

## THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT FIFTY\*\*

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**Abstract**—An analysis and examination of the National Archives of the United States. The 19th century background and need for the governmental agency is quickly sketched. Emphasis is placed on the role of J. Franklin Jameson (beginning in 1906) and the coalition of scholars, civil servants, public officials, patriotic organizations, and the press which he put together to secure the legislation founding the National Archives in 1934. Some of the technical and theoretical accomplishments of the agency are covered; its growth and movement into new areas of responsibility is documented; the reasons for the loss of independence in 1949 and the return of independence in 1985 are examined. Five areas of concern for the future of the Archives are briefly examined: public visibility and use; liaison with the scholarly community; use of technology; archival education and training; and strengthening ties with the public in general. The paper concludes with a call for a new coalition to ensure the continued preservation of archival institutions in the future.

1984 marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the National Archives of the United States. Many events were held to celebrate the occasion. But aside from celebration, anniversaries are usually times for reflection and reassessment, and this was true for the National Archives despite our short history as an institution. The real point of our activity was, of course, to learn from the past, to help us to understand who we are as an institution, and even possibly to outline where we are going.

Let's begin with the past.

The government began well in terms of records with the appointment of Charles Thomson as the Secretary of the First Continental Congress. It is to him we owe thanks for his solicitous concern for the safety and preservation of the earliest records of our government. But by 1797 when President Washington left office, he was obliged to take his papers and records with him since there was no place to deposit them, this despite his stated belief that they were "a species of public property." By 1800, when the federal government had moved to the District of Columbia, the first of a long series of major fires that would vastly reduce our documentary heritage occurred. The list of these conflagrations is long: 1800 War Department; 1801 Treasury; 1814 British invasion; 1833 Treasury again; 1836 Post Office and Patent Office; and so on, and so on.

Official Washington was not blind to the destruction of our nation's records. Congress appointed its first committee to look into the condition of "the ancient public records and archives of the United States" in 1810. President Jackson requested appropriations for

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depositories for safekeeping the archives in 1836; and President Hayes did the same in 1878 and 1879.

Between 1889 and 1903, 30 bills were introduced into one or the other house of Congress to resolve the sad condition of our archives. Finally, in 1903, land was purchased for an archives building; but still nothing happened. As Elihu Root wrote years later, "Nobody seemed to take interest enough in the subject to have the building put up after the land was bought" [1].

All this was to change in the first few decades of the twentieth century. I would like to say that high-minded or idealistic reasons caused the long overdue formation of the National Archives, but in fact it was a series of practical and political considerations that ultimately proved decisive. Among these, three are worth mentioning here: (1) The power and the activities of the federal government grew dramatically with the nation in the decades following the Civil War, and thus intensified the problem of housing government records. As a result, civil servants began agitating for an archives; (2) Large-scale pension legislation for Civil War veterans, and the initial inability of the government to cope with this, brought home to the Congress the necessity of preserving records for use by the government to serve the people; and (3) The growth of graduate education in the United States, following the German Ph.D. model and the requirement of documentation for "scientific" historical writing, created a new interest group in the demand for an archives.

Of these three, it is the last that is particularly significant. The American Historical Association (AHA) was founded in 1884. Within a few years, committees were sending memorials to Congress on the subject of improving governmental archives. In 1893, a paper presented at the Association's annual meeting stated: "Archives hold the evidence of facts: what the Bible is to the Theologian and what the statute law is to the lawyer, the state archives is to the historian." The paper ended by proposing action: "Would it not be well that we, who are gathered here in the interest of historical research, should make our opinion and desire heard. . . ?" [2]. Thus the campaign began.

The mantle of leadership in the drive to establish a National Archives was assumed by J. Franklin Jameson beginning in 1906. Jameson, holder of one of the first Ph.D.'s in history granted by an American university, founding member of the AHA, scholar and teacher, and director of the Bureau of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution in Washington, labored for over two decades to accomplish his goal. A recent writer described Jameson as "bewhiskered, bespectacled, lean and dignified-looking" [3]. Apparently his single-minded devotion to archives and to the importance of the collection and publication of documentary sources, a passion that was to result in both the National Archives and its adjunct the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, was not obvious. The vicissitudes of Jameson's quest are well documented and need not be recounted in detail here. But what is worth mentioning is the coalition that Jameson put together to secure the establishment of the National Archives.

