

No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records

LEONARD RAPPORT

EVERY REPOSITORY OF PUBLIC RECORDS has on its shelves records which, if offered today, we would not accept. If we wouldn't accept them today, why should we permit these records to occupy shelf space? For such records there should be no grandfather clause.

Why do we have such records? Why do we tend to hold onto them? How can we go about getting rid of them?

If storage, preservation, and servicing of records cost nothing, if everything—space, material, energy, personnel—were free and in limitless supply I would advocate saving a record copy of every document, however trivial. Such complete retention would anticipate every conceivable future use, including those we don't dream of today. But space, material, and energy, instead of being free and limitless, are becoming scarcer and costlier; and people, if not scarcer, are becoming more expensive. So, more and more, we have to think of what records we are going to be able to afford to preserve.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, it may be that at some time you have read a 1944 paper by G. Philip Bauer, one of the National Archives early staff members. Bauer was writing about accessioning, not internal disposal; but what he said about the former, I believe applies to the latter. Bauer proposed that an appraiser should in every case ask whether the public benefit to be derived from saving public records

is sufficient to offset the necessary expenditure of public money. "The question of what absolute quantity should be retained," he wrote, "depends in the last analysis upon how much money the Nation is willing to pay for the purpose."

A half-dozen years later, when I came to the National Archives, there were those who still thought of Bauer as something of a records burner. I sensed that Herman Kahn, in his comments that followed Bauer's paper, expressed the prevailing feeling. Bauer's theme, as Kahn understood it, was that public value in records was purely utilitarian; and he disagreed.

"I believe, on the contrary," said Kahn, "that we keep records for the same reason that we build schools, or rear our children, or support our aged parents. It is one of those things that we do without asking ourselves whether or not it represents a profitable investment but simply because it is our innate assumption that civilized men can do nothing else. We know that because we are not barbarians we must keep records. In other words, the keeping of records in a civilized society is primarily an act of faith. We keep records because of our deep emotional and intellectual commitment to the values of the civilization of which we are a part, and to what our ancestors did and to what we hope our children will do We keep records because we are civilized men and therefore must do so."

As to whether I am a follower of Bauer's pragmatism or of Kahn's response you already have sufficient clues.

Although what follows is based on my experience with federal records in the National Archives, it should be applicable to public records in general, and particularly to state records. But whatever the level—federal, state, county, or town—we should keep in mind that what we are talking about are *public* records, instruments created for a purpose. The records are to serve the citizenry, not the reverse. The records do not belong to archivists, historians, genealogists, or to any special group or class of persons other than they belong to all and to each of us as citizens. We have to keep this in mind because, in addition to our obligation as archivists to do our best, as servants of the people, to preserve for them records of value, we have, as Bauer implied, an obligation not to make the nation pay for preserving what isn't worth the cost of preserving.

Why do we continue to keep records of questionable value and how did we come to have them in the first place?

Taking the second question first: there are several obvious ways we got such records. One is that the original appraisal was faulty. The appraiser judged them worthy of accessioning when, in fact, by the standards of the time of appraisal they weren't. Or the appraiser judged them correctly by the appraisal standards of the time; but the standards have changed and by today's standards they are not worth keeping.

Also, the records may have been accessioned without any real appraisal. This was not uncommon in the early years of the National Archives. In those years the vacuum of the building's hollow interior sucked in records that, in later years, would have gone to records centers, with perhaps a small residue finding its way into the National Archives. Recently, in reappraising the records of two agencies established during World War I—the U.S. Shipping

Board and the U.S. Railroad Administration—I found, in going through the accession dossiers, that evaluations of these record groups were the exception rather than the rule.

It is recognized that an intensive study of these records will show that a number of them have no value but this separation of good from bad cannot adequately be made under existing circumstances at the White House Garage.

or

It was deemed advisable to transfer the entire group to the Archives even though it was known that considerable parts of the files had no administrative or historical value or were duplicated in other places. This was done primarily because space and time were not available for an appraisal of their value.

or

It is recommended that the entire collection be accepted by the Archivist and that the General Subject file of the General Counsel be studied . . . to determine which claims might be eliminated. This recommendation is made in view of the fact that the United States Railroad Administration is closing its office and is forced to move from its present quarters within a few weeks.

More than forty years after the last was written somebody—I—got around to making the recommended study of the 400 feet of the last-mentioned series of the General Counsel's records. I recommended what I thought they deserved: total destruction.¹

When records such as these occupy for four decades the country's most expensive archival shelf space, time inevitably burin-ishes them with a patina of permanence.

