

## THE NEED FOR REGIONAL DEPOSITORIES FOR FEDERAL RECORDS

IN PLANNING a permanent program for federal records in the states the issue of centralization versus decentralization is fundamental. Assuming that it were feasible to house in Washington five to ten million cubic feet of archives (and it seems to me that any addition to overcrowded Washington of huge storage facilities would be of doubtful wisdom), the military developments of the present war serve to emphasize the virtues of a program of decentralization. This danger was foreseen a long time ago. A humorous skit in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of London in 1774 pictured two Americans on a visit to London in 1974, finding it in ruins like Baalbek, Persepolis, Athens, and Rome. Britain, largely because of her injustice to America, the visitors discovered, had declined, and the colonies had become the seat of empire. The view that some day New York might be to London what Byzantium was to Rome was widely held in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Despite such fashionable predictions, however, it is interesting to note that our own national capitol was burned long before military aviation had come into existence and that actually two wars of the nineteenth century endangered the archives of Washington. Today, with aerial warfare, the complete centralization of records has proven hazardous and impractical. When the archives of Southern Rhodesia were sent to London, the authorities may have felt that they were far safer there than in East Africa. Nonetheless they were totally destroyed during the great fire of London of 1940<sup>1</sup> while Il Duce's "Balcony Empire" never seriously threatened Britain's East African possessions.

Therefore, we must plan our archival buildings not only for peace but for war-time as well. Established principles of military engineering and protective concealment will determine the plans, construction, and arrangement of such buildings. In the long run they will also dictate the choice of locations for housing our records.<sup>2</sup>

Granted that some form of decentralization of archives were in-

<sup>1</sup> See THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST, v (April, 1942), 130, and Southern Rhodesia, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, July 2, 1941, p. 1900-932.

<sup>2</sup> The trend toward decentralization in Great Britain was disclosed as early as 1910 in a report of the Royal Commission of that year, and, at least temporarily, the war has accelerated the process. See R. B. Morris, "The Challenge of Historical Materials," THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST, iv (April, 1941), 91, and "The Federal Archives of New York City: Opportunities for Historical Research," *American Historical Review*, 42 (January, 1937), 271.

stituted and that the bulk of the federal central office records were stored in and around Washington, Mr. Holmes has pertinently raised the question as to the practicability of keeping the records of the federal government outside Washington either at or near their present locations or of sending them to the nearest regional depository that may be established. I think there will be general agreement among archivists that records which have an integral part in the administration of a federal bureau or agency—such as the archives of field offices—should ultimately be transferred to Washington, although it might be prudent to have microfilm copies of such records sent to strategically located depositories outside the national capital. Let us then be consistent and maintain that archives that are of prime importance to the operation of a local federal office or are of regional significance should not be sent to Washington.

Is it practicable to draw the line? In most cases the rule will be simple and the enforcement of it perfectly practicable. Certainly it possesses many advantages from the administrative point of view. My illustrations are drawn largely from New York City where I have had some first-hand experience in studying federal archives. A number of years ago there were stored in the quartermaster supply office in Brooklyn, army transport shipping records of the first World War, including material from such ports of embarkation as Norfolk, together with other records from posts as far away as Fort Sam Houston, Fort Oglethorpe, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. There was no logical reason for keeping them in Brooklyn. Staff officers planning embarkation movements of troops today would want to study them in Washington where they properly belong. The same is true of records originating in the Bureau of Aircraft Production, in the finance office of the army's Second Corps Area. Such material might be of value to the War Department or the War Production Board today, but its possible value to army officers in the Second Corps Area seems negligible. It would also be more logical and more convenient for students of the activities of the Department of Agriculture to study at one central location in Washington the records, at present scattered in countless localities throughout the country, of, let us say, the field stations of the Division of Virus Serum Control, of the Meat Inspection Division, or even of the Soil Conservation Service, than to be compelled to visit these many local agencies. This would also hold true of field offices of the Bureau of Internal Revenue, which

according to Treasury policy and practice are controlled and administered from Washington.

On the other hand, the records of certain federal agencies or bureaus are fundamentally regional in character or are of far greater value to the local operation of the agencies than to the central needs of the superior Washington offices. In such cases there is often a very considerable local interest in the study and examination of such materials, and it would be perfectly logical to expect the investigator to go to the localities or regions to consult such records. I suggest four major categories, but there are doubtless numerous others. These four bulk large, however, in the total volume of federal archives in the states. They are (1) the archives of custom houses, (2) the archives relating to immigration and naturalization, (3) the archives of such regional federal agencies as the Tennessee Valley Authority or the Bonneville Power Administration, and (4) the archives of the federal courts and of the Department of Justice. In all the above categories, except insofar as the safety of the records was endangered by remaining *in situ* or their removal was physically necessary because of inadequate storage space, I can see no advantage in sending noncurrent records to Washington.

