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THE PROBLEM OF FEDERAL FIELD OFFICE RECORDS¹

PLANNING A PERMANENT PROGRAM FOR FEDERAL RECORDS IN THE STATES

UPON its establishment in 1934 the National Archives was at once confronted with an overwhelming mass of records in the nation's capital—the accumulation of our government in its 145 years of eventful existence. These records nearly equaled in quantity all the records to be found in field offices of the federal government throughout the forty-eight states. Because they were the central records of our government, because they were often stored under very unsatisfactory conditions, and because the pressure for space in the District of Columbia has been unrelenting from the early days of the New Deal through the recent emergency and war periods, the National Archives necessarily has concentrated almost all its available resources upon the task of caring for this accumulation.

Although less has been done about federal records outside the District of Columbia, the National Archives has never been permitted to ignore their existence nor the problems involved in planning an adequate program for their care. There could be little peace of mind, for instance, so long as regional directors of the Survey of Federal Archives were sending in reports and memoranda calling attention to one situation after another in which the continued existence of valuable field records was endangered. Both the inventories of that survey and the countless lists submitted by field offices of papers that they wished authorization to destroy called attention to the fact that many field offices were jammed with useless papers which should be disposed of more systematically lest they jeopardize the safety of records that needed to be preserved. In many field offices it was found that space was as much at a premium as in the District

¹ The four papers that constitute this series of articles were read before the opening session of the sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Richmond, Virginia, October 26, 1942.

of Columbia. Also, the growing threat of modern war, with all its destructive power, brought a sudden realization that records in certain large cities and in areas having military and industrial installations that were natural objectives of bombing expeditions were relatively unsafe. In recent months we have also been faced with the phenomenon of central agencies being moved out of Washington and taking with them their records and records problems to almost a dozen cities from New York to Salt Lake City, yet often, if they are older agencies leaving quantities of their earlier records behind them in the National Archives. Finally, we are now confronted with enormous quantities of field records of New Deal agencies that are being liquidated. And of course we realize all too well that one of our major problems after the war will be the handling of possibly even greater quantities of such records of the many war agencies that have been established.

The problem thus posed is one of vast proportions and of almost unbelievable complexity. The manner of its solution is not only of administrative concern to the federal government but also of deep interest to a growing number of scholars in all fields who in the future may wish to base their researches upon records that reflect the rapidly expanding spheres of federal activities. Although the final decisions must be made by officials of the National Archives, this is a subject upon which all scholarly organizations have a right to be heard, and it should be plain that the National Archives must know their views if adequate consideration is to be given to them. There can hardly be too much discussion of the issues and the interests involved. It seems especially fitting that the problems should be placed before the Society of American Archivists at this meeting. It is hoped, however, that discussion will not end here, but that those who are interested will give written expression to their views upon some of the phases of this many-sided subject.

The question of what to do with records of field offices of the federal government is not new. A number of older federal agencies were faced with the problem long before the National Archives came into existence. As the frontier moved westward, Indian agencies, land offices, and military posts outlived their usefulness and were closed. Some action had to be taken with respect to their records. In some cases, it is true, they were destroyed or abandoned; and some abandoned ones of great historical interest have been salvaged

by local historical societies and libraries, to which we owe a debt of gratitude. More often, however, and especially if the records still possessed administrative interest, they either were transferred to some local office or post that was still in existence or were sent to Washington. Eventually, large quantities of records of closed offices were concentrated in Washington, where they were placed with the older central records of the agency in some storeroom, from which they ultimately found their way to the National Archives. The total accumulation of field office records acquired in this manner by the National Archives is large. Not all of them have been identified and described, because, in general, after many moves they have become confused and disorganized—sometimes mixed with central office records and often mixed with each other. Frequently they are in poor physical condition, for less care was given to them than to the records of the central office. They are often discouragingly fragmentary, and one sometimes suspects that they are merely remnants that were overlooked when the others were destroyed. Yet, despite this disheartening picture, the remaining records from early field offices of the federal government are among the most valuable in the National Archives—representing as they do an age when, because of the lack of speedy transportation and communication, much more discretion was necessarily left to the local official.

Coming down to a more recent date, it is particularly appropriate that we consider the records of field offices of emergency agencies of the first World War. As these offices were closed their records were practically always sent to Washington in accordance with instructions carefully worked out in the central offices. These records were much used in the first few years after the war in the settlement of certain post-war problems, such as claims arising out of canceled contracts, claims for services, and the adjustment of disputed accounts. Because they created serious space problems, some of these field records, after they became less active, were destroyed. This policy sometimes involved the intelligent destruction of series of routine records. In other cases records were preserved on a sampling basis. For example, the records of all state fuel administrators were disposed of except those of Minnesota, Michigan, and Massachusetts. These were selected and saved as samples of state organization records that might be of value in case of a future war. In other instances all field office records of the war agencies have been preserved. The

records of state food administrators are now in the National Archives, as are those of the zone offices of the United States Grain Corporation. Similarly, the National Archives now has the records of all the district offices of the construction branch of the Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation and of most of the district records of the operations branch of the same agency.