¹ Many hours of seeking, by systematic sampling and by use of a subject index, failed to reveal a single file I judged worth preserving. I did find significant products of the General Counsel's office—but they were in the subject-classified file of the Director General.

There are other reasons for having such records, reasons that may apply more to records in repositories other than the National Archives. In a state capital, in a smaller bureaucracy, where the archives may be less insulated against agency pressures, the officials who created and nurtured the records may want, and be able, to get their creations into that archives, whether or not they meet the accessioning criteria. Again, public archives that lack strong enabling legislation may feel they have to accept some records they don't want in order to assure getting others that they do want. (This happens more often in the private sector.)

It is easier to understand why we have these records than it is to understand our reluctance or inability to get rid of them. We won't find explanations in archival theory; no theory is going to justify keeping what clearly should not be kept. We have to look closer to home, to human nature, to ourselves. These records sit peacefully on our shelves, making no demands. The dust on their containers is evidence that the absence of disturbance is mutual. We seldom walk down an aisle, open at random a box or tray, examine its contents, and ask ourselves, "Why are we keeping these particular records?" Their inclusion in our published guides and inventories helps establish their credentials. In archival institutions one isn't likely to get in trouble by leaving on the shelves records that shouldn't be there; but the persistent archival memory is not kind to the archivist who misjudges and throws away what should have been kept. The human mind multiplies few things as much or as fast as the value of a series of records that a searcher (particularly a Ph.D. candidate) asks for and discovers no longer exists.

It is human nature also for persons who brought in records to be touchy about having their judgment reversed. Custodians having a long association with particular records may develop possessive feelings, regardless of the value of the objects of their affections. Unit heads may have bureaucratic misgivings about emptying (and possibly losing) stack areas, particularly if heads of neighboring units, less interested

in internal disposal, keep their areas full. And if the official line of an archival institution is that it is bursting at the seams and is therefore in urgent need of more space, perhaps of a new building, then internal disposal is not apt to get top priority.

Finally, there is mystique. Consider, for example, records that have to do with ships, with the sea. Trains, trucks, buses, and airplanes haul cargo and passengers all over this country; but records of individual trains, trucks, buses, or planes, or of their crews, or of their individual trips, are generally not viewed as immortal documents. But when cargo or people move on bodies of water, the carriers and their crews take on a mystique, as anyone disposing of maritime records finds out. And when you combine the mystique of the sea with the mystique of the military, you have a double mystique that can be overwhelming. I don't know how anybody gets rid of any records relating to a warship, whether or not the vessel ever fired a round in anger. Perhaps it is fortunate for all concerned that my appraisal experience has been entirely with civil records.

And so, for various reasons, most of us have accessioned records we probably shouldn't have accessioned. And for various reasons we hold onto records we should get rid of. And though we do reappraise on an *ad hoc* basis, and get rid of, some accessioned records, none of us, as far as I know, reappraises holdings systematically and periodically. That is what I am proposing we do.

Under this proposed reappraisal procedure we would be obliged to make a case for continuing to retain records rather than for getting rid of them.

The interval of reappraisal could be almost any period; perhaps twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years. Such an interval would allow time for the repository to publish and circulate descriptions of these records, to prepare guide entries and inventories, and otherwise to serve notice of their existence and availability. It would allow time to analyze what uses, if any, are made of the records. Where samples or selections are periodically accessioned, this analysis would be particularly useful in determining

whether the actual uses of these samples and selections were those on which the sampling or selection schemes and percentages were predicated.²

It usually isn't hard to identify series of records for reappraisal. In most published guides and inventories are series that, from their descriptions, are obvious candidates. For example, it required no particular perspicacity to suspect that the item in the National Archives inventory of the U.S. Railroad Administration records reading "Correspondence Relating to Unused Ticket Claims Filed Prior to the Expiration Date. . . ." may have been on the shelves too long; and indeed an examination failed to reveal any redeeming values (no pun intended).

An objection certain to be offered to periodic reappraisal of accessioned records is that no matter how often a series qualifies for continued retention, it would take only a single unfavorable reappraisal to wipe it out. This is true. It makes the survival of accessioned records subject to changing standards. But most public records are destroyed without ever seeing the inside of an archives; and they are destroyed in accordance with whatever standards apply at the time of their one and only appraisal. Archivists of the nineteenth century, if they could have foreseen what we routinely destroy in accordance with general schedules, might have been horrified; and, similarly, archivists of the twenty-first century may be. But unless we save, as I wish we could, a record copy of every document, there is no way of appraising except according to what we at the time believe to be the correct standards.

