

Research Articles

Bibles, Benevolence, and Bureaucracy: The Changing Nature of Nineteenth Century Religious Records

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Abstract: The American Bible Society's founders conceived the organization in 1816 as a traditional missionary moral reform agency. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ABS more closely resembled a modern national nonprofit corporate bureaucracy. Important changes in institutional recordkeeping accompanied and reinforced this change in mission. Increasingly, ABS field agents and employees were discouraged from presenting rich narrative reports, and were required to quantify their work into narrow statistical compilations. Recordkeeping case studies, sensitive to the broader process of institutionalization, can contribute to bureaucratization theory, expose institutional power relationships, and help archivists better appraise the informational value and limitations of their collections.

About the author: Peter J. Wosh is director of archives and library services at the American Bible Society in New York. He holds a Ph.D. in History, with a concentration in nineteenth-century American social history, from New York University, and this article grew partly from research relating to his dissertation. An earlier version of it was delivered at the Society of American Archivists convention in New York in 1987. Dr. Wosh currently chairs the Society of American Archivists' Religious Archives Section. He recently co-edited *The Diocesan Journal of Michael Augustine Corrigan, Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, 1872-1880* (Newark: New Jersey Historical Society, 1987).

WHEN THE AMERICAN BIBLE Society's Board of Managers convened in New York on 2 February 1859, the members of that body debated and discussed a subject central to the concerns of modern day archivists: the nature, scope, and adequacy of institutional documentation. Recordkeeping had constituted an important concern for the men who managed Bible Society affairs ever since the organization's founding in 1816. Still, when the managers met in 1859, they decided that a new age required a new type of record. Their deliberations offer important insight to the archivist, always interested in chronicling and determining record-keeping changes over time. More broadly, however, the record-keeping debate stimulated and signalled an important change in the Bible Society's history—a change which paralleled developments in other religious institutions at roughly the same time. The American Bible Society (ABS) was undergoing a transformation from a traditional missionary moral reform organization to something very new and very different—a national, nonprofit corporate bureaucracy. Its records policies constituted an integral element of that transformation.

Archivists spend considerable time processing, describing, and appraising their collections, but do not always turn their thoughts to the question of records creation. In fact, the kinds of records an institution produces at specific moments in its organizational life tell us much about its own development, the changing nature of its governing structure, and broader social trends. Recordkeeping decisions also play an important, if often unrecognized, role in institutional decisionmaking. Case studies that explore the ways in which records creators use, manage, and occasionally mismanage documents can expose some of the biases and limitations of institutional archives, and help archivists more effectively understand their collections. Such studies

can also offer important insights into the process and nature of institutionalization, and help place recordkeeping problems in a broader social perspective.

The wealthy and respectable Christians who established the American Bible Society in 1816 perceived the organization in very different terms from the men who sat on the Board of Managers in 1859. The founders did not plan to employ a full-time, paid administrative staff to conduct their affairs. They sought principally to guarantee, in the words of the first ABS constitution, "a wider circulation of the Scriptures without note or comment." This mission necessitated some arrangements for printing and binding, but the first generation of managers simply subcontracted these tasks to appropriately pious master workmen. Bringing such mundane mechanical operations under their own roof appeared wasteful and rather counterproductive. The board, after all, had set its sights on reforming the world, not superintending a manufacturing concern. The organization's sole purpose involved publishing and disseminating the Holy Scriptures, and its interdenominational character dictated an avoidance of all theological controversy or doctrinal strife. It appeared to be a broadly public purpose, directed by men committed to participation in public life. The early managers considered themselves eminently qualified, by birth, talent, and virtue, to direct New York City's—and indeed the entire nation's—social, political, and economic fortunes. While courtroom and countinghouse affairs occupied much of their time, the merchants and lawyers supporting the Bible movement dutifully accepted the burdens and responsibilities of public office as well.¹

¹On this patrician generation of New Yorkers generally, see Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, 1750 To the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), esp. 46–88; M.J. Heale, "From

