

A SOLDIER-ARCHIVIST AND HIS RECORDS: MAJOR GENERAL FRED C. AINSWORTH

I AM delighted that the American archivists have reserved a place on their annual program for famous personalities of our profession. It is not a very fortunate thing that the archival personalities associated with our country's history are by no means as "famous" as they might be. Their story is an enduring part of ours, but we have necessarily been too deeply engrossed in the problems of construction and integration to pay much attention to the fascinating psychological element. Yet few among us will deny that the directing influences in the field of archives have largely been, and often continue to be, of a subjective character. All of us can easily recall the familiar experience of having to regard a *fonds* as the product of individual caprice rather than of established archival procedure. It becomes necessary to study the record keeper equally with the records, to estimate the causes and ideas involved in that relationship, to understand the motives of previous generations of archivists, and finally, and most important of all, to draw upon this type of knowledge in order to fix a rational balance between what must be general and permanent, and what must be individual and particular, in archives administration. In short, we must try to outline the proper circle of action for the enterprising archivist. And for that reason Major General Fred Clayton Ainsworth, late adjutant general of the United States Army, and manager extraordinary of War Department archives, has seemed an excellent subject for this program. His career sharply illustrates this central problem of the archival personality.

General Ainsworth is not a difficult person to write about. He was, for one thing, a unique man in a unique job. Let us admit the unhappy truth that the list of great federal archivists has not been long. True, there have been outstanding names: Treasury has benefited from Rosecrans, State has had Haswell, and the War Department itself enjoyed the ministrations of Lieber and Billings. Ainsworth had characteristics much in common with these men. He too was a pioneer, and that is an important fact to remember when assessing the somewhat harsh quality of his performance. There was in him that strong current of adventurous individualism that so unmistakably distinguishes the pioneers, archival or otherwise, of that

period. What makes Ainsworth so notable as an individualistic archivist is that he was so successful. His was a current with sources, wanderings, power, and destiny peculiar to its possessor because of the almost infallible fortune that went with it. One of the more obvious manifestations of this worthwhile attribute was the lack in Ainsworth of what might be called the academic touch. He had little of the subtle feeling for universal implications and abstract reasoning that we have come to regard as indispensable where archival planning is concerned. Rather, he was a driving executive, shaping his ideas from the hard patterns of practical life, considerate of ends and reckless of means, developing his marvelous capacity for leadership in terms of rational experience not philosophic conviction. We quickly recognize this type of personality: it is one with that of Andrew Carnegie, James Hill, Leonard Wood, and other great players on that incredibly remote stage, played on by the older generation. It is not the type of erudite scholar or painstaking research worker or slightly unworldly compiler that we are inclined to regard as naturally suited to archives. Yet Ainsworth was without question one of the most capable archivists to whom we can look. The reason for this, I am sure, will throw a little more light on what I have called the "archival personality."

There are first the biographical circumstances in the case. Fred C. Ainsworth was emphatically not the memoir-writing kind, and little of his early history has been preserved. That is perhaps no great loss to our understanding of him, for such opportunists rarely have the habit of developing one set of activities logically out of another. He was born in 1852 in a small Vermont village. Fairly soon he decided on a medical career, thereby demonstrating leanings toward scientific method and an inclination toward hard work. By the middle seventies he had obtained his medical diploma; but the student of physics and pills was restless in the laboratory and eager for a life of more commanding activity. What was more natural than to look across the narrow eastern horizons into the tumultuous, war-whooping West? And what course more logical than to gain entrance to this gorgeous outdoor arena by way of the army medical corps? Once the decision was made, the counsel of friends and instructors availed nothing. Ainsworth accepted an appointment in the army as assistant contract surgeon, and lost no time setting out for the land of opportunity.

That was in the seventies, when the Southwest was witnessing

some of its most active Indian fighting. The hopeful young doctor was probably on the ground in many engagements. At least that was his reputation years after when he sat down to write a detailed account of his share in the bloody Geronimo campaign; and a cloud of witnesses have testified to his command of frontier history and fiction alike. At any rate, the life of field service was more grateful to his temperament than that of the hospitals. He made peripatetic army rounds of posts like Vancouver, Yuma, Camp Grant, and West Point. At the same time the surgeon was characteristically active and exact in his duties; he earned a reputation for being a conscientious "medico" with quite as much regard for soldiers' skins as he had disregard for his own. The frontier experience shaped him unmistakably: for the rest of his life it was clearly manifested in the tough Ainsworth physique, the shrewd Ainsworth eye, and the laconic Ainsworth speech.

