

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES  
AND RECORDS SERVICE

# newsletter



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GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

## Walt Robertson Remembers...

*He was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1917, the son of a Scottish carpenter who worked in the ship-building trade. He was the second of five children. In 1925, when he was 8, the family came to the United States. He has lived in the Washington area since. In 1941 he joined the staff of the National Archives as a junior laborer. It proved to be a permanent alliance, except for two years of overseas service as an infantryman in World War II. Walter Robertson Jr. retired last summer as Executive Director of the National Archives and Records Service. However, he stayed on for several months as Special Assistant to the Archivist. Retirement came for real at the end of 1975. The children--five of them, as in the family into which he was born--were through college. The golf courses were beckoning. Thus, before Walt Robertson and his wife, Helen, became too deeply involved in retirement, The Newsletter talked with him about his years at the National Archives, from the days when he was a new recruit and on through his long service as the organization's chief administrator executive.*

Q—How did you come to join the staff of the National Archives?

A—Well, I had graduated from high school in 1936 and had attended the University of Maryland for a while. I was living in Silver Spring, working and going to Ben Franklin University when I thought it would be a good idea to get into the Federal Government. I took an examination and received a letter from the Archives offering a junior laborer's job—\$1,080 a year. Having set my sights on Federal employment, I relinquished a job as a bookkeeper for a private company at \$50 a week for take-home pay of \$35 a payday, twice a month.

Q—Was it possible to live on that?

A—(A laugh.) Hardly.

Q—What was your first day like?

A—The first day of duty I came in a tie and a suit. The Director of Personnel, after I had been sworn in, told me to "go home and get some clothes on because you're not properly dressed for the job."

But then there was a panic call from upstairs asking if there were any raw recruits because they needed some messengers. So I received a reprieve and became a special messenger and never fell below that. Messenger service was elaborate in those days. The messenger unit was about 25 strong.

Q—Were you satisfied with your change in employment?

A—About one month of this job was the end of the road for me. The company I had left was making overtures to me to come back to a fairly responsible job. The salary would be so much different from the \$15-plus a week I was receiving that I resigned six weeks after I came aboard. I resigned at 10 o'clock in the morning and went across the street and was browsing in Kann's department store when the Executive Officer, Collas Harris, sent an assistant to ask me to come back to the building to see him. He persuaded me to stay on. The following week I was assigned the job of Pennsylvania Avenue receptionist and sat in the alcove in the lobby and handled the ingress of visitors to the building. The fly in the ointment was that in order to better my grade I had to subject myself to another Civil Service examination. The only way to get a better grade was to run a typewriter. I had to rent a typewriter and carry it from the rental store to the Civil Service building at 7th and F Streets to take a typing examination. Somehow I passed and got a clerical rating, CAF-2—\$1,440 a year salary. Not too much later I moved up to the administrative office. Collas Harris had at least three secretaries and all paper work which went over his desk had to go through his lawyers. He had two attorneys. He didn't seem to have any strong management or budget help. But then he hired a strong budget man, John Wells, from the Department of Agriculture. I became a workhorse on the budget under Wells. I got my first break in Government when a Civil Service classifier came over to audit this Grade 3 budget clerk. John Wells was in conference and the classifier decided he could get everything from me. Two weeks later the job came back from the Commission—Grade 5.

Q—You had described it very well.

A—I had described it very well.

Q—So your long love affair with the budget started almost from the beginning.

A—There was a little motivation there. In Government in those days the chief of finance was a glorified bookkeeper and the man that was on the rise was the budget man, the planner. He had the ear of the men running the programs. I had a number of offers to move into other fields. I was offered the Mail Room, Central Files, and then Finance. I opted to stay with John Wells in the staff capacity and moved up in that area.

Q—The National Archives was an independent agency when you signed on in 1941. How was it organized?

A—There was the National Archives itself, the Federal Register, and one Presidential Library—the Roosevelt Library. In the National Archives there were 11 paper records divisions and three non-paper records divisions. The FDR Library had about 10 people. The Federal Register had 15-20, nearly half of them attorneys. The Administrative Officer had a large staff with divisions of personnel and payroll, finance and accounts, printing and reproduction, a stenographic pool, and the messenger-laborer-trucking unit of almost 100 people. The Administrative Officer's staff totaled about 130-150, the Archives staff 225-250. With the FDR Library and Federal Register, the entire staff was about 400 strong—compared to 2,600-2,800 today with all the added functions. There was a cutback during the war years and just after the war years, so in that period there were even fewer employees than in 1941. In the early days you could hire a Ph.D. as a subprofessional for \$1,600 a year. The top professional jobs paid \$3,200—a huge salary in those days. There were no automatic in-grade promotions, but Collas had the authority to give them.

Q—What was the National Archives like when you came back from war service?

A—There had been a power struggle going on. Many of the top National Archives people had gone into war service and a new group had tried to take over operations. That ended when a rider on the Appropriation Act precluded paying those whose appointments were made during wartime and who then were at Grade 11 or above. When I came back from the war I had a very hard time in this building. I finally got my old job back. Then Wayne Grover, who had left the National Archives during the war



**END OF A CAREER**—Walter Robertson Jr. consults the annual budget book. Retiring after 34 years of Federal service, Robertson has been the Executive Director—or chief administrative officer under other titles—of the National Archives and Records Service since 1954. He joined the staff as a junior laborer in 1941 and rose through the ranks.

and had made a great name for himself in handling Army records, was named Archivist. I got an appointment with him and proceeded to tell him it was a great institution but lacked management talent. He said he would give me a 90-day trial in one of the top administrative jobs. I got the job in three months. Wayne Grover and I worked together for 17 years. That was the big move for me, right then.

