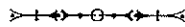


Modern Archives
PRINCIPLES & TECHNIQUES



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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY

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CHAPTER I

Importance of Archival Institutions

IF THE average man on the street were asked why governments establish archival institutions, he would probably ask, "What are archives and what are archival institutions?" If, then, the purposes of an archival institution were explained to him, he would probably dismiss the matter with the comment that the whole thing is just another example of governmental extravagance. As for the archives themselves his final query would more than likely be, "Why not burn the stuff?"

With this popular attitude toward archival work common in all countries it is remarkable that any archival institutions have been established with public funds. There must, therefore, have been other reasons than popular demand for their establishment.

ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Archival institutions probably had their origins in the ancient Greek civilization. In the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ the Athenians kept their valuable documents in the temple of the mother of the gods, that is, the *Mêtrōon*, next to the court house, in the public square in Athens. 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 defence, the manuscripts of model plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the lists of the victors in the Olympic games. These writings were preserved and transmitted from the earliest times until perhaps the third century after Christ in the form of papyrus rolls. Although they are not now kept in archival institutions, their initial preservation was in such institutions.

Although archival developments during the decline of the ancient civilizations and the Middle Ages had some influence on the character of archival establishments in the early modern period, it is sufficient for my present purpose to consider modern institutions; and of these, despite the great significance of developments in Germany, Italy, Spain, and other countries, those

of France, England, and the United States will best serve to illustrate the importance accorded to the preservation of national archival resources.

FRANCE

The basic importance of archives to established society can best be seen by observing how they were treated when a society broke down. During the French revolution institutions that had been evolved gradually since feudal times were destroyed. Foremost among these were the institutions of the state; but others—religious and economic as well as governmental—were also uprooted. Property rights and privileges were swept away. An attempt was made to obliterate every vestige of the hated ancient regime.

In this period of upheaval, what happened to the records of society? In the initial fervor of the revolution, in 1789, the National Assembly established an archival institution, in which its acts were to be housed and exhibited. A year later, by the decree of September 12, 1790, this archival institution was made the *Archives Nationales* of Paris. It was the first national archives established by any country. In it were to be kept the records of the New France—records that signified its gains and displayed its glories.

What was to be done with the records of the past? Should the rich archival treasures of the ancient regime be kept—records of the royal council in the *Trésor des chartes* dating back to the 12th century, or records of *curia régis*, the oldest central governmental unit with origins in the 13th century? The more radical revolutionaries insisted on their destruction, for in them were embodied the rights and privileges of an old order. But the more conservative argued that these treasures were now public property and therefore should be preserved. Since they were public property, the public should have access to them; for the public should have the opportunity of searching official records to protect its own interests, which were involved in the liquidation of feudal rights and property relationships.

A decree of June 25, 1794, established a nationwide public archives administration. Under this decree the *Archives Nationales* was given jurisdiction over the records of the various central government agencies in Paris, which had theretofore maintained their own archival depots; over the records of the provinces, communes, churches, hospitals, universities, and noble families; and over district archival depots in which records of defunct and abolished local government agencies had been placed during the

revolution. The decree also proclaimed the right of access to public records, thus becoming a sort of archival "bill of rights." The nationwide archives administration was further solidified by the law of October 26, 1796, which gave the *Archives Nationales* jurisdiction over the archival institutions that were established in the main cities of the *départements* to take over the records formerly held in district archival depots.

Throughout the French revolution records were recognized as basic to the maintenance of an old society and to the establishment of a new. Records of the old society were preserved primarily, and perhaps unintentionally, for cultural uses. Records of the new were preserved for the protection of public rights. The recognition of the importance of records to society was one of the important gains of the French revolution. This recognition resulted in three important accomplishments in the archival field: (1) an independent, national, archival administration was established, (2) the principle of public access to archives was proclaimed, and (3) the responsibility of the state for the care of the valuable documents of the past was recognized.

ENGLAND

About fifty years later, on August 14, 1838, a central archival institution was established in England. This was the Public Record Office. The reasons for its establishment were quite different from those that impelled the French revolutionaries to establish the *Archives Nationales*. The preservation of evidence of newly won privileges was not one of the reasons. Quite the contrary, for the basic rights and privileges of the English people, which had been established gradually through the centuries, were embodied in registers. From the 13th century onward the contents of important documents, either in an abridged or in a complete form, had been entered on rolls of parchment. These entries, which were acceptable as legal evidence, made reference to the originals unnecessary.

