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GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS
IN THE UNITED STATES

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The situation with regard to government publications in the United States is peculiar and complex. Even before the establishment of the Government Printing Office in 1852, the system had been inaugurated of allowing Senators and Members of Congress to designate certain libraries to which all government publications published by order of Congress should regularly be sent. Under this system there are maintained, at the present time some, 500 collections of thousands of volumes each of government publications in state, college, high school, society and public libraries all over the United States. In addition, for over half a century, each Senator and Member of Congress has been supplied with a large quota of these same documents for gratuitous distribution to his constituents. Furthermore, until 1895, each publishing bureau of the government conducted a generous distribution of its numerous publications. In 1895, the distribution of the bureaus was to a considerable degree centralized in the then newly created office of the Superintendent of Documents.

It will thus be seen that in the United States both the public and the libraries have had ample opportunity for a long-standing acquaintance with government publications.

This fact must be taken into account when passing upon the unusually numerous catalogues of government publications issued in the United States.

The earliest effective catalogue is what is known as the Ben. Perley Poore Catalogue. It is retroactive and, in structure, it is a chronological, descriptive list of all the Congressional and of many departmental publications issued from 1789 to 1881. This catalogue was printed at the expense of the government. From 1881 to 1895 was a period of individual effort. To these years belong the Ames Catalogue of Congressional publications, covering the years 1889 to 1893, the so-called McKee Indexes to Reports of Committees, from 1789 to 1887, in two volumes, and the Hickox Monthly Catalogue of all government publications, in ten volumes, from 1885 to 1894. The two latter were private ventures; the former was a government publication. In 1895, the Office of the Superintendent of Documents was established and a fixed system of indexes and catalogues was created by the law establishing the office. This system comprises first a Monthly Catalogue of all government publications, an index published at the end of each session of Congress to all the congressional publications of that session, and a Document Catalogue published at the close of each Congress and including both departmental and Congressional publications. All these indexes and catalogues are supplied gratuitously to the libraries. These monthly, sessional and congressional catalogues and indexes have appeared without interruption for the past fourteen years.

Very recently the Ames Catalogue was supplemented by two volumes covering the years from 1881 to 1889, thus disposing of the hiatus which had heretofore existed. In other words, the United States has, at the present time, retroactive catalogues from 1789 to date, chiefly themselves government publications.

A fact which may have some significance for governments preparing to consider the issue of current catalogues is the following.

In spite of the lavish free distribution of government

documents in the United States, the proceeds of the sales of documents by the Superintendent of Documents has increased from \$ 889.00 in 1896 (the first fiscal year of the office) to \$ 55,000 in 1908. In addition to this sum, the income from sales of documents by other departments is appreciable. In 1907 it was \$ 18,000 in the Patent Office, \$ 18,000 in the Geological Survey and \$ 4,000 in the Document Division of the Interior Department. This would seem to prove that a popular demand for government publications exists.

Emulating the federal government, several of the states of the United States have proceeded to put the record of their official publications into permanent form. Wisconsin has issued a checklist, California is issuing, and Texas has just begun the issue of a current Catalogue.

Considerable work has been done in the way of recording official publications by bibliographical and historical societies and by private initiative. In 1908 M. R. R. Bowker completed in four parts, his checklist of the publications of the states of the Union and in 1907 the Carnegie Institution of Washington began to publish an index of these publications. Nine volumes of this index are issued. These two enterprises are private ventures.

The Public Archives Commission has issued a monograph on the public archives of New York State and counties, another on the laws and legislative journals of the thirteen colonies, the New York Public Library has issued a checklist of the official publications of New York from 1693 to 1776.

An elaborate bibliography of the colonial laws of Connecticut has been issued by a private Club. M. Worthington Ford has published a bibliography of the publications of the Continental Congress.

This list of various efforts to establish a record of the official publications of the United States and of the states of the Union might be extended. There is enough of it to demonstrate the existence in the United States of the conviction of the desirability of supplying libraries with catalogues of government publications.

It will have been noted that aside from the catalogues

issued by the United States under the act of 1895, and the current lists of California and Texas, all the publications cited were issued as opportunity offered, that is, they were not the outcome of an intention to found and maintain a permanent, continuous record. The expediency of maintaining such a record is the chief burden of the question before you.

Let us therefore consider how far, in the light of the experience of the United States, such a record meets the requirements. It should be said in passing that the manner of adjusting their publications into series varies somewhat in the different governments. Thus every government issues its parliamentary proceedings. Some governments include in this series, as appendices, certain executive and legislative reports, Sweden, France, Italy for example. Other governments, as the United States and England, maintain a distinction between the proceedings and reports. In the United States there is the Congressional Record, the Journals and the Congressional Documents. In England there is Hansard, the Journals and the Parliamentary Papers. In the Scandinavian, German and some Slavic countries, the great statistical series is the repository for the commercial, financial and industrial reports. Such a comprehensive series is unknown in the Latin countries, in England and in the United States.

The manner of adjusting these series has no effect upon the question of a current catalogue. Such a catalogue is undoubtedly the kind with which to start. It gives to libraries and to students a record from which to select what they respectively require and to governments a basis for further bibliographical work.

When it comes to a retroactive catalogue there is need for consideration. In the first place an unqualified retroactive catalogue is an impossibility now for any government more than five years old. The catalogue, if retroactive, must be such for a certain period, and no matter how contracted that period, if it is only a decade, a catalogue that would be worth making would require many years in its completion, with the result that, after all, only a fragment would have been

produced. If a current catalogue is well made, its internal arrangement clear and intelligent, and if it is supplied with cumulative indexes — no other catalogue, retroactive or otherwise, ought to be imperatively necessary. When such a current catalogue is once promoted then the librarian's work, as such, is done.

What remains to be accomplished is the work of a type of specialist, yet to be evolved — a specialist who shall be a composite of the lawyer, the librarian, the bibliographer, the statesman, the statistician, the economist and the historian.

What remains to be accomplished after producing a record of government publications for the collector, i. e. the current catalogue, is to produce a record of government publications for the student.

Such a record should be built along the lines of activity of the state and should be issued in sections. The sections would be confined to specific classes of publications, as the legal and judicial publications, the diplomatic publications, the commercial, the financial etc., publications.

In spite of the multiplicity of document catalogues in the United States, most of them more or less retroactive, we are still unable to produce a checklist of our statute law, of our consular, navy or military regulations, of our financial, commercial or statistical annuals, etc. etc. We have no idea of what constitutes a file of the publications of our Treasury Department, of the contents of Land Office reports, or of those of Indian Affairs.

A publication such as has been referred to, confined to commercial and vital statistics of the various countries, has for some years been under consideration by a special committee of the Royal Statistical Society of Great Britain and of the International Institute of Statistics.

There is, then, no question as to the desirability of governments issuing a current catalogue of their publications. The reasons why no government should attempt a general retroactive catalogue of its publications are chiefly inability

to make it final as to record and length of time required for its completion.

Instead of a retroactive catalogue and in its place, every government ought to be able to produce a record of its chief series and a record of the publications recording at least those activities common to the modern States.