This policy of bringing to Washington the records of closed field offices has been continued to recent date. Mention need be made only of the records of field offices of the National Recovery Administration, all of which were brought to Washington after the demise of that agency. After they had been in Washington a few years and the need of consulting them for administrative purposes had lessened, they were transferred to the National Archives. Records of abandoned field offices of other agencies are probably still being brought to Washington and will continue to be in years to come, at the instance of the agencies themselves; although more and more, instead of being kept for a time in the agencies' Washington offices, they are being offered directly to the National Archives.²

It is evident from this rapid historical survey that the federal agencies themselves have set a precedent that cannot be overlooked in a consideration of this problem. Nearly all the records they have brought to Washington have been records of closed field offices, however; so it may be argued that the precedent is not directly applicable to older records in offices that are still in existence. Never-

² A smaller quantity of field records has been brought to Washington through channels other than the parent agencies, although with their permission. The most important of these channels was the Library of Congress, which, before the establishment of the National Archives, often acted to preserve archival materials of historical value. In 1903, for example, to prevent the destruction of certain older custom house records, which had been authorized by Congress, the library obtained permission to have them transferred to its custody. These included customs records from Kennebunk, Portland, and Rockland, Maine, New Bedford, Mass., New York City, Perth Amboy, N.J., Philadelphia, Georgetown, D.C., Alexandria, Tappahannock, and Yorktown, Va., Edenton and Elizabeth City, N.C., Savannah, and New Orleans. These records have been transferred recently to the National Archives. The library in 1905 also obtained the transfer, from the office of the surveyor general at Tallahassee, of the East Florida archives, comprising some 62,000 documents. Two years earlier, the Spanish and Mexican archives at Santa Fé, which came into the possession of the government with the cession of New Mexico and adjacent areas of the southwest, were transferred by order of the Secretary of the Interior to the library, but in 1923, yielding to local pressure, the library returned them to Santa Fé. An attempt was made to obtain the transfer of similar Spanish and Mexican archives in California, but this was defeated by local interests, with the result that all but a small part of the records were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 (Librarian of Congress, *Reports*, 1903, p. 26-28; 1904, p. 49; and 1923, p. 2).

theless, one dilemma that must be faced if any program of field depositories is adopted is clearly apparent. Eventually, certain field records will be located in Washington while others will be in the states. This may be desirable. Possibly certain field records may best be brought to Washington, while others are more suited for depositing elsewhere. Possibly this division of field records is inevitable. At this stage of the argument we shall pause only long enough to note that the two alternatives to such division are (1) complete centralization or (2) the eventual return to appropriate field depositories of all field records now in Washington.

Two precedents for leaving federal records in the states deserve to be mentioned at this point—one of them furnished by the General Land Office and the other by the Office of Indian Affairs. There are, of course, other instances of local records being turned over to state libraries and historical societies, but such action was usually taken by local officials upon their own responsibility, whereas the cases to be described represent deliberate decisions made in Washington and sanctioned by Congress through enactment into law.

The General Land Office precedent goes back to 1840, when Congress passed a law urging the completion of the surveys in public land states and providing that "whenever the surveys and records of any such district or State shall be completed" the surveyor general "shall be required to deliver over to the Secretary of State of the respective States . . . or such other officer as may be authorized to receive them, all the field notes, maps, records, and other papers appertaining to land titles within the same."³ It was in compliance with this act that in 1869 the records of the surveyor general for the district of Mississippi were placed in the custody of the state of Mississippi. At the instance of the commissioner of the General Land Office, the act of 1840 was amended in 1853 to provide that any "agent of the United States" should have free access to records that either had been or might be turned over to the states under the 1840 law, and that such records should "in no case hereafter be turned over to the authorities of any State, until such State shall have provided by law for the reception and safe keeping of the same as public records."⁴ Under this act as amended, when the offices of the surveyors general were closed a great many states

³ 5 *U. S. Statutes at Large*, 384.

⁴ 10 *Ibid.*, 152.

received the records of the surveys of the public domain within their borders.

Nothing was said in this law concerning the records of the district land offices that had charge of the disposition of the public domain, but the precedent established with respect to survey records was followed in a law of 1876 that closed the last land offices in Ohio (at Chillicothe), Indiana (at Indianapolis), and Illinois (at Springfield) and provided that "the Secretary of the Interior is hereby authorized to transfer to the States respectively aforesaid such of the transcripts, documents, and records of the offices aforesaid as may not be required for use of the United States, and as the States respectively in which said offices are situated may desire to preserve."⁵ From time to time as the last land offices were closed in other states, there were passed other special acts with similar provisions, and in 1926 a general act was passed authorizing the Secretary of the Interior "whenever the last United States land office in any State has been or hereafter may be abolished" to transfer such records "as may not be required for use of the United States and which the State may desire to preserve" on condition that "such State has provided by law for the reception and safekeeping of the same as public records, and for the allowance of free access to the same by the authorities of the United States."⁶ In accordance with these acts a great many states received the records of land offices that had at one time existed within their borders. Some states, however, neglected to comply with the provisions of the law and therefore the records were sent to Washington. Such of these records as were not destroyed by the General Land Office are now in the custody of the National Archives.

An important consideration in the establishment of this policy by the General Land Office was the belief that there existed in Washington duplicate copies of all essential records maintained in the field offices with respect to surveys and the alienation of the public title to specific tracts of land. Duplicate copies of all plats of surveys, of all field notes of surveyors, and of all abstracts of entries were sent in contemporaneously by field officials, while the Land Office kept its own set of tract books, which were supposed to duplicate the information contained in those in local offices. The General Land Office also kept the original entry papers, upon which final

⁵ 19 *U. S. Statutes at Large*, 121.