Dedicated to preserving the traditional, deferential, and hierarchical values they treasured, the managers drew no distinction between their public and private pursuits. Prominent local clergymen and benevolently disposed laymen took time from their regular business activities to manage the American Bible Society's affairs on a part-time basis. Richard Varick, for example, served as the society's first treasurer between 1816 and 1819. Born in 1753, Varick had formerly served as a mayor of the city, speaker of the State Assembly, and New York attorney general. He viewed the Bible Society treasurer's position as part of his public charge, and maintained the society's books when not involved in other activities. The first few treasurers and corresponding secretaries received no remuneration for their efforts, and the board itself regulated every detail of the operation through its committee structure.²

Every detail of Bible work did indeed interest the early managers. They proved especially meticulous in establishing a thorough record-keeping system to insure that correspondence concerning the cause would be carefully preserved and available

for their inspection. In 1817 they created their first paid position—that of recording secretary and accountant—and the individual they hired was explicitly charged with maintaining the minute books, accumulating accurate accounting information, and corresponding with the hundreds of voluntary auxiliaries who had already affiliated with the society. This appointment reflected both the extraordinary increase in the society's volume of business and correspondence since its founding two years earlier, and the first recognition that affairs could no longer be conducted exclusively through the efforts of part-time philanthropists.³

The managers engaged John Pintard to serve as recording secretary. Pintard was a founder of the New-York Historical Society, trustee of the New York Bank for Savings, director of the Brooklyn Steamboat Company and Sailors Snug Harbor, secretary of the Mutual Insurance Company, and promoter of the Erie Canal. He personified the civic humanitarian impulse characteristic of urban elites in early Republican America, and devoted his career to administering and maintaining the learned societies and cultural institutions of early federal New York.⁴

The managers explicitly instructed the part-time secretaries for domestic and foreign correspondence to "deliver to the Recording Secretary all the letters [they] may write relative to the concerns of the Society, excepting such as shall be mere letters of form." They charged Pintard to "copy

City Fathers to Social Critics: Humanitarianism and Government in New York, 1790-1860," *Journal of American History* (June 1976): 21-41; and Michael Wallace, "Changing Concepts of Party in the United States: New York, 1815-1828," *American Historical Review* (December 1968): 453-491. For an important treatment of the lack of distinction between public and private in this period, see John S. Whitehead, *The Separation of College and State: Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale, 1776-1876* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). Concerning Bible, tract and Sunday School societies generally, the standard treatments remain Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960) and Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960). An important study of institutions in nineteenth century America is Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700-1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York: New York University Press, 1982).

²For a brief biography of Varick, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Varick, Richard."

³On the initial decision to hire a paid employee, see Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Managers, 22 January 1818, American Bible Society Archives (hereinafter cited as ABS Archives).

⁴Pintard's career is treated in Dorothy Barck, ed., *Letters From John Pintard To His Daughter*, 4 volumes (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1937-1940); David L. Sterling, "New York Patriarch: A Life of John Pintard, 1759-1844" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1958) and Richard Harrison, *Princetonians, 1776-1783* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).



Figure 1. Bible House, Astor Place, New York City, 1893. The relocation of production, distribution, and translation functions to this uptown facility physically articulated the American Bible Society's mid-nineteenth century emphasis on centralization, bureaucratization, and businesslike management. (Courtesy of American Bible Society Archives.)

them without delay into books to be provided for that purpose, one for the foreign and the other for domestic correspondence, and as soon as the said letters are copied to forward the same according to their respective destinations, and to note in the said Books the time when, and the mode in which he forwarded each letter.” The managers also mandated that “an Alphabetical Index and such marginal notes as may promote the convenience of reference” be constructed by the recording secretary, and that “the said books be laid on the table at each meeting of the Board for the inspection of the Managers.”⁵

⁵Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Managers, 15 May 1818, ABS Archives.

