

THE IMPORTANCE
OF THE CONCENTRATION
AND CLASSIFICATION
OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

by DUNBAR ROWLAND, LL. D.

*Director Department of Archives and History.
State of Mississippi, U. S. A.*

In the various discussions of the best present-day methods of historical work, which are being presented to us on this occasion, it is a need so obvious to which I call your attention that I fear I am placing myself in the position of telling you something which you already know. But sometimes it is the most obvious needs that we are apt to overlook in the prosecution and advancement of any great work. I trust then that, in view of its supreme importance, you will excuse the triteness of my theme when I employ these few moments in impressing upon you the need of the concentration and classification of national archives.

You know for yourselves that one of the greatest difficulties in the way of the modern historian, in his search for sources of information, is the location and use of manuscript materials in national archive repositories. How to make the investigation of such collections less difficult is a problem which has perplexed historians for the past several centuries, and it is one which is still, in a large measure, unsolved. But the demand for improved conditions in the preservation and administration of historical sources is becoming more and more

insistent, as the use of public archives by careful investigators becomes more universal ; and that demand must be met if we continue to raise the standard and increase the value of historical method and work.

If the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marked by a more extended use by historians of public archives, and if the nineteenth century may be said to have developed the scientific school of historians, surely it is for us in the beginning of the twentieth century to seriously direct our attention to the duty of making national archives more accessible and more usable. There is an impetus in that direction, and it is very gratifying to think that the present century may be marked by the adoption of a great international plan for the concentration and classification of public archives.

We are living in an age in which there is little reverence for principles and methods which will not stand the tests that we apply to the operation of general laws, and every branch of knowledge is feeling the new impulse. In the midst of all this revising, reconsidering, and passing away of old systems and old methods, the historian, too, is adopting new methods, the full development of which demand a complete revolution in the appreciation, study and care of original historical sources. It is only to one branch of such sources that we shall confine ourselves in this paper; that being the original records that accumulate in the public offices of the government, which, studied carefully, reveal with accuracy the condition, progress and tendency of a civilization. That public archives as a rule, have been and are now being negligently and unsystematically preserved, even by the most advanced nations, is common knowledge. These careless and unscientific methods in the care and classification of national archives prevail in the United States, and an acknowledgment of this fact relieves us of the imputation that we come to you as advice-givers. We may be too sincere to entirely commend your advancement along this line, but we wish, by the confession of our own short-comings, to emphasize our interest in any progress on this side which will enable us to solve the archive problems on our side of the water.

That the State owes a duty to its history, and that it should make its public records accessible by the adoption of some uniform method of classification is generally recognized by advanced nations, yet the fact remains that, with a few notable exceptions, little has been done in that direction by even the most enlightened people. It is very safe, I think, to say that public archive conditions in Europe, as well as in the United States, are far from satisfactory. While there has been some improvement, we are still contending with conditions growing out of centuries of neglect, and old and inadequate methods generally prevail. In other words, the historian of to-day is confronted in his investigations with many of the difficulties which beset the historian of the seventeenth century. These difficulties have remained because there are inherent defects in the systems generally in use. In many countries no systematic plan for the care of public archives has ever been adopted. The public records have been stored, as so much accumulated material (with little or no classification) in scores of buildings widely separated from each other. In some instances, guides to collections have been prepared, but calendaring on a large scale is not in general use, and the publication of documentary history is limited to occasional volumes. These methods of archive administration are familiar to historians everywhere and are widespread in the United States.

It may be of interest just here to give a brief history of the origin of the records of my own country. The accumulation of public archives in the United States comes from two separate and independent sources, one national and the other State. The first deals with the history of the growth and development of the nation, the second with that of each of the forty-four States which compose the Federal Union. The national government has no control over the State archives and the States are independent of each other. The archives of the older States, such as Virginia and Massachusetts, begin with the earliest settlements of the seventeenth century, and the records of these States are the most ancient in the country.

It was during the days of colonization that our archives were shared with other nations, and important records concerning

our early history lie cared for, or uncared for as the case may be, in European repositories.

The records of the nation begin with the efforts of the American colonies to establish their independence. The national archives are preserved in Washington, while the records of each State are kept at its own capitol building. The national archives are located in the governmental departments in which they originated, and are stored in widely separated buildings. There are twenty or more archive repositories in the city of Washington, but there is only one in which the public archives are easily accessible to investigators and that is the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

The difficulties with which American historians contend in their searches for material both at home and abroad, have forcibly impressed them with the great importance of introducing new and improved methods in the control and administration of public archives. Nor are we without some well-directed efforts along this line. Conditions with us are being somewhat improved by the work of the Public Archives Commission, which is engaged in the study of State archives; by the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution which, among other activities, has investigated the condition and extent of the national archives; and by State Historical Departments and Commissions which have in their possession the archives of the States. But with all this the country's archives as a whole are still in a chaotic condition, scattered in various repositories, and administered in haphazard fashion. However, with the present keen interest in the subject, it is safe to say that the demand will soon arise for the concentration of the national archives in one suitable building, specially planned and constructed for an archive repository.