⁶ 44 *Ibid.*, 672.

decisions with respect to the granting of patents were based. Thus it was felt that the interests of the federal government were sufficiently protected. On the other hand, the states definitely had need of these records as the foundation of all titles to lands within their boundaries, and frequent reference is still made to these records in most states where they were retained.⁷ Through experience the General Land Office has learned that the two sets of records were not always exact duplicates; indeed, many questions that have arisen have been based upon inconsistencies between them. The Land Office still finds it frequently necessary to write to state officials who have the custody of these records and in some cases to send a man to consult them. Thus, the General Land Office has been inconvenienced by the policy adopted, but it is doubtful whether it has been as greatly inconvenienced as it might have been had all these records been sent to Washington and all the questions of state officials been referred to the central office. Doubtless much could be learned from a more thorough study of federal-state co-operation as exemplified by this General Land Office experience.

The precedent furnished by action with respect to field records of the Office of Indian Affairs is of more recent date and is different from that presented by the General Land Office in that the greater part of the records involved are not duplicated in Washington. In 1934, just a few months before the establishment of the National Archives, there was passed, with the consent of the Office of Indian Affairs, an act sponsored by Congressman Hastings of Oklahoma, which authorized the Secretary of the Interior, "under rules and regulations to be prescribed by him," to place with the Oklahoma Historical Society "as custodian for the United States of America and the Secretary of the Interior" certain records of the Five Civilized Tribes and of other Indians in the state of Oklahoma.⁸ The law provided that whenever certified copies of these records are desired by the government to be used for its benefit "they shall be furnished without cost," and, further, "that any of the records placed with the Historical Society shall be promptly returned to the Government officials designated by the said Secretary upon his request therefor." Under this authority the Secretary of the Interior

⁷ It is the plat and tract books that are most frequently referred to locally. The inventories of the Survey of Federal Archives reveal that the correspondence of the local offices, a large part of which is not duplicated in Washington, is rarely or never consulted and, in many instances, is not kept under satisfactory conditions.

⁸ 48 U. S. *Statutes at Large*, 501.

has permitted the Oklahoma Historical Society to take possession of a large quantity of the older records of both abandoned and existing Indian agencies in Oklahoma. An act, introduced by Senator Norris and passed June 29, 1938, permits the Secretary of the Interior to place with the Nebraska State Historical Society, under similar conditions, "any records of Indian tribes which are within the confines of the State of Nebraska."⁹ In this latter instance, however, no action is known to have been taken under this permissive legislation. A special situation had existed in Oklahoma, of course, in that the greater part of that state's early history was bound up with the history of the Indian tribes within its borders, and the tribal governments of the Five Civilized Tribes represented the equivalent of a territorial government in that portion of Oklahoma formerly known as Indian Territory. The arrangement with respect to the Oklahoma Indian records also has caused the government some inconvenience in that several federal agencies in Washington have occasionally found it necessary to send their representatives to Oklahoma to consult the records, but again it is questionable which solution of the problem would over a course of years cause the least inconvenience.

Before passing from this historical survey to a consideration of specific proposals for the care of federal records in the states, it seems desirable to pause long enough to consider briefly the implications of two recent developments. The first of these is the removal of central offices of the federal government to locations outside the District of Columbia. Such records as have been removed with these agencies are, of course, not records of field offices. If these agencies with their records come back to Washington after the war, as some doubtless will, the problem will take care of itself, but there is certainly a reasonable doubt whether all of them will return. In other cases there may be a partial return of the agency. Some agencies, of course, have had parts of their central offices located outside Washington for many years. For example, the office of the supervisor of surveys, directing the activities of the Cadastral Engineering Service of the General Land Office, is in Denver, the office of the chief engineer of the Reclamation Service, in charge of the enormous construction program of that agency, is also in Denver, and the Health and Safety Service of the Bureau of Mines is in

⁹ 52 *U. S. Statutes at Large*, 1243.

Pittsburgh. There are also the rather special situations represented by the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Bonneville Power Administration, the headquarters offices of which have always been located outside Washington. Should records of all these agencies be brought into Washington, or are we going to begin dividing the records of headquarters offices as well as those of field offices? If they are to remain elsewhere than in Washington, records that may be of administrative use to such agencies should unquestionably be located near their central offices. This problem might be handled, however, merely by waiting to transfer the records to an archival institution until the administrative calls are so reduced in number that they could be handled satisfactorily from Washington. The answer to this question will, of course, influence the nature and location of depositories for federal records outside Washington, since relatively large bodies of records are involved.

