

I have just about met myself coming back. Perhaps we should at this point accept Mr. Holmes' fine suggestion that we put these field records of federal agencies in temporary warehouses until we make up our minds—until we can give further study to the three suggested solutions, to decreasing the number of typewriters in federal service, to the destruction of useless federal records, and to microphotography.

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ARMY FIELD RECORDS

EVERY individual, it is commonly said, has certain idiosyncrasies. One of mine is that I started out to become a historian and have never been able to get over it. In spite of having been employed for some time as an archivist, in spite of my present duties, I cannot help thinking of myself primarily as a historian. It is as such that I contribute to this discussion of regional depositories for federal records. My interests and the fortunes of employment have directed my thinking on the subject into two main streams, local history on the one hand and military history on the other. Where these two flow together to become western military history is formed the beginning of a turbulent whitewater course of great promise, which has been explored but little. It is the rocks and mud and roots underlying this particular stream—in short, the records that hold it within its banks—that are my concern.

It may not be a pleasant fact, but fact it is that most—and I mean most—of the historians of this country have only the faintest conception of the source materials available among the records of the federal government. This is particularly noticeable in the case of War Department and army records, but it is scarcely less so for those of most other agencies as well. In fact, scholars are so innocent of the true possibilities that they frequently mistake relatively unimportant collections or parts of collections for something much larger and consequently bring out articles and books based on a very small part of the sources available. This is especially, although by no means exclusively, true of the local historians.

To avoid criticism of others, allow me to use my own case as an example. Longer ago than I like to admit, I started to study the history of the United States Army in the Pacific Northwest. With the advice of a professor for whom I still have the greatest admiration as a scholar and teacher, I started with the records of Fort Vancouver, which were available locally, happen to be unusually complete, and, as such field records go, are extremely valuable. It was thought that they would be the real basis of the study, although it was realized that there must be some additional material among the records of higher commands. Much new material could have been presented and the study as then planned would have contributed something to the knowledge of the Pacific Northwest and of the army in the West, but it would not—it could not—have been the real story of the army in that region because it would have been based on fragmentary sources. It would have been narrow, distorted, and incomplete. I do not believe that this is the kind of local history that we want to produce, but it is the kind that will continue to be written until scholars become aware of the greater sources available.

Fortunately, the opportunity came for me to work with War Department and army records, and it became more and more apparent that the records of Fort Vancouver and even those of the Division of the Pacific and the Department of Oregon, the next higher commands and those that have the highest order of peace-time field records, were relatively insignificant—even for local history, mind you—when compared to the records of the Secretary of War, the headquarters of the army, the adjutant general, the quartermaster general, the commissary general of subsistence, the chief of engineers, the inspector general, the judge advocate general, the chief of ordnance, and the surgeon general. The records, which can be lumped together as the records of the War Department, are the most important single source for the military history not only of the Pacific Northwest but of every section of the country since the War of 1812, if not since the Revolution. By learning something of the departmental records and thus being able to re-evaluate the field records as compared to them, I was forced to the conclusion that the departmental records must be the real basis of my study and that the field records contain only supplementary information of secondary value. Military history simply cannot be written from field records of this type alone.

Let me illustrate with some specific instances. I was naturally

interested in the entire supply problem for the Department of Oregon and was on the lookout for any material that threw light on it. Incidental information was picked up bit by bit in the post records, but from those of the quartermaster general's office it was possible to piece together a reasonably good general picture. The entire system was described in great detail, however, in the proceedings of a court of inquiry held at Fort Vancouver to investigate charges preferred against an assistant quartermaster at that post in the 1850's. Information to be obtained nowhere else, especially about transportation on the Columbia River and communications between Fort Vancouver and other posts, is contained in this verbatim testimony on file among the court-martial records of the judge advocate general's office.¹ Or take the 125-page report of an inspection of the Department of the Pacific made in 1854 by Col. Joseph K. F. Mansfield. Inspector General Mansfield visited every post on the Pacific Coast and, as a trained observer, wrote a report that is the best description of that area, not only from the military but also from the social and economic points of view, that it has ever been my good fortune to find.² Sources such as these are not to be found in field records.

