

YOUR NATIONAL ARCHIVES¹

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The first known archival institutions² were set up by the Greeks of Athens in the fifth century before Christ. Athenians kept their valuable documents in the temple, next to the court house in the public square. The temple contained treaties, laws, minutes of the popular assembly, and other state documents. Among the documents were the statement Socrates wrote in his own defense, the manuscripts of model plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the lists of the victors in the Olympic games. Although archival developments during the decline of the ancient civilizations and the Middle Ages had some influence on the modern period, archival institutions of today are primarily the result of recent movements.

The first modern national archives was established by France on September 12, 1790, keep the records of the New France that signified its gains and displayed its glories. During the French Revolution, institutions that had survived since feudal times had been eliminated. Radicals were for destroying the old records to obliterate every vestige of the hated ancient regime. Wiser men argued that the records should be preserved as evidence of the progress made by the new order. The records, they claimed, were public property and the public should have access to them. They should be saved to protect public and private rights. This point of view prevailed and the French saved their ancient records. By a series of national laws, the *Archives Nationales* took over the records of every branch of the central government, as well as those of the provinces, communes, churches, hospitals, universities, noble families. This first true national archives made three lasting contributions to the archival field:

1. An independent, national archival institution was established,
2. The principle of public access to archives was proclaimed,

¹The editor, with Mrs. Owens' permission, has shortened this paper by removing some personal, technical, and descriptive materials.

²"Archives" are described as "all records made or received by any public or private institution in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business and preserved by that institution or its legitimate successors in unbroken custody as evidence of its: functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities, because of the informational value of the data contained therein."

3. The responsibility of the state for the care of valuable documents of the past was recognized.

About fifty years later, in 1838, the English set up a central archival institution, the Public Record Office. Unlike French Revolutionaries, the English did not seek preservation of evidence of newly-won privileges. The rights and privileges of the English people, which had been established through the centuries, were embodied in registers. But for six centuries these registers and other documents had been haphazardly stuffed into closets, garrets, and castle towers. The Public Record Office was organized to gradually round up what records could be saved and to establish policies for future preservation of similar documents. Unlike the *Archives Nationales*, the Public Record Office is concerned only with the records of the central government.

Other European countries likewise made historic progress during the nineteenth century. Probably the most efficient and thorough was the archival institution of the Prussians. Their principles, in time, influenced all archivists who followed them.

In the United States as early as 1810 a Congressional committee found the public papers "in a state of great disorder and exposure." In 1818 an act was passed to set aside two fire-proof rooms in the capitol to house the records of the Continental Congress. This was the embryo of the Library of Congress. Fires in 1814, 1833, and 1877 destroyed valuable records. The fire of 1877 led to the appointment of a presidential commission to look into the situation, and Rutherford B. Hayes became the first president to recommend establishment of a national archives. The commission visualized "a cheap building . . . as a hall of records." After the American Historical Association was organized in 1884, it pressed for the establishment of a national archives. Early in the twentieth century a group of the most astute archivists in the country made a sort of inventory of government records and where they were to be found.

With the coming of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency, in 1933, the proponents for a National Archives found a president who not only understood the need but one who acted upon his understanding. On June 19, 1934, he signed the National Archives Act and dreams that some had come to look upon as impossible suddenly became reality. Those who had been making

studies and surveys knew where the records were; now they could go and get them. With the Archives Building already under construction, the newly appointed staff of the National archives searched virtually every public building in Washington and the basements, attics, and storage rooms of most of them yielded some government records.

Not all records had been carelessly kept. The State Department, from its infancy had preserved meticulously its records and made use of them by efficient finding systems. As the other branches of the national government turned over their records to the National Archives, the archivists requested the State Department to do likewise. At first, the State Department refused. But the National Archives Act had established a national archival agency in the full sense of the word and no department archives were to be permitted. Every record of the federal government was to be given into the custody of the National Archives. Under pressure, the State Department yielded, and its records were transferred. Finally, there yet remained but one hurdle—to wrest from the Library of Congress the original Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The librarians urged exception in the case of these two documents since they were the two chief tourist attractions of the Library of Congress and since the Library had saved them so long. But the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were records of the federal government. It was feared that should the National Archives yield on these, other government officials could withhold a document. And so, with bands playing and flags flying, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence journeyed with all proper ceremony to their new home in the rotunda of the National Archives Building on 9th, Constitution and Pennsylvania.

In the twenty years following the signing of the National Archives Act, American archivists made more progress than Europeans had in the preceding century and a half. The National Archives makes claim to five distinct contributions to the archives movement:

1. Its building set standards that will never be disregarded by future planners.
2. The National Archives introduced new methods of restoration, preservation, and photographic reproduction.

3. The National Archives set up new methods of retirement of non-active records, arrangement, and description.
4. The National Archives developed the Record Group plan of classification.
5. The National Archives established a reference service that breaks with the old viewpoint of archivists' proprietary attitude.

