

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT FIFTY

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Nineteen eighty-four marks the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the National Archives of the United State.¹ Many events have taken place in celebration of this milestone: the post office issued a National Archives commemorative postage stamp and the National Archives' major exhibition mounted in the Archives building entitled "Recent America" opened to rave reviews. Both the National Association of State Archivists and Records Administrators (NASARA) and the Society of American Archivists held their annual meetings in Washington to add to the festivities. Aside from the celebration, anniversaries are usually time for reflection and reassessment, and this is true for the National Archives, despite our short history as an institution. The point of this activity is, of course, to learn from the past, to help us understand who we are as an institution, and even possibly to indicate where we are going.

The U.S. government began well in terms of records. The Secretary of the First Continental Congress (1774) exhibited solicitous concern for the safety and preservation of the earliest records of our government, and today they are in excellent condition. But by 1797 when President Washington left office, he was obliged to set an unfortunate precedent by taking his papers and records with him since there was no place to deposit them, despite his stated belief that they were a "species of public property." By 1800, after the Federal government had moved to the District of Columbia, the first of a long series of major fires that would vastly reduce America's documentary heritage occurred. The list of these conflagrations is long: in 1800 at the War Department; in 1801 at the Treasury; in 1814 during the British invasion; in 1833 at the Treasury again; in 1836 at the Post Office and the Patent Office, etc.

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. (The oldest of the "ancient" records was 34 years old at the time!) Beginning in 1836, various presidents requested appropriations for depositories for safekeeping the archives. Between 1889 and 1903, 30 bills were introduced in Congress to resolve the sad condition of our archives. Finally, in 1903, land was purchased for an archives building but nothing else happened. As one politician wrote years later, "Nobody seemed to take interest enough in the subject to have the building put up after the land was bought." 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.

In the years following the American Civil War the activities of the federal government grew dramatically as the United States grew to world prominence. Increased government activity intensified the problem of housing government records, and civil servants's agitation for an archives grew. At the same time, legislation providing pensions for Civil War veterans was enacted and the initial inability of the government to cope with this massive program brought home to the Congress the necessity of preserving records for use by the government to serve the people. On another front, the growth of graduate education in the United States, following in the wake of American universities adopting of the German requirement of documentation for "scientific" historical writing, transformed historians into a new interest group demanding an archives.

But, even if the conditions were ripe for a national archives to be established, a campaign to convince the Congress to vote the necessary funds was needed. To achieve this end an unusual coalition was assembled. The main component of this group was the American Historical Association. The persistent historians provided essential leadership. From this national organization support in the form of resolutions and letters to Senators and Congressmen was solicited from other organizations, local historical societies, political and patriotic groups, and libraries. Slowly the net spread. But Congress is not noted for its responsiveness either to individual academics or to resolutions passed by learned societies. More was required. The muscle, in terms of numbers, was found in 1921 in the American Legion, the association of World War I veterans. Slowly the Legion's attention was maneuvered away from supporting construction of a massive national memorial in Washington to supporting efforts to properly preserve the records of World War I and eventually to supporting preservation of all the official records of the U.S. government. Undoubtedly, the example of the Civil War pension files proved helpful.

The press was the final component of the coalition. Once the Legion decided to support the idea of a national archives, William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper baron, 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 paper 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." With such a coalition, action was inevitable. But Congress, preserving its prerogatives and its own timetable, waited three more years. Finally in 1926, a provision of the Public Building Act (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 if the building was designed by the famed architect John Russell Pope and located on Pennsylvania Avenue exactly midway between the White House and the Capitol. It is significant to recognize that another 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 in the United States no practicing archivists familiar with federal archives who could have helped with planning the building or organizing the agency. Relatively few states had active archival programs, and none had developed full programs or had built archival buildings. Earlier plans for federal officials to study and tour major European archival institutions had been abandoned during World War I and never revived. However, the European practice of housing archives in buildings initially built for other purposes probably would have made such a tour of limited value. The decision to build a building — modeled more on a monumental Carnegie public library than anything else — and later to create an agency to occupy it, provided a unique opportunity for the pioneer 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 19th century concept of a “hall of records” had been rejected. The National 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 National Archives was to have both physical and legal control of the records in its charge; it was to control access to them; it was given records management responsibilities; it was to include “non-traditional” records like motion pictures and recordings in its holdings; and it was mandated 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 during the depression years, and talent of the highest quality was readily available. In 1935, when 132 staff positions were filled, the Archives was able to select from 15,000 applicants. The professional staff was mainly comprised of historians, 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 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; others were theoretical, such as the development of the basic unit of archival control and organization, the record group. But it was in the area of access — making information available — where the National Archives substantially outdistanced all other archival institutions. Almost from the formation of the agency, work was begun preparing guides to the holdings. The first was issued in 1938, within three years of the first researchers’ visits. Naturally, phone and mail inquiries were also serviced. The concept of special access — the practice of reserving the best materials for a few (selected on the basis of politics or scholarly reputation)