First and foremost was, of course, the American Historical Association. Its persistence and leadership were essential. From this national organization, bases of support in the form of resolutions and letters to Senators and Congressmen were solicited from other organizations, local historical societies, patriotic societies, political groups and libraries. Slowly the net spread. But Congress is not noted for its responsiveness to either individual academics or to resolutions passed by learned societies. More was required.

The muscle, in terms of members, was found by Jameson in 1921 in the American Legion. With the aid of Eben Putnam, the Legion's national historian, Jameson successfully maneuvered the Legion's attention away from a massive national memorial in Washington to support for the proper preservation of the records of World War I, and thus the preservation

of all the official records of the U.S. government. Undoubtedly, the example of the Civil War pension files proved helpful.

And support continued to grow within the government. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon requested funds for an archives building; the various military departments, groaning under the weight of war records, did the same. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover reported to Congress “[I]t should require no argument to justify the wisdom of erecting an archives building” [4]. The final piece of the coalition was provided by the press. Once the legion supported an archives, William Randolph Hearst was not far behind. By 1923 he personally ordered a press campaign to force Congress to act. At the crucial moment in that year’s Congressional debates, the Hearst papers in Washington “ran several columns of stories each day, illustrated with photographs of storage conditions for old records” in order to shame the legislative branch into action. Banner headlines proclaimed “United States Is Only Nation of World Lacking Archives Building” and “Entire Legislative History of U.S. Rotting Away in Attic of Capitol” [5].

With such a coalition, action was inevitable. But Congress, preserving its prerogatives and its own time table, waited three more years. Finally in 1926, a provision of the Public Buildings Act, [6] the first since the war, contained funds for an archives building. The stated reason for the action was classic American pragmatism: “The Archives Building was placed first on the program because . . . it would provide more general relief [for the overcrowded and poorly housed government] than any other building.” But a building does not a program make, and this is true even when the building is designed by the famous John Russell Pope and located on Pennsylvania Avenue exactly midway between the White House and the Capitol. It is significant to recognize that three years passed between the time funds were voted for construction of the National Archives building and the action of Congress that established the institution. This means that the building was planned, constructed, and virtually completed without a clear definition of what the duties and responsibilities of the new agency would be, and without any clear thought about who would head or staff it.

It should be recognized that there were at that time no practicing archivists familiar with federal archives who could have helped with either the planning for the building or the organizing for the agency. Relatively few states then had active archival programs, and none had developed full programs or had built archival buildings. The decision to first build a building, modeled more on a monumental Carnegie public library than anything else, and then to create an agency to occupy it, provided a unique opportunity for the early staff at the National Archives to define and create a new profession as they undertook their daily work. The groundwork for the new profession had been laid in the legislation establishing the National Archives. The nineteenth-century concept of a “hall of records” had been rejected. The Archives was not to be a mausoleum that contained only the best-known documents of state housed in inexpensive space with the agencies that created the records controlling access to them. Instead, the Archives was to have both physical and legal control of the records in its charge; it was to control access; it was given records management responsibilities; it was able to hire professionally competent persons outside the civil service procedures.

This latter point is important, because the success of any organization ultimately rests on the quality of the staff. The National Archives was fortunate in that its initial hiring of staff occurred in the depression years, and talent was readily available. In 1935, when 132 positions were filled, the Archives was able to select from 15,000 applicants.

The professional staff were mostly historians, of course. But neither their training nor their experience was easily applied to the new job of dealing with the greatest volume of records in the world. Despite some false starts, the work began and the process of defining what an archives is and what exactly archivists do was underway.

In the years that followed, numerous achievements in the slowly emerging field of archival administration were realized by the National Archives staff. Many of these were technical, particularly in the areas of preservation and microfilming. Others were theoretical, such as the development of the basic unit of archival control and organization, the record group.

In the area of preservation, then as now, all archivists' and librarians' biggest headache, substantial work was accomplished. Since the National Archives was specifically chartered to hold such "non-traditional" federal records as photographs and motion pictures, work in these areas was also pioneering. But it was in the area of access, making information available, where the Archives substantially outdistanced all other institutions.

Almost from the beginning of the agency, work was underway on guides to the holdings. The first one was issued in 1938, within three years of the first researchers' visits. Naturally phone and mail inquiries were also handled. The concept of special access, the common European practice of reserving the best materials for a few who were selected on the basis of politics or scholarly reputation, was discouraged and quickly disappeared. But perhaps the biggest contribution to access was made in the Archives microfilm program.

