
The National Archives: Substance and Shadows, 1965-1980

By *Trudy Huskamp Peterson*

Sometimes the bright light of memory blinds us to a clear view of recent events. The period at the National Archives from the departure of Wayne Grover in 1965 to the arrival of Robert Warner in 1980 is easily remembered by everyone associated with the National Archives during those years. Most people would also agree that the institution of 1966, as they remember it, was far different from the one of 1980. But how was it different? When did it change, and why? What were the forces that fostered change? Memory, bright but unfocused, provides few answers. A close look at the record is required.

The years from 1966 to 1980 cover the administrations of two Archivists of the United States (Robert Bahmer, 1966–1968, and James B. Rhoads, 1968–1979) and an interregnum of nearly a year during which the search for a new Archivist was conducted (1979–1980). It would be logical to assume that the crossroads occurred at the 1968 transfer from Bahmer to Rhoads, but that does not appear to fit the events. Instead, just as the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974 was a watershed in the political history of the presidency, 1974 was the pivotal year for the National Archives. In the years preceding 1974, the Archives was generally on the offensive—anticipating events, initiating outreach activities, growing. In the years following, the Archives was often on the defensive—reacting to rather than shaping events, struggling to stabilize relationships with

important outside constituencies. This is not to suggest that there were no bad times between 1966 and 1974; there assuredly were. Nor did new initiatives cease in 1974; activities and programs continued to arise and flourish. But the weight of the institution had shifted, and the Archivist became more and more absorbed in the tasks of internal management and crisis response. Archival energies had been redirected.

The full description of these years at the National Archives cannot be compressed into the space of this essay. Instead, the thesis that 1974 was a critical year will be tested against five principal activities in the National Archives: reaching out to the public; providing access to the holdings; advancing archival theory and practice; matching facilities to needs; and managing the relationship between the Archives and the General Services Administration. In each case the changes will be described; at the end of the essay the causes of change will be surveyed.

Robert Bahmer and James B. Rhoads, the two men who led the National Archives during this period, had both come up through the institution. Bahmer, who earned his doctorate at the University of Minnesota, was one of the first group of archivists who created the National Archives in the 1930s, and, with the exception of the years 1941–1948, when he was part of the records management operations of the military, he never left. “Alternately tough and folksy in manner,” according to historian Don McCoy, Bahmer had been Archivist Wayne Grover’s right hand man from the time Grover took over as Archivist in 1948. He was Grover’s choice for Archivist, both because of his competence and because Grover saw no other internal candidate who was qualified. Revealingly, in 1965 Grover wrote to John W. Macy, Jr., the chairman of the Civil Service Commission, that for the position of Archivist of the United States “there is no

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The refurbishment of the Archives Rotunda was symbolic of the expansion of public programs during the late 1960s.





James B. Rhoads served as fifth Archivist of the United States from 1968 to 1979.

young candidate available who is fully qualified as an archivist, largely because our staff at the 'key position' level, with one exception, came to work at the National Archives at about the same time and are about the same age." "The one exception," he continued, "a very able young man, Dr. James B. Rhoads, needs more over-all experience." And so, without much difficulty, Grover realized his plan to bring Bahmer into the big corner office on Seventh and Pennsylvania and to have Rhoads installed in the smaller office next door as deputy.¹

Rhoads was a very different personality from Bahmer. James B. (Bert) Rhoads joined the National Archives in 1952. He was demoted in a "reduction in force" shortly after he arrived, and spent some time as a microfilm camera operator before getting back onto the professional track. But he advanced rapidly and completed a doctorate in history along the way. A tall man, he was gentle, courteous, and almost shy in personal relationships, happier when working with archival people and issues than when making a



Robert H. Bahmer served as fourth Archivist of the United States from 1966 to 1968.

speech or courting a congressman. During Rhoads' first years as Archivist, Herbert Angel served as his deputy; when Angel retired in 1972, Rhoads named James E. O'Neill his deputy.

By January 1966, when he took over, Robert Bahmer had spent seventeen years sitting next door to the Archivist's office. He was sixty-one years old and wanted to retire in a couple of years, but, he confided to close friends, there were several things he had always wanted to do and now he was going to make them happen. In his brief period as Archivist, Bahmer opened up windows and let new initiative flow in. Some of his staff referred to him affectionately as an archival version of Pope John XXIII.

Bahmer believed that the National Archives should and could reach a wider world. With Rhoads' assistance, he induced Lawson Knott, the Administrator of General Services, to establish the National Archives Advisory Council to maintain "a direct and formal relationship with the academic community." The academic community was very broadly defined, because Bahmer wanted to move from the idea that archives were of interest only to historians and to include political scientists, economists, genealogists, and others in the community of persons using the resources of the Archives. He began a series of conferences on special topics of interest to scholars "to increase communication between archivists and the scholarly community and to provide

¹"Register of the National Archives: September 16, 1937," National Archives Library, Box 3 I A-2; Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968* (1978), p. 216; Wayne Grover to John W. Macy, Jr., Nov. 4, 1965, "Operation Exit 1," Grover Personal Papers, Record Group 200, National Archives (hereafter RG 200, NA).

