

The National Archives: A Memoir, 1980-1985

By Robert M. Warner

Writing the story of one's own times is a difficult task. As Archivist of the United States, I precipitated or participated in many of the important events at the National Archives over the past half decade. In this capacity, I bring a unique, and I hope valuable, perspective to the recent history of the National Archives. But what follows is not history. It can more appropriately be described as an impressionistic and subjective overview written by one of the central figures. I will leave the writing of formal history of these years to others.

My memoir properly begins with the retirement of my good friend and predecessor, James B. Rhoads. The search for an individual to replace Rhoads as Archivist of the United States did not prove to be an easy task. Tensions between the National Archives and its parent agency, the General Services Administration (GSA), had been widely publicized, and many potential candidates were wary of the bureaucratic pitfalls of government service. The position remained open for ten months even though Administrator of General Services Rowland G. Freeman had appointed a distinguished search committee to develop a list of qualified candidates.

There were many unanswered questions about the job, the most serious of which was whether the new Archivist would have the authority and the funding to carry out the legally mandated mission of the agency. I had several full and frank discussions with Administrator Freeman after he asked me to serve as Archivist. He assured me that I would be allowed to manage the National Archives without interference, and I

accepted the position on July 15, 1980. For the most part he kept his commitment.

Shortly after I assumed the post of Archivist, I addressed the staff on what I thought would be the path ahead for the National Archives. I used this opportunity to introduce myself to the staff and to let them know that the Archives would be moving forward once again. My first tasks as Archivist were obvious to me. I had to reassure the Archives many constituent groups about the professional leadership of the agency. I had to build a solid working relationship between the Archives and the General Services Administration. Most importantly, I had to impart to the Archives staff a sense of enhanced vigor and mission. These tasks proved to be ongoing ones that never ended during my tenure.

Communications absorbed a major part of my time. In my nearly five years as Archivist, I visited all of the Archives facilities, some several times. I also spoke to virtually all of the major historical, archival, genealogical, and library organizations throughout the country, and many small ones as well. These outreach activities, though time consuming and sometimes physically wearisome, were a useful and essential vehicle for raising the visibility of the Archives and for addressing the concerns of individuals and organizations who cared about the National Archives and Records Service (NARS). They also served a very useful educational function for me, keeping me informed about what archival and user groups were thinking about the National Archives. Unfortunately, communications with GSA were not as successful as those with NARS staff and outside groups. Even though a substantial amount of time was taken up by meetings with the GSA administrator and other GSA officials, these efforts at education and information-sharing met with mixed results. Overall, communication between NARS and GSA was unpredictable.

I quickly discovered that much of my time was

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Many of the staff members gathered for a group photograph on April 1, 1985, the day the National Archives became an independent federal agency.





Robert M. Warner (right) served as sixth Archivist of the United States. Here he is shown with Deputy Archivist George N. Scaboo.

taken up with the federal budget process. In comparison with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, the National Archives received the smallest budget increases over the past decade. This trend had been a source of great frustration to my predecessor, Bert Rhoads, but I hoped to reverse the pattern of relative decline. But the years from 1980 to 1985 were not a good time for growth on the domestic side of the federal budget; in fact, the years from 1980 to 1985 were hard on the Archives budget. Instead of increases, there were declines. The budget for fiscal year 1982 received the steepest cut—16 percent was removed from our eighty-eight million dollar appropriation. A reduction of this size, occurring as it did within a few weeks, forced me to make a series of hard decisions, including the release of young, dedicated employees. These actions were among the most painful in my thirty-year career as an archivist. Since that low point, the budget has increased to nearly one hundred million dollars in fiscal year 1985. In like manner, the staff has increased from the 1982 level.

Not all of my time was devoted to communication problems and budget cuts, however. The appraisal of records, a major function of the National Archives, and one at the very core of

the archival profession, became a subject of national interest and concern during my tenure at the Archives. The major focus of concern was on the preservation of the records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Acting on orders from the U.S. district court in Washington, the National Archives conducted the most expensive and elaborate appraisal project in its history. To tackle the enormous problem of appraising the five million field office case files of the FBI, I established a task force of some of the best and brightest archivists in this institution. By the time the project was completed, seventeen archivists had sampled eighteen thousand files in Washington and seven other cities over a nine month period at a cost in excess of six hundred thousand dollars. The twelve hundred page report of the task force stands as evidence of what has been accomplished and the difficult decisions that lie ahead.

