

# The Future of the Archival Profession

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*National Archives*

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ONE of the inscriptions at the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance of the National Archives Building quotes the line from Shakespeare: "What is Past is Prologue." This inscription has been used as the text of many public speeches in Washington. Its meaning for us is obvious. It implies that the past provides the knowledge we must have to understand the future. And it applies to the future of our archival profession, about which I am to speak to you today.

Although some archival work was done quite early in this country, the archival profession, as such, did not develop until rather late in our national history. In colonial times archival work was a matter of individual enterprise, a few persons going about to accumulate documentary materials for historical projects in which they were interested. The first organized efforts to preserve and make available the documentary resources of the Nation were made by three types of institutions: historical societies, libraries, and archives.

The historical society was the first type of institution to enter the field of collecting and preserving documentary materials, and the first historical society to be established in this country was that of Massachusetts in 1791. It was followed a few years later by the American Antiquarian Society, and a few years after that the New York Historical Society was formed. During the decade of the 1820's many State and local historical societies were established. By the outbreak of the Civil War 65 such societies had been founded in the settled parts of the country.

In the period after the Civil War libraries came to the fore as the custodians of manuscript materials. The library profession, as such, in the United States was developed largely in consequence of the stimulus given it by Justin Winsor, who was chiefly instrumental in forming the American Library Association, and by Melvil

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Dewey, who developed the basic techniques of classification and established the Library Bureau, which concerned itself with improving methods and installing various new library systems. In the last two decades of the century library work was established firmly as a separate profession. Large manuscript collections were accumulated in various libraries of the country. Those of Harvard University, the John Carter Brown Library of Brown University, and the Lenox Library in New York City grew out of the activities of bibliophiles and collectors. The Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, which took over the manuscript collections acquired by the Federal Government and maintained by the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the Department of State, was a governmental enterprise. On the West Coast somewhat later counterparts of the great eastern repositories were established in the Bancroft Library, the Huntington Library, and the Hoover Library.

Late in the last century a third type of repository appeared on the scene. This was the archival institution. In 1889, shortly after its establishment, the American Historical Association formed a Public Archives Commission, which for many years sponsored inventories of State archives and meetings of archivists throughout the country. As a result of its stimulus a number of State archival institutions, many of which grew out of historical societies, were established in various parts of the country; and finally in 1934, almost 150 years after the establishment of the Federal Government, the National Archives was established to preserve and maintain the valuable public records of the Federal Government.

At the present time there are over 500 sizable repositories in this country that are accumulating and preserving the documentary resources of the Nation. These repositories contain undreamed-of quantities of source material. The methods that have been applied to their management are a compound of those of the historian, the librarian, and the archivist. These methods are still evolving and have not yet been refined into a distinct discipline.

The developments within our profession can be elucidated further by examining the principles and techniques evolved in a particular repository. The first of these, as I mentioned before, was the Massachusetts Historical Society. On January 24, 1791, eight persons met at the home of William Tudor in Boston to form a society for "the purpose of collecting, preserving, and communicating the antiquities of America." Each of the members of the newly formed society contributed whatever manuscript resources he had. And from these small beginnings developed one of the most im-

portant manuscript repositories in the United States. Among the very early accessions of the society were the papers of two colonial governors, one from Massachusetts and the other from Connecticut; and the history of their papers illustrates, in part, how records were handled by the society.

The Thomas Hutchinson papers were derived from a number of sources. Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of Massachusetts between 1771 and 1774, was very much interested in the history of Massachusetts and collected both private and public documents for a history that he was writing in his home. In 1765 his house was pillaged by a mob; and the manuscripts that he had accumulated were thrown into the street, some of them trampled in the mud, and others destroyed altogether. His neighbor, the Reverend Andrew Eliot, gathered up as many of them as he could and took them into his home. Eliot's son gave the papers rescued by his father to the society, of which he was a founder. Other trunks of manuscripts of Governor Hutchinson, seized by the State in 1774 when the Governor fled to England, became part of the State archives. In 1821 these were reviewed by Alden Bradford, secretary of state, who removed certain private papers and deposited them with the Massachusetts Historical Society, of which he was a member. The Hutchinson papers, from whatever source they were acquired, were arranged chronologically, bound in three volumes, and indexed. This was the standard way of keeping private papers. Later the Hutchinson papers became a source of dispute between the society and the State of Massachusetts. Repeated requests were made to the society to return the papers, all of which were denied. Eventually, in 1873, the papers were returned to the State after the decision of an umpire, who was appointed jointly by the State and the society to determine which of them were of a private nature and which were deposited by Alden Bradford in 1821. Since the private and public papers had been bound together into volumes without regard to their source, the umpire decided that all of them should go to the State.