Your National Archives—how does it operate? To attempt to answer this, here is a sketchy description of the processes through which documents go from their creation to their use as records in the National Archives.

By act of Congress, every document of every federal government agency is eventually the responsibility of the National Archives. The National Archives Building will house fifteen million cubic feet of records. Each year, at present rate, government agencies produce approximately thirty million cubic feet of documents. These, obviously, cannot all go into the building on 9th, Constitution, and Pennsylvania. Since 1939 a records management program determines exactly what to do with documents as they are produced.

Routine documents are now produced on standard forms and are kept by standard finding aid procedures. When they are retired, by arbitrary time schedules, they are disposed of one of four ways: out-right destruction, waste-paper, record centers, National Archives Building. Those that are out-right destroyed are usually papers that are confidential but have lost their usefulness to the government. Documents bearing important signatures are usually destroyed when they are no longer useful. Waste-paper is the largest single industrial product in Washington. More documents go this route than any other. Waste-paper purchasers are required to macerate government documents so that they cannot be sold as documents. A third route for retired documents is to the Record Centers. The National Archives maintains sixteen of these scattered throughout the country. Millions of feet of government records find temporary care in these until decisions are made for their destruction or permanent housing. The fourth way that documents may go is to the National Archives Building. Only one per cent of all documents produced by the federal government become archival.

The one per cent singled out as permanent records arrive in the National Archives Building by trucks, which are unloaded in the basement. Employees transfer the records to gas chambers for fumigation to kill vermin. After this process, employees determine to which section of which stack-level the records will go. There are seventeen stack levels, each divided into four sections by firewalls. Certain levels are sacred to certain branches of the government and assignment of space is almost automatic.

When the records arrive on their permanent stack level, an archivist then takes them over. He is an expert in the branch of the government originating the records. He is familiar with its history, operations, personnel, and all records it has heretofore produced. He transfers the records to permanent boxes, drawers, or shelves, but he does not make any changes in their arrangement. He then makes an inventory. The inventory will *attribute* the records to their office of origin, *name* what the records are, *qualify* them functionally, *limit* them between dates, and *measure* them quantitatively. The inventory identifies the records with their "Record Group" and describes them so that a searcher may more easily identify them. When the records have been described and shelved, they are ready for use.

The records at National Archives are used primarily by the agencies of the federal government. In the seventeen stack levels the phones ring constantly. Archivists answer them and ferret out the data needed. Distant inquiries come by letter. The individual searcher with a *bona fide* need is welcome and will receive courteous attention. It is impossible, however, for the individual searcher to find what he wants for himself. There is no roomful of catalog cards describing everything such as the Library of Congress provides. Archives cannot be classified by such rigid systems as Dewey-Decimal. National Archives can afford to adopt elaborate finding systems because no one but its own staff need ever learn them.

My internship project³ in the General Land Office section was to take fifty-seven cubic feet of Revolutionary Bounty Land Script Application files between 1794 and 1906 and prepare an inventory for them. They were simply sitting on the shelves, but

³In the summer of 1962, the writer participated in a month-long institute on the preservation and administration of archives conducted by the National Archives and the American University.

no inventory had been prepared for them. To do this, I went to the Archives Library and acquainted myself with the nine legislative acts that had created the bounty land and described the scrip files within these acts. My inventory had to be acceptable for me to pass the course and then it became one of the thousands of inventory finding lists of the Archives.

In addition to the uses already described, the National Archives performs a number of specialized services. It maintains a large room almost exclusively used by genealogists and provides them not only with a vast array of records in books, papers, and on microfilm, but also provides expert assistants and elaborate self-help finding aids.

The historical documents publication program carries on in the National Archives Building the editing of a mass of historical material of enough popular interest to justify publication in book form.

The microfilm department operates dozens of cameras and enormous development laboratories to make available on microfilm millions of feet of documents. Microfilm may be borrowed or bought. With the exception of a small per cent of classified materials, the records in the National Archives are available to the public. All an individual has to do is to prove his need of any item.

There are fully two floors filled by the cartographic records. This division cares for maps dating back of the Revolution to Indian maps, maps of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. There are war maps made on cloth so they can be jammed in the pocket when fording a river; there are maps containing secret data printed on rice paper that can be eaten if the bearer is captured. There are tons and tons of maps, besides an enormous amount of documentary materials related to them. There are aerial maps that can chart half a continent in a shot. To care for such maps, they must be cut into sections.

When the National Archives Building was completed, it cost \$8,750,000. Reporters, at that time, described it as "the jewel box" to hold choice bits of historical records. Archivists hastened to correct this false concept. The National Archives Building is the storehouse of the ordinary documents telling of the day to day operations of a self-governing people, preserved and made ready for study "that the future may learn from the past."