

Accessioning Public Records: Anglo-American Practices and Possible Improvements

HAROLD T. PINKETT

IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY it is important that information in public records concerning the policies and performance of government be readily available. The U.S. National Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials noted in its report of March 31, 1977, that the "systematic preservation of governmental records and documents is essential . . . to enable the people to judge the conduct of the government on the basis of maximum information, made publicly available as soon as feasible, consistent with such competing public interests as the preservation of national security and the safeguarding of Constitutional rights and privileges."¹ The quantity of such desirable information, in the opinion of scholars, journalists, and others who use it most, is often reduced by the inaccessibility of public records. Although excessive security classification and unreasonable protection of privacy are often mentioned as basic causes of inaccessibility, it should be noted that lack of systematic arrangements for saving and servicing valuable records in suitable research facilities of archival agencies can contribute also to inaccessibility and inadequate information.

Vital also is the recognition that public records rank high among the monuments of a nation's past and, in the words of historian Charles M. Andrews, their preservation "may serve as a true measure of the degree of civilization to which it has attained." Without such preservation, Andrews contends: "No people can be deemed masters of their own history."² Public records deserve, therefore, a fate better than that of indefinite and unprotected storage in limbo. This article describes representative current practices in saving valuable public records in the United States, Canada, and England and suggests possibilities for improvements in these practices.³

Anglo-American Practices

Public records have been defined in various ways, but are now generally considered to comprise all documentary or machine-readable materials, regardless of

The author is chief of the Legislative and Natural Resources Branch of the Civil Archives Division of the National Archives, and is a former editor of *The American Archivist*.

¹ National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, *Final Report* (Washington, 1977), p. 3.

² Charles M. Andrews, "Archives," American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1 (1913): 264-65.

³ Most of the information for this article was obtained during a study of accessioning of public records in the United States and abroad assisted by a fellowship award of the Council on Library Resources and from recent publications of public archival agencies and investigative groups. The article also contains observations and ideas obtained by the writer during more than thirty years of service at the U.S. National Archives and Records Service.

physical characteristics and right of access to them, that are made or received by a government agency or establishment in the transaction of its authorized business.⁴ Methods of centralizing such materials deemed worthy of permanent preservation vary substantially from place to place and tend to produce a disparate pattern of archival holdings. One factor in this development is legislation pertaining to the transfer of records from the government agency to archival custody. In the United States, Canada, and England there is usually permissive authority for the transfer of non-current public records. In the exercise of this authority archivists are usually accorded the right to examine records and develop standards and procedures for the selective retention of records of continuing value.

In some instances there is mandatory authority for the transfer of public records to archival agencies, although the agencies usually prefer to rely upon voluntary action. The Administrator of General Services, "when it appears . . . to be in the public interest," may "direct and effect the transfer to the National Archives of the United States of records of a federal agency that have been in existence for more than fifty years and determined by the Archivist of the United States to have sufficient historical or other value to warrant their continued preservation." The transfer is required unless the custodial agency head certifies in writing that the records must be retained in his custody for current administrative purposes.⁵ There is also often a mandatory aspect concerning the transfer of records of continuing value accumulated by terminated public agencies, especially in the United States. Such records must usually be deposited in a public archival repository, unless they deal with functions transferred by law to other agencies. There also tends to be some reduction of permissive authority in transfers when archival officials have the support of top-level management officials in bringing pressure on operating agencies to limit their use of filing equipment by reduction of their records holdings.

In some American states, legislative authority has recently been provided for the transfer of valuable local government records and other documentary materials to a network of repositories administered cooperatively by state archival agencies and colleges and universities. This development, now well exemplified in Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota, and Texas, has been promoted to improve general access to information in county and municipal records and local non-government materials, to utilize space and personnel not otherwise available, to provide a coordinated and comprehensive accessioning program, and to furnish documentary materials for faculty research and curriculum enrichment.⁶ In a few instances the U.S. Administrator of General Services has approved the preservation of federal records in agency records centers rather than requiring their

⁴ This definition, broadly interpreted, could cover a great part of the so-called "public papers" that are distinguished from "federal records" in the *Final Report* of the National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials (p. 6). It is substantially consistent with the sweeping definition in 1954 of the British Committee on Departmental Records headed by Sir James Grigg: "All papers used in the course of Government administration, whether they are Minutes of meetings of the Cabinet or forms used by members of the public for claiming sickness benefit, are public records."

