

## CURRENT ASPECTS OF RECORDS ADMINISTRATION<sup>1</sup>

### THE ARCHIVIST'S CONCERN IN RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

CONSIDER the archivists of the nations, how they go; they fight not, neither do they produce munitions. And few if any of them justify the use of this Biblical paraphrase by being arrayed so as to shame Solomon—unless it be intellectually. Yet archivists must direct their energies to the common war effort as conscientiously as other citizens. They have, unless they cease being archivists for the time being, five categories of useful activity: (1) Protection of the cultural resources for which they are responsible against hazards of war, (2) providing from the records in their care information useful in the war effort, (3) promotion of effective records administration in governmental agencies, (4) collection and preservation of materials for study of the war enterprise, and (5) actual compilation of current narratives. This discussion is concerned with the last three, which in government are closely interwoven. Because of the concentration of attention on events in Washington and the comparative magnitude of record-making activities there, it will be devoted largely to problems of the federal government.

The present-day interest of archivists in records before they become archives represents the florescence of a phase of archival economy that has been manifested without such clear recognition for some time. The occasional implication of a skeptic that we have no concern for the way in which government agencies currently make and file records has induced me to look to archival literature for indications as to whether or not we are radical in our thought. In the truly formidable body of knowledge contained in the back issues of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, I have found no less than eight articles in which some responsibility of the archivist for records before they reach his custody is recognized.<sup>2</sup> Such responsibility is

<sup>1</sup> The three papers that constitute this series of articles were read at the sixth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Richmond, Virginia, October 26, 1942. A fourth, by Harry Venneman, dealt with the Budget Bureau's Committee on Records of War Administration; a revised statement on its current activities will be printed in a future issue.

<sup>2</sup> A. R. Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, II (October, 1939), 217-219; Emmett J. Leahy, "Reduction of Public Records," III (January, 1940), 19; Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Develop-

implicit in the provisions of several state laws for inspection and control of inks, paper, and filing equipment. The proposed uniform state public records act, prepared by a committee of this Society, would give the head of the state archival agency supervision over the "making, administration, and preservation" of "all public records" in a state.<sup>3</sup> There is a consistent note throughout these documents—a desire to develop in public officials a knowledge of good record-keeping methods and an appreciation of the value of records.

Two years ago in a learned article on archival development, Ernst Posner pointed out that whereas in eighteenth century Europe the archivist was primarily a government official and during the nineteenth he was generally a scholar, the twentieth century has seen the trend swing back toward the archivist as an administrative official of government. Referring to the right of inspection possessed by archivists in some countries, Dr. Posner said: "The authority of archives administrations to examine records still in the custody of the government agencies will prove to be a first step that leads to even broader powers. If all the public records of a nation are one sole undivided *fonds*, the agencies that are destined to receive and keep them ultimately will be justified in claiming the right to give their advice as to how the files of government offices should be organized and kept from the beginning so as to insure a satisfactory original arrangement that will also be suitable for retention by the archives agencies. We may assume that gradually the archivists will become the nations' experts who must be consulted in all questions of public record making and record keeping and likewise become the trustees who will safeguard the written monuments of the past, of the present day, and of the future."<sup>4</sup>

Under the National Archives Act of June 19, 1934, the archivist of the United States possesses the right to inspect records in federal agencies. Broad interpretation of the responsibilities implicit in that

ment Since the French Revolution," III (July, 1940), 170-172; Philip C. Brooks, "The Selection of Records for Preservation," III (October, 1940), 221-234; Waldo G. Leland, "The Archivist in Times of Emergency," IV (January, 1941), 6-7; Christopher B. Coleman, "Some Problems of State Archival Administration," IV (July, 1941), 153-154; C. C. Crittenden, "Some Problems of State Archival Administration," IV (October, 1941), 262; and Edward F. Rowse, "The Archives of New York," IV (October, 1941), 272-273.

<sup>3</sup> "The Proposed Uniform State Public Records Act," III (April, 1940), 115.

<sup>4</sup> "Some Aspects of Archival Development," III (July, 1940), 172.

provision was given by the National Archives Council in a resolution of July 25, 1942, asking the archivist formally to call the attention of the head of any agency to unsatisfactory conditions of records management found existing in that agency.

