

Pease Award

Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution

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Abstract: The French Revolution has been widely regarded as a turning point in archival history, yet few have probed the complexity and numerous contradictions of this transitional period. Rather than smoothly ushering in a new concept of archives or archival practice, the Revolution fostered two divergent tendencies. Records and documents from the Old Régime were reviled and frequently destroyed, even as archival structures were developed to care for new records of the Republic, and for selected records from the past. This article explores both of these tendencies in order to provide a fuller picture of archival development during the Revolutionary period. Yet the very fervor surrounding archives during that time also provides the basis for more universal reflection. The battle over the appropriate formation and content of archives demonstrates the extent to which they are, above all, cultural institutions, and the ways in which archival documents are frequently of importance as much for their symbolism as for their content. This article concludes by examining the ways in which archives, as “sites of memory,” are very much products of their time, invested with a meaning that may be changed—as during the French Revolution—by changing beliefs and values.

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The Society of American Archivists 1995 Pease Award Citation

The Theodore Calvin Pease Award is named for the first editor of the *American Archivist* and is given to the best student paper as judged by the current editor of the *American Archivist* and two individuals with expertise in archival research and literature. The 1995 selection committee consisted of Richard J. Cox, Tyler Walters, and Bill Wallach. The award recipient receives a certificate, a cash prize, and publication in the *American Archivist*.

The 1995 award winner, entitled "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution" was prepared by Judith M. Panitch in a course taught by Philip B. Eppard at the School of Information Science and Policy, SUNY at Albany. This author's essay considers the impact of the French Revolution on the modern archival profession and science. Ms. Panitch has demonstrated how historical events can affect the nature and use of archives in society. Revisiting ground plowed by Ernst Posner, this student questions Posner's interpretation of this key period of archival development. She looks at the parallel and contradictory tendencies to overturn the past and to preserve its records and artifacts. Ms. Panitch has cast an intriguing story of archives as the battleground between preservation and destruction, a story that should be all the more familiar to us living at the end of the twentieth century.

THE TITLE OF ERNST POSNER'S well-known article "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution" makes manifest what has since become an archival commonplace: That the French Revolution represents a landmark event in the evolving conception and administration of archival institutions. The advances of that era, writes Posner, were three-fold.¹ First, "the framework of a nation-wide public archives administration was established," encompassing existing but defunct depositories, as well as active record-producing public entities. Second, "the state acknowledged its responsibility respecting the care of the documentary heritage of the past." And finally, the Revolution definitively established the principle that archival records should be accessible to the public.

So familiar are these assertions that they resurface regularly and without elaboration throughout the literature. Robert Bahmer's article entitled "Archives" in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, for example, draws liberally upon Posner to reaffirm that the "concept of an archives as a public service agency . . . did not reach its full development until the French Revolution." James O'Toole also recapitulates Posner, observing that, "as in so many other things the French Revolution proved a watershed event" in archival history, while Charles Kecskeméti pronounces in passing that the "history of modern archives starts with the French Revolution."² Indeed, the more this dictum is

¹Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 161-62.

²Robert Bahmer, "Archives," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 1 (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1968), 516; James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 29; Charles Kecskeméti, "The Professional Culture of the Archivist," *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 412.

repeated, the more skeletal and axiomatic it becomes, until the Revolutionary era appears, above all, as a moment of rapid but essentially unproblematic transition. Such a perspective appears itself to have originated with Posner's article, in which his own necessarily selective discussion conveys an impression of continuous progress, as though a short-lived period of destructive furor rapidly gave way to more enlightened concepts consolidated in a few key laws.

Not surprisingly, however, this development hardly proceeded so tidily. If the Revolution was, in the words of one twentieth-century scholar, "perhaps the most complex phenomenon which it has ever been given to historians to study,"³ then its relationship to and treatment of archives prove no exceptions. Rather than exhibiting a direct and discernable evolutionary path, archives more properly reflect the influence of two opposing tendencies which had consequences for all cultural and historical institutions and artifacts of the day. On the one hand, they suffered in the by-now infamous campaign to eradicate all traces of the defeated monarchy. Statues were torn from their pedestals, books burned, church façades defaced, in a frenzy of Revolutionary vandalism which sought to eliminate any sign of a hated and shameful past. At the same time, a mood of conservation had taken hold, resulting in the establishment of museums, libraries, and archival repositories. Some felt that remnants of the past ought to be retained for pedagogical purposes; others wished to immortalize the founding of the new egalitarian Republic. In either case, these warring propensities toward preservation and destruction defined an era. "The Revolution," writes historian Michel Delon, "is contained entirely in this alternation between brutal elimination of the past and its sublimation as testament, between amnesia and memory, between vilification and historic neutralization."⁴

By their very nature, archives proved a privileged and fertile field upon which this battle played out, both in popular attitudes and, more significantly, through the numerous legislative mandates to which Posner alludes. Their turbulent history bears recounting all the more because so few scholars of this century have comprehensively addressed the issue. Posner's essay remains focused principally on developments subsequent to the Revolution, while Robert-Henri Bautier's much-cited address, "La phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives," concentrates upon preceding centuries. Amédée Outrey and Vida Azimi have both written rather theoretical articles probing specific attitudes and events of the period, while Carl Lokke provides a helpful but ultimately non-interpretative chronology. Brenneke's classic *Archivkunde* has yet to be translated from the German.⁵ Most existing studies, in fact, belong to the highly charged and partisan historiography of the nineteenth century, and must be treated with some caution, if no less interest.

³Léon Delessard, "La Révolution Française et les Archives Départementales," *Mémoires de l'Académie des sciences, arts et belles lettres de Dijon* (1944), 167. This and all other unscripted translations in the text are the author's original versions, prepared for this paper.

⁴Michel Delon, "La bibliothèque est en feu: Rêveries autour du livre," *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France* 34, no. 2-3 (1989): 120.

⁵Robert-Henri Bautier, "La phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives: la constitution des dépôts d'archives et la naissance de l'archivistique, XVIe-début du XIXe siècle," *Archivum* 18 (1968): 139-49; Amédée Outrey has written several legally and historically oriented articles, including: "La notion traditionnelle des titres et les origines de la législation révolutionnaire sur les archives: La loi du 7 septembre 1790," *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* (1955): 438-63, and "Sur la notion d'archives en France, à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* (1953): 277-86; Vida Azimi, "La Révolution française: déni de mémoire ou déni de droit?" *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 68, n.2 (April-June 1990): 157-78; Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 31 (March 1968): 23-31; Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1953).

