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ADVENTURES OF AN AMATEUR ARCHIVIST[1]

WE ARE meeting today in our sixth annual session under the shadow of a world calamity. Let us accept it as a good omen that we meet in this historic city of the Old South. As we see her today, charming in her physical beauty, confident in her industrial might, inspiring in her culture, it is hard for us to realize that within the memory of living men she herself was the victim of a devastating conflict. Yet from temporary defeat, she has wrung victory; from disaster, she has risen to power and prosperity; from sacrifice and suffering, she has acquired strength and courage and vision. She stands today a glorious symbol of the unconquerable American spirit.

Again war in its most devastating form is sweeping over the face of the earth. Our own country has been sucked into the maelstrom and is girding up her strength to beat down the powers of force and evil. We cannot doubt that by the might of justice and freedom and righteousness she will win through to victory. But today the demands upon her are so great, her task so vast, her danger so imminent that she is justified in calling upon all of us to cut to an irreducible minimum our peace-time activities that do not contribute to her ultimate triumph.

Why then are we here today? Our answer is that we are here because it is our firm conviction that our work as archivists will contribute not only to victory but also to that just and sane peace that must crown that victory. We are the custodians of the accumulated evidences of those traditions and ideals of democracy and freedom for which we fight and without which, we believe, no such peace can be established or maintained in the world. That is our justification at this critical moment.

A glance at our program shows that it is concerned chiefly with

[1] Presidential address delivered at the sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Richmond, Virginia, on October 26, 1942.

archival problems as they relate to war and peace. They are serious problems that will tax our mental and physical strength to the utmost. It is for that reason that I have thought it wise to afford you a brief period of relaxation this evening by striking a somewhat lighter note reminiscent of happier days.

The subject of my address was suggested in a letter written to me some eight years ago by a distinguished contemporary American historian. Upon learning of my appointment as the first archivist of the United States, Professor William E. Lingelbach wrote to me that he considered the office of archivist "a key position not only for the work in Washington, but also throughout the Nation at large." He then added: "The successive stages in getting the Archives project started in right will be interesting history some day." Those "successive stages" are the subject of my address this evening.

They might also have suggested the title except for the fact that responsibility for the title rests upon one of my distinguished predecessors in the position to which your kindness elevated me at our last annual meeting. In his presidential address of 1940, Waldo Leland told us that when he received the notice of his election as president of our Society, he was "happily pursuing" his personal and official education in Lima, the "City of the Kings," gazing with awe upon the "towering Andes," and still somewhat dazed by his "initiation into the fascinating mysteries of Peruvian archaeology." He confessed that the "exaltation of mind," induced by these novel and stimulating circumstances, led him to accept his election without giving sufficient consideration to "the incongruous position" that he, who had never been an archivist, "would occupy as president of this professional association." However, upon his return to mental normalcy, his apprehensions were allayed by the comforting thought that if he had never been an archivist "there were many of the members of the Society who had not been archivists very long." Thus with that amiability that is so characteristic of him he told us in the kindliest way possible that he considered all of us mere amateurs playing at a game intended for professionals. The scientific exactitude of his classification was so obvious, so far as one of us was concerned, that I have chosen for the title of my address, "Adventures of an Amateur Archivist."

The scholar who will some day write the history that Professor Lingelbach had in mind will, of course, find his chief sources in the archives of the National Archives, but he will not find all of them

there. Many of those "successive stages" to which he referred were never recorded in official documents and are known only to those who had a part in them. It is of these unrecorded experiences—at least of some of them—that I shall speak this evening. Needless to say, this address makes no pretense of being a history of the National Archives even in its infancy; it is nothing more than a simple narrative of certain incidents of more or less interest that are tied together into some sort of unity only because they are all phases of the same general subject.

