

International Scene

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The Dutch Association of Archivists Marks Its Centennial

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Abstract: The founding of the Dutch Association of Archivists (VAN) in June 1891 was related to developments in the organization of public records in the Netherlands at the end of the nineteenth century. That organization, which continues today, is described by the author. The role of the Dutch association, especially in the commissioning of a manual to provide practical interpretation of archival principles, and in the drafting of the first and subsequent Dutch national archives laws, is also discussed.

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THE DUTCH ASSOCIATION OF Archivists, or *Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland* (VAN), was founded in the city of Haarlem on 17 June 1891, making it the oldest association of its kind in the world. Other European archival associations were founded somewhat later: in Germany archivists organized the first *Deutscher Archivtag* in 1899; in France the *Association amicale et professionnelle des archivistes français* originated in 1904; and in Belgium a society, which included employees of museums and libraries, was founded in 1922.

The founding of the Dutch association was related to developments in the organization of public records in the Netherlands at the end of the nineteenth century; it is therefore appropriate to discuss those developments. Moreover, the administrative organization of public records has remained essentially the same since 1891, so a brief discussion of that organization is also useful as a description of public records in the Netherlands today.

Organization of Public Records in the Netherlands

Government archives in the Netherlands reflect the country's three administrative levels: state, provincial, and municipalities and water boards.¹ The State Archives of the Netherlands is under the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs. At the level of the state archives, the General Archives in the Hague (*Algemeen Rijksarchief*, ARA) is the most important. The ARA keeps the archives of government agencies whose functions cover, or previously covered, the state as a whole, such as those of the Queen's Secretariat, the Houses of Par-

liament, the departments, the central state services, as well as the archives of former colonies and overseas territories insofar as these originate from agencies within the Netherlands. The important role of the Netherlands in the history of Western expansion makes Dutch archives, especially those in the General Archives, indispensable for the study of the history of Asia, Africa, America, and Oceania.

The capital of each of the eleven provinces is the site of a branch of the State Archives which houses the archives of the past and present provincial administrations and the central government agencies in that particular province, including the archives of dukes, counts, bishops, monasteries and castellans, prefects, governors, queen's commissioners, lawyers, civil servants, and of many private institutions, families, and individuals.² The State Archives in the provinces formerly were provincial archives, but during the centralization of the last decades of the nineteenth century, they were brought under the administration of the State Archives. This took place between 1877 (the province of Gelderland) and 1890 (the province of Zeeland). The provincial records are housed alongside state records in the state archives branch in each province. The only authority that provincial government has regarding archives is the inspection of municipal archives by a provincial employee, the *provinciaal inspecteur*.

The records in municipal archives are second in importance only to the records in the state archives. The importance of Dutch cities in the economic and political history of the country until 1795 and their standing as cultural centers in their own right in the nineteenth century are reflected in the rich-

¹This information is found in a more comprehensive form in "Fact Sheet on the Netherlands: Public Records," published as Fact Sheet 33 E 1988 by the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, Sir W. Churchillaan 368, Postbus 5406, 2280 HK Rijswijk, the Netherlands.

²In former years there were eleven provinces, each with a State Archives in the provincial capital. Recently a new province, Flevoland, was created in the new land reclaimed from the IJsselmeer; there is as yet no State Archives for Flevoland.

ness of the records in municipal archives. Most municipal archives date from the latter half of the nineteenth century; by 1890 there were approximately thirty municipal archivists. Currently, approximately sixty of the 741 Dutch municipalities employ archivists, while more than 220 municipalities jointly operate regional archives. Other local authorities have no archivist of their own, with archival work assigned to the clerk of the municipal council.

Water control boards have their own records departments. These autonomous public authorities have had the important function of controlling the water in the canals and rivers in the Netherlands since the Middle Ages. Some of the larger water boards, such as Rijnland, Delfland, and Schieland, employ their own archivist, while others have an agreement with state or municipal archives for the preservation of their records.

The Dutch Association of Archivists

The first meeting of all state archivists was held under the presidency of the archivist general in 1890 at the end of the period of centralization of public record keeping. Officially state and municipal archivists had few formal ties, being part of different governmental bodies. Nevertheless, as professional colleagues they felt a need for further communication and the exchange of experiences. This need for cooperation led to the founding of the Dutch Association of Archivists in the summer of 1891. Forty of the forty-eight professional archivists joined the new organization, whose main function was to promote the interests of the archival profession in the Netherlands. The members agreed upon three goals for their new association: (1) to give a theoretical background to *archivistiek*, the work of describing and managing archives; (2) to write an archives law; and (3) to ameliorate the status of archivists by organizing a standardized training program

and by gaining recognition and adequate pay for the profession.

In order to meet the first goal, the VAN commissioned a manual which would provide a practical interpretation of the archival principles then current in Europe. In 1898 *Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* was published by S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin.³ The *Manual* is the association's main claim to fame. It has been translated into English, German, French, Italian, and Chinese and after almost a century it still is a very important book on the theory of the profession.⁴

The association's other important goal was to establish a legal basis for Dutch archival institutions. On several occasions the association drew up draft archives laws and campaigned for a law granting public access to historical archives. The first Dutch national archives law of 1918 stands as one of the finest achievements of the association. The VAN also played an important role in the revision of the law on archives in 1962, and in the legislative amendments of 1968. The VAN has participated in monitoring the application of the 1962/68 law and the redrafting of an archives act by the Ministry of Culture in the last decade.

