



# Civil Service and Libraries

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IN THE FIELD OF public administration in the United States, civil service is one of the types or forms of supervisory, over-all personnel control legally imposed by certain major governmental jurisdictions on part or all of their operating departments and subdivisions. Since its inception in the federal government by passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 it has become the most commonly accepted form of central staff personnel agency at all levels of government in this country. Public libraries, meaning libraries partially or wholly tax supported, are frequently but by no means always included by law within the jurisdiction of the civil service agency.

No one knows exactly how many separate civil service jurisdictions or agencies there are in the United States; nor does anyone know exactly how many libraries in these same jurisdictions are under civil service control. Within the continental and territorial area of the United States there are some 136,500<sup>1</sup> political subdivisions or legally established state, county, city, village, township, and other types of governmental units or special districts employing personnel. Among these over 5,400 have some degree or type of civil service coverage. Nearly all of the 48 states and 185 counties out of 3,050 have civil service to some degree or a personnel merit system of some type. At least 845 of the 1,346 cities of over 10,000 population are involved.<sup>2</sup>

Verner W. Clapp and Scott Adams quote 1952 figures enumerating 133 federal agency libraries in Washington and vicinity and 1,201 elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> If the term used is "library units" rather than "libraries," the total outside Washington is cited as 6,766 including Agriculture Department, Air Force, Army, Navy, Veterans Administration, and 37 field libraries of the Judicial Branch of the government. Most of the 133 federal libraries in Washington and the majority of those elsewhere are under civil service.

Inconclusive figures indicate that in nearly half our states the state library staff and the librarians of the state's institutions, other than

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educational, are mainly under civil service. At least 45 per cent, or some 85, of the 185 counties under civil service include the county libraries.

On three different occasions committees of the American Library Association have attempted to gather statistics on the status of civil service in public libraries.<sup>4-6</sup> None of these compilations have been wholly satisfactory, and accurate, up-to-date figures are badly needed. A recent inquiry by the writer reveals that there are at least 600 public libraries, other than federal, under civil service, partially or wholly, in the entire United States.

Librarians have been debating in print the merits of civil service as applied to libraries for half a century. Briefly stated, the principal arguments may still be summarized as follows:

### Advantages.

1. Prevents appointments through political or personal influence.
2. Selects best-qualified candidates through appropriately devised, competitive entrance and promotional examinations.
3. Promotes continuity in office, and protects employees from removal for political or other insufficient reasons.
4. Opens the door of opportunity to all citizens equally.
5. Saves the time of appointing authorities.

### Disadvantages.

1. Does not eliminate political and personal influence, especially at the city hall, civil service commission, and library board levels.
2. Limits the geographical area from which candidates may be selected, especially in state and local situations, hence may bar the best available even from competing.
3. Makes removal, even for serious cause, too difficult.
4. Examination content and procedure are too often inadequate, if not inappropriate, and fail to test essential personality factors.

Another disadvantage recently pointed out by library administrators is that few persons with outstanding qualifications will submit to the delays, inconvenience, and exigencies of civil service procedure since they can usually find satisfactory positions without doing so. Also, the better grade people are among the first to leave, unwilling to await the long drawn out and uncertain promotional procedures. This may leave an institution with mediocre quality personnel, particularly weak at the supervisory level.

Statistics of numerical growth of civil service and its spread geo-

graphically, e.g., from 131,208<sup>7</sup> positions, or 10 per cent<sup>8</sup> of federal employees, in 1883 to 2,216,230, or 88 per cent, in 1952,<sup>9</sup> certainly indicate, as do comparable statistics on state and local civil service agencies, a growing trend of popular approval of the basic principles civil service stands for in the public mind and greater public and employee confidence in the arguments *for* rather than *against*. Though much less, the increase in the number of libraries included under civil service may be similarly interpreted.

