

# The Influence of Historians on the Archival Profession in the United States

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**Abstract:** The founders of the first archives (herein the term includes historical manuscripts) in the United States were historians; they were among the founders of the archival profession, and historian/archivists continue to be the leaders of the profession. The increasing concern of archivists with conservation, security, and ethical use of records, and the rapidly developing technology for the automated creation, storage, and retrieval of records, have widened the gulf between the historical and archival professions. The ties between them, however, are far from severed. Many archivists belong to and participate in historical organizations and vice versa. Historians and archivists also continue to be allied in committees representing their mutual professional interests and in numerous documentary publication projects. Training in archival administration, in whatever subject, such as science or literature, is required by an archives and, for the foreseeable future, in the use of computers, is essential for archivists. Unless, though, such training is based on a solid educational background in history and historical methodology, archivists are not adequately prepared for their profession.

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*About the author:* Mattie Underwood Russell, a native of Mississippi, holds the B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Mississippi and the Ph.D. degree from Duke University. Her career has included teaching history for six years in Mississippi high schools and at Mars Hill College, 1943-1946, and teaching archival administration in the School of Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1969-78. In 1948 she became assistant curator of manuscripts at Duke, and in 1952 she was named curator, a position she still holds. She has served on local and state historical boards and committees, as president of the Historical Society of North Carolina, as chairman of the ALA/SAA Joint Committee on Library-Archives Relationships, and as a member of SAA's Committee on Education and Professional Development, and she presently represents the Southern Historical Association on the National Archives Advisory Council. Her publications include articles in the *American Archivist*, library journals, and the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, twelve sketches in the *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, and three biographical sketches in the *Encyclopedia of Southern History*. She is a Fellow of the SAA and in 1982 was chosen by the University of Mississippi as one of its fourteen alumnae to be recognized for their career accomplishments.

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THERE ARE SOME HISTORIANS who feel that archivists have come to ignore their professional forebears and no longer realize the importance of historical training for archival administration. While this allegation may apply to some archivists, it should not be valid for anyone who is knowledgeable about the role historians have played in the founding or archival repositories and in the development of the archival profession in the United States. Neither should the allegation apply to those who recognize the indivisibility of the joint mission of archivists and historians to preserve and disseminate historical knowledge. Although the first responsibility of certain archivists, even where there is a records manager in their organization, is to the creator of the records in their custody, they also have a similar responsibility to other clients. My purpose is to review, in part, the origins and development of archival institutions and the archival profession in this country and to show that historical studies always have been, and must continue to be, a bedrock of our profession, technology and management theories notwithstanding.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, the term archivist is used herein to refer to those professionals who work with historical manuscripts as well as those who work with archives. Actually, in some manuscript departments, the title of archivist is used in preference to curator, cataloger, or librarian. Anyone who has worked with historical manuscripts or archives, or both, knows that often they differ in the nature of their origin rather than in type. Manuscripts, however, have a definition problem that does not exist with ar-

chives. The non-textual materials that often appear in manuscript collections and archival record groups fit neatly under the term archives. To speak of pictures, printed items, and audiovisual and machine-readable records as manuscripts requires an explanation to those unfamiliar with all the types of material that often should be retained with the manuscripts to which they relate. The definition of a manuscript collection in the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*<sup>1</sup> is helpful, but it does not include audiovisual and machine-readable records. If "manufacts" were generally adopted as the term for nontraditional items in manuscript collections, it would be as useful as the terms artifacts and memorabilia.

If less is said these days than formerly about the relationship between history and archival administration, that is somewhat understandable. We are living amidst an information explosion, much of it conveyed in nontraditional formats. Instead of being responsible for only textual and iconographic records, archivists now also have to preserve audiovisual and machine-readable records and provide access to their contents. Barring a major catastrophe that would slow down the use of computers, a high percentage of the records generated in the future will be in computerized form. The legislative wheels of Congress tend to turn slowly, but already some members of that body are using an automated system for indexing their records. This affects the way the records are filed and thus will affect the procedures for processing, describing, and servicing them should they ever reach an archives or library. As early as

<sup>1</sup>"Collections of manuscripts. This section applies to collections of manuscript materials formed by or around a person, family, corporate body, or subject. The materials may be in their original form or reproductions, and may include photographs and printed materials. . . ." Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler, eds., *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1978), p. 114.