In the first place, then, the fate of archives during the Revolutionary period casts light upon a lively chapter of French cultural history, illuminating values and mentalities of a remote and unsettled era. More immediately, a careful reading of Revolutionary discourse and actions, both detrimental and favorable toward archives and documents, promotes a more thorough understanding of archival development during that defining period. The origins of Posner's assertions become apparent and, so fleshed out, his conclusions reclaim their deserved complexity and nuance. Finally, and more universally, I believe that this chaotic episode of archival history reveals much about archives themselves, suggesting specifically their fundamental fragility and malleability. The Revolution's raging debates and contradictory impulses thus prove intrinsically interesting, even as they provide eventual material for more abstract theorizing about the nature of archives and about our ongoing relationship as human beings to our own documentary heritage. It is, in many ways, the very extremity of the Revolution, itself demanding closer scrutiny, which also permits transcendence of its own particularity, and, as in so many matters, demonstrates the era's worth as the touchstone it has become.

Before examining the changes which archives underwent, it is helpful to recall how they were viewed at the start of the Revolution. The eighteenth-century concept of archives was far more restricted than our current definition of the term allows, and referred at that time exclusively to documents conferring legal or economic advantage upon the owner or named party. Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, an authoritative source for contemporary thought on most any topic, makes this understanding explicit: "Archives se dit d'anciens titres ou chartres qui contiennent les droits, prétensions, privilèges & prérogatives d'une maison, d'une ville, d'un royaume" ("Archives is the term used for those old titles or charters which contain the rights, pretensions, privileges, and prerogatives of a house, a town, or a kingdom"). The *Encyclopédie* further defines *titre* as "any act which establishes some right," and *chartres* as "very old titles, as from the 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th century, or at least anterior to the 15th century."⁶ This legalistic definition prevailed through the last days of the monarchy, and was so well ingrained in political and scholarly consciousness that it was repeated virtually unaltered in leading legal texts of the day.⁷

The power of archival records, then, could be vast, for upon them rested the entire legal, political, and economic legitimacy of the monarchy and nobility. Robert-Henri Bautier compares them to an "instrument placed at the disposition of those in power" and to "an arsenal of judicial and political arms."⁸ So crucial were archival records that sovereigns maintained them in secrecy. Furthermore, in an administration not so far removed from Louis XIV's declaration that *l'état c'est moi*, even official State archives were understood to "constitute the personal documentation of the sovereign and to remain at his personal disposition."⁹ The same prerogative applied to any holder of *titres* or *chartres*.

Given their importance, it is understandable that, early in the Revolution especially, archives were a hated and frequently attacked symbol of feudal oppression. Seen as preserving "documents written in [legalistic] 'code' to serve the rights of some and subjugate

⁶*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, 1751–1765): Vol. 1, 619; vol. 16, 359; vol. 3, 220.

⁷For a detailed study of contemporary use and understanding of the term "archives," see Outrey, "Sur la notion d'archives."

⁸Bautier "La phase cruciale," 141.

⁹Bautier "La phase cruciale," 144.

the rest,"¹⁰ they provided a natural lightning rod for revolutionary outrage. This sort of spontaneous, visceral hostility manifested itself especially during the period of the *Gran' Peur*, the rural insurrections which gripped the countryside during the summer of 1789, following the fall of the Bastille. The peasant, writes Philippe Sagnac, "took his own Bastille, invaded the châteaux, ran straight to the seigneurial archives, held at last in his hands the charters, monuments of his own servitude, and delivered them to the fire."¹¹ Much like attacks on other symbols of oppression—defacement of churches, coats of arms, statues, and carriages, for example, and even the strangling of game birds on seigneurial manors—this mutilation and destruction of records can best be construed as a metonymic assault against the nobility and the seigneurial system, an act of displaced retribution which might in some cases have even had practical consequences for the peasants whose debts and obligations had just gone up in flames.

In many ways, this image of the patriotic peasant and avenging sans-culotte plays to some of the most enduring myths of the Revolution. In the end, however, the effects upon archival records were isolated, modest, and little-documented. Of far greater magnitude are those instances in which the government actively initiated the wholesale destruction of records. In what reads now as a series of harrowing directives purporting the purification of France and the obliteration of dangerous or painful reminders of the past, the state itself became the author and authorizer of a more systematic revolutionary vandalism.

A series of laws promulgated between 1789 and 1793 abolished most titles and privileges, and appropriated to the government the properties of nobles, the clergy, emigrés, the condemned, and, of course, the monarchy, along with the written records belonging to and granting land and benefits to these classes. While some of the confiscated documents did in fact wind up in the archives of the new regime, and others were transferred in sales to profit the state, those remaining were put to more dramatic patriotic use. On May 12, 1792, for example, the Legislative Assembly decreed that papers of the nobility and the orders of knighthood, which were then being housed in the Augustine Convent in Paris, should be burned in the Place Vendôme (although titles to nationalized properties and items of particular historical interest were spared).¹² A similar bonfire on June 19 of that year was praised on the floor of the Assembly by no less than Condorcet, rationalist mathematician and one of the last remaining *philosophes* in these early days of the Terror:

It is today that, in the capital, Reason burns, at the foot of the statue of Louis XIV, 600 folio volumes attesting to the vanity of this class whose titles will at last disappear in smoke. . . . [W]e must enfold all depositories [of titles] in a common destruction. You must not retain at the nation's expense these ridiculous hopes which seem to threaten our equality. Do not believe this goal unworthy of you, for it is a question of combating the most idiotic, but most incurable of passions, namely vanity.¹³

¹⁰Azimi, "La Révolution française," 164.

¹¹Philippe Sagnac, *La Législation civile de la Révolution française (1789–1804)* (1898; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1973), 85.

¹²Armand Gaston Camus, "Mémoire sur les dépôts de chartes, titres, registres, documents et autres papiers qui existaient dans le département de la Seine, et sur leur état à l'époque du 1er janvier 1789, sur les révolutions qu'ils ont éprouvées et sur leur état au 1er nivôse de l'an VI," in Félix Ravaisson, *Rapport adressé à S. Exc. le ministre d'Etat au nom de la commission instituée le 22 avril 1861* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1862), 322.

¹³*Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises*, First series (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1879–1913): vol. 45, 378. Hereafter referred to as *AP*.

He then introduced, and there was passed, a resolution requiring “all titles and genealogies found in public repositories [to be] burned,” pending extraction of any having potential financial value for the state.