The improvement in the training of archivists and their position in society has been another important goal for the association since its founding. The association was successful in meeting both these goals, but at the cost of much hard work. The 1918 Archives Law stipulates the qualifications necessary for two levels of archivists—senior archivists who hold a university degree and mid-level archivists

³S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* (Groningen: Erven B. Van der Kamp, 2d ed., 1920).

⁴The English translation of the second Dutch edition by Arthur H. Leavitt was published as *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1940; 2d ed., 1968).

who have no university degree. The VAN has been involved in the development of the curriculum and in staffing the training program conducted by the National School for Archivists (Rijksarchief School) since the school's reopening in 1955.⁵ A representative of the VAN has sat on the governing board of the school since the school's reorganization in 1970.

It seems appropriate for the association to look not only at its past achievements, but at its current position and its future. Where does the VAN stand at its centennial?

The development of public records administration in the last century, especially in the last twenty-five years, has had a great influence on the VAN. The Archives Law of 1962/68 gave the archivist general a central role in archives administration, a role which has been strengthened by a recent reorganization within the Ministry of Culture. Groups of archivists with mutual interests have formed their own organizations, such as the Circle of Municipal and Regional Archivists and the Circle of Archivists of Water Boards. The 1962/68 Archives Law created an Archives Council to advise the Ministry of Culture on archival matters. It is clear that the role of the VAN has changed from that of being the principal initiator of archival developments into a position of interpreting and reacting to new developments in the Dutch archives world. The advice of the VAN is still sought by archival administrators, but the VAN is no longer the sole adviser. It has taken some time to get used to this new position. It is still true that through the VAN the archives community can present a clear point of view on important archival matters. Respected by its members and by the Dutch government, the VAN continues to

play an indispensable role in the Dutch archives network. The Ministry of Culture recently acknowledged this role by providing money for the association to set up its own bureau with a part-time professional employee. The VAN will try to expand this support in the future.

In former days it was necessary to have a senior or mid-level archival diploma to become a member of the VAN. The association is now open to anyone who has a position in an archives, but few librarians or keepers of stamp and photographic collections exercise this option. Current membership in the VAN numbers nine hundred. Foreign individual and institutional membership is welcomed.

VAN members receive the Dutch archives journal, *Het Nederlands Archiefvenblad*, published quarterly with an output of approximately 360 pages a year.⁶ The first edition appeared in 1892 and the journal is still flourishing. The *Archiefvenblad* provides a lively forum for debate on professional and technical matters, reports on activities within the association, and the results of research within the archives. A longstanding tradition is the publication of the VAN presidential address, which is given each year at the beginning of the general assembly. In addition to the journal, members receive the monthly *Nieuws van Archieven* with information about meetings, new books and inventories, and other acknowledgements. The VAN assembles a member's yearbook, entitled *Staat van het Nederlandse archiefwezen* which lists all the archives and related organizations in the Netherlands along with their employees.

The association sponsors seminars or study days that include lectures and that usually include contributions from foreign

⁵Founded in 1919, the Rijksarchief School was closed during the years 1924-55 due to a lack of pupils and governmental support.

⁶The *Nederlands Archiefvenblad* is published by the Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland. Subscriptions cost 110 Dutch guilders a year. The subscription address is: Bureau Van Spaendonck, Postbus 90 154, 5000 LG Tilburg, the Netherlands.

archivists. Member interest in the study days is great. Twice a year the association convenes assemblies that are a combination of lectures and archival excursions. The fact that the Netherlands is a rather small country makes it possible for VAN members to attend these assemblies with only a one-day journey by train. In these ways the association makes it possible for every member to keep in touch with the developments in the profession and with colleagues.

The association is adopting modern technology to help in achieving its goals. International Archives Days 1980 featured a film, "The Archive," produced with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture, which was broadcast on Dutch television to promote archives. The VAN has also recently produced a video about the use of computers as finding aids for the retrieval of photographs; this video was shown at the Eleventh Congress of the International Council on Archives in Paris in 1988. During the last decade the VAN has published a series of guides to the General Archives and to the State Archives in the provinces. A committee of the VAN has written these guides in cooperation with the staff from the respective archives. Thirteen published volumes have appeared to date and the fourteenth, and last, volume will appear in 1991.⁷

The VAN Centennial Celebration

In 1991 the Dutch Association of Archivists will celebrate its hundredth birthday.

The board of the association has appointed members to a special committee to organize festivities during the centennial. Honorary president of this committee is His Royal Highness Prince Claus, husband of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. The centennial program has several parts. A congress for VAN members, titled "100 Years of Choosing for Later," will be held 24-26 April 1991, in the city of Groningen, the capital of one of the northern provinces. The VAN also will convene an international congress on 2-6 October 1991 in Maastricht, the southern-most provincial capital. The theme of the Maastricht congress is "Archives and Europe Without Boundaries." In connection with this congress, the International Round Table on Archives will gather in the city of Haarlem.

During October 1991 a huge celebration and exhibition on all facets of Dutch archives will take place in the New Church, next to the Royal Palace on Dam Square in Amsterdam. Everything about Dutch archives will be exhibited, from the oldest documents of the tenth and eleventh centuries to the most modern data-communication systems, conservation and restoration projects, and techniques. All the archives in the Netherlands will hold an "open day" on 12 October 1991 so that the public can see with their own eyes what archivists do.

In spite of the fact that the VAN is the oldest professional association of archivists in the world, it has a lively profile and intends to keep it that way for the next hundred years.

⁷Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland, *Overzichten van de archieven en verzamelingen in de openbare archiefbewaarplaatsen in Nederland* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samson).