Ralph Dunbar's study of federal libraries<sup>10</sup> presents evidence that under federal civil service there have been won better position classification and job description and progress toward the realization of the principle of equal pay for equal work. However, he states frankly that in several most important areas of employer-employee relationships "all is not on the plus side." B. L. Gladieux's fairly recent, highly critical yet constructive article "Civil Service Versus Merit,"<sup>11</sup> Dunbar cited for the negative. Yet Dunbar is able to conclude:

Whatever the minus quantities may be, when the conditions of government service are checked against the seven major criteria for employer-employee relationship enumerated at the outset, the net result is surely a solid plus. The principle of equal work for equal pay prevails, the rate of compensation is favorable when compared with that of outside agencies, the tenure conditions are satisfactory, advancement is possible, working conditions are generally good, health is safeguarded, and a retirement system is in effect. It would appear therefore that the civil service recruiting circular was justified in its claims of advantages for federal library service.<sup>10</sup>

There has been a systematic effort, particularly at the national level, toward improving public relations through the publishing of explanatory booklets, speech releases, etc., a valuable example of which is the U.S. Civil Service Commission's *The Librarian in the Federal Civil Service*.<sup>12</sup>

At the local level there is recent evidence in a number of instances of desirable general trends in civil service administration definitely improving library and civil service relationships. These include the delegation of authority by civil service administrators to operating agencies; the use of unassembled examinations; an "open register" and continuous or weekly scheduling of beginning-level professional examinations; participation by the appointing authority in oral examinations; group orals; positive and intelligent recruiting programs; the cooperative sponsoring of library subprofessional or clerical training courses in local junior colleges; improvement in job analysis and posi-

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tion classification procedures; improved salaries; fringe benefits; permissive contractual relations for holding examinations between very small civil service jurisdictions and larger ones, or even with qualified commercial agencies; selective certification from eligible lists; and liberalizing restrictive residential requirements. Chicago, St. Paul, and Los Angeles public libraries, both city and county, report the greatest satisfaction with these new developments. In certain other places the absence of these and other desirable improvements in public personnel administration at the central staff agency level are regretfully noted.

Many of the above developments also apply in the state libraries and state-wide civil service areas. There is also a growing cooperation with professional associations, especially in New York State and New Jersey; on-the-job training programs permitting "trainees" to hold civil service positions without examination while in training; use of recommended specialists on oral boards; employee award programs; and development of the "human approach" in various administrative relationships.

On the other side this writer has current testimony from civil service authorities themselves that there is too much "system building," with emphasis on form rather than substance; confusion in thinking; and emphasis on needs and wants of the civil servant rather than on the needs of the service and the government. For example, present forms of veteran preference too often handicap competent selection. But it is encouraging to note that both the Civil Service Assembly and the National Civil Service League have published positive recommendations designed to mitigate the extreme type of veteran preference legislation found in some localities, and these recommendations are reflected in some of the more recent laws of this subject.

From an experienced library administrator has recently come a letter showing great discouragement over current library and civil service relations in one state. The chief complaint is that in his state, civil service is still posited on long lines of people haunting post office bulletin boards and waiting for jobs to turn up—a failure on civil service's part to adapt recruiting procedures to current realities. Long procedural delays utterly discourage competent candidates. Personnel "technicians" who seem to be looking through the wrong end of the telescope at those they should serve are in the saddle. This correspondent concludes: "Less often do the civil service people come to the harried administrator with the friendly questions, 'Are you having trouble? Can we help?' and more often with the arrogant assertion, 'You're in trouble—we'll fix you!'"

Some details of the New Jersey Library Association's recent cooperation with the state civil service, which operates all civil service in New Jersey, may be worth noting. In 1949-50, the Civil Service Committee of the New Jersey Library Association developed an improved and apparently workable plan with the State Civil Service Commission for all public (state, county, city) libraries in the state under civil service. Two paragraphs from the committee's printed report described this as follows:

Commission staff representatives assured N.J.L.A. Committee members that the main objective was to produce a set of class titles and specifications that would enable an examining division to devise tests that would select candidates well qualified for the specific jobs to be filled in every case; hence titles and specifications should be adoptable in principle and adaptable in detail. For example, the "typical tasks" statement would be illustrative only, not all-inclusive.

The Civil Service representatives also asked the Committee to prepare a statement that would serve to indicate this point of view to the Library Association, to review all proposed specifications in the light of it and to report to the Commission action taken by the Association. The Committee was again assured of complete cooperation on the part of the Commission and staff.<sup>13</sup>

The New Jersey Library Association itself, later, at its convention, took action on the list of class and position titles for libraries under civil service prepared by the Civil Service Commission by approving the list, with one modification, as "adoptable in principle and adaptable in detail," adding, "This approval is given with the understanding that these specifications are to be regarded as experimental, generally descriptive, not restrictive; that they are considered flexible and will be adapted to specific situations, and that the examples of 'typical tasks' are to be considered as illustrative only, not all-inclusive."<sup>14</sup>

The library association was assured that this understanding was acceptable to the technical staff of the Commission and understood it was to the Commission itself. Any other interpretation of a state-wide plan aimed to fit libraries varying from the "one-man" library staff to a staff of over 300 would have been at best a valiant attempt to do the impossible.