It was measures such as this, coupled with a new law of July 17, 1793,¹⁴ that authorized the destruction *en masse* of archival records in the provinces, where, it is generally acknowledged, the most extensive and spectacular campaigns took place. Frequently incorporated into patriotic festivals or instructive exercises, the disposal of these records inspired unfettered flights of the patriotic imagination. Papers, writes Serge Bianchi, “were baptized with derogatory names: rags, ecclesiastic cartridges, cannon fodder, playthings, magic papers, certificates of deception, childishness, lying titles . . . ,”¹⁵ and the circumstances of their destruction were no less spectacular. An official from the city of Mantes, for example, reported that “[b]eneath the tree of liberty was lit a fire into which were thrown all *orders of priesthood*, feudal titles, and tapestries bearing the fleur de lys. . . . Around the fire, the citizens and our priests danced a carmagnole to the sound of music composed by citizens of our community.”¹⁶

Numerous variants of this scenario are recounted in fairly lurid detail by the archival histories of the nineteenth century,¹⁷ but of greater interest than any specific degradations is the force motivating this destructive agenda. Unlike the spontaneous insurrections of the *Gran' Peur*, the state now actively sponsored and encouraged manifestations of violence in the furtherance of its own ideological and political agenda. Destroying the symbols of the old regime demonstrated the extent of one's hatred of that government and, conversely, one's devotion to the Republic. At the same time, large-scale, irreversible obliteration of the monarchy and nobility's legitimizing and functional operating documents would seem to prevent any reversion to that system in both symbolic and practical terms. The new administration skillfully channeled popular passions so that, observes Philippe Sagnac, “What had been insurrectional in 1789 became legal in 1793.”¹⁸ Moreover, it became, from the State's point of view, both useful and desirable.

Despite the high-sounding Revolutionary rhetoric which accompanied the disposal of monarchic, feudal, and religious documents, a good number fell victim to more prosaic, primarily economic, concerns. We have already mentioned the government's policy of auctioning for profit seized and nationalized properties, with the dispersion of titles this procedure entailed. In other cases, the financially foundering Republic took a more high-volume approach, remanding papers of the appropriate size and composition to the nearest arsenals for use in manufacturing munitions. A law of January 15, 1793 instructed that local directorates which “possess depositories of paper and parchment in their various quarters will allow the representatives of the Minister of the Navy to proceed freely and without delay in the sorting [of these papers] and the removal of those which they judge

¹⁴Article 6 of the law proclaims that any holders of feudal titles are “required to deposit them within three months at the local clerk's office. Those deposited before August 10 will be burned that very day in the presence of the general Communal Council and citizens; the rest will be burned three months later.” Cited in Henri Bordier, *Les Archives de la France* (1855; reprint Geneva: Mégoriotis, 1978), 327.

¹⁵Serge Bianchi, *La révolution culturelle de l'an II: Elites et peuple, 1789–1799* (Paris: Aubier, 1982), 166.

¹⁶Bordier, *Les Archives*, 336. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷See especially Bordier, *Les Archives*, 333–40 and the Marquis Léon de Laborde, *Les Archives de la France: Leurs vicissitudes pendant la Révolution, leur régénération sous l'Empire* (Paris: Renouard, 1867), 233–44.

¹⁸Sagnac, *La Législation civile de la Révolution française*, 149.

suitable for artillery use.”¹⁹ Other documents were claimed for paper making, in order to economize on the use of linen.²⁰

The extent of cultural losses resulting from this state-sanctioned vandalism are to this day unknown and unknowable. As a recent paper by Annie Regond prudently cautions:

We too often forget that the exact state of our cultural heritage . . . that is, books, archives, art works and buildings, was not known with any precision at the beginning of the Revolution. In the same way, we know even less about the exact extent of destructive acts, their dates, the perpetrators, or their motivations. . . . In fact, we completely lack any systematically derived data which might allow the broad synthesis that could constitute a sound basis for reflection.²¹

Authors since the Revolution, however, have not been deterred from proffering their best estimates, extrapolations, and flights of fancy, especially during the nineteenth century, when interest in archival history, and in the Revolution more generally, intensified markedly. Between 1870 and 1914 “several thousand studies on the Revolution filled journals and periodicals,”²² and the most comprehensive studies we now have to work with date from this period. In many cases these accounts—considering the lack of hard data which Regond so regrets—provide the best overall portrait readily available. At the same time, their authors make no pretense of hiding or disguising their own opinions, which must be accounted for in the attempt to derive a more objective appreciation of the Revolution’s archival advances and errors.

On the one hand, Henri Bordier, writing in 1855 as former Archivist of the Empire, is the principal exponent of the view that Revolutionary vandalism, while regrettable, was not on the whole as extensive or as deleterious to archives as might be supposed. “It is incontestable,” he writes, “that an enormous number of papers and parchments were sold or burned in that terrible year of 1793,” but these were, he claims, documents “almost entirely lacking historic or literary value.”²³ More specifically, in a study of some fifteen thousand addresses to the Convention, a forum in which, he avers, speakers never hesitated to “proclaim their patriotism and give all possible proofs of it,” Bordier found only sixty-four which discussed the burning of records in the provinces. Of these, a mere sixteen identified the records with any degree of specificity.²⁴ His scientific method may be questionable, but Bordier expresses confidence that very few truly significant records were eliminated and even that, on occasion, “entire archives, said to have been destroyed by revolutionary vandalism . . . were later found lying about ignored in some corner of the prefecture or town hall.”²⁵ For the most part, modern historians adhere to this general view. “A little skepticism regarding destruction statistics . . . is in order,” cautions Carl

¹⁹Cited in Edgard Boutaric, “Le vandalisme révolutionnaire: les archives pendant la Révolution française,” *Revue des questions historiques* 12 (October 1872): 350.

²⁰De Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 241.

²¹Annie Regond, “‘Vandalisme révolutionnaire’ et protection du patrimoine pendant la Révolution française: pour une enquête nationale,” in *Révolution française et ‘vandalisme révolutionnaire’*, edited by Simone Bernard-Griffiths, Marie-Claude Chemin, and Jean Ehrard (Paris: Universitas, 1992), 131.

²²Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic*, translated by Jonathan Mandelbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 153.

²³Bordier, *Les Archives*, 329.

²⁴Bordier, *Les Archives*, 332.

²⁵Bordier, *Les Archives*, 326–27.