Since what we destroy we cannot retrieve, accessioned records that fail reappraisal deserve safeguards. There might be a staff review panel to consider reappraised records that seem to deserve a last look before they disappear forever. Such a panel might want to question the reappraiser and his reappraisal. There might

be some sort of public defender of reappraised records, an ombudsman, who could, if it seemed necessary, check the facts and reasoning of the reappraisal by going to the records themselves. The panel could consider any protests or comments from staff members or interested outsiders.

Up to this point, everything I have argued has been based on the assumption that we will reappraise accessioned records in accordance with our present standards. Now I would like to suggest that we consider some rather drastic revisions in our way of thinking about what records we should keep and how long we should keep them. (This gets into accessioning policy; but if we avoid accessioning the wrong records we avoid having to get rid of them.) If these suggestions are valid, following them would undoubtedly permit much more internal disposal than is currently possible.

The first suggested revision has to do with records that we keep chiefly for their evidential value.

The guidelines I believe most public archives in this country follow derive from those that Theodore Schellenberg established in 1956 in a National Archives bulletin, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*.

The 1950 Federal Records Act authorized the Administrator of General Services to accession federal records that the Archivist of the United States determined to have sufficient historical or other value to warrant continued preservation. Since 1960 the successive Archivists of the United States, in delegating the appraisal function, have declared this bulletin the chief authority for determining these values. Schellenberg's discussion of evidential and informational values, as spelled out in this bulletin, reproduced in subsequent archival literature, and taught in archival courses, has become gospel throughout the land.

It isn't bad gospel. I know none better. Schellenberg valiantly and with some suc-

² Suggesting an initial interval of at least twenty years after accessioning doesn't mean an advocacy of an arbitrary period of immunity. An obviously bad accession could and should be reappraised as soon as possible, no matter how short a time it has been on the shelves.

cess spelled out what records are important and valuable and why, and how to identify them. There is the temptation to boil it all down to a simple solution: save the valuable and get rid of the valueless, as simple and as surefire as the stock market axiom, buy low and sell high. But determining what is important enough to accession and what isn't is not as simple as determining that it is profitable to sell for \$50 a stock that cost \$25. Evidential and informational values are useful concepts. But Schellenberg did not advocate accessioning records simply because they were evidential or informational. He was aware that there is not a record created that is totally devoid of such values, however minute. These values had to be important values; and it is against this adjective that we collide and sometimes founder. "Important" involves subjective judgments about which Schellenberg couldn't do much more than give us his own definitions and some examples.

I believe we should reexamine Schellenberg's views, particularly on records kept mainly for evidential values. These are values, said Schellenberg, "that attach to records because of the evidence they contain of organization and function." Such records "should be preserved regardless of whether there is an immediate or even a foreseeable specific use for them." No archivist, he believed, is likely to question that such records should be preserved. "Differences of judgment will arise only as to the completeness with which such evidence should be preserved." As in the case of "important," "completeness" involves subjective judgment. I believe Schellenberg tended to overvalue the evidential. As a result, those of us who follow him tend also, I believe, to keep too many records as evidential. We accession what he describes as "the proof of each agency's faithful stewardship of the responsibilities delegated to it and the accounting that every important public official owes to the people whom he serves." "Stewardship" some-

how has overtones of Sir Hilary Jenkinson discussing the records of the Lord Steward of the King's Household rather than of Schellenberg contemplating what to keep of the U.S. Railroad Administration of World War I. In the United States in the last half century the functions of the federal, state, and local governments have multiplied and there have risen, flourished, and died hundreds of authorities, councils, boards, departments, services, administrations, agencies, offices, commissions, committees, panels, corporations, systems, missions, and whatever, administered by secretaries, under secretaries, deputy secretaries, assistant secretaries, administrators, directors, commissioners, and the like.³ To look back through the last forty years of the annual issues of the *United States Government Manual* or to browse in the more than two thousand pages of the National Archives *Federal Records of World War II* will reveal how much potential proof of stewardship is involved. Much of this proof we accession doubting, in Schellenberg's words, "even a foreseeable specific use," almost assured in our own minds that nobody will ever look at these particular records. If we could audit the documents brought into the National Archives and, probably, into other public archives, with proof of stewardship as a justification, I venture to say that we would find that most—probably 90 percent or more—have since their arrival never been looked at by a human eye. Further, I would guess that no matter how long we retain these predominantly evidential records, most are never going to be looked at by anybody. This isn't as bad as it sounds. The same can be said about the pages of many of the books on any library shelf. But it is troublesome to see rows of containers which within our memory have never been disturbed and which our instinct tells us aren't going to be disturbed; and assuring ourselves that these are proof of faithful stewardship may not totally settle our