The managers made extensive use of each scrap of information they could find concerning the moral condition of Americans and the state of Scripture destitution throughout the United States. Every incoming letter was read to the managers at every meeting of the Board. In their attempt to assess the spiritual welfare of remote corners of the United States and allocate their resources according to need, no letter appeared too trivial, no correspondence irrelevant. In a nation of island communities, they craved information—information especially concerning the distant western and southern regions, but information as well concerning the lives of the poor who sometimes lived in their own neighborhoods, but of whose lives they knew precious little.

New York City and the nation underwent an extraordinary transformation in the forty years or so after the American Bible Society was founded, and this great transformation between 1815 and 1860 stimulated Christians to redefine the nature of benevolence and revise the manner in which they did business. Many historians have chronicled the familiar story of New York's economic rise: the beginnings of packet service between New York and Liverpool; the opening of the Erie Canal; the city's role as America's major entrepot for European goods and its domination of the southern cotton trade; its emergence as the most productive manufacturing city in the Republic; and the concentration of banking, credit, and capital on Wall Street. Steamboats, railroads, and telegraphs linked previously isolated areas of the country and heralded the emergence of a new national economy. Technological developments in the printing trades revolutionized the information market, and the penny press carried news from the metropolitan centers into the rural villages and small towns of antebellum America. New York became the information capital of the young republic, and the national headquarters of the major interdenominational Protestant philanthropies, making it in some important ways the religious capital of mid-nineteenth century America.⁶

⁶Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), describes the growth of New York City during the ante-bellum period. More recent specialized treatments of this transformation include: Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1826-1863* (Port Washington: Ira J. Friedman, 1949); James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Carl F. Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and the*

The expansive economy, and the extraordinary growth of the American Bible Society, brought a new style of management to Bible affairs. By the 1850s, the Bible Society employed thirty-seven full-time agents, with each responsible for distributing the Scriptures and soliciting subscriptions in a specific geographical territory. Their salaries totalled more than \$32,000, and they brought in nearly \$100,000 in annual donations and Scripture sales; the auxiliaries they supervised contributed another \$125,000 to the home office. The society had begun producing written manuals outlining these agents' responsibilities, regularizing its own internal reporting arrangements, and creating an increasingly well-defined system for regulating the flow of information between the field and the home office.⁷

Insurance executives, corporate attorneys, and investment bankers now wielded the power on the Board of Managers, and they hoped to bring the precision of the actuarial table and the rationality of the organization chart to Bible affairs. They relied on the railroads, the most complex and sophisticated business concerns of the age and the only other enterprises heavily dependent on nonlocal capital resources, for administrative models. The managers cre-

Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790-1840 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973); Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979); Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975); and Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

⁷Report of the Sub-Committee, Minutes of Meeting of the Committee on Agencies, 1 March 1855, ABS Archives.

1.
Journal of an Agency, in behalf of the American Bible Society, begun at New York, March 1822.
by Rev. Richard Dobson Hall.

Agreeably to the instructions given to the Agent.
the following objects are to be kept constantly in view.

It is to aid the Parent Society in accomplishing the great ends of its Institution - i.e. a free and universal distribution of the Holy Scriptures by all lawful and praxential means.

The best means for securing these desirable results appear to be

1st The formation of new Auxiliaries, where circumstances are favorable - and recommending such measures to those already formed. In the formation of new Societies and receiving those already in existence - two provisions are indispensable. viz: Their sole object shall be to distribute the Bible without note or comment - and to place the disciples forward, after supplying the wants of the district, at the disposal of the Parent Socy. Due care must be taken to improve Societies work. The necessity of them ~~was~~ execution to support themselves and not to expect too much from the Parent Institution.

