

AN ARCHIVIST LOOKS AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

WHAT does the archivist expect of the Library of Congress? His natural reaction is that of the scholar's pride in the national library with its superb collection of printed materials and historical manuscripts, especially the Presidential Papers which are associated with that institution in the archivist's mind. But what of the paper work involved when a great institution services its collections, meets the Congress and the public, replies to countless questions by mail, hires and fires, and, in short, conducts its affairs both as a center of culture and as a government agency? The records created in the administration of the Library of Congress since the accession of Dr. Putnam in 1899 are the concern of this short paper and some of the details of their creation are now set forth.¹

Called in to make a survey of the records of the Library of Congress, an outsider first had to study the administration of an agency that carries on such diverse functions as supplying Congress with information, registering copyrights, distributing talking book machines to the blind, sponsoring concerts by one of the country's leading string quartets, providing photoduplication services, and cultivating cultural relations with Latin America. Fortunately each office and division of the Library of Congress has written a manual explaining its functions so a start in that direction was made at once. Your archivist also had the unusual privilege of attending meetings of the Librarian's Conference and thus, had a first hand knowledge of some of the library's current problems. Attendance at meetings of the Professional Forum gave him the reactions of a larger group to professional and, to some extent, administrative questions.

After a short study of the administration of the Library of Congress, your archivist devised a form for listing the records, held an explanatory meeting and thus launched a records survey. However strange and curious an outsider may regard an agency not his own, he, in turn, is regarded with curiosity by a staff whose records it is his task to survey. It is unfortunate that an archivist has to be regarded as a "thrower awayer" and is frequently met with the statement, "We have nothing to throw away," but this may be because

¹ Most of the records prior to 1899 have been merged with the collections.

the profession has not propagandized itself into that higher realm where the archivist hopes to strike a balance between the conservative officers who wouldn't throw away gum wrappers and others who practically have their waste baskets outside the door waiting for him to dump their obsolete records at once without benefit of the National Archives and a committee of Congress. There seemed to be no middle ground at the Library of Congress although there was a variant attitude to the effect: "Don't look now and maybe he'll go away."

But this interloper did not go away. He aided various officers in filling out their forms, and when the forms were submitted, edited them for fuller information and for uniformity in answers. In the meantime, he listed personally the records located in the various cellar vaults which did not seem to come within the particular jurisdiction of any office. When all the forms were edited, your archivist sat down to condense the forms into entries for an inventory. The entries were numbered consecutively throughout the inventory and arranged by types of records under each office. The forty-odd offices of the library arranged to follow the administrative chart in the latest annual report. Each office had a short sketch delineating its historical background so that the entries could be placed in their proper setting. It is hoped that this inventory will serve several purposes. It will give to the records administrator and to the historian a picture of the records system as it existed in the spring of 1945. It will enable library authorities to see what items may be listed for disposal and, what is more, after items have been approved for destruction, an alert records officer can see that disposal actually does take place.

Several interesting methods of record keeping may be mentioned. In 1899 after he had been in office for a month, Dr. Putnam urged the various offices and divisions of the library to engage in the practice of making letter press copies. This was done with great gusto until abolished by the MacLeish administration in June, 1940. In spite of this prohibition, one office still continues to letter press its outgoing correspondence with the plea that it is "so convenient." Under this system, the Putnam regime created 548 letter press volumes of correspondence for the office of librarian alone. The Copyright Office ended letter pressing in 1936 having brought forth over 2,000 volumes between 1897 and that date. Nor was the practice of making letter press copies confined to outgoing correspon-

dence; it was used to duplicate all sorts of records many of which an archivist would regard as ephemeral. For instance, the "service slips," 3 by 5 personnel records showing various changes of an employee's status as they occurred, were issued with an original and nine copies. Nevertheless, for a number of years, letter press copies were also made. At one time the library deposited funds with the local banks rather than with the Treasury Department. The deposit slips for this transaction were duplicated in letter press. For a period type-writer passes and applications for leave were letter pressed. The Library of Congress as early as 1911 began the practice of photo-duplication. This process has sometimes led to excessive duplication, when, for four years, the pledges of employees to the Community Chest were photostated. Until recently, it was the custom to bind correspondence and even documents of lesser value. One division still continues to bind its correspondence and, what is more, the incoming and the outgoing letters are separate. In many a government agency no "fair copy" volumes exist after the middle of the nineteenth century; the Library of Congress has a fair copy of travel authorizations and point to point itineraries, 1899-1906. An archivist might be puzzled by the "red cards" in vogue 1930-1936. Whenever an employee was absent and there was "no application for leave on file," the "red card" was issued. Somehow it was deemed necessary to create three cubic feet of records to show that no records existed!

Up to this moment the field under discussion has been that of records administration rather than archives and history. An inventory of over a thousand entries ranging from a single volume to a series of 2,440 letter press volumes in the Copyright Office cannot help but reveal items useful to the investigator in history and library science.