This much space has been devoted to New Jersey because it represents one of a growing number of constructive and somewhat successful and continuing efforts on the part of professional associations and the civil service authorities to solve mutual problems, and a mode of procedure thoroughly investigated and reported upon favorably in a

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recent publication of the Civil Service Assembly entitled *Guide to Personnel Activities of Professional and Technical Associations*.<sup>15</sup> That this New Jersey procedure is still not completely successful is due more to differing interpretations than to the plan itself. In New Jersey, libraries are under civil service in 66 of the 118 local and county governments having this personnel agency control.

New York \* is another state where the library association and civil service authorities have been working closely on problems of common interest with interlocking committees as in New Jersey. There, too, much progress has been made, and New York has gone further than New Jersey in the field of reconciling certification of librarians and civil service.

The extent to which certification, at first voluntary, then legally permissive, and finally compulsory or mandatory along lines quite similar to certification of teachers, may make it appropriate to exempt librarians from civil service has been a serious issue for some fifty years. John Cotton Dana<sup>16</sup> opposed both certification and civil service from 1910 on. C. C. Williamson<sup>17</sup> was one of its earliest and most eloquent advocates. In the 1920's and 1930's the arguments waxed hot. H. S. Hirshberg, urging tentative personnel standards for small libraries in 1926, said, "Standards presuppose certification. . . ." <sup>18</sup> In the successive editions, 1910, 1923, and 1929, of *The American Public Library*,<sup>19</sup> Arthur E. Bostwick consistently maintained his position as an intelligent opponent of civil service. His brief discussion of certification in the 1923 and 1929 editions shows him as favoring the

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\* The following breakdown of the number of separate governmental units under civil service in New York State as well as a statement concerning 228 of the public libraries under civil service in New York State has been supplied in a letter dated April 5, 1954, from Henry J. McFarland, Director of the Municipal Service Division of the New York State Department of Civil Service.

In the 62 counties, 10 are under the administration of State Civil Service, 5 are under the administration of County Personnel Officers and 47 have their own county civil service commission. With the 62 cities, 1 is under State administration, 5 are under the administration of their respective county civil service commissions, 56 are under city civil service administration. The 932 towns, 74 are administered by State Civil Service Commission, 81 by County Personnel Officers and 777 by county civil service commissions. The 549 villages, 44 are under State Civil Service Commission, 49 are under County Personnel Officers and 456 under county civil service commissions. Of the approximately 2600 School Districts, 51 are under city civil service commissions and the remainder approximately 2549 are under State Civil Service Commission administration.

A breakdown of 228 public libraries mentioned in our letter of March 16: two of the public libraries are under counties, 20 are under cities, 42 are under towns, 65 are village, and 99 are school districts.

basic principle. Carleton B. Joeckel<sup>20</sup> favored certification and argued against civil service in 1935 in his *The Government of the American Public Library*.

In an issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* devoted to "Improved Personnel in Government," it was said, "Librarians are also distinguished for the progress made toward securing compulsory certification."<sup>21</sup> In the same year, writing in the *A.L.A. Bulletin*, Eleanor Hitt of the California State Library said, "So far, civil service has not nullified our present system of certification of county librarians, as the holding of a certificate of the State Board of Library Examiners has been made one of the requirements for the position of county librarian by the civil service boards themselves."<sup>22</sup>

It should be recalled that in California certification has been required for county librarians from the beginning in 1909. The certification requirement was carried over into the revised county free library law of 1911 and has been in effect ever since. County library staff members, other than the head librarian, are appointed by the county supervisors on recommendations of the librarian, without certification. Civil service is involved for those counties under civil service.

