

## FINDING MEDIUMS IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES: AN APPRAISAL OF SIX YEARS' EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

ON November 8, 1935, the then small staff of the National Archives moved from temporary quarters into the massive structure which had been designed to serve as a long needed repository for the noncurrent and permanently valuable records of the government of the United States. It is not within my province, in discussing the subject which the chairman of your program committee has assigned to me, to undertake a detailed review of the problems which the National Archives has faced, or to enumerate its many accomplishments, during the almost six years which have intervened between that day and this. But it is necessary, by way of introduction, that I attempt a summary explanation of the fundamental difficulties which the infant institution necessarily faced and to describe briefly certain of its accomplishments. I do this in the hope that it will at least sketch for you the general framework of large-scale archival activity into which the making of finding mediums must be fitted as only one of many important parts.

In 1935 the United States was 159 years old, and for that many years it had been making records of its activities. As these activities increased so did record making. As a result, by 1935 the total volume of records of the federal government in Washington and the forty-eight states was some seven million cubic feet.

A part of the over-all problem of the National Archives was to secure at least a working knowledge of these records—to know where they were, what they were, something of the information recorded in them, the use that was and could be made of them, and the administrative history and functions and record-keeping activities of agencies that had created them. A part of the problem was to appraise these records, to distinguish between those of ephemeral administrative usefulness and those of permanent value. A part of the problem was to secure the legal transfer to the custody of the archivist and the physical transfer to the National Archives building of the noncurrent and permanently valuable portion of this great mass of records, and there, as a first necessity, to fumigate them, clean them,

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the fifth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Hartford, Connecticut, October, 1941.

repair those that needed repair, and then to provide them with the safest possible storage. A part of the problem was to arrange them, to know their contents, to furnish information from them, and to provide means for facilitating the securing of this information.

For the solution of this over-all problem the National Archives could not fully profit by obedience to the wise injunction boldly carved beneath one of the great stone figures which guard its Pennsylvania Avenue entrance, "Study the Past." There was no archival segment of that totality of human experience called history from the study of which this new archival agency could learn all the answers to the questions of policy and technique it must give. In assembling its staff, it could not bring to the solution of its problems men and women fully trained for their new duties either in universities or the school of experience. Training in state archival agencies, in record-keeping units of federal agencies, in libraries, and in the use of documents for purposes of scholarly research could help, and did; but no one of these trainings, nor any combination of them, was in itself sufficient to prepare one completely for the breaking of new ground that the National Archives was called upon to do. The problem was a new one in the United States, or, if one wishes, an old one so greatly magnified and so complex that experience on a smaller and simpler scale was no complete guide to its solution. Nor could more than partial help be had from Europe or other parts of the world. Studies were made, of course, and profitably continue to be made, of the practice of archival administration elsewhere. Nevertheless, while much has been learned that by wise and intelligent adaptation can be of profit, the National Archives to a large extent has had to learn from its own experiences. This was to learn by resort to the age-old method of trial and error.

In spite of its inexperience and the magnitude and complexity of the problems it faced, the National Archives has accomplished much during the past six years. It has made a preliminary survey of some three million cubic feet of records within the District of Columbia. It has planned and directed a more detailed survey by the Works Progress Administration of some four million cubic feet of federal records outside the district. After careful study it has recommended to Congress that authorization be given for the disposition of many tons of "useless" papers. It has appraised as worthy of preservation and brought into the National Archives building more than 350,000 cubic feet of records. It is conservatively estimated that the number

of individual sheets of paper in this great mass of records is more than a billion and a half. One can perhaps visualize them as standing like books on shelves and occupying a hundred miles of shelving. They have been fumigated and cleaned and placed on shelves or in containers in great concrete vaults which constitute by far the greater part of the building. In marked contrast to the conditions of their previous storage, they are carefully protected from thieves, fire, insects, sunlight, injurious chemicals and excesses or deficiencies of moisture in the air, and from other enemies of their continued existence. Barring some major archival cataclysm, more than a third of a million cubic feet of the most valuable records of our government are at last safely housed.

But the archivist is not a miser, storing up documentary treasures in order that he may gratify a perverted sense of possession, guarding them so zealously, hugging knowledge of them so selfishly to his bosom that though they continue to exist, they are of no use to a world which might otherwise derive real profit from a study of its past. The preservation of records is not an end in itself; records are preserved in order that they may be used. The use that is made of them, now or in the future, and the social profits derived from their use constitute the justification for the continued existence of the National Archives and of other institutions which have records in their custody.