The other governor's collection, the fate of which I wish to review briefly, were the papers of Jonathan Trumbull, colonial Governor of Connecticut between 1769 and 1783. These papers were given to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1795 by David Trumbull, the son of the Governor, in a fit of ill temper because the corporation of Yale College was lukewarm about receiving them. The papers were bound in 23 volumes and indexed. The State of Connecticut repeatedly urged the society to give them

up to it, claiming that they had more interest for the State of Connecticut than they did for the State of Massachusetts, but these requests were repeatedly denied.

Through the years the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society became much larger. By the outbreak of the Civil War it had over 500 manuscript volumes in its custody, and by the end of the century this number had doubled. The collections spanned five centuries and included such important items as Winthrop's journal, the correspondence of Richard, Increase, and Cotton Mather, and a number of very important collections of manuscripts such as those of Prince, Belknap, Pickering, and Winsor. These materials represent one of the prime sources of historical information in the Nation. They were used by the most eminent of the American historians — by Jared Sparks, George Bancroft, George Ticknor, William H. Prescott, John Lothrop Motley, Francis Parkman, Justin Winsor, and others. The council of the society stated that the society was in a sense "trustees for the scholars of the country."

As the collections of the society increased in volume — and particularly as its pamphlet collection, which became very voluminous, increased in size — repeated attention was given to the growing need for space. As early as 1855 a standing committee of the society reported that it should "disburthen itself of much . . . of this mass of cumbrous matter not immediately akin to our pursuits." Just before the Civil War it was noted that the "shelf room was crowded to overflowing." In 1866 it was reported that the manuscripts already in the possession of the society "afford very little accommodation for the future additions." In 1889 the council of the society again reported the need of weeding and stated that "it is not the space, but the system, which is at fault"; it expressed the opinion that even if more space were available the society "should obtain no permanent relief with the present methods of accumulation."

Gradually the society accepted the enlightened principle, which is characteristic of any mature manuscript repository, that research resources should be held where they are most likely to be used. This principle was most succinctly stated by R. C. Winthrop, Jr., in 1890. He said:

I am aware that an idea prevails, in many quarters, that when a Society or an individual has come into possession of a mass of miscellaneous original material for history, it should be kept intact at all hazards; but, to my mind, a much broader view to take is to consider how far it may be appropriate, in the interest of historical research, to transfer portions of such material to

institutions immediately connected with the subjects to which they relate. In other words, the duty of providing the various classes of historical manuscripts with the fittest, the safest, and the most convenient homes ought, in my judgment, to be paramount to any selfish consideration.

In line with this enlightened view the society returned the Trumbull papers to the State of Connecticut, and John Hancock's letter books (which were really the first five letter books of the President of the Continental Congress and the Journal of the Congress of 1774) to the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

At the turn of the century, in 1899, the president of the society, Charles Francis Adams, lifted the veil on the next century and made his predictions as to what would happen in regard to documentary materials. He said:

The accumulation of historical matter, it is to be remembered, progresses with ever-increasing rapidity. The word is a strong one, but to me the future is in this respect appalling to contemplate. We are to be bankrupted by our possessions . . . The progression has been, and is, geometric. At the same rate the accumulation of the twentieth century defies computation in advance, — it will altogether defy any nice classification or exhaustive cataloguing. The problem of the future, therefore, is not accumulation; that is provided for. It will go on surely, and only too fast. The question of the future, so far as the material of history is concerned, relates to getting at what has been accumulated — the ready extraction of the marrow. In other words, it is a problem of differentiation, selection, arrangement, indexing and cataloguing.