In a discussion before the Trustee's Section of the A.L.A., also in 1937, one question asked was, "What are the effects of civil service on public libraries?" Ralph Munn of Pittsburgh, leading the discussion, said at the end, "Certification gives far greater protection than civil service. Although there is difference of opinion, the weight of experience is against civil service."<sup>23</sup>

Civil service administrators regard certification as a floor or minimum qualification on which to build further selective procedures by open-competitive examination, an idea developed and elaborated by G. L. Belsley in 1938 at the University of Chicago Library Institute. But even Belsley, arguing intelligently and cogently against certification as a substitute for civil service, said, ". . . the trend appears to be in the direction of compulsory certification for all classes of librarians."<sup>24</sup> The A.L.A. committee's excellent pamphlet *Civil Service and Libraries*<sup>25</sup> quotes Belsley's opinion and itself characterizes certification as a valuable complement to, but no substitute for, civil service.

Opinion still varies from the one extreme that considers certification a complete and satisfactory substitute for civil service to the opinion that good civil service administration renders certification wholly unnecessary. At present twenty-four states provide certification for

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municipal and/or county librarians by statute; ten have voluntary plans; school librarians are variously treated—usually education department certificates for teacher-librarians are required. As recently as February 1954 the situation regarding certification of librarians was characterized at the A.L.A. Midwinter Conference as “chaotic.” The Board of Education for Librarianship has this year asked the Library Education Division to conduct new studies.

According to S. Gilbert Prentiss, Public Library Consultant of the Division of Library Extension at Albany, New York State’s current procedure involves the use of a written certification examination to establish civil service eligibility lists for the beginning professional positions in municipal public libraries. For promotional appointments above the level of Senior Librarian I or Library Director I, oral examinations conducted by technical specialists from the library profession under the supervision of the Civil Service Department will be used. “It is the hope of many of us,” writes Prentiss, February 1954, “that in time this certification program will be recognized by the Civil Service Department to the extent of allowing the use of unassembled examinations for professional library positions. This would require revision of the present Civil Service law, however.”<sup>26</sup> Prentiss also gives it as his opinion that certification in New York State is generally felt to be accomplishing its purpose, with the exception of some minor problems, and is working out reasonably well. The New York State certification procedure is specified in the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, approved by the Regents. Complementary to this is the fact that the New York Civil Service Department and State Education Department have accepted specifications for library positions formulated by the New York Library Association.

Alice I. Bryan frequently mentions certification in her discussion of civil service and libraries.<sup>27</sup> Miss Bryan sees no likelihood of the civil service merit system decreasing in scope. She predicts, “More and more public libraries are likely to come under its aegis . . .” and that public librarians might better work with other public agencies to improve the adaptation of commission procedures to the peculiar necessities of library management rather than debate the merits and demerits of inclusion under civil service commissions.

In her final summary, where Miss Bryan proposes six elements of a program to increase the adequacy of professional public library personnel, number four reads as follows: “A state-administered program of compulsory certification of professional librarians to hold positions in public libraries that are determined by job analysis to require full

professional training for their performance.”<sup>28</sup> On a later page, however, the author points out that “Certification of professional librarians can be nothing but a pious gesture unless there is a clear definition of library positions of a truly professional character for which formal professional schooling is necessary. . . .”<sup>29</sup> She adds that certification depends directly upon larger units of library service, upon scientific classification of library positions, and upon a system of state financial aid in which grants will be withheld where certification regulations are not complied with.

How to enforce obedience to compulsory certification laws on the part of local boards has been a problem which seems best solved by the threat to withhold all public support, as in New Mexico, not merely extra “state aid.” It is suggested that librarians should study the New York and New Mexico plans and watch for somewhat similar developments in New Jersey. Those who question certification, it is fair to state, will find ammunition for their point of view in Oliver Garceau’s volume, *The Public Library in the Political Process*.<sup>30</sup>

In professional education for librarianship there is definite need for advanced courses on personnel administration with adequate coverage of all the aspects of modern public personnel administration policies, procedures, and techniques. J. J. Donovan, Associate Director, Civil Service Assembly, in an interview on February 4, 1954, said that curriculums in professional schools for librarianship, social work, medicine, and others, are not providing students with the tools and knowledge necessary for their education in the administrative aspects of their professions. The present writer believes this to be true, feeling also that there is great need for more adequate training for “middle executives” and supervisors.

Donovan states also that, on the whole, there are more and more competent young civil service technicians emerging from our colleges and universities than formerly; that professionalization of civil service is a distinctly progressive and observable trend; and that as more professionally qualified civil service technicians, administrators, and executives are being produced the result is that civil service is becoming more and more firmly established as an acceptable personnel system.