This point has been emphasized because it has a direct bearing on the problem under discussion. Local historians have tended to urge the retention of field records in local depositories in the mistaken belief that this would best serve the interests of local history. I believe that exactly the opposite of this is true, that the interests of local history would be served much better by the centralization of both field and departmental records in one great research center such as the National Archives. Granted the distance to Washington from such isolated frontiers as the Pacific Coast, the point is that to do a satisfactory job the trip is going to have to be made anyway, and it is more economical in the long run to do as much as possible of one's research in a single place where the closely interrelated field and departmental records may be used together. Nor should it be forgotten that some of the best local history is being written by persons who are not living in the sections under study. This condition will increase, to the benefit of local history, in direct proportion to the centralization of the records and the knowledge of them possessed

¹ Judge Advocate General's Office, Courts Martial, HH-896, in the National Archives.

² The Adjutant General's Office, Miscellaneous File, 282 (formerly AGO, 162-M-1855), in the National Archives.

by historians. If our graduate schools had any understanding of the possibilities for dissertations in local history—worthwhile studies of general as well as sectional interest—which could be made from materials already in the National Archives, there would be a regular bull market in that field.

Incidentally, there could be no better way to force the importance of these sources upon the consciousness of historians than to encourage the publication of a series of monographs in various fields based on these materials and written by persons who know them thoroughly. Such studies could not be ignored—nor could the source materials after the publication of a few volumes based on them. Finding mediums are useful for certain purposes, but they cannot possibly get across the message as forcefully as well-documented studies or even a series of published volumes of documents. Despite the importance of this to the National Archives and to the historical profession, not a single first-class work of this sort has come out of the staff of the National Archives in the eight years of its existence. Reconciling one's self to this is the peculiar form of purgatory for those who would pass from the historical to the archival profession. It is particularly tragic when promising students of history learn more about valuable records than any outsider can ever hope to know but are given no opportunity to use the acquired knowledge in their real field.

In at least one respect the field records of the army differ from those of other agencies, and confusion will result if this is not recognized. Although both are field units, a distinction must be made between geographical commands, such as posts, districts, departments, divisions, corps areas, and service commands, and tactical commands, such as regiments, brigades, divisions, corps, armies, and expeditions. The records of the latter, the fighting units, are not of much significance except for periods of war but bulk very large for each of our periodic crises. The 130 volumes of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* serve to support this statement; there are at least 50,000 cubic feet of such records for the World War. Obviously these records are of great importance for both administrative and historical purposes, and it is equally obvious, since they cannot be left on the battlefield and few of the organizations have an existence of long duration, that field records of this type must be centralized. Large quantities of them should be and

are being destroyed, but many of them, especially those of higher echelons, should be preserved carefully and in close proximity to the departmental records they supplement.

The records of geographical commands, on the other hand, are comparable to the field records of other federal agencies and presumably can be treated in a similar manner. Some of the advantages of centralization have already been suggested, and I feel sure that my own belief in the matter is already apparent. The War Department has long had a policy, unfortunately not always followed in practice, of having sent to the adjutant general's office the records of discontinued commands and abandoned stations. Had these been left in the field, no one place would have had anything of much value, and those who needed to use them would have had to travel widely, to say the least. Brought together in one place where groups of them can be used with each other and with the records of the War Department, they become of considerable administrative and historical value—the whole being, in this case, greater than the sum of its parts. This policy is sound and ought to be extended even more than it has been to still-existing posts retaining records for which they have no further administrative use.