Lokke, while Paul Gerbod concurs that archival repositories in France's municipalities certainly "suffered the consequences of abandonment or of the bonfires celebrated in popular jubilation[, but] the majority survived."²⁶

Bordier's contemporaries, on the other hand, were far less sanguine, chief among them the Marquis Léon de Laborde, who penned a still-cited inquiry, notable both for its comprehensive scope and for the florid vehemence of the author's prose. De Laborde, a politician and art scholar, was named Director of the Imperial Archives in 1856. A titled noble who prospered during the regime of the Emperor Louis-Philippe, he has been termed "one of the most violent adversaries of the Revolution."²⁷ His revealingly titled treatise, *Les Archives de la France, Leurs vicissitudes pendant la Révolution, leur régénération sous l'Empire*, represents a frontal attack on the Republic, focusing upon, but hardly limited to, its handling of the nation's archives. Even such a proponent of de Laborde's conclusions as Edgard Boutaric, writing in the *Revue des questions historiques* in 1872, terms the work "a passionate plea against the Revolution . . . essentially true, but with a partisan aspect: which has damaged his credibility."²⁸ In assessing the consequences of Revolutionary policies, de Laborde calculates that "more than 10,000 archives were affected and more or less devastated, that they contained a billion documents, that more than two thirds were destroyed, and that the order of the remaining third was thrown into upheaval."²⁹

Hostile as de Laborde's account may be, even he makes clear that willful revolutionary ravages reflect only part of the story. As Serge Bianchi reminds us, "The idea of Jacobin vandalism gives a false sense of history. The archives and museums of the Year II are its antithesis. It is just as true to affirm that the defense of our history was born in

²⁶Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," 31; Paul Gerbod, "Vandalisme et anti-vandalisme du pouvoir politique de 1789 à 1795," in Bernard et al., *Révolution française et "vandalisme révolutionnaire,"* 295.

²⁷A. Giry, "Archives," in *La Grande Encyclopédie: Inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts* (Paris: H. Lamirault, 1886), 749. We might additionally note that the Marquis' family history certainly must have contributed to his hostility regarding the Revolution: His father, Alexandre-Louis-Joseph, had been forced to flee to England during this period and eventually served in the Austrian Army, while his grandfather, Jean-Joseph, was arrested and guillotined during the Terror. (See *La Grande Encyclopédie* at "Laborde," v. 21, 688.)

²⁸Boutaric, "Le vandalisme révolutionnaire," 334. The extent of de Laborde's partisanship may be clearly seen in passages such as the following:

All were swept up in the spirit of the rights of man and the conquests of civil liberty; the old regime was shouted down, all our history vilified; France, throwing off her garment which she deemed too worn, claimed to be starting a new sort of humanity, superior to the preceding sort, and which had need of neither experience nor tradition. Archives suffered in this explosion of spirits; they had no importance and offered no interest simply because they conserved the laws and traditions of another time. So the old regime was abhorred, none wished to learn from it; and, the better to destroy it, it was resolved to destroy anything which might call it to mind." (de Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 18–19.)

That Boutaric himself was no friend of the Revolution is made clear by his proposal to study chronologically, "the general measures which were taken during the Revolutionary period to confiscate, transport, move, pile up, make scrap of, dismember, divide into small piles, obliterate [and] scribble upon these secular archives which go from Dagobert to Louis XVI, and which make of us, I would say the first, the most ancient of modern peoples" (Boutaric, "Le vandalisme révolutionnaire," 340).

²⁹De Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 125. We might note, without much surprise, that de Laborde was violently critical of Bordier. In an interesting footnote to the history of archival history, the latter riposted with his own publication, in which he chides that "we have rarely seen such bitterness spill from the pen of a functionary, whose duties would instead seem more conducive to a calm and discreet seriousness" (Bordier, *Les inventaires des Archives de l'Empire: Réponse à M. le Marquis de Laborde, Directeur Général contenant un Errata pour ses préfaces et ses inventaires* (Paris: Librairie Bachelin-Deflorenne, 1867), 2.

the Year II, as to prove that the Jacobins and sans-culottes destroyed the symbols of the Ancien Régime's 'governing elite.'"³⁰ That Bianchi should single out archives as an example of Revolutionary conservation is not incidental, for their consolidation and organization represent a massive feat of planning and dedication; one which has, moreover, been far more meticulously documented than the corresponding destruction of archives, and can thus be studied a bit more dispassionately. Which is not to say that this aspect of the archival past is any less convoluted. Indeed, rather than standing in unequivocal opposition, the impulses toward destruction and conservation are frequently intertwined, with the latter containing disturbing elements of the former. A brief chronology will highlight some of the more significant developments and contradictions in this history.

The gains made in archival theory and management can again best be appreciated through comparison with the state of archives under the Ancien Régime. We have seen that archival documents, as judicial and economic instruments, were primarily of interest to their owners, who understandably preferred to keep close watch over them. The result was an unregulated multiplicity of archival repositories. As Bordier writes: "The King of France had his 'trésor des chartes,' the parliament its registers; the Church, monasteries and communes all had their charter rooms; each body jealously guarded its own archives; no depository was connected with any other, and it was impossible to imagine ever uniting them all."³¹ An account conducted in 1770 identified 405 archival repositories in Paris and 5700 outside the capital, including 1700 monasteries and 1780 seigneurial seats.³² Through the series of confiscations and abandonments mentioned earlier, many of these documents rapidly fell under control of the Republic, which additionally was generating records of its own conduct and decisions.

It was in fact these latter legislative records which inspired the Assembly's concern for archival preservation. In one of its earliest acts, dated July 29, 1789—a mere two weeks after the fall of the Bastille—the members approved their own rules of procedure, including provision for establishment of a legislative repository:

Choice will be made . . . of a safe place for the deposit of all original documents relating to the operation of the Assembly, and there will be constructed cabinets having three keys, of which one will be given to the president, the second to one of his secretaries, and the third to the archivist, who will be elected from among the members of the Assembly by a majority vote.

The act additionally instructs the Archives to house original copies of all laws, as well as one of the two official copies of the minutes for each session, and to communicate these items only to the President or Secretaries of the Assembly, or upon their written orders.³³ On August 4, the Assembly elected as archivist Armand-Gaston Camus, a well-known lawyer and scholar, admired, according to Lokke, for his "unquestioned probity" and

³⁰Bianchi, *La révolution culturelle de l'an II*, 172–73.

³¹Bordier, *Les Archives*, 1.

³²Bordier, *Les Archives*, 326; Giry, "Archives," 740. Giry objects that many private and religious archives had been overlooked in this census and that we can, "without exaggeration, place at over 10,000 the number of archives in France at the end of the Ancien Régime." This is a figure repeated by Langlois (Charles Langlois and H. Stein, *Les Archives de l'histoire de France* (1891; reprint, Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1966), p. iv).

³³*AP*, v. 8, 302–3.

“exemplary private life,”³⁴ but just as likely chosen in tribute to his impeccable Republican credentials.³⁵ Camus immediately proposed reclassifying the documents under his control and renaming the “Parliamentary Archives” as the “National Archives.” Except for a two-and-one-half year imprisonment by the Austrians from 1793 to 1795, he served at its head until his death in 1804.