1973 the Department of State instituted a full-text information storage and retrieval system for its Central Foreign Policy File.<sup>2</sup>

Acquiring, housing, and maintaining machines for administering filmed and taped records is not a new problem, but it is taking on gigantic proportions. For example, between 1966 and 1972 United States military personnel microfilmed perhaps as many as three million documents captured from the North Vietnamese. The documents are recorded on ninety to one hundred reels, each containing 1,000 feet of film. The films were coded for use in File Search Equipment. Sets of the film are at the National Archives and at the Texas A&M University Archives, but no one has the necessary equipment to use the records.

While the technological juggernaut has been rolling inexorably along we archivists of today have added to our regular duties a number of tasks not undertaken by our predecessors. Among them are the crusade to convince producers of books and records to use acid-free paper for those that should possess durability and permanence, to encourage the use of archival-quality film and tapes, to conserve deteriorating materials, to avoid litigation over invasion of privacy or copyright violation by researchers, and to develop the best security systems for combating the increasing theft of manuscripts and archives. As beneficiaries of the blessings the computer has brought, we in turn face countless miles of computer print-out on poor-quality paper, machine-readable tapes and discs beyond number, possible unavailability of the necessary hardware for researching cer-

tain tapes and discs, the changeability of software systems, and incompatibility of software with the hardware that may be available. Furthermore, software systems are sometimes proprietary in nature, that is, they are leased by a private vendor. The formidable dimension the computer has added to the production of records and to the provenance, conservation, preservation, and servicing means that most future archivists will have to know how to use the computer and keep informed about developments in computer technology. Considering all the expanded and new responsibilities archivists now face, it is hardly surprising that some of them do not remember, if they ever knew, whence their profession has come.

It would be well for all archivists in the midst of coping with discussing, debating, and writing about their numerous and varied interests, problems, and ideas to review periodically their professional heritage. Historians, not archivists, are the ones who deserve the most credit for the establishment of the first state archives, the National Archives, and a number of the leading manuscript departments. They also were among the founders of the Society of American Archivists, and historian/archivists have provided the principal leadership in the archival profession.<sup>3</sup>

The tradition in the United States of preserving historical manuscripts began with the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791 by the Reverend Jeremy Belknap, who was a historian.<sup>4</sup> The lawyer and historian Thomas McAdory Owen was the chief founder of the first state archives, the Alabama Department of Archives and

<sup>2</sup>David H. Herschler and William Z. Slany, "The 'Paperless Office': A Case Study of the State Department's Foreign Affairs Information System," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 142.

<sup>3</sup>Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 93.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies, An Inquiry into Their Research and Publication Functions and Their Financial Future* (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, 1962), p. 3.

History, which was established in 1901.<sup>5</sup> Two years later the North Carolina Historical Commission, now the Division of Archives and History, was established with historian Robert D.W. Connor as secretary. After eighteen years in that position he accepted a professorship in the Department of History and Government at the University of North Carolina. Because he had proved to be a successful executive and understood both the "administrative and historical importance of Archives" as well as being an able historian, he was recommended by the American Historical Association to be the first head of the National Archives and Records Service. Since he had the support of the AHA and was a Democrat, Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him in 1934 as Archivist of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Like all of his successors in that position, Connor held the Ph.D. degree in history. A high percentage of the chiefs of divisions in the National Archives and Records Service have also held doctoral degrees. In 1942, the year after Connor resigned from the National Archives to return to the University of North Carolina to teach and write history again, he was elected to a two-year term as president of the Society of American Archivists.<sup>7</sup>

The American Historical Association was organized with forty members in 1884, eight years after Herbert Baxter Adams introduced the German seminar method of teaching history at Johns Hopkins University. According to its act of incorporation, the Association was created for the "promotion of historical studies, the collection and preservation

of historical manuscripts, and for kindred purposes in the interest of American history and of history in America."<sup>8</sup> The first standing committees of the Association were the Historical Manuscripts Commission formed in 1895 and the Public Archives Commission created in 1899. Their mission was to inventory manuscripts and public records in the United States. These inventories were published in the annual reports of the AHA and constitute the first guides to archives and manuscripts in this country.<sup>9</sup>

The first executive secretary of the American Historical Association and editor of its journal, J. Franklin Jameson, is known as the "Father of the National Archives." As executive secretary of the AHA for thirty years, he led a crusade for the systematic collection, organization, preservation, and publication of historical records. After being appointed in 1908 chairman of the AHA's committee to promote the establishment of a national archives, Jameson led the battle to end the disgraceful neglect and destruction of the records of the federal government. He visualized a national archives for the United States that would be modeled after the archives of European countries. It would be directed by scholars and would not be simply a warehouse for records. He was joined in this struggle by his close friend Waldo Gifford Leland. Leland the theorist and Jameson the confidant of congressmen and presidents "dropped the seeds of archival preservation where they gradually took root."<sup>10</sup> Their work together at the Department of Historical Research in

<sup>5</sup>Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 38 and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup>McCoy, *The National Archives*, pp. 16-24.