the National Archives with guidance on how best to serve the research needs of scholars." To broaden the impact of the conferences, the proceedings were printed and distributed as publications. He proposed the development of *Prologue* as a popular magazine to introduce wider audiences to the holdings of the National Archives and oversaw the planning stage for the journal. In 1969 the National Audiovisual Center was established in the National Archives to serve as a central information point, depository, and sales outlet for audiovisual materials produced by federal agencies. With the exception of the conference series, all of these Bahmer-inspired outreach programs are still in operation today.²

The 1970s, while witnessing a revival of the exhibits program in the National Archives Building and the development of a docents program (as well as some less happy experiments with

an associates or "friends" program and a plan to furnish selected public areas of the National Archives Building with American furniture and decorative arts of the Federal Period), saw nothing comparable to the variety of programs that Bahmer unleashed. A number of projects were completed in honor of the American Revolution bicentennial, including documentary publications, indexes to holdings, and a major exhibit with an associated book. But surely the most significant outreach event of the 1970s came not from the National Archives at all, but from ABC television. The series "Roots," tracing the family of Alex Haley, triggered an avalanche of genealogical research requests. For the first time in its history, the microfilm reading room in the central National Archives Building had lines of people waiting to use microfilm readers, and staff members finally had to devise a system of time limits on reader use. Letters poured in, and researcher visits shot up in all Archives facilities. By the end of 1977, research services were 50 percent higher than the previous year, and nearly

²*Prologue* 1 (Spring 1969): 52–54. Although the Council and *Prologue* were ideas of Bahmer's, both were formally established after Rhoads became Archivist.



Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the number of researchers visiting and writing to the National Archives increased at a rapid rate, but the television series "Roots" triggered an unprecedented rise in research requests.



Herbert E. Angel, Deputy Archivist from 1968 to 1972, worked with Rhoads to expand the number and size of federal records centers.

a decade later the impact of the public's new interest in family history research is still being felt. But coping with extra demands for genealogical reference service on this scale created massive problems for a staff already stretched thin. The Archives and its resources became far better known than ever before—and the National Archives had had nothing to do with initiating the publicity.³

A second focus during the Bahmer-Rhoads years was expansion of the public's access to the holdings of the National Archives. The first federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was passed in 1966, the same year that Bahmer became Archivist, and the amendments that made it an effective, working law were passed in 1974, in part as a congressional reaction to the perceived secretiveness of the Nixon administration. The amended Freedom of Information Act changed the ground rules on access to records of agencies in the executive branch. All agency restrictions had to be revised; archivists had to learn new procedures; and litigation became a reality as researchers now had the right to sue to gain access to records in federal custody. The Archives even found itself inheriting lawsuits concerning access to records when the files were transferred to archival custody; the most notable example was litigation over access to the records of the Watergate Prosecution Force, which followed the records right through the doors of the Archives. Yet Rhoads and his deputy, James E. O'Neill, welcomed the passage of the amendments to the act, believing that it would benefit researchers and that it reflected a policy of open records that the Archives traditionally advocated.

Curiously, the advantages that researchers gained under the FOIA amendments were nearly obliterated by the Privacy Act, passed in 1975. This act had the potential to close to research use virtually all archival records in which an individual was named, whether that person was living or dead. Alternatively, the act would have required the Archives to attempt to notify persons at their last known address before releasing information concerning them (visions of addressing thousands of letters to "George Washington, Mount Vernon, Virginia," flittered through the minds of archivists). Archives officials lobbied vigorously for exemption from such portions of the act, and eventually Congress was persuaded that the National Archives had already substantially protected the individual rights

that the act was designed to protect. The Archives was finally exempted from some of the bill's features, that, if passed, might have severely restricted access to archival records.

Congressional laws were not the only source of changes affecting access. Presidents have always tried to control the release of information relating to foreign relations and national security, and ever since 1940 a formal set of executive orders has governed the system of classification and declassification of government documents. The most long-lasting of these orders was Dwight D. Eisenhower's Executive Order No. 10501, "Safeguarding Official Information in the Interests of the Defense of the United States," issued on November 5, 1953, which served as the basis for the classification system until March 1972. At that time President Richard Nixon issued a sweeping revision of the entire document classification system—one with definite effects on the National Archives. During the fifteen months preceding the issuance of Nixon's order, an interagency committee studied the existing system, with the Archives, through contacts at the White House, as an active participant. As a result of that study, in the summer of 1971 President Nixon asked Congress to approve a supplemental appropriation for the General Services Administration to assist the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) in the declassification of World War II records which, the president said, amounted to nearly 160 million pages. Congress ultimately did appropriate money for Archives' declassification efforts, and from that time on the Archives has had a major program devoted to reviewing and opening classified documents.

The Nixon order also created an Interagency Classification Review Committee to oversee the implementation of the executive order. Because one of the committee's powers was to take appeals from persons who had been denied access to agency records, and because of the large volume of classified material held by NARS, the Archivist was given a seat on the committee and, within a year, Rhoads was named acting chairman of it. For the first time the Archives had direct and formal authority to press other agencies for liberalization of access. The Archives quickly developed a reputation within government classification circles for liberality and openness. It is probably no surprise, then, that when the executive order was again revised under President Carter's direction, the committee was scrapped and replaced by an Interagency Security Oversight Office located within GSA but deliberately not within NARS. The period from 1972 to 1978 marked the apogee of Archives'

³"The National Archives and Records Service in 1977" (Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States), pp. 1-3.

influence within the government in promoting access to records.