The organization and operation of the new National Archives were finally consolidated under the Law of September 12, 1790,³⁶ which proclaimed it “the repository of all the acts which establish the Constitution of the Kingdom, its laws, and its division into departments.” The archivist was to be elected for a term of six years, over the objections of Camus, who wished the appointment to be permanent.³⁷ Two commissioners were also elected from among the members of the Assembly. The law established the specific duties of the archivist, including the requirement that he “live in the place where the archives will be established; he may only leave for important reasons, after notifying the commissioners,” and that he furnish to the Assembly an annual report on his work and the Archives’ holdings. The Archives was to be open to the public three days a week, from 9 A.M. to 2 P.M., and from 5 P.M. to 9 P.M. Thus was established a single, unified institution with responsibility for all documents relating to the new administration, and open for the first time to the general public.

The legislation examined up to this point would seem to cleave neatly in two: Elaborate measures were devised to safeguard the records of the Republic, while, conversely, documents relating to the Old Regime were ordered burned, sold, or recycled. Yet such a characterization, however convenient, unjustly oversimplifies legislative and archival history, and minimizes the vision of those who established the heart of the modern French archival system. From the outset of the Revolution, numerous voices were raised in defense of the nation’s cultural heritage, newly wrested from the privileged and religious classes. The Decree of June 19, 1790, abolishing hereditary nobility and titles, for example, explicitly forbid citizens under “pretext of the present decree, to attack the monuments placed in churches, the charters, titles and other documents concerning families or properties, or the decorations in any public or private place.”³⁸ Concern for the monuments of the past continued to grow, long before the Abbé Grégoire, in his 1794 reports to the Convention, actually coined the term “vandalism” and decried its excesses as “counter-revolutionary.”³⁹ If nothing else, as Bordier points out, it was still necessary to “see and sort [old

³⁴Lokke, “Archives and the French Revolution,” 25.

³⁵Outrey, “La notion traditionnelle,” 444. De Laborde takes a characteristically less charitable view of the new archivist: “The functions [of the office] were few, and well within his abilities” (*Les Archives de la France*, 5–6); “his exile [in an Austrian prison] had suggested to him no new or reasonable ideas regarding the organization of archives, he understood them no better than before his departure” (*Les Archives de la France*, 99).

³⁶AP, v. 18, 572–74 and 646–49. (The law was actually debated over the course of two sessions, on the fourth and ninth of September.)

³⁷See Outrey “La notion traditionnelle” for details of this heated debate. Under the Ancien Régime, most archival officials did in fact hold life-long appointments, but the Assembly found such an arrangement at odds with its democratic spirit.

³⁸Cited in John Hall Stewart, *A Documentary Summary of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 143.

³⁹Grégoire, “Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le Vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer,” “Second Rapport sur le Vandalisme,” and “Troisième Rapport sur le Vandalisme” (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1794). In fact, Grégoire makes few specific references to archives at all. Boutaric suggests that he ignored them because he simply did not care about their fate: “[T]he conservation of documents had no interest at all to Grégoire or his colleagues: they concerned a past whose memory it was necessary to erase. At the most, it was

titles] before pronouncing their condemnation.”⁴⁰ From these considerations, both elevated and venal, was born a series of measures designed to bring some order to the masses of old records suddenly in the possession of the new republic.

The first such measure, the Law of August 7, 1790, mandated the consolidation “in a same and single location” of several Ancien Régime repositories in Paris.⁴¹ Apparently, this reorganization presented logistical difficulties—most notably a lack of space—and it was only undertaken in response to the new Law of 12 brumaire Year II (November 2, 1793).⁴² Under this law, records were assigned to either of two repositories, an “administrative and land section” (“partie domaniale et administrative”) or a “judicial and historical section,” both under control of the Archivist of the Republic. The law further directed the city of Paris to “remit to the two sections of the National Archives the titles, minutes, and registers which it had removed from other repositories.”

Even at this preliminary stage, three features characteristic of the Revolution’s subsequent archival legislation begin to emerge. The first is a tendency toward both physical and administrative centralization, “the desire,” as Camus himself later characterized it, “to make all revolve around a center, and bring everything toward unity.”⁴³ At the same time, as *fonds* were combined, the archivists sorted individual records according primarily to document type and content. Although certainly foreign to modern principles of arrangement in their obliteration of any previous, naturally occurring order, these schema did reflect contemporary French archival practices, drawing heavily upon the passion for encyclopedic classification which so characterized the Enlightenment.⁴⁴ Finally, the entire operation was marked by an ideological component no less pronounced—indeed allied with—the very spirit which promoted the burning of records beneath the Tree of Liberty. In proceeding with sorting operations under the law of 12 brumaire, wrote Camus, “we adopted the principle of letting nothing remain which bore the stamp of servitude, but to conserve [only] that which could provide evidence of public or private ownership, or which could be used for instruction.”⁴⁵ Most frequently, the documents “bearing the stamp of servitude” were those consigned to the bonfire or the arsenal. Thus conservation proceeded hand-in-hand with destruction.

These tendencies were amplified by the Law of 7 messidor Year II (June 25, 1794), “the veritable code of the National Archives and for all the repositories . . . in the Republic.”⁴⁶ Between the titles and documents amassed under the Law of 12 brumaire, and those confiscated from nobles, émigrés, the clergy, and others, the Convention’s Committee on Archives rapidly felt itself deluged, as well as pressured to turn these papers to best

thought that a few items should be saved to attest to the history of progress and the human spirit, by pointing out [earlier] errors and showing just how wretched men had become under the fatal influence of the monarchy” (Boutaric, “Le vandalisme révolutionnaire,” 327). Grégoire’s lack of attention, however, seems equally likely to stem from the fact, as we have seen, that archives were conceived as legal, and not cultural, institutions, and thus fell outside his scope. Still, the growing concern for France’s heritage is unmistakable.

⁴⁰Bordier, *Les Archives*, 329.

⁴¹*AP*, v. 18, 652.

⁴²*AP*, v. 78, 1270–77.

⁴³Camus, “Mémoire sur les dépôts de chartes,” 336.

⁴⁴Bautier, “La phase cruciale,” 147. According to Nancy Bartlett, “the tradition of the Enlightenment’s Encyclopedists still inspired efforts at universal codification systems among leading French curators” as late as the middle of the nineteenth century [Nancy Bartlett, “*Respect des Fonds: The Origins of the Modern Archival Principle of Provenance*,” in *Bibliographical Foundations of French Historical Studies* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Press, 1992), 108].

