
Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

ROBERT W. LOVETT

TO THE PURIST, the topic of this chapter might be considered somewhat of a contradiction in terms. But the word "archives" has come to be used broadly to include not only government records, but also the records of business firms, institutions, and even families. And those records are often called archives even when they are no longer in the custody of the person or institution creating them. Properly speaking, such records would then be historical manuscripts, but they will be considered as legitimate subjects for discussion here.

Non-governmental archives, then, are the records of business firms and institutions of all kinds, whether in the custody of the firm or institution itself or transferred to a collecting library or similar depository. They may be distinguished from historical manuscripts in many ways, aside from the primary characteristic that they were once part of an organic unit. One of their important properties is likely to be bulk. For example, Baker Library, of the Harvard Business School, has a number of collections of the records of business firms, any one of which would number over a thousand volumes or the equivalent. Associated with the point of size, is the importance of series. The ledgers, journals, and cash books of the nineteenth century firm, or their twentieth century equivalents, possess the maximum research value only when found to be complete for the life-span of the firm. On the other hand, it is a characteristic of such records that some are often found to be of marginal value, and that judicious weeding is desirable. Finally, a greater portion of such collections is apt to consist of recent materials than is the case with historical manuscripts; and they are likely to contain more varied forms, including bound and unbound records, pictures, maps, printed items such as employee magazines and advertising, and the like. Logically,

Mr. Lovett is Head, Manuscript Division, Baker Library of the Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University.

Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

all of these distinguishing characteristics of non-governmental archives affect the way in which they should be handled; some of these effects will be considered later.

The interest in archives, both governmental and non-governmental, has increased tremendously in this country since the turn of the century. The Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association began active work in 1899 and sponsored meetings of persons interested in archives from 1909. The Harvard Commission on Western History, under the leadership of F. J. Turner and others, was actively collecting manuscripts in this field during the years just after 1909. The establishment of the National Archives in 1934, accompanied by growth in the number and strength of state archival agencies, has had important benefits for the whole records field. The Committee on Archives and Libraries of the American Library Association was active in the early 1930's, and the Society of American Archivists was founded in December, 1936. This Society issues *The American Archivist*, the most important quarterly in this field published in this country, and early set up committees to represent interests in business records, church records, college and university records, and more recently in labor union archives. Courses in archives and records management have been established at American University, including a popular and valuable summer course, and at New York University; and a summer Institute on Historical and Archival Management, sponsored by Harvard University and Radcliffe College, was started in 1954.

The most extensive field of non-governmental archives, and that with which the author is most familiar, is that of business records. The Harvard Business School Library began collecting in 1916, and with the establishment of the Business Historical Society in 1925 (now inactive) and the building of Baker Library in 1927 its collecting increased rapidly. The value of business records for historical purposes has come to be more and more appreciated; for example, two institutions, which had deposited material in Baker Library in the 1920's, with the assurance it would never be removed, have now reclaimed it. At the same time the care of business archives within the firm has received attention, in a development paralleling that in the area of governmental archives. As the National Archives, now part of the General Services Administration, is at present concerned with records management, as well as with archival techniques, so the management of current records is an important part of the business archives field. In fact, some of the most active consultants in that field obtained

their first records experience with the Navy records program during and just after World War II. The connection between current records management and archives in the area of business has always been close; witness the contributions of the filing systems experts and the typewriter and office equipment companies. But the emphasis now is different; it is more concerned with the complete records picture, from first creation of a form (in fact, there is an area known as records birth control) to final disposition.

One of the organizations which has had a great deal to do with the application of modern techniques to the care of business records is the National Records Management Council.¹⁻³ It was organized in 1949 by the Committee on Business Records of the American Historical Association as a non-profit organization with headquarters in New York City. The Council has made numerous studies of the handling of business records and has come up with some useful concepts. They are prepared to survey records of a business firm or other institution and to set up a modern records system. They tend to emphasize the monetary savings resulting from a great reduction in the bulk of the records and the storage of a large portion of the remainder in less expensive buildings and containers. But the Council has not forgotten the values for historical research possessed by some of the records and has made studies of those which historians and others would consider worthy of permanent preservation. It has published useful articles and a bibliography, and has sponsored a two-day seminar conducted each fall by New York University.⁴⁻⁶ It has also spawned at least two private consulting firms in the field of business records. Of course there are many others, including one which has refurbished a Pennsylvania mine for storage of valuable records from firms in the area.