The method of preserving archives in numerous repositories seems to have been the outcome of the custom of carrying the public records about in the train of the king, as a part of the royal establishment. This custom especially prevailed in England, and, as the records accumulated, necessity demanded that they be left in certain royal castles belonging to the

crown. In this way archive repositories were established throughout the kingdom, as convenience or caprice dictated. In England we find Edward I. establishing an archive repository in the Tower of London, and in later reigns repositories were located in the king's castles of Pontefract, Tutbury and Turnbridge. Once fixed these repositories continued, and others were added as the royal records increased. In the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria it has been estimated that the national records were scattered in no less than sixty repositories. Some idea of how the public archives of England were cared for in the time of Charles II, may be gained from the report of William Prynne, the keeper of the records in the Tower of London. He reported them in «confusion and chaos, under corroding, putrefying cobwebs, dust and filth in the dark corner of Caesar's Chapel in the White Tower». This is doubtless a true picture of the methods used for the care of public archives throughout Europe at that time.

This system of archive preservation in many scattered repositories was continued in England until 1856 when the public records of the nation, — that is to say, those which had survived the vicissitudes of the centuries, — were collected and placed in a suitable building especially constructed for the purpose. The agitation in England for improved methods which began in the reign of Queen Elizabeth culminated in the building of the great Public Record Office in London in the middle of the nineteenth century. The experience of fifty years has demonstrated the wisdom of concentrating national archives in a central repository located at the seat of government, and the actual working of the English system has, I am informed, convinced the officials of the Public Record Office that even a more complete concentration of the public archives than now exists is desirable.

The practical operation for centuries of the decentralized system of archive preservation and administration has clearly shown the disadvantages of such a system. In the first place, the buildings usually devoted to this use are entirely unsuited for the purpose. They are generally located in out-of-the-way places and are rarely, if ever, fire-proof. The records have

been accumulated in such a manner as to make them incomplete and fragmentary, and an exhaustive study of any given subject is impossible. The absence of uniformity of administration, and a lack of logical classification also, are apt to prevail where the records are retained in different repositories throughout the country.

The centralisation of the national archives at the seat of government, occupying a building designed exclusively for the purpose as already stated has, after fifty years of experience on the part of the English people, been found productive of the most satisfactory results. Such a system affords an opportunity of grasping the archive problem as a whole, and, by specialization, secures the most effective service in its solution, thereby creating a class of experts trained in the study of the best methods of research and placing them at the service of the investigator. It further gives notice to investigating students and historians that in one accessible repository the entire documentary history of the nation may be found; it emphasizes the importance of national archives as historical sources; and it encourages and stimulates the writing of accurate and truthful history. Under such a system the investigator feels encouraged to exhaust all sources of information, and gain complete mastery of the subject he is treating. Concentration, too, promotes uniformity of administration and makes easier both a national and an international study of world movements and world problems. It furthermore leads up to a uniform, logical system for the care and classification of all original historical sources, and forever abolishes the careless wasteful methods that have been the despair of historians for centuries. It must not be supposed, however, that the care of historical sources ends with concentration, which of itself can never cure existing archive troubles. But concentration combined with a scientific system of classification will place the facts of history in the possession of the historian in such a manner that he cannot fail to give us an accurate story, even though it is reserved for another more gifted to furnish the Macaulayan life and color.

In a brief suggestive paper like this it is impossible to

discuss a system of archive classification, nor is there one at present to which we could confidently point as a model. The system, however, which prevails, though modified to suit local conditions, should, in its application everywhere, retain a general likeness and uniformity, and should provide for the freest access by investigators.

It is generally conceded in historical circles, that the inaccessibility of public archives due to unnecessary restrictions and the absence of the true historical spirit, even where the sources are in a tolerable condition, is sometimes the greatest drawback to the investigation of important collections. The administration of archives should be based upon the theory that their preparation for public use is the end and aim of their preservation. When properly classified, bound, calendared and indexed, they are in reality nothing more than manuscript libraries, and should be made just as accessible and usable as the printed volume. In fact, in archive administration very many library methods could be used to advantage. The card index system could be applied to volumes of manuscripts just as easily as to collections of books. An index to a manuscript volume is not more difficult to prepare than one to a printed book, and tables of contents could be furnished with equal ease. In other words, there is no reason why the improved methods of library administration should not be applied to archive collections.

In conclusion, and as an apology for questioning the condition of your archives, I should like to add that our interest in European sources amounts to something more than mere intellectual curiosity. During the long period of American discovery and colonization, the larger part of our records were stored in your repositories, which fact gives us a vital interest in your archives. The investigation, therefore, of European archive collections by American historians has for many years been growing in interest, and the day of profitable research seems to have just begun. It is doubtless true that European historians also are making investigations in countries other than their own to a much greater extent than formerly. Thus causing the use of public archives to assume an international

importance, and establishing an interdependence in the use of historical sources.

In the United States, in addition to personal investigations by historians, transcripts of valuable records relating to American history are being extensively made for State Departments of Archives and History, the Library of Congress and historical societies; and guides to the archives of England, France and Spain have been completed or are in course of preparation by the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution.

Nor does our dependence upon you end here. Since the scientific theory that history, in its best sense, is the continued narrative of the evolution of human society, specifically and systematically traced, has been accepted, it is to you that we must come for more remote sources in tracing with historical accuracy, the meaning of our civilization. The same forces that were in operation to give the Teutonic nations pre-eminence here have continued to operate on our shores with triumphant results. But other European influences have profoundly impressed our history, and still linger in our midst; and it is to the finer, subtler Latin races, France and Spain, that we must also refer for the full interpretation of our history. Our civilization then is a continuation of yours under new conditions, and in recording its history, there must ever be explanations and solutions which call for a more definite and uniform care and classification of national historical sources.