Questions involving such documents as ship manifests and customs declarations constantly come before the federal customs authorities of the ports of entry. It is to the advantage of such officials to have a good deal of this material close at hand. It is true that the Washington offices of the Treasury and Commerce departments prepare statistical compilations of revenue collected, of imports, and of exports, but for such purposes the individual local papers are not needed. Furthermore, these ports of entry are limited in number. The effective use a historian can make of customhouse records when they are left in their offices of origin has been demonstrated by Professor Albion.

There is constant demand for immigration and naturalization records, especially in connection with proof of citizenship. It is conceded that many immigrants finally move considerable distances from their original ports of entry, so that there would be advantage in having microfilm copies of all such materials in Washington for consultation there as well as at the ports of entry. In this case, too, as with customs records, since the major ports of entry for immigrants to this country are limited in number, we are not faced by the mis-

cellaneous and scattered archival distribution posed by the small field office or substation. It might be added that such records also shed valuable light on the history of ports of debarkation.

Mr. Holmes has thoroughly considered the problem presented by the archives of regional agencies, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, and it would be superfluous to say more at this time. It might also be added that certain agencies that record their transactions directly with individuals, such as many of the New Deal agencies mentioned by Mr. Holmes, seem to me to fit into the same category as the customs and immigration records, and that accordingly there would be little advantage in centralization.

Finally, in regard to the federal judicial records, I emphatically agree with Mr. Holmes that these should not be considered field records, because the courts possess a large measure of autonomy. As a matter of fact the problem of the federal judicial archives in the states is now so pressing that, if for no other reason, some form of regional depository, even if temporary or makeshift in character, will have to be devised and very quickly. At a meeting of the judges of the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York in June, 1942, it was decided that records generally prior to the year 1912 "were no longer needed in the transaction of the current business of the Court with the exception of the permanent minutes, the judgment rolls, the opinions of the Judges, the judgment dockets, and of certain old historical matter most of which covers the period prior to the year 1789 and which was collected under the supervision of" the late Judge Hough. Mr. George J. H. Follmer, clerk of the court, reported to Judge Knox at that time that much of the records are "unindexed and [their] contents unknown to the Court, the bar, or the public." On October 1, 1941, the volume of records on hand was estimated as exceeding 550 tons in weight. The case papers fill the equivalent of 10,500 legal-size cabinet drawers, and the dockets, minute and calendar books, and other volumes occupy 400 linear feet of shelving. But of this total, 85 per cent has accumulated since 1900, and bankruptcy records under the act of 1898 account for 50 per cent of the total of all classes of records. In general, the material in the Southern District is accumulating at the rate of 12 to 15 tons yearly.

Now when the clerk of the court admits that the bulk of the material is a *terra incognita* as far as court, lawyers, and public are

concerned, I do not see how the court can dismiss such vast quantities of material as possessing no historical value. It was purely fortuitous that Judge Hough collected the admiralty records of the colonial and state courts. The inventory of the Survey of Federal Archives revealed that there is a large quantity of first-rate historical material in vice-admiralty that he had not segregated and was not aware of. As regards bankruptcy, the court clerk states that out of a total of 10,149 proceedings before the court, 6,121 came under the bankruptcy acts of 1801, 1841, 1867, and 1898. The court wishes to dispose of this material entirely; yet the economic and social historians are quite likely to find far more material of historical significance here than in the cases of prize, piracy, and maritime matters, which, because of their antiquity, the court wishes to preserve. The antiquity of a document should not be the primary test of its importance.

Let us consider these bankruptcy papers a little more closely. In the first place, these archives constitute the chief activity of the court—a doctor to financially sick corporations and individuals, who, as a result of the swing in the business cycle, have been forced into involuntary bankruptcy, or who, through enabling legislation representing a great advance over English debtor laws, have gone into voluntary bankruptcy. These papers may help determine the correlation between unemployment and bankruptcy wage earners. With respect to business failures, Mr. Justice Douglas pointed out a number of years ago that no scientific correlation can be made until more is known respecting the causes of failures. These papers give us a detailed account of what happened to these financially sick corporations and people, an account that no historian or economist has as yet taken the trouble to study. Corporate reorganization under section 77b of the act of 1898, as modified by the act establishing the Securities and Exchange Commission, is one of the most interesting and significant phases of industrial and finance capital *in extremis*. Must we lose these data and have nothing left for the study of these companies save the formal judgment roll or the opinion of the judges? As Professor Herbert Heaton has shown in his study of nonimportation, 1806-1812, the papers of federal district courts can be of prime importance in the study of our economic history. But are prize, piracy, and nonimportation any more significant to historians than bankruptcy?

