ARCHIVAL PRINCIPLES

Selections From the Writings of Waldo Gifford Leland

This staff information paper consists of excerpts from the writings and speeches, 1909-21, of Waldo Gifford Leland on the archival movement and archival practices in the United States. To these few men contributed more than Leland did. It is the purpose of this paper to bring together from various sources statements by him that have especial significance for American archivists. Leland's theories and policies were not, of course, accepted in toto by the National Archives. His are the more or less classical views derived from European practices, some of which had to be adapted rather than adopted in applying them to the modern mass records of a relatively young nation. All archivists, however, can profit by reading his lucid and cogent writings on archival economy and will enjoy his "postscript" of 1955, written after this paper was sent to him for comment.

Leland's early interest in archival materials was shown in the publication (4 years after he was graduated from Brown University and 3 years after he earned the Master of Arts degree from Harvard) of a Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington (1904; 2d rev. ed. 1907), a work coauthored with Claude H. Van Tyne. While a staff

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1This paper is issued for the instruction of the staff of the National Archives.

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member of the Carnegie Institution's department of historical research, 1903-27, Leland organized and participated in the American Historical Association's annual conferences of archivists, and in most of the years from 1921 to 1931 he was a member either of the Association's Public Archives Commission or of its Committee on National Archives. In 3 years of this decade he was also a member of the Association's Committee on Obtaining Transcripts From Foreign Archives.

For almost 30 years Leland worked actively for the establishment of an archival agency in the United States Government. In 1912, for example, he wrote for the American Historical Review an article, "The National Archives: A Programme," which was reprinted in 1915 as a Senate document. A reading of this shows that many of his ideas—on the proposed building, stacks, search rooms, staff, and methods of records control and description—were adopted some 20 years later. With Leo F. Stock of the Carnegie Institution, he gave a series of lantern-slide lectures, not only in Washington but in other cities of the country. In these joint lectures Stock discussed slides showing neglected and ill-housed Federal records and Leland talked on the need for a Federal archives, showing slides of archival establishments in England, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Canada. "It was a sort of E.C.A. or Point IV in reverse," Leland wrote almost 40 years later, "an effort to apply European know-how in the United States."

In charge of the Carnegie Institution's historical mission to France, Leland spent about two-thirds of his time from 1907 to 1914 and from 1922 to 1927 in Paris, during which he became well acquainted with archivists from many parts of Europe. He attended the course on Service des archives in the École des Chartes, visited archival establishments in Belgium, the Netherlands, and England, and took part in the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians in Brussels in 1910, at which he read a paper on the work of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association.

The results of his work in Paris are contained in Guide to Materials for American History in the Libraries and Archives of Paris, the first volume of which, on libraries, was published by the Carnegie Institution in 1932, and the second
volume, on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 1943. Volumes 3 and 4, dealing with the Archives Nationales and the Ministries of War, Marine, and Colonies, have long been prepared in typescript and are now being revised for publication in 1955 and 1956. The extensive field notes of the Paris mission have been deposited in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.

Returning to Washington during World War I, Leland became secretary of the National Board for Historical Service. In 1926 appeared his work, with Newton D. Mereness, An Introduction to the American Official Sources for the Economic and Social History of the World War. This guide discusses both the publications and the records of many Government departments and agencies for the war period and contains valuable information on their filing systems and on the post-war transfer of the records of emergency agencies.

In the years after 1927, when he was director of the American Council of Learned Societies, Leland continued his interest in archives, testifying at congressional hearings in favor of an archival agency for the United States, and further carrying the archival gospel to the historical profession and the public.

After the National Archives Act was passed in 1934, Leland urged the appointment of Robert D. W. Connor--a historian with archival experience--as the first Archivist of the United States. He supported J. Franklin Jameson, then Chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, who represented the American Historical Association in this matter, in persuading President Franklin D. Roosevelt to make the appointment and in persuading Connor to agree to accept it if made. To Connor and his successors Leland has freely given counsel from his wide store of knowledge both of archival matters and of public relations. He was one of the founders of the Society of American Archivists, served twice as its president, and has contributed several articles to its quarterly journal. A signal service to archivists and scholars was his work as chairman of the executive committee for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, 1939-41. During World War II he was chairman of the Budget Bureau's Committee on Records of War Administration, which advised the Bureau's War Records Section and furthered the World War II history program in the civilian agencies of the Government.
More intangible but no less valuable to the archival movement in the United States were Leland's associations with the scholarly world--not only with fellow historians but with other social scientists and, for that matter, with physical scientists and specialists in languages and literature. His position and influence gave especial weight to his opinions and enlisted under the archival banner many scholars in fields other than history. His clear thinking, quick wit, tact, and charm were not inconsiderable assets in the crusade.