The records in the National Archives have been used almost since the first truck load was placed in one of the stack areas. As their quantity has increased and as knowledge of their value for a wide variety of purposes has spread, their use by officials of the government, by university professors, by graduate students, by lawyers, and by many others of widely varying occupations and interests has steadily and rapidly grown. During the past fiscal year the total of services on records was more than eighty-seven thousand, or in the neighborhood of three hundred a day; and the greater part of these were for agencies of the government of the United States.

Three hundred fifty thousand cubic feet of records in the custody of the archivist constitute a mine of information on a surprisingly wide variety of subjects of value to administrators, to scholars, and to other searchers. But in order to make this information conveniently available, it is necessary that adequate finding mediums be developed, by the use of which members of the staff and others may locate desired information without undue expenditure of time. Various

types of finding mediums, in the form of indexes, registers, and the like, were sometimes made by the agencies which created these records; but for the purposes of the National Archives they are too frequently inadequate. Furthermore, important groups of records, as a result of their vicissitudes prior to transfer to the National Archives building, have become so greatly disordered that no satisfactory searches for information can be made in them and no completely adequate finding mediums prepared until they have been logically and orderly arranged.

The need for the preparation of finding mediums was recognized by those who planned the administrative organization of the National Archives in the early days of its existence. Influenced, presumably, by library administration in this country, provision was made for work on finding mediums by six separate operating units.<sup>2</sup>

A function of the Division of Accessions was to prepare "identification inventories," documents by which was effected the transfer to the legal custody of the archivist of the records described therein. A function of the custodial divisions (of which there are now sixteen), that is, divisions which have physical custody of groups of records, was to make detailed descriptive inventories of the records in their custody "for the use of other professional divisions and of searchers." A function of the Division of Classification was to develop "a logical and comprehensive classification plan" and a numbering system that would "positively identify each archival series in the various collections transferred to The National Archives." A function of the Division of Cataloging was to make use of the descriptive inventories produced by the custodial divisions and the classification plan devised by the Division of Classification for the development of a great central catalogue which would "facilitate the use of all archival series" and "aid searchers in locating specific subject information in the various archival collections." A function of the Division of Research was to make "for the guidance of searchers" cross-sectional studies of the collections in the several custodial divisions. A function of the Office of the Director of Publications was to compile and edit "guides, inventory lists, catalogs, calendars, and other instruments for facilitating the use of collections." Inadequate provision was made

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps I should explain that for the purpose of this paper I am interpreting the term "finding mediums" broadly to include not only all products of the work of the staff specifically intended "for facilitating the use of records," but also all which later served such uses.

for co-ordination and supervision of the finding mediums work of what were to become largely autonomous operating units and for utilizing knowledge based upon experience in the Division of Reference and elsewhere in attempting to secure information from records.<sup>3</sup>

For five years little progress was made in the preparation of finding mediums as such. The so-called "identification inventories," sometimes containing only a general description of large groups of records, sometimes containing fairly detailed and accordingly helpful listings of groups, were necessarily prepared in connection with the steady flow of records into the building; and in many cases, in lieu of anything better, they served as helpful though decidedly makeshift finding mediums. The Division of Accessions was abolished in 1938 and its function of preparing identification inventories was transferred to the custodial divisions. These divisions, because of their preoccupation with accessioning, disposition, reference work, and other pressing duties, and for other reasons, produced little in the form of "detailed descriptive inventories" of series or work preliminary thereto. Some helpful lists, however, such as one of logs in the Matthew Fontaine Maury collection, another of meteorological records, and a third of customhouse documents assembled for use in the settlement of French Spoliation Claims, were prepared. The Division of Classification, working independently of the custodial divisions, produced "classification schemes" for the records of the Food Administration, the Committee on Public Information, and a few other relatively small agencies. These may otherwise be described briefly as title line inventories of series or groups arranged in accordance with an attempted reconstruction of the administrative organization of the agency which created the records. The Division of Cataloging began the development of an archival card catalogue, using information chiefly obtained from accessions documents and such few classification schemes as were made available to it. But because of an attempt to work on the basis of accessions rather than record groups (to be later defined), because the catalogue entries were even briefer and accordingly less useful than information in other finding mediums on which they were based, because of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of establishing subject headings adequate for the needs of searchers, and because of its incompleteness,

<sup>3</sup> Statements of functions have been taken from the *First Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States . . . 1935* (Washington, D.C., 1936), 13-18.

the catalogue did not prove to be a useful finding medium. The Division of Cataloging otherwise occupied itself with the preparation of helpful indexes to certain groups of records. The Division of Research produced no cross-sectional studies. In 1938 it was abolished and its functions reallocated to the custodial divisions and the Office of the Director of Publication (which became in 1941 the Office of the Director of Research and Publications). In the Division of Reference certain cross-sectional studies were undertaken, among them one on materials in the National Archives of value for the study of the maritime history of the United States, one on prefederal records in the National Archives, and one on federal records resulting from the adjudication of land claims in California based on Spanish and Mexican grants.