2^d In visiting those Societies already established, their actual state and the causes of declension must be diligently enquired into - and if necessary - a re-organisation and alteration of the system. The Agent is expected to make himself acquainted with the proceedings of each Society and suit his advice to the state of things.

ated a paid, internal hierarchy of professional managers to regulate Bible affairs on a daily basis. They created and redefined administrative positions throughout the early nineteenth century, subdividing more and more tasks between the different offices. The names of these offices and their dates of creation offer some indication of the direction in which the society was moving: corresponding secretary (1826), general agent & accountant (1827), recording secretary & accountant (1832), general agent & assistant treasurer (1832), editor & librarian (1836), treasurer (1838), assistant agent (1840), financial secretary (1840), and general agent (1853). Administrative work had emerged as a full-time occupation, fixed monetary salaries and contractual obligations increasingly governed terms of employment, and an internal hierarchy developed among the society's employees. Richard Varick relinquished his post as Treasurer in 1819, but remained active on the Board of Managers and eventually served a term as society president. When Andrew L. Taylor resigned as ABS assistant treasurer after seventeen years in 1886, he did so to accept a position as secretary of Dr. Jaeger's Sanitary Woollen System Company on Broadway. His association with the society terminated with his final payroll check. The contrast is instructive and relevant. Increasingly, full-time administrators seeking bureaucratic rewards and career opportunities rather than part-time philanthropists hoping to dispense benevolence, managed internal affairs. The new administrators and the new managers brought a commitment to efficiency, an emphasis on productivity, a more systematic approach to benevolence, and not insignificantly, a new passion for recordkeeping to their tasks. But it was to be recordkeeping of a very different kind, and recordkeeping to be used for a very different purpose.⁸

When the Agencies Committee met to consider its recordkeeping policies in February 1859, it discussed a series of motions presented by a relatively new member of the Board of Managers — Archibald Russell. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1811, Russell had been trained in the law. He made his greatest mark in a fairly new field of study, however—the science of statistics. A founder of the American Geographical and Statistical Society, his *Principles of Statistical Inquiry* earned him widespread recognition in mid-nineteenth century America. As president of the Five Points House of Industry and presiding officer of a savings institution for the poor, he knew the value of a well-managed benevolent enterprise. He began his association with the Bible Society in 1843, and his concerns reflected the anxieties of recently elected businessmen and brokers on the Board of Managers. Was the American Bible Society, the new members of the board asked with increasing frequency, conducting its affairs efficiently? Had the society successfully applied the appropriate laws of business to the work of benevolence?⁹

In 1858, Russell asked the Agency Committee to consider three resolutions. First, he wished to introduce “a tabulated Schedule to be filled out by each Agent, weekly,

ABS Annual Reports, and Andrew Taylor's subsequent career has been reconstructed through New York City Directories, available at the New York Historical Society.

Brief overviews concerning some of the topics addressed in this paper can be found in Reinhard Bendix's discussion of “Bureaucracy” and Peter M. Blau's analysis of “Organizations and Theories” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. On general changes in the corporate world, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977) and Thomas C. Cochran, “The Business Revolution,” *American Historical Review* (December 1974): 1449–1466.

⁹“Russell, Archibald,” *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, edited by James Grant Wilson and John Fiske (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1898), 41:432; *New York Times*, 21 April 1871.

⁸The creation of new offices has been traced through

and transmitted to the Bible House monthly.” The printed schedule would include “all the information relative to the acts of the Agents and result of their labors that may be easily stated in this form.” Second, he suggested that, when an agent’s commission came up for renewal, an “abstract of the last year of the tabulated reports which have been forwarded from time to time” be carefully examined and presented to the full board. Finally, Russell proposed “abolishing all Sub-Agencies and making each Agent report to the Bible House.” These measures would significantly reduce agents’ autonomy, provide new instruments for gauging their effectiveness, and revolutionize institutional recordkeeping.¹⁰

The committee that considered his request did not respond with one mind. This particular group contained a significant number of older, more traditional Bible men and evangelicals. William Forrest (1791–1865), for example, was the committee chair, and he had spent his career conducting a traditional seminary for young men in Manhattan, far removed from the cares of South Street and Wall Street. Forrest and his supporters objected especially to condensing the rich information which agents provided into “a dry tabulated statement.” Traditionally, Forrest informed Russell, each agent presented his monthly account in “a narrative form.” While the agent’s reports “included most of the particulars enumerated in the schedule” that Russell proposed, it also offered much more. The agents attempted to “weave the whole into a narrative, which affords an opportunity of introducing anything interesting in the way of incident, anecdote, remarks or conversations coming under their notice or to their knowledge.” This narrative helped Agency Committee members keep abreast of the

agent’s personal progress and evaluate the general state of the Bible cause in a specific district. It also chronicled exciting and significant personal incidents that the ABS frequently published in its monthly *Bible Society Record*. The narrative certainly appeared “decidedly preferable,” according to some Committee members, to the narrowly conceived statistical format.¹¹