Public Obligation To Care for Archives

The chief monument of the history of a nation is its archives . . . .

... it is unquestionably as much a function of the government to provide for the preservation and use of its archives as it is to make laws and levy taxes. This is recognized in all civilized countries, and to neglect properly to perform this function is not only unbefitting the dignity of a great state, but it endangers an inheritance which future generations have a right to demand shall pass to them unimpaired.

Definition of Archives

... The archives of a nation are the entirety of the records produced by its governmental agencies in the transaction of the public business. The archives of any governmental office are the papers and documents officially produced by the office and its agents, or received in it, which serve to record the operations of the office and which are destined to remain

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in it. The fact that certain of these documents may be printed does not render them non-archival in character. 4

Archives consist of many different forms of documents--letters, reports, memoranda, accounts, vouchers, orders, etc. Some are printed but more remain in the form of manuscript.

The archives of an organization have a unity corresponding to the unity of the organization. If portions of the archives of an organization are destroyed, or removed, the unity is destroyed, and the remaining archives are correspondingly impaired as a record of functions. 5

The archives of the federal government are composed of the letters, orders, reports, accounts, and other documents produced in the course of transacting the public business, whether located within the District of Columbia, or wherever the operations of the government extend. The value of these archives may truly be said to be inestimable. In the trans- action of current business those of recent date are in constant use while those of earlier origin are frequently referred to. They constitute the chief protection of the state against unfounded or ill-founded claims. In international discussions or disputes they are the principal source from which arguments may be drawn to support the contentions of the govern- ment. On them are based the titles to millions of acres of land and to thousands of patent rights. The actual money loss, to say nothing of the inconvenience, that would result to the government and to citizens as well, by the destruction of any considerable part of the federal archives, can hardly be calculated. 6

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5 Unpublished lecture of Feb. 24, 1921, on "Archives and Archives Buildings," p. 1. The lecture was given before the District of Columbia Library Association; a copy is in the National Archives Library.

As respects manuscripts, first of all a distinction must be sharply drawn between historical manuscripts, on the one hand, and public archives on the other. Historical manuscripts are such documents as diaries, letters, account-books, etc., in short all manuscript material having historical value which does not come from the archives of any public office. For convenience the term historical manuscripts may be used to include private archives, which are the official records of non-governmental bodies, such as churches, societies, business and industrial organizations, etc. 7

Almost all librarians have a few manuscripts in their libraries, and it is a rather common practice to call these manuscripts "archives," but we must distinguish very sharply between archives and historical manuscripts, because the two are not the same thing. In any public office there are a great many documents going out and a great many documents coming in, and copies of the one and the originals of the other are carefully preserved and filed. All those which are produced in the transaction of public business and which have to be kept in any office constitute the archives of that office.

You can readily see that to understand fully the transactions of a given office you must have the records of these transactions and have them arranged in the order in which the transactions took place, otherwise you will not have a complete or an intelligible record. It is highly desirable, therefore, that the records of public offices should be kept by themselves, and that other manuscripts of private origin—the records of business houses, correspondence of individuals, etc. should not be mixed with them. It may be that among the public archives there are documents relating to a certain subject, and that among private manuscripts there are other documents relating to the same subject. The tendency of the librarian, rather naturally, is to place them together; but in so doing he would insert in the public records matter which officially does not belong there and which would be a cause of confusion, because to anyone investigating that subject it would give the idea that those private manuscripts are of official origin, whereas they are not.

That, then, is the first thing for a librarian to remember—that he must distinguish sharply between public archives and historical manuscripts, that he must not mix them. They may be kept in the same building, of course, or in the same room; but they must be entirely separate, both as to location and as to treatment.

Transfer

It follows from what has just been said that the public archives are public property. Because of their nature they require especial safeguards. If lost or destroyed it is practically impossible to replace them. Constituting as they do a record of all the public acts they should remain always in public control—they should not be placed in the custody of private or only semipublic institutions. Their custodian is an integral part of government, and bears the same responsibility as the other parts of the governmental machinery.