Important as the Freedom of Information Act and various executive orders have been in controlling access to records, nothing during the Bahmer-Rhoads period generated more controversy and concern than the debates over access to the records of the presidents. When Bahmer left office, he could surely claim that the advent of the presidential library system had been an unrivaled boost to research and writing on the history of the presidency. While the Lincoln papers were not open until 1955, and Adams material was still in the process of becoming available, the NARS argument ran, the presidential libraries brought the opening of 85 percent of the Roosevelt papers within five years of the president's death, the rapid availability of the papers of Roosevelt's successors, and, even more important, archival control over presidential papers as soon as they left the White House, preventing accidental (or intentional) loss or destruction. While it was true that President Truman maintained control over some key files, in early 1968 it seemed that the presidential library system was a successful means to open papers and foster scholarship.

Unlike Bahmer, Rhoads as Archivist found nothing but trouble in the entire range of questions relating to presidential papers. Only a few

months after he took over a researcher named Francis Loewenheim charged that the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library had treated individual researchers (himself in particular) unfairly, restricted specific documents unjustifiably, and proceeded in its publication program improperly, if not illegally. In September 1969 Loewenheim and nineteen other scholars repeated these charges in a letter printed in the *New York Times Book Review*.

As the situation deteriorated, the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians agreed to create a joint ad hoc committee to investigate the case. The committee's final report, issued August 24, 1970, concluded that there was no deliberate and systematic withholding of documents from Loewenheim at the Roosevelt Library nor was there a deliberate and systematic attempt to conceal the existence of a publication project from scholars (one of the points in contention). The real impact of the Loewenheim case was not found in the report, which flatly stated "there has been no scandal at the Roosevelt Library," but in the reexamination of practices that it fostered within NARS. Archivists were instructed to ensure that researchers had access to all finding aids, knew of recently opened records and restrictions on documents, and were informed of publication projects. NARS became much more conscious



Due to the Freedom of Information Act and expanded declassification efforts, public access to the holdings of the National Archives increased in the 1970s.

of its role in providing open information about restricted items, and it became more aware of the complaints of scholars about restrictions in general.⁴

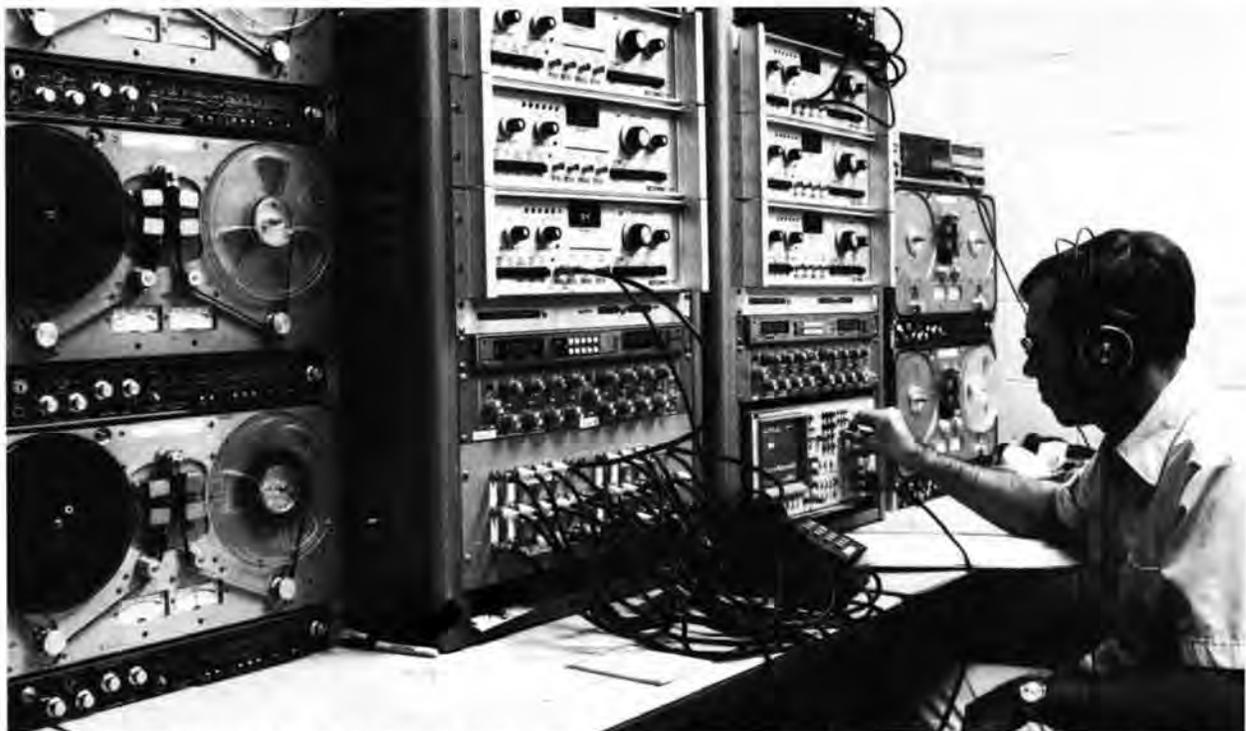
The Loewenheim case was barely fading from archival consciousness when questions began to be raised about the donations to the National Archives of the papers of President Lyndon Johnson, with accompanying tax deduction and restrictions on public access, and of the vice-presidential papers of Richard Nixon, also with deductions and restrictions. In 1969 the Congress had passed a tax reform act that prohibited the deduction of the value of papers if, in short, the papers were created by the individual donating them. Eventually the Congressional Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation tried to determine whether the donation of President Nixon's papers had occurred after the tax provisions had gone into effect (whether, in other words, the Nixon deed of gift to the National Archives had been backdated to make it appear that the donation took place before the act took effect). Archives' staff member Mary Walton Livingston provided evidence that, indeed, the donation had occurred after the effective date of

the act. This controversy formed part of the events leading to Nixon's resignation.