<sup>7</sup>*American Archivist* 5 (1942): iii; *Ibid.*, 6 (1943): iii.

<sup>8</sup>*Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1889* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), p. 1; *Ibid.*, 1936, p. xv.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 1895, p. 10; 1899, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>H.G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation, Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 7.

the Carnegie Institution of Washington led to the first survey of the federal archives and the publication in 1904, while Jameson was director, of Claude H. Van Tyne and Waldo G. Leland's *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States*. Before this guide appeared, historians knew little about the nation's records. Its publication also made them aware of the need for a national archival program.<sup>11</sup>

After visiting European archives in the course of attending the 1910 meeting of the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians in Belgium, Leland wrote that "The chief monument of the history of a nation is its archives, the preservation of which is recognized in all civilized countries as a natural and proper function of government."<sup>12</sup> Quite deservedly his name was given by the Society of American Archivists to its first publication award. Fortunately, both Jameson and Leland lived to see their dream of a national archives become a reality. In 1934, when the National Archives Act was passed, Jameson was Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.<sup>13</sup> Leland was executive secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1934, and he served as president of the Society of American Archivists in 1940 and 1941.

Some American historians have become noted as collectors of historical manuscripts. Foremost among them has

been Lyman Copeland Draper of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton of the University of North Carolina, William Kenneth Boyd of Duke University, and Lewis George Vander Velde of the University of Michigan were important historian/collectors, who collected only for their institutions. Historian Hubert Howe Bancroft's monumental library of manuscript and printed Western Americana was purchased from him by the University of California at Berkeley. Draper bequeathed his collection to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, where he worked for thirty-seven years.<sup>14</sup>

The identification of individuals trained in history who have been or are now working in archival and manuscript repositories or who have been involved in other significant ways in the preservation of our documentary heritage could go on for pages. If one checked the educational credentials of the several thousand persons listed in the current and past membership directories of the Society of American Archivists, the search probably would reveal a surprising number of holders of doctorates in history. The Great Depression and the current slump in the job market for Ph.D. graduates account in part for the large number of people with doctorates in history entering the archival field. When Connor, who "often referred to himself as an amateur archivist,"<sup>15</sup> took

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup>Waldo Gifford Leland, "The National Archives: A Programme," *American Historical Review* 18 (October 1912): 1.

<sup>13</sup>*Dictionary of American Biography*, Supplement 2. "Jameson, John Franklin," by Waldo Gifford Leland.

<sup>14</sup>Larry Gara, "Lyman Copeland Draper," *Keepers of the Past*, Clifford L. Lord, ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 40-51; Carolyn J. Mattern, "Lyman Copeland Draper: An Archivist's Reappraisal," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 444-454; Fletcher M. Green, *Essays in Southern History, Presented to Joseph Gregoire de Roulhac Hamilton, Ph.D., LL.D., by His Former Students at the University of North Carolina*, The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science, vol. 31 (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1949), pp. v-vi; *Dictionary of American Biography*, Supplement 2. "Boyd, William Kenneth," by Robert H. Woody; Ruth Bordin, *The Michigan Historical Collections. The Vander Velde Years, Twenty-five Years of Leadership*, The Michigan Historical Collections, Bulletin No. 11 (June 1961); John Walton Caughey, *Hubert Howe Bancroft, Historian of the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946), pp. 349-365.