How is all this of benefit to a company librarian who has been asked to look after some of his or her firm's records, or to find information on the subject? It is obvious that the answer depends partly on how far the company intends to go in the preservation of its records. Perhaps the librarian is given only a few of the treasured pieces, the act of incorporation and by-laws, an early account book or minute book, the founder's picture, or a few letters. Even so, he should preserve them carefully with enough cataloging so that they can be found, for they may be the beginning of a true archives. If ammunition as to the value of the company's records for its own administration, for its public relations, and for the recording of its history is needed, the librarian could write to a business school where a course in

Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

business history is taught. The list of worthwhile company histories published by such institutions is growing all the time. For instance, the Harvard Studies in Business History now number nineteen volumes. Current business histories in process are listed in an occasional news bulletin from the Sheraton Group which has its headquarters at Harvard Business School.⁷ Or if the company is ready to embark on a complete records program, the librarian can suggest the publications of various of the advisory firms mentioned earlier. In large metropolitan areas some of these are prepared to offer warehouse storage for little used yet important records, complete to the provision of reference service and recommendation as to the length of time which they should be kept. Perhaps the company has reached the point of setting up an archives of its own. Again the records management consulting firms can help, and the experience of such firms as Ford and Firestone which have already established archives will be useful. The Ford Archives has issued articles and pamphlets descriptive of their procedures, and *The American Archivist* frequently contains pieces illustrative of individual company experience.⁸⁻¹⁰

If the company is going out of existence the librarian is urged to suggest that some library might be interested in the records. The author, in connection with a project of the Business Records Committee of the Society of American Archivists, has recently made a survey of such institutions. Out of seventy-six returns, sixty-six indicated that they had accepted business records. Some thirty-six of these even said that they would take records of companies still in existence. As two or three suggested, it would be helpful if the company would make money available to defray the cost of handling such records. And although some thirty-three would place restrictions on the use of the records if asked, most would probably wish a free hand to discard earlier material which might prove valueless. It is from firms going out of existence that Baker Library, and probably the others, have obtained a large proportion of their business record holdings. But with space becoming scarce, it is likely that these institutions will become still more selective in the future. Regional cooperation is being increasingly practiced; for example, within the past three years Baker Library has sent four collections to institutions in areas to which the materials more closely related. The University of Florida has started a Southern Business History Center; the Longwood Library, established by the Duponts in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, has embarked on a collecting program for that region; and

the University of Oregon is interested in Pacific Northwest business records, to mention a few widely scattered examples.

The question of what to collect is a problem facing also the librarian suddenly asked to look after his institution's archives. While the writer speaks from the standpoint of a university archives, many of the suggestions given here apply to the collections of other types of institutions. Generally it is the library which is chosen to collect these materials though archival experts recommend, at least in the case of college archives, that they be made administratively independent.¹¹ The librarian, or whatever his position may be, might well start with the publications of his institution. He could consider his set of the catalog or yearbook or whatever the title may be as the official archival set. If the title is to be much in demand by users, it would be well to have a second set for lending. As the purpose of the collection becomes known, other materials will start to come in. Archives tend to attract supplementary materials, which may not be official but are none the less important. The librarian should not neglect the records and publications of student societies, of alumni groups, selected student notes and papers, and similar materials. He may eventually want to classify and house these items separate from, but adjacent to, the official records. The time will come, if only when offices are cleaned out, that the original records of his institution are turned over to him. Then he will have a full-fledged archives, and some hints on their handling are to be considered next. *The American Archivist* has carried articles relating to the collecting of college, church, and labor union archives. Harvard, which has the oldest and probably the largest university archives collection, has published a pamphlet for the guidance of its faculty, and descriptive articles.¹²⁻¹⁷

The handling of archival materials presents special problems. The first principle, and one which applies to both governmental and non-governmental records, is to keep the records of a given unit, whether it be a firm, a department or office, or family, together. A companion principle is to preserve, if possible, the order in which the records were originally arranged. Sometimes unbound records, in particular, come to one in such disorder that this is impossible. Then it is best to arrange these materials in that order which seems most suitable to them, whether it be chronological, alphabetical, or other.