The National Archives is the concrete expression of a national ideal. No single person, no single group of persons created it. The ideal is as old as the nation, the institution as young as yesterday. Among its creators must be enrolled presidents and cabinet secretaries, senators and representatives, highly placed administrators and lowly placed clerks. With them were associated a goodly company of learned societies and patriotic organizations, of publicists and scholars and other conservators of national traditions and ideals. At the top of the roll stands the name of a president of the United States. It was President Hayes who, in 1877, first recommended to Congress the erection of a suitable repository for the nation's archives and his recommendation came to fruition half a century later when Congress authorized the erection of the National Archives building. The appropriation was made upon the recommendation of President Coolidge; the cornerstone was laid by President Hoover; the act creating the National Archives establishment was signed by President Roosevelt. It is truly a national institution.

My own official connection with it began with my appointment as the first archivist of the United States on October 10, 1934; it closed with the acceptance of my resignation by the President on September 15, 1941. These are matters of record and I mention them here merely to delimit the period of my amateurish adventures in an ancient and honorable profession. The National Archives was a one-man institution for one day only, for I was merely the first of a staff that, at one time or another, included more than six hundred men and women from every state in the union. As it stands today it is the creation of many men and many women, and if the too frequent repetition of the pronoun "I" in this address grates harshly upon your nerves, please bear in mind that it is used in a co-operative and not an individual connotation.

The first and most persistent of the many "successive stages" in getting the archives started was the problem of the staff. The National Archives Act as originally enacted gave the archivist authority to appoint members of the staff "solely with reference to their fitness for their particular duties and without regard to civil-service law," with the single exception that any employee or official with salary of $5,000 or over should "be appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate."

The phrase, "solely with reference to their fitness for their particular duties," would have had a reassuring effect had it not been for its twin phrase, "without regard to civil-service law." The former set up a high ideal, the latter was a patent and unmistakable invitation to the patronage brokers. I suppose that nothing so perturbs the equanimity of a newly appointed and inexperienced administrator in Washington as the patronage bogey. It greets him upon his awakening in the early morning; it sits by his side during the long working day; it is his bedfellow throughout the wee small hours of the night. You will, therefore, understand my trepidation of mind when during my first official day in Washington an experienced administrator upon learning that the archives was listed as a "patronage agency," said to me: "The politicians have played a joke on you!"

Comforting, wasn't it? But now, in retrospect, I must confess that the expectations aroused by his remark proved to be worse than the realizations. Two men who had some influence in the administration smoothed our way through the patronage maze. One of these men was the President of the United States. Even before I had received my commission, the President sent to me a letter he had received from a Congressman urging him to appoint a certain man as "first assistant archivist." This man was a scholar of distinction and well qualified for the job. Nevertheless, it did seem to me to be somewhat premature to consider the appointment of a "first assistant archivist" when as yet there was not even an archivist. It was, therefore, a relief to read the President's memorandum attached to the letter in which he said: "This is for your information, as I do not want to force anybody on you as a member of your staff. That is your responsibility." I took his statement to mean that the archivist was to have a free rein in appointments, including those which the President himself was authorized to make, and I never had any reason to think otherwise.

The other man to whom I referred was the chairman of the Democratic National Executive Committee. There was a suspicion, more or less prevalent throughout the country, that Mr. Farley took a certain interest in matters of patronage. This suspicion explains a dispatch that appeared soon after my arrival in Washington in a New York newspaper under the intriguing headline, "Archives Politics." The body of the dispatch was as follows:

> The new Archives Building, as stately and august as the new Supreme Court Building, should be free from political intrigue and sharpshooting. But it isn't. Instead of bending over precious books and records in his cloistered sanctuary, Archivist R. D. W. Connor has a political broil on his hands. The fight is between him and Farley, who is irked at the sight of jobs going to waste. Early in the session, Congress appropriated funds for 90 archive officers. To date Connor has appointed 25. . . . Farley is demanding action—quick. In less than two weeks it will be too late, for if the remaining 65 appointments are not made by July 1, the money reverts to the Treasury. Farley says it will revert only over his dead body.