**Q**—The Hoover Commission was recommending at about this time that general services of the Federal Government be consolidated in one agency. What do you remember about that period?

**A**—Ed Leahy was one of the National Archives staffers who went into the service early. He was a brilliant young man when I met him in 1941. He went into the Navy and came out with a lot of stripes, still a young man, and very likely would

have liked to become Archivist of the United States. He became a powerhouse on the Hoover Commission staff. As far as records were concerned, the Government was not faced with an archival problem but a record storage problem. Something had to be done about the proliferation of records. The record center concept and automatic disposition schedules for records came to the fore. There was a power struggle over where the Archives belonged. One of the recommendations was that there be a records management organization with the Archives subordinate to it. I surmised this was the Leahy philosophy. But the end result was that records management became part of the National Archives which became the National Archives and Records Service in the General Services Administration. It was a traumatic experience for many of the oldtime staff to go into GSA, but I was

still young and ambitious and wondering what was coming next. The whole domains of oldtimers like Collas Harris were collapsing. NARS gave up everything administratively under the centralized office concept except the job of administrative officer which became a liaison function with only two or three people to support it. I was heading up the Division of Budget and Finance which moved to GSA. I became part of the central office GSA staff but stayed on in the National Archives Building. However, I was officially back on the NARS staff in 1954 as Administrative Officer.

Q—How do you size up the Archivists of the United States for whom you have worked?

A—I didn't know the first Archivist, Robert D. W. Conner, very well. He was dignified, a well-known historian from North Carolina. He ran the place from his office and did not make public appearances. When I was on the desk in the Pennsylvania Avenue lobby, he passed me at 11:30 a.m. every day on way to lunch at the Cosmos Club. He had a chauffeur. My other contact was when he came back. The second Archivist was Solon Buck who was a talented professional man, a nationally known scholar from Minnesota. No one criticized his professional competence. He lectured, though, and therefore, did not get along well with Congressional Committees and the Budget Bureau. Wayne Grover brought a massive change to the National Archives. His Ph. D. was in public administration and he began to apply those principles. Wayne was a great manager to get this place organized with limited funds. He and Bob (Robert) Bahmer, his deputy, worked very closely together. Grover was a taskmaster, conservative, introverted. Bahmer was a good thinker and writer and although he later became Archivist on his own, he also was as responsible as Wayne Grover for many of the things done during Grover's era. Bahmer was great. Bert (James B.) Rhoads received rigorous training before becoming Archivist. He is a fast learner and went up through the chairs. When he became deputy, Bahmer worked him hard, gave him tough assignments. When he became Archivist he was ready to bite nails, seven days a week. Of all the Archivists I've known, I guess Bert has the most breadth. He could do almost any job.

## U.S. FINDS 1814 DEBT TO NEW YORK WAS PAID

Taxpayers won't have to pay back \$11 billion to New York City. That's the good news turned up by James Harwood of the Archives (NNFL) who along with a Bureau of the Public Debt staff member searched records on a \$1 million war loan made by New York to the Federal Government in 1814. As reported in the press, New York thought that the debt, with accrued interest, might total \$11 billion by now. Harwood and Schuyler Shewmaker of the Bureau of the Public Debt, however, discovered in Debt Bureau and U. S. General Accounting Office records in the Archives that the loan had been in fact repaid, with interest, in 1817. Credit New York City with a good try.

## MAJOR WOMEN'S PARLEY IS HELD AT LBJ LIBRARY

In an important followup in this country to the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico, a conference on women in public life was held in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library to seek to inspire women to increased participation in public life at all levels.

The two-day convocation in November drew by far the best attendance yet in the series of public service conferences held at the Library.

Among the speakers were Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who drew three standing ovations. It is men who need to be liberated, she said. "Women are trying to get men to understand what humankind is all about."

Congresswoman Martha Griffiths said that the real way to power politically for women was through sheer effort. All it takes for a woman to defeat a man in an election, she said, is to be twice as smart and work 10 times as hard. "Fortunately, it's easy," she said.

Among the participants were former Ambassadors Clare Booth Luce and Carol Laise, writer Gloria Steinem, and former LBJ press secretary Bill Moyers.

Topics included the international life of women, media coverage of women, and state and local issues.

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**DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD**

**WALTER ROBERTSON, JR.**

Administrative Officer  
Office of the Archivist of the United States  
National Archives and Records Service

Citation: For distinguished service in providing administrative and managerial leadership of the highest quality over an extended period of time.

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*On the left, Bernard Boutin, GSA Administrator.  
right, Walter Robertson, Jr.*

Mr. Robertson began his Government career in the National Archives in 1941. By dint of personal efforts at self-improvement and extraordinary competence and devotion to duty, Mr. Robertson has progressed through clerical, statistical, and budgetary assignments to his present position as Administrative Officer for the National Archives and Records Service.

He has consistently demonstrated outstanding ability in planning, developing and controlling the budgetary requirements for NARS during a decade and a half of unusual expansion resulting in large part from the transfer to GSA of records operations of other agencies. The details of these transfers of personnel and finances were handled in exemplary fashion.

Mr. Robertson has developed an effective system of program planning and progress reporting, which is characterized by its simplicity and effectiveness in providing for evaluating program performance and projecting future requirements. He has furnished a variety of administrative and managerial services to program components, the net effect of which is to keep to a minimum the paperwork burden on operating officials.

Underlying Mr. Robertson's administrative and technical competence is his extraordinary talent for dealing effectively and harmoniously with people.