Insofar as finding mediums are concerned, the most fruitful activity of this period was the preparation in the Office of the Director of Publications of a comprehensive, though necessarily general, over-all description of records which were in the custody of the archivist by the end of 1939. This was published in 1940 as a book of 321 pages entitled *Guide to the Material in The National Archives*. Out of date even before it went to the printer, because of the steady inflow of records, it can best be supplemented, for general purposes, by reference to a processed series, issued quarterly, entitled *National Archives Accessions* and containing brief descriptions of newly accessioned records.

By the spring of 1940 there had been accumulated in the National Archives a considerable body of knowledge with which to attack the problem of finding mediums. This knowledge was based on study and experience in examining records for informational purposes, in assisting searchers, in attempting to create finding mediums, and in using such as had been prepared. The time had arrived, in the opinion of the archivist, to undertake a re-examination of the whole problem of finding mediums in the light of five years' experience. Accordingly, on March 1, 1940, he appointed a committee "to make a study of finding mediums and other instruments for facilitating the use of records in the custody of the Archivist," and directed it to make a report of its findings together with its recommendations thereon. For about nine months members of this committee gave much of their time to a study of the problem. The committee held fourteen lengthy sessions. At some of these, members of the staff were present to discuss their experiences and present their views. At



two meetings nonmembers of the staff similarly assisted the committee. Written expressions of opinions, prepared by fifteen division chiefs at the request of the committee, as well as certain other materials, were given careful consideration.

Early in 1941 the committee made its report. After examination of the recommendations therein, the archivist directed that there be put into operation a comprehensive plan for the preparation of finding mediums that effected a radical reorganization of previously existing procedures. As regards the preparation of finding mediums themselves, it was provided that, with few exceptions, they should be drafted by the personnel of the divisions which had immediate custody of the records concerned. They were to consist of (1) registrations of record groups, (2) a card catalogue of record groups based on these registrations, (3) preliminary check lists, (4) preliminary inventories, (5) inventories, and (6) finding mediums of other types such as calendars, lists of documents, special reports, indexes, etc. Identification inventories and guides were to be prepared as heretofore, and it was contemplated that the Division of Reference would make special reports on materials in the custody of more than one custodial division. The Division of Classification and the Division of Cataloging were abolished. Provision was made for centralized supervision and co-ordination of the work of the divisions by the assistant director of archival service and a co-ordinating unit in the Office of the Director of Archival Service, and for editorial work prior to processing or publication in the Office of the Director of Research and Publications. An Advisory Committee on Finding Mediums, composed of the assistant director of archival service, the director of research and publications, the chief of the Division of Reference, and two chiefs of custodial divisions, was appointed. This committee was directed to study continuously the finding mediums problem and to make to the archivist recommendations for such changes in practices and procedures with reference thereto as it might consider desirable. It was directed also to submit to the archivist its recommendations on projects proposed by custodial division chiefs for the final arrangement and inventorying of record groups, on divisional priority lists for such work and on projects for the preparation of certain finding mediums of other types.

Basic to the new plan is the concept of "record groups," a concept developed because of the often demonstrated need, for purposes of description as well as for other archival purposes, to think of and

work with the whole mass of records of the government as separate though broadly interrelated groups. The term "record group" is elastically defined, because of the varied character of records produced by multitudinous agencies of the government, "as a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories." Each record group, when any part of it shall have been transferred to the custody of the archivist, is to be "registered." Each registration document is to include an appropriate name for the record group, e.g., Records of the Office of Indian Affairs, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Records of Customhouses. This is to be followed by the designation, with inclusive dates, estimate of quantity, etc., of the part or parts of the group in the custody of the archivist, and summary information regarding quantity, inclusive dates, custodianship, and physical location of parts not yet transferred. It is expected that each "registration of record group" will not exceed one page in length, that soon they will be completed for all record groups represented in the National Archives, and that in the future they will be promptly revised or additional ones prepared as new material is accessioned. They will thus provide a brief, over-all, up-to-date, general description of records in the custody of the archivist and closely related records not yet transferred. It is planned that there will be developed also a card catalogue of record groups. In this catalogue will be main entry cards by name of the agency carried in the title of the group, and added entries for all predecessor or related agencies represented in the group. No subject entries are to be undertaken. This catalogue will thus be in the nature of an index to registrations of record groups by names of agencies represented therein.