The reasons for the establishment of the British Public Record Office were both practical and cultural. The practical considerations related to the conditions under which public records were found. Although the volume of the rolls in their entirety was considerable, it was not sufficient to impel the government to create a central archival institution for their maintenance. The files that were subsidiary to the rolls were a different matter. Not only had they, lacking value as legal evidence, been neglected; but they had increased greatly as the ancient machi-

nery of the Chancery, the Exchequer, and the Courts of Law gave way to a more complex administration.

In the reign of Charles II, William Prynne, as Keeper of the Records, had tried to restore order to the archives, which "had for many years lain bound together in a confused chaos, under corroding, putrefying cobwebs, dust, and filth in the darkest corner of Caesar's Chapel in the White Tower." For his purpose he said he employed soldiers and women "to remove and cleanse them from their filthiness, who, soon growing weary of this tedious work, left them almost as foul as they found them."¹ A century later certain documents of the reign of Charles I could not be found until under the direction of an ancient clerk some old books were unearthed in a room near the gateway of Whitehall.

A disastrous fire in the Cotton Library resulted in a report in 1732, which Sir Hilary Jenkinson says "may well have provoked misgivings not only as to the danger from fire in many of the Repositories in which vast masses of Public Records were vaguely known to exist but also as to the possibility of their loss by other means than accident."² By 1800 records were found in over fifty different and widely scattered repositories in London. This situation led to a full-dress inquiry by a "Select Committee appointed to inquire into the State of the Public Records." As a result of this inquiry a Record Commission was appointed in 1800, the first of six such commissions appointed between 1800 and 1834. The working of the government, however, was so proverbially slow that a committee was appointed by the House of Commons to inquire into the work of the last of the Record Commissions. This committee in 1836 reported that in one repository all public records "were found to be very damp; some were in a state of inseparable adhesion to the stone walls; there were numerous fragments which had only just escaped entire consumption by vermin, and many were in the last stage of putrefaction. Decay and damp had rendered a large quantity so fragile as hardly to admit of being touched; others, particularly those in the form of rolls, were so coagulated together that they could not be uncoiled."³ This inquiry led to the passage of the Public Record Act of 1838.

The cultural impetus to establish the Public Record Office came from the historians. From the 17th century onward they had attempted to develop a public recognition of the value of records. Their efforts, however, met with little immediate public or official response. As late as 1848 a Select Committee

of the House of Commons reported that "it is but a small fraction of the public who know the extent and value, and comprehend the singular completeness of the historical documents of this country. Our Public Records excite no interest, even in the functionaries whose acts they record, the departments whose proceedings they register; or the proprietors to whose property rights they furnish the most authentic, perhaps the only title-deeds."⁴

The Public Record Office, under the statute that created it, was made a separate department; it was not subordinated, as in France, to a ministry. It was concerned only with records of the central government, not with those of local or private origins.

THE UNITED STATES

About a hundred years after the establishment of the Public Record Office, the United States government established a national archives. This was done by the Act of June 19, 1934. Throughout the 19th century repeated efforts had been made to induce the government to take better care of its public records.⁵ As early as 1810 a Congressional committee found the public papers "in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe nor honorable to the nation." Fires in 1814, 1833, 1877, and at other times, destroyed valuable records. The fire of 1877 led to the appointment of a Presidential commission to investigate the conditions under which the public records were kept. In consequence of its report President Rutherford B. Hayes recommended the establishment of a national archives in his annual messages of 1878 and 1879. "The records of the Government," President Hayes said in the first of these messages, "constitute a most valuable collection for the country, whether we consider their pecuniary value or their historical importance." In the decades following this message many Congressional attempts were made to provide better storage facilities for these records. They had as their objective the construction of "a cheap building . . . as a hall of records." Meanwhile, the American Historical Association, which was organized in 1884, had begun to press for the establishment of a national archives. In 1899 it set up a Public Archives Commission, which between the years 1900 and 1912 published various inventories of State archives and sponsored the publication of guides to Federal archives and to archives in Europe relating to American history, and which held annual meetings from 1909 on. The Association, in discussions with the President

and Congress in 1908, stressed the importance of an archival establishment "for researches in American history." In 1910 it petitioned Congress to erect "a national archive depository, where the records of the Government may be concentrated, properly cared for, and preserved." While Congress authorized the development of building plans in 1913, it was not until 1933 that the construction of such a building was begun.