In five years came promotion to a captaincy, and for five more years Ainsworth was a well-known figure about various Texas posts. Then came one of the sudden, acute turns in his career. The vigorous young officer, well fortified by recommendations and anxious to acquaint himself with new worlds, returned east to become recorder of the Army Medical Board. Through this position Ainsworth seems to have made his first venture into the mysteries of office bureaucracy and systematized paperwork on a large scale. The venture was strikingly successful. Political connections were made and strengthened; executive capabilities were developed; and a most fortuitous knowledge of army correspondence and document systems was acquired. Indeed, into the close environment of files, clerks, and paperwork Ainsworth fitted with perfection. His very presence, we are told, seemed surrounded by an atmosphere of proud self-assurance; the tall, rangy body, topped by a head long and erect, and characterized by a cold blue glance that was as well calculated to inspire obedience as the strong mask of feature was to convince of courage and responsibility—these were the redoubtable contours of a personality completely rational, entirely efficient and controlled, and overwhelmingly successful.

The surgeon general himself made due note of these qualities and came to wonder if, after all, they would not be better adapted to the needs of the Washington staff. The roomy old brick buildings then occupied by the medical department's headquarters were at that time harassed by a constantly growing problem of record keep-

ing that seemed to threaten the smooth routine of the whole organization. It was a complex problem; not only concerned with the purely archival questions of filing systems, finding media, and reference procedure, but also with the larger and more subtle ramifications of governmental relationships, group interests, and—needless to say—partisanship. It was a problem that centered in the medical department's archives only as a malignancy centers at some haphazard crook in the body, while deriving much of its growth from the whole physiology; in a like manner the troubles of the surgeon general's Record and Pension Division were the focal point of a group of pressures that were felt throughout the War Department, in other government agencies, in Congress, and throughout the ranks of thousands of Civil War veterans. The surgeon general was justified in giving it his closest attention.

It all began with the expansion of the War Department after the Civil War. The war itself, and the economic growing pains which ensued, had brought about an increase in government services far beyond the prudent limits of previous generations. Nowhere was this change more apparent than in the department that was charged with the double duty of policing the reconstruction South and expediting the opening of the West. And when Congress, in 1879, began to pass large-scale pension legislation for the veterans of the Civil War, the War Department, through its surgeon general's and adjutant general's offices, had to shoulder the unprecedented burden of investigating, through myriads of musters, returns, and books and papers of every description, the military history of each of thousands of claimants. Previous pension services had been microscopic in comparison; it was a modern job and needed modern methods of managing such enormous quantities of military archives, not to speak of a huge pension correspondence. For seven lean years the SGO Record and Pension Division struggled desperately to navigate this ocean of business. An average claim for pension required arduous searches through jungles of half-assimilated records, searches made all the more unpredictable by the hearty vegetation of red tape. The first solution was simply to ask Congress for more clerks. And Congress complied, for each member had his bundle of constituents' requests for action. Of course this way out of the tangle was soon blocked by the lack of co-ordinated procedure, a lack made worse by the traditional refusal of the old-fashioned, rigid letter-book correspondence system to be adjusted to these demands.

The morale of the division sank as the yearly backlog of arrears piled up, as records began to fall into tatters from overuse, and as heads shook ominously on Capitol Hill.

All this came to a sudden end when, in July, 1886, Captain Ainsworth was appointed by the surgeon general to lead the way out of the archival wilderness. The choice was made on the basis of managerial competence, probably with the advice of a group of Congressmen then interested in improving departmental administration. It was certainly not made with reference to archival experience on a wide scale. That was considered quite secondary, not from any antagonism to archivists, but simply because no one had a very clear idea just what an archivist was. Senator Cockrell, who was deeply interested in problems of federal administration, finally became the head of a Commission on Methods of Business in the Executive Departments that tried very hard indeed to identify the species archivist. In the process three volumes were produced on War Department organization and paperwork, ample testimony to the problem that confronted Ainsworth when he arrived in Washington that hot summer day. Nevertheless, he had as assets the friendship and assistance of the surgeon general and Senator Cockrell, and was prepared to use them.