Preliminary work on microfilming had been underway under the sponsorship of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies before the Archives was established. But the wide use of the medium to preserve information, to reduce the bulk of material, and to provide quick and easy access for all was the Archives achievement. By 1941, the Archives microfilmed or otherwise copied over 75,000 pages of records a year. And, to carry the advantage one step further, the Archives began to keep a negative print of frequently used film so that positive copies could be quickly and economically produced for researchers.

The National Archives was, in a real sense, the creation of historians. And, as we have seen, most of its professional employees were trained as historians. Yet as the institution and the profession of archivist developed, everyday concerns began to lead away from the traditional view of making historically important documents available to serious researchers. One of the original arguments for the institution was that it would provide service to the various government agencies. This proved to be true, and undoubtedly shaped to some extent the kinds of material preserved in the Archives. But it was the problem of bulk or quantity of government records that demanded a whole new approach from the early archivists-historians.

Years later the Archivist of the United States noted that it was almost inconceivable "that the Federal government, in the 22 years from 1930 to 1950, should have created more than seven times as many records as it did during its previous 155 years of history." This fact, the Archivist stated, was the reason archivists "began to go berserk, frightened at birth, one might say, by a very real monster" [7].

Fear of the monster ultimately led archivists to become involved in everything about records from their creation to their destruction or preservation. This involvement, which came to be known as the "life cycle of records," promised that the new archivist would not be merely a custodian of discarded documents but rather an invaluable aide in saving money for the government in space, equipment, and personnel costs.

Government economy and efficiency, plus the archivists' concern that the appropriate records documenting the activities of the government be created, identified, and preserved, led in the years immediately after World War II to two new functional parts of the National Archives: records centers and records management. The Archives' initial successes in the areas of current and semi-current records, and the resulting possibilities of enormous savings and cost avoidance for the government proved fatally attractive to the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, the first Hoover Commission. In

1949 the Commission recommended and Congress approved the inclusion of the Archives in the newly formed General Services Administration [8].

After 15 years of independence the Archives, now renamed the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), found itself a small part of a large agency that was primarily concerned with federal supplies and buildings management. Gone were the days when President Franklin D. Roosevelt took a special interest in the Archives and its work. Can you today imagine a President who, worried about a large bulk of federal records created during the war, toyed with the idea of turning the Pentagon building into a records storage area after World War II [9]?

In the years preceding the War, the Archives had acquired other functions beyond the traditional archival role. Records centers and records management have already been mentioned, but perhaps of greater general interest is the *Federal Register*.

One year after the establishment of the National Archives, the *Federal Register* was created as a part of the Archives. Its function, to provide official notice of current government actions through a series of publications and by making documents available for public inspection, was seen as a logical outgrowth of the Archives' responsibilities for the custody and preservation of records fundamental to citizens' rights and to the functioning of the government.

Four years later, in 1939, Presidential Libraries joined the National Archives. Franklin Roosevelt is credited with conceiving the idea of a library that would contain the President's papers as well as those of his associates, and various gifts, artifacts, and other memorabilia, in order to fully document both the President's life and his administration. Since 1939 the network of these "Presidential archival depositories" (as the law calls them) [10] has grown to seven, with the prospect of three additions in the next few years, a Carter Library in Georgia, and probably buildings for Nixon and Reagan in California.

When the National Archives was absorbed into the General Services Administration (GSA) in 1949, it appeared at first that the new reorganization would work. NARS budget increased, as did its influence within the government. The administrators of the new agency, although never very interested in the Archives and its cultural role, were not hostile and tended to handle policy issues with benign neglect. But in time the main role of GSA to efficiently and economically administer the physical resources of the government came to dominate NARS as well. History became a bother not a goal. Inevitably policy intrusions came; a tendency that culminated in the so-called Nixon—Sampson agreement of 1974 between the President and Arthur Sampson, the Administrator of GSA, which ignored the Archivist of the United States and his professional staff entirely and provided for the destruction of Presidential papers and tape recordings.