This did not end Nixon's relationship to the Archives, however. Shortly after his resignation, a deed of gift for the Nixon presidential papers, including the famous tape recordings, was concluded between the former president and Administrator of General Services Arthur Sampson. The Archivist of the United States, who customarily handled such negotiations, was excluded, and although the exclusion was legally proper it raised eyebrows, especially when the character of the deed was disclosed. The September 1974 arrangement, known as the Nixon-Sampson agreement, provided for the destruction of the tapes and very unusual and limited access to other Nixon items. Congress subsequently passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974, which canceled the Nixon-Sampson agreement and set criteria for access to the materials. In addition, at the urging of Bert Rhoads, Congress created a National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, which was directed to study the larger question of ownership and access to the papers of federal public servants, especially those of the president.

The commission, known informally as the Public Documents Commission, provided a forum for the smoldering access questions. Hearings

⁴Final Report of the Joint AHA-OAH Ad Hoc Committee to Investigate the Charges against the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Related Matters (Aug. 24, 1970).



The Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 included provisions governing "Watergate tapes" of the Nixon administration. Above, an archivist reviews tapes for classification, description, and preservation purposes.

were held, testimony taken, memorials received. Two independent conferences also examined these questions. One, the American Assembly, concluded that the papers of presidents should be public records; the other, an invitational conference of scholars and archivists held at New Harmony, Indiana, rather unharmoniously found that custodians and users had very different views of the problems of access and use but that it was probably desirable to have a uniform, legal system of control over the materials. The commission eventually recommended legislation to control the disposition of the papers of public officials.⁵

Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger had deposited his papers from his service as secretary of state in the Library of Congress, over the protests of the National Archives, which believed that official records might be included in the papers. Kissinger placed substantial restrictions on the records, and a coalition of groups and individuals sued to have the papers declared to be records and hence accessible under the Freedom of Information Act. A 1980 decision in favor of Kissinger did nothing to ease the sense of frustration of researchers and archivists relating to access to documents created by public officials.

The passage of the Presidential Records Act in 1978 was a direct result of the recommendations of the Public Documents Commission. The act, which was to go into effect during the term of President Reagan, seemed to answer the question of access to presidential and vice-presidential records. It did not resolve questions of access to the papers of other federal officials, such as members of Congress and judges, but it did settle the most notable and notorious question: who controlled access to the papers of the president. Because the legislation did not repeal the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, it left open the possibility that a library could be built and presidential records deposited in it. In fact, the new legislation included specific language that permitted the placement of presidential records in a "presidential archival depository." But the point remained that an issue—access to papers of presidents—that had hardly been viewed as a problem in 1966 had, by 1980, blown into a cause celebre, had occasioned congressional hearings and legislation, and had, at least for a

while, deeply divided archivists and historians as they struggled to find a policy on access and use.

The problems of access addressed during the second half of the 1970s were generally unknown during Bahmer's administration. In many ways the litigation that was a feature of life at the National Archives in the years after 1974 was a reflection of the social forces at work in American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But for archivists it was a new world. Individual researchers sued under the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to documents. Other researchers appealed for declassification of documents. A coalition of individuals and organizations sued to prevent the records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from being destroyed in accordance with an Archives-approved records schedule. And so on. The litigious age had found the Archives.

A third area in which the National Archives changed greatly during the Bahmer-Rhoads era was archival theory and practice, both in terms of advancing concepts within the Archives and of promoting practices in other archives in the United States and around the world. One of these changes involved acceptance of the need for the Archives to provide long-term storage of machine-readable data produced by computers. In 1963 the Social Science Research Council had publicly expressed its concern about the increasing quantity of social science data in machine-readable form in federal agencies. NARS, acknowledging the rapid growth of this form of documentation, took an inventory of machine-readable records in thirteen federal agencies in 1964. No action was taken based on the results of the inventory. After Bahmer became Archivist he established a committee on the disposition of machine-readable records. The committee's report, presented in 1968, recommended the establishment of a special organization within NARS to deal with machine-readable records. The following year Rhoads created a Data Archives Staff in the Office of Records Management.

The first public discussion of proposed criteria for NARS to use in the appraisal of machine-readable records was a speech by NARS staff member Meyer Fishbein in 1970 before the Society of American Archivists' convention. The following year the data archives staff was transferred to the Office of the National Archives and renamed the Data Archives Branch. The staff still remained small and its activity focused on the statistical and, to a limited extent, the scientific files of the government. In 1972 the branch drew up the first general records schedule for machine-readable records and in 1973 the re-

⁵"The Records of Federal Officials" (Final Report of the Forty-Eighth American Assembly), Apr. 3-5, 1975; Alonzo Hamby and Edward Weldon, eds., *Access to the Papers of Recent Public Figures: The New Harmony Conference* (1977); National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, *Final Report* (1977).