I also became involved in a second legal records appraisal project during my time as Archivist. This one addressed the enormous volume of case files generated by the lower federal courts. By 1976, the Archives had accumulated almost five hundred thousand cubic feet of district court records, a doubling in volume in just twelve years. Clearly the existing appraisal guidelines were

ineffective. The Archives took the initiative of requesting the assistance of Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, in his capacity as chairman of the Judicial Conference, and an ad hoc committee composed of Archives and conference officials recommended a course of action. The committee established general retention guidelines and specific disposition schedules for the records of the U.S. district courts, the Court of Claims, the bankruptcy courts, the courts of appeal, and the Court of Customs and Patent Appeals.

The Judicial Conference and the Archives approved the new schedules in 1980, but professional societies and individual researchers expressed concern that important historical documentation would be destroyed if the new schedules were implemented. Concern focused on twentieth century district and bankruptcy court case files, which, with few exceptions, had been identified as disposable through 1979. As a result, the Archives declared a moratorium on the disposal of records and began to review schedules. After additional evaluation of the files, the Archives revised the schedule to meet the concerns expressed by the research community. The

revised schedules went into effect in 1983, and it appears that they will stem the court records problem without jeopardizing important historical documentation.

Another fundamental concern during my tenure was that of the physical preservation of permanently valuable historical records. This is not surprising, since preservation is widely recognized as one of the most serious problems facing libraries and archives throughout the country. But the enormity of the preservation problem at the Archives made it something of a unique case. No single technology was available to "solve" our preservation problem; careful analysis was needed as our first step. At the same time, we could not be satisfied simply with evaluation and planning—we had to take positive actions while our long-range plans were in preparation.

I ordered a number of actions. First, an Archives task force conducted a detailed analysis of the intrinsic value of records—an essential first step in preservation planning—and published their report as a National Archives Staff Information Paper in 1983. Second, we allocated funds for the expansion and improvement of



The physical preservation of permanently valuable historical records was a top priority during the Warner years. The Archives has developed a plan that systematically details the agency's preservation needs to the year 2000.



As part of its fiftieth anniversary celebration, the National Archives mounted a major exhibit chronicling the history of "Recent America, 1934-1984." The exhibit received favorable reviews and attracted enthusiastic crowds.

preservation laboratories in the National Archives Building and at a regional facility. In addition, new staff was added to the preservation team, putting the National Archives at the forefront of archival preservation programs. Finally, building on this momentum, the preservation laboratories have increased the volume of materials treated on site and have increased the use of contractors for additional quantities of documents.

Our preservation activities reached a new high point with the completion of a twenty-year preservation plan that carefully and systematically outlined NARS' preservation needs and established a program to meet them. This twenty-year plan analyzed the scope of the preservation problem at the Archives by breaking it down into meaningful components, projected the type of treatment necessary to meet our preservation needs, and then applied this solution to a twenty-year period and calculated the cost to resolve the backlog and keep up with the inflow of new materials. An anticipated appropriation from the Congress in fiscal year 1986 will allow the Archives to begin the implementation of the plan.

Yet a third concern during my years as Archivist was public programs. The fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Archives provided the opportunity to expand our public programs into new areas. During the anniversary year we mounted a major exhibit, "Recent America, 1934-1984." For the first time the Archives made extensive use of audiovisual materials as well as photographs and records in order to give an illuminating and public view of American history. The exhibit received rave reviews and attracted enthusiastic crowds. We also produced anniversary publications: Harry Abrams, Inc., the distinguished art publisher, served as the publisher for *The National Archives of the United States* by Herman Viola, and *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* devoted an entire issue to the early history of the agency. The Archives was even honored by the U.S. Post Office with a special commemorative stamp! The fiftieth anniversary of the Archives, through these and other public programs, provided a pleasant interlude for the entire agency.