It is more effective in the long run, of course, to achieve one's objectives through co-operation than by official complaint. The need of working with agencies was expressed four years ago by Emmett J. Leahy in a report of a committee of this Society advocating planned programs of records disposal.<sup>5</sup> My own thoughts on the subject amount to an extension of those embodied in an article in the October, 1940, issue of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, setting forth the concept of the life history of given bodies of records.<sup>6</sup> That article advocated beginning as early in that life history as possible the process of selecting which records should be preserved and which eliminated.

As a matter of fact the selection process is the heart of the relationship between the archivist and the maker of archives. Planning for the transfer of certain materials to the National Archives and for the elimination of others in a regular sequence brought our staff into activities we now call "records administration" long before that actual term became current in 1941.

The growing realization that the staff was amassing a fund of knowledge concerning the management of current records, together with the ever-increasing number of calls from other agencies for information and advice, led at the beginning of this year to the formal establishment of a "records administration program" by the National Archives. This activity is officially described as one "to assist in developing throughout the Government principles and practices in the filing, selection, and segregation of records that will facilitate the disposal of or the transfer to The National Archives of records as they become noncurrent." The program encompasses the activities of all members of the professional staff having to do with records in other agencies before they are reported to the National Archives for disposal authorization or offered to it for transfer.

Operations under the program are carried on by preparing memoranda on records administration, by making studies of such general subjects as the evaluation of common types of records, by participa-

<sup>5</sup> "Reduction of Public Records," III (January, 1940), 19.

<sup>6</sup> "The Selection of Records," III (October, 1940), 223-226.

tion in interdepartmental enterprises, and most important, by direct co-operation with the several agencies. This co-operation is manifest in surveys, preparation of retention and disposal schedules, and consultation. In this connection the staff finds it increasingly necessary to develop special competences in filing and related techniques.

The following might be considered a fair statement of the major objectives of the program: to prepare "complete, simple, and elastic working methods in such routine matters as preparing, dispatching, filing, and destruction of correspondence and other papers . . . to develop a system which will place Government correspondence in order for the rapid separation of valuable records and documents . . . from routine correspondence and to serve as a guide in making decisions as to the classes and kinds of records that should be safely and conveniently stored in the . . . Archives Building." That quotation, however, is not from our current literature. It is from a report of the Budget Bureau's Interdepartmental Board of Simplified Office Procedure published in 1929.

Realization of such needs on the part of a group of administrative management officials suggests the intimate relationship between archival and current operational needs. The office manager was once characterized in *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* as a "professional enemy."<sup>8</sup> But in the same article, published three years ago, it was urged that the archivist give technical advice on "how to organize the documentation of family or business firm." The same need exists in government.

Records have usually been a concern of management engineers, even though they have not always taken archival interests into account. Archivists have been equally prone to ignore the interests of current administration. Yet the two cannot help affecting each other, and they can work together to mutual advantage. The co-operative goal was well expressed by Waldo G. Leland in his first presidential address before this Society on war activities of archivists: "I believe," he said, "that the archivist, in collaboration with the administrator, would be able to simplify and abbreviate the practices of record making, to make the completed records more useful to the administration, to render their manipulation far easier, to bring about frequent reductions of their bulk, and, finally, to make

<sup>7</sup> Budget Bureau, *Eighth Annual Report* (1929), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Binkley, "Strategic Objectives in Archival Policy," 11 (July, 1939), 164.

possible their transfer to the archives establishment in condition to be readily absorbed and administered."<sup>9</sup> This contribution of the archivist to current administration is one of his war services at present, and one that merits more emphasis than it has received.

Both current administrative and archival needs would be served best by the designation in each department or independent agency of the government of a competent records officer with adequate authority and staff. He should have sufficient authority to deal with other officials in planning administrative documentation. If he is to attain maximum usefulness, the records officer should advise administrators in the planning of forms and procedures so as to prevent the creation of unnecessary papers and to have records properly identified; he should study filing schemes in all their bewildering variety so as to apply them properly in diverse circumstances; he should train the personnel doing mail and records work, whether they are under his immediate supervision or not; he should know how to evaluate records from the legal and administrative points of view, depending on archivists to define research uses; and finally he should administer the whole retirement program, eliminating chaff promptly and transferring the wheat to safe custody. With a qualified and enthusiastic records officer in action, we might hope that an adequate, objective, well arranged record of the agency's war operations would be kept, rather than a chaotic mass of documents so unmanageable as to distress both archivists and potential users.