It is surely a curious fact that if there existed a Connor-Farley "political broil," one of the broilers at least had never heard about it; and, further, if one of them was willing to lay down his life in so good a cause, he forgot to mention his sacrificial ambition to the other. Of course, to the news reporter, it was a mere bagatelle that at the time his dispatch was sent from Washington every member of the staff of the National Archives authorized by Congress had already been appointed and was on the job.

James A. Farley showed a mild interest in the work of the National Archives, but at no time did he seek to control or influence any appointment to its staff. Only on one occasion did he intervene in a matter affecting an appointment. That was a case in which his chief lieutenant at the Democratic national headquarters for reasons known only to himself, was trying to block an appointment I had recommended to the President. Mr. Farley called us into conference, heard our statements, and turning to me said: "It's your job and if you want this man it's O.K. with me. I shall approve your recommendation."

It was to be expected, I suppose, that the chief pressure for jobs would come from Capitol Hill. This was one expectation that was fully realized, but this statement also needs to be qualified. So far as the National Archives was concerned, the great majority of Con-

gressmen were content to endorse applications of their constituents without attempting to exert pressure to compel compliance. A few others, on the contrary, were not above threats of reprisals if their recommendations were not accepted, but only two so far as I know ever attempted to put their threats into effect. Both attempts failed. With rare exceptions, our relations with Congressmen in matters of patronage were uniformly satisfactory.

It was our ambition and our constant endeavor to live up to the ideal set by Congress in the requirement that all personnel be selected on a basis of fitness for the duties to be performed. The most serious obstacle to the attainment of this ideal with the fact that there existed no reservoir of professional archivists upon which the amateur archivist could draw. This obstacle, however, was partially offset by conditions in the country in 1934 and for sometime thereafter. It was the period of the "Great Depression," and thousands of people through no fault of their own were unemployed. Moreover, a continuous stream of capable, well trained young scholars was annually pouring forth from our colleges and universities into a world that had no demand for their services. From this source, the National Archives was able to recruit many exceptionally able employees who in normal times would have taken their places in competing professions. There was, of course, a definite limit to this advantageous situation and when we saw that limit approaching we recommended to Congress that it remove the National Archives from the list of "patronage agencies." The necessary legislation was passed in 1938.

How successfully did we live up to our ideal? Perhaps the best answer to this question is the following passage from the annual report of the archivist with reference to the staff at the time it was placed under Civil Service:

> It may not be amiss at this time to make some note of the character of the personnel that has been obtained by appointing employees "solely with reference to [their] fitness for their particular duties." Although academic achievements cannot be fully accepted as criteria for the determination of ability, particularly in the case of the administrative personnel, it is nevertheless significant that of the 319 employees on the staff of The National Archives at the close of the fiscal year [1938] no less than 160 held bachelor's degrees, 73 master's degrees, and 32 the degree of doctor of philosophy. Moreover, many of the employees do not regard their education as finished when they join the staff. The records show that, during the fiscal year 1938, 68 members of the staff

were increasing their qualifications for archival work by attendance at local professional schools, colleges, and universities.

No wonder a disappointed Congressman complained on the floor of the House that "in order to secure employment in the Archives, one must have a postgraduate course in one of the larger universities of the country, as well as considerable experience in some similar institution." The "patronage bogey" was but a bogey after all!

The setting up of the National Archives introduced a new word into the American language that seemed to appeal to the risibilities of the Washington newsmongers. Apparently they had never heard, not to say used, the word "archives" unless, parrot-like, they wanted to consign something to "the archives of gravity," without knowing in the least what they were or where located. When the appointment of an archivist was announced, the more curious among them dashed off to consult their Websters that they might display their erudition before their less curious colleagues. Having thus broadened their knowledge, they hastened to tell the world just what sort of creature this New Deal creation was. A Washington news photographer dug up somewhere in his "morgue" an ancient photograph of the new archivist and distributed copies to his clients under the heading: "He's U. S. Archivist." The photo looked more like a vaudeville make-up of a communist than a staid and very conservative country schoolmaster and I was relieved to note that the photographer had furnished a legend for the reassurance of his patrons: "No, dear children, an archivist is not a radical. He is one who preserves historical documents." By such a narrow margin did I escape the attention of the Dies Committee.