Archives are preserved primarily for public or administrative purposes, secondarily for private purposes, such as those of the historical investigator. With the lapse of time, however, the administrative value of any given body of documents decreases, while its historical value, presumably, increases. It is therefore a good principle—although its application is frequently modified in practice—that archives, so far as they are segregated, should be administered by agencies the sole or chief function of which is archival. If this agency performs other functions, such as the collection of books (for example, a State library) or the fostering of historical interests (as in the case of a department of archives and history) the archival and other functions should be sharply distinguished, and the public records should be physically as well as theoretically separated from other collections.

Archives no longer in current, that is, in frequent use, in the offices in which they properly accumulate, should be transferred to a central depot.

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In the transfer of archives, series or groups of documents that constitute units should not be broken except horizontally. The entire series, or at least the entire series to a certain date, should be transferred as a whole. There should be no selection of certain documents which are supposed to have especial historical interest. In any series or homogeneous group all the parts are necessary for the understanding of any one part. They constitute an organic whole (if one may apply the term organic to archives) which may not be dismembered. The truth of this is apparent if one reviews the processes by which any series or group of archives comes into existence.9

... To disintegrate a series of archives, selecting from it certain documents for preservation in a special depot, and leaving the remainder of the series to its fate, is one of the most dangerous of operations. Not only does it destroy the unity of the series, but it favors the supposition, almost invariably incorrect, that the selected documents contain all of value, and that the rest of the series is worthless.10

Custody

Records that are once transferred to an archive depot should pass into the legal as well as the physical custody of the archivist. Nothing but vexatious friction can come of any arrangement that permits the legal custody of archives to remain with those who no longer possess them.11

Recovery

... Furthermore, the State should have full power to replevin any documents, wherever found, which it can prove to have once been part of its public archives, or which (such as the official papers of agents of the State) should properly have been a part of its public archives, although they may never have actually been placed in an archive depot.12

12"Some Fundamental Principles," p. 266.
Destruction

... It is evident that many records cease after a certain time to have any value for administrative or historical purposes. These should not be indefinitely preserved to occupy space required for the storage of more valuable material. The official in whose custody they originally were is the only one competent to pass upon their uselessness for administrative purposes, and so they naturally may not be destroyed without his recommendation. Their uselessness for historical purposes should be determined by the [archival authority]. 13

... Only the State, or its authorized agencies, may destroy any part of its archives. 14

... In providing for the disposal of the papers care should be taken to see that, if they are sent to the paper mill they are immediately and completely destroyed. The inconvenience of having public records, even though condemned, at large in the community and not under the control of the government, is evident. 15

Classification

The classification of the archives is one of the most perplexing problems that confronts the archivist. Archives are produced as a by-product of the activities of government. They are, as it were, a moving-picture film of the government at work. Unless all parts of this film are in their proper places an incoherent view of the governmental activities is obtained. 16

... In general, the principle enunciated by the Dutch, and adhered to in most European archives, the "herkomstbeginsel," the "respect des fonds," or "principe de la provenance," should be adopted. The archives should be

classified according to their origin; they should reflect the processes by which they came into existence. In the case of old archives it is not always possible to perfect a classification in accordance with this principle, but in the case of the more recent records, and especially of those transferred to the archives depot from time to time, the principle should be adhered to. Nothing is more disastrous than the application of modern library methods of classification to a body of archives. 17

... No decimal system of classification, no refined methods of library science, no purely chronological or purely alphabetical arrangement can be successfully applied to the classification of archives. The sad work that Camus and Daunou made of the Archives Nationales in attempting to apply a logical system of classification should be a sufficient warning. The administrative entity must be the starting point and the unit, and the classifier must have a thorough knowledge of the history and functions of the office whose records he is arranging; he must know what relation the office has borne to other offices, and the relation of each function to every other function. 18

... The first essential is a guide to the public offices and their history which shall show for each office its origin, its functions, the origin of these functions, whether transferred from another office or arising from new legislation, the modifications of these functions or their cessation, the organization of the office, with any changes therein, and finally the termination of the office (if it be no longer in existence) showing whether the functions then ceased or were transferred to other offices. 19

Description

... Four classes of publications naturally suggest themselves: general guides, inventories or check lists, calendars,

and collections of texts. The general guide should be an enumeration of the various groups or series of records, indicating for each series its title, the number of volumes composing it, and its limiting dates. It does not go into details but supplies a sort of first aid to those who would use the archives. Its compilation should go hand in hand with the arrangement of the records and their final grouping.