The majority of the board completely disagreed. Its members had no time to sift through long stories and anecdotes. Business concerns and service on benevolent boards took up more time in 1859 than in 1816. The revolutions in transportation and communication that allowed businessmen to accumulate great fortunes also tremendously increased the daily volume of business transactions. New York’s rising capitalists spent long hours in the office, and found little time for the cultural and intellectual interests that occupied the earlier Federalist gentry. The separation of work and residence further pressured businessmen. Managers commuted to Wall Street and Pearl Street from uptown residences, rode the cars to Astor Place late in the day to look after ABS affairs, and subsequently returned home. The new capitalist lifestyle seemed a constant struggle against the clock, and time itself assumed new significance. By 1884, George M. Beard would diagnose a new, peculiarly modern disease in his work, *American Nervousness*, attributing much of the increasingly common anxieties and mental breakdowns characterizing the middle class simply to the pressure of always being on time.¹²

Time economy demanded a new form of

¹¹Minutes of Meeting of the Committee on Agencies, 2 February 1859, ABS Archives.

¹²Arthur H. Cole, “The Tempo of Mercantile Life in Colonial America,” *Business History Review*, XXXIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1959): 277–299; Chandler, *The Visible Hand*, 207–215; Cochran, “The Business Revolution;” Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 47–48.

¹⁰Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Managers, 1 July 1858, ABS Archives.

2

STATISTICAL REPORT.

MONTHLY REPORT OF
FOR THE DISTRICT OF

AGENT OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY,
FOR THE MONTH OF

PERSONAL LABOURS.

Auxiliaries, Branch Bible Societies, and Bible Committees visited by the Agent, and their Names.	Religious Meetings, Ecclesiastical Assemblies, and Churches in which the Agent presented the Bible Cause—their Names.	Anniversaries of Auxiliaries, Branch Bible Societies, etc., attended by the Agent—their Names.	Auxiliaries, Branch Bible Societies, and Bible Committees organized or revived by the Agent—their Names.	No. of Bible Sermons and Addresses delivered by the Agent.	No. of Letters relating to the Bible Cause written by the Agent and Circulars sent.	No. of Miles travelled by the Agent in behalf of the Bible Cause.	Amount of Money collected by the Agent—Donations.	Amount of Money received by the Agent from Sales of Books.	Amount of Money paid over by the Agent to the American Bible Society.	Amount of Money paid over by the Agent to Auxiliaries.	Agent's Expenses for travelling, postage, and stationery.	Amount of Subscriptions secured by the Agent, but not yet paid.

Post-office Address,
Dated,

18

Signed,

Agent for

N. B.—Please fill the blanks carefully, and return this report to the Secretaries at the Bible House as soon as possible after the close of the month. Add your detailed statement on the blank pages. Leave margins for binding.

3

STATISTICAL REPORT.

MONTHLY REPORT OF
FOR THE DISTRICT OF

AGENT OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY,
FOR THE MONTH OF

LABOURS OF ASSISTANT AND COUNTY AGENTS.

No. of Assistant and County Agents included in this report.	No. of Auxiliaries and Branches visited by them.	No. of Bible Sermons and Addresses delivered by them.	No. of Anniversaries of Auxiliaries and Branches attended by them.	No. of Auxiliaries or Branches organized or revived by them.	No. of Letters and Circulars sent out by them.	No. of Miles travelled by them for the Bible Cause.	No. of Pastors, Officers of Bible Societies, and Bible Society Patrons, visited by them.	Amount of Money collected by them in form of Donations.	Amount of Money received by them from Sales of Books.	Amount of Money paid by them to Auxiliaries.	Amount of Money paid by them to the District Agent.

