

THE CONSOLIDATION OF FILES

THE creation of consolidated subject files from originally arranged chronological files, files of small administrative units, or indifferently put together files violates the primary precepts of archival economy. The principle of provenance is assailed. *Respect des fonds* is disturbed. The integrity of the files is destroyed. Everything is wrong, except that often for the first time the files can be used.

Casting aside the archival bromides that promptly rise to mind in response to the heresy suggested by the consolidation of completed files, one may reflect that, after all, it is precisely the consolidation which preserves the records for archival use and prevents their decay and disuse. Nevertheless, consolidation is no panacea for the restoration of disordered records to a workable condition, and the advantages and disadvantages of such rearrangement should be weighed carefully before it is undertaken.

The purpose of consolidation is to bring together related records of an agency which may be scattered widely among small files of its various executives and administrative divisions. The effect is not only to telescope the place element but to telescope the time element by bringing together related records theretofore separated by date levels in filing. Consolidation can best be made of completed files, preferably of sort duration, within one agency. Usually, when the original files are in a recognizable form or when a usable system can be restored or instituted, the identity of those files should be preserved. Likewise, files which are indexed adequately need not suffer the ignominy of rearrangement. It is principally records which have suffered through many administrative metamorphoses and handlings by various file clerks with no clear-cut filing system in mind that lend themselves to consolidation. In such cases, almost any understandable arrangement would be an improvement.

It is axiomatic that the principal requests for material in most noncurrent or relatively inactive general files are from the subject viewpoint. For such requests, nothing could be handier than a consolidated subject file. On the other hand, there are requests for material by name of the correspondent, by office, or by date. These requests are more difficult to locate, though, of course, finding them may not have been much simpler in the original file. The chief objection to consolidated files, however, seems to be the difficulty in

tracing through a particular transaction. Often a letter or report mentioning previous correspondence or inferring subsequent action is found in the subject file with no indication of where the associated material may be found. It is possible that this material may not have been filed or that the transaction was never completed, but, since the entire file is not together in one place, the question of its existence becomes the more tantalizing. A distinct advantage of consolidation, on the other hand, is that the searcher is assured that all the material on a certain subject has been brought together in one place, and there is no question that the file of some official, presumably having no authority over the subject but who may somehow have figured in the transaction, may have been ignored in the search. Another disadvantage of consolidation is that many records are left unidentified. Carbon copies of letters and memoranda, sometimes even originals, may be left undated or with no indication of their source and authorship, thus leaving a serious impediment in the tracing of administrative history and procedure.

Some experiments by the War Department with the consolidation of files offer examples of the pros and cons of the subject. One is the Letters Received file of the Quartermaster General's Office of the War Department, extending from 1800 to 1894, which was consolidated into a subject file by the clerks in that office some time after the system of filing was changed in that year. The records were originally arranged chronologically by year, thereunder by the initial letter of the name or office of the writer of the letter, thereunder chronologically by date of receipt of letter. There was no attempt at indexing the material until a subject index for each year was begun in June, 1862. During the Civil War period and until 1870, the office was broken down by numbered divisions, each with its own set of letters received books, endorsement books, letters sent books, and document files; from 1871 to 1883, there was a separate series of letters received from officers, agents, and employees of the Quartermaster Corps, and a letters received series from departments of the government and other bureaus of the War Department; there was a separate Transportation Branch, 1871-1889, which succeeded the 4th Division, River and Rail Transportation, 1865-1870; and during the period 1884 to 1889, the office was reorganized into lettered branches, each with its own files. Moreover, separate charter books were kept to record material concerning the chartering of vessels by the Quartermaster Corps.

Doubtless it was this administrative confusion in the files which caused the clerks in the office to consolidate the records into a single subject file to meet their needs in servicing the records. The result was three separate files: the subject file; a vessel file arranged alphabetically by name of vessel; and a residue file left in the original arrangement, evidently the remainder of the main file of the office, as the subsidiary division document files have disappeared. It is believed that the original intention was to include all the material in either the subject or the vessel file but that the letters which readily lent themselves to subject grouping were first consolidated and the rest were left for later reflective consideration, which never came about. It is quite possible though, that one of the old specters of consolidation simply reared its ugly head and was not solved: some records do not conform to integration on a subject level. Such division of filing is unsatisfactory, of course, because both files are left incomplete and consequently have lost a certain degree of effectiveness. Probably this residue would have eventually been intercalated into the main file if the original plans had been completed. Rarely in such cases are the residual records so dissimilar that some homogeneous filing system or integration with the consolidation scheme could not be worked out.