Rhoads and his staff fostered a building program that expanded the records center facilities in nine states and presidential libraries in seven states. Above is the federal records center in San Bruno, California.

sponsibility for appraising machine-readable records was assigned to the branch.

Rhoads and O'Neill became convinced that machine-readable records presented a major problem area that would require substantial financial and intellectual contributions from NARS. Consequently, they began planning for an expanded staff, and in 1974 the Data Archives Branch became the Machine-Readable Archives Division, signalling a shift from viewing computers as producing exclusively statistics to seeing them as a means for creating every type of record format—the foundation of a new format for archives. Staff numbers increased and an effort was made to survey key agencies to identify and appraise machine-readable records. From this initiative came writings and speeches about the archival value and the administration of machine-readable records that have influenced the handling of computer-generated records around the world.

Another of the Bahmer-Rhoads changes in archival practice was the creation of a formal training program in the National Archives. Ever since the time of Solon J. Buck and Ernst Posner, new archivists at the National Archives had been given classroom instruction in archival theory and practice. The program was now expanded substantially. Bahmer gave Rhoads free rein to de-

velop and implement a full-scale training program for entering archivists, and starting in 1966, the National Archives had a Civil Service Commission-approved formal training agreement. The training year included both formal classroom work and rotational work assignments. The basic entry level required a masters degree. The training program made possible a career ladder with automatic promotions, and this undergirded a concerted and successful effort to increase substantially professional standing and pay levels for archivists in the government.

The training program was quite small in its first years; then it received an unexpected boost from President Lyndon Johnson. The president, consummate politician that he was, wanted ample staff for his prospective presidential library, but he knew he could not get a separate appropriation just for that. Instead, he supported an increase in funds for NARS generally, and in 1969 some thirty-six new archivists were inducted into the training program, chiefly from the offices of the National Archives and the presidential libraries. The training program, with some modifications (the academic credits for the classroom portion were dropped in 1970; the central office hiring of trainees for the field libraries faded away in the mid-1970s), survived until 1978, when GSA as a whole switched to a training program



Public programs received an added emphasis during the Rhoads years. A 1971 exhibit entitled "The Art of Diplomacy" displayed some of the more colorful treaties signed by the United States.

called the Career Intern Development System. Known as CIDS, it was adapted by the Archives to include most of the features of the previous program, but the training was spread over two years, additional classroom work was included, and writing skills received special attention. But the thrust of the program remained clear: NARS was committed to providing its new employees with training in-house which combined instruction in theory, introduction to practice, and acquaintance with the basic programs and functions of the various units within NARS.

Another development which fostered the advance of archival theory and practice lay within the National Historical Publications Commission. This time the emphasis was on nonfederal archives, and the role was providing money. The National Historical Publications Commission had been revitalized in 1951 and had established itself as the major source for funds for documentary publication in the United States. Archivists had looked longingly at the federal money that was supporting documentary editing and, with some special leadership from South Carolina Archivist Charles Lee, lobbied for a similar commission that would underwrite archival projects. The interest in history that was stimulated by the imminence of the bicentennial of the American Revolution helped the idea along. Legislation proposing a records commission was drafted and was endorsed in 1973 by the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. The records commission legislation ultimately was modified by the Congress to make the records commission a part of a renamed and reorganized National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and to provide two million dollars in grant money for nonfederal records and manuscript preservation projects, including acquiring, arranging, describing, and preserving them and making them available for use. The bill passed and was signed by the new president, Gerald Ford, in that key year 1974. Thereafter NHPRC money, moving throughout the country, created an unprecedented wave of progress and employment in nonfederal archives. NHPRC money funded experimental projects, surveys of records, writings on basic archival topics, and a host of other contributions to archival theory and practice. In the process, it created a network of relationships that broadened and strengthened NARS' role and fostered experiments in archives from which the agency could benefit in the future.

A final Bahmer-Rhoads contribution to advancing archival theory and practice can be found in the expanded role of the National Archives in the activities of the International Council on

Archives (ICA). One key event happened in the Bahmer era, but most of the progress occurred in the Rhoads years. The major Bahmer event was the 1966 Extraordinary Congress of the ICA, held in Washington at the invitation of Wayne Grover. Using what Donald McCoy has characterized as a "soft sell," the U.S. archivists and their Canadian colleagues pushed hard for liberalization of access to archival records around the world. The congress formally adopted that position, the first time that world archivists had collectively taken a stand on openness. Then in 1976 the National Archives and the Society of American Archivists hosted the International Council's quadrennial congress, where Rhoads was installed as president of the council. Throughout the next four years Rhoads traveled extensively, supporting archival activities around the globe. He even managed to inaugurate a cooperative documentary publication with the U.S.S.R. on the development of Russian-American relations, a precedent-setting collaboration for the archival community. There is no doubt that U.S. archivists provided leadership to facilitate world-wide archival advances.

The fourth focus of the Bahmer-Rhoads years is the crisis of facilities. If the proudest legacy of Robert Bahmer is the archival outreach programs he founded, perhaps the greatest legacy of James B. Rhoads is in the archival buildings he obtained and renovated. From Grover and Bahmer he inherited mighty problems of space for archives and records, and he tried to find acceptable solutions. It is cruelly ironic that this great effort of his became, at the end of his term as Archivist, a source of continuing problems.