Date

Signed,

Agent for

OPERATIONS OF AUXILIARIES.

Names of Auxiliaries included in this report.	No. of Branch Bible Societies.	No. of Protestant Churches co-operating.	No. of Protestant Churches not co-operating.	No. of Families visited.	No. of Destitute Families found.	No. of Destitute Families supplied.	No. of Destitute Persons supplied.	No. of Sabbath and other Schools supplied.	No. of Volumes distributed in the Army and Navy.	No. of Volumes circulated by Sale.	No. of Volumes circulated by Donation.	Value of Volumes Sold.	Value of Volumes Donated.	Total Receipts from Sales and Donations.

Figure 3. Statistical report, from *The Bible Agents' Guide*, 1894 edition, reflecting changes in managerial expectations regarding agents' productivity and in the use of agents' reports to support institutional decision-making. (Courtesy of American Bible Society Archives.)

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watemark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access

communication. The managers sought brief summaries, statistical breakdowns, and easily assimilable factual data. Sacrificing complexity for simplicity, the board wished to reduce information to its most basic level—a single number if at all possible. The destruction of the narrative report accomplished this. Like the credit rating and the stock-turn ratio, the tabulated statement heralded the birth of a new bureaucratic age. The new records concealed as much as they offered. When the full board approved Russell's recommendations, Bible agents were confronted with a new form of report. Each monthly statement required twenty-six separate entries. Agents were required to specify the "Number of Bible Sermons and Addresses delivered," but the Managers exhibited minimal interest in the sermons' content. Agents counted up the "Number of Pastors, Officers of Bible Societies, and Bible Patrons visited," but bore no obligation to describe or relate the conversations they engaged in. The last column in each report, after all, adequately measured their success in the eyes of the board: "Total Receipts from Sales or Donations." By 1864 the Society included in its *Instructions to Agents* manual, a section titled "Pecuniary Transactions." In it, the managers informed their field representatives that "this Society expects its Agents to be systematic, prompt, and exact." "They can never be successful labourers in the Bible field," commented the managers, "unless they are *conscientious* and *thorough businessmen*." The businessmen on the Board had indeed effected their own managerial revolution.¹³

This revolution in recordkeeping played an important, subtle, and largely unrecognized role in future institutional decision-making. The board, by revising its reporting

methods, could now construct endless statistical tables, designed to determine whether Bible work in a given area paid off, whether an agent operated efficiently, whether more favorable ratios of receipts to expenditures could be obtained in other areas of the country. Crude figures, calculating the precise cost of distributing each item of Scripture, could be devised. Agents began to realize that maximizing receipts and slashing expenditures counted for more in the eyes of home-office bureaucrats than stories of conversions or time spent merely proselytizing to unreceptive audiences. An ecclesiastical career might turn on the amount of collections received from congregations, and new managerial and fundraising skills determined success in an increasingly competitive benevolent marketplace.

William Forrest, the chairman of the Agency Committee who advocated an older, more traditional, missionary approach to Bible labor, fought the new recordkeeping regulations. Buried within his reports was a strong and radical critique of the new informational system. "To measure such work [Bible work] by the dollars and cents which are derived from it, or to estimate it by the amount which it costs," he commented, "is like counting the price of the ointment, when poured upon the head of the Saviour—like an attempt to bring within the computation of a business transaction the worth of truth, or the gain of godliness."¹⁴

Forrest eloquently criticized the new policies, but in the final analysis he failed. The future belonged to men like the Rev. Edward W. Gilman, the Society's corresponding secretary between 1871 and 1900, and a career administrator. Writing to William Whipple, the society's agent in Persia in 1892, he criticized a narrative report recently forwarded by the Persia

¹³American Bible Society Board of Managers, *Instructions to Agents of the American Bible Society with Miscellaneous Items of Information* (New York: American Bible Society Press, 1864), 13.

