "vast accumulation of unpublished records in the archives of the various government offices." He called attention to a recently issued "account of these unpublished records," which would make possible the completion of a definitive study in the future.[3] This "account" was the *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington* by Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland.

Examination of the citations documenting the institute series, particularly the *Service Monographs*, as well as of those furnished

[1] John A. Fairlie, *The National Administration of the United States of America* (New York, 1902), v.

[2] Lloyd M. Short, *The Development of National Administrative Organization in the United States* (Institute for Government Research, *Studies in Administration*, No. 10, Baltimore, 1923), vii.

[3] Fairlie, *National Administration*, vi.

by other more recently published general works in the field, reveals that the work hoped for by Fairlie is yet to be done. Although a number of specialized studies such as Gaillard Hunt's *The Department of State of the United States* or *Federal Justice* by Homer S. Cummings and Carl McFarland have been written after study of available archival source material, few general works have made any extensive use of record materials. The difficulties formerly experienced in archival research have been a basic factor in the neglect by social scientists of this field. But, as Dr. Roy F. Nichols pointed out last year, "Now all this is changed."[4] The inventories of the Survey of Federal Archives are making available information about great masses of source materials hitherto unknown. The National Archives already has in its custody a large percentage of the more important materials described by Van Tyne and Leland. Therefore, as conservators, arrangers, and servicers of source materials for the study of national administration, federal archivists have a vital interest in our subject of discussion. They look forward to the time when their institution will be the center of research activity by administrative historians, federal administrators, and students of public administration. It is reasonable for them to regard the National Archives as the responsible central institution of the government charged with the collection, preservation, and preparation of materials for the study and writing of our administrative history. This very important work can be done only in the archives in which great masses of original source materials are available. It is work that the archivist-historians must develop first. Its development is their duty to the historical and archival sciences.[5]

From the viewpoint of the federal archivist, administrative history is the study of the development, organization, functions, and activities of those agencies which have composed the national government. Special attention is given to procedures by which agencies come into existence, undergo changes as to organizational form or functions, and are absorbed or liquidated. It is largely a factual study—the investigation of when, how, and for what purpose agencies were established; the determination of their supposed or actual functions, their relation to each other and to the general pattern of government; the

[4] Roy F. Nichols, "Alice in Wonderland," THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST, III (July, 1940), 151.

[5] A. IUrchenko, "New Registration of Archival Material and the Study of the History of *Fonds*-Creating Institutions," translation of article from *Arkhivnoe Delo*, XLVIII (1938), 19-33; typescript in the library of the National Archives.

description of their internal organization as affected by changes in function, purpose, or jurisdiction; and, finally, the reconstruction of the history of their records. Generally speaking, discussion of the reasons for the establishment, change, or discontinuance of agencies, or the critical appraisal of their work is left for others to produce on the basis of the objective studies of the archivist.

More specifically, administrative history should be discussed from three points of view, first, as part of the general culture and training of the archivist; second, as an aid to the practicing archivist; and third, as a tool prepared by the archivist to facilitate the use of his records.

Administrative history should be a part of the cultural background of the federal archivist, constituting what Dr. Samuel F. Bemis has termed ". . . a reliable knowledge of the American political system and its historical development. . . ."[6] Its study should be anticipated in his educational preparation and in the training program of archival institutions. He must know the basic printed source materials, their nature and content, and the keys to their use. He must get the general idea of administration as the way in which governments carry out their functions. He must obtain a comprehensive picture of the manner in which the American people, through agencies of government, have met their needs. He must see administrative history as a part of the cultural history of the United States, to see it as it ties in with the economic, social, political, and military history of the people, relating the changing organizations and functions of governmental administration to the expanding or contracting developments and needs of a democratic community. He must see the records created by these changing organizations and functions as a "living photograph" of a growing people working out their problems. Only from this point of view can the federal archivist see the details of his daily tasks in their proper perspective as related to the larger framework of national culture; only thus can he be saved from narrow professionalism, devoting his hours to the dry-as-dust compilation of what Hubert Hall has aptly called "unscholarly descriptions . . . and tedious statements of official establishments."[7]

Secondly, administrative history is the primary aid enabling the

[6] Samuel F. Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST, II (July, 1939), 159.

[7] Hubert Hall, *British Archives and the Sources for the History of the World War* (London, 1925), 10.

practicing archivist to deal with his own function. It guides him in the selection of records for retention or disposition, and provides, in part, for what Hilary Jenkinson has called "the moral defense of archives."