⁴⁵Camus, “Mémoire sur les dépôts de chartes,” 335.

⁴⁶Camus, “Mémoire sur les dépôts de chartes,” 336.

fiscal advantage. Their response was this law, proposed in an impassioned endorsement by Julien Dubois:

When statues of tyrants have been toppled, when file and chisel spare no emblems of feudalism or monarchy, republicans can only view with indignation the traces left in manuscript collections of so many offenses made to human dignity. The first impulse which moves us is to deliver all these titles to the fire and make vanish the slightest vestiges of so hated a regime. Only the public interest can and should limit this laudable zeal. . . . Far from wishing to cool [this passion], it is precisely to proscribe what is rightly reprehensible that we urge a severe examination, and are wary only of an ill-considered haste which could offend justice, harm the public fortune, and cause us later regret.⁴⁷

The innovations of the law were two-fold. First, the National Archives was confirmed as “a central repository for the entire Republic.” It was to have jurisdiction over all other repositories, monitoring their operations, and in many cases appropriating documents from them. At the same time, the law detailed a more elaborate sorting system than that previously employed. Valid titles documenting state ownership of property would continue to be sent to the “section domaniale” and legal documents to the “section juridique.” Furthermore, “charters and manuscripts proper to history, the sciences, and the arts, or which are useful for instructive purposes” would be sent to the Bibliothèque Nationale or to local libraries. Finally, the Committee earmarked for automatic destruction “purely feudal titles,” as well as land titles “without any utility” because referring to property already disposed of. To this end, the law authorized formation of a “Temporary Title Agency” (“Agence Temporaire des Titres”) and the appointment in each department of local officers (*préposés au triage*). These committees were allotted six months to complete their task. In all other respects, previous laws on archives still remained valid, including the right of “any citizen . . . to request in any repository . . . consultation of the records contained therein.”

The effects of the law were far-reaching and ultimately controversial. It is undeniable that the Agence Temporaire des Titres was forced to make rapid, summary judgements regarding an enormous quantity of documents, and that its members had moreover to carry out their work at the ideological height of the Terror. Lokke repeats an earlier determination that “upwards of 500,000 kilograms (550 tons) of records” were marked for destruction in Paris alone. Frequently records awaiting triage were transferred to poorly equipped holding areas, where they were subject to harmful conditions and neglect. Not unexpectedly, the Marquis de Laborde criticizes the work of the Agency as even more reprehensible than the wholesale vandalism committed by those who did not know better:

The Commission of 1794 . . . shared all the prejudices of the moment, presumed to date everything, even history itself, from the establishment of the Republic, saw in the old archives merely a fiscal resource to appropriate the property of churches, convents, corporations, princes, émigrés, and the condemned, and, if it set aside several charters, treatises, and diplomas in a very small number for the sake of

⁴⁷AP, v. 92, 177–82.

curiosity, it was only for the purpose of sending them off most illogically to the public libraries.⁴⁸

Bordier, on the other hand, asserts that “[e]ven while making certain concessions to the Revolution’s destructive tendencies, concessions which were indispensable at the time, [the Law] nevertheless firmly reasserts the ascendancy of science and enumerates most clearly those practical measures to which we owe the salvage of so many precious items which remain to us today.”⁴⁹

Interestingly, at least part of the disagreement between de Laborde and Bordier would seem to stem not from political differences, but from their assessments of Revolutionary archival theory. De Laborde particularly laments what we might today call the Commission’s disregard for principles of provenance and original order:

To introduce into the unity [of an archives], in which all parts hold together, the dissolving force of a triage which arbitrarily reassigned items to land, judicial, and historical sections, was to alter completely the archives and diminish the significance of the items so isolated. . . . The triage ordered by the Convention disturbed, by its arbitrary and absurd divisions, all archives which, as I said, had been arranged over the centuries in an intelligent and continuous order. This triage . . . ruined archives by separating them.⁵⁰

A more tolerant Bordier, continuing his dialogue with the Marquis, argues that:

The great crime of Camus and [his successor] Danou, according to M. de Laborde, is to have accepted the ideas of the Convention regarding archives, and to have persevered . . . : 1) in the Revolutionary plan to classify all documents in land, judicial, and historic sections, without thought to their provenance; 2) in the pretension to centralize in the general Archives all items of historic interest which could be found in the departments and in conquered nations. These two charges are equally unacceptable, because the men who lived during the Revolution and at the beginning of this century considered archives from a perspective other than our own; they were dealing with a question of militancy, where we have a question of art; they argued amidst the difficulties of a new situation, while we talk about facts with the wisdom of long experience.⁵¹

Whatever their operating methods, archival commissions certainly required more than six months to realize the Convention’s vision. Members were appointed to the Agence des Titres on November 8, 1794; in 1796, the Decree of 5 Floréal Year IV (April 24) authorized the reorganization of the agency, which functioned for another five years under various names. Work in the provinces ended earlier, when the Law of 5 brumaire Year V (October 26, 1796) closed local agencies. The next significant reorganization of the na-

⁴⁸De Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 72.

⁴⁹Bordier, *Les Archives*, 8.

⁵⁰De Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 85–87.

⁵¹Bordier, *Les Inventaires des Archives de l’Empire*, 4. Nancy Bartlett’s article on the origins of “Respect des Fonds” again provides a more thorough discussion of the history of the principle of provenance and of de Laborde and Bordier’s roles in its development.

tion's archives did not occur until 1800, when the pressures and constraints of Revolutionary politics, economics, and ideology had eased considerably, and once the framework of France's archives had been firmly established. As Boutaric observes, "From here on, we enter a period of conservation of documents."⁵²

This tour through archival history began by accepting the thesis of Ernst Posner: that the French Revolution altered fundamental conceptions about the nature, mission, and administration of archival repositories. In examining the content and implementation of certain defining laws of that era, culminating in the Law of 7 messidor, we have observed the ways in which the Revolutionary government appointed itself curator of all records from both the Old and New Regimes; undertook their management through a centralized nation-wide system; and confirmed every French citizen's right of access to these documents. This approach has worked backward toward the origin of Posner's conclusions, filling in their outlines and reaffirming that very image of innovation which the Revolution itself worked so hard to perpetuate.