Consolidation was not a new scheme among War Department filing systems. Within the chronologically arranged files of the Adjutant General's Office and the Secretary of War's Office, records relating to a particular subject or person had been consolidated under the number assigned to one of the records in the collection since about the 1850's. The policy of consolidating related files under one number became widely used from the 1870's until the adoption of the subject decimal filing system in 1917 (1913 in the case of the Secretary of War's files). The files of the Adjutant General's Office relating to the Mexican War, the Indian wars, Custer's battle of the Little Big Horn, the Boxer Rebellion, army experiments with bicycles, the occupation of Vera Cruz, and many other such subjects as well as files relating to the career of a single officer were brought together in this manner. Such consolidation was not confined to the main files of the office but cut across administrative boundaries to include associated records from the files of the subdivisions of the office and the files of the geographical commands of the army. Considerable cross referencing was involved in superimposing consolidation on a strict system of assigning numbers in sequence to letters by

date of receipt (1890-1917) or the formerly used system of arrangement under each year by initial letter of the surname of the writer or his office, thereunder numerically by date of receipt of letter. Consolidation was made by the clerks who had had to withdraw all the records on a subject or person to save themselves the trouble of ever having to repeat that laborious operation and who therefore tied together the related records as one group and made appropriate references in the files and in the indexes and letters received books to the consolidated filing place.

Another ambitious project in consolidation was the first World War records of the Quartermaster General's Office, July 1, 1917, to roughly 1922. This file comprises some ten thousand cubic feet of the records of the main office and its subdivisions. It is arranged by the War Department decimal classification scheme with an additional breakdown known only to the classifiers and to the deity, without benefit of index. There are cross references—sheaves of them. Their bulk and multitude serves only to further confuse and confound the searcher. Successful searches have been made in this file, but skill had little to do with it. It is useless to say that consolidation ruined these records. The original files must have been in such a condition that a rearrangement was deemed necessary. What ruined this file was the failure to take advantage of the opportunity to weed out countless duplicates, printed material easily available elsewhere, and obsolete memoranda and letters of transmittal; the lack of skilled personnel—contrary to most business and government personnel classifications, subject and classified filing is a highly technical job, demanding high-grade intelligence and aptitude as well as technique; the lack of a finding medium, even a copy of the amplified classification scheme. This file offers a perfect example of the fact that an index to a classification scheme—the printed War Department code—is no index to the material in the file. Indeed one of the chief advantages of consolidation should be that a static file, consisting of records of permanent or relatively permanent historical and administrative significance, lends itself to adequate indexing.

A more notable example of consolidation is the file of the War Industries Board of the last war. In 1919, when the records of that discontinued agency were placed under the custody of the Council of National Defense, Miss Adelaide R. Hasse was employed to adapt the haphazard files created by a war-time agency with more important and pressing things to do than bother about its files to the necessities

of post-war study and analysis. The records were transferred to the War Department by an Executive Order of April 21, 1921, but the consolidation project was continued. Miss Hasse's qualifications for the job included her former positions as librarian of the Office of the Superintendent of Documents, where she devised the document classification scheme and prepared the first checklist of government documents, and as chief of the Department of Government Documents and later the Economics Division of the New York Public Library, as well as her work as compiler of the index of U. S. documents relating to foreign affairs and indexes to economic material in state documents. Definitely this was not to be a file clerk's affair. Miss Hasse was confronted with the task of organizing the files of over eighty units and sections of the War Industries Board, which were arranged without any standard or uniform system of filing, into a unified scheme which could be used for studies of various phases of industrial mobilization for war by the Army Industrial College, Congressional committees, the Planning Branch of the General Staff which was laying plans for the next war, and individual historians and economists. Her decision was to arrange the files into three major categories: administrative, technical or commodity, and company. Within each category, the material was grouped alphabetically by organization or subject. The general arrangement was as follows. The administrative file was divided into two sections: the War Industries Board as a subdivision of the Council of National Defense, July 28, 1917, to May 28, 1918; and the War Industries Board as an independent organization, May 28, 1918, to its termination on December 31, 1918, with its short period of liquidation in 1919. General administrative records were filed first, followed by files of top officials, and then the operational divisions and committees in alphabetical order. A similar project was undertaken in the files of the Council of National Defense. In the technical or commodity file of the War Industries Board, Miss Hasse encountered a situation which is one of the principal problems of consolidation within the files of one agency. In gathering together records reflecting a complete picture of certain subjects, such as priorities, price fixing, contracts, and facilities, she naturally had to begin with the predecessor agencies to the War Industries Board which had considered those subjects. Therefore, she had to withdraw certain pertinent records from the files of the Council of National Defense and its advisory commission, which administered or rather encouraged war produc-

tion before the creation of the War Industries Board. The company file is less successful than the other two files, because the material filed there consists of priority certificates and routine correspondence having little if any historical significance. No index was made to the files, but cross references were included in the files, and a card list of the subjects used, with reference to related subjects and references from subjects not used, was compiled. Miss Hasse also made considerable use of filing duplicate material in several places.