The army, and consequently its record system, differs from most other agencies in one other respect. The Interior Department's General Land Office has little in common with the Office of Indian Affairs or the National Park Service, and both the bureau and field records of these practically independent services reflect the differences of purpose between them. Throughout the War Department and the army, however, both in the various bureaus and in the field, there is now and always has been a practically uniform system of record keeping. There are variations, of course, but anyone who really knows the records of one office or field establishment for any period can easily understand the records of others for the same period. Because of this uniformity, and because of the endorsement system, which has been used throughout the army from a very early period, the advantages of centralization and the disadvantages of decentralization are increased.

Dossiers are built up as correspondence is passed through perhaps half a dozen or more offices, both departmental and field, and the only place that the complete story can be found is in whichever office takes final action or receives final instructions. Countless tons of paper

have doubtless been saved as a result, but it is extremely convenient to have the records of various offices and field establishments together when one starts chasing a tempting morsel found registered, say, in the adjutant general's office. Perhaps it started with an inspection report on Fort Vancouver, which had been sent to the headquarters of the army; the commanding general sent it to the adjutant general with comments, and the latter asked for the opinion of the quartermaster general who made a recommendation, which was sent to the Secretary of War for approval; and on the seventh endorsement it ended up at the headquarters of the Department of Oregon with instructions to inform Lieutenant Ducrot, the acting assistant quartermaster at Fort Vancouver, that he must not give away blankets to the Indians without specific authorization even if they were freezing.

This system is adequate for local administrative use and works beautifully for both administrative and historical purposes when the records are centralized. It does impose difficulties, however, for local historical use. Certain records, in general of little or no interest to scholars, are needed permanently at field stations for administrative purposes. Most of these must be kept at the posts themselves to be of any real value and are not suitable for regional depositories. Others are needed for only a short time locally but are of semipermanent value in Washington. The greatest percentage, as in the case of records of tactical commands, are of no permanent value for any purpose and can be destroyed after a relatively short period of time.

The Division of War Department Archives at the National Archives recently made a very revealing study of the field records problem. Using the published inventories of the Survey of Federal Archives for three states selected as representative of various conditions, Georgia, Indiana, and Oregon, the conclusion was reached that 54.5 per cent of the army field records reported for those states have already been authorized for disposition, that 18.1 per cent more ought to be reported for disposition immediately, and that 4.5 per cent are not records at all. Thus, 77.1 per cent of the problem disappears or can be made to disappear. It was estimated further that 17.8 per cent of the field records are of the type needed permanently at the field stations. This leaves 1.9 per cent to be transferred to Washington, 1.5 per cent that might be suitable for local depositories, and 2 per cent of undetermined character. For the country as

a whole, if the figures for these states are representative, this would mean less than 10,000 cubic feet of records to come to Washington or only about 10 per cent of the present War Department holdings of the National Archives. Similarly, it would leave less than 8,000 cubic feet to be divided among possible regional depositories. As that report concludes, "The idea of establishing regional depositories thus has very little pertinence with respect to the field records of the War Department."³

Turning again to the local historian, it seems to me that he must look elsewhere than to regional depositories for the answer to his problem, at least so far as military history is concerned. First, he must learn that most of his sources are already in Washington in the National Archives. Second, he should encourage the centralization of the remaining few that are still scattered throughout the country. Finally, he should get behind and back the initial efforts that have already been made in the publication of important series of documents, by both printing and microfilming. This last is the real solution for the students of local history, and it is hoped that, through the co-operation of universities and state historical societies with the National Archives, progress in this direction will continue.

There is a lot of talk at these meetings about the archival profession. As a parting shot—and as a historian—I should like to remind you that preserving records is not an end in itself; it is only a means to an end. The only standards of archival work deserving of a second thought are those which are designed to preserve valuable records for use, either administrative or scholarly or both. All policies, including the one now under discussion, must be formulated with this above all else in mind. If this criterion is applied, the military records of the United States will continue to be centralized in Washington and the established policy in this regard extended.

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³ Memorandum of Chief, Division of War Department Archives, to Director of Records Accessioning and Preservation, August 25, 1942, on "Field Records That Might Be Placed in Local Depositories."