— was discouraged and quickly disappeared. Perhaps the most important contribution to access was made through the Archives microfilm program. Scholarly organizations had begun microfilming source materials before the National Archives was established. However, the wide use of this medium to preserve information, reduce bulk, and provide quick and easy access for all was an Archives achievement. By 1941 the Archives had microfilmed or otherwise copied over 75,000 pages of records each year. To extend the advantage one step further, the Archives began retaining a negative print of frequently used film so that positive copies could be quickly and economically produced for users.

In 1939 another innovation entered the picture: the first federal presidential library. Franklin Roosevelt conceived the idea of a library that would contain his papers, as well as those of his associates, and various gifts, artifacts, and other memorabilia, in order to fully document both a President's life and his administration. Since 1939 the network of "presidential archival depositories" (as the law calls them) has grown to seven, with the prospect of three additions in the next few years — the Jimmy Carter Library in Georgia, and probably buildings for Presidents Nixon and Reagan in California.

The National Archives was, in a real sense, the creation of historians. 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 National Archives 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 by the early archivist-historians.

Years later the Archivist of the United States Wayne C. Grover noted that it was almost inconceivable "that the Federal government, in the twenty-two years from 1930 to 1952, should have created more than seven times as many records as it did during its previous 155 years of history." This fact, Grover stated, was the reason archivists "began to go berserk — frightened at birth, one might say — by a very real monster." Fear of the monster ultimately lead archivists to become involved in every aspect of records from their creation to their destruction or preservation. This level of involvement with what 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 such areas as space, equipment, and personnel costs.

Government economy and efficiency, plus archivists' concern that 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 functions of the National Archives: record centers and records management. The Archives' initial successes in managing current and semi-current records, and the resulting potential for 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 (GSA). After 15 years of independence, the Archives, now renamed the National Archives and Records Service (or NARS, the familiar acronym), found itself a small component 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 National Archives and its work. Today one could hardly imagine a president who, worried about the fate of the large bulk of federal records created during the war, toyed with the idea of turning the Pentagon building into a records storage area after the war.

When the National Archives was absorbed into the General Services Administration in 1949, it appeared, at first, that the new organization 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. Preserving 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 President Nixon and 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.

Rather than go into details of the unhappy relationship with GSA, it is sufficient to say that the relationship between the Archives and its parent agency was less than successful. But this sad story has a happy ending. On Friday, October 19, 1984, President Ronald Reagan signed into law a bill reestablishing the National Archives as an independent agency, effective April 1, 1985. In a statement released by the White House at the time of the bill signing, the president said that he “concurred” in the assessment that the National Archives had “suffered as a result of its placement within the General Services Administration.” He went on to call attention to the “irreplaceable national treasures” held by the Archives and stated that “the agency that looks after the historical records of the federal government should be accorded a status that is commensurate with its important responsibilities.”

Obviously, all of us at the National Archives agree with the president's assessment. But rather than dwell on that part of the past, it would be more appropriate to recount how this legislation came to be. In the tradition of the founding of the National Archives, the independence bill was also the result of a coalition. Once again historians were prominent, firstly as individuals who formed the Emergency Committee to Save the National Archives and the Coalition to Preserve Our Documentary Heritage. In time the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History assumed its current role as our allied disciplines' voice on Capitol Hill, and came to play a major role in this legislation. Genealogists provided the numbers in this case, and once again the press was crucial. Many other individuals were important, even critical, in the pursuit of independence, and in time I hope to acknowledge their contributions. But by now the lesson should be clear;

coalitions of knowledgeable and determined people are essential to the National Archives.

