



Federal Government Archives

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TWO PHASES CAN BE DISTINGUISHED thus far in the history of federal government archives as a centrally controlled aggregation of permanently valuable records. In the first phase, which ended about 1946, the ground work of organization was laid, the over-all record situation of the government was surveyed, the majority of the older records in federal offices in Washington were centralized in the National Archives Building, the first Presidential Library was founded, and experience was acquired in the wholly new field of handling modern archives.

In the second phase the National Archives in Washington, with its single outlying Presidential Library at Hyde Park, New York, has expanded into a comprehensive organization for dealing with all aspects of the records and record problems of the federal government, in the field as well as in Washington, and for the administration of a system of Presidential libraries. In this period too, great progress has been made toward the embodiment of our acquired experience in a solid professional literature.

The first phase of our history began with the approval of the National Archives Act on June 19, 1934, and the appointment some months later of R. D. W. Connor as first archivist of the United States. Connor, as secretary and later member and chairman of the North Carolina Historical Commission, had become thoroughly familiar with the then accepted methods of archival administration and had been a leader in the movement for the National Archives. He promptly recruited a small staff of assistants, trained especially in the field of history, to survey the records of the government, stored in hundreds of offices, cellars, attics, and warehouses in and about Washington, to determine their quantity and nature and to make a rough appraisal of their relative value for permanent preservation. Later with the aid of the WPA, this survey was extended to all offices and establishments of the government in the field.

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The transfer of records selected for permanent preservation into the National Archives Building started slowly in 1936 and 1937. Then as the government expanded for defense and for war, and other federal agencies became pressed for space, records were brought in at a rate that taxed our physical ability to handle them and far outran our ability to bring them under full administrative control. But all through the process of organization, survey, and hasty acquisition members of the National Archives staff studied critically the problem of how best to handle large masses of recent archival material and debated with each other on every question of policy and procedure.

As soon as the volume of records in the building warranted it, custodial divisions were set up under the deputy examiners who had surveyed them in the agencies and negotiated for their transfer. At first these divisions had no other responsibility than the physical placement and shelving of the records in the stacks. The functions of disposal, classification, cataloging, and reference service were assigned to separate functional units. But gradually this organization, predominantly functional, gave way to an organization which was predominantly by record aggregates. The wastefulness of having records of a single agency appraised for accessioning purposes by one group of persons (the custodial chiefs, who had initially surveyed them and presumably knew most about them) and for disposal by a different group of special examiners, traversing essentially the same areas of investigation, became apparent, with the result that each special examiner was assigned to work in a custodial division under the direction of its chief. The physical layout of the building, moreover, made central reference service so cumbersome that it had very soon to be modified, step by step—first to allow agencies which had transferred records to go direct to the divisions where they were kept, and later to allow any private researcher to go direct to the division that held the records he was interested in. Gradually the central reference unit narrowed its function to that of serving mainly persons interested in genealogical problems and providing a supervised place where scholars could work at night or on Saturdays with records brought out for them during regular office hours.

After several years of experiment the conclusion was also reached that no uniform scheme of classification or cataloging could be applied with profit to the widely various kinds of material in the different divisions. Finally the idea was dropped, and the custodial divisions were made responsible under a minimum of central direction for preparing such finding aids as would be most useful for the control

of their particular holdings. Broad policies were laid down to govern the general pattern of these finding aids, but wide latitude was left to the divisions to adapt their organization and style to suit the different kinds of records and the often very specialized nature of the reference that was made to them.

All records in the building were assigned according to their latest active provenance to record groups—typically the records of a government bureau, with exceptions to take care of the records of small or short lived agencies that fell outside the typical bureau organization. Two-page registration sheets were issued for each record group defining its scope and briefly outlining its contents.