For several months after my arrival in Washington, friends invariably introduced me to strangers with the apologetic explanation, "Mr. Connor is our first archivist." With a perfectly blank stare, the other invariably countered with, "And just what is an archivist?" If I explained that an archivist is a custodian of archives, I got just exactly nowhere, for the inevitable response was, "But what are archives?" It was really quite embarrassing until help came like manna from heaven. At a cocktail party at my apartment, my Negro servant who had come to Washington with me from Chapel Hill, busily circulated among the guests distributing canapés of anchovies and hugely enjoying his first Washington party. One of the guests, who had also recently come from Chapel Hill, having a certain amount of

cocktail safely stored under his shirt and another glassful in his hand, in a happy frame of mind and at peace with the world, approached the servant and reaching for an anchovy, said: "Henry, what are these things?" With a grin, Henry replied: "'Deed, suh, I don't eggsactly know, but I thinks dey's archives." That was one definition Washingtonians never failed to comprehend.

We were, indeed, fortunate to have such an adequate definition for most people in Washington who thought at all about the matter thought of archives as only "rare," "unique," or what they chose to call "historic documents." When an announcement was made that the Public Works Administrator had allotted $3,600,000 for stacks in the new archives building, a Washington correspondent reported to his paper that "a roar about it is going up at the Capitol." In explanation he said:

> There will be a louder roar when Congress convenes. It is coming to be regarded as a wholly unnecessary and unwise expenditure. Congress intended the Archives building for the important state papers and historic documents of the Republic, things like the original constitution, for example. All this new money for new stacks has led to the belief that it is the intent of the bureaucrats to load the costly structure up with cart loads of dry-as-dust departmental papers, the usual trash that is wrapped up in the customary red tape.

Either the story was an invention of the reporter's infertile imagination, or somebody at the capitol was pulling his leg. I am inclined to the leg-pulling theory; certain internal evidence seems to point to its author. One congressman did attempt to get up a "roar" but his "roar" never exceeded the tempo of a whine.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the question, "What are archives?," was of merely academic interest. Suppose we rephrase it as follows: "Should the National Archives be considered merely as another historical museum or should it become in reality what its name implies?" The answer to this question involved the whole future, character, and functions of the institution. Let me cite a single illustration selected from many. When the archives appropriation for 1936-1937 was under consideration by the House, the chairman of the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, an uncompromising adherent of the "historic documents" school, moved a drastic cut in the amount recommended by the Appropriations Committee. In a sweeping attack on our conception of the purposes and functions of the National Archives, he said:

> . . . the original idea was to build a small structure something like the Folger Memorial to store a few rare documents, such as the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, treaties, proclamations of outstanding interest, and so forth. . . . Here you have a structure costing well over $12,000,000, and you . . . are going to fill it with a lot of trash which had better be in ashes. . . . It seems to me right now is the time for the [National Archives] council to get together and come to a sane understanding of just what is to be the policy in the future and stay within that policy.

His attempt to strangle the institution in its cradle failed and the council, fortunately, was not forced to adopt his idea of a sane policy for the future.

Plainly we had an educational job to do and we determined to miss no opportunity to speak and write about archives in general and the National Archives in particular. The lists of public addresses and published articles on the subject that appear in the appendices of the annual reports of the archivists, though by no means complete, make a rather impressive showing. Even more important were the annual reports themselves and the hearings before the House Committee on Appropriations.

