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"LET'S LOOK AT THE RECORD"¹

TO THOSE of you who were old enough to listen to speeches delivered over the radio in the presidential campaign of 1928 and who were not inhibited by your political predilections from listening to the Democratic candidate, it will not be necessary for me to explain the provenance of the title of my paper. Obviously Al. Smith used the word "record" in the very broad sense of evidence, but he usually found his evidence in the form of documents that constitute records in a more specific sense. The importance of consulting the original official records, if we are to know the truth, was well illustrated by Mr. Warren's brilliant exposé of Fourth-of-July myths at our last meeting. That original records are valuable for checking the authenticity of printed versions of them, of secondary writings, and of memory and tradition is well known, at least to scholars and lawyers; but it is not so well known that much the greater part of the recorded experience of men as individuals and in their institutional relationships exists only in the form of unprinted records.

Admitting the literal truth of this statement, some may think that, nevertheless, all or nearly all the really important records either have been or ultimately will be printed and thus be assured of preservation and availability. As a matter of fact, however, the records that get printed are as a rule those that someone believes a considerable number of people will want to read, and they are not by any means necessarily the records that embody the most potentially useful human experience. An administrator may determine a course of action, a judge may render an important decision, or a scholar may make a significant contribution to knowledge on the basis of records that no one would think of printing. A generation or two ago some scholars had hopes that all documents of importance for research in American history might be printed, but the tremendous

¹ A paper read by the Archivist of the United States before the Literary Society of Washington, D.C., December 9, 1944.

increase in the bulk of documentation, the widening scope of the historians' interests, and the realization that there are other ways of making records available for use when they are needed have put an end to that dream.

It is evident, therefore, that, unless much of value in recorded experience is to be lost, provision must be made for the preservation and availability of records either in their original forms or in inexpensive photographic reproductions.

Such then is the *raison d'être* of such establishments as the National Archives of the United States. But the word "archives" seems to have been an unfortunate selection for use in the name of the institution. It is not only, as an assistant of mine once said, that many people when they encounter the word "archives" do not know whether one is supposed to eat them or to use flit on them! More serious is the fact that so many different conceptions or misconceptions of the meaning of the word prevail among those who are aware that it has some relation to records or documents. A few days ago we were all regaled with the information in Jerry Klutz's column in the *Washington Post* that an archivist is a "dead file clerk." By printing the three words without hyphens, an amusing play upon the expressions "dead-file clerk" and "dead file-clerk" was achieved, but the former is about as objectionable as the latter to archivists. Archives are not dead files, though bodies of archives may and frequently do contain files that are dead and ought to be buried. The belief that archives are dead files is responsible for the theory that they should be stored in warehouses with no provision for making them available for use, though why they should be preserved at all if they are really dead is difficult to see.

Another prevalent misconception is that archives are old documents—musty, of course, and of no practical value—that ought to be preserved as museum pieces. On a slightly higher level is the belief that the word "archives" is synonymous with "historical manuscripts" and that archives are preserved solely for use by historians as source materials. To some, archives are public records as distinct from private papers, to others official documents are archives regardless of whether they are or should be in official custody.

A fundamental fallacy that runs through most of these misconceptions is the supposition that a single document may be an "archive" and that therefore a number of such documents constitute archives.

Actually the word "archives" is one of those collective nouns, without a reputable singular form, of which there are so many in the English language, such as "statistics," "politics," "goods," "clothes," and "headquarters." The word "archives" connotes a body of related documents that, because of their possible evidential value, are preserved as records by the agency that created or received them or by its legitimate successor. It may also mean two or more such bodies of records or even an institution that has the custody of such a body or bodies of records. The agency that has created the records is an essential part of the concept of archives. In other words, unless a body of records can be said to constitute archives of some governmental agency, organization, institution, family, or even person it cannot be said to possess the characteristics of archives. Thus we may speak of the archives of the government of the United States, the archives of the State Department, the archives of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, the archives of the Literary Society, the Jones family archives, or the archives of John Doe, though usually the odds and ends of documents preserved by John Doe because of their possible evidential value are so fragmentary and lacking in integration as hardly to justify their being called his archives.

It will be apparent then from this definition that archival documents may be old or very recent, current or noncurrent from the point of view of administration, active or inactive from the point of view of use, interesting or uninteresting, significant or insignificant; also that they may be handwritten, typewritten, processed, or printed; and finally that they may take the form of drawings, paintings, photographs (including motion picture film), diagrams, charts, maps, and even sound recordings. All that is necessary is that they be officially preserved for their evidential value as a part of the body of records of some agency.