The next step is the preparation of inventories of the contents of the different series. Such an inventory indicates the title, dates, number of documents and, very briefly, the character of the contents of each volume, box, or portfolio, in any given series. An inventory of the records of a department would include all the series formed from the archives of that department, grouped under the respective offices from which they emanate. A series of such inventories covering all the groups of archives in the depot is probably the most satisfactory form in which to provide the student with an account of the available material. Their compactness, the ease with which they may be used, and the rapidity and economy with which they can be compiled, are all in their favor.

Then we may expect that calendars of certain of the more important documents will eventually be published. In this form of catalogue the individual document is the unit and the entry for it, besides stating its title, date, author, approximate length, etc., includes a more or less succinct résumé of its contents. A calendar may include all the documents in a given series or group or it may include all documents on the same subject or of the same kind regardless of the series in which they are to be found. The résumé may be very detailed, so that for historical purposes it practically takes the place of the original, as in the well-known British Calendars of State Papers, or it may be much briefer as in the various volumes published by the Library of Congress. The latter form is much more rapidly compiled and is, in general, more practicable. 20

Provision of Access

The next problem is that of the actual use of the archives. Little comment need be made respecting their use by officials.

These have the same rights of access to their records as when the latter were in their custody. Of course these rights should not be abused. Documents should not be withdrawn without giving a receipt for them, and they should be promptly returned. Calls upon the archivist for documents should be answered with all possible speed, for it must always be remembered that the [archival institution] is in a way an adjunct of the office whose records it preserves. With regard to non-official use the principal problem is to determine which archives may be communicated and which should be withheld. 21

... In most countries a chronological dead-line is drawn beyond which the student may not extend his researches... A limitation of this sort is undoubtedly convenient from the administrative point of view, but it is artificial and needlessly hampers or makes quite impossible many lines of investigation. A more satisfactory procedure would be to establish a chronological line on the earlier side of which any investigation (except possibly in certain specified cases) could be made without the obtaining of special consent, but on the later side of which each case should be treated on its merits, the decision as to whether the documents asked for should or should not be communicated to be made by the board of record commissioners after consultation with the department or office concerned. The principles upon which such decision should be based have been admirably stated by an official of the government as follows:

(a) Archives which represent completed incidents which carry no sequence may cease to be confidential as soon as the incidents are closed.

(b) Archives which relate to political events may be open to general inspection when danger of inflaming public opinion by their revelations has passed.

(c) Archives which contain personal information affecting individuals may cease to be confidential after two generations have passed.

(d) Archives which pertain to international relations must remain confidential as long as they relate to pending negotiations, or if they contain information which would disturb or lessen international good feeling.

Archives furnishing information which might be used against the government's interests should remain confidential.  

Postscript. Quarante ans après--To be confronted with a systematic compilation of excerpts from one's own writings is a revealing and surprising experience--especially if those writings were the expressions of youthful certainty. I do not, however, retract any of the principles, doctrines, dogmas, articles of faith, and other opinions so categorically set forth. I might modify them, a wee bit--or even moderate some of them, though not very much--or possibly restate them, though meaning the same thing--in the light of the experience of these 40 years. Such experience, for example, as the unimaginable (before World War I) increase in the sheer bulk of archival materials and the consequent dire necessity of reducing that bulk, the applications of high speed photography, the employment of electronic selection, the mingling of personal manuscripts and archives as in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, and above all the development of policies and processes by the National Archives in dealing with problems of mass, selection, arrangement, and description. With regard to description we are no longer under the spell of the British Calendars of State Papers, nor are the British themselves. I find that I was most severe in addressing librarians (in 1916), but I want to assure the members of that learned and devoted profession that I was only trying to make room for the sister and (in the United States) younger profession--that of archivist.

--W. G. L.

22"The National Archives: A Programme," p. 27. The Government official referred to in this passage was Gaillard Hunt, Chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress, who represented the United States at the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians held at Brussels in 1910. Hunt's paper, from which Leland quotes, was published in the Actes of the Congress (Brussels, 1912).