In the handling of business records it is usually convenient to develop an order for the arrangement of a series within a collection. This places the minutes of directors (in the case of a corporation) first; followed by records of stockholders; then by the general ac-

Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

counting series (ledgers, journals, cash books, trial balances, notes payable and receivable, semi-annual accounts, and the like); next come property records, including deeds, inventories, and surveys; then production records, with labor series placed here as well as series relating to amounts produced; followed by sales records; and finally correspondence, miscellaneous unbound records, and diaries or scrapbooks. This order will not fit all collections, but it suggests a logical arrangement.¹⁸

It is well to have for each collection, or for each separate unit within a single large collection, a shelflist or summary descriptive card. However, for the large collections it is obvious that complete details cannot be put on cards. Here the inventory or descriptive list in sheet form, such as is used in the National Archives and similar large institutions, becomes invaluable. Each series should be recorded, with enough description so that the user will know what to find therein. It is best to note each volume and its dates within a series, but the total number of volumes and inclusive dates only need be given if a short-cut is desired. This record of the contents of a given collection may then be placed, together with other pertinent materials, in a collection folder. The curator need not despair because he cannot index every name mentioned; although this may still be done in the case of a few rare historical manuscripts, it is impossible for the large modern collection of business records. The curator should, however, be making preparation for the day when he can issue a guide to his collections, and for this he can prepare an index listing the most important names and places.¹⁹

One of the characteristics of modern business records noted earlier was their bulk, and the fact that they might be weeded. There are few hard and fast rules to follow here, but a few suggestions may be helpful. Selection may be exercised in the matter of what to take in the first place. In this matter the increasing evidence of regional cooperation has much significance. The custodian may also look for representative examples of particular industries. At least one industry, through the Forest History Foundation, is prepared to place important collections in this field with selected libraries. Even the person responsible for his institution's archives may, through the records management programs mentioned, insure that only records of permanent value end up as archives. The removal of duplicate material is an obvious procedure. Sometimes it is found that the information in a primary record, such as a waste book or day book, has been copied into a final journal; the earlier record may then be discarded.

Sampling is another possibility, especially adapted to long runs of a routine record, such as payrolls. Microfilm is really rather an expensive way of reducing bulk; it too is especially adapted to long runs of one type of record. Few libraries have found it economical as yet to use film for this purpose. However, if a firm wishes to make a security copy of its records to store at another location, in case of fire or bombing, microfilming is the obvious answer.

The weeding of correspondence files is a difficult process, and unless the series is entirely of a routine nature, it is perhaps best to keep it intact.²⁰⁻²² Or, to look at it another way, the higher the man is in the chain of command, the more reason there is to keep his files intact. It is often difficult to segregate, in a purely business collection, the business material; or in an institutional archives to remove the official records from the private. It is better to err on the side of keeping too much than to find need later for something which has been discarded. Various titles are available on the subject of the legal and governmental requirements for the keeping of business records;²³⁻²⁵ but little has so far been done on what records the historian would like to find preserved. Perhaps that is because they have not been able to agree among themselves. The other side of the coin is represented by the question as to whether sufficient, significant records are being created in the first place. Minutes and correspondence have become increasingly stereotyped, and the business man would be doing historians a service, if he had the time, by keeping an office diary or journal. The practice of adding recorded interviews with older persons to the archives of a given organization or area is becoming increasingly common.^{26, 27}

The records, once collected and organized, should be made as widely available as possible. Printed guides, or even annual report listings, are ways of making collections known. The proposed National Register of Manuscripts will be valuable, though it is likely that entries for single collections, whether they consist of one or a thousand volumes, may need to be limited to one card. The questionnaire previously mentioned carried some questions on this subject. Some forty-one replies indicated that the persons would be willing to report such collections to a national listing.²⁸ The individual company may need to place restrictions on the use of certain records, but many have found it advantageous to make their files freely available to the qualified scholar. Anniversaries are not the only times when such records may be of use; however, they do furnish excellent opportunities for exhibits and appropriate publicity. Libraries and historical

Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

societies which have acquired the records of other units should also make them as freely available as possible. Occasionally, especially in the case of records of a company still in existence, the library may have to agree to a restriction of some sort. In the case of deposited materials, some libraries have a useful provision that, if their return is not asked for within a specified time, the materials become the property of the library. This provision is incorporated in a form filled out by the firm, or its successor, at the time of the transfer of a large collection of records.

There remains but to sum up the present state of non-governmental archives in this country. They are still the pressing problem which A. H. Cole, retiring this year as librarian of Baker Library, described in an article written in 1945.²⁹ However, an attack on the problem is being made on several fronts, as the present paper has tried to point out. In the case of present-day bulky records, it still appears that the individual company must bear the responsibility and cost of preserving its own archives. But even here organizations like the National Records Management Council are ready to help with procedures for the reduction of the cost of the whole records program. In the case of companies going out of existence, the industry (such as the Forest History Foundation) and private collecting institutions should stand ready, on a regional basis, to insure the preservation of historically important materials. The questionnaire, to which several references have been made, provided a place for reference to special problems presented by business records. The most frequently mentioned were their bulk, creating space problems, and a lack of staff to handle them adequately. At least two replies noted that persons trained in accounting or business subjects would be valuable staff members, but with the present state of library financing, it seems unlikely this suggestion will be followed. The low use value of such records was another factor mentioned. However, the very interest in such materials indicated by these replies is an encouraging point. One can be hopeful that, with the cooperation of business itself, and of historians and other users of the records, some way will be found of segregating the valuable materials from the chaff and of making the former more widely available. Much is being done, but much more still needs to be done.