<sup>15</sup>McCoy, *The National Archives*, p. 45.



charge of the National Archives during the Depression, there existed no pool of professional archivists upon which he could draw. All appointments by the Archivist of the United States were exempt from Civil Service regulations, and Roosevelt gave him a free hand in making appointments. Connor resisted political patronage pressure in appointing professionals and instead chose from a large group of talented, well-trained persons, many of whom were recommended by one of his fellow historians who sought positions for their students and friends. It has been said that J. Franklin Jameson was, "not surprisingly, Clio's champion spoilsman."<sup>16</sup>

The historians employed at the National Archives in the mid-1930s had, of necessity, to begin immediately to train themselves to be archivists. The only manual then available in English was Sir Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration*, first published in 1922. This work provided basic archival principles applicable to all archives, but our federal records differed in many respects from those of the British Public Record Office with which Jenkinson was familiar. Consequently, the staff of the National Archives had to develop its own guidelines for surveying records in the federal agencies and for developing procedures for the acquisition, organization, description, storing, and servicing of the records. One of Connor's early appointees with a Ph.D. degree in history, T.R. Schellenberg, became one of the leading archival theorists in the United States. His *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* was published in 1956 in both the United States and Australia. It was later translated into several foreign languages.<sup>17</sup> His se-

cond book, *The Management of Archives*, appeared in 1965 and is both a revision of his earlier work and an expansion into the methodology of manuscript curatorship.

Herman Kahn, one of the founders of the Society of American Archivists, held several important positions in NARS, including the directorship of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library from 1948 to 1961. When he was elected president of the Society of American Archivists in 1970 he was Associate Librarian for Manuscripts and Archives and lecturer in history at Yale University. In his presidential address to the society on the archival vocation he said that "most of the truly professional training of an archivist comes *before* he is given any specifically archival training." He went on to say that

the training one receives as an undergraduate and graduate student in history or related subjects, which gives or should give one a knowledge of what scholarship is, what research is, how research is conducted—the relationship of the scholar to his sources, and the uses and limitations of various kinds of sources—the whole story of man, and as a part of that story, how man has used the record in writing his own story—all of those vast areas of human knowledge that make use of the written record—it is when he is being trained in these fields that the potential archivist is receiving the truly professional part of his training. Now, it is true that after having received the professional part of his training, he is still not an archivist. What turns him into an archivist is the final training that he receives in the craftsman's skills. . . . That knowledge laid on top of the deep and solid earlier cultural training creates the archivist.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>18</sup>Herman Kahn, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation," *American Archivist* 34 (January 1971): 7.

Since archives, regardless of their subject matter or format, are historical records, training in history and historical research is essential for any archivist. Kahn included in his educational requirements for archivists training in either history or subjects related to history. There is, though, no substitute for history as a background for an archival career. This is true not mainly because of the knowledge about events, persons, and movements that an archivist trained in history brings to the job. More importantly, it is true because a solid academic background in historical studies gives one a perception that is needed in appraising the kinds of archives to acquire and retain and how they should be described. Furthermore, such training gives one a better understanding of the interests and needs of the researchers who will use archives. Even if an archival repository specializes in a particular subject field such as psychology, physics, or literature, it is with the history of those fields that the archivist is concerned. So archivists in such repositories should have historical training as well as training in archival administration and the subject speciality of the archives. The leadership that historians have always provided in this country in developing and administering archives, in publishing our documentary heritage, and in the archival profession itself proves that archivists should first be historians.

Not only was the movement to preserve and make available our documentary heritage centered in the American Historical Association, but that was the birthplace of the archival profession. In 1909 the AHA, through its Public Archives Commission, sponsored the organization of a conference

devoted to matters related to archival administration. It was called the Conference of Archivists, and its members were historians, staff members of the new state archives, and librarians with manuscripts in their charge. The conference served as a forum for exchanging information and ideas about archival matters through discussions and the presentation of papers.<sup>19</sup> As archival repositories increased in number and significance, there developed a feeling among the growing number of archivists that their interests and those of their institutions would be better served by an independent, self-governing organization. This sentiment had become sufficiently strong by 1936, especially among the new federal archivists, for the Society of American Archivists to be formed that year during the annual meeting of the AHA. The founding members numbered more than two hundred, and they included nineteen state archivists, eighty-three archivists in the National Archives, fifty-six curators of manuscripts, and twenty academic historians.<sup>20</sup>

The new society chose as its first president Albert Ray Newsome, an historian from the University of North Carolina who had chaired the Public Archives Commission. He also served as the first editor of the *American Archivist*, which began publication in January 1938. In his presidential address, Newsome called upon the society "to foster a wider and more intensive interest in archives among the national organizations of historians, economists, sociologists, political scientists, statisticians, lawyers, and other learned professions."<sup>21</sup>

As the archival profession has matured and increased in membership and archival administration has become

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1909*, pp. 33, 339-378.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1935, vol. 1, p. 176; Society of American Archivists, *Proceedings, Providence, R.I., December 29-30, 1936* (Urbana, Ill.: Society of American Archivists, 1937), p. 5; Lester J. Cappon, "The Archival Profession and the Society of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 15 (July 1952): 197.

