

# THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

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## FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 1882-1945

ON APRIL 12, 1945, the Society of American Archivists lost its most illustrious member. The first archivist of the United States and past president of this Society once called Franklin Delano Roosevelt the nation's most eminent amateur archivist. Certainly no one had a greater appreciation of the importance of archives or better understanding of the complexity and magnitude of the problem they present. Someday it may be said that in the field of archival science he was a man ahead of his generation, for he not only recognized the problems but made sound suggestions for their solution.

Mr. Roosevelt knew he was not elected an honorary member of this Society because it wanted to pay homage to the president of the United States. In his letter of February 12, 1942, accepting the membership he took occasion to advise archivists on the need of protecting federal, state, and local archives against the dangers of over-centralization in a modern world and urged duplication and distribution of the treasures in our custody. The atomic bomb has forcefully and tragically proved the wisdom of this advice.

The National Archives was indeed fortunate in having Mr. Roosevelt's active interest during the first years of its existence, but during the latter years his time and energies were so taken up with the burden of the war that he was unable to give as much time to it as he would have liked. He was a conservationist with the historical source material of our nation as he was with its natural resources. He would tell with pride how as Assistant Secretary of the Navy he found the early archives of the department in the attic of the present State Department Building and rescued them from deterioration or damage if not from oblivion. Anyone who has had occasion to work under the eaves of that building on the side opposite the White House knows that it is filled with coal dust in winter and is unbearably hot in summer. There was historical material there and the unpleasant surroundings were only an added challenge for Mr. Roosevelt to investigate and act.

Possessing an unusual historical sense, he was extremely cautious about destroying anything. He constantly questioned the ability of men to determine judiciously and accurately the historical value of contemporary material. Not unmindful of the physical problem the records of the federal government present because of their bulk, he believed that on becoming inactive the greater part should be allowed to age, as it were, and only when by the test of time it was proved whether they were valuable or not should decision be made as to their final disposition. Even then every effort should be made to avoid submerging the high policy records with the more or less routine mass important only to an individual.

Shortly after this country entered the war archivists became concerned over the possible fate of the records and archives in areas of combat. In a war to preserve our civilization and culture it was important not to destroy its basic records. Within two days after receiving a memorandum asking that he give his attention to this problem, President Roosevelt in a cabinet meeting directed that the services provide protection against unnecessary loss or destruction of enemy archives. A few months later when it became evident it was advisable for someone to provide an invading army with a plan to implement his order he quickly endorsed a recommendation that an archives adviser be sent to Allied Force Headquarters to aid the theater commander in this special task.

The work of protecting enemy records was made much easier because Mr. Roosevelt's interest in these problems was generally known. A prominent American civil affairs officer in Italy whose aid was being enlisted on one occasion said, "Do you know that just before I left the States I received a call to visit the White House? On reporting I was told that the purpose of the summons was to make sure that I understood the President's great concern for the protection of Italian local archives." Attention of the military had been focused on national or ministerial archives, but Mr. Roosevelt's concern for local archives expressed in a special order broadened the scope of American and British interests in the protection of cultural materials.

He listened with great interest to a first hand report of the archives adviser who had returned from the Mediterranean theater of war. Then he told how in 1919 while visiting Belgium the car in which he and King Albert were riding stopped beside a shell-torn

building in Zeebrugge. As they looked into the damaged structure the American Assistant Secretary of the Navy saw a sight which was horror to his eyes. Row on row of shelves filled with documents were exposed to the elements. He got out of his car and upon making inquiry learned that the files went back to the twelfth century. Returning to the car he asked the King to have a guard placed on the premises and to give the custodian of the documents orders to have a cover put over the holes in the building in order to protect these treasures from loss or damage. The King promised to have this done and as Mr. Roosevelt entered the car gave the order to drive on. But Mr. Roosevelt was persistent and asked to have the car stopped; and in order to make certain the archives were safe he asked that the king personally give orders right then and there to the custodian and the military guard. With pride and satisfaction he told how King Albert good naturedly complied with the request and as the car drove on how pleased the persistent American felt in his own mind.

Throughout his years Franklin D. Roosevelt was a collector of historical material including early Americana, books, prints, and manuscripts relating to the United States Navy and his native Dutchess County. It was this love of collecting that provided a means for his wife and his two late secretaries, Miss Margaret Le Hand and Louis M. Howe, to keep alive in him the desire to live and to give him courage to look forward during the dark years he was convalescing from the scourge of infantile paralysis. All his life he found comfort and release in working with his collections. If the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library performed no other service to the nation than to have provided him with a retreat from the burdens of office its role has been important.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was interested in anything he made it live. It was so with his collections. He breathed life into them. He immensely enjoyed showing his collected treasures to visitors and entertaining them with anecdotes about their history. His enthusiasm was so infectious that without trying he often won converts to his hobby.

As a leader he knew that the art and wisdom of successful administration are found in the knowledge and understanding of one's fellowmen, a sense of proportion and the ability to do the right thing at the right time. Without these qualities the formal knowledge

required to do the job is useless, and no job is more demanding of these qualities than that of being the president of the United States. By a nod of the head, a suggestion or a friendly note he could inaugurate far-reaching policies, but behind these informal acts lay deep convictions arrived at through long study and thought. He possessed a love for people and respected the dignity of the individual, and because of these traits he could not help being a humanitarian. He was profoundly sincere when at the laying of the cornerstone of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library he said, "of the papers which will come to rest here, I personally attach less importance to the documents of those who have occupied high public or private office than I do to the spontaneous letters which have come to me and my family and my associates from men, from women and from children in every part of the United States, telling me of their condition and problems and giving me their own opinions."

The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library was high in his affection and details concerning it were never too unimportant for his attention. In planning it he included among other things a room which he intended to make available to the Dutchess County Historical Society. Had he lived he would have encouraged the establishment of a Hudson River Valley historical society. Indeed, nothing was dearer to him than the Hudson River and his own native county, its people and its history.

Ever present in the mind of Mr. Roosevelt was the belief that he would some day return to his home on the Hudson and work on his papers. He knew, however, that he could never stop preaching against wrongs committed by man to his fellow man and that he would always have to play an active part in society. On an occasion after his third election to the office of the president, he addressed a gathering of school teachers in New York state in the Hyde Park High School. He spoke of the many things that need to be done to improve the welfare of his Hudson Valley neighbors and then admitted that his one great ambition on retiring from the presidency was to be elected supervisor of the town of Hyde Park, New York.

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