The increased facility with which records are made today as compared with a few generations ago and the increased amount and complexity of activities that need to be recorded have caused some concern in recent years lest society be overwhelmed by an unmanageable mass of records. There is some justification for this concern. The total quantity of records of the federal government now in existence in Washington and in the field is estimated today at seventeen million cubic feet and it is certain that the quantity has doubled in the last six years. But the solution of the problem of bulk

is not to be found in dispensing with records of man's experience. It will probably be found in a combination of three other procedures. The first of these is birth control in record-making, so that ephemeral documents that have no real evidential value will not be preserved as records at all, and real progress is being made in this direction by a number of agencies of the federal government. The second procedure is the disposal of vast quantities of routine records as soon as they have outlived their possible evidential value. It has been estimated recently that not more than twenty per cent of the records of the federal government now in existence will have sufficient value to warrant their continued preservation after the lapse of a few years. Prompt disposal of records as soon as they have outlived their usefulness can be accomplished, however, only if plans for their ultimate fate are made in advance and they are segregated from permanently valuable records as they are filed. The third procedure for the solution of the problem of bulk is the reproduction of entire series or groups of records in the form of microphotographs, which occupy less than five per cent of the space of the originals and can be read with ease in a reading machine. The possibilities of this technique had not been fully explored when the outbreak of the war shut off most of the necessary supplies and equipment, but enough progress had been made to make it certain that the physical bulk of many bodies of records can be greatly reduced without losing any of their record content.

Reduction of records by microphotography does not in itself, of course, reduce the number of documents in existence, and some research scholars are appalled at the thought that they or their successors will soon be confronted with such an enormous number of documents that they can never make effective use of them. The solution of that problem is to be sought in effective control over those bodies of records that are selected for permanent preservation. That does not mean that archival materials should be classified by subject and catalogued document by document as individual books are catalogued in a library. When it is realized that the 650,000 cubic feet of records now in the National Archives comprise several hundred million individual documents, it is obvious that such treatment would be impossible, even if it were desirable. An archival document, however, although it may be physically separate from all other documents, is not an independent item as are most books

and pamphlets. It is, as a rule, a part of a file or a dossier, which in turn is part of a series, which is a part of the body of records or archives of an agency; and much of its significance depends upon its relationship to the other documents in these categories. It is a fundamental principle of archives administration, therefore, that the integrity of the record groups as originally created must be preserved. Moreover, if this is done, the original classification schemes, indexes, and other finding aids that enable the records to be used while they were current can serve the same purpose after they are transferred to the custody of an archival agency.

That does not mean, however, that the archivist who takes over noncurrent records has nothing to do in order to make them readily available for use. Apart from the facts that they may be in disorder and have to be rearranged or the original indexes may have been lost, it is often the case that the use that is made of noncurrent records is very different from the use that was made of them when they were current, and as a consequence different types of finding aids are necessary. The fundamental problem, however, is to provide the searcher with an over-all picture of what bodies of records are available and then to provide him with a more detailed breakdown of the records in those groups that appear to him to be promising. If his search can be quickly narrowed down to a few series or files or boxes of documents, it need not matter to him that there are hundreds of millions of other documents in the repository.

In the National Archives the 650,000 cubic feet of records in custody have now been divided into some two hundred record groups, most of which consist of all the noncurrent records of an existing or former agency or subagency of the government. Numbers have been assigned to these record groups and for each of them a brief description indicating their general character, chronological scope, and quantity and also the nature of the activities and functions of the agency that created them is available. For many record groups or parts of record groups preliminary inventories or checklists—which describe the material series by series—have been compiled, and it is expected that ultimately an indexed inventory of each record group will be available. Special reports or lists descriptive of material available for given subjects, regions, or periods—somewhat comparable to subject bibliographies—are also compiled, as, for example, the thirty reference information circulars that have been prepared

to inform government officials of materials in the National Archives on specific topics—materials that might be of use to them in connection with the prosecution of the war or with planning for the post-war period.

The task of bringing under control the permanently valuable noncurrent records accumulated by agencies of the federal government during more than a century and a half is far from being complete; in fact we have only scratched the surface as yet, but it is not an impossible task. Nor will the task of dealing similarly with the even greater quantities of valuable records that have recently or will in the future become noncurrent be an impossible one. It will cost money, of course, to bring these records under control, but not so much as can be saved by the effective management and prompt retirement of all records throughout the government. In fact, recent programs in a few agencies of the government have indicated that, by preventing the meaningless proliferation of files, with six carbon copies of each letter, and by the disposal of routine records promptly after they have outlived their usefulness, large sums can be saved that would otherwise be spent for floor space and filing equipment and for the salaries of innumerable dead-file clerks to attend the unburied remains. Moreover, the resultant body of records that comes to the National Archives when records administration is effectively applied in the agency is less expensive to store, to bring under control, and to render service on than is a mass of unselected and badly organized records.

Time does not permit me to tell you of the progress that has been made and is being made in the field of archives administration outside the federal government. In our states, our large cities, and even in many of our great corporations, as well as in the federal government, rapid progress has been made in the last ten years toward the ideal of recording, preserving, and making available to all who have occasion to use it that part of man's experience that may be valuable to him or to his successor. It is not too much to say that the time may come when anyone who has good reason for doing so may have opportunity to "look at the record."

SOLON J. BUCK

The National Archives