<sup>21</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Proceedings, Washington, D.C., June 18-19, 1937*, pp. 61-64; *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1932. Proceedings*, pp. 64-66.

more complex, the ties between archivists and historians have naturally become looser. These ties, however, are far from severed. There have continued to be many archivists with membership in historical associations, and historians continue to appear on programs at meetings of archivists and vice versa. Historian Walter Rundell, Jr., was selected in 1965 by Wayne C. Grover, Archivist of the United States, to direct a survey of the use of original documentary source materials in the teaching of American history to graduate students in the United States. The results of the survey were published by Rundell in 1970 under the title *In Pursuit of American History. Research and Training in the United States*. He served as president of the Society of American Archivists in 1977-1978.

In 1948 the AHA appointed the Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts comprised of three historians and three archivists to make recommendations concerning the acquisition and administration of large twentieth-century manuscript collections.<sup>22</sup> A major move toward improving communication between archivists and historians was the creation in 1972 of the Joint AHA-OAH-SAA Committee on Historians and Archives with three representatives from each association.<sup>23</sup> The National Archives Advisory Council and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission also serve as links between the two professions. Their memberships include representatives from the major historical associations and the Society of American Archivists.

The journal *Prologue* was launched by NARS in 1969 as an attempt to bridge the widening gulf between the historical and archival professions. James B. Rhoads, then Archivist of the United States, expressed his concern in the first issue of the journal over the drifting apart of the "academic and archival scholar." He stated that the purpose in publishing *Prologue* was to reverse that trend.<sup>24</sup> Articles of historical interest based on records within NARS, discussions of major archival problems and programs, reports of recent accessions and openings of records, descriptions of publications of NARS, and other information of both an archival and historical nature are included in the journal.

Another area in which historians and archivists have been closely allied for several decades is the production of letterpress and microform editions of the records of many prominent Americans and of a number of organizations, institutions, and companies. The principal sponsor and financial supporter of these documentary publication projects has been the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. It was created by the National Archives Act but as a separate organization. The Archivist of the United States is chairman of the commission, which is responsible for making "plans, estimates, and recommendations for such historical works and collections of sources as seem appropriate for publication and/or recording at the public expense."<sup>25</sup> The commission was J. Franklin Jameson's idea, but it did little until after its re-

<sup>22</sup>Thomas C. Cochran, et al., "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1950*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d.), pp. 64-71.

<sup>23</sup>*Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1972*, vol. 1. *Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, n.d.), p. 119.

<sup>24</sup>*Prologue* 1 (Spring 1969): 1-2.

<sup>25</sup>McCoy, *The National Archives*, p. 10.



organization in 1950.<sup>26</sup> Nearly 250 documentary editions that have been endorsed or financially supported by it since the inception of its grant program in 1964 are listed in its 1981 annual report.<sup>27</sup> Nothing has been more vital to the success of the documentary publication projects than the cooperation between the archivists who hold the documents and the historians who compile and edit copies of them.

When it became known in 1979 by historians and archivists over the country that Rear Adm. Rowland G. Freeman III, Administrator of the General Services Administration, the parent agency of NARS, had put in motion an operation to transfer from the National Archives to its regional branches approximately 300,000 cubic feet of records, they formed the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage.

The efforts of this group led to White House intervention in the matter, and Freeman abandoned his plan for a massive transfer of records from the National Archives.<sup>28</sup> That organization continues to be a watchdog over our federal records system.

To keep abreast of the technical, theoretical, and philosophical advances in the archival field and also meet our daily commitments as archivists is quite a challenge. In the midst of these responsibilities and the increasing emphasis on technology and management in our profession, we must not, however, lose sight of the fact that training in history and historical methodology has always been, and will continue to be, essential for archivists. Neither should we ignore our ancestral debt to the historical profession.

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*National Historical Publications and Records Commission, 1981 Annual Report*, pp. 25-30.

<sup>28</sup>*SAA Newsletter* (May 1980), p. 1; James E. O'Neill, "The National Archives and Records Service in 1979," *Prologue* 12 (Summer 1980): 6, 8; Marvin Stone, "The Scholars Win One," *U.S. News & World Report* (4 February 1980), p. 88.