In January 1966 the National Archives and Records Service was physically located in the central building in Washington; an annex in northern Virginia that held military records; the presidential libraries for Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower; ten regional records centers; and a specialized personnel records center in St. Louis. All archives were located in the central building or in the Virginia facility. Grover had been seeking a second archives building but had failed. Instead, he had managed to obtain the funds for a major national records center in Suitland, Maryland, which opened in February 1967. Records poured in. Ultimately the Virginia warehouse was closed, and it was immediately apparent that some of the space in the Suitland center designed and equipped for temporary records would have to be used for archives. The Washington National Records Center, as it is officially called, originally held overflow and less used archives, but it quickly began to accession records out of the center itself and became a

major archives in its own right. Increasingly, too, archives were transferred from the central building to Suitland, and the archives area in the records center, complete with fourteen foot high shelving and warehouse-style stack areas, grew and grew. In 1985, less than two decades after opening the center, the National Archives was once again renting space to operate as a records center in the Washington, D.C., area, and archives were in unsuitable records center space.

The 1960s space crisis in Washington was reflected around the country. Many of the regional centers needed expansion, upgrading, or just plain abandonment for more suitable quarters. Of even more concern, some records in the regional centers were of clear long-term archival value and needed to be transferred to archival control. Bringing these archives to Washington, with its overcrowded facilities, was no answer, so in 1968 the Archives did the next best thing and established regional archives branches in all the federal records centers except the center in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, and the National

Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

The new Archives Advisory Council raised questions about the operation of the regional archives, suggesting that the dispersion of records to many geographical locations might impede research. Rhoads, having succeeded Bahmer by this time, told the advisory council that the establishment of regional archives stemmed from two factors: "space limitations in the National Archives Building and the desire to make certain research materials more accessible to those who would use them." He assured the council that central office records "would not be split up and sent out to the regions, and in some cases regional records would be brought to Washington if investigation revealed that it was more advantageous to do that than to leave them in the region." "In all instances," Rhoads told the council, "the records in regional archives would be administered by a trained archivist under the same standards and regulations employed in the National Archives—he would be an employee of the National Archives working in the field." In addition, the National Ar-



Two fires—one in Missouri and one in Maryland—dramatically directed public attention to the need to rehabilitate buildings throughout the Archives system.

chives hoped to place a complete set of its microfilm publications in each of the regional archives branches, although Walter Robertson, Jr., the Archives' budget officer, told the council that the Bureau of the Budget had halved the request for funds for the copying and distribution of the film. The regional archives branches, with the somewhat reluctant blessing of the council, were a fact.⁶

The space crisis in the records centers was especially well-known to Rhoads' first deputy Herbert Angel, who had spent his career interested in problems of records management and records centers. Working together, Rhoads and Angel fostered building programs that resulted in new records center facilities in Chicago; Bayonne, New Jersey; San Bruno and Laguna Niguel, California; and Dayton, Ohio, plus the presidential libraries for John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford. Major facility improvements and additions were completed at the centers in Atlanta; Waltham, Massachusetts; Denver; Fort Worth; and Seattle and at the four older presidential libraries. The National Archives Building itself had major renovations in the exhibition area and the microfilm reading room, and in 1973 smoke detectors, water sprinklers, and fluorescent lights with ultraviolet filters were installed in the stack areas. Space for a number of office activities was leased in the center of Washington, plus space in the suburbs for the new National Audiovisual Center and the stock film library.

But in 1973 this remarkable record began to turn sour. From then on there were disasters, unfavorable press, and ultimately the first congressional oversight hearings that NARS had ever experienced. The General Services Administration (GSA) exacerbated the crisis, and these events in no small measure contributed to the resurgence of belief among the Archives' clientele that the placement of NARS within GSA was inappropriate.

On July 12, 1973, a fire swept through the top floor of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. The center, which had been transferred to the National Archives from the military, had never been equipped with sprinklers. NARS had repeatedly requested sprinklers for the St. Louis center and had just as repeatedly been turned down by GSA. Now several million files had been destroyed, and ingenious methods had to be devised to reconstruct the infor-

mation in the destroyed records. The fire gave immediate visibility to the need to rehabilitate buildings throughout the Archives system.

As if that was not disaster enough, fire came again four years later. This time the blaze was at the Archives' nitrate film vaults in Suitland, Maryland (near, but not in, the records center there). The fire destroyed 800,000 feet of "March of Time" movie outtakes from the 1937-1940 period, as well as 109 canisters of aerial mapping. To make matters even worse, in December 1978 another fire erupted in the nitrate vaults, this time destroying almost thirteen million feet of newsreels in one storage unit. While the cause of the fire remains somewhat a mystery (ironically, at the time of the fire workmen were in the vaults to install new air-conditioning equipment and lower sprinklers, and some NARS officials believe the blaze may have been caused by a spark), three fires in five years created a sense of alarm.

With the bicentennial at hand, some archives employees began lobbying for special fire protection for the most important records in the archives, including the records of the Continental Congress.

Eventually it was installed, but in the meantime the space crisis in the main building continued to grow. When a department store near the Archives went out of business, NARS rented some of its space to house a portion of the archives from the main building. A few employees, convinced that the store was a firetrap, raised loud objections to the move. Congressional interest in questions of safety and storage was aroused, and when GSA decided that it would be too expensive to upgrade the old store to meet fire standards, NARS was forced to vacate the structure. Some of the records went to the Washington National Records Center; some went to the main building; and some items were even placed with a local storage company.