Did we succeed in our object? I am sure I do not know; perhaps it would be wise to adopt an attitude of healthy skepticism, or at least of suspended judgment. At any rate, there are still areas in Washington not far from the capitol where continued missionary work would do no harm. Nevertheless we certainly made progress. Early in 1937, the "Merry-Go-Rounders" stated in their widely circulated column that "the reason the Archives Building is filled with trash" was because the other government departments "will not surrender their precious and historic papers." But if those eminent operators in their snooping around the archives building had been a bit more thorough, they would have learned that at the very date their statement was published there were deposited in the building the official records of the United States Senate from 1789 to 1934, transfers from nine of the ten executive departments, from eighteen independent establishments, and from one United States court. Only the House of Representatives held out in stubborn conviction that its records would be safer and more easily accessible for use if left tied up with "the customary red tape," in unlabelled packages and jammed higgledy-piggledy in dark cubby-holes in the capitol and neighboring buildings than they would be if properly arranged,

labelled, described and listed in adequate finding mediums at the National Archives.

The "historic documents" conception of archives gave rise to what we may call the case of archives *vs.* library. Its origin may be found in a rhetorical expression in President Hoover's speech at the laying of the cornerstone of the archives building. "There will be aggregated here," he said, "the most sacred documents of our history—the originals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States." After thus throwing the fat into the fire and without explaining how two documents can be "aggregated," Mr. Hoover slipped out of the capital city into the quieter life of Palo Alto.

On the basis of his statement, the Washington press built up the case of archives *vs.* library. It was surely a remarkable case—a case in which all the issues were feigned, all the allegations were fictions, and the parties of record were not the parties at interest. The parties at interest were reporters in search of a good "story" to enliven the dull seasons, the parties of record were alleged to be the National Archives and the Library of Congress. The case finally petered out because the parties of record refused to plead and left the parties at interest holding an exploded balloon.

After the opening of the archives building, one of Washington's stock questions was: "When will the Declaration and the Constitution be transferred to the archives?" Strange as it may seem, nobody would believe either the archivist or the librarian when they denied that any such transfer was under consideration. One Washington paper published a story under the headline, "Librarian Demurs to Archives Proposal to House Constitution," in which the archivist was represented as having "declined to comment on the matter saying that it was 'too ticklish'," and the librarian was credited with the incredible statement: "I think President Hoover made a mistake." And the unfortunate reporter could not explain how the librarian could "demur" to a "proposal" the archivist had never made.

But of course that was no way for two government hirelings to treat a good story and they should not be allowed to get away with it. Accordingly, another reporter, with his eye on his city editor, "scooped" his rival with a harrowing story of how the archivist and the librarian were locked "in a secret, bitter struggle," so bitter, indeed, "that Congress may have to decide the question."

Why worry about facts when fiction makes a better story? Imagination scorns facts; fiction alone is "creative writing." Perhaps it was that canon of art that induced two eminent Washington creative writers to give the story a free ride on their "Merry-Go-Round." Here it is:

> Nobody around the Archives Building will admit it, but the dust-proof vaults, intended to hold the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, are now filled chiefly with waste paper. "Historic documents cannot be moved until we have completed our burglar alarm system," explains the guide. But that is not the fact. Real truth is that Herbert Putnam, head of the Library of Congress, will not give them up. . . . In his disappointment, Archivist R. D. W. Connor has retreated in the background in the Archives management . . . and stands now a wistful and defeated figure.

I wonder if those two fellows ever learned how badly they had missed the boat. At any rate, the Washington correspondent of a paper printed far from the madding crowd of Washington beat them to it by a dozen nautical miles. This correspondent by painstaking research was able to reveal the real significance of the case of archives *vs.* library. The Roosevelt administration, he discovered,

> . . . was having another internal row over the United States Constitution. . . . Half the Administration says they [the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution] should be left where they are. . . . The other half says they should be placed in the Archives Building. . . . You see, it isn't just a matter of safe keeping. It's the old fight between the legislative and executive over the separation of authority. . . . The Library of Congress functions under the authority of Congress. The National Archives will come under the authority of the President.