⁵ 44 United States Code, Sec. 2103.

⁶ See John A. Fleckner, "Cooperation as a Strategy for Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 447-59; and David Levine, "The Management and Preservation of Local Records: Report of the State and Local Records Committee," *American Archivist* 40 (April 1977): 189-99.

transfer to repositories of the National Archives and Records Service. Such approval can be given for reasons of economy and efficiency. The Department of Defense operated such centers for a few years, but after 1954 transferred their administration to NARS. That department, however, still operates an approved archival unit at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

In England there is legal authority for the transfer of national government records to repositories (i.e., county or municipal facilities) other than the Public Record Office when the Lord Chancellor determines that, for some reason such as their technical nature or special local interest, such records would be safely and more suitably preserved at such places. Similarly, national government records relating wholly or mainly to affairs in Scotland or Northern Ireland are authorized to be transferred, respectively, to the Scottish Record Office at Edinburgh or the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland at Belfast.

The extent of regularity in transfers of valuable public records from government agencies to archival repositories varies widely and affects accessibility of the information in the records. In some instances statutes provide for regular transfers of certain kinds of public records to archival custody. Records of standing and interim committees of the Oregon State Legislature, for example, are regularly transferred, in accordance with statutory stipulations, to the Oregon State Archives shortly after the close of legislative sessions. Non-current records of the U.S. Congress, including committee records, are being transferred to the National Archives Building at the close of each Congress, as prescribed by law.

Regularity in the flow of various records to the British Public Record Office is called for by the Public Records Act of 1958, which states that records selected for preservation shall normally be sent to the PRO not later than thirty years after their creation. Such records are those remaining after the periodic disposal of standard records possessing temporary value, after first and second "reviews," and after special appraisal procedures. Of considerable interest are the first and second review arrangements. During the first review, registered files (agency records controlled under the British registry system) and unregistered files requiring individual appraisal are evaluated, after five years, in terms of their value for agency purposes. Agency officials, who make this evaluation, are instructed that such purposes include the possibility of records being required for precedential or guiding information in future situations, and the evaluators are advised against destroying records simply because the activities documented by them have ceased. Records retained at the first review are given a second review twenty-five years after their creation. At this juncture records are evaluated jointly by agency officials and staff members of the Public Record Office. Guidelines established for this evaluation are designed to help ensure the permanent preservation of records relating to the following matters: administrative history, work performance, policy formulation and implementation, legal rights and obligations, publicized events, major trends, important scientific and technological developments, and significant regional or local developments not documented in other records.⁷

Special arrangements are provided for the evaluation of particular instance papers, which are records dealing with a common subject but having file units relating to specific persons, bodies, or places, such as case files. When it is con-

⁷ Public Record Office, *A Guide for Departmental Record Officers* (Third Edition, 1971), pp. 24–25.

sidered necessary and practicable, the Public Record Office consults appropriate scholars or others to determine whether such records should be retained *in toto* or selectively. Thus, in England, records that survive the appraisal gauntlets of lists of periodic disposal, first and second reviews, and special evaluation arrangements are legally directed to be transferred to archival custody in a regular flow after thirty years.

More prevalent than statutory provisions for promoting regularity in the archival accessioning of public records are records retention and disposal schedules, sometimes called records control schedules. These records management devices, now familiar to most archivists, list the recurring records of a government agency and show the periods of time for which they are to be kept in agency space and possibly in a records center and the periods of time or the events after which they are to be destroyed or, if of permanent value, transferred to the appropriate archival institution. Such schedules have been developed widely since World War II by federal and state archival agencies in the United States. In their records management programs involving the use of records centers these agencies are insisting that schedules stipulate intervals after which records of permanent value are to be transferred from the centers to archival repositories. Implementation of these schedules is stimulating a more expeditious and orderly accessioning of public records. Significant progress in the use of these schedules in Canada is also evident. Archivists and researchers, sometimes perturbed by managerial zeal in records disposal, can applaud the concept adopted by the Public Archives of Canada: "A records schedule is just as much concerned with the retention of a valuable record as it is concerned with the destruction of worthless material."⁸ Accordingly, Canadian public records managers are instructed to assign definite periods for the retention of records, and in the case of valuable records to specify intervals after which such records are to be transferred to the Public Archives of Canada.⁹