A second recent development deserving special consideration is that of the establishment of temporary war agencies. To what extent should we allow the problems presented by their field records to influence the planning of a permanent program? Some of the major war agencies, such as the Lend-Lease Administration, the Board of Economic Warfare, and the National War Labor Board, operate chiefly in Washington and will have few if any field records. A few, such as the Office of Defense Health and Welfare Services, are merely co-ordinating agencies that operate through existing field channels, the records of which are part of our general problem. The Office of Civilian Defense operates largely through the state councils of defense, the records of which will doubtless remain in the states as they did after the last war. Plans for caring for them are already well advanced in many states. If the experience after the last war serves as a precedent, when this war is over there will undoubtedly be pressure to centralize in Washington the field records of such agencies as the Alien Property Custodian, the Office of Defense Transportation, the War Production Board, the War Shipping Administration, the Office of Censorship, and the Selective Service System. There may be less pressure for the centralization of the records of the local field offices of the Office of War Information and Office of Price Administration, but pressure for such centralization is likely to extend at least to the records of the zone offices. The reasons for such pressure are obvious. With all large war agencies,

questions of claims, refunds, post mortem enforcement cases, investigations, and personnel will exist, the settlement of which would seem to make centralization of field records desirable for administrative purposes. In this connection further study of the liquidation of temporary agencies of the last war would be valuable. There will doubtless exist also a desire on the part of the government to maintain close control over the records of many war activities, such as those represented by the Office of Censorship. If any of these records are to be allowed to remain in field depositories, it is plain that they will have to be depositories under the complete control of the federal government. Possibly such depositories under the control of the National Archives could, once the records are properly organized and inventoried, render the heavy administrative service that will be required. The question is whether agencies needing this service might not prefer to have the records centralized in a depository in Washington. There is also the pertinent question as to whether the National Archives would be in a position to act quickly enough to prevent the war agencies' acting for themselves. Obviously, it could not act quickly without the advance planning necessary to have the depositories ready, and such planning is difficult in war-time. How far is it wise to allow our planning for field depositories to be dominated by consideration of the fate of war records, which we may not be in a position to control anyway? Perhaps it would be better to eliminate them entirely from consideration, lest we be forced to act prematurely, and to allow a program for the field records of the federal government to develop slowly and surely in response to the peace-time needs of the nation.

Three basically different solutions to the problem of the field records of the federal government have been proposed: (1) That of a system of regional depositories; (2) that of maintaining depositories in each of the states, possibly under some system of federal-state co-operation; and (3) that of centralizing federal records in Washington. The combination of any two of these, or of all three, has also been envisioned.

The establishment of regional depositories for federal records seems to many a very simple and natural development. In 1935, when the Survey of Federal Archives was begun, there were more than seventy federal agencies with established regional schemes of administration. Some agencies had more than one such scheme.

The Geological Survey, for instance, had separate regional organization schemes for its Conservation Branch, Topographic Branch, and Water Resources Branch. In all, these seventy agencies operated through 108 different regional organizations.¹⁰

Presumably, the records of these regional offices are of importance second only to those in Washington. They are also large in volume. The records of lesser offices, if there exists a third or fourth level in the hierarchy, might well be concentrated in regional depositories where they would be accessible to regional supervisors. This would be the easier arrangement to administer because records of these smaller offices would be of less importance and a greater proportion of them would be disposed of as routine material of little value. Concentration of records at the zone level would be wise also because offices on a lower level would be established and discontinued, or changed in their location, more rapidly. Such regional depositories would correspond more or less to the natural regionalism that exists in the country, would reflect regional interests and problems, and would serve eventually as centers for writing regional history. They would be located in the larger cities, where there is a concentration of federal offices, so that federal officials could be assisted with their records administration problems, including the disposition of records of slight value; so that transfers of records worth retaining would be relatively simple and inexpensive; and so that service in response to requests of an administrative nature could be easily rendered. In contrast to any plan that provided for scattering federal records among the forty-eight states, the regional plan would provide for depositories of some size and dignity, with sufficient records to justify the maintenance of a fair-sized staff, including technical experts, and appropriate technical and library facilities. Other federal agencies would understand and appreciate the nature of such regional depositories and be quick to take advantage of them. Budgeting for and administration of such a system of regional depositories would be relatively simple.

In the earlier thinking about a regional scheme, separate archival

¹⁰ National Resources Committee, *Regional Factors in National Planning and Development* (Washington, 1935), p. 71. Maps showing these regional organization schemes, agency by agency, appear on pages 206 to 223. This publication is of primary importance in connection with any consideration of regional depositories. Also thought provoking are the papers contained in U. S. Department of Agriculture Graduate School, *Washington-Field Relationships in the Federal Service* (Washington, 1942).

buildings were doubtless contemplated. It was later suggested, however, that advantage might be taken of the present program for erecting federal office buildings in the larger cities—a program, presumably, merely interrupted by the war—by designing them so that space is reserved for an archival depository. Several floors might be designated for this purpose, or, possibly, more efficient use could be made of the inner part of the building, less suitable for offices, by fitting it up for the housing of records. This would place the regional archives establishment in the same building with most of the offices it was intended to serve, and there would be maximum efficiency in the use of these facilities. In fact, one of the questionable features of the scheme is that it would be difficult to prevent the archival depository from becoming a central filing office for the agencies housed in the building. Perhaps such a development, to the extent that it took place naturally, would be all to the good. The distinction between current files and archives is a theoretical tight rope that in practice it is often impossible to walk.