At the same time, however, it is useful to retain some distance from the sweeping and infectious spirit of novelty inherent in Revolutionary rhetoric. Tocqueville's classic study, *L'ancien régime et la Révolution*, demonstrated the similarity between many administrative institutions of the Old and New Regimes; much the same claim can be made for their cultural institutions. In its "concern for the preservation of its cultural heritage," writes Jacques Solé, "the revolutionary era . . . appears to be guided as much by continuity as by rupture."⁵³ In the case of archives, this continuity manifests itself in several ways. First, as Bautier has pointed out, "the archival guardians of the Ancien Régime were members of the Revolution's triage agencies and provided the National Archives with their first 'clerks': they are really the ones who founded the French Archives, and they did so according to traditional concepts, as expressed in theoretical treatises and the work of practitioners."⁵⁴ In other words, arrangement proceeded along the principles of encyclopedic classification outlined earlier. Moreover, while politics and ideology unquestionably colored the massive triage projects imposed by the Legislature, it is remarkable just how frequently the Republic's archivists managed to introduce their own more professional interpretations of the law. Even de Laborde acknowledges, with tremendous relief, the numerous occasions upon which individual archivists, under their own initiative, chose to retain documents which should ordinarily have been marked for destruction.⁵⁵

More frequently overlooked amidst examinations of upheaval and evolution is the continuity which prevailed regarding the fundamental conception of archives. They were considered legal instruments on the eve of the Revolution, and so they remained at its end. It was never, after all, the intention of the French Revolution to do away with or to limit property. Records of legal ownership—both old and new—therefore merited continued careful attention. Similarly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, with its subsequent elaboration in the laws of the Republic, was considered the ultimate "title" granting rights to all citizens. Its security required special vigilance. To be sure, political realities had their effect on the particular documents or types of documents which archival repositories henceforth contained. Outrey points out, for example, that the actual debates of the Assembly "were envisioned as a sort of title," which that body ordered transcribed, pub-

⁵²Boutaric, "Le vandalisme révolutionnaire," 357.

⁵³Jacques Solé, *La Révolution en questions* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 308.

⁵⁴Bautier, "La phase cruciale," 148.

⁵⁵De Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 139–42.

lished, and housed with its archival materials, in contrast to the earlier practices of the monarchy and parliament.⁵⁶ More conspicuously, those documents suddenly deprived of their legal authority—such as feudal titles, genealogies, and adjudicated land titles—were swept out of archives and consigned as “historic monuments” to libraries, or were destroyed entirely. The measures taken to reorganize and reorder archival establishments were “above all intended to facilitate the administration of the nation and its departments, and to better document its services.”⁵⁷ The notion of archives as a site of historical or cultural scholarship had yet to take hold; their purpose at the close of the Revolution remained unaltered.

Whatever their novelty, or lack thereof, it is clear that archives were very much shaped by the Revolution’s ongoing vacillation between preservation and obliteration. The paradox, like so many puzzles resulting from the interplay of human beliefs and passions at a time of turmoil, may defy satisfactory resolution. Yet these two impulses need not be seen as divorced entirely one from the other. This final discussion will seek to situate the Revolution’s simultaneous destruction and salvation of archives into a broader context, giving it a sense in terms of both the very particular circumstances of the era, and, more generally, of society’s relation to the records it creates.

On the one hand, the desire to destroy the records of the Ancien Régime appears to be, first and foremost, an intuitive, cathartic, and eminently understandable expression of rage, directed at one of the most prominent symbols of a hated and vilified class. Viewed with a bit more distance and dispassion, however, the impulse for destruction appears not merely as an act of negation and denial, but also the necessary prelude and counterpart to more constructive institutions, as though the past had to be put definitively to rest if it were not to endanger the emergent Republican future. This thesis of the *tabula rasa* has been developed at some length by Serge Bianchi in his influential book *La révolution culturelle de l’an II*. In order to regenerate society, he proposes:

It was necessary to extirpate the roots of the irrational and corrupt Ancien Régime . . . to destroy the signs, symbols, beliefs and values of ‘the age of shadows and fanaticism.’ It was necessary to eliminate the ‘gothic,’ ‘barbarous’ vestiges of the monarchy, of feudalism, of traditional religion. . . . As long as the seeds of the old social system and of superstition persisted, the Revolution would have no firm foundation.

The *tabula rasa* was inseparable from the new system of values . . . [although] the project aroused some reserves [because] assimilated to a simple campaign of ‘revolutionary vandalism.’⁵⁸

Bianchi’s particular interest is in the many idiosyncratic customs that characterized the revolutionary landscape: the imposition of a new calendar, for example; the secular festivals which replaced religious celebrations; the rechristening of towns (by which St. Denis became Franciade and countless villages were suddenly known as “Montagne”); or the penchant for “revolutionary names” (Brutus, Marat). All demanded the abolition

⁵⁶Outrey, “La notion traditionnelle,” 443.

⁵⁷Robert-Henri Bautier, “Les Archives,” in *L’Histoire et ses méthodes*, ed. Charles Samaroun (Paris: Pléiade, 1961), 1133.

⁵⁸Bianchi, *La révolution culturelle de l’an II*, 157.

of tradition, the effacement of the past, in order to take root and acquire their own authority. Such a concept takes on uncanny descriptive relevance in the case of archives, which, we have seen, formed the conceptual and practical basis for the hated institutions of the Old Regime. Their destruction struck symbolically at the heart of the old order, obliterating the very vision of history inscribed in feudal deeds, titles, and other documents, clearing the stage for the constitution of a new history. “Never,” writes Vida Azimi, “has there been such a will to escape from history,” as during this period. For the sanctioned “vision of time, the Revolution substituted the vision of emptiness, absolute nothingness from which could emerge a universe without precedent.”⁵⁹ The destruction of historical records—that is, of the historical record—permitted the construction of a new civilization from the foundation up.

At the same time, the Revolution was just as concerned with establishing archives as with eliminating them, and this concern extended—albeit belatedly and rather brutally—to the records of the old regime as well as the new. True, these records were preserved neither intact nor in context. They were sorted and reordered, frequently abandoned and misused. Those which survived were promptly reclassified and relocated. But the Revolution undeniably “saw itself as a child of the Enlightenment and as having a cultural and more specifically educational vocation . . . reflected in the determination to destroy and to preserve at the same time. In effect, the revolutionary government assigned itself the role of managing nationalized cultural properties.”⁶⁰ The new nation, in other words, saw fit to retain selected monuments of the past, but only on condition of redefining them for posterity. The brave new Republic could indeed accommodate documentary reminders of its predecessor regimes, but only by wholly appropriating these vestiges, placing them in newly-conceived institutions dedicated above all to the glorification of the Republic.