For the researcher the records of the Secretary's Office will be most fruitful. Besides being the depository of the records of the librarian and the chief assistant librarian this office also for many years was a focal point in administration. Not only did the office of the secretary prepare the librarian's correspondence and maintain his files but carried on much of the library's correspondence by drafting letters based upon memoranda received from the various divisions. Moreover, the Secretary's Office was the principal channel of communication between the librarian and the subordinate offices of

the institution. Although the office of the secretary has diminished in importance, it is still the first place to go for records pertaining to the history of the Library of Congress for the last forty years of the twentieth century. Here will be found (to mention only a few) the "Subject File" containing correspondence relating to administration and policy matters of the library; the "Senate and House Files" showing the nature of its services to Congress; and "Division Memoranda" touching departmental and division affairs. Archivists will show considerable interest in the secretary's records (and those of the Manuscripts Division) having to do with "Project A," or the copying program for obtaining historical material in foreign archives and libraries. Librarians may be reminded of their humanitarian endeavors by the material pertaining to the committee for the restoration of the University of Louvain and the correspondence of the American Library Association War Service Committee (not strictly Library of Congress records). The international expert may remember that during the first World War the Library of Congress was the certifying authority for American libraries for the release of books seized by the British. Three cubic feet of records show how the library made these certifications.

For the investigator in the field of administrative history considerable importance can be attached to the General and Special Orders from 1899 to date. These show many internal changes and policies. Important too, are the annual reports submitted by the divisions to the librarian from which he made his excerpts for the printed annual reports. Unaccountably missing are the reports prior to 1914 but certain divisions have reported copies as far back as the turn of the century.

Some day it may be that an administrative historian will discuss the role of the chief clerk among government agencies, even in those agencies where he lingers on in the guise of an "executive assistant." In the Library of Congress the office of chief clerk was a dominating force in the administration of that agency until the abolition of the office and the distribution of its functions in 1940. The Library of Congress *Manual* for 1901 stated that his duties were those "usual in Executive Departments of the Federal Government." He had charge of personnel matters, supplies, the preparation of vouchers, travel, accounting, publications, printing and binding, and, after 1912, photoduplication. Just as the office of the

secretary was the agent of the library in certain administrative matters, the office of chief clerk was the agent of the librarian in the performance of the library's "housekeeping" functions. The records of the office of the chief clerk, a little scattered but apparently intact, reveal the administration of this many sided unit of the library.

If the historian is interested in the history of a particular division, especially the older ones, he may be pleased to learn that a record of orders and correspondence of the Order Division go back to 1897; binding lists and correspondence of the Binding Office to 1902; general correspondence of the Card Division to 1900; correspondence of the Descriptive Cataloging Division (inherited from the former "Catalogue Division") to 1897; correspondence of the Subject Cataloging Division to 1903; orders in the Loan Division to 1899; and borrowers' account cards 1867-1919; correspondence of the Serials (formerly Periodicals) Division to 1898; reference correspondence of the General Reference and Bibliography Division (formerly Reading Rooms) to 1899; general correspondence of the Manuscripts Division to 1897; correspondence of the Maps Division to 1897; correspondence and memoranda of the Music Division to 1902; correspondence of the Prints and Photographs Division to 1900; congressional correspondence of the Legislative Reference Service to 1915; memoranda of the Law Library to 1907; and correspondence of the Copyright Office to 1897 but applications and record of registrations of this office to 1870 and some of its account books to 1883.

But the most interesting records that it was my privilege to examine were not created by the Library of Congress at all but center about the personality of Bernard R. Green. This individual who is not listed in the *Dictionary of American Biography* had a share in completing the Washington Monument and in constructing the State, War, and Navy Building. Under the direction of General Casey, an army engineer, he built the Library of Congress (1889-1897) and was then charged with its maintenance. Next he was intrusted with the construction of the National Museum and the Public Library for the District of Columbia. His architectural horizon was broad enough to include consultation in the building of the state capitol at Harrisburg and an interest in renovations of the Willard Hotel and Hogan's Oyster House. Most interesting by far are the records relating

to the erection of the main building of the library. They fall into two groups: those created by the Commission for the Library of Congress, 1886-1888, and those created by the Office of Building for the Library of Congress, 1889-1897. The commission was composed of the Secretary of the Interior, the architect of the capitol, and the librarian of Congress. The minutes of their meetings still exist. This commission apparently was able only to acquire the site, remove the buildings thereon, make the excavations and begin the foundations before it was succeeded by the Office of Building for the Library of Congress. Construction was supervised by the army engineers but Bernard R. Green was the man on the spot who got the work done. Here is fascinating material for the architect as well as the historian. Besides the plans, the architect will be engrossed with the little notebooks showing architectural details, the specifications, and the record of granite shipped wherein are listed course by course and piece by piece the granite used in the construction of the building. The historian will pore over the time books, correspondence, the contracts, vouchers, quarterly reports, and lists of applications and workmen employed. The historian will pause over these lists, for the ones for applications have a column wherein it is stated whenever the applicant had Congressional backing. The lists of workmen arouse curiosity likewise, because in the column devoted to the explanation for leaving which usually bore the legend "no work," one suddenly comes upon the word "imposter." The daily progress of the construction was recorded in a journal of activities. In red ink is the entry on the day when General Casey was stricken by heart attack while visiting the library and died soon after reaching his home.

Conscious of its approaching sesquicentennial in 1950, the Library of Congress is making an attempt to assemble its records so that they may be utilized for a history of the library as that institution approaches the close of a century and a half of existence. If the archivist has been inclined to differ with the library in its methods of record keeping, he can have more assurance for the future because the new librarian of Congress is not only a librarian but an archivist as well.

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The National Archives