A further elaboration of this plan connects the regional archival depository of this character with the movement for greater and more effective interdepartmental co-operation at the regional level, a subject that was being studied by the National Resources Planning Board and the Bureau of the Budget before the war began. There is need for greater co-ordination and integration of federal programs in the region, but to obtain this it is necessary to draw the agencies together at this level into one city and into one building, if possible, in order that they may gain greater familiarity with each other's work. At these federal subcapitals, centralized services in such matters as personnel management, supplies and equipment, processing and printing, and management of office and storage space could be provided for the many separate agencies whose offices had been brought together physically. One of these services might well be a regional administrative reference service for officials, in which a regional library and a regional archives establishment would find a place.

If all of this seems somewhat theoretical, the answer is that our planning is for the future and that plans should be pointed in the directions in which the federal government will move in coming decades. Our planning becomes still more important when we realize that our decisions may have an influence, however slight, in the determining of those directions.

Perhaps the most serious drawback to the regional plan is that at present, at least, regional areas are not standardized. Some are purely arbitrary areas for the decentralization of administration and their boundary lines conform to state boundaries. Other regional boundaries are based upon natural features, such as drainage areas or the character and extent of certain natural resources. Still others rest upon economic considerations, such as the transportation pattern or the extent of metropolitan influence. In some cases state boundaries are entirely disregarded; in others where they are generally followed states may be divided between two regions. Certain states have a peculiar borderline location so that in the case of one agency's regional pattern they may be associated with certain states in one direction, while in other patterns they are associated with other states in the opposite direction. Montana, Oklahoma, and Ohio may be mentioned as examples. There is little chance of a regional depository being located within their borders. Records relating to different federal activities within their boundaries would likely be sent out of the states in different directions, with the result that the states would be impoverished and would find it difficult to know in which direction to turn for the information they wished. The state of Washington might resent having to send its federal records to California. New Orleans might resist transferring its records to Atlanta or St. Louis, as the case may be, and might prefer their being sent to the nation's capital if they had to go out of the state. The more one considers the situation, the more impossible it seems to set up a system of regional depositories without stirring up considerable local feeling. A system of regional depositories in almost all the larger cities, taking advantage of a federal office building program so far as possible, might be a solution. The advantages of a true regional program would be largely dissipated by this arrangement, however, without the obtaining of advantages that would accrue were the states themselves made the units.

States represent ready-made administrative areas. Why not, then, consider the possibility of basing a system of field depositories upon the definite, stable framework that they seem to provide? In this connection, let us first revert to the previously mentioned precedents set by the General Land Office and the Office of Indian Affairs and ask ourselves whether it is desirable to continue the policy there begun of depositing field records in existing state libraries and histori-

cal societies, under such safeguards as are represented by those examples. Mention has already been made of the special character of the records so deposited. Perhaps there are other records of similar character, which such institutions might be glad to have and which might appropriately be placed in their hands for safekeeping. It seems very doubtful, however, whether a continuance of this policy would solve the field records problem, and for the following reasons:

1. Many federal agencies might be reluctant to place their field records in non-federal depositories. The pressure that will probably exist after the war for bringing the records of most field offices of emergency war agencies to Washington has already been mentioned. The same pressure exists to a high degree for all federal records. So long as records have any considerable administrative value, even if the need to refer to them be only occasional, federal agencies like to have them at hand for quick reference when they are needed. Considerable persuasion would be necessary to get federal agencies to leave their records in field depositories, even if such depositories were under federal control. It must be remembered that at least for the present the final decision as to what to do with their field records rests with the agencies and not with the National Archives. If they were expected to deposit their records with existing state institutions, it is quite possible that such deposits would be limited to records that are duplicated in Washington or to routine records of borderline value. All really important records might continue to be brought to Washington, and the problem would not be solved.

2. Speaking quite frankly, all of us know that in many states, particularly in the Far West where great quantities of federal records are to be found, the state libraries and historical societies are very weak institutions, inadequately housed, inadequately staffed, and inadequately supported. In some states they receive no state support and are hardly to be considered state institutions. The simple fact is that they are wholly unprepared to assume the burden that would be thrown upon them. Even responsible institutions rarely have the facilities that would be required to care for records in such quantities as would be necessary if they were to contribute materially to the solution of the field office problem.

3. State institutions have their own areas of responsibility; and those areas are usually large enough to tax all their resources. They are responsible for the archives of their state government and possibly

for the records of certain local governments as well. If they are historical societies, they must add to their responsibilities for public records the collection of papers of important individuals and the records of private institutions, organizations, and business firms. Their first loyalty is to the state that supports them. It is likely that federal records, because of their bulk, would come to be looked upon as white elephants, and that they would be crowded out of satisfactory storage space in favor of state records and prize private collections.

4. So far as the federal government, through the National Archives or otherwise, attempted to exercise some measure of effective supervision, as provided by the conditions of deposit, over storage conditions, over rehabilitation techniques, and over the arrangement and description of the records, a dual system of control would be established which might represent a potential source of friction.

The time expended in explaining why the system of deposit with existing state institutions would be inadequate and unsatisfactory is not wasted if it helps us to visualize the only kind of system that is likely to work—a system of federal depositories in the states, supported with federal funds and under federal control. After all, it seems only proper and equitable that the federal government should bear the cost of preserving its own records and not place that burden upon the states, which are not adequately supporting their own agencies in the work that they ought to be doing. The one possible development in this connection that has fired the imagination of some of us is that of federal-state co-operation in the building and operating of joint depositories, the housing under one roof of what are really two archival establishments. This idea may not appeal greatly to those states that already have splendid new buildings, but they are still comparatively few.

