

Introduction

The phrase "study the past" is engraved on a stone pedestal outside the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance to the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. These words greet staff members and researchers alike as they enter the building to work with the permanently valuable records of the federal government. All who enter the building share a common belief in the importance of preserving our nation's federal documentary heritage.

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the institution established to preserve our national historical resources has not itself been the subject of much historical investigation. There have been only two book-length studies of the agency: H. G. Jones' *The Records of a Nation*, published in 1969, and Donald R. McCoy's *The National Archives*, published nine years later. The dearth of research on the Archives is due, in large part, to the relative youth of the agency. Established in 1934 by President Franklin Roosevelt, the National Archives was fifty years old only this past year.

Anniversaries are a time for reflection and celebration. During 1984 the National Archives both reflected on and celebrated its first fifty years of

service to the nation. As one anniversary activity, *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* commissioned essays for a special issue devoted to the early history of the agency. The essays by Donald R. McCoy, Virginia C. Purdy, and Rodney A. Ross were first published in that issue of *Prologue*. The response to the issue was exceptional, and requests for additional copies exceeded all expectations. In fact, more single copies of that issue of *Prologue* were sold than of any other issue in the journal's seventeen year history.

The popularity of the anniversary issue led to discussions about the possibility of expanding the work already published into a brief but complete history of the agency. The essays in *Prologue* carried the Archives' story to 1949. Could other knowledgeable individuals be commissioned to finish the task? The Archives was fortunate to have several staff members willing to take on such an assignment. The essays by James Gregory Bradsher, Trudy Huskamp Peterson, and Robert M. Warner complete the portrait of the National Archives over its first fifty years.

A word is in order on the limitations of this book. Based on printed primary and available secondary sources, and written against tight deadlines, *Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the History of the National Archives* is far from the last word on the history of the agency. In fact, the National Archives holds over 750 cubic feet of records documenting its own history; these materials must be explored fully before the term



“definitive” can be granted to a study of the Archives. Nor is this book a seamless narrative; as the subtitle indicates, this is a collection of essays on the history of the National Archives. And, as with all such collections, each essay has its own individual focus and manner of presentation. It is, to be sure, a modest effort to honor the National Archives on its golden anniversary.

Guardian of Heritage does fill a void in the historical literature on the Archives. The book provides a useful overview of the history of an important agency, answering common questions about its development over the past half century. More importantly, the book is an invitation to archivists, researchers, tourists, and even the merely curious to come to the National Archives, meet its staff, and explore its unparalleled collections. Above all, the combination of text and illustrations acknowledges the contributions of the thousands of individuals who have made the National Archives what it is today.

This book is a collaborative effort involving the contributions of many staff members of the National Archives and Records Administration. Foremost among these contributors are the six individuals who prepared the essays that follow. Each of these authors has been or is currently a staff member of the National Archives, and all share a common commitment to the mission and goals of the agency. Yet these contributors are also trained historians who have been able to look at the agency from a critical perspective.



Collectively, they have produced a brief but balanced portrait of the National Archives.

Other staff members and former staff members were equally generous with their time. James B. Rhoads, James E. O'Neill, and Frank B. Evans reviewed each of the chapters for clarity and accuracy. They provided substantive suggestions and improvements that added to the quality of the publication. Herbert B. Angel was also generous in reviewing the chapters that touched upon his tenure at the Archives. Foremost among the reviewers, however, was Robert B. Brookhart, who not only reviewed each of the essays, but also made numerous editorial changes that improved the book as a whole.

But this book is much more than text. The dozens of photographs and illustrations herein give the book a visual dimension that is rarely found in institutional histories. Credit for the quantity, quality, and graphic presentation of these images belongs to several people. Staff members in the Still Picture Branch of the Archives, particularly Barbara Burger and Edward McCarter, were generous with their time in the search for appropriate photographs. William Cunliffe, at the time chief of the Cartographic and Architectural Branch, located several photographs and drawings in that branch's collections. Most important to the visual appeal of the book were the efforts of Serene Feldman Werblood, whose considerable graphic skills added luster to the work of the six authors.

Finally, this book would not have been possible had it not been for the contributions of the staff of the Publications Division of the National Archives. Division director R. Kevin Flood approved plans for the project and provided advice and encouragement from its inception as a special issue of *Prologue* to its final completion as a book. Division staff members Katherine V. Coram, Richard Smith, and Mary C. Ryan provided timely professional assistance to the editor. Their hard work is reflected in every page of this publication.

“*Litera, Scripta, Manet,*” reads the motto of the National Archives and Records Administration. Loosely translated, the words proclaim that the “written word endures.” The essays that follow tell the story of how those words have been applied in the preservation and use of our federal documentary heritage over the past fifty years. As the Archives enters its second half-century of service to the nation, these words are as relevant as the day they were first inscribed on the agency's seal. The written word continues to endure at the National Archives. □

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