The future work of the archivist is determined by the character of the materials with which he will have to deal. These materials have certain characteristics that I wish to underscore: their volume, their organic character, and the diversity of physical class and type.

When Adams made his predictions about the future of the archival profession, the holdings of the Massachusetts Historical Society consisted of about 100,000 pamphlets and 1,000 manuscript volumes. These holdings are but a drop in the bucket when compared with those of present-day repositories. I estimate that the manuscript volumes contained about a half million single record items and comprised about 250 linear feet of records if kept under modern conditions of storage. Though I am not prone to measure the value of record materials in terms of volume, I should like to emphasize that the total volume of materials that had been accumulated by all repositories in the Nation at the turn of the century was quite negligible. The problem of mass with which the present-day archivist must deal is one of the main determinants of the methods and policies he must apply.

The second characteristic of recent documentation to which I wish to draw attention is its organic character. Instead of accumulating mainly the papers of eminent Americans, such as colonial governors, revolutionary patriots, the founding fathers, the Presidents of the United States, we are now accumulating the papers of organic bodies. The archival institutions established in the last half century, in fact, are concerned principally with records of organic bodies — governmental agencies, businesses, churches, learned institutions, and the like.

The third characteristic of recent documentation is its diversity of physical class and type. Instead of accumulating only textual and cartographic records we are now concerned as well with audiovisual records — still pictures, motion picture films, and sound recordings. Instead of accumulating mainly letters, we are now accumulating all physical types of records — account books, letterpress books, ledgers, questionnaires, and forms of all kinds.

These changes in the quantity and the types of materials with which we are dealing determine the methods and principles we shall have to apply in the future.

The first major change in the policies and procedures of the archival profession relates to selection and accessioning. From an age of scarcity we have come into an age of plenty. Instead of having a very small quantity of documentary material available for accessioning, we are now overwhelmed by its quantity — or “bankrupted by our possessions,” to use the words of Adams.

In an age of plenty the archivist must become far more discriminating as to the materials that he takes into his repository. In regard to modern records particularly — the records that are now being produced or that will be produced in the future — the archivist must be far more selective than he has been in the past.

For information on contemporary political, social, and economic developments the scholar is likely to look more and more to printed publications rather than to original documents. The volume of printed materials is so great that the scholar has difficulty finding his way among them, and it is an almost impossible task for him to go beyond the printed word in seeking information on some contemporary event or episode or on some social or economic condition of the present day. It is indeed questionable whether any but a very small proportion of the public records that are now being produced have any interest for the scholar and whether governments are justified in preserving any but a very small proportion of such

records. The job of appraising records becomes increasingly difficult as they approach the present day.

The wealth of documentation that is available to archivists has another influence on policies of selection and accessioning that I think is particularly important. When large quantities of material are available in the archivist's own backyard he needn't trespass on the fields of his neighbors to acquire additional materials. Archivists, in a word, will become selective in regard to the source of the materials that they take into their custody. If they are concerned with public records they will take in only the public records produced by the governments they serve, not those of other governments. If they are State archivists they will not be particularly interested in acquiring records of the Federal Government except those that are excess to the needs of the archival establishments of the Federal Government. Archives of one State will not be acquired by the archival institution of another. Similarly, there will be a division of labor in preserving research materials of a private nature; and private papers originating in one part of the country will not be accumulated by repositories located in another. Each institution will concern itself with the research materials that relate to the particular geographical area it serves. There will not be such a scattering of research materials as there has been in the past.

A brief reflection on what has happened in the past will bring out some of the problems that beset a scholar in carrying on research. Federal archives have been scattered among various research institutions. There is no important historical event or episode with which the Federal Government has been concerned of which all the records are to be found in one place. The records relating to the formation of the Union, for example, are found in many places. The records of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1803-6), which have recently been the subject of litigation, were found, during the preparation of legal briefs for the litigation, to be scattered among several repositories. A complete and full study of the Lewis and Clark exploration can be made only by referring to records that are now very widely scattered, though many of them are of public origin. Maps produced during the expedition, for example, are buried among files organized on a purely geographical basis without reference to their source.

