

THE WORK OF THE PUBLIC  
ARCHIVES COMMISSION  
OF THE  
AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
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The advantages of a centralized administration of archives are so well recognized that any insistence upon them is quite unnecessary. In certain countries however the governmental structure as determined by the constitution makes such a centralized administration impossible. In those countries then the problem presents itself of securing, so far as possible, the advantages of a centralized administration without the administration itself. Nowhere perhaps is the problem more pressing than in the United States of America. Here by reason of its Constitution the national or federal government has no jurisdiction over the archives of the various States which compose the national union. The central government cannot promulgate a single regulation respecting those archives nor exercise the slightest supervision over them. Its authority or jurisdiction extends only over the archives of its own offices. Each State has exclusive jurisdiction over the archives within its own territory (1). Thus, as there are

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(1) Except of course over the archives of such offices of the federal government (post-offices, navy-yards, army posts, customs-houses, land offices, etc.) as may be located within the State. In practice the State government exercises little or no jurisdiction over the archives of the smaller local divisions, such as counties, cities, and towns, but it possesses the power to do so and in some States, notably Massachusetts, it makes good use of this power.

at the present moment some forty-eight States (1), we have, including the federal government, forty-nine distinct jurisdictions, mutually exclusive and wholly independent as regards their archives. The problem then, as it presents itself in America, is two-fold: first, within each of these forty-nine independent jurisdictions there must be secured some adequate provision for the care and administration of the archives, a task which, in view of the slight interest displayed by popular legislative bodies in matters historical or archival, is none of the easiest; and secondly, once an archive administration established in each of the forty-nine jurisdictions, these forty-nine administrations must if possible be induced to adopt, so far as allowed by local conditions, uniform methods and practices. Whatever progress has been made in the United States towards the solution of this double problem is due in no small measure to the efforts of a committee of the American Historical Association, the Public Archives Commission.

Ten years ago but little general interest was manifested in the preservation and proper administration of the public archives. These were regarded and treated rather as office records than as historical materials, and as office records they were allowed to accumulate in their places of origin, such of them as were not needed in the transaction of current business being stored away and generally neglected. This state of affairs had existed for over a century, notable exceptions being found of course in certain States or in certain offices of the national government, and is still far too prevalent; fortunately it is now giving way to improved conditions and by the end of another decade it is to be hoped that it will be the exception rather than the rule.

In 1899 the American Historical Association (2), which

(1) Including Arizona and New Mexico admitted during the last session of Congress.

(2) This organization, founded in 1884 and chartered by the federal government in 1889, includes in its membership most of those who are actively engaged or seriously interested in historical work and studies. Although possessed of no legal power it is able on account of its influence to accomplish much that in other countries is done by a department of the government.

had since its establishment displayed great interest in archival matters, appointed a permanent commission, known as the Public Archives Commission, the duty of which should be « to examine into the condition and character of the public records of the United States, of the several States, and of local communities, with a view to obtaining and publishing such information concerning them as would make the records more generally known and more easily available ».

The commission at once set to work to prepare a series of reports upon the archives of the various States. Having at its disposal only the most limited funds and being invested with no legal or governmental authority to conduct its investigations it was obliged to depend upon the gratuitous labors of those interested in the cause and upon the good will of the government officials whose records were to be examined. With such devotion and tact however was the work inaugurated and carried on that the commission has been able during the first decade of its existence to publish some forty-one reports dealing with the archives of thirty States and of two cities (1). These reports vary greatly as was inevitable, the conditions of investigation being very dissimilar and the experience and skill of the investigators being not always of the same degree. Some of the reports are avowedly of a preliminary nature while others are sufficiently detailed to serve as a guide in the use of the material for historical purposes. In the aggregate however the reports are of great value.

As was to be expected the work of the commission and especially the publication of its reports had a powerful influence in arousing public interest not only in the historical content of the archives but in the general subject

(1) These reports are printed in the Annual Reports of the American Historical Association from 1900 to 1908. The States thus far dealt with are Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin. The two cities are New York and Philadelphia. Other reports are in preparation.

of their preservation and administration. Too often the reports revealed a deplorable state of affairs, which, once brought to light and made generally known, demanded attention. Thus in State after State measures of one sort or another have been passed for the better preservation and administration of the public records. During the last ten years twenty-four States have taken action in this respect. The measures thus passed vary greatly for conditions are not the same throughout all the States but all have for their aim a better archive administration (1).

Along with the progress thus far made towards the solution of the first part of our problem the second phase of the problem has begun to demand attention. What measures shall be taken to insure the proper development of archival science and uniformity of practice throughout all the independent archive administrations that are being created? Here again the Public Archives Commission has been able to be of service. Recognizing the advantage to be derived from consideration and discussion by those in charge of public records in the various States of common problems, the commission organized a conference of archivists which was held in connection with the annual meetings of the American Historical Association last December (1909). At this conference especial attention was devoted to the consideration of European practice with reference to American conditions. The success of the conference was such that it is planned to hold another during the coming December (1910) and it is probable that it will become a

(1) In some States a centralized system has been adopted, a Department of Archives being established; elsewhere the archives, or the more important of them, have been deposited with the State library; in other States a historical society has been entrusted with certain of the archives, while in still others a historical commission has been created, the secretary of which is, to all intents and purposes, the State archivist. In the federal government little has been done beyond centralizing the archives in certain departments and in causing a large amount of archive material to be placed in the Library of Congress. For an account of the federal archives see the volume published by the Carnegie Institution of Washington: *Guide to the Archives of the government of the United States*, by Van Tyne and Leland, Washington, 1907 (2<sup>d</sup> edition).

permanent feature of the annual meetings of the Historical Association. In these conferences will be considered as systematically as possible the various problems with which American archivists have to deal. It is not unlikely that before long the conference will undertake the compilation of a manual for archivists in which questions of classification, cataloguing, etc., will be treated and which will serve in a measure at least as a guide for American archivists, thus insuring a certain degree of uniformity in practice and method throughout the various States. The conference may even develop into an association of archivists which could in many conceivable ways perform some of the functions of a centralized national administration. Such an association would of course have no power to enforce any of its recommendations; its effectiveness would depend upon its influence and this would depend upon various conditions. But it is evident that such an association, wisely directed and commanding the support of all archivists, would have a most powerful influence in the development of archival science.

In the foregoing paragraphs the attempt has been made to indicate the character of the archive problem in America and to show what has been accomplished towards its solution by the Public Archives Commission. This body, being merely a committee of an incorporated association and having back of it no other power than the influence of the association which created it, has been able, by investigating the public archives and by publishing reports thereon, to arouse general interest in the care and administration of the archives, which in turn has been the means of securing important measures in half of the States for better archive administration. At this point the commission has taken steps to bring the archivists of the country together for the consideration of common problems and the adoption of methods based on sound principles and suited to American conditions. By this means it is hoped to insure a rapid and logical development of archival science and the adoption of uniform practices throughout the country.

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