References

1. Lovett, R. W.: Business Records. *American Archivist*, 13:303-305, July 1950.
2. Holmes, O. W.: Some Reflections on Business Archives in the United States. *American Archivist*, 17:291-304, Oct. 1954.
3. Sabbe, Etienne: The Safekeeping of Business Records in Europe. *American Archivist*, 18:31-45, Jan. 1955.
4. Shiff, R. A., and Barcan, Arthur: The New Science of Records Management. *Harvard Business Review*, 32:54-62, Sept.-Oct. 1954.
5. National Records Management Council. Technical Information Service. *Guide to Selected Readings in Records Management*. New York City, The Council, 1954.
6. National Records Management Council. Technical Information Service. *Quality Controlled Paperwork and Record Keeping*. New York City, The Council, 1953.
7. Soltow, J. H.: The Business Use of Business History. *The Business History Review*, 29:227-237, Sept. 1955.
8. Edmunds, H. E.: The Ford Motor Company Archives. *American Archivist*, 15:99-104, April 1952.
9. Graham, S. K.: Records Retention and Destruction. Address delivered before Special Libraries Association, Pittsburgh, June 6, 1956.
10. Overman, W. D.: The Firestone Archives and Library. *American Archivist*, 16:305-309, Oct. 1953.
11. Browne, H. J.: An Appeal for Archives in Institutions of Higher Learning. *American Archivist*, 16:213-226, July 1953.
12. Wilson, D. H.: Archives in Colleges and Universities. *American Archivist*, 13:343-350, Oct. 1950.
13. The Harvard University Archives. *A Pamphlet Prepared for the Information of Officers of Instruction and Administration*, 3rd ed. Cambridge, Harvard University, 1947. 10p.
14. Shipton, C. K.: Harvard University Archives: Goal and Function. *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 1:101-108, Winter 1947.
15. Shipton, C. K.: The Collections of the Harvard University Archives. *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 1:176-184, Spring 1948.
16. Sweet, W. W.: Church Archives in the United States. *American Archivist*, 14:323-331, Oct. 1951.
17. Lewinson, Paul: The Archives of Labor. *American Archivist*, 17:19-24, Jan. 1954.
18. Cole, A. H.: Business Manuscripts: Collection, Handling, and Cataloging. *Library Quarterly*, 8:93-114, Jan. 1938.
19. Jackson, Elisabeth C., and Curtis, Carolyn: *Guide to the Burlington Archives in the Newberry Library, 1851-1901*. Chicago, The Newberry Library, 1949.
20. Lovett, R. W.: The Appraisal of Older Business Records. *American Archivist*, 15:231-239, July 1952.
21. Shiff, R. A.: Protect Your Vital Records Against Disaster! *Harvard Business Review*, 34:73-84, July-August, 1956.

Care and Handling of Non-Governmental Archives

22. Collison, R. L.: *The Treatment of Special Material in Libraries*. (Aslib Manual no. 2) 2nd ed., London, Aslib, 1955, pp. 26-32.
23. Cope, D. A.: *Adequacy of Business Records for Legal Purposes*. Lawrence, Kansas, University of Kansas, School of Business, Bureau of Business Research, Dec. 1955.
24. Record Controls, Inc. *Retention and Preservation of Records with Destruction Schedules*. Chicago, Record Controls, Inc., 1956.
25. National Development Foundation of South Africa. *Retention and Preservation of Business Records*. (Studies in Business Practice) June 1952.
26. Bornet, V. D.: Oral History Can Be Worthwhile. *American Archivist*, 18:241-253, July 1955.
27. Bombard, O. W.: *Speaking of Yesterday: an Explanation of the Ford Motor Company Archives Oral History Project*. Ford Motor Company Archives, 1952, p. 8.
28. Land, R. H.: The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. *American Archivist*, 17:195-206, July 1954.
29. Cole, A. H. and Cochran, T. C.: Business Manuscripts: a Pressing Problem. *Journal of Economic History*, 5:43-59, May 1945.