Rhoads tried hard to get substantial funding increases for preservation, but progress was slow and the increases never enough. Critics of the National Archives continued to question the security of materials within the buildings, and both a system of physical security (including an identification badge system) and an accelerated program of physical preservation of documents were implemented. The summer of 1979 was a time of crisis. For the first time in its history, the National Archives was called to testify at congressional oversight hearings in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House raised questions about the 1978 fire in the nitrate vaults, the current preservation practices at the Archives, and the administration of the

⁶"Minutes of the Second Meeting of the Archives Advisory Council," *Prologue* 1 (Fall 1969): 37-40. Nearly 20 years later, each of the field archives still does not have a complete set of NARS microfilm publications.

National Archives Trust Fund (a nonappropriated revolving fund). The Senate focused on the future of the presidential libraries system as part of a general inquiry into services for former presidents.

At this key stage a new administrator, Admiral Roland G. Freeman, arrived at GSA. Correctly sensing that one of the major problems at the National Archives was matching the space available in the facilities to the reality of the records on hand, Freeman set out to solve the problem. Within a few weeks of assuming office, he ordered NARS to come up with plans to solve the space problems through two means: microfilming records and then destroying the originals, and shipping large quantities of records to the regional archives branches where, presumably, there was more space than in crowded Washington. Staff and researchers alike were horrified. They raised various objections, such as the uncertain longevity of microfilm, the intrinsic value of some of the records to be filmed, the disruption of research patterns that would result from dispersal, and the problems of maintaining intellectual control over materials in multiple storage sites. To meet the administrator's demands, plans for accelerated microfilming and dispersal were completed, but the public outcry against the destruction and dispersal features was so great that in the winter of 1980, with the approval of GSA, the plans for massive relocation were quietly dropped.

While the public controversy about space and its solutions focused on the archival holdings, the space crisis was equally severe in the system of federal records centers. In 1978, for the first time, the fifteen NARS records centers disposed of more than one million cubic feet of records during a twelve month period; however, in the following years the disposal rate slipped below this mark. NARS tried to persuade agencies to schedule records for destruction, particularly those records held in the records centers. While partially successful, in 1980 over 25 percent of the records in the centers still remained unscheduled. The space problem was complicated by litigation which prevented the destruction of records; lawsuits involving AT&T, IBM, and others led to freezes on the destruction of over one and a third million cubic feet of records by 1980.

The crisis of facilities was a major theme of the Bahmer and Rhoads years, and the controversy over it became particularly nasty in the mid to late 1970s. Although NARS actively sought space for a new archives building, and the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Commission (PADC) included space for an archives facility



Even though shelving in federal records centers was used to the max-

in its plans for renovation of the avenue, Administrator Freeman reversed his predecessor's decision and disapproved plans for an expanded National Archives in Washington. NARS lost its opportunity for a portion of the PADC development space. With increasing demands for environmentally controlled facilities for such special records as motion pictures and computer tapes, and with the constantly growing pressure to take in more records of all types, the 1970s had brought the National Archives no closer to a solution to the space problem—if anything, the problem was even more acute. Rhoads was a great builder and remodeler of libraries and records centers, but he had been unable to solve the central problem of space for archives.

A facet by which it is possible to measure the change in the National Archives between 1966 and 1980 is in the management of the relationship between the General Services Administration and the National Archives. Four stages can be identified: the years of "Operation Exit," the



imum extent possible, records storage space was a chronic problem.

period of subsidence, the 1974 events and their aftermath, and the Freeman years at GSA. In each of these stages the leaders of the National Archives were tested in their ability to push their programs while maintaining a degree of professional independence from GSA.

"Operation Exit" has been described by Donald McCoy, among others. Briefly, after he retired Wayne Grover headed an effort (which he dubbed "Operation Exit") to obtain NARS' independence from GSA. Grover and his collaborators hit on the idea of a published study of the relationship between the two organizations, believing that once the story was written down it could never again be totally ignored.⁷ The re-

⁷Julian Boyd, a member of the "Operation Exit" group, wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes, another member, that in the fall of 1967 Grover "said that the book *must* be published and that afterwards the problem could never go away. He was right." Boyd to Holmes, Apr. 1968, "1968," Holmes Personal Papers, RG 200, NA.

port, written by H. G. Jones and published under the title *The Records of a Nation*, was presented to the General Services Administration. GSA officials, in a neat bureaucratic maneuver, turned the problem of answering the charges over to the National Archives. Deputy Archivist Rhoads drew the assignment of drafting the reply, which parried the criticism of NARS in the report and divided the Grover group from their friends at NARS. All in all, however, the report was not crucial, for with the defeat of Johnson and the advent of the Nixon administration, executive branch support for the independence movement was gone and congressional interest, marginal at best, evaporated.⁸

By the time the 1970s arrived, all immediate hopes for independence appeared to be dead. Instead, Rhoads tried to find a method of dealing with GSA on the financial and managerial issues of NARS that left him free to manage the archival side of the business. That worked relatively well for about six years.