From the standpoints of breadth of jurisdiction and numbers of trained personnel, the Navy and Agriculture departments have the nearest to this ideal organization of any agencies in Washington. Although with somewhat less extensive breadth of jurisdiction and staffs, records officers in the Treasury and War departments also have been leaders in this field.

The most obvious point of liaison between the archivist and the maker of archives is the retirement of records from current use. Good current records administration produces regular schedules for periodic disposal and periodic breaks in the files for transfers of records to archival custody. These procedures greatly facilitate the war efforts of both old line and emergency agencies.

The archivist is to the government as a whole what the records

<sup>9</sup> "The Archivist in Times of Emergency," *iv* (January, 1941), 7.

officers I have described are to individual agencies. The archivist of the United States has recently stated that the fundamental objective of the National Archives "is to make the experience of the Government and people of the United States as it is embodied in records of the Federal Government and related materials available to guide and assist the Government and the people in planning and conducting their activities."

The records of the last war fell into disorder that is well known to all of this group. Similar results in this war will be exceedingly difficult to avoid, although the prospect is somewhat brighter than it was twenty-five years ago. That is partly because of the conscious efforts being made in many agencies to establish effective current records administration. There is, however, another significant type of activity that is designed to digest the lessons of current experience.

In the last war current historical projects were conducted on a large scale; and in this conflict work of the same nature is being done. A wide variety of undertakings is in evidence. I want to dwell on this type of enterprise only long enough to point out its close affinity to records administration. Both are designed to preserve evidence of the organization and activities of agencies engaged in the war effort. Both depend upon selections from the multitudinous records currently accumulated. It is to be hoped that the current historians will avoid destroying the archival integrity of files and collecting isolated items rather than unified series. Most of them are aware of these dangers—in fact most of them are not actually engaged in collecting true record material. Nevertheless they must use official records, and their concern with the ever-changing administrative pattern of government is as great as that of the records administrator. Some records officers are taking an active share in seeing to it that important policy developments are recorded. Whether that is a proper function for a records administrator or should be performed by a separate official is a point meriting further discussion. My major purpose is to emphasize the closeness of the two functions and the need for co-operation.

It is easy, of course, to speak these generalities. The men who follow me on this program will say more about what actually is being done, and those of us who are engaged in records administration work must be daily more engrossed in details than in principles.

Certain basic tenets of archival faith are being developed in the meetings and publications of this Society through the years. I believe the legitimate interest of the archivist in records administration should become one of them. And in exercising that interest I believe the archivist can perform a useful function of government in war-time.

Current records administration is to the archivist of today what the study of diplomatics was to the archivist of earlier times—and more. Authorities on the qualifications of archivists say that archivists, in order to apply the principle of provenance, should know the methods by which records in their custody are produced.<sup>10</sup> The complexities of modern administrative documentation have so multiplied the technical facets of filing that many persons regard it as a mysterious cult to be either feared or blandly ignored. Neither attitude is consistent with the principle that the whole life history of records is an integrated continuous entity. No period in that history can be ignored. It is inevitable that the iniquity of omitting care for records as they accumulate shall be visited upon the third and fourth generations of later administrators, archivists, research students, and society as a whole.

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### THE CONTROL OF RECORDS

THE control of correspondence and other records occupies a prominent position in the field of management, for if they are not controlled, human effort, valuable space, and materials are wasted. You have often heard of “people keeping records.” In these times it might be changed to “records keeping people”—keeping them, in many instances, from efforts essential to the successful prosecution of the war.

The office space occupied by records is important. It has been estimated that there is enough space occupied by government records in Washington to satisfy the requirements of the Navy and War departments under present conditions. It would be most enlightening to know the relationship of space occupied by records to that occupied

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Posner, “European Experiences in Training Archivists,” IV (January, 1941), 37.