Since the 1960s the stormy relationship between NARS and GSA has bred a continuing "independence movement" among those who knew and used the National Archives. By the late 1970s following a series of official and officially sponsored studies and reports, bills were regularly introduced into both houses of Congress to re-establish an independent National Archives. At first the bills died in committee; usually, during the next Congress, hearings were held. Finally, during the 98th Congress, the legislation was successful. President Reagan signed P.L. 98-497, the National Archives and Records Administration Act, on October 19, 1984. The National Archives became an independent agency on April 1, 1985.

Now that the administrative placement of the Archives within the structure of the Federal government has been solved, and the Archives is free to set its own priorities, to tell its own story to the Office of Management and Budget and the Congress, and to rise or fall on its own merits, great changes can be expected. It is probably futile now to speculate on those changes, but it does seem clear that there are other forces at work that will change the Ar-

chives in the future. Here are a few of the emerging issues and problems that I see in our future: First, the Archives' public visibility and usefulness in the development of public policy will increase. One pundit maintains that Richard Nixon did more for the National Archives than any President since FDR. He is right in so far as public visibility is concerned. The genealogical craze that blossomed after the television series "Roots" also helped to make archives well known. Now, having emerged from obscurity, we must expect the information in the National Archives to be used more often by policy makers. I had this brought forcefully home to me when I was subpoenaed by the U.S. Senate and ordered to produce "all material in the National Archives" dealing with Alexander Haig during his confirmation hearings as Secretary of State. Second, the role of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) as the National Archives liaison with the archival and historical community will increase. I mentioned earlier that Jameson's passion for a Commission to collect and oversee the publication of important documents resulted in the inclusion of the Commission in the original National Archives legislation. In the 50 years since then, and particularly in the past 20 years, the Commission has been extraordinarily successful in its work. Support has been provided for the editing of multi-volumes of papers, for microfilming, for preservation, and for studies of archival and records management problems. Most recently the State Assessment Grants, which surveyed archival practices and conditions in almost every governmental jurisdiction in the U.S., promise to have a major impact. Third, technology promises to change the entire information industry in the United States, and the Archives will certainly be changed in the process. Where these changes will lead is unknown, but our goal in using the new technology must be to aid in the management and control of the records of the future. In time, technology may provide control over the life cycle of records and it may ultimately lead to connections between NARA and the broader network of information sources now being created. This way access to archival information, pioneered by NARS' use of microfilm, can be further expanded.

Access may also be expanded by the new storage techniques offered by optical disks and other technological advances. These technologies have the added benefit of contributing in major ways to solving the massive preservation problem facing archives around the world. Here the National Archives has a great opportunity to assert national leadership, since no other archives in this country will have the funds or expertise necessary to work in these areas.

Fourth, archival education, a topic of concern to me personally, must have more attention from NARA in the future. Many of the current programs in basic archival education are fine and should grow and flourish. But remember that while Melville Dewey began formal library instruction in 1883, most archival education programs are less than a decade old. The Archives' instructional role is not clear for the future, but it should possibly include internships, advanced seminars, continuing education and other activities to cooperate with existing university archival programs. And we must not overlook our responsibility to educate the public through our museum and exhibit programs. Fifth, NARA must work at strengthening its ties with its various publics. I have mentioned the role of the NHPRC vis-a-vis historians, but it is through the National Archives Advisory Council that we are able to have formal relationships with almost all groups that use the Archives.

Finally, since I began by talking about the coalition that was formed by J. Franklin Jameson to get the National Archives established, I would like to end with a few words about the necessity for a new coalition to preserve archives. No one would deny that the study of history has experienced a kind of renaissance in the past decade. The bicentennial of the Revolution, the "Roots" phenomenon, and now the approaching Constitutional bicentennial have all contributed to this. As a nation we delight in historic sites, in genealogy, in historical museums, and even television historical epics. Our historical consciousness has been raised

and we have all benefited. But, at the same time, it seems unbelievable that so few people who are involved with reconstructing their small part of the past or in enjoying and benefiting from the "history boom" have grasped the connection between the preservation of records, primarily public records, and the preservation of history. Yet, librarians, archivists, academics and others who know the value of records have not found a way to unite their various constituencies in support of our common cause. Collectively we have failed to find a way to seek the support on a national basis of the society and government whose documents we so carefully preserve, whose history we record and analyze, whose culture we proudly exhibit. The lesson, "that without records there is no history," has not been impressed on our leaders or public-spirited citizens. A way must be found to do so.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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