In four short but hectic months the newcomer to the SGO Record and Pension Division office had completely swept away the arrears of business that had cluttered up the place for years. It is not necessary to accept his claim that these amounted to ten thousand individual reference investigations to be certain that the accomplishment was a truly great one. It was great not because of the reforms by which Ainsworth inaugurated his archival career, but because of the revolution he effected in the minds of the record keepers. In a very comparable sense it was an "industrial" revolution, for Ainsworth employed the large-scale mechanisms of America's manufacturing age to the large-scale situations in Washington. The letter-book, that venerable army institution and bottle neck of correspondence, was banished in favor of a card register and card index. These new devices enabled clerks to process any amount of letters simultaneously. Filing and searching were made matters of methodical office procedure on the principle of division of labor, instead of being left to the vagaries of individual clerks who formerly had worked on single cases something like a medieval handicraftsman. An express messenger service moved papers through the offices like a well-oiled

conveyor. Each pension claim was subjected to this straight-line process, and, as if to complete the factory analogy, Ainsworth required his clerks to work overtime. His innovations proved, by their instantaneous success, that a brand new period of archival history had begun, at least so far as the War Department was concerned. Most significant, they were the product of a single-minded organizing genius.

But this was only the beginning, and Ainsworth's next stroke was even more spectacular. He had solved a problem of management and system; now he met one of a more purely archival nature: that is, of preserving records in constant use and "fast crumbling away." The numerous rolls of the Civil War armies, for example, had often been composed on inferior paper, had been subjected to haphazard storage conditions, and in many cases had been so roughly used in the pension business that a whole staff of clerks was occupied recopying them. Copies, and copies of copies, had in turn fallen apart from excessive use. The expense of reproduction by printing was prohibitive, while photography and allied techniques had not as yet been perfected sufficiently to be of aid. All archivists of that time and before had had to wrestle with this kind of situation, as a rule with imperfect success.

Ainsworth's response to this emergency was what he called the "index record card," so named because it was a rectangular piece of heavy paper bearing an extract from the record of a soldier and capable of being filed in index fashion. Each entry pertaining to a soldier in the original documents of military service or hospital care was copied on a separate card, and all the cards pertaining to the same man were assembled. The cards were then placed in paper jackets, one for each individual name, and the jackets filed by army units and personal names. Tedious searching for all parts of a soldier's record was thus made a thing of the past. Once the soldier's name was known one could get the desired information simply by turning out the proper jacket with its packet of cards. Original rolls and books could be kept out of active use. For the first time the volunteer army records of the War Department were made available in an effective way.

The index record card system may not have been a completely new thing, and the idea for it may not have been all Ainsworth's, as some facts seem to indicate; nevertheless his administration made it seem so. It was a great success from the beginning. Eventually about

sixty-two million cards were prepared, covering not only the Civil War, but the service of American volunteer soldiers since the Revolution. Here was, in effect, a totally new War Department archives, of immense size and usefulness, on the basis of which Ainsworth speedily became indispensable to anyone who needed the information contained in it. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Congress was delighted at the saving in clerical salaries effected by the index record cards; the Grand Army of the Republic was gratified at the ease and accuracy with which pension calls were now answered; and Ainsworth became a formidable representative of this interesting mixture of influences. The Cockrell committee enthusiastically endorsed the magic cards and probably made possible the appropriations voted by Congress to continue the work. Ainsworth, in turn, did not see why every scrap of information that could be found regarding every American soldier should not be made available in this way. Once again, an individual had revolutionized an archival system generations old.

Once the records in the SGO had been reorganized and "carded" according to the new system, it was impossible to deny its extension elsewhere in the department. While old-time clerks grumbled and looked askance, the Congressional friends of archival reform began a movement to create a single great archives office within the War Department; to make Ainsworth its head; and to apply his methods without restraint. This meant, in effect, the joining together of the surgeon general's and adjutant general's records. It also meant the vesting of large archival affairs in what we would call "unprofessional" hands. Within three years the deed was accomplished, and the Record and Pension Division of the War Department was set up. Not until the founding of the National Archives was there to be so much interest excited in Washington over the subject of the preservation of records. Nor could any one then find serious fault with the man who had started it all. Ainsworth was so mindful of the responsibilities of his position that he left no stone unturned to make his new organization work well. In due time, his office was made almost autonomous of the department itself. Talk began to be heard again of a national hall of records that would further centralize federal records under the care of this extraordinary man. Ainsworth had become possessed of enormous influence. It was no exaggeration to say that the great record system under his care was only another element of the Ainsworth personality. That he was well-nigh in-

vincible was demonstrated in 1894 when the old Ford's Theater Building, housing a large portion of his workers, collapsed under the strain of overcrowding. There was a great deal of feeling against Ainsworth at the time, but it all came to nothing against the weight of his prestige and connections.