³ There were in 1980 about a thousand such officials appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate (not including diplomatic and military appointees); and there were several hundred other presidential appointees who did not require Senate confirmation.

unease. It is as if we have raised and are maintaining memorials to ancestors, sometimes of no particular distinction or accomplishments, out of some atavistic stirring of conscience or from a feeling that this is a valediction we owe them without being able to explain to ourselves exactly why. When looking at these evidential records of some minor, forgotten agency or official there is a temptation to wonder if perhaps a certified statement of "well done, good and faithful servant" might not be enough.

As an example of the evolution by which we arrive at the degree of completeness of such evidence, consider the Wage Adjustment Board of World War II. In 1946, while the board was still in existence, a competent archivist appraised its records. The appraisal, in accordance with the archival thinking of the time (and perhaps reflecting the stack space available), called for the accessioning by the National Archives of almost 700 feet of records, with more to come. These were of enduring value as "the basic record of the policies, procedures, and operations of the Board, and as the principal source of information regarding labor-management relationships and wage stabilization efforts in the key building and construction industry during World War II." But later there were, apparently, some second thoughts. By the time the records were accessioned the quantity had been reduced to 175 feet.

Thirty years ago, as a new archivist, I prepared an inventory of these records. This inventory was published in 1954. Twenty years later, while a member of the Records Appraisal Staff, I asked an archivist on rotation there to look at these records and, if she thought it called for, to reappraise them. She did, and reduced the 175 feet to 24 feet.

In the late 1940s, not long after the records came to the National Archives, two former public members of the board, one a Harvard economics professor who was later to become Secretary of Labor, the other a Harvard Law School graduate and labor lawyer, wrote a history of the board, which the Harvard University Press published in 1950. Only their service on the board and their intimate knowledge of it

accounts for such a high-powered team writing a book about such an obscure agency. In the thirty years since its publication I doubt there has been a single scholar who has used the board's records. I am aware that a published history is not supposed to do away with the need to preserve original records; but as far as the Wage Adjustment Board is concerned, I don't anticipate revisionists.

A recent reexamination of the remaining twenty-four feet of the board's records convinces me that something less than half that amount would include whatever worthwhile evidence and information there is, and would constitute all the proof of stewardship that it is worth asking the taxpayers to burden themselves with.

My other main suggestion is that we take a close look at our use of the term "permanent." We in the archival profession like that word, and we in the National Archives exemplify that liking. "Permanent" is the adjective that National Archives regulations, finding aids, catalogs, and other issuances apply to accessioned records; and we instruct federal agencies to earmark, segregate, and schedule for transfer to the National Archives their "permanent" records. "Permanent" is a convenient term for which no simple substitute comes to mind. It may seem semantic hairsplitting to make a to-do about it. But the Federal Records Act, as adopted in 1950, does not include the word. It refers instead to records that "have sufficient historical or other value to warrant their continued preservation."

Again, I don't want to go on about a word. But for those persons involved in internal disposal, "permanent," with its overtones of everlasting, to the last syllable of recorded time, is not an easy concept to get around. "Worthy of continued preservation," awkward though it is, implies that some accessionable records may be less than eternal. It permits us more easily to entertain the thought that appraisal standards can change, that an appraiser's evaluation may be less than infallible, and that we might entertain the idea of bringing into an archives records we believe will have use and value enough to justify their

accessioning but not their endless retention. To put it another way, we now canonize our accessioned records, a state that to the faithful is definitive, infallible, and binding. If we might, instead, beatify them, we could, with an easier mind, periodically reassess them to see whether they continue to possess enough value to warrant the cost of their continued worshipful retention.

Returning to the 400 feet of records of the U.S. Railroad Administration's General Counsel, I was aware that to store them in the National Archives Building would involve a true cost of at least \$4,000 a year; to store them in the General Archives Division at Suitland, where in fact they were, would be less. To microfilm them at present rates would cost an estimated quarter of a million dollars.⁴ If they were to be kept in their original form I wasn't too worried; though entirely on wood pulp paper, they would last, untouched as they were, longer than any of us will. If we—that is, the National Archives—are determined to keep such records, I suggest dead-storing them in a salt mine. We could pay air fare to the mine for any once-in-a-generation inquirer, and still come out ahead.