The speed, if not the regularity, of the flow of valuable records to archival repositories tends to be lessened by their retirement in intermediate storage facilities of government agencies (basements, attics, etc.) or records centers operated by archival agencies. The use of these accommodations for retirement is often made inevitable by inadequate space in archival buildings and by defective recordkeeping practices causing records of continuing value to be interfiled with those of temporary value. In the latter situation, intermediate facilities become useful places for identifying and segregating valuable noncurrent records destined for preservation in archival institutions. A British Committee on Departmental Records, however, aptly noted that the use of "limbo" repositories may encourage the deferment of the appraisal of records.¹⁰ Such action tends to lessen regularity in the flow of records to archival custody and research use.

Although there is wide use of record centers and other intermediate facilities for temporary storage of permanently valuable records, there are noticeable arrangements for direct transfer of such records to archival institutions. Frequently the arrangements reflect more concern for the immediate safekeeping

⁸ Treasury Board, *Paperwork Management Series: Records Scheduling and Disposal* (Ottawa, March 1972), p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Great Britain, Committee on Departmental Records, *Report* (London: reprint, 1966), p. 70.

of highly valued documents than desire to hasten their use in research. The documents benefiting from this solicitude were created, usually, at high governmental levels or long ago. In many American states, records of the governor are treated as public records and are usually transferred directly to the state archival agency. Records of governors in North Carolina, Oregon, and Maryland have been received in an orderly flow for many years by the archival agency. Similarly, records of other high officials and those of important boards and commissions are usually transferred directly to archival custody. Documents concerning famous historical persons, episodes, and experience are accorded similar treatment.

Several classes of federal records are acquired directly by the National Archives and Records Service. These regularly include records of the Executive Office of the President; presidential boards, commissions, and committees; Congress; the Supreme Court; audiovisual records; cartographic records; and records of unquestionable value that are not susceptible to screening or other processing.

The Public Archives of Canada tends to receive directly from government agencies only old records for which there is likely to be practically no administrative use. In England direct transfers of public records are fairly normal, since there is no record center system as in the United States and Canada. Such transfers regularly occur, when the Public Record Office has determined that accessionable records have been arranged, packed, labelled, and listed in a prescribed manner.

Policies and practices in the accessioning of public records inevitably affect the characteristics of the accessioned records. Some current policies and practices are important in helping to increase the quantity and quality of archival resources. Archival agencies that have power and programs for surveying public records and developing standards and procedures for their selective preservation, and that have suitable physical facilities are accumulating impressive bodies of documentation. Several American state archival institutions now provide safekeeping for nearly all extant public records relating to colonial and early statehood years. Repositories of the National Archives and Records Service now hold more than a million cubic feet of records concerning American experience from the Revolution through World War II. The Public Archives of Canada has accessioned more than 50,000 linear feet of important classes of the nation's public records. Some 500,000 linear feet of records, including some going back to the Norman Conquest, are held by the British Public Record Office.

On the other hand, some archival policies and practices lessen prospects for systematic accumulation of complete and logical bodies of some types of archives. State archival agencies in the U.S. often having relatively limited financial resources and space, understandably have centered their accessioning efforts on the smaller and more familiar bodies of state and county records for the colonial and early national periods, which tend to be of the greatest interest to the largest number of their researchers, genealogists and local historians. Accordingly, they have tended to give less attention to the acquisition of larger and more complex bodies of state and local records created in recent decades. When attention has been given to the latter, often it has been irregular and unplanned. Thus, accessions of the state agencies frequently show gaps and missing categories of records created by social welfare, educational, natural resource, and regulatory or-

ganizations of the twentieth century. Moreover, most state and local government agencies have not made impressive progress in providing or encouraging systematic care of records of municipalities, which constitute a largely untapped source of historical information. Archival networks in the four states mentioned earlier, however, are providing improved arrangements for the preservation of valuable local public records.