The catastrophe did not halt the work of carding more than a few days. Soon the Civil War volunteers were indexed; then those of the Mexican and Indian wars; and finally, the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War were covered. The Pension Act of 1890 provided thousands of new claimants, and so did the Spanish American War. By that time the Record and Pension Office, as Ainsworth's establishment was now called, had become, through sheer weight, a kind of higher authority on archival matters. The card record system was regarded as being almost beyond criticism, and there was danger that it would be extended to other types of federal records that it did not fit at all. What was worse, the office was able to absorb, whenever it wished, whatever records of other agencies that Ainsworth thought should properly belong in his collection. It seemed to many that the Record and Pension Office was usurping the prerogatives of a national archives without being one. Not a few observers must have wondered what, after all, an archivist really was.

The most vocal antagonism to the Ainsworth system of archives administration came from the historical profession. At the turn of the century American historical scholarship was becoming well organized and was turning with zeal to the intensive study of official documents. Connected with this strengthening of the research worker was the movement for a hall of records that should house all the inactive files of the federal government. The historians supported the idea of a national archives depository not only from the standpoint of efficiency but also from that of reference service. Once Ainsworth had begun his comprehensive changes, many hoped for greater freedom of access to the invaluable materials in the War Department. Nothing of the sort occurred, however. To Ainsworth's mind, the war records of the nation were not public property in the democratic sense of the word; they belonged to a disinterested third party, the government itself, and as such should be used only by high federal officials. He believed, furthermore, that the soldiers' histories were of a "confidential nature" which demanded that they be withheld from the eyes of contemporary generations, that "improper use" of their information might not be blamed on him. Of

course this point of view was a very logical one for a man of his character and training to take; but it also demonstrates clearly the limitations of the Ainsworth conception of archival science. His attitude was little more than a conservative rationalization of the political-pension aspects of his office. His definition of confidential archives, moreover, included such prized collections as the files of the Confederate government and certain personal papers of Jefferson Davis. These he ordinarily refused to allow any student to see. As president of the board of publication of the official records of the Civil War he even supervised, in the later stages, the careful editing to which those volumes were subjected.

The conflict with the historians was only a small part of the constant struggle for power in which Ainsworth now became engaged. He more and more lost sight of his archival functions and devoted himself to the new duties that came with loftier positions. In 1906 he was made military secretary of the army, a position tantamount to, and later changed into, that of the adjutant general. His authority was immense and unquestioned until 1912 when, as a result of severe differences with Leonard Wood, he was forced to resign and to retire from public life.

Although Ainsworth was only partly an archivist in the accepted modern sense of the term, his achievements in that field are not to be questioned. The introduction of large-scale archival techniques, for example, was a most necessary and certainly a permanent thing; and its success was made possible at a rather early date by the foresight and will of the former army surgeon. The movement for a national archives was thereby given considerable impetus, and a group of ideas was established on the subjects of *fonds*, indexes, and administration. Secondly, a definite step was made in the growth of ideas on the subject of the uses and purposes of archives. It is true that Ainsworth did little to make this development natural and swift; but he did make it possible, by his work in the war records, for the problem to arise in a clear-cut fashion. It remained for more liberal and systematized practices to be formally adopted years later when the National Archives itself was set up. And not among the least of Ainsworth's progressive gains were his emphasis upon skilled and professional archives workers; his invention of the record card system, and consequent efforts to preserve intact original documents; and his accumulation of much knowledge regarding transfers, cataloging, and searching procedures.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that the Record and Pension Office did not really succeed in setting up a unified, professional, and continuous archives for the war records. After Ainsworth's time the centralizing principle was to a large degree abandoned. Then again, there was his failure to develop, among all classes of the population, a broad and liberal appreciation of federal archives, free from group or political interest, and capable of yielding definite historical values. That particular problem was beyond the vision of the Record and Pension Office; it confronts us again today. The lessons of the Ainsworth type of career can be used to advantage. And, since the Indian-fighting, hard-hitting surgeon was such a paragon among the Washington bureaus, it is not inconsistent that the most unique archival collection in their midst is that of the millions of carded records, still testifying to the powerful character who made of them and the War Department records from which they sprang, an archives establishment unlike any that had gone before.

Here was, indeed, an archival personality of the first rank. But it may well be asked if all the elements of a well-rounded archivist were exhibited in that personality; or, to put the question as it was stated at the beginning of this paper, if the sphere of action of the enterprising archivist does not include the universal and objective qualities of the mature student as well as the ability to grasp and deal with the complicated problems of administration. I think that it does, and that the lesson of the sixty-odd million record cards is one of warning against the dangers of subordinating the archival ends to the archival means, of making the procedure, rather than the description and use, the purpose of archival economy. This, however, is the verdict of another era of archivists. To them the Ainsworth career, both in its brilliant accomplishment and circumstantial omissions, is a great light on the path of achievement directly ahead.

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