By the joint use of federal and state funds, buildings might be constructed on a scale that could scarcely be afforded by either government alone. They could be provided with the most modern facilities and equipment for the repair and photoduplication of records. Library resources might be pooled into a single adequate library. Search room facilities might be combined. Scholars, administrators, and lawyers could use both federal and state records in the same institutions. Joint resources could be drawn upon for exhibitions and other publicity purposes. The records, however, could be kept

apart and under the control respectively of state and federal employees.

Is such close co-operation really possible? Carefully considered arrangements and agreements would be necessary, of course, but it is doubtful whether they would be more involved than arrangements that have been successfully administered in other co-operative federal-state programs. There would be other advantages. The records of co-operative federal-state programs such as exist with respect to roads, vocational education, social security, and employment, and of others likely to be established in the future would be kept sufficiently close together so that they could be consulted together to obtain a complete picture of the operation of these services in a single state. There could be mutual co-operation in working out programs of complementary nature for the preservation of income tax returns and other records which represent duplication of information between federal and state holdings. The possibilities of such co-operation are largely unexplored. They can be expected to increase in the future. A co-operative program of this type might well win greater political support from Congress and from state legislatures. Congressmen are always anxious to get something for their states. In this respect, a state program would doubtless have far greater appeal than the regional program, which is more likely to excite political jealousy over the location of depositories and to result in political discontent when such locations are disappointing, as they must often be. Locally, such a program is likely to appeal to state pride, and state legislatures may well grant far more financial support to such institutions than to the present weak agencies whose achievements are often not of a character to impress legislators. To the extent that the institution satisfied a local need, the legislature would be under pressure to grant this increased support.

Finally, the possibilities of this program's contributing to the raising of standards of archival work and to the stimulating of serious and productive research throughout the country are particularly exciting. They need not be dwelt upon, for they will be obvious to most of the members of this society. Parenthetically, it may be said that even in states that now have satisfactory buildings, the establishment of a federal depository in the same city would achieve many of the advantages that may be claimed for this program.

Now we come to the disadvantages. In the first place, it may be

assumed that depositories such as we have been speaking of would be located in the state capitals. In a large number of states, however, the state capitals are not the largest cities and therefore not the cities in which the concentration of federal offices is usually found. Philadelphia and Harrisburg in Pennsylvania, Chicago and Springfield in Illinois, and St. Louis and Jefferson City in Missouri, are examples illustrating the rather common situation that exists. Another complication is that state universities and other educational institutions likely to make use of the records for research purposes are often to be found in the larger cities rather than in the state capitals. Again, federal agencies in the larger cities would be reluctant to allow their records to be removed to depositories in the capitals. Under the circumstances they might prefer to send them to Washington. The real question is whether in such cases the institution would be able to function as a genuine archival agency, actually serving federal officials and agencies, or would fail in one of its major purposes.

A second serious drawback is that state boundaries, after all, are not wholly acceptable dividing lines. The jurisdictions of most federal field offices cross state lines, so that records relating to operations in one state are likely to be taken out of that state. When we consider the records of zone offices, which encompass a number of states, we have the reverse of the situation that was cited as a disadvantage of regional depositories. States may be convenient ready-made areas in one respect, but in another they are very artificial. Seriously, why should we worry about a depository in New Jersey if we are to have one in New York City or in Philadelphia? If the records so far as they relate to specific activities in particular states are going to get mixed up under either system, what has been gained?

A final argument that may be used against both the regional and the state schemes may be presented at this point, and it is a fundamental one. It is that neither the central records nor the field records can stand alone. They must be used together if a complete picture is to be obtained. A knowledge of the policies, procedures, and programs of a central office is not enough. It must be supplemented by a knowledge both of the local conditions out of which such policies, procedures, and programs grew and of the effectiveness of the enforcement and execution of the same. The program found outlined in the records of a central office is one thing; the degree to which it is carried down through the hierarchy of field officials and made effec-

tive is another thing and the more important of the two. History has been written too much from the central records alone. It is equally dangerous to write history from the field records alone. Yet, is it not this kind of one-sided history writing that a system of field depositories would encourage? The conscientious historian would be forced to shuttle back and forth between Washington and the field. He could not get his records together and would have to take copious notes in order to compare and correlate. He would lose time and his product would suffer. Besides, others than residents of Tennessee might be interested in Tennessee history. We should only make it necessary for the student at Harvard, Northwestern, or Rice Institute to travel to two widely separated places (or to more, if we place records relating to Tennessee in various depositories) instead of to one.

The field office records are of interest to both the administrator and the historian because they contain the details of the execution of a program. Using the Office of Indian Affairs as an illustration, it is suggested that studies of some of the basic problems in Indian administration must be made mainly from the local records. A few such problems are the operation of the allotment policy, the administration of tribal holdings, irrigation projects and their contribution to the Indian economy, sources of Indian income, operations of Indian police and Indian courts, the question of ordinary day schools versus boarding schools, employee living conditions and relationships on Indian reservations, the effectiveness of certain health programs, and Indian-white relationships on the edges of reservations. It is only the field records that permit an objective study of actual accomplishment. The reports of field officials that are received and filed in the central office cannot tell the full story, and they are naturally colored by personal interests and, perhaps, prejudices. As another illustration, let us ask whether the field records of the Soil Conservation Service offices in Kansas and Texas, the famous "dust-bowl" region, now that those offices are being closed, would be of greater use locally than in Washington. The records of these offices embody the experiences of the federal government in its first serious experimental work in remedying a condition that may occur again. Federal officials in Washington presumably would be responsible for formulating the programs to deal with such conditions in the future. Would not the experience of the past more likely be drawn

upon in formulating such programs if the records were in Washington?