Records having legal, administrative, or historical values constitute source materials which it is agreed the archivist should seek to preserve. The archivist who is to perform "appraisal work" with federal archives successfully must have an adequate background in administrative history to be able to determine such values. "Knowledge and perception . . . of the agency of origin, its objectives, and its methods," says Dr. Philip C. Brooks, are essential tools to the archivist in this activity. Indeed one of the categories of value used in appraising federal records is "the usefulness of records for the study of administrative history."[8]

When archival agencies were mere warehouses dominated by an "exclusively registrative-conservative" purpose, the knowledge of administrative history was entirely unnecessary. The adoption in the nineteenth century of chronological, subject, or library systems of arrangement likewise presupposed little detailed knowledge of agency history. When the principle of provenance or "office appurtenance" supplanted such systems, "the necessary initial conditions" of all archival arrangement became "knowledge of the history, organization, and jurisdiction of the agency whose files [are] to be put in order. . . ."[9] The preliminary study of administrative history became essential because upon it depended the success of all subsequent work on the materials for their utilization. It is accurate knowledge of agency history which protects the archivist from making mistakes in the matter of arrangement. V. H. Galbraith has summed up the principle in this fashion: Archivists must project themselves back into the age of the creators of the archives. To do this they must "recreate their world, and a part of their world was their administrative system."[10] David W. Parker, a Canadian archivist, furnished practical evidence of the value of such knowledge when he wrote:

> As a result of studies in administrative history . . . I felt sure of my ground. . . . In brief, as knowledge of former administrations steadily

[8] Philip C. Brooks, "What Records Shall We Preserve?" (The National Archives, *Staff Information Circular*, No. 9, June, 1940).

[9] Ryszard Przelaskowski, "Schedule of Internal Work in Modern Archives" (The National Archives, *Staff Information Circular*, No. 10, October, 1940), 3ff.

[10] V. H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Use of the Public Records* (Oxford, 1934), 10.

> grew more detailed and complete, the better did I find myself equipped, not only to reconstruct whole series as they once existed but . . . to give to each residual portion and fragment its proper place. . . . Thus as I studied . . . the pattern and framework of a by-gone department . . . gradually took shape from the documents before me. . . .[11]

The intensive study of administrative history required of the federal archivist implies the necessary existence of available source materials. In this connection, the subject may be discussed from three additional points of view: first, as a study of agencies by use of printed sources external to their records; second, as a study of agencies by an examination of the physical arrangement of the records they produced; third, as a study of the record-creating bodies by reference to the informational content of their own files.

The archivist must have access to a complete and workable specialized library. It must contain legal, documentary, historical, biographical, and bibliographical works which contribute to the understanding of our national government throughout its history. The entire collection must be so adequately catalogued for its specialized purpose that no likely source of information can be missed. The librarian and his staff should be as completely at home in the field of administrative history as are their archival colleagues, if they wish to serve them adequately. The library must be more than a mere appendage to the archival structure—it stands at the very heart of its successful functioning.

Second, information gained by examination of the original order of a body of records can be illustrated by specific example. The United States Railroad Administration adopted a uniform filing system. When its records were first examined by the archivist, many files created by its Division of Labor were found with the records of the director general and of the chief of operation. The existence of records in these particular locations told the archivist facts about the operation and organization of this wartime agency which he could never have learned in years of library research. Here was a "living photograph" which the archivist saw and utilized in building up knowledge necessary to arrange and service this particular collection.

Third, as Hilary Jenkinson has said:

> The study of Administration, though partly achieved from external

[11] David W. Parker, "Some Problems in the Classification of Departmental Archives," American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1922, I, 167.

> sources, can never be divorced entirely from the study of the Archives: one goes in this matter in a curious circular fashion; for the Archives cannot be understood without a knowledge of the Administration which produced them, and the history and the development of that Administration is often written in the Archives, so that the process is simply that of puzzling it out.[12]

Archival sources of administrative history have been grouped by Miss Bess Glenn of the National Archives into two types: authority sources and history sources. "Authority sources," which assist the archivist in determining names of administrative units and their terminal dates, consist of letter heads, printed forms, ledger headings, binder's titles, signatures, and addresses. "History sources" consist of reports, work sheets, records prepared for investigating bodies, correspondence, office memoranda, orders, circulars, regulations, minute books, hearings, and accounting and personnel records, all of which furnish the archivist with information on the organization and functioning of a given agency. Great variety is found in such materials in the files of a single bureau. They must, therefore, be checked carefully against other source materials outside the files themselves.