The national archival agencies of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain tend to have more positive programs for the systematic transfer of records to their custody than do most state or local agencies. Accordingly, their holdings are more likely to represent complete and logical bodies of archives concerning affairs of recent decades. Nevertheless, the holdings relating to some recent national concerns such as energy sources, environmental distress, urban blight, racial inequality, and consumer interests show significant gaps in essential documentation. Often the gaps seem to be created by lack of attention to trends in research and public anxieties which would be better met by systematic rather than irregular accessioning. Moreover, the accessioning of public records at both national and lower levels lacks much desirable coordination with other archival activities. The accessioning frequently takes place without systematic survey and appraisal work, which might help to ensure that only valuable records will be transferred to archival custody and those of temporary value will be segregated for eventual disposal. Such work also aids in the development of accessioning plans to obtain a proper balance of documentation of varied government functions and of informational resources. Transfer of records to archival stack areas without regard to arrangement planning has often lessened opportunities for economy and efficiency. In this situation it is difficult to maintain contiguously related bodies of records and to service them efficiently. Similarly, finding aids are frequently prepared with little thought of accessioning additional groups of records to bring a complete and logical body of archival material under satisfactory intellectual control. Accordingly, finding aids tend to become outdated soon after the preparation, because unprojected accessioning has occurred.

Possible Improvements

In spite of remarkable advances in measures for the identification and archival preservation of public records, especially during the last quarter century, there are possibilities for further improvements. Fortunately, further advance does not seem to be significantly impeded by inadequate legal authority. More effective implementation of existing authority, however, might yield important improvements. Major goals of the implementation should include increased efforts to secure (1) adequate funding for archival space and personnel, (2) the earliest possible designation of permanently valuable records and their separation from disposable records, (3) more effective use of retention and disposal records schedules, and (4) more planning for periodic and direct transfers of valuable records to archival repositories.

Although this article deals primarily with authority and methodology in the saving of public records, it is recognized that lack of proper space and personnel may seriously affect the saving of valuable records. The history of archival administration is replete with instances of inadequate physical facilities for the storage of public records. Fortunately recent years have brought marked expan-

sion in the physical facilities of national archival agencies in the United States, Canada, and England and those of several American state agencies. Expanding accessioning programs in these national and state agencies attest to the greater possibilities for preserving more of the documentary heritage of nations and their subdivisions, when ampler facilities exist. Efforts that can be made for obtaining more adequate archival accommodations are exemplified in the story of the persevering and intensive campaign for the state archives building in Georgia. This successful campaign was conducted through the press, radio, and television; by means of official archival activities; with assistance from civic, patriotic, educational, and religious organizations; and in contacts with people at the grass roots.¹¹ It demonstrates how improved archival facilities for public records can claim and win public support.

It is also obvious that systematic accessioning of public records requires not only adequate buildings but also sufficient personnel to handle physical tasks of transporting and arranging records and involves the intellectually awesome responsibilities of analyzing and describing them. National archival agencies tend to have more adequate personnel for varied archival tasks than state, provincial, or local agencies. Personnel shortages in these agencies naturally make archivists reluctant to expand their holdings and lead them to concentrate on the most pressing archival services—usually reference services. Although increased staffing with full-time paid employees is the desideratum, part-time paid, voluntary, and uncompensated persons can often be used advantageously in the accessioning of public records. Such persons may include college and university students, amateur historians, and public-spirited citizens.

It has been noted that major public archival agencies are authorized to promote improved records management practices and controls in government agencies. This responsibility permits archivists to help the agencies develop filing methods that separate documents in terms of the duration of their usefulness as well as in terms of subject matter and other factors. Well known to archivists and record managers is the transitory nature of many types of public records. They normally include records relating to repetitive facilitative activities of short-term administrative or legal concern dealing with facets of internal management common to most agencies. Such matters include personnel administration, supply and property management, expenditure and cost accounting, transportation service, space management, and communication service. Such transitory records can be made more easily separable under planned file arrangements involving separate file folders or separate file series. Accordingly, valuable records can be freed from entangling trivia that often impede archival accessioning.

Archivists are also increasingly familiar with classes of public records that are worth saving permanently and are identifiable with good file classifications. Such records usually relate to the basic mission of a government agency or establishment. They deal typically with such activities as planning and organizing, establishing policies and procedures, executing legal responsibilities, reporting or investigating work performance, and conducting public relations. These activities are shown in varied types of traditional records such as correspondence, narrative reports, charts, maps, directives, minutes, speeches, publicity releases, and

¹¹ See Mary Givens Bryan, "The Georgia Archives Building—A Case Study in Promotion," *American Archivist* 27 (October 1964): 499–501.

proceedings. In recent times they are also recorded more and more often in audiovisual and machine readable materials. In seeking to save selectively the above-mentioned records, archivists will not find any precise criteria that can be applied in every situation. Any criteria devised, even with great skill and foresight, tend to be influenced by contemporary needs and interests. Nevertheless, a growing body of literature provides archivists with some useful guidelines for making choices of public records that can reasonably be expected to have value for the future as well as the present.¹² These guidelines may need to be applied in varying ways to deal with the changing physical characteristics of public records, but many of them have continuing validity in appraisal actions, irrespective of physical characteristics.