It is suggested by some that a distinction might be made between field records of national importance and field records of local importance. The fact is that no records are purely of national importance and no records are purely of local importance. It is only a matter of degree, and not only would it be difficult to decide the disposition of records on such a basis but the decision would be subjective in character.

It is apparent by this time that in presenting the arguments against field depositories, we are presenting the arguments for centralization. Centralization would also probably be more economical and more efficient. Few have stopped to consider that the cost of the maintenance of a system of separate field depositories, no matter which of the proposed plans might be adopted, would be greater than the amount needed at present for the maintenance of the National Archives in Washington. To this cost would have to be added the amount necessary for an increased administrative staff at the National Archives to provide the necessary supervision over such a field organization. Budgeting, purchasing, and accounting would become exceedingly complex. A large amount of correspondence would be necessary, in connection not only with administration but with the correlation and integration of work on guides, inventories, and other finding mediums, and with the handling of reference inquiries. Close administrative supervision would be necessary if the regional depositories were not to become almost autonomous archival establishments. Funds for travel on the part of staff officers and others might have to be increased instead of decreased. Additional red tape and delay is the inevitable accompaniment of the establishment of field services. Would it not be a great deal simpler if all records worth preserving were brought together in one place, where they would be easier to organize, inventory, and administer according to accepted and uniform standards, and where they could be consulted through application to but one central office of reference service?

Two of the arguments most frequently heard against centralization are, first, the lack of space in the National Archives building, and second, that it is unwise in case of wars and disasters to have all the nation's valuable records concentrated in one place. The first argument will hardly stand up under closer examination. It is true that,

barring miracles of achievement in microphotography, there are now enough records worthy of retention in the District of Columbia alone to more than fill the National Archives building. Another building will soon be necessary whatever may be the decision about the field records. The real issue is simply whether the greater merit lies in the program for field depositories or in that for centralization. If it lies in centralization, the necessary space could be provided in Washington more economically through the erection of one building than through the erection of a number of depositories in the field.

The second argument, as to the dangers from war and disaster, is more serious. Such dangers may be exaggerated by some and possibly underrated by others, but no one denies that they exist. If centralization is otherwise sound, the only possible answer to this argument lies in the insurance that might be provided by the multiplication of copies, relying for this purpose chiefly upon the camera.

What consideration should be given to the relationship of microphotography to this whole problem? Professor Robert C. Binkley, we recall, spoke of microphotography as one of the modern processes and devices that in their entirety promise to have an impact on the intellectual world comparable to that of printing. Such inexpensive copies of the originals, easy to transport, store, or reproduce, would, be held, tend to decentralize scholarship. The resources of the great centers would become available to state and city libraries, to educational institutions, and to the individual scholar wherever located.¹¹ If this vision is realized, the service rendered by the National Archives might be, in large part, that of a great mail order house for copies of public records. Centralization of the original records would be no deterrent, perhaps would even facilitate, the decentralization of the copies.

How far short of Binkley's vision microphotography will fall in the next generation we cannot now know. But it is obvious that the early period of emphasis on techniques and experimental production is passing. One has only to be aware of the vast quantities of records now being filmed in government agencies and elsewhere, partly as a result of war demands for space and insurance copies, to realize that microfilming has reached the mass-production stage. The National Archives, as part of its file microcopy program, has filmed hundreds of volumes of early records of great historical value—

¹¹ Robert C. Binkley, "New Tools for Men of Letters," *Yale Review*, n.s., 24 (March, 1935), 519-537.

records of central offices and field offices alike—and stands ready to furnish positive prints of these films from its master negatives for a modest price. Perhaps this is the answer to the natural desire of states and regions to acquire those federal records that relate to their fields of interest. They need not burden themselves with bulky original records. Selecting carefully, they can order on microfilm what is most valuable to them and can build up a true “collection” of the choicest material. Are we justified in planning an elaborate program of regional depositories, based upon an older experience of the scarcity of originals, in the face of the mounting growth and improvement in techniques that multiply copies, distribute them cheaply, and cut to an inconsequential figure the space needed for storage?

Even the most ardent advocate of centralization, however, quails before the thought of bringing to Washington the long-accumulated and bulky case files of federal courts in the eighty-three judicial districts throughout the country. Court records are hardly to be considered field records in the strict sense, because the courts themselves possess a large degree of autonomy. Some of the arguments for concentration, consequently, do not apply to them. They are more complete in themselves and more able to stand alone. The advocate of centralization wavers also before the thought of centralizing all the bulky records of New Deal agencies that record their transactions directly with individuals—the loan folders, for example, of such organizations as the Farm Credit Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Commodity Credit Corporation, the Rural Electrification Administration, the Federal Housing Administration, and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, or the agreements and contracts with individuals made by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, and the Social Security Board. Few would maintain that records of a city post office should be brought to Washington, yet there are conceivably certain records of the New York post office that would have considerable value for local history. One questions the wisdom of bringing to Washington the records of such regional authorities as the Tennessee Valley Authority or the Bonneville Power Administration, unless, of course, they should conceivably go out of existence some day. The greater likelihood is that they will grow rapidly, and that there may be established other regional authorities patterned upon them.