In the performance of his reference function the federal archivist finds an intimate knowledge of administrative history the most necessary condition to successful work. According to V. H. Galbraith:

> A moment's thought will show the importance . . . of a knowledge of administrative machinery. We owe the preservation of the archives . . . to the men who staffed . . . the departments. The motive . . . for the preservation of these archives was . . . originally a purely practical one. They were dead papers put aside for future reference . . . they owe their preservation . . . to administrative convenience alone, not to any appreciation of their historical value. We shall . . . make best use of them if we approach them with the same . . . knowledge of their inter-relationship as the clerks who made and kept them.[13]

From the reference point of view, it is necessary for the federal archivist to have a graphic notion of the historical development of the entire national administrative system to service his collections properly. A mere knowledge of organizational changes is not sufficient. What is needed is a vivid conception of the way in which administrative machinery has dealt with its various objectives at different times in our history, for it is from these objectives that the

[12] Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Rev. ed., London, 1937), 98-99.

[13] Galbraith, *Use of Public Records*, 11-12.

reference question will be presented to the archivist. The reasoning of the archivist in reference work has to be: To what extent was the federal government ever interested in such a matter as this? If it was interested, which of its agencies were, according to the administrative organization of the time, likely to handle such a matter? On this principle, archival investigation starts, not from an immediate survey of the records themselves, but from a study of the distribution of functions of the government at a given time.

Knowledge of these principles will lead the archivist to the records of the Naval Observatory for correspondence of the great German scientist, Alexander von Humboldt. Such a method will enable him to find the files pertaining to "Arrangements for official functions held at the White House during the Wilson administration" in the records of the National Park Service. Without knowing the administrative organization and distribution of functions in 1917-1918, with what success will the archivist find materials illustrating the "Effect of government control of prices on the consumer during the World War?" Without knowledge of administrative procedure, even the search for individual pension case files may prove difficult, for the system of filing claims under the successive acts of Congress is devious enough to puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer.

Let us present a specific request to the archivist. Where is the claim of F. Richard against the United States government arising out of damages inflicted by military actions in East Florida prior to the treaty of 1819? The archivist knows that this treaty made provision for the settlement of such claims and that the Superior Court of the Territory of Florida was designated to pass upon them. Unfortunately, however, the territorial court records are not available. He learns that the secretary of the treasury was authorized to hear appeals from the territorial court. Although data on the activity of the secretary of the treasury in connection with these claims is abundant, no East Florida claims papers appear in the records of that office. The archivist finds that the secretary made payment on claims but refused to pay interest, referring to the attorney general for opinions in support of the validity of his actions. Search in the attorney's files produces no claims papers. It is learned that the Federal District Court for the Northern District of Florida took over the functions of the territorial court in the matter of claims when Florida became a state. Successive facts uncovered lead the archivist to files of the Department of State, the Court of Claims, and the Supreme Court

without result. Only one fact remains known—that the secretary of the treasury did pay claims. Treasury auditors had to certify these payments. The archivist learns that these auditors and their functions had been transferred to the general accounting office when that agency was established. At last the search is successful, for the certified claim together with all papers relating to it is found in the files of that office. Administrative history as a tool of the archivist has paid dividends.

We make no claim that the knowledge of administrative history is the sole requisite for successful reference work, or for any other phase of archival practice. We realize that above all, the archivist must have common sense, judgment, and imagination. As Dr. John C. Fitzpatrick once said, "It is quite possible to be a good archivist without . . . imagination; but the man who possesses it will always be just a little better archivist than the one, no matter how good, in whom it is lacking."[14]

The archivist must prepare aids to lighten the burden of research. In compiling such aids or finding media in the past, he has instinctively incorporated into them historical sketches of the agencies whose records were being described. Thus Van Tyne and Leland found that ". . . a short history of each bureau or division and a succinct statement of its duties, methods of work, and mode of keeping its records, would be . . . the safest guide to those seeking to know where the archives of a certain character are likely to be found."[15] As Dr. Luther Evans has said, the chief purpose of including administrative history in such compilations is to "buttress" them by furnishing information helpful to the user. Records, arranged according to the principle of provenance, will reflect the organic structure and functioning of an agency. By presenting an overall picture of that structure and its functioning and by highlighting the points which the records prove need to be brought out, it is possible to show an intelligent user of a finding medium where he may find material of interest to him. Its inclusion has the primary purpose of showing why certain records were created as they were, why certain materials are not to be found in given collections, or where related subject-matter may be located. Thus such an historical statement explains to the

[14] United State Library of Congress, *Notes on the Care, Cataloging, Calendaring, and Arranging of Manuscripts,* by John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, 1934), 7.