¹⁴Minutes of Meeting of the Committee on Agencies, 1 March 1855, ABS Archives.

Agency. Of course, he conceded, "there is no question about the hardships faithfully endured by your men" and "the four instances which you allude to are of a thrilling character." Still, Gilman complained, "you say you are employing twenty men: what are they accomplishing? Some of them you describe as being very successful: what of the residue? On an average, each man sells three books a week. Is that the best that can be done? Can we not make our methods for putting the Scriptures into circulation more efficient and economical?" Remember, cautioned Gilman, your men should not "be spending their time in arguments and wayside preaching." In the nearby Levant Agency, Gilman observed, twenty men working in Constantinople, Adrianople, Adabazar, Smyrna, and Caesarea sold 4,398 copies in ninety days: "cannot your men be brought up to some [such] standard as that? The average sum received, if I calculate correctly, was thirty cents a volume . . . it is quite worth while for you to keep the figures in mind, and to aim resolutely at something better than you have ever reported."¹⁵

Clearly, a new standard was being applied to Bible laborers, and a revolution in institutional recordkeeping helped set that standard. The new reporting schemes allowed information to be filtered, analyzed, and presented in new ways. They provided the informational base upon which the new bureaucratic structures could be constructed. Most significantly, they enshrined the values of business in the arena of benevolence.

What has all this to do with archives? Archivists, when they turn their thoughts to records creation, can occupy a unique place within their institutions. Remaining sensitive to changes in recordkeeping pol-

icies and practices over time, exploring the ways in which records creators use, manage, and mismanage their own documentary record, and understanding the biases and limitations of institutional records can help the archivist more effectively appraise the informational value in her or his collections. It can help the archivist understand gaps in the documentary record and discern the reasons why modern records seem so silent on the most salient aspects of human existence. A recent article in the *American Archivist* argues that archival theory does not exist. It may be that we have been attempting to construct archival theory in the wrong areas.¹⁶

American historians, in recent years, have paid much greater attention to the process of institutionalization, charting the development and evolution of large organizations in nineteenth-century America.¹⁷ Several important insights from this new literature contain significant theoretical implications for archivists. First, the new institutional historians stress the importance

¹⁶John W. Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 66-74.

¹⁷See the discussion in Thomas Bender, Peter D. Hall, Thomas L. Haskell, and Paul H. Mattingly, "Institutionalization and Education in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *History of Education Quarterly* (Winter 1980): 449-472, for an elaboration of many of these points. Examples of recent histories which I would place within this new institutional historiographic framework include: Hall, *The Organization of American Culture*; Chandler, *The Visible Hand*; David F. Allmendinger, *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975); Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); and Geoffrey Singleton, "Protestant Voluntary Organizations and the Shaping of Victorian America," in Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 47-58. One suggestive article in the archival literature which addresses issues concerning recordkeeping and bureaucratization is Michael A. Lutzker, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 119-130.

¹⁵Edward W. Gilman to William Whipple, 13 September 1892, Corresponding Secretary's Papers, Levant Files, ABS Archives.