Doubts such as these lead one to consider a program, built to fit

specific situations, with regional depositories in New York City or the Tennessee Valley, if called for, with co-operative buildings in certain states, if they are needed and if satisfactory agreements can be reached, and with the centralization in Washington of certain classes of field records that have high administrative value or that, for other reasons, the agencies do not wish to have scattered. This, of course, would make for an exceedingly complex administrative set-up. Such a program might not be understood as well by Congress, and it might not be so popular with the people. There would be many difficult decisions to make in connection with the allocation of records. It is the kind of compromise solution that meets many objections but makes nobody happy. It is, nevertheless, worth thinking about.

One final course of action deserves to be presented. Could we not free ourselves from the pressure for immediate decisions by establishing at a number of appropriate points in the country not permanent depositories but temporary concentration stations, which would also be processing plants? They should be located in large warehouse-type buildings, as well protected and fire-resistant as possible, and yet far less expensive than the traditional archives building. Buildings of this character should become available soon after the war. Records of war agencies could be moved into these buildings as the agencies closed their work and vacated their quarters. Other field offices, too, could send at once to these centers records that were causing critical space situations or that could not otherwise be properly cared for. This would represent a natural expansion of our present field program of having field representatives in several of the larger cities. The field representatives could continue to survey and dispose of as large a quantity of routine records as possible before the remainder was removed to a regional concentration center. But it is impossible for them to do a final job on large, complicated accumulations in the short period in which it is often necessary to act. Other records, possibly not of permanent value, would often need to be kept for a number of years after the war for administrative use in connection with the liquidation of the agency, and these records could be maintained temporarily in the concentration centers.

At these concentration centers a staff would be engaged in further study of the records, eliminating smaller series of useless papers, possibly weeding some files and sampling others, and setting aside those other records that need to be kept only temporarily. Here, too, the final body of records deserving permanent preservation might

well be given its preliminary, if not its final, arrangement. Microfilm equipment should be available at all such centers so that at this point suitable records could be placed on film. Records thus reduced in bulk and properly organized would be ready to be sent to Washington or to be placed in a field depository. By that time enough should be known about them to decide which action is the more appropriate. If space were not available in Washington, or if the field depository were not yet available, such records could be set aside in one portion of the building and held for years if necessary. Possibly preliminary checklists and inventories could be provided for the records in this stage, and a staff would have to be maintained to meet the demands for service on the records as long as they are administratively active.

As the records worthy of permanent preservation increased in quantity they would give indication of the nature and size of the permanent depository required for the particular area. This depository would not need to be in the same place as the temporary center. The character of the records accumulated there would help to determine the most logical location. A large independent archival establishment may be forecast, or a number of smaller ones, possibly in co-operation with the states. If and when permanent depositories are built, five or ten years after the war, advantage could be taken of the radical changes and advances in building construction and equipment that are almost certain to be characteristic of that period. Co-operative relationships, if they are indicated, could be slowly and carefully worked out on the basis of rather definite knowledge of the problems to be met. There would be time to learn whether agencies recently moved from Washington were to be returned there. There would be time to see whether or not the post-war activities and functions of the federal government were to be expanded or contracted, and plans could be made on a scale to fit the indicated trend. More time would be gained to test and determine the final rôle of microfilm. We should be able, if regional depositories are indicated, to tie in with the regional planning of federal service agencies as such planning develops after the war.

When permanent depositories are built, the temporary centers could be abandoned with little or no loss to the government. If owned, they could be turned over to other agencies; if rented, they could be returned to their private owners. Such a course of action would permit us to plan a program for the field records to fit the

indicated needs. We would grow into it. There would be less risk of mistakes, of building depositories where they are not needed, of building them too large or too small, and of placing in them the wrong type of equipment. Under conditions as unstable as the present, this might be the course of wisdom.

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THE INTERESTS OF THE STATES IN FEDERAL FIELD OFFICE RECORDS

IN HIS paper, "Planning a Permanent Program for Federal Records in the States," Mr. Holmes suggested three different solutions to the problem of handling the field records of the federal government. He first discussed the feasibility of a system of regional depositories, then a system of federal-state co-operation for maintaining depositories for federal and state records in each of the forty-eight states, and finally the centralization of all federal records in Washington.

I am not disposed to favor the suggested system of regional depositories. A survey in 1935 showed that more than seventy federal agencies had established regional schemes of administration. Not only were the regions or areas of the various agencies different in geographical scope, but the regional organization schemes of the various offices within a single agency covered different territories.

Three advantages of the regional depository system suggested in the first paper were that such depositories would be located in larger cities; that such depositories would be of some size and dignity; and that they might be located in federal office buildings rather than separate archival buildings.

I am somewhat doubtful of the further concentration of business, government or otherwise, in overcrowded cities. For instance, the recent removal of the National Park Service from Washington to Chicago merely helped to solve a Washington space problem. A better solution might have been its permanent removal, along with the Department of the Interior, to some small town in Kentucky or Oklahoma.