Turning to more specific suggestions, I offer some for reconsidering accessioned records.

First, let us ask ourselves the questions already mentioned: would we accession these records if they were offered today? If we wouldn't, why should we continue to keep them?

Second, is there a reasonable expectation that anybody, with a serious purpose, will ever ask for these records? I stress, a *reasonable* expectation, not a conceivable expectation (anything is conceivable). A century from now, for reasons not now easy to guess, it is conceivable that somebody will want to see the correspondence relating to the unused ticket claims that I recommended for disposal. This is a conceiv-

able expectation but not, to me, a reasonable expectation. And it is on reasonable, not conceivable, expectations that appraisers must base their decisions.

Third, what if, following this reasoning, we throw away records and the conceivable indeed occurs and we or our successors have a request for them from a serious researcher? To anticipate and to allow for this, the best we can do, once we decide there is no reasonable expectation of use, is to ask ourselves: if we are wrong and someday somebody does come along who wants these records, will the requester or will scholarship in general be badly hurt because these particular records no longer exist?

Appraising is at best an inexact science, perhaps more an art; and a conscientious appraiser, particularly an imaginative one with an awareness of research interests and trends, is apt to know nights of troubled soul searching. Such an appraiser realizes that every scrap of paper has values, perhaps unique values. When reappraising records of the U.S. Shipping Board, I more than once listed for disposal records containing information about a particular vessel or a particular voyage that was unique—information that couldn't be duplicated anywhere else. This has to be displeasing to persons who may be interested in particular vessels and want every iota of information about them. To these persons unique and important may be synonymous; but they are not necessarily synonymous to an appraiser. The interests of these ship buffs have to be weighed against the cost to the taxpayer of maintaining for these persons these records. I could not justify for such a reason such maintenance.

Having qualified, I imagine, in the eyes of at least some for a place in the pantheon of archival Attilas, let me clinch that honor with some final thoughts designed to ease the consciences of those reappraisers who go against the wisdom and judgment of

⁴ I would, of course, oppose this microfilming. But if an agency had been so ill-advised as to have misspent public funds to microfilm such records, I would probably be inclined to accession the film simply because the deed had been done and the film requires a fraction of the space of the original records.

their predecessors and declare disposable what those venerable persons had declared permanently valuable.

We who reappraise should consider carefully what we are doing, realizing that what we destroy we can never recover. But having done what we believe we have to do, as diligently and as conscientiously as we know how, and having done the best we can, we should be philosophical and of good cheer. We should lift our line of sight and view records and our decisions about them as they fit into the sweep of time. We might think back to the Metroon, the city archives of ancient Athens, which Ernst Posner tells us contained not only "records pertaining to budgetary and financial matters subject to the Council's supervision" and "contracts of the state with private individuals" but also official copies of the dramas of the great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These last were probably kept in the Metroon "as a result of a motion of the orator Lycurgus" (an appraisal judgment that has stood the test of time). Of the contents of the Metroon, little more than the great dramas managed to survive. Though I do not ask that you subscribe to the theory of that archivist who thought saving only the poetry of a nation might perhaps be enough, through the ages there does seem to be almost such a law of selection and survival, a law that results in our inheriting from the golden age of Greece, Homer and Sappho, Socrates and Plato, rather than the official records. If there is such a law (which there probably isn't) then no matter how carefully and agonizingly we appraise and pre-

serve, it is possible that 2,500 years from now something of Emily Dickinson and Faulkner may survive, and nothing at all—nothing evidential, nothing informational—of the U.S. Shipping Board, of the U.S. Railroad Administration, of the Wage Adjustment Board of World War II.

If that does not put a troubled appraiser in a more comfortable frame of mind, share with me two apocalyptic visions. In the first it suddenly becomes possible to keep a copy of every single document created, and, for these documents, a perfect, instantaneous retrieval system. In the second, and less blissful, vision the upper atmosphere fills with reverse neutron bombs, heading toward every records repository. These are bombs that destroy records only, not people. They come down and obliterate every record of any sort.

Keeping these two events in separate parts of your mind, project forward a century. How different would the two resultant worlds be? In the first would our descendants, having all the information that it is possible to derive from documents, have, therefore, all knowledge? And if they have all knowledge would they have, therefore, all wisdom?

In the second, lacking the records we have as of this moment, would our descendants wander in a world of anarchy, in a world in which they would be doomed to repeat the errors of the past?

I leave it to you to conjecture as you please. My own guess is that between these two worlds there wouldn't be all that much difference.

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