REASONS FOR ARCHIVAL ESTABLISHMENTS

To recapitulate, what reasons led France, England, and the United States to establish archival institutions?

The immediate, and obviously the most impelling reason was the practical need of improving governmental efficiency. At the time of the revolution the pre-revolutionary central ministries of France had filled record repositories all over Paris, while in the interior of the country the archival depots in the districts were overflowing. In England five centuries of government operations had filled many scattered record repositories in London. The records of the Exchequer, for example, had been moved time and again from one place to another, "with what losses and confusion it is hard to estimate," to quote Jenkinson.⁶ In the United States, during a century and a half of the Federal government's existence, public records filled attics, basements, and other out-of-the-way places, into which they had been shoved when they were no longer needed for current work. In the course of time a government naturally amasses so many records that some action must be taken with respect to them. When such records glut government offices they hamper the conduct of business, they occupy valuable office space, and they serve as a daily reminder that something should be done with them.

The second reason was a cultural one. Public archives are one among many types of cultural resources, which include books, manuscripts, and museum treasures. They are as important a resource as parks, or monuments, or buildings. Since they are produced by a government, they are peculiarly its resource. In contrast to other types of cultural resources, which may be administered by private agencies, archives can be administered by no other agency than the government itself. The care of valuable public records, therefore, is a public obligation. This fact was first recognized in France. During the revolutionary period, it has been noted, records of the National Assembly were kept to establish the new order, but the records of the ancient regime,

which were considered to be public property, were kept primarily for cultural purposes. These cultural papers (or *Chartes et Monuments appartenant à l'histoire, aux sciences et aux arts*) were set aside for preservation in the *Archives Nationales*. In England and the United States historians were the first to recognize the importance of public records, and largely through their insistence national archives were established in the two countries. Historians saw that such records in their entirety reflect not only the growth and functioning of a government, but also the development of a nation. In the United States, where they stood in the vanguard of the movement to establish a national archives, their views were ably expressed by the late Professor Charles M. Andrews (1863-1943), eminent American historian, who said:

The more it is realized that the true history of a State and a people lies not in episodes and surface events, but in the substantial features of its constitutional and social organization, the more will archives be valued and preserved. No people can be deemed masters of their own history until their public records, gathered, cared for, and rendered accessible to the investigator, have been systematically studied and the importance of their contents determined. . . . It has been well said that "the care which a nation devotes to the preservation of the monuments of its past may serve as a true measure of the degree of civilization to which it has attained." Among such monuments, and holding first place in value and importance, are public archives, national and local.⁷

The third reason was one of personal interest. The French revolutionaries were partly impelled by this reason to establish the *Archives Nationales*. Because they were concerned with the destruction of an old society and the creation of a new one, they were made conscious of the importance of public records in defining various social, economic, and political relationships. They found that such records were fundamental to the protection of feudal rights and privileges, so they established a special agency (*agence temporaire des titres*) that made a point of segregating for disposal all records pertaining to such rights and privileges (*titres féodaux*). They also found such records to be fundamental in establishing newly won rights and privileges, and so they marked for retention all papers useful in substantiating the rights of the state to confiscated properties. Public records obviously define the relations of the government to the governed. They are the ultimate proof for all permanent civic rights and privileges; and the immediate proof for all temporary property and financial rights that are derived from or are connected with the citizen's relations to the government.

The fourth reason was an official one. Records, even the older ones, are needed by a government for its work. They reflect the origins and growth of a government and are the main source of information on all its activities. They constitute the basic administrative tools by means of which the work of a government is accomplished. They contain evidence of financial and legal commitments that must be preserved to protect the government. They embody the great fund of official experience that the government needs to give continuity and consistency to its actions, to make policy determinations, and to handle social and economic as well as organizational and procedural problems. In short, they are the foundation upon which the governmental structure is built.