Beyond the record group registration sheet, the usual next step in description was the inventory—technically referred to as the preliminary inventory—describing in greater detail the records within each record group. A few such inventories were completed and processed during the war. Their unit of description was the series, which might range in size from a thin sheaf of papers or a single volume to a giant alphabetical name file or a classified subject file running to several thousand linear feet. The determining fact about the series (as the term came to be used in the National Archives) was, as a rule, that when it was active in the agency of its last provenance, it should have been regarded and treated as a unit complete in itself, containing records filed together for some administrative purpose. The arrangement of series in an inventory followed the most convenient logical order—usually an order reflecting the organization of the agency but sometimes corresponding rather to its functions.

Government records, as a rule, must be approached for purposes of reference through a knowledge of the historical functions of the government and the agencies that discharged those functions at different times. Agencies are in effect the corporate authors of their records; and their records are usually so intimately related to each other that if removed from their context, their full meaning would be difficult to discover. The records of agencies that dealt with related problems were assembled conveniently under the care of the same division or section, but for any subject approach to them the National Archives relied on the devices of special subject guides and, in a few cases, indexes to the inventories.

In 1940 the National Archives brought out its first over-all printed guide describing in general terms its entire holdings. And a series of special subject guides—usually initiated in response to some specific reference request or recurrent type of request—was instituted. Most

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of these special subject guides bearing the generic title of *Reference Information Circulars*, were thin little pamphlets, very limited and general in their identification of pertinent records. A beginning was made in the program of copying on microfilm important series of documents in the National Archives and offering positive prints of them for sale. As the phase drew to a close, work was also started on a larger, more informative guide to all the records in the National Archives.

Toward the end of the war, members of the staff made a limited survey of the records of temporary war agencies and, in cooperation with those agencies developed plans for the orderly disposition of their records. The National Archives took over a large volume but very small proportion of the records that had been created during the emergency and assisted in drafting disposal schedules to cover the vast remainder.

The second phase of our history has brought no basic change in the internal organization of the National Archives. But an act of Congress in 1949 incorporated it with its appurtenant organizations in the newly created General Services Administration, where it was given larger responsibilities and bureau status as the National Archives and Records Service. The function of advising and assisting other agencies in the solution of their record problems, which was greatly expanded, was assigned to a new Division of Records Management, coordinate with the National Archives, the Federal Register Division, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. The new division, in collaboration with the National Archives staff and records officers in the agencies, proceeded methodically to get all agencies of the government to bring their records, insofar as practicable, under the control of comprehensive schedules. Such schedules are intended to identify the small portion of records that are worth permanent preservation and to set time limits on the retention of the rest. This task largely completed, the division now is placing greatest emphasis on the enormously complex problem of bringing about greater economy and efficiency in the creation and maintenance of current records throughout the federal government.

A system of regional record centers under staff supervision of the Records Management Division has been established to provide inexpensive space for the storage of semi-active records, most of which are of temporary administrative or legal value only and are eventually destroyed. And in place of the single existing Presidential Library, Congress has, by an act approved August 12, 1955, authorized the

acceptance of all such libraries as may be offered to the government in the future and their establishment as a "part of the national archives system." Thus provision is now complete for a coordinated management of all federal records and for the orderly preservation of all valuable records of the government, in the field as well as in Washington, and also the papers of men whose high office imparts to their archives a quasi-public character.

The Federal Register Division, which had been created as a part of the National Archives Establishment in 1935, has rounded out its registry and editorial functions by taking over from the Department of State the responsibility for publishing the slip laws and *Statutes at Large* of the United States.

Other activities have been broadened and deepened. In 1950 the National Historical Publications Commission, which had been inactive from the time of its creation by the original National Archives Act, was brought to vigorous life as an agency for stimulating and facilitating the publication of historical documents. An executive director was appointed and now supervises, among other things, the compilation of the indispensable *Writings in American History* and the preparation of an authoritative guide to all manuscript depositories in the United States. And the very important, scholarly enterprise for the selective publication of the *Territorial Papers of the United States* has been taken over with its editor, C. E. Carter, from the State Department and is now one of the regular activities of the National Archives.