Any appraisal of relationships and trends by one person is open to question as to its validity when the area concerned involves groups of persons with necessarily differing approaches. The judgment of employees, speaking either as individuals or groups, would probably differ from that of both the library administrator and the civil service

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administration even though, actually, the public interest is supposed to be the paramount interest of all three.

The Public Library Inquiry, in addition to presenting data nowhere else available concerning the relationships between civil service and libraries, points out some of the observable trends. Among them are the gradual increase in the number of libraries under civil service and the more favorable attitude toward civil service on the part of libraries operating under it than was the case a number of years ago. Summing up, the report reads, "No librarian reported complete satisfaction with civil service provisions, but a few felt that the advantages considerably outweighed the disadvantages." "Only two library administrators were completely opposed to all civil service provisions. . . ." <sup>31</sup>

Another statement by Miss Bryan which more than one person has found it appropriate to quote, is also pertinent: ". . . whether under civil service control or not, the morale and efficiency of public library personnel depend on recognition by librarians of the importance of adopting the principles and practices of modern personnel management and of developing them as a specialized skill under the direction of personnel experts within and without the library system." <sup>32</sup>

All civil service authorities having libraries under their jurisdiction should read Miss Bryan's careful study; all librarians operating libraries under civil service also should ponder it. Then, should both groups get together and talk things over, it is quite likely there would be a sudden and possibly 95 per cent increase in the peaceful and intelligent solutions of mutual problems and misunderstandings.

In Leigh's summary volume covering the Public Library Inquiry, it states, "Very few cases were found in which a strong public library personnel office was co-operating with a progressive civil service commission to adapt the commission's procedures to library needs and requirements and to decentralize its administration in library hands. This, however, rather than impotent opposition, may be the only road to improvement, inasmuch as the merit system has become a fixed part of local governmental machinery from whose jurisdiction public libraries are not likely to be exempt in larger proportion than is now the case." <sup>33</sup>

After working under civil service well over twenty-five of his total years as a library administrator, the present writer is still of the opinion that civil service as a system of public personnel administration control too seldom aids, as it could, and too often handicaps public libraries in obtaining and managing their own personnel to the best interests of the libraries' basic service functions.

At the same time, it must be admitted that nowhere do we find a more advanced stand on desirable developments in the field of public personnel administration than in the current publications of the Civil Service Assembly and the writings and practices of civil service leaders in the field. These leaders know as well as anyone the shortcomings of some of their associates. Similarly, librarians look confidently to their own American Library Association and affiliated groups for professional leadership, at the same time knowing full well there are "weak sisters" (and brothers) in the membership whose attitudes and practices do not represent the profession's best nor its ideals.

Mr. Donovan, in the interview mentioned above, offered librarians the following suggestions in the interests of better civil service relationships: first, that librarians inform themselves on the necessary elements of a good modern personnel policy and program, the content, not merely the techniques and procedures; second, that librarians ask themselves whether they have such a program; third, if not, what should be done about it? Mr. Donovan also admitted the possibility that library administrators could select and manage library personnel better without civil service than with it, provided the library had a sympathetic and intelligent library board that would support wholeheartedly the merit system and be strong enough also to resist political and personal pressures, and had a competent personnel officer and office staff. He mentioned the New York Port Authority under Director Austin J. Tobin as the most usually cited proof of this theory. "But," said he, "this theory needs a Tobin!" He added that any good administrator could always make *good* use of a *good* civil service system. It is the civil service framework that is needed, in his judgment.

At all times the civil service advocate's answer to his critics has been that given a good basic law there is no evil in civil service that good administration cannot cure, and there are always potential evils lurking in public employment that only good civil service can forestall. Thus, over the years "from the Pyramids to the Pentagon," as W. G. Torpey<sup>34</sup> picturesquely measures time, it is still a case of "What are the alternatives?" The several state legislative investigations of civil service in progress in 1953-54, and the repeated naming of investigative agencies at the federal level, with the Hoover Commission now the agency, indicate both dissatisfaction and a striving for better things.

Achieving the goal of public personnel administration—an ideal public service—is still some distance ahead, but its possible achievement is worthy of, and needs, the harmonized and continuing best

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efforts of our two great service arms of the government, the one aiming to select and administer the best personnel, the other aiming to organize, for best use, published experience and the power of print.

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