Separable bodies of records produced with good file arrangements become more clearly identifiable for permanent preservation when they are included in retention and disposal schedules. The preparation of these instruments affords archivists an opportunity to collaborate with government agency officials in an important task affecting the disposition of records. Basic objectives in the use of the schedules are to promote the disposal of records of temporary value, direct the storage of semi-current records, and save records of enduring value. Adequately prepared, the schedules show all records created and maintained by an agency, possibly organizational components creating and maintaining them, title and characteristics of each record series, and the period of time or event after which each series should be destroyed or transferred to a records center or archival institution. The schedules therefore can be instruments for designating valuable records and prescribing their safekeeping.

Successful implementation of records schedules depends heavily upon regular breaking of files. This involves separating active from inactive records and therefore facilitates the transfer of valuable records to archival custody. The nature and use of records determine how the file-breaks can be most effectively established. Some groups of records fall naturally into chronological segments. Fiscal records, for example, are normally filed by the period covered by accounts, such as month, quarter, or fiscal year. Census records are accumulated in periodic enumerations. Legislative records fall into natural segments for regular or special sessions.

Agricultural records are often filed by growing season. These and other records susceptible to chronological filing lend themselves easily to regular breaking of files. On the other hand, there are records that are not susceptible to such filing, such as general subject files and office reference files. These must be artificially broken to facilitate periodic retirement to an archival agency or disposal. An increasing number of government agencies in the United States, particularly those creating a great volume of records, have prescribed file-breaks on an annual, biennial, or other periodic basis. In addition to regular breaking of files, the removal of blocks of records of enduring value for archival accessioning can be expedited also by retiring records on the basis of an event such as the completion of a business transaction or a research project. Such records can be

¹² For a discussion of widely approved appraisal guidelines see T. R. Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records* (National Archives Bulletin No. 8, Washington, D.C., 1956). Guidelines for varied documentary materials including audiovisual and machine-readable records, are presented in Maynard J. Brichford's *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977).

marked for periodic separation from active files and transferred to archival custody.

Furthermore, the accessioning of public records can be improved by direct transfers from creating agencies to archival repositories, when indirect transfers through records centers or other intermediate facilities are not necessary. Such indirect handling is unnecessary, when permanently valuable records are easily identifiable, can be accommodated immediately in archival repositories, lack extensive or restrictive use, have no intermixture of records of temporary value, and are arranged in good order. Direct transfers eliminate the costs of rehandling valuable records more than once after their retirement and expedite their use with related materials already in archival custody. Moreover, such transfers minimize possibilities of inadvertent disposal of valuable records, since they prevent their storage with large disposable bodies of records that may be periodically discarded.

An eminent collector of Americana at the British Museum, Henry Stevens, nearly a century ago declared that the wealth of a nation includes "her stores of golden thoughts, inventions, discoveries, and intellectual treasure, invested mainly in print and manuscripts." These valuable possessions, he lamented, are "too often stored somewhere in limbo." He observed: "The half of them are not recorded, and the resting places of many are not known."¹³ This view seems just as applicable then and now to valuable public records as to books and manuscripts, particularly when instead of being regularly placed in archival institutions, those records lie dormant in obscure, inaccessible, and often unsafe places. Changes of these conditions to effect a steady flow of selected public records to archival custody can not only help to preserve and protect valuable cultural resources, but also can bring benefits to government offices and the public. With changes suggested in this article, offices can expect to have storage space regularly released for more urgent use without loss of essential administrative material; archival institutions can provide desirable physical protection and more efficiently plan their related activities; and the public can have access to a regular flow of valuable information for assessing government action, protecting public and individual interests, understanding the past, and possibly planning for the future.

¹³ Henry Stevens, *Photo-Bibliography* (London, 1878), pp. 12-13.