Finding aids have multiplied in number and improved in quality, and the microfilm publication program has been greatly enlarged and developed. By July 1, 1956, a total of nearly 100 preliminary inventories and 6,400 rolls of microfilm publications (reproducing about 4,750,000 documentary pages) had been issued. Two ambitious subject guides were nearing completion—one, a guide to records in the National Archives relating to Latin America and the other, a guide to materials of interest to genealogists. The second *Guide to the Records in the National Archives* was completed and published in 1948, and a large two volume handbook entitled *Federal Records of World War II*, begun in 1946, was published in 1950-1951. A guide to the still picture holdings is now being edited for publication, and a guide to the cartographic records is well under way. A card catalog of motion picture holdings has advanced to about the halfway point and should be completed within two or three more years.

Particular stress has lately been placed on the training of archivists

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and the development of professional literature. *Staff Information Papers* on the various techniques employed in the National Archives have been prepared and issued. Most important among these are the following: No. 14, "The Preparation of Preliminary Inventories"; No. 15, "The Control of Records at the Record Group Level"; No. 18, "Principles of Arrangement"; and No. 19, "The Preparation of Records for Publication on Microfilm." Another paper in this series is about to be released on the subject of archival sampling, and yet others are in preparation on the appraisal of fiscal records and the appraisal of motion pictures. A larger pamphlet, in the series of *National Archives Bulletins*, covering the subject of appraisal standards generally, is now in press. T. R. Schellenberg, a long-time staff member and official of the National Archives, has recently completed a full length treatise on the whole broad subject of *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* which has been published by the University of Chicago Press. Instructional pamphlets in the field of records management have also begun to appear, including three on correspondence management (entitled *Plain Letters*, *Guide Letters*, and *Form Letters*), and others have been planned for issuance in the near future.

In conjunction with the Maryland Hall of Records and the National Archives and Records Service, American University has instituted an intensive course of full college status in archival method—primarily for the training of archives recruits. Summer institutes, also jointly sponsored, have been held for several years, originally dealing only with archives administration, but now including records management.

An archival institution also has a task to perform in public education. From the beginning the National Archives has displayed in its public exhibition hall documents of popular interest. Since December 1952, however, when the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were transferred to it from the Library of Congress, it has given increasing emphasis to its program of exhibits and to the publication of facsimiles and popular expository pamphlets such as the brochure entitled *Charters of Freedom*. Today the majestic Hall of Archives with its shrine containing the three great charters—the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—and the Circular Gallery, lined with documents relating to every state in the Union, has become one of the great attractions of Washington for tourists and students who visit here.

But the searcher after documentary evidence, in all his myriad forms as scholar, lawyer, government official, genealogist, scientist, and plain John Doe, remains the principal focus of effort. His interest is attested

in reference service statistics that seem never to level off—some 414,000 in the National Archives alone last year, more than 2,200,000 for record centers, National Archives, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library combined.

All records in the National Archives that are not restricted by law or executive decision are open for use, not only for scholars in the recognized academic disciplines but for any other person who is able to use them in support of some right or claim or in pursuit of a mere desire for information that cannot be so well satisfied by reference to books in a library. The restrictions that exist are based chiefly on considerations of national security, friendly foreign relations, and respect for the legitimate desire of most citizens and business establishments that the government maintain the privacy of information obtained in confidence which may touch upon their private lives or businesses. But under a provision of the Federal Records Act of 1950 all restrictions on records in the National Archives are automatically voided after fifty years unless they are extended by the Archivist of the United States, and very few restrictions have been so extended.

On the whole, federal government archives are probably more accessible to the public, and are put to more use, than those of any other national government in the world, despite our relative youth as a nation. Other countries, looking back on generation after generation of secrecy in governance as a vested right, may and do at times regard us with dismay. We look upon it as simply another evidence that the government of the United States is the property of the people of the United States.