Alas! there was no John Marshall to determine this weighty question of constitutional law.

Of course an infallible press must never be caught in error even when it is mistaken. One paper reported that the archivist and the librarian were about to spring "at each other's throat," and when they refused to spring some explanation was in order. A very eminent Washington commentator, upon the retirement of Dr. Putnam after forty years of distinguished service, revealed the secret. How he discovered it would baffle Ellery Queen himself. But here it is in plain black and white:

> The archivist of the United States never mobilized to obtain for the

> National Archives the original drafts of the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence because there was a sort of gentleman's agreement not to raid the Library of Congress, where they are now deposited, as long as Herbert Putnam was Librarian. Now that Putnam has made way for Archibald MacLeish, Congress wonders whether transfer of the Nation's most precious documents may not be imminent.

There you have it! The truth at last and I am happy to pass it on to the present archivist and the reigning librarian—gratis!

"Real truth is"—if I may be allowed to crib this brilliant bit of "picturesque patter" from the merry-go-bounders—"real truth is" there was no agreement, "gentleman's" or any other kind, and the librarian never refused to surrender "the nation's most precious documents" to the archivist because, if for no other reason, the archivist never asked him for them. The story is an example of "creative writing" in its snappiest mood.

The vision of the huge vaults in the archives building crammed with "trash" faded slowly and reluctantly disappeared when the major executive departments decided to entrust their "precious documents" to the tender care of the National Archives. The old line departments at first were naturally reluctant to turn their records over to this new and illy understood agency. Many of their officials, indeed, did not understand that their records if transferred to the archives would still be available for use. Moreover, they quite properly wanted to be assured that the archivist and his staff knew enough about their business to preserve their holdings and administer them efficiently. It all came back to a matter of a little education reinforced by some gentle outside pressure.

The State Department is, of course, the premier executive department of the government; its records rank first in public interest and in historical value. The department had long maintained its own efficient Archives Section as a repository for such of its records as had attained the dignity of archives. It had also been the most liberal of the departments in permitting the use of its archives for research purposes. When, therefore, an official of the department suggested that its records be transferred to the National Archives, his immediate superior was quoted as replying, "They will be transferred only over my dead body." Isn't it remarkable how many people one runs up with in government service who are ambitious of martyrdom in the interest of our Uncle Samuel? Nevertheless, the State Department's

records were transferred and, fortunately, that particular official has not yet qualified for a martyr's crown.

The National Archives can claim no particular credit for the gentle outside pressure which produced that result. That much must be conceded to the chairman of the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, our first and hitherto most uncompromising critic. When the State Department's appropriation for the fiscal year 1937-1938 came before the House for consideration, he moved the elimination of an item of $1,700 for the repair and binding of records in the department's Archives Section. The National Archives, he said, had been established

> . . . to take care of just such documents . . . [and] the first documents that should have been turned over to the Archives are those that now rest in the State Department archives. . . . Here is a duplication of effort; just as clear a case as it is possible to present, . . . because in the State Department you have an archives doing exactly what was set out as a responsibility placed upon the National Archivist and the National Archives.

Shortly after this incident, George S. Messersmith, assistant secretary of state, told me that he had under consideration the matter of transferring to the National Archives all of the State Department's records prior to 1906. Anxious that he should not act without full knowledge of our facilities, I suggested to him the advisability of making a visit to the archives building before acting. He came, accompanied by Cyril Wynne, the department's liaison officer with the archives. After a thorough inspection of the building and equipment and of our methods of operation, Mr. Messersmith remarked, "Well, this answers all of our questions," adding that he was now ready to submit his recommendation to the Secretary of State. The recommendation was made and approved and the transfers were made during the fall of 1937.