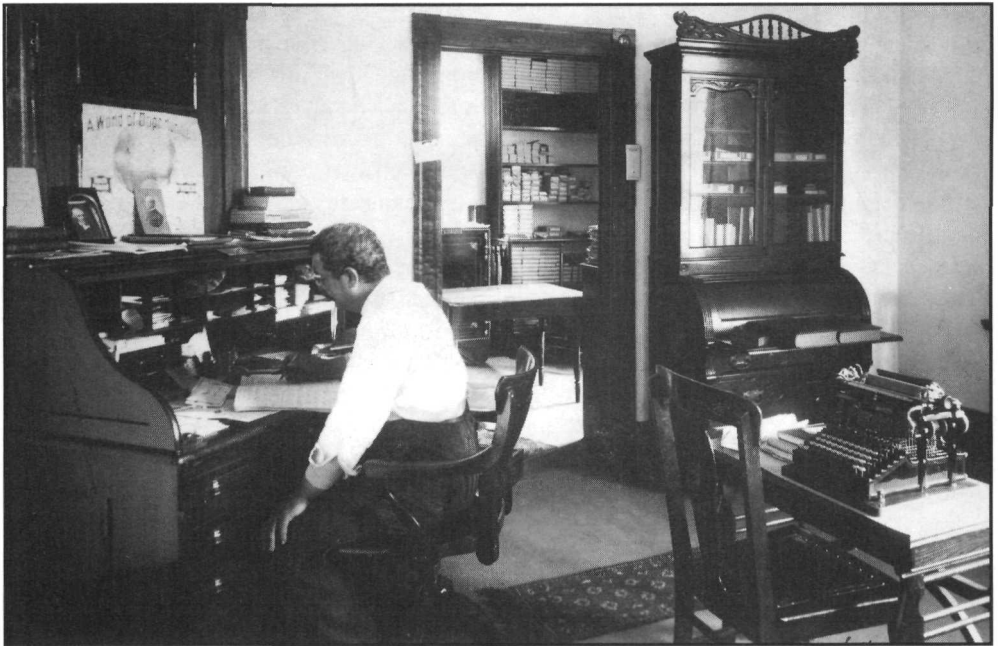


Figure 4. John Percy Wragg, Superintendent of the ABS's Colored Agency, working in his office at Atlanta's Gammon Theological Seminary, 1907. The ever-present typewriter, wastebasket, and filing equipment, as well as a variety of record types, characterized the turn-of-the-century administrative office. (Courtesy of American Bible Society Archives.)

of linking social sectors. Specific institutions did not constitute isolated arenas of specialized activity, but rather shared their structures and personnel with other social institutions. Understanding the revolution in recordkeeping at the American Bible Society, for example, requires some consideration of the rise of managerial capitalism, the creation of the railroad, the growth of the life insurance company, the changing social composition of the Protestant ministry, and New York's dynamic urban milieu. Recordkeeping studies underscore the essential interdependency and interrelationships between the organizations we document, and remind us that our archives were not created in an institutional vacuum.

Second, recent institutional histories emphasize the importance of dissecting internal, as well as external, relationships.

Organizations rarely move forward in a linear, unified manner. Internal conflicts develop and intensify as administrative hierarchies emerge within an institution. Power struggles frequently evolve into informational struggles; control over the nature and form of institutional information can mean control over the organization itself. Recordmakers, as well as recordkeepers, have always pursued their own well-defined "documentation strategies" to advance very specific social and institutional goals and agendas. Archivists must remain sensitive to the implications of this fact in evaluating the historical records that have survived.

Finally, sensitivity to changes in institutional recordkeeping offers important insights into the ways in which organizations transform themselves to persist and remain

vital. Careful written recordkeeping constitutes an essential element of modern bureaucratic life. The moment an institution elects to change the form and/or content of its written record can signal an important ideological shift within the organization. The desire for a new kind of record, and the impulse to organize information in new ways, bears a complex, yet largely unstudied, relationship to the process of bureaucratization. Careful case studies, documenting such changes within specific organizations and connecting them with larger institutional changes, can make an important contribution to bureaucratization theory.

For archivists to make such theoretical contributions, however, they need to remain conscious of the dangers of bureaucratization within their own profession. Many archivists in recent years have moved away from traditional historical and humanistic concerns, and have defined them-

selves as "information specialists." Recognizing that professional historians constitute a diminishing percentage of their research clientele, some have constructed a rather narrow definition of archival responsibility. They have defined their principal concern as one of service to the administrators of a particular corporation, governmental agency, or denomination, and defined as their principal priority retrieving the information their specific administrative constituency demands most frequently. Less consideration has been given to the nature of records which repose in their care. Truly understanding an archival collection demands a sophisticated historical knowledge of institutional life that moves beyond simple structural issues. Ultimately, it requires archivists to behave a bit less like the nineteenth-century bureaucrats who created their holdings and assume the perspective of the twentieth-century humanistic scholars they frequently serve.