It is expected that in the near future preliminary check lists will be available for all records in the building for which equally detailed finding mediums have not already been prepared. It is planned that each list shall cover "a conveniently separable part of a record group" or in some cases an entire group. In it the records are to "be described in any convenient preliminary order," the units of description to be "series, groups of series, or parts of series, or such other units as in a given case may appear to be desirable." Each list is to contain a brief introduction giving such readily available infor-



mation concerning the history of the records and the administrative units involved in their creation as may be helpful to persons using the list.

A next step in the making of finding mediums is to be the compilation of preliminary inventories of the record groups for which the body of material in the National Archives is sufficiently extensive or complete to justify such work, and for which preliminary check lists or similar documents have been prepared. This will involve the assembling and grouping of information in the check lists, the preparation of an over-all administrative history of the agency and its records, and "the integration and revision of all this data." It is required that these preliminary inventories be prepared as quickly as possible.

Preliminary check lists and preliminary inventories are intended to make available for staff use and for the guidance of other agencies and searchers such information descriptive of records as can conveniently be assembled within a short time after the records have been brought into the National Archives building. They are to be prepared in accordance with the belief that to the starving seeker after information half a loaf of a finding medium, even though it be half-baked, is far better than none. They represent an urgently needed compromise between immediately pressing needs and a distant realization of the elusive ideal of perfection. They are intended to be, however, only preliminary to the production of what, with all due reservations in the use of the word "final," are designated in the archivist's directions as final inventories of record groups. These are to be prepared as circumstances permit and in accordance with detailed plans for arrangement as well as inventorying, approved in each instance in advance by the archivist.

A final inventory, it is planned, is to contain as an introduction an account of the administrative history of the agency or agencies which created the record group; a discussion of the history, general character, and significance of the records; pertinent data concerning parts of the group not in the custody of the archivist, related records or papers, and existing finding mediums; and "an explanation of the character of the inventory." It is expected that for the most part the "units of description" will be series, but smaller or larger units may at times be used as the nature of the records and other circumstances make advisable. The entry for each unit is to include its title,

inclusive dates, information about its quantity, arrangement, and contents, necessary cross-references, and other pertinent matter.

It is contemplated that cataloguing, based on final inventories, may be undertaken. Sufficient reference has already been made to the fact that there is provision for the preparation of other finding mediums such as calendars, indexes, special lists and studies, etc., as circumstances make them desirable and their production possible.<sup>4</sup>

The sub-title of this paper reads: "An Appraisal of Six Years' Experience." I believe that adequate appraisal for the period before 1941 has, under the circumstances and for present purposes, been sufficiently indicated. As for the new plan, it has been in operation for too short a period for final judgment to be passed upon it. It appears, however, to be well and wisely devised to fit the special needs of the National Archives and may well be at least highly suggestive to other archival institutions. More specifically:

1) It is based, not on theory alone, but chiefly upon considerable experience and upon careful consideration of the views of many individuals.

2) It meets the pressing need for immediately available and usable finding mediums by providing for preliminary check lists and preliminary inventories, yet it provides for the ultimate preparation, as circumstances permit, of more nearly definitive finding mediums which should be of the greatest helpfulness in guiding interested persons to desired information.

3) It provides a definite, integrated program, to be implemented by specific instructions, necessary in a large organization, so that no operating unit concerned need any longer be in doubt of its part in the whole program.

4) It is, nevertheless, flexible. One should note the extent to which such expressions as "preliminary," "convenient," "tentative," "readily available," "as may appear to be desirable," "as a rule," etc., appear in the archivist's statement of the plan. Adequate consideration has thus been given to the special circumstances of varied nature which characterize record groups and parts thereof.

5) It vests in the divisions which have custody of the records, which presumably have accumulated specialized knowledge as a

<sup>4</sup> The immediately preceding paragraphs are based upon and to a considerable extent contain paraphrases of as well as quotations from National Archives memorandums, from the Archivist to Heads of Operating Units, February 28, 1941, and from the Director of Archival Service to Chiefs of Custodial Divisions, June 9, 1941.

result of their many other duties, primary responsibility for the preparation of finding mediums.

6) It nevertheless provides for that centralized supervision and co-ordination which is essential in so large an institution as the National Archives.

7) It recognizes the experimental character of the work that has been planned, at least for the time being, and provides for continuing study of the problem of finding mediums and contemplates such future changes in practices and procedures as further experience may make advisable.

8) Finally, it makes provision to put into written form much of the knowledge of records now only in the minds of members of the staff. It should not be forgotten, however, that no written finding can ever entirely take the place of that finding medium which is the mind of an intelligent and zealous staff member.

PHILIP M. HAMER

The National Archives