

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROJECT¹

IN the July issue of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* Mr. Karl L. Trever has an extremely interesting paragraph in his article, "Administrative History in Federal Archives." This paragraph brings the point of view of the archivist on the subject matter of administrative history. The paragraph follows:

From the viewpoint of the federal archivist, administrative history is the study of the development, organization, functions, and activities of those agencies which have composed the national government. Special attention is given to procedures by which agencies come into existence, undergo changes as to organizational form or functions, and are absorbed or liquidated. It is largely a factual study—the investigation of when, how, and for what purpose agencies were established; the determination of their supposed or actual functions, their relation to each other and to the general pattern of government; the description of their internal organization as affected by changes in function, purpose, or jurisdiction; and finally the reconstruction of the history of their records. Generally speaking, discussion of the reasons for the establishment, change or discontinuance of agencies, or the critical appraisal of their work, is left for others to produce on the basis of the objective studies of the archivist.²

From the point of view of the students of public administration, administrative history draws its significance from a somewhat different context. For them the history of administration is an important source of understanding of the administrative structure of the present and of the probable and desirable directions which its future evolution will or should take.

Public administrators are a problem-solving species. Their problems are never-ending and often repetitive. Too often, like some members of the lower orders, they puzzle out their problems anew when they reappear from time to time. Students of history of administration have an obligation to record the succession of administrative problems and their solutions as a useful aid to those who must deal with contemporary problems of government.

Moreover, the teachers of administration have a special responsibility leading to a lively interest in this subject because it is they who

¹ Summary of address delivered at the fifth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Hartford, Connecticut, October, 1941.

² *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, IV (July, 1941), 160-161.

form the minds and the ideals of the administrators of the future. Students and teachers need to know the history of their subject for breadth and depth, for perspective and for understanding.

Finally, it may be said that students of public administration are among the architects of the administrative system of the future. Their influence is widely felt as they are called upon to advise and consult on problems of administrative organization and management. Three recent official reports and recommendations illustrate and continue the stream of influence which this group possesses: the report of the President's Committee on Administrative Management; the report of the President's Committee on Civil Service Improvement; and the report of the Attorney General's Committee on Administrative Procedure. Such responsible influence demands a clear appreciation of the philosophy, principles, successes, and failures of the administrative system of the past.

More specifically the student of the history of administration is interested in such topics as these:

1. The development of public functions and offices, their distribution among different levels of government, and the nature and consequences of the interrelationships of one administrative system with another.
2. The development of legal powers of public officials and their successive application to new economic and social problems.
3. The growth and nature of the public service and of the ideals which have governed it from time to time.
4. The growth of administrative structure, methods, and procedures, especially the function of top management and the administrative corps.
5. The changing character of the official and non-governmental controls which keep public servants within legal and other limits—judicial review, legislative direction, the impact of pressure groups.
6. The success or failure of all of these aspects of administration in the light of their objectives; and the reasons for success or failure; more broadly the consequences of administrative action upon the public economy.
7. The history of ideas about public administration.

The Committee on the History of American Administrative Institutions was appointed in the autumn of 1940, sponsored by its parent, the Committee on Public Administration, one of the units in the Social Science Research Council. Its members are Mr. Roy

Nichols, Mr. Solon J. Buck, historians; Mr. Julius Goebel, Jr., a legal historian; Mr. Lloyd M. Short, Mr. John M. Gaus, Mr. James Hart, and Mr. Leonard D. White, students of public administration, the latter acting as chairman. The function of the committee is not primarily to conduct research in this field, but to facilitate and encourage research. It is directed to proceed along any or all of the following lines as circumstances may indicate: to plan research, to keep investigators in touch with each other, to encourage theses and other writing in the field, to develop pilot studies, and in general to stimulate interest in contributions in this area. The committee is charged with responsibility of filling up one of the three major gaps in the intellectual equipment of students of administration, to wit: a more rigorous conceptual organization of the subject matter, a comparative analysis, and a history.

The time span of the history of American administration will necessarily begin with the period of colonization, although greatest emphasis will doubtless be placed on the period subsequent to national independence. The center of interest will naturally vary with the problem under scrutiny. Thus the emergence of administrative law enforcement covers principally the two decades 1830-1850; one significant period in the use of inspection apparently came to an end about 1820; on the other hand the perplexing problem of adjusting federal and state agencies in concurrent fields began in 1887. The "space" span will be in principle all-inclusive—federal, state, county, municipal, territorial, and colonial with their interrelationships.

From another point of view, the perspective of the committee is equally inclusive. That is, we are interested not only in top management, central direction, and the central staff and auxiliary services, but also in the varied range of line activities: police and fire, education and health, the regulation of business and the provision of services, the conservation of natural resources and the management of municipal utilities.

It is apparent from the foregoing that the committee has set itself a task which will not be completed at any proximate date, or indeed at any conceivable date. But it is true that history is never completely written and the task of the committee is to focus attention upon this important area rather than to exhaust scholarly efforts along these lines.

The first steps of the committee include the following:

1. A broad analysis of the field of administrative history, a preliminary statement of which has been completed.
2. A trial bibliography which in its first stage now includes about two thousand items.
3. The formulation of a few major inquiries, including the history of federal-state administrative relations, the evolution of administrative powers, the transition from judicial to administrative law enforcement, and pilot studies illustrating the possibilities of writing the administrative history of a state and of a city.

The sources of material include principally constitutions, laws and municipal ordinances, debates and journals of legislative bodies and of constitutional conventions; public documents emanating from official agencies, especially their annual reports and administrative documents; manuscript material of all forms, the official records and papers; biographies, autobiographies, diaries, and letters; newspapers and contemporary publications; and a wide variety of secondary sources.

The committee anticipates that considerable work will develop in due course of time for which the assistance of archivists will be extremely important. Students of administrative history need access to the materials in custody of the archivists as well as their intelligent guidance in finding and using manuscript data. They will profit also by the work in administrative history which archivists must do in order to handle their material effectively. More than that it is to be expected that archivists will themselves be writing administrative history beyond the immediate requirements of their official work.

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