When the late 1960s independence movement failed, Grover predicted that NARS would continue as part of GSA until an administrator of general services made a major mistake.⁹ For a while it appeared that this had happened in the case of the administration of the Nixon papers. In addition to signing the Nixon-Sampson agreement described above, Administrator Sampson appointed one of his GSA lieutenants as the official responsible for access to the Nixon materials, thereby excluding the Archives from control. And when the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act required GSA to draw up regulations to administer the Nixon materials in accordance with the law, Sampson appointed a task force composed largely of non-NARS officials to draw up the plans (including a report to the Congress that was replete with errors). A change of administrators cooled the situation, and the Nixon materials passed into archival custody, speeded along by some sharp ques-

⁸H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation: Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (1969); McCoy, *National Archives*, Chap. 19. Bahmer believed that the price GSA would exact for independence would be to leave the records centers behind in GSA, and he thought that was a price too high to pay.

⁹On Sept. 26, 1966, Grover wrote to Julian Boyd, Oliver W. Holmes, and Lyman Butterfield (the four members of the "Operation Exit" group), "Sooner or later the leadership of GSA will make a mistake that the historical profession will not be able to stomach. . . . Unless enough powerful people can be convinced simply that the status and environment of the National Archives Establishment should be improved, I am afraid that we have little hope but to wait for GSA to make a mistake." "Operation Exit 1," Grover Papers.



Deputy Archivist James E. O'Neill served as Acting Archivist of the United States in 1979–80.

tioning of the new administrator by Representative John Brademas at a congressional hearing in January 1976.

From this period on the issue of NARS independence never faded. In 1976, at the convention of the Society of American Archivists, retired NARS Executive Director Walter Robertson, Jr., publicly called for the separation of NARS from GSA—the first time that a former NARS official had spoken out on the subject since the end of Operation Exit. In 1977 the report of the Public Documents Commission recommended that GSA and NARS be divorced; in 1978 the Archives and Records Task Force of the President's Executive Branch Reorganization Project concluded that some change might be required in the relationship between the two—a position endorsed by the National Archives Advisory Council. Then the appointment of Rowland G. Freeman as administrator heated the situation

to the boiling point.¹⁰

While it is possible to point to a number of key decisions by Freeman that inflamed public opinion—such as the decision to transfer the regional operations out of NARS and into GSA, the determination to send records to the regions, the emphasis on filming and destroying documents, the opposition to the decentralized presidential library system and the preference for a central one (a striking contrast to his interest in decentralized archives), the cancellation of any new archival building for NARS—it was the impetuosity of his actions that activated the most opposition. The administrator appeared to be making unilateral decisions about issues that were primarily archival in nature, to the dismay of archivists and the research community.

Between the arrival of Freeman in July 1979 and the arrival of the new Archivist, Robert Warner, a year later, the genie of impatience escaped from the bottle. Acting Archivist James O'Neill and Acting Deputy Walter Stender found the GSA-NARS balance especially difficult to maintain during the interregnum. Within that year protests were lodged by a wide variety of archival and historical organizations; two new groups were formed (the Emergency Committee to Preserve the National Archives, composed of historians and archivists, and a staff organization at the National Archives that has become known as the National Archives Assembly); a delegation composed of the president of the American Historical Association and former Archivists Bahmer and Rhoads went to the White House in person to complain about GSA interference in NARS; Rhoads made a public speech denouncing the GSA-NARS connection; and bumper stickers and even black humor posters were created. Magazines and newspapers across the country carried stories of the controversy, and letter-writing campaigns were organized. By 1980 the unquiet corpse of Operation Exit appeared to be turning once again.

The National Archives and Records Service that Robert Bahmer inherited in 1966 was substantially different from the one Robert Warner found in 1980. True, both were institutions within the General Services Administration; both administered records and archives and printed the *Federal Register*. But while Bahmer had a nationwide series of federal records centers under his control; Warner found that he could only give advice to regional operations run by GSA. Bah-

¹⁰"Report to Congress on Title 1, Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act, P.L. 93-526" (Mar. 1975); Walter Robertson, Jr., "NARS: The Politics of Placement," *American Archivist* 39 (Oct. 1976): 486-489; National Study Commission, *Final Report*.

mer believed that the space problem might be solved by a new Archives building in Washington; Warner found that any immediate possibility for this had disappeared. Bahmer found few outreach programs in place, so he created them; Warner inherited a substantial formal outreach program plus a large and aroused informal constituency. Bahmer had operated within a series of rather gentlemanly arrangements concerning access to records; Warner found the Archives deeply enmeshed in legal regulations concerning access and involved in numerous lawsuits on a wide variety of archival issues. Bahmer entered office when a drive for NARS independence was getting underway; in this, at least, Warner found a situation that was similar, if less formally organized.

It fell to James B. Rhoads to preside over the years when these striking changes occurred. And if any one year was the fulcrum of change, it was 1974. The list of legislation for that year tells most of the story: the amendments to the Freedom of Information Act, the establishment of

the Public Documents Commission, the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act seizing the Nixon papers, and the creation of a function providing records grants within the National Historical Publications Commission. The mid-1970s were a time of turmoil in America. It was impossible that the Archives, which, after all, reflects the government as it responds to changing social conditions, would remain serenely above it all. The crisis in government fueled demands by the public for increased accountability by public officials. These demands led to a clamor for access to government information, and that, in turn, brought the Archives directly into the public debate. When the government is in crisis, records are key. But it would have been impossible for Robert Bahmer to predict, even when he left the Archives in 1968, that so many revisions would sweep through the institution in such a short time. More than just Watergate, 1974 was a watershed not only for the presidency and the body politic but also for the National Archives and Records Service. □