The dissatisfaction which has been expressed regarding this arrangement has been due largely to extraneous causes over which Miss Hasse had little control. In the first place, Miss Hasse left to accept another position in 1923, shortly before the file was completed, so that the consolidation was never finished. Secondly, records selected for special study by legislative committees and by the War Department were extracted from the files and not returned in time for inclusion in the consolidated files, so that there exist several small files on certain subjects like copper, nickel, lead, and zinc, and a small consolidated file on most of the War Industries Board policies, which are now kept as separate series in addition to the material on those subjects in the technical or commodity file. In the third place, in the various moves and handlings the files have suffered, and apparently intended chronological arrangement under a subject or a subdivision thereof was thrown awry, aided materially by the disintegration of the poor quality folders. For the rest, the disadvantages stated above as generally standard with all such consolidations apply to this file as well.

Experience in servicing requests on this file at the beginning of this war, when frantic efforts were being made to draw on the experience of the last war—the fruits of such search being thereupon ignored, has in the main proved the soundness of the original plan of consolidation. The calls were by subject or about the organization and functions of an administrative unit, and, while it was difficult for the searcher to trace a particular action, experience in finding records in the files of the Council of National Defense, which were left practically intact, proves the inadequacy of the administrative approach. In the latter case, a search on, for example, early plans for food control prior to the establishment of the Food Administration takes one to the records of the chairman of the council, the chairman of the advisory commission, the secretary's file, and on to the divisional files *ad infinitum*, whereas the subject can be found in the consolidated

War Industries Board files by looking in two places—in the technical or commodity file under Food and under U. S. Food Administration. If it cannot be found there, one can be sure that Mr. Hoover carried it off to the Hoover War Library. The consolidated file does present a few foibles which the person servicing it must know. For example, material on steel can be found under Steel, Iron and Steel, and American Iron and Steel Institute. But this is a difficulty encountered in any alphabetical subject file, and even its antidote, a classified subject file, is not free from the vagaries of the many facets in the presentation of material on a subject. There is also some duplication in searching the main consolidated subject file and the small consolidated subject file on policy matters which was set aside for study by the Army Industrial College, though, of course, this was doubtless accomplished without Miss Hasse's consent or approval. Another difficult feature is the inclusion of much routine administrative material, such as priority certificates, blank forms, and much printed material accumulated from other sources, such as Department of Commerce reports, census of manufactures, *etc.*, which nowadays would automatically be put on a disposal list or otherwise eliminated as useless papers.

If one views files as research tools and not as phenomena handed down from the past to be cherished as such, consolidation in the cases cited above was not so much a violation of provenance as a change in the function of the files from administrative to historical. Thus, in becoming noncurrent, the files became only relatively inactive, and the purpose for which they were used differed accordingly. On that ground it can be argued that consolidation was justified. Consolidation, in fact, increased the activity of the files. That the results were not always satisfactory is not so much a condemnation of the theory as of the manner in which it was carried out.

The transition from administrative to historical use demands that changes in the filing system to accommodate and facilitate the new use be much more carefully and expertly carried out than in the original instance. The file can now be considered as a complete unit with full knowledge of the intended use and therefore escapes the tentativeness of beginning files, which must respond to a changing or expanding administrative organization. Particularly if consolidation is to be by subject, extreme care and thoughtfulness as well as sound technique must accompany the choice of subjects. Classification and indexing also require considerable technical facility, as well as

familiarity with the material content and an appreciation of the attitudes of potential researchers. It requires the best efforts of a combination archivist-historian-librarian-file clerk to do the job, and of all these techniques in equal parts.

One of the best testimonials to the efficacy of consolidated files is the modern system of central files, which, with adequate weeding, should preclude the need for any subsequent rearrangement. It is highly possible that some of the records of this war, conceived in haste and indirection, may eventually be collected for the use of post-war analysts of the war mobilization picture by consolidation. It should be expected that by this time the mechanical and rectifiable mistakes of the past will be avoided, that the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation be carefully weighed before the task is undertaken, and that proper elimination of useless papers and adequate finding mediums accompany the creation of order out of chaos and a comprehensive file out of numberless small files.

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