The recent very laudable activities of private firms and organizations in publishing the documentary materials produced by eminent Americans, an activity sponsored by the National Historical Publications Commission, again reveals the extent to which private papers

are scattered. Those of Jefferson are in more than 50 repositories as well as in the hands of innumerable collectors and private persons. Similarly, those of all other eminent Americans have been widely scattered. One of the prime tasks facing an editor of personal papers is to locate them and bring them together. Obviously such writings are dispersed in the course of their production because letters sent are usually preserved, if at all, among the papers of their recipients. But even the main bodies of retained papers, such as those of Washington, have been through the course of the years scattered in many repositories. So eminent a historian as Jared Sparks, while editing the Washington papers, took the liberty of tearing apart a diary kept by our first President and giving a part of it as a memento to a friend.

The extent to which manuscripts have been dispersed is well illustrated by an incident described by Francis L. Berkeley, Jr., in a discussion before the American Philosophical Society of "The Problems of the Control of Manuscripts." Berkeley says that a distinguished teacher of history, Prof. William N. Bischoff, S. J., was studying the history of the so-called Yakima Indian War in Oregon, 1855-56, and that in order to obtain the information on this relatively minor border incident he had to obtain manuscripts from 42 repositories in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Europe — that his research led him "from Boston to Berkeley, from Victoria to Quebec City, from the Pacific to the other side of the Atlantic — to London, Paris, Lyons, Marseille, Fribourg, and Rome."

In the future it is likely that archival repositories will consider it their function to collect documentary resources in a more orderly and systematic manner; and if they acquire resources that relate more particularly to some other geographical area, they will make either copies or the originals of such materials available to archival institutions serving the other areas. One of the future developments that I see is a more rational, a more orderly, and a more enlightened policy of accessioning and a freer interchange of copies of documents among documentary repositories. The function of an archival institution, I believe, is not one of collecting and hoarding research materials, but one of serving the needs of scholars and other users; and these needs can be best served by having documentary resources preserved in the places to which they pertain and where they are most likely to be used. It is not the function of an archivist to complicate the problems of research by dispersing research resources; it is his function to bring them together.

The second major change in policies and procedures of archivists called for by the nature and quantity of the materials with which they must deal will relate to their methods of making archives and historical manuscripts available for use. These methods, of course, are primarily methods of description, resulting in the production of finding aids such as guides, inventories, catalogs, and indexes.

In the last century, when there was a paucity of research materials and when such materials were housed mainly by historical societies that served as libraries or by libraries themselves, the methods employed were primarily those of librarians. In the Massachusetts Historical Society, for example, the manuscript collections were usually bound in books, the contents of the books were indexed, and the books themselves were cataloged. If the manuscripts did not lend themselves to binding, the individual documents were handled separately and were separately cataloged. The standard procedure was to produce a catalog of separate physical entities, whether individual documents or volumes of documents.

This procedure could be followed so long as the quantity of the material was small. It is possible to give attention to each individual record unit when the units are few. But with the acquisition of great quantities of research materials of all physical types, new techniques of description should be applied. Essentially these are the techniques of collective description, that is, description of aggregates in single entries; and these techniques are essentially archival rather than library techniques.

In the future, I believe, all the descriptive processes that have been taken over from the library profession will be reexamined, and critical questions will be raised as to whether the methods that are now being followed are indeed well suited to making known the content and significance of manuscript collections. I am confident that by such a reexamination new methods will be developed that will be more suited to making known to scholars and other users the holdings of manuscript repositories than those that now exist. These techniques will enable archivists to describe their holdings in a reasonably uniform manner throughout the country and will greatly facilitate the interchange of information about holdings, eventually resulting in the creation of union catalogs of such holdings similar to those that now exist for publications. The guide to the manuscript repositories of this country now being produced by the National Historical Publications Commission will be a step in the direction of providing comprehensive information about manuscript resources; but it is only a first step, and in its production it

became quite evident that proper descriptive techniques were not being followed in many research institutions.

In the course of time archivists will create their own profession. It will be a profession with techniques and principles as well defined as those of the library profession but quite distinct from them. And these techniques and principles will be embodied in literature that will constitute the basis for a separate discipline — for separate training courses taught in library schools and universities.

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