The historical importance of the bankruptcy records in federal dis-

strict courts outside New York is also evident. For example, the district court at Richmond has twenty-five feet of bankruptcy case papers, 1842-1845, based on the bankruptcy law of 1841. Writing on *Sixty Years of Branch Banking in Virginia*, Professor Starnes stated that "the conclusion is justifiable that the banking system of Virginia prior to 1860 compared favorably with that of any other state in the Union . . . we have been unable to discover that any incorporated bank ever failed, or that any man ever lost a dollar by a Virginia bank note until the banks were engulfed in the general ruin caused by the Civil War." As Dr. Kathleen Bruce points out, Professor Starnes' study appears to have been made without benefit of court papers. Doubtless his important conclusions would have been enriched and possibly modified by a study of the records of the Bank of the Valley of Virginia, the Bank of Virginia, the Farmers' Bank, and the Bank of Philippi, all in the custody of the district court at Richmond.

As a matter of fact, too few historians have ever studied the federal archives in the states and only now are graduate schools beginning to realize the wealth of research material that lies buried in these records. The judicial and legal records offer especially rich opportunities for investigation by social scientists. The study of the Department of Justice made by Homer Cummings and his staff was based wholly on Washington records. No consideration was given to the administration of the department outside Washington, and the authors were dependent entirely upon field reports from the district offices. The next generation of scholars should explore these federal records outside Washington in order to see how federal policy was translated into action.

With these considerations in mind, it seems to me that archivists and historians should be in unanimous agreement that we do not want such records as those of the Southern District Court of New York destroyed. On the other hand, we must recognize that the court does not have the physical facilities to continue housing this body of material. By being kept in outlying warehouses their future safety is really jeopardized. Therefore, if the archival authorities oppose the destruction of these papers, they are bound to propose an alternative. Failure to do so promptly will lead to a chaotic archival situation in New York City. We do not want a repetition of such incidents as occurred there in the early 1900's, when many tons of customhouse

records were disposed of without regard to their historical importance and a private dealer in New York purchased for a song the bulk of the ship manifests for the ports of New York and Baltimore, 1790-1810.

Many of the objections Mr. Holmes raises to permanent regional archives are weighty and cannot be lightly dismissed. Were we to set up regional depositories at the headquarters of the nine army corps areas, for example, Philadelphia, Richmond, Detroit, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Los Angeles might consider themselves slighted. To work in co-operation with state archivists in the erection of jointly operated and controlled buildings involves legislation in the forty-eight states as well as Congressional enactment. While it might be useful to undertake such a program in a few judiciously selected states for experimental purposes, the larger program would be dependent in very large measure upon the federal government's putting up the bulk of the money. Mr. Holmes has himself considered the weightiest objection to such a plan. In general it would set up archival centers at considerable distances from such important centers of federal activity as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco.

In the meantime the nation requires a practical and immediate program. In planning such a program we must not only plan for the storage of the records of the vastly expanding war agencies that will be dismantled in large measure after the war, but we must also satisfy the demands of custodians of federal records in the states that we relieve them of large and historically important segments of material, which the National Archives under present space conditions is physically incapable of housing. Temporary storage depots in nine or a dozen key cities of the country could be quickly and rather economically set up. Large staffs would not be necessary, as the immediate task would be that of storage rather than of classification. For the time being the rapidly accumulating mountain of such non-current records could be safeguarded until sufficient funds were available and interest aroused to ensure the careful examination and classification of such materials. When the time is propitious, classification should be made roughly along the following lines: (1) Records that should be destroyed without microcopying, such as duplicates, triplicates, and timesheets; (2) records that should be destroyed after microcopying; (3) records that should be stored regionally, microcopies being sent to Washington for consultation



by central offices; (4) records that should be transferred to Washington.

In the long run, military and fiscal, no less than archival, considerations will dictate the kind of permanent housing these regional archives are to receive. In the meantime, let us get the historical materials out of the busy federal agencies in the states and into places of safety. Some form of regional storage would seem to be the answer.

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