Such interpretations depend upon the specific confluence of circumstances that determined the Revolution’s conduct in archival matters, the specific awareness that certain records embodied the prerogatives and privileges of the past while others symbolized the promise of a new society. Framed in these terms, the frequently confusing, contradictory mass of Revolutionary actions and attitudes indeed appears more coherent. At the same time, we may also wonder whether any intrinsic properties of archives might additionally have contributed to their fate. Does the French Revolution, in other words, hold any more universal lessons for archives, or can it provide at least a starting point for more theoretical reflection?

It is not my intention to elaborate a semiotics of archives based on a single case, but the symbolic allure of records has already been suggested and this line of thought bears development. The issue has been touched upon in recent archival literature, most notably by James O’Toole, who asserts that “there are certain kinds of records in which the symbolic values outweigh the practical values.”⁶¹ Particularly striking about the Revolutionary era is the way in which some records (principally the founding documents of the new order) appear invested of equal parts practicality and symbolism, while the significance of others (remnants of the Old Regime) shifted abruptly and entirely from the realm of practicality to that of pure symbolism.

⁵⁹Azimi, “La Révolution française,” 159.

⁶⁰Bronislaw Baczko, “Vandalism,” in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1989), 866.

⁶¹James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 238.

To consider how this can be, it is fruitful to step beyond the scope of purely archival thought into that of psychology and sociology, through the concept of collective memory. Pierre Nora's introduction to the essays he assembles in *Les Lieux de Mémoire* proves particularly evocative in this regard and relevant to our own train of thought.⁶² In his essay, Nora defines memory, specifically collective memory, as a sort of living heritage, the "unself-conscious, commanding, all powerful" repetition of tradition which links a society to its past. Opposed to memory is history, "which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past. . . . [H]istory is a representation of the past" which attempts to analyze, totalize, and make sense of it.⁶³ It is the fate of memory in an historically-oriented age to be distilled into "*lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory); the places, objects, and rituals which a society designates as links to the past and as emblematic of its current identity.

Without quibbling over Nora's terminology or his very obvious agenda of identifying the components of a French national identity, I believe two of his premises, one explicitly stated, the other less so, to be particularly relevant. First is the tendency of modern societies to set aside and privilege certain places, institutions, or other "*lieux*" as important links to the past, valuable precisely because of these associations. It is hardly accidental that Nora epitomizes archives as a "*lieu de mémoire*": "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image;" an "obsession with the archive . . . marks our age;" and "no society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own."⁶⁴ Even more important is the suggestion that the true significance of any "*lieu de mémoire*," archives included, is societally determined. They are above all "spectacular symbols,"⁶⁵ and so must possess all the malleability of any sign. Their significance may consequently alter, increase, or vanish altogether, as the society which invests them with meaning itself evolves.

Both of these declarations seem, to me, profoundly descriptive of the archival case of Revolutionary France. As the new Republic repudiated its monarchic past, old records were vacated of their meaning and import. Functionally useless, because they were irrelevant in practical terms, uninteresting because they reflected values deemed archaic, they could instead be made to stand for the myriad sins of the Old Regime, and were treated—or mistreated—accordingly. Their significance lay no longer in their specific content, but in their association with the past. For the Minister of the Interior to consider "[a]ll old papers with gothic writing . . . [to be] nothing more than feudal titles, reflecting the subjugation of the weak by the strong,"⁶⁶ merely epitomizes this change in perception. To honor or treasure such papers would be suspect, but sacrificing them to the "patriotic holocaust" or treating them as just so much scrap paper was proof of Republican virtue.

At the same time, the Republic's concern for protecting its own records, and eventually selecting records of its predecessor regimes, demonstrates an increasing appreciation for the defining power of archives and for their potential authority as a "*lieu de mémoire*."

⁶²Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," translated by Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25. Aspects of this issue have also been explored by Kenneth Foote (see, for example, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378–92), but Nora's discussion remains more general and, I believe, provides a broader basis for reflection.

⁶³Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8. I shall leave aside, as does Nora, the question of when, exactly, the "modern" era can be said to start.

⁶⁴Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13.

⁶⁵Nora, "Between Memory and History," 12.

⁶⁶Cited in de Laborde, *Les Archives de la France*, 23–24.

The creation of new repositories helped the Revolution to affirm its own identity, while the triage and reclassification of old records guaranteed that a particular interpretation of the past would be imposed upon succeeding generations. The Revolution, writes Bautier, “was the first time that such a considerable plan encompassed the archives of an entire regime—political, administrative, feudal, religious—exceeding even the notion of State Archives and instead forming the Archives of the ‘Nation.’”⁶⁷ But it was also around these very archives that the notion of “the nation” could in part crystallize and take hold in the collective consciousness. Constitution of the new National Archives, which glorified the achievements of the Revolution and marginalized or minimized all which went before, appears in this light as essential to the political and psychological legitimacy of the New Regime.

To suggest that such considerations actively or explicitly shaped the archival policies of the French Revolution would, of course, be excessive. Indeed, much of the history we have examined reflects above all the very pragmatic concerns born of unique historic and cultural circumstances. If archives and records attracted such vehement reactions or elaborate legislation, it is in part because they mattered in quite practical terms to the functioning of the Republic and in the lives of its citizens. In this sense, study of the Revolution and its treatment of archives is of interest as it illuminates the passions of the past and the origins of certain modern concepts and assumptions.

Yet it is difficult, given the era’s intense preoccupation with archives, to escape the impression that some more fundamental impulse is also at work. The significance of archival records clearly extends beyond the information they contain, for only this broader symbolism would seem capable of incorporating such enduring extremes of both revulsion and reverence. It is in characterizing these properties that the utility of Nora’s “*lieu de mémoire*” notation becomes apparent. Archives in this schema appear nothing less than a sacred space in modern society, specifically designated to convey a vision of the nation’s past, its origins, and its identity. National archives are respected, at least in part, because they give meaning to the nation, confirming its legitimacy and—perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the case of Revolutionary France—its vital mythologies. Creating new archives and reinventing the old thus constituted a founding act of the new Republic.

But if archives bring meaning to the nation, it is ultimately national consensus which in turn confers upon archives their meaning and mystique. Should consensus change, should the nation advance or evolve or disappear altogether, then archival records may be reconsidered and redefined, perhaps even rejected. Modern archival theory and practice, of course, would likely preclude the wholesale destruction and reorganizations which marked the Revolution, yet this period makes clear a relationship which has not changed. Far from standing as enduring monuments to the past, archives instead appear somewhat fragile, eternally subject to the judgement of the society in which they exist. Neither atemporal nor absolute, the meaning they convey may be manipulated, misinterpreted, or suppressed. That the archives of the past are also the mutable creations of the present is perhaps one of the most enduring and vivid lessons of the French Revolution.

⁶⁷Bautier, “Les Archives,” 1133.