At his next hearing before the House Appropriations Committee, Mr. Messersmith, reporting his action to the committee, said that he had gone into the matter very carefully and had "decided that in the Archives Building . . . our 'children' will be better cared for than we would be able to care for them in our own home. . . . I can say," he added, "in so far as my experience abroad is concerned, that the arrangements in the Archives Building, for the preservation and making accessible our archives are far better than those existing anywhere else in the world."

The affair of the State Department was easy sailing; the War Department was something else. We had frequently been assured that it would be our hardest nut to crack. "The War Department will never part with its records," chorused the ancient order of Job's Comforters. They left us no illusions, but we bided our time in confident assurance that some day opportunity would knock. It did knock, and it knocked with an importunity not to be denied.

On June 10, 1937, I was called to the White House. The President wanted to know how we were getting along. I gave him a brief report of progress and problems. He then asked if there was anything he could do to help. Clearly opportunity was knocking and I flung open the door. "Yes, Mr. President, perhaps you can persuade the War Department that holding on to its old records of an archival character is not necessary to the defense of the country." He wanted to know what I meant. I called his attention to the repeated complaints of the department over a period of half-a-century that it lacked the office space essential for its work and explained its tenacity in holding on to its old records that occupied space that could be better used for other purposes. By way of illustration, I cited the Confederate archives, thinking that no records could possibly have less value to the United States government for official purposes. He promptly replied that he would consult the Secretary of War about the matter and reaching for his memorandum pad scratched on it a "memory jogger."

Would he ever think of it again? I wondered. But there was no need to worry; my suggestion had struck a responsive cord not only in Franklin D. Roosevelt, the President, but also in Franklin D. Roosevelt, the historian. The historian allowed no grass to grow under his feet before dispatching to the secretary a memorandum asking to be advised whether it would not be advantageous to all concerned if the "Confederate Archives" were transferred to the custody of the archivist. The mention of the Confederate archives had evidently stimulated his historical imagination and completely blotted out all recollection of the other noncurrent records of the department. It also, as it happened, enabled the secretary to score a good point against us. In his reply to the President's inquiry, he said:

> One phase of this situation which I feel should receive your thoughtful consideration before any definite decision is made, is whether, as a broad question of public policy, it would be advisable to place the Confederate records in what is generally looked upon as the Nation's highest type of

> repository for records, while at the same time the records of the Union army . . . remain in less favored buildings. . . . Such preferential treatment of the records of those who so long engaged in armed opposition to the major portion of our now reunited country might easily form the basis of adverse criticism which it might not be well to invite unnecessarily.

The President sent the letter to me saying he thought the secretary had made "a pretty good case for keeping all the Civil War records together." However, he left the door open for further discussion by adding: "I wish you would . . . let me have your opinion as to what, if anything, we should do next." The implication of that "we" did not escape me, but it also put me on the spot and the only thing I could think of to say was that the secretary's point would lose its force if he "should see fit to adopt the suggestion that all the [Civil War] records" be transferred to the archives.

But that point was not the whole of the secretary's case. What floored me with amazement was his contention that the department must retain the custody of the archives of the defunct Confederacy because they were necessary to enable the Secretary of War of the United States to make "administrative decisions" required of him by law. Accordingly, he felt it to be his duty to recommend "that no steps be taken to divest the War Department of its custody or control of those records."

"What should we do next?" Certainly not attempt to meet the secretary on the front that he himself had chosen. Fortunately, he had left both of his flanks open and both were vulnerable. One was the physical condition of the records, the other, the building in which they were housed.

For our attack on the first we found a well stocked arsenal in the reports and orders of the secretary's predecessors over a period of forty years. These reports and orders were replete with such descriptive phrases referring to the records as "actually in tatters," "fast crumbling away," "so dilapidated" as to be practically useless, and our own surveys had disclosed the fact that these phrases were no exaggerations. Replying to the President's question, we pointed out that the War Department had no facilities and no experts for repairing these "tattered" documents and, quite modestly of course, called his attention to our own unexcelled equipment and expert personnel for that purpose. As luck would have it, only a week before the Secretary of War and the archivist opened their barrage over the

head of the President of the United States, the President had made a visit to the archives building and had been so favorably impressed with our repair work that he had sent to us for rehabilitation some of his own old and damaged manuscripts. His comment on the result was: "I have never seen such a fine piece of work." We cherished the hope, therefore, that on this phase of our sham battle the umpire's decision might well be anticipated.