Public Law 98-497, The National Archives and Records Administration Act of 1984, will have a profound impact on the National Archives and its ability to accomplish its mission in the future. The name of the agency will be changed to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and the next Archivist of the United States will be appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate. But more important, the National Archives will be free to set its own priorities, to tell its own story to the Office of Management and Budget and the Congress, to rise or fall on its own merits. Great changes can be expected, but I am sure that all of these will be clearly aimed toward the accomplishment of the mission of the agency: to make available to the government and to the people the records of all parts of the government that have been determined to have sufficient historical value to warrant their continued preservation. It is probably futile to speculate on the changes that might occur in the next few years, but it does seem clear that there are other forces at work which will change the Archives in the future. Among a few of the emerging issues and problems that the National Archives must confront are the following:

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 Franklin Roosevelt. He is right insofar as public visibility is concerned. The phenomenal interest in genealogy that blossomed in the wake of the TV series "Roots" also helped to make archives much better known. Having emerged from obscurity, we must expect the information in the National Archives to be used more often by policy makers. This was brought forcefully home to me when I was subpoenaed by the U.S. Senate and ordered to produce "all material in the Archives" dealing with Alexander Haig for use during his confirmation hearings as Secretary of State.

Second: The new National Archives, and particularly the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) will have a much larger role in assisting the American archival community, particularly state and municipal archives, whose mission is also to preserve public records. There is an obvious need for this assistance. The National Archives is in the best possible position of any archival institution to provide this service because of its size, its variety of activities and records, as well as its ability to experiment while drawing on the widest pool of expertise.

Third: Technology promises to change the entire information industry in the United States, and the National Archives will certainly be changed in the process. Where these changes will lead is unclear, but our goal in using the new technology must be to aid us in the management and control of the records of the future. For example, National Archives staff are intensively studying the MARC format for the description of records to determine if it is applicable to the holdings of the National Archives. If so, the promise of NARA becoming part of a nationwide network of archival sources is greatly accelerated. 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. Thus access to

archival information, pioneered by the National Archives' use of microfilm, can be further expanded.

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

Fourth: Archival education 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. Remember, however, that Melville Dewey began formal library instruction in 1883 and most archival education programs are less than a decade old. Rapid change and increased complexity of archival problems, legal questions, and sophisticated preservation strategies, to cite but a few examples, will require a high level education. What the configuration of this instruction will be, I do not know. But it will probably not be entry level education because complex problems will require advanced training. The National Archives in Washington will be an essential part of this instruction, which should include Presidential Libraries and records centers, and should be undertaken in cooperation with several major universities. NARA, fortunately, already has, or has planned, facilities on the university campuses of Emory, Michigan, Stanford, and Texas.

Finally, since this article began with a description of the coalition that was formed to establish the National Archives, and stressed the importance of the coalition that was formed to secure the passage of the independence bill, it is fitting to close with a few words about the necessity for a new and permanent coalition to preserve archives. No one would deny that the study of history has experienced a certain renaissance in the past decade. The Bicentennial of the Revolution, the "Roots" phenomenon, and now the approaching Constitutional bicentennial all have contributed to this renaissance. As a nation we delight in historic sites, in genealogy, in historical museums, and even in TV 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.

At a time of declining (or, at best, static) public support for cultural and educational institutions, archivists, academics, and others who know the value of records have not found a way to unite our various constituencies in ongoing support of our cause. We need to find more effective ways to get the attention and win 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 fully impressed on our leaders or public spirited citizens. We must find a way to do so, and we know from the example of the National Archives independence battle that it *can* be done. Moreover, it must be done if archives are to flourish, museums prosper, and history (in all of its dimensions) is to find its rightful place in the sun.

FOOTNOTES

1. This article is based upon remarks by Robert M. Warner, Archivist of the United States, before the Annual Fall Meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri, on November 2, 1984.