[15] Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland, *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington* (Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1904), iii.

searcher why papers relating to the publication of the laws are to be found in the archives of the Department of State, or why public utility dockets were separately filed by the National War Labor Board. Furthermore, historical sketches act as a corrective to finding media now outdated. With the transfer to the National Archives of records earlier described by Andrew H. Allen, Gaillard Hunt, David W. Parker, Claude H. Van Tyne, Waldo G. Leland, Newton D. Mereness, and others, former citations may need to be revised. A seacher coming to the National Archives today, armed with a series of "Parker numbers," would be confronted with an entirely new situation, for much of the material described by Parker had been reorganized even before it left the executive departments.

The technique of gathering and compiling data on administrative history has been set forth with admirable clarity in a document entitled *The Preparation of Inventories of Public Records* issued in tentative form by the Work Projects Administration.[16] Although primarily intended as a guide for state and local archivists, its methodology is equally applicable to the federal archivist engaged in similar studies.

The archivist should not be interested in administrative history as an end in itself. He is not concerned with the production of scholarly dissertations, but rather with the production of tools which enable him to perform his own functions and, at the same time, to provide such information as results from his researches to the clients of the archival establishment. This duty must not become blurred by overemphasis on administrative studies. They are time consuming and may justly become the object of criticism if allowed to prevent the performance of services which both government and public have a right to expect.

Finally, a few words should be addressed to the clients of the archivist. To the administrator we suggest that he familiarize himself with the history of his agency and its predecessors. By doing so he will be better able to visualize the arrangement and content of the records created by them. His requests for service from such records will become more definite and the archivist's response more rapid and fruitful. We cannot expect the active administrator to write the history of his own agency, but we should urge him to pro-

[16] Work Projects Administration, *Preparation of Inventories of Manuscripts; a Circular of Instructions for the Use of the Historical Records Survey Projects.* (Washington, 1940.)

vide in the current files of his office those facts of existing organization, duties, and functions which will clarify agency history for the archivist of the future. These are points upon which the archivist and the administrator may co-operate for mutual benefit.

To the student of public administration we suggest that administrative history has a distinct contribution to make to his field. One of the factors tending to complicate national government has been the tendency to impose ideal schemes of reorganization upon administrative systems without referring to the natural growth or history of the system itself. Comparative studies of the past and present functioning of federal agencies are the proper basis for reform. If the past neglect of the historical approach to administration has been due to the inaccessibility of source materials, the concentration of great masses of federal archives in Washington has made possible a more comprehensive view of federal administration than has ever before been obtainable. The co-operation of the archivist in providing the means for the utilization of the records in his custody to this end is assured.

To the general scholar we suggest that the knowledge of administrative history is an additional means of controlling research data. If Dr. Nichols' alluring Alice was bewildered by the prospect of meeting in the "archival wonderland" 22,000 feet of United States Food Administration records, what will be her state of confusion when she learns that last year American citizens returned to federal bureaus over one hundred million reports, questionnaires, accounting forms, tax schedules, and inspection sheets, part or all of which may eventually find their way into the "wonderland" to frighten Alice or her grandchildren? How else, but by a personal knowledge of the broad outlines of administrative history, can anyone expect to utilize for research purposes the vast quantities of federal records now being created, when it is realized that over twenty different agencies now deal with agriculture, while nearly a dozen others deal with railroads? What other key but a knowledge of administrative history will unlock for the student of the future the records now being created by the constantly changing organizations set up to meet the present national emergency? Of course, by intelligent methods of selecting records from these agencies for preservation, the archivist will do much toward assisting in the control of data. He may also compile indexes, catalogues, inventories, guides, and calendars, each furnishing some measure of assistance in directing

the scholar to materials worthy of attention. But unless the searcher approaches his problem with "the proper frame of reference" his study will still be difficult and confusing. And so, the archivist urges the scholar to provide himself with those basic facts of administrative history which relate to his own research problems.

The archivist in the federal system is primarily a public servant entrusted with materials constituting the record of our government's past activities as an instrumentality of the people. Administrative history is a fundamental means toward conserving that record and making of it the living heritage of democracy.

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