The second flank was the building in which the records were housed. It was a garage—no, not an old abandoned garage, but a garage in daily use with all the appurtenances thereunto belonging—cars, trucks, busses, gasoline pumps, and vats for lubricating oil. Fire protection there was none. If our account of these conditions was not a masterpiece of "creative writing," at least it was an effective bit of factual description.

It turned the trick. The War Department capitulated. The secretary reconsidered his decision and agreed to adopt so much of the archivist's suggestion "as may properly be availed of without imposing legal limitations upon this Department and its duly constituted agencies and its statutory activities." A series of conferences followed, resulting in an arrangement satisfactory to all and the records were transferred in 1938. The nut had been cracked and nobody's thumb had been bruised.

Two years passed. The nation had launched its great defense program. The army was rapidly expanding and the War Department was again "sorely pressed" for space which could be found only by releasing "for other purposes" floor space used for departmental files. The secretary felt obliged "to solicit" the aid of the archivist "in carrying out the program of the President in connection with the preparation for the National Defense." Would the archivist take over the records and release the space so badly needed? The archivist would and did. The records were transferred and the department got its needed space.

I had just written that sentence, when the postman arrived bringing me a copy of the report of the archivist for the quarter ending June 30, 1942. My eye fell at once on the following passage:

> As in the preceding quarter the War Department records accessioned were greater in volume than those of any other agency. The transfer of a residual body of first World War Selective Service records, . . . marked the practical completion of the long process of solving the problem of what to do with some 136,000 cubic feet of such records in order to

release as far as possible, for war purposes, the large amount of floor space they had occupied.

For these and other war-time services, the National Archives, shortly after Pearl Harbor, was officially listed among the essential "defense agencies" of the United States government.

To bring this address to a close, it only remains that I perform a duty that you imposed upon me as your president a year ago when you elected to honorary membership in our Society the nation's most eminent amateur archivist. During my seven years of service as archivist of the United States, President Roosevelt's keen personal as well as official interest in the work of the National Archives was a constant source of encouragement and an ever present help in time of trouble. It was a great privilege, therefore, to be your agent for communicating your action to him and I now have the honor to lay before you his letter of acceptance.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

February 13, 1942.

My dear Dr. Connor:

May I tell you how very much honored I am by my election as an Honorary Member of the Society of American Archivists?

I need not tell you of my lifetime interest in the building up of archives throughout the nation—especially because of my own personal interest in the naval history phase and the local Dutchess County material.

At this time, and because of the condition of modern war against which none of us can guess the future, it is my hope that the Society of American Archivists will do all that is possible to build up an American public opinion in favor of what might be called the only form of insurance that will stand the test of time.

I am referring to the duplication of records by modern processes like the microfilm so that if in any part of the country original archives are destroyed, a record of them will exist in some other place.

This involves, of course, a vast amount of work because of the volume of federal, state and local archives of all kinds—but I think that a broad plan would meet with hearty public support if it could be properly publicized.

The Society can count on my continued support in the fine work which it is doing.

Always sincerely,

(Signed) FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Dr. R. D. W. CONNOR, *President*,
The Society of American Archivists,
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

The suggestion of the President that this Society should "do all that is possible to build up an American public opinion in favor of what might be called the only form of insurance [for private and public records] that will stand the test of time," fits so neatly into our program at this meeting that one might suspect he had previous notice of it. I strongly recommend that this Society, at this meeting, consider and adopt suitable plans for putting our new member's suggestion into effect.

R. D. W. Connor

University of North Carolina