The federal records centers program, the unglamorous but essential workhorse of the Archives, continued on its traditional, well-managed route during my tenure. A milestone was reached in 1983 when the volume of records destroyed exceeded the volume of records accessioned for the first time in many years. In 1985, the eleven archives branches that had been administered by the federal records centers were given increased visibility and placed under the Office of

the National Archives. The Philadelphia Archives Branch was relocated from the suburbs to the center of the city, making the branch more accessible to researchers. The move touched off a discussion of possible moves for other branches.

Presidential libraries also were active during my years as Archivist. Of great personal pleasure to me was the acceptance in April 1981 of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. This highly functional building, with an understated elegance, set a new design standard for presidential libraries. It was the first of the presidential libraries to be designed in consultation with the National Archives. The foundation for the Carter Library was laid during this period, and the initial plans for the Ronald Reagan Library also got underway. More frustrating was the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, since Watergate controversies and the resulting legal problems have prevented any progress.

Of all of the Archives-related events of the past five years, none received more attention in the press than the passage and enactment of legislation re-establishing the National Archives as an independent agency. No doubt a comprehensive history of this important event will be written at a later date. But in lieu of a complete study, I would like to offer a brief overview of the campaign.

The campaign for this legislation began long before I came to the Archives. In fact, it had been going on for more than thirty years. It was not until my tenure, however, that the first legislation was introduced in Congress. The first bill was introduced in the Senate in 1980, and similar legislation was introduced in each of the following years. It was the 1983 bill, sponsored by Senators Thomas Eagleton and Charles Mathias, that first garnered significant support on Capitol Hill. At that time, professional associations such as the American Historical Association, the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, The Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage, and the Society of American Archivists took up the cause. Other professional organizations, genealogists, and educators joined them. They lobbied members of Congress and their staffs on the importance of the independence issue to the orderly preservation of valuable historical documents. More importantly, these organizations rallied their members to write and phone their congressional representatives. All of these efforts were aimed at educating Congress and the president on the issue.

It was a long road from the introduction of the bill to the passage and enactment of the leg-



Above is a view of a stack area in the National Archives Building in downtown Washington. This particular stack area holds the journals of the U.S. House of Representatives.



Above is a view of the map storage cases at the National Archives' newest facility in Alexandria, Virginia. Cartographic records and architectural drawings demand specialized care to ensure permanent preservation.



Some of the nation's newest citizens swear allegiance to the United States in naturalization ceremonies held at the Archives every September 17, Constitution Day.

isolation, and the process was fraught with anxiety. The bill reached the floor of the Senate, and Sen. Mark Hatfield assumed the primary role in obtaining both Senate and White House approval for the legislation. Support for the bill also came from the Office of Management and Budget. The bill passed the Senate in late June, but we knew we still had quite a ways to go before it could become law. A separate independence bill was introduced in the House by Representatives Jack Brooks and Glenn English. Other congressmen, such as Frank Horton, and many congressional staff members helped to secure House passage in early August. The important second step had been achieved, but two major steps remained.

Nineteen eighty-four was an election year, and a conference to reconcile the two versions of the independence legislation was not held until October 1. The Senate passed the compromise version two days later and the House followed suit on the following day. The bill was sent to the president on October 4, and the friends and supporters of the Archives held their breath. On the advice of Edwin Meese, then counselor to the president, President Reagan signed the bill into law on October 19, fifty years and three months to the day after President Roosevelt had first established the National Archives. The archival profession, and all those who are concerned about

this nation's documentary heritage, breathed a sigh of relief.

What changes will independence bring to the Archives? The most significant change that independence will bring is expanded opportunities. For the first time in thirty-five years, the Archives will be able to set its own priorities, to tell its own story to the Office of Management and Budget and to Congress, and to rise or fall on the merits of its programs. With these new opportunities comes the responsibility to vigorously pursue archival goals and the means to achieve them. We must do more than acquaint the public with who we are, what we do, and why that work is important. The Archives is probably the least known of our national treasures. The long term goals of the new National Archives and Records Administration must be both to carry out its mission with great effectiveness and to increase public awareness and appreciation of archives.

The National Archives begins its independent status with a record of real accomplishment over the past half century. The next five decades will bring great opportunities for change, for progress, and for real leadership among archives in this country